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# Ideology and the study of South African English poetry

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## Summary

Ideology is intricated in South African English poetry and its critical reception in complex ways which demand ongoing examination. In this study I approach the subject along three lines of enquiry. In the first section I trace the development of a materialist critical practice up to the recent challenge it encounters in the work of Michael Chapman. In the second section I attempt to shift this debate onto new ground by reformulating the concept of ideology in post-modernist terms as a discursive practice rather than, as traditionally conceived, an autonomous body of ideas. In the final section, which forms the bulk of my study, I apply this discursive understanding of ideology to a reading of select poems by English-speaking white South Africans, from Pringle to Butler.

## Opsomming

Ideologie is in die Suid-Afrikaanse Engelse poësie verwickeld op komplekse maniere wat slegs deur voortdurende ondersoek aan die lig gebring sal kan word. In hierdie studie word op drie terreine van ondersoek gekonsentreer. In die eerste afdeling word die ontwikkeling van 'n materialistiese kritiese praktyk in Suid-Afrika geskets tot en met die resente bevraagtekening daarvan in die werk van Michael Chapman. In die tweede afdeling word probeer om die fokus van die debat te verskuif deur die konsep van ideologie in postmodernistiese terme te herformuleer as 'n diskursiewe praktyk in plaas van 'n outonome stel idees soos dit tradisioneel beskou is. In die laaste afdeling, wat die grootste gedeelte van die studie beslaan, word hierdie diskursiewe opvatting oor ideologie geïllustreer aan die hand van uitgesoekte gedigte deur blanke Engelssprekende Suid-Afrikaanse digters van Pringle tot Butler.

## 1

If we are looking for a critical event to mark the first decisive challenge to the dominance of traditionalist literary criticism in the study of South African English poetry, there is the publication *Poetry South Africa: selected papers from Poetry '74*. Peter Wilhelm writes in the introduction that the U.C.T. conference from which these papers were selected "was a sequel to the 1973 conference of the Afrikaans Sestiger writers, and brought into the spotlight divisions of approach and outlook as irreconcilable, and as often bitter, among the English poets as among their Afrikaans compatriots." (Wilhelm, 1976: 9) The selection of papers bears this out: Ridley Beeton and Guy Butler are placed uneasily alongside Tim Couzens and Mike Kirkwood. Despite these "divisions of approach and outlook", many of the papers are marked, however, by a common concern, in one way or another, with questions of colonial ideology (even if only, as in the case of Douglas Livingstone, to defend poetry against what he terms "Polit-Lit"). Given the revolutionary political climate in Southern Africa in the sixties and seventies this preoccupa-

tion is hardly surprising. At the same time Marxism and structuralism were opening up new methods of enquiry into the relationships between literature, language and society.

For purposes of my study Kirkwood's paper, "The colonizer: a critique of the English South African culture theory" (1976), is of particular interest. It represents one of the first attempts at introducing into the study of South African poetry, in a fairly systematic fashion, insights gained from sociological studies of colonial ideology. In his paper Kirkwood adopts an existential-Marxist position and contrasts the false consciousness and alienation of Eurocentrism (what he terms "Butlerism") to the radical self-awareness of the "awakened colonizer" (*ibid.* 127). He concludes his argument by collapsing the division between "life" and "art", thereby renouncing the claim to autonomy of the literary artefact:

'Art for liberation' should indeed be the theme of the colonizer writer, in our view: the liberation of the colonized is the liberation of the colonizer also. The attempt to realize such a programme in the arts will demand, we contend, a self-transcendence in the colonizer writer, just as it will in the colonized writer. We stop short of advocating the techniques of that transcendence, but we point out that a life-technique, as well as an art technique, will be required. (*ibid.* 131-132)

It seems, though, that the impetus for radical critique was slow to gain momentum. Five years after the U.C.T conference Isobel Hofmeyr was polemising against the still "lacklustre" results of critical enquiry into South African literature:

Instead of a dynamic critical approach, as one would expect from a 'new' discipline, we face a critical malaise. Article after article conspicuously fails to elucidate any meaningful aspect of South African literature, past and present. Writers continuously resort to tired and hackneyed formulations that should by all rational standards have been obsolete years ago. Despite having come under heavy and concerted attack, the phantoms of our peculiar brand of prac. crit. still go strong – universality, felt life – a naive empiricism and the use of generally shoddy analytical concepts that are incapable of articulating their own premises. (Hofmeyr, 1979: 39)

As exceptions to the theoretical naïvety of traditionalist studies, Hofmeyr mentions the work of Tim Couzens, Kelwyn Sole, Mike Kirkwood and Stephen Gray (she acknowledges, though, that Gray works from a different paradigm to the others). The paucity of South African literary criticism is attributed to the fact that the "dominant vision of this criticism belongs to the class-based practices of a privileged and insulated fraction that lives, perceives and understands the world through an ideology of liberalism." (*ibid.* 42) She argues that we need a theory of literature that will "explain the complexities of a dynamic society and its culture" (*ibid.* 44), and that we must understand literature "as an activity and process" where the writer is "part of a social context and the bearer of the weight of its beliefs, conformities and rebellions", (*ibid.*). Hofmeyr concludes by summarising the conditions under which a vigorous critical practice is likely to emerge in South Africa:

South African literary criticism needs to be a rigorous and exacting discipline, placed on a respectable theoretical footing and grounded in a truly interdisciplinary approach. If we continue to use literature as easy philosophy for making moralistic judgements on 'universal human nature', or as an elitist pursuit for preening one's sensibilities, we might as well forsake any pretence of being interested in South African literary history and the society from which it comes, and go instead to join therapy groups. (ibid. 48)

By 1982 there was greater confidence, however, in the eventual success of a radical critical practice in South Africa. Nick Visser argues at this time that "alternative perspectives" are fast gaining ascendancy over practical criticism, which had revealed itself to be ideologically circumscribed and incapable of addressing the literary issues of the day. He singles out Marxist literary criticism as the most significant of the challenges to literary traditionalism:

Whatever the merit of the various perspectives (and I believe open-minded and thorough examination shows each of them to have a great deal), the one that seems to be moving most strongly towards reorientating literary studies in this country, and the one that appears in quantity and quality of published research to be the most productive, comprises sociology of literature generally and Marxist literary criticism in particular. That this should be the case will be disquieting to many. We are unlikely, however, to make this state of affairs disappear simply by anathematizing sociology of literature and Marxist literary studies and all their adherents. (Visser, 1982: 331)

Approximately a decade after the U.C.T conference, Marxist analysis had thus succeeded in firmly establishing itself in South African literary criticism. Additional critics had emerged since the mid-seventies, notably Michael Vaughan, David Maughan-Brown and, more recently, Jeremy Cronin and Njabulo Ndebele. Most of the work done to date has been overtly sociological in nature. Cronin, whose work is informed by structuralist practice, is a notable exception. It is this structuralist aspect of his work which sets him apart from socio-political critics such as Tim Couzens and Michael Vaughan.

Instead of direct sociological analysis, Cronin applies techniques of discursive analysis to poetry. His interest lies in how ideology is mediated through particular linguistic mechanisms, which include specifically poetic devices and structures. As an aid to such an enquiry he draws a functional distinction between "aesthetic ideologies" and "socio-political ideologies":

Both varieties of ideology are liable to be at play within the same text. While they certainly interact in complex ways, it is important not to conflate them too readily. Not least because there are frequently disjunctures between these two varieties of ideology within the same text. . . . The reception of the text may also involve both aesthetic, as well as more directly socio-political ideologies. Such ideologies, at the reception end, may be considerably in agreement, or even completely at variance with those in the text. (Cronin, 1985: 2-3)

Cronin explores the implications of this distinction between the aesthetic and the socio-political through three sets of related antinomies: form and content,

the universal and the immediate, and the private and the social. He sees South African literary criticism, particularly when confronted with black poetry, as falling within these opposed positions:

On the one hand there have been polemical interventions which have attacked the 'formlessness', the 'excessive particularization', and the 'excessive public' character of this poetry. All of these attacks have been couched in the terms and categories of an aesthetic ideology. On the other hand, there have been defensive attempts at rehabilitating this literature. Such attempts have been dominated by socio-political criteria.

In our view these two opposed positions have tended to fall into merely antinomic, mutually reinforcing ideological standpoints, the one taking its stand in the aesthetic domain, the other in the socio-political. (ibid. 8)

In his study Cronin attempts to illustrate how traditionalist literary criticism, with its privileging of form over content, the universal over the immediate, and the private over the social, has given rise to theoretical opposition which has tended to be "simply reactive" (ibid. 23). He cites as evidence the work of Couzens, Mbulelo Mzamane and Vaughan. Through careful elucidation of the theoretical assumptions underlying both aesthetic and socio-political criteria, Cronin endeavours "to break through the antinomies" (ibid. 8).

Yet to characterise South African literary studies as falling neatly into two categories is to ignore the complex position of a critic such as Stephen Gray. Although Gray also favours a socio-historical approach, he does not adopt a Marxist perspective. As early as 1978 he outlined the basic shape research into South African poetry ought to assume by urging a multicultural and multilingual reconstruction of its history in its full particularity. The project he proposes is daunting in its scope and detail and will hardly be encompassed within the parameters of a single study. Yet in its very open-endedness it offers a tantalising prospect of what collective research into South African poetry could amount to over the decades to come, where widely divergent studies would illuminate different aspects of the work:

I have stressed that research should be undertaken from scratch. . . . I have suggested that it should be conducted on a comparative basis, so that all facets of the polylingual culture of this African subcontinent be explored in their dozens of permutations. . . . I have also suggested by implication that, although a thorough knowledge of the great tradition of mainstream English poetry is an absolute essential, it should by no means be used as the only referent in the search for patterning here. . . .

Then, apart from money and time and energy, I feel one is going to need a team of linguistic polymaths, of historians and archivists and bibliographers, too, plus a very strong reliance on the librarians and documentalists who have the material for us to discover. (Gray, 1978: 11-12)

At present the study of South African poetry is dominated, however, not by Cronin and Gray but by Michael Chapman, whose publications and papers since 1981 have exerted strong influence on the shape of South African poetical studies. Notwithstanding his having characterised his work as "seek-

ing to blend literary-critical and social-historical insights" (Chapman, 1983: 1), Chapman has vigorously defended formal "literary" criteria and has campaigned relentlessly against what he has come to call in a recent article "the sociological idea":

Whereas an earlier textual criticism tended to neglect the poem as the construction of specific critical and ideological practices, the tendency among sociologically-orientated commentators in the current South African literary debate is to go to the other extreme and collapse all textual signification into surrounding discourse. In focusing here on Campbell I want to defend the resilience of the poem as text and, by implication, literary-critical activity against the intrusions of the 'sociological idea'. In doing so it will be necessary to acknowledge several valuable insights and procedures of literary sociology, particularly those which reveal criticism as active social practice and which open the efficacy of any poet's self-declaring intentions to ideological investigation. . . . At the same time, however, I want to remain critically alert to the hidden agenda of literary sociology as a struggle in South Africa for new forms of dominance: particularly in those cases where it is held that one may not give assent to any writer whose 'message' does not accord with that of the socialist millennium. (Chapman, 1987: 80-81).

It is ironic that these remarks are directed against Cronin, whose analysis of Campbell's poem "Rounding the Cape" prompts Chapman to rail against literary sociology. In defence of the poem he assesses Campbell's achievements in terms of such categories as poetry's appeal to "mythic consciousness" (ibid. 79), imagination as "the highest form of the intellect" (ibid. 80), the ability of poetry "to invest indigenous forms of life with the full palpability of their being" (ibid. 85), and "poetry's capacity to strip away the conditioned response and to tap the primitive unities of words and things" (ibid. 87). Yet it is precisely the structuralist paradigm from which Cronin operates that renders problematical the notions of transcendental consciousness, autonomous being, and the unity of words and things ascribed to by Chapman. Chapman fails, however, to address Cronin's theoretical premises, seeing him instead as "fairly representative of the current sociological line" (ibid. 82), and grouping him together with such critics as Couzens and Vaughan (ibid. 92), whose work, as we have seen, Cronin himself views as "reactive".

In using Cronin's analysis as the basis of a sweeping polemic against the "sociological idea", Chapman reveals no sensitivity to the complexity of materialist analysis and Cronin's position within it, and this despite Chapman's own reference to the gains provided by "the radical enquiry into semiotics of structuralism and Marxism over the last twenty years":

Cronin's critique usefully reminds us that, after the radical enquiry into semiotics of structuralism and Marxism over the last twenty years, no defence of poetry can simply offer tautologous pronouncements on 'beauty', 'truth' and 'life'. At the same time, however, his critique reminds us, by its very omissions, that poetry, indeed any imaginative literature, is a humanistic pursuit: a grappling at particular times with the complexities of experience, within various kinds of personal,

historical and formal constraints. . . . Campbell the poet is a reminder to literary sociology in general that, while culture, ideology and convention govern individual roles in systems, every person's sociolinguistic abilities are diverse. Language embodies ways, not one way, of looking at the world. Similarly literary criticism – especially in societies of narrowly-defined political tolerances – should also perhaps set out to affirm, in valuable new ways, its own semi-autonomous relationships to iron sociological times. (ibid. 91)

Chapman does not, however, specify what he means by the important concept of the “semi-autonomous” status of literary criticism. The term is central, we must remember, to Althusser's Marxism, and thus demands elucidation if it is not to undermine Chapman's argument. Moreover Chapman's portrayal of Cronin's project itself constitutes the “heresy of paraphrase” (ibid. 79) of which Cronin is accused. It distorts this project by presenting it as a merely dogmatic application of a sociological master code. Chapman sums up his case against Cronin as follows: “To reduce the paradoxes of Campbell's personality and practice to a limiting ‘colonialism’ is to fail fundamentally to restore his poetry to the full imaginative and emotional pressure of its moment of creation and reception” (ibid.).

It is worth mentioning that the notion of a recoverable “moment of creation and reception” raises epistemological problems which are simply ignored. But the point I wish to take up is that Cronin's reading avoids precisely a reductivist interpretation by foregrounding what he calls a complex “vertiginous play of subversions” (Cronin, 1984: 78) within the poem. He provides insight into how different meanings co-exist while simultaneously undermining one another. Cronin is particularly alert to the ambivalences and disjunctures between structural oppositions in the poem (white and black, coloniser and colonised) which he examines in order to show that the poem is characterised by “Denial . . . of colonial oppression shadowed by a half-admission” (ibid. 68). For Cronin it is “in the resonance of this cognitive subversion that many of the poem's fascinations and shortcomings lie.” (ibid.). Far from denying the poem its “imaginative and emotional” impact, these are retained and seen in relation to another structure of meaning: colonial ideology as it is inscribed in the text. The “shortcomings” referred to are moments of ideological closure in the poem which are integral to, and not external to, its meaning. Rather than “collapse all textual signification into surrounding discourse”, Cronin examines the discursive procedures of the poem itself. He discovers in the poem not one voice but contradictory voices which speak, albeit in a schizophrenic fashion, of “ways . . . of looking at the world”.

Chapman ultimately rejects Cronin's reading on grounds that at a strategic moment he arrives at an interpretation “according to the syntax of grammar rather than verse” (Chapman, 1986: 83). Yet there is no reason why the syntax of grammar should be ignored. Along with other components it forms the basis of meaning in the poem, even if only to introduce ambivalence. It can in fact be argued, as Cronin does (ibid.), that the syntax of grammar provides the literal meaning against which other meanings arise. Chapman's distinction between the syntax of grammar and verse is unconvincing.

It is within the context of the continued debate on ideology and its relation to critical practice that I wish to examine the concept of ideology afresh. Thus in the next section I posit a discursive conception of ideology, which sees it not as a body of autonomous ideas but as processes of signification which are inscribed in different discourses as specific ways of perceiving and thinking. I hope thereby to shift the debate onto different ground and offer, perhaps, a new understanding of the relationship between what Cronin has identified as the aesthetic and the socio-political components of meaning in the poem.

I am aware, of course, that this understanding of ideology is not new. Nevertheless, as Rory Ryan has pointed out, when theory poses a threat to the literary orthodoxy, particularly in South Africa, it is often suppressed through the simple and effective strategies of ignoring it, marginalising it, and misconstruing it as merely oppositionary (Ryan, 1987: 7–8). Therefore a detailed exposition of the key premises of my argument is called for.

## 2

Although the term “ideology” varies considerably in meaning from one context to another, where it ranges in sense from false consciousness and dogmatism to any set of ideas appropriate to a particular social group (Williams, 1976: 153–157), most uses of the term have in common that ideology denotes distinct ideas which have their source in an originary consciousness. Thus we find both Marxists and liberals accusing each other of harbouring false ideas about man and society, and therefore of promoting ideology above truth.

The fact that the term has given rise to contradictory uses in popular discourse simply demonstrates its inherent instability. In a sense the term epitomises the fate of signs in general. It is interesting to note that ideology derives from two Greek words, *idea* and *logos*, which mean, respectively, “idea” and “word.” What the different senses attributed to ideology manifest is that there is evidently a breach between the word and the idea, between the material signifier and the conceptual signified. Yet it is precisely the notion of the rupture of the sign, and its several ramifications, that is absent from the popular understanding of the term.

This popular understanding can be termed traditionalist in that it is predicated on an essentialist view of knowledge, language, and identity. Ideology is treated as free-floating ideas which are embodied in, and communicated directly through, the word. In addition ideology is seen to be exchanged between individuals who possess an expressive core of consciousness, which is source of meaning and of being.

A non-essentialist conception of ideology is one that abandons the view of ideas as the property of individuals in favour of a notion of ideology as distinctive processes of signification. Such a conception regards ideology as inscribed in language. Ideology is understood as discursive procedures rather than as the content of words. A discursive understanding of ideology is elaborated by Catherine Belsey in her book *Critical practice* (1980) and by John Frow in his article “Discourse and power” (1985). Belsey draws exten-



sively on Louis Althusser, Jacques Lacan, and Pierre Macherey, while Frow draws on Umberto Eco, Michel Foucault, and Paul Hirst. I use Belsey and Frow because each provides a useful synthesis of important contemporary insights in an attempt to rethink the notion of ideology in post-modernist terms.

Both Belsey and Frow premise their arguments on the theory of the differential nature of the sign, where meaning is perceived as dependent not on the correlation of a sign with a reality outside language but on the position of the sign in a differential system. Belsey explains:

The most revolutionary element in Saussure's position was his insistence that language is not nomenclature, a way of naming things which already exist, but a system of differences with no positive terms. He argued that far from providing a set of labels for entities which exist independently in the world, language precedes the existence of independent entities, making the world intelligible by differentiating between concepts. (Belsey, 1980: 38)

If it is conceded that "language precedes the existence of ... entities", it follows that ideology likewise does not exist in an autonomous realm of ideas but, as Belsey goes on to argue, "is inscribed in signifying practices – in discourses, myths, presentations and re-presentations of the way 'things' 'are' – and to this extent it is inscribed in language" (ibid. 42). According to this view ideology cannot be conceived of in essentialist terms because it is inscribed in language and language is a system of differences. It is through differentiating between concepts that language makes possible intelligibility. Ideology ensures that this process assumes a prescriptive function.

Louis Althusser is credited by Belsey with having broken with the conception of ideology as a set of ideas in people's heads. He is said to have shifted the debate from reality to discourse in his insistence that ideology establishes a relation of signification between the subject and the world (ibid. 57). Althusser maintains that "What is represented in ideology is ... not the system of real relations which govern the existence of individuals, but the imaginary relation of those individuals to the real relation in which they live" (Althusser, 1971: 165). Thus he uses the Lacanian notion of the imaginary order to argue that the relation between the subject and reality is mediated through discourse and determined by ideology.

Frow is interested primarily in the epistemological implications of a discursive understanding of ideology. He argues that meaning arises from metonymic displacement, which he characterises as the substitution of one sign for another in "an endless chain of semiosis" (Frow, 1985: 208). Meaning is therefore perpetually deferred along a signifying chain. Ideology arrests this process by imposing closure (ibid. 211). This closed meaning is projected in discourse as natural and self-evident, indicative of the way things really are. Frow claims that "Ideological utterance is marked by ... an automatization which appears as a kind of semantic crust proclaiming its authority and its status as second nature" (ibid. 206). What ideology is seen to mask then is the social construction of meaning by positing instead a natural meaning.

Of central concern to Frow is the relation between power and discourse. He argues that because it is not possible to appeal to “an extra-discursive real . . . as a final authority . . . [t]he decisive criterion of analysis could thus no longer be the relation between discourse and a reality which would be external to it, since discourse would be ‘interpretable and intelligible only in terms of their own and other discourses’ constructions and the categories of adequacy which they apply to them’. Instead, the relevant criterion would be that of the relations between discourse and power, the intrication of power in discourse.” (ibid. 199–200) The “categories of adequacy” and the power relations that sustain these categories operate therefore within a discursive formation of interwoven texts. The phrase “categories of adequacy” should be understood to include the values, beliefs, concepts, linguistic devices, and interpretative strategies by means of which truth is determined and judgements are made. Frow asserts that these categories of adequacy are ideologically motivated in that they are maintained through the exercise of hegemony in the discursive realm by a particular social formation. Following Michel Foucault, on whom he bases much of his argument, he emphasises that hegemony, or power, should be conceived moreover as asymmetrically dispersed within discourse and not as monolithic (ibid. 204). Power is fragmentary. It is deployed from many positions within discourse and follows diverse routes.

Whereas Frow is interested primarily in the ideological (or discursive) construction of reality, Belsey is interested, in addition, in the way ideology interpellates the individual in discourse as a unified subject who is centred on an essence. This essence is defined as eternal human nature. Myths, images, and scientific procedures all represent the individual to himself as an integrated complex of ineluctable instincts, desires, limitations, and aspirations. Belsey contends that although the construction of the subject in language results in a split subject, ideology seeks precisely to suppress “this contradiction . . . between the conscious self, which is conscious in so far as it is able to feature in discourse, and the self which is only partially represented there” (Belsey, 1980: 85). She argues that the subject is therefore constituted as “not only a grammatical subject . . . but also a subjected being who submits to the authority of the social formation represented in ideology as the ‘Absolute Subject’” (ibid. 62).

Belsey explores in detail the implications specifically for literary criticism of a discursive understanding of ideology. She follows Pierre Macherey in speaking of the unconscious of the literary text, its silence or reverse side. What is concealed by the text is the process of production that makes it a text, including “the strategies by which it smoothes over the incoherences and contradictions of the ideology inscribed in it” (ibid. 129). Belsey invokes Jacques Lacan in drawing a parallel between the construction of the unconscious in relation to the subject and the creation of the unconscious in relation to the text:

The unconscious is . . . a construct, created in the moment of entry into the symbolic order, produced in the gap between the subject of discourse, the I of the

enonce, and the subject of the enunciation, the I who speaks. Constructed of elements whose entry into the symbolic order is barred, the unconscious is structured like a language. Its discourse . . . threaten[s] the apparent autonomy of the ego. . . .

[Likewise the] unconscious of the work is constructed in the moment of its entry into literary form, in the gap between the project and the formulation. The process is precisely parallel to the process by which the child enters the symbolic order. The text is a bearer of ideological meaning, but only in so far as literary form permits the production of meaning. To adapt Lacan's formula, the text speaks, but it is because literary form has made it a text. (ibid. 131, 135)

The function of critical practice, as Belsey sees it, is to articulate that which is unspoken in the text, to decentre and deconstruct the text, and in so doing to produce the text anew. This involves using the text to reconstruct the ideology that determines its silences. In the final analysis what is present in the text, she avers, is history, "not as background, not as cause, but as the condition of the work's existence as ideology and as fiction" (ibid. 136). To the practice of a kind of consumerist criticism, which projects itself as non-theoretical, neutral, and objective – in short as transparent – she opposes a productive critical practice: "No longer the accomplice of ideology, no longer parasitic on an already given literary text, criticism constructs its object, produces the work" (ibid. 138).

Frow gives the name of "resistance" to this type of critical practice. He argues that "Both 'ideology' and 'resistance' are uses of discourse, and both are 'within' power" (Frow, 1985: 206). A critical practice of resistance inserts itself into the fissures and figures of ideology, fracturing the discursive formation and turning its tropes against it, opposing power with power in numerous textual engagements with the intention of ultimately reappropriating ideology for counter-hegemonic purposes. This involves the exposure of the omissions, gaps, contradictions, partial truths, and self-serving value systems of the ideology inscribed in the text. A critical practice of resistance thus employs strategies of infiltration of, and confrontation with, the ideology inscribed in the text in an effort to break it open.

According to Frow it is possible therefore to escape and oppose specific ideologies. Belsey endorses this view when she maintains that "while no society can exist without ideology . . . and while it is impossible to break with ideology in the general sense, nonetheless it is possible to constitute a discourse which breaks with the specific ideology (or ideologies) of the contemporary social formation" (Belsey, 1980: 62-63).

A critical practice that does not address the question of the text's ideological formation and simply accepts it as given, as natural, acts in complicity with this ideology. Whether it is made explicit or not, ideology is inscribed in the text. By not exposing and questioning it, the critic subjects himself to it, is interpellated by it as a subject. Such a critic implicitly upholds the social formation in whose interest ideology applies coercive force. No critical practice is ideologically neutral.

Terry Eagleton maintains that the raw material of literature is not reality but ideology (Eagleton, 1975: 68–73). Literature deals directly with modes of perception, cultural codes and conventions, social values, and metaphysical beliefs. It illustrates, perhaps better than any other form of writing, the specifically discursive means by which a society constructs reality. If it is our desire in South Africa to break away from prevailing hegemonic practices, this desire ought to be reflected in the way we read South African literature. An understanding of what transpires on an ideological level between reader and text when we read South African literature is part of an ongoing process of cultural critique and transformation.

In the next section I have chosen to examine select poems from what Isobel Hofmeyr and others identify as the liberal-humanist tradition of South African poets: Thomas Pringle, F.S. Slater, Roy Campbell and Guy Butler. It is not the fact of their adherence to liberal-humanism that interests me, but the numerous ways in which this ideology is inscribed in their poetry. I am curious to know what textual strategies they adopt and how these accord with both manifest and latent meanings in the texts. Moments of uncertainty and ambiguity intrigue me. Of significance also is the critical study of the poetry. For it is precisely the interrelation of the poetry and the criticism, their mutuality, that identifies the field as a discursive formation and consequently as the site of a hegemonic practice.

### 3

As Stephen Gray points out (Gray, 1978: 9-11), past anthologies of South African poetry provide a reliable guide to its historical construction. In their selectivity it is possible to trace the gradual canonisation of a tradition. Michael Chapman takes up this theme and argues that “successive anthologists, from John Alexander Wilmot in the late nineteenth century to Guy Butler and Chris Mann in 1979, have continued to promote a traditional sensibility and style as the approved inheritance.” (Chapman, 1984: 19) He characterises literary traditionalism as the exercise of reason and restraint:

Although the liberal-humanist line has, then, its own internal divisions, the overall impression remains of a poetry in which moral discourse takes precedence over the image, mellifluous syntax over the cryptic utterance and an order of concepts over the imagination. Despite its use of African subject-matter, it is a poetry which does not entirely succeed in (or more likely does not altogether see the necessity of) severing itself from, or even transforming, its standard-English literary codes. (ibid. 39)

I should like to take up the suggestion, offered in parenthesis, that this line of poetry fails to sever itself from or transform the tradition from which it derives not because its attempts are unsuccessful, but because it does not set out to do so. Since Miller and Sergeant’s *A critical survey of South African poetry* (1957), it has become commonplace to view this poetry as attempting to devise new modes of poetic response which are somehow more appropriate

than traditional ones in portraying conditions on the African sub-continent. The purported success or otherwise of such attempts are then used as a standard against which to measure the commitment, perceptiveness and originality of the poets in question. Thus Pringle, for example, is both praised and condemned, depending on whether it is his use of South African themes and diction which is foregrounded or his adherence to Augustan-Romantic styles of composition. Rather than adopt such antithetical positions perhaps we should accept, instead, that this poetry does not pretend to be anything other than colonial, and explore the implications of this premise. For it seems to me that it is precisely the double vision of colonialism, which brings into focus simultaneously the colony and the metropolis, that characterises this poetry. How this is realised in different ways is the subject of my present enquiry.

Thomas Pringle (1789–1834) lived at the Cape for six years. He was originally leader of a Scottish group that formed part of the 1820 settlers. He spent some time farming on the frontier, travelled fairly extensively in the eastern Cape, and resided in Cape Town for several years. He distinguished himself as a vocal abolitionist and defender of the free press. Before his arrival at the Cape he had published a volume of poems in Edinburgh where he had worked as an editor. On returning to Britain after the failure of his plans at the Cape, he was appointed secretary of the Anti-Slavery Society. His complete African writing was published a few months before his death under the title *African sketches* (1834), which comprises two sections: Narrative of residence in South Africa and Poems illustrative of South Africa.

Pringle is commonly referred to as the father of English poetry in South Africa, though Stephen Gray has pointed out that this distinction applies more accurately perhaps to Frederic Brooks (Gray, 1978: 9). Pringle is elevated to this position partly at least because he embodies the qualities admired by the liberal-humanist tradition-makers. He is credited with having an enlightened attitude towards the indigenous people and is seen as exemplary in his defence of freedom and justice.

In a study of Pringle's depiction of the Bushmen, A.E. Voss identifies, however, a contradiction between Pringle's Christian sentiments and the colonial ethos to which he ascribes. Voss uses as an example the much anthologised "Afar in the desert" and maintains that Pringle emerges in this poem as "the archetypal white colonial: mounted, rifle in one hand, Bible in the other." (Voss, 1982: 20). Previous commentators have praised the exotic lyricism of the poem, have savoured its hypnotic evocation of a desolate waste-land, and have discovered in its sentiments a universal need for meditative solitude. Voss does not ignore these aspects but sees them as symptomatic of a pathological tendency:

The power of Pringle's poem is not in its 'local colour', but in its presumably intuitive following of the frustrations of colonial experience to their potentially horrifying and alienated conclusions: solitary identification with God and Nature can mean the elimination of society. Hence the tissue of paradox and opposition on which the poem rests: poet rides, bushboy runs; poet raves, bushboy is silent;

bushboy is 'alone' yet 'by my side'; the 'death-fraught firelock in my hand' is 'The only law in this Desert Land', yet in this desert land the 'still small voice' says 'GOD IS NEAR!' God, it seems, is on the side of the firelock.

I wish to take up some of these suggestions and elaborate on them. In the poem the speaker (whom Voss identifies with Pringle) gives his reasons for seeking solace in the desert:

Afar in the Desert I love to ride,  
 With the silent Bush-boy alone by my side:  
 When the wild turmoil of this wearisome life,  
 With its scenes of oppression, corruption, and strife . . .

Dispose me to musing and dark melancholy;  
 When my bosom is full, and my thoughts are high,  
 And my soul is sick with the bondman's sigh—  
 Oh! then there is freedom, and joy, and pride,  
 Afar in the desert alone to ride! (25-28, 32-36)

Because despondency and rapture are equally insistent, the tone is ambivalent. This ambivalence is paralleled by a contradiction in the speaker's motives. He identifies social ills and injustices, especially the sufferings of the slave, as the cause of his melancholy. He feels spiritually contaminated by colonial society. Riding into the desert is the only cure. Yet he takes with him the attitudes of the colonial, the ills of which are therefore simply perpetuated.

This occurs in at least two ways. In the first place the speaker is patronising towards the bush-boy. He acknowledges his presence while simultaneously denying him his full humanity. The boy's silence announces this strange presence/absence. He does not speak, is not called upon to speak, and consequently is not involved by the speaker in any form of human relationship. In the second place the speaker describes the initial stretch of wilderness as a scene of pastoral serenity (47-48) while claiming at the same time that the "death-fraught firelock" which he carries is the "only law of the Desert Land" (39-40). The purported law of the desert, a law of violence, does not inhere in the landscape but is what he brings with him. He holds the law in his hand. It is his law: the law of the pioneer-settler.

Thus the bush-boy's brooding, disruptive silence is also the text's silence. That which is unspoken, which is repressed, subverts the text's conscious articulation. The speaker talks of the curative powers of solitary communion with God. But we detect in his words not the remedy for colonialist ills but their apotheosis. Gun in hand, sullen bush-boy at his side and yet absented, the speaker exults in silent and child-like reverence over the solitary wasteland around him:

And here, while the night-winds round me sigh,  
 And the stars burn bright in the midnight sky,  
 As I sit apart by the desert stone,  
 Like Elijah at Horeb's cave alone,

'A still small voice' comes through the wild  
 (Like a father consoling his fretful Child),  
 Which banishes bitterness, wrath, and fear, –  
 Saying – MAN IS DISTANT, BUT GOD IS NEAR! (89–96)

The fact that by the end of the poem the bush-boy has been forgotten draws attention to the denial of his humanity. He has served his purpose as poetic device for the romantic colonialist imagination. In himself he is unimportant: his humanity lacks substance. He is a bit of exotic detail in a poem which seems to owe much to the tradition of the picturesque travelogue.

The poem illustrates in fact the limit of the picturesque within which Pringle's response to Africa is contained. The deeper he moves into the African desert the more he encounters simply a void where articulation is impossible except in terms of a series of negatives which recall the absent picturesque:

A region of drought, where no river glides,  
 Nor rippling brook with osiered sides;  
 Where sedgy pool, nor misty mount,  
 Appears, to refresh the aching eye: (81-85)

What this indicates is that Pringle's ideology is inscribed in the very conventions and techniques he employs. It is these discursive means, rather than some free-floating body of ideas, that determine his perception of his subject. It is through the discursive means that the subject is articulated. These cannot simply be left behind when he flees into the desert away from colonial society. For even flight into the wilderness on the part of the troubled prophet/reformer is a convention carrying a cultural specific meaning rather than a universal one.

Stephen Gray has published a poem in which the silent bush-boy muses to himself as he jogs next to the master's horse. The poem is called "In memoriam: Thomas Pringle (bush-boy speaks)":

he's never grown out of his Nativè Land  
 he does not look as if he belongs  
 here we offer him a kingdom of all  
 he surveys down the sight of a firelock  
 an Eden puckered with bare spoor  
 over the border and into the dark  
 but this man – he rides in excursions  
 looking back through me for home  
 he says it is wrong to enslave me  
 yet he grows taller in my company (5–14)

The reversal of perspective is startling. A century-and-a-half of silence is broken by the bush-boy's observations on Pringle the colonial, the hunter,

and the philanthropist. The bush-boy's speech is situated in the gaps in Pringle's discourse and exposes the ideology that shapes it.

In the first place Pringle is seen by the bush-boy to view Africa "down the sight of a firelock" and to reduce it to "an Eden puckered with bare spoor". By implication the desert is therefore of Pringle's own making. As colonialist he contributes to the devastation of Africa and not, as he believes, to its salvation. In the second place Pringle is said to "grow taller" in the company of the bush-boy. Pringle's self-regard, the "pride" he speaks of in "Afar in the desert", is in direct proportion to the degradation of the bush-boy. The colonialist measures his superiority by the distance between him and the colonised.

Gray's poem forces us to take a fresh look at "Afar in the desert". We notice that the relationship between the speaker and the bush-boy is paralleled by the relationship between God and man (father and son). Thus the speaker aligns himself with God. He conceives of himself as lord over Africa and pursues his alienation and isolation to the point of creating around him a desert. In this desert he communes with his own lonely self.

Unsurprisingly the literary assumptions of colonial readers of the mid nineteenth century prove to be similar to those of their British compatriots. Thus a contributor to the *Cape montly magazine* decries the absence of meritorious poetry in the colony and espouses a poetic creed founded on moral sensibility, enthusiastic description of nature, and introspective contemplation of divinity:

The moral atmosphere of colonial life is not considered sufficiently nutritive or conducive to poetic thought. We have too much of hard money-grabbing ... and, withal, of narrow views and overwhelming conceits to cultivate the amenities and refinements of the poetic spirit. ... It is not every country that can prove, to the fullest extent, a 'Meet nurse for the poetic child.' There must be the rugged grandeur of the mountain and the flood, or the soft beauty of the wooded landscapes and the sunlit glades. There must be the stirring traditions of the historic past, and the kindred associations of the exciting present. ... But though this be true, there is a still higher truth that must be remembered. The essential spirit of poetry is independent of external associations. It consists in the vision and the faculty divine. ... (Anon. 1858: 342-343).

Poetry is said to possess an "essential spirit" – an essence. In other words it has a defining characteristic which is everywhere the same, whether the poem is composed in the Congo, in China, or in the Lake district of England. This common denominator can be abstracted as an autonomous quality independent of history and of culture. By implication the writer of the article is in the privileged position of being able to detect this spirit, no doubt because his spiritual faculties are appropriately refined, and he would be able to discriminate for instance between the authentic isibongi in Zulu society and the sham praise-poet. Paradoxically this essential spirit, which has fixed and absolute qualities, is described in terms of, and predicated on, organic nature. The vegetable world is used to image the metaphysical world in so far as the spirit is said to require a "nutritive" environment which will "cultivate" it. Further-



more the poetic spirit is alleged to flourish only where there are mountains, lakes, and forests. Urban life, and by extension social life, is consequently regarded as inimical to poetry.

Clearly the poetic utterances and the theoretical reflections of this period are mutually reinforcing. Inscribed in this discursive formation, and projected as self-evident through a circular path of closure, are all manner of essentialist and supremacist assumptions and beliefs about man, reality, moral values, and culture. Practices and concepts that are contingent on history are presented as eternal and unchanging. Poetical studies is elevated to theology. Only by articulating the silences of the texts is it possible to reconstruct their ideological unconscious. This requires a strategy by which the texts are penetrated and subverted from within their textual operations.

A century of colonial versifying lies between Thomas Pringle and Francis Carey Slater (1876–1958). Born of settler stock, of which he says he is “prodigiously proud” (Slater, 1954: 5), Slater grew up on a farm near Alice in the Border district, where he learnt also to speak Xhosa and took delight in their folktales and legends. When he was eight his father brought home several volumes of verse: Shakespeare, Milton, Wordsworth, Scott, Burns and Longfellow. These volumes, he says, “were to influence my future life to an undreamed-of extent.” (ibid. 33) Interestingly his appreciation of Scott is as enthusiastic as Pringle’s had been: “As a genius of universal stature he seems to me to approach nearest to Shakespeare of all British writers.” (ibid. 63)

Slater started publishing his best work in the nineteen-twenties, when he was already forty-eight, and continued publishing for over twenty more years. His important works are *The Karroo and other poems* (1924), *Drought* (1929), *Dark folk and other poems* (1935), and *The Trek* (1938). While Roy Campbell and William Plomer were in the process of introducing modernist techniques into South African poetry, Slater continued to adhere to the Romantic and Victorian styles of his early influence. Seen alongside his younger contemporaries, he is essentially a nineteenth-century figure, a poet of the untrampled South African veld.

Slater was also an important anthologist. In his preface to *The new centenary book of South African verse* (1945) he comments on the alleged “derivative” nature of South African poetry.

The main fault in our poetry, according to English critics, is that it is too derivative in form. Apparently they look to new countries for a new technique – a new way of writing. This seems hardly fair. New forms are the natural development of a ripe culture, and a new country is the last place in which to seek them. . . . If, then, the poets of the younger countries introduce new themes and fresh and arresting imagery while handling old forms in a characteristic manner, is this not all that may be reasonably expected of them? (Slater, 1945: x).

His view of how a tradition develops is clearly conservative. In the early stages the old techniques and forms are maintained, and by implication the modes of perception to which they give rise. Slater, who uses primarily the

Romantics as his models, seems partially at least to have himself in mind as he writes this. Yet several critics have viewed him as the first English poet to have spoken in a truly South African voice. Commenting on his work Anthony Delius, for instance, says that "Whatever tendency there might have been to 'colonialism' in S.A. English verse before Dr. Slater, there has certainly existed no excuse for it since his work during the '30's." (Delius, 1954: 67) As evidence of this break with colonialism, Delius cites the distinctive South African imagery employed by Slater (*ibid.*).

Nevertheless Slater is not a particularly popular poet today. To my knowledge there have been no recent articles on him. He has not provoked the kind of interest we find, for instance, in Pringle and Campbell. In fact one of his works, *The Trek*, published in 1938 to coincide with the centenary celebrations of the event, may even be a bit of an embarrassment today. The poem raises, in a particularly stark manner, the question of the relationship between English and Afrikaner in South Africa. It is this that I wish to address in my commentary on Slater.

In view of the poem's aggrandisement of Afrikaner history and key personalities (though several are portrayed as bigoted and stubborn), it is interesting to note what Slater's later thoughts were on the Afrikaners, after the experience of the Ossewa Brandwag and the rise to power of the Nationalist Party:

A number of my writings in verse – especially my longest poem *The Trek* – afford unquestionable evidence of my sincere admiration of great South Africans of Dutch descent and their heroic deeds. But whilst I honour the Voortrekker leaders of long ago, who were giants in courage, mind and spirit, I find it most deplorable that their mantle of leadership should have fallen upon the shoulders of those who, in comparison with them, are spiritual dwarfs. . . .

We, South Africans of British descent, are not sufficiently numerous to rescue South Africa from the Afrikaner extremists, who are proving so harmful to her both here and in other lands. . . . In the circumstances, it seems to me that the salvation of South Africa mainly depends upon the better class of Afrikaners, who are worthy descendants of Dutch and French ancestry. . . . Inter-marriages between this type of Afrikaner and English-speaking South Africans are frequent, so let us continue to hope that such happy unions of young hearts and hands may ultimately result in a truly united and peaceful South Africa. (Slater, 1954: 229)

It is understandable therefore that Slater should have admired a man like Jan Smuts, with whom he maintained a warm correspondence and friendship from the time of the publication of *The Trek*. In a letter dated 3 June 1947, Smuts expresses his appreciation of the service Slater has done to South Africa through his poetry:

I had so hoped to find an opportunity to see you and thank you for sending me a copy of your Oxford Edition. Alas, such an opportunity has not come. And so I send you this line to thank you and congratulate you on the honour you have thus brought South Africa. . . .

Something of the intimate spirit of South Africa will be found there and be

enjoyed by those who do not know the South Africa which is ours. You have been the interpreter of much that is best in the spirit of our country and our people and for this too I thank you. (ibid. 240)

Slater maintains an ambiguous stance towards the Afrikaners. He promotes an English liberalism while, at the same time, he transcribes the central Afrikaner myths. In his poem *The Trek* he looks back nostalgically to an earlier age and endeavours to create an epic in which to encapsulate its heroism. That he chooses to do so by identifying closely with Trekker history rather than with Settler history, as Alexander Wilmot for instance had done in his heroic poem on the British settlers (1870), is unusual in South African English poetry:

Not locomotive-engines, snorting dragons  
 Belching black smoke, I sing, but tented wagons:  
 Wagons that like the battered caravels  
 Of Christopher Columbus by their spells  
 Wrested the unknown from its secret cells;  
 Wagons that conquered plain and mountain-belt –  
 Cradles that rocked the Children of the Veld  
 Into a nation stubborn strong and hard,  
 Narrow, suspicious, slow to give regard  
 To the rights and views of those of other race,  
 But, won to friendship, friends of steadfast breed.  
 Nor sing I petrol's toys of dizzy pace  
 But the slow-trudging ox and ambling steed.  
 The smoke-flagged factory, industrial town,  
 Temples of this machine-enchanted age,  
 I leave to budding bards of fame full-blown,  
 Or over-blown, and make my pilgrimage,  
 At trek-ox pace, through plains austere and brown.  
 Not of mechanics, masons, engineers  
 I sing, but of bronzed farmer-pioneers:  
 Men who from their saddles grew, like trees from earth,  
 With swinging guns for branches, quick to flame  
 With deadly flowers; men who found living tame  
 Save on the brink of danger; men who won  
 Strength from the barren veld and burning sun. ('Theme', 1–26)

These are forceful lines, and one senses that Slater has learnt from Campbell how to employ vigorous metrical expression. They are strong in cadence, resonant in sentiment, stirring in expression, and vivid in imagery. To say that the lines are forceful is to concede to their power of persuasion and to acknowledge the coercive power of the language. Whereas previously South African poets had responded to their environment mostly through incidental lyrical outbursts, *The Trek* constitutes a systematic reconstruction of a historical event along mytho-poetic lines. To this end a rousing rhetorical style is deployed, one that is able to carry with it a weight of importance absent from most earlier South African poetry in English.

The dignified and solemn tone is slightly compromised though by the vituperative reference to "budding bards of fame full-blown,/Or over-blown". The defensive tone of this statement can be read as signalling a moment of self-doubt and self-justification. The poet is regressing in time, escaping from the present to "sing" of an earlier age, and for a moment he seems conscious that he is romanticising and falsifying the achievements of this period. Witness for instance his portrayal of the "bronzed farmer-pioneers" as larger than life and his investiture of their actions with the sweeping grandeur of romance. They are "men who found living tame/Save on the brink of danger". Most revealing of all is the description of their weaponry. The trekkers are like trees that have "swinging guns for branches, quick to flame/With deadly flowers". This is a bold metaphorisation of killing, a daring infusion of the act of slaughter with an effulgence of beauty.

Part of the reason why an Englishman could write so convincingly on a subject that is intimate rather to Afrikanerdom relates also to rhetorical technique. In the first place the poet projects himself as a fellow pilgrim into the interior. He speaks of himself in the first person. He is the "I" of the poem and participates in the "pilgrimage,/At trek-ox pace". But of course the poet is, strictly speaking, absent from the poem. It is the reader who speaks on his behalf and who is therefore in the position of the speaking "I". Thus the reader is interpellated as subject of the poem-as-pilgrimage and is subjected to its ideological co-ordinates. The journey as pilgrimage is in pursuit of, as the poet subsequently spells out, "the Land of the Trekker's dream,/Where milk and honey in plenty stream" ("Onward the wagons went", 25-26). In other words he pursues in this allegorical journey an inner vision of the promised land. For this reason too it is a desert journey, like that of the Israelites, "through plains austere and brown". History is reconstructed as biblical myth and as such is seen to be the expression of Jahweh's will. Because the myth is ascribed to by both Englishman and Afrikaner, who share a belief in the Christian bible, it serves to bind together the two groups in a common understanding of history. For socio-political reasons this is an important task in a country still suffering from the wounds inflicted by the Anglo-Boer war. This alliance is clinched in the naming of a common enemy, the "swarming legions of savage men" ("Onward the wagons went", 24) encountered en route to the promised land.

In the second place the poet creates a convincing story through skilful manipulation of realism. The grand epical gesture is carefully supported by meticulous attention to detail. Thus a simulacrum of truth is attained through the rhetorical means of mimesis:

Onward labours each caravan, each plodding bullock, each patient man;  
Trek-chains rattle; jukskeis squeak;  
Wheels wake thunder in each stone-throated creek. . . .

Koppies cackle to the crack of whip;  
See-sawing, heavily, tents rise and dip  
("Onward the wagons went", 11-14, 17-18).

The noise of the trek, its rumbling invasion of the interior, speaks triumph-

antly of colonial victory. Yet the heroism of conquest masks the bloodshed by which subjugation of the indigenous people is ensured. It is noteworthy that the historic appropriation of the land is paralleled in the poem by cultural appropriation of an indigenous literary idiom. For cultural appropriation also ultimately serves hegemonic purposes. On the whole the indigenous people are silenced by the discourse of the colonisers. Nevertheless at one point, between episodes in the epic or white narrative, the Zulu warriors are given a voice. This voice invokes the spirit of black death:

“Arise, great black Vulture,  
Devourer of other birds,  
Flap thy prodigious wings  
In the scorching face of the sun,  
And darken his dazzling eyeball.” (“Zulu warrior’s chant”, 1–5).

Significantly Slater’s most frequently praised and anthologised poems are precisely the poems which find inspiration in African idiom and indigenous literary forms (the *Dark folk* poems). Through their inclusion in anthologies Slater is acknowledged as having successfully colonised the indigenous aesthetic. The choice of these poems is testimony of their force. Slater knows the rhythms and expressions of the native tongue, and uses them skilfully and, it would appear, authentically.

In relation to these *Dark folk* poems the image of the vulture and sun is perhaps uncommonly subtle and complex. It is self-consciously literary, and for that reason belongs arguably within a sophisticated European rather than an African symbology. The darkening of the “dazzling eyeball” of the sun by the “great black Vulture” has a deep resonance in European culture and mythology. Pre-eminently the eye, which is also the narrative “I”, suggests a divine faculty of reason and perception. It is the white eye of the blazing sun, which is also the Son who dies and is reborn in victorious glory. The vulture that swoops up from below on “prodigious wings” is an awesome personification of death and the devil. It is an infernal spirit invoked by a heathen people.

The chant thus aligns the Afrikaners with Christendom and the Zulu warriors with the legions of hell. Ironically therefore the Zulu warriors damn themselves. Their speech is turned against them, betrays them. They speak, but in so doing they condemn themselves to hell. The very skill with which Slater reproduces the idiom and imagery of the indigenous tradition is used therefore as a weapon against the people to whom this tradition belongs.

In terms of its ideological formation it is entirely appropriate that the poem ends with Afrikaner victory and Zulu defeat at Blood River. It is a victory of Christianity over heathenism. The day of the Covenant testifies to that victory, and to the victory of myth over history.

The poem was published when large sections of the South African population were already well on the way to shedding their rural past. In this and other poems, notably *Drought* and *Dark folk*, Slater sets out to preserve in poetry a pre-industrial, arcadian South Africa. He uses a nineteenth-century idiom in describing the veld and, like Wordsworth, uses the idea of the rural

as a symbol of pre-industrial consciousness. Writing about the poem *Drought*, Sydney Clouts says that the theme is "space, distance, vastness, controlled by the voice of a poet for whom the preservation of scenes with historic significance and the evocation of a heritage of myth are of importance in a structure which has mnemonic ends as well: it preserves the past." (Clouts, 1971: 96)

The poetry of Roy Campbell (1901–1957) has been studied extensively. South African poetry is seen by some as beginning in fact with Campbell. At least two anthologies of South African poetry start at this point, ignoring totally everything that had come before. The search for a founding figure of a "true" South African poetry has led therefore to several figures: Pringle, Slater and Campbell (and recently Brooks). This absence of agreement on the origin is indicative of the displacement of the origin within the discursive field. The founding figure is original in the sense of not being derivative. He occupies the point of origin, there where South African poetry supposedly springs to life in the fulness of authentic being. It would seem, however, that the question of a South African poetic identity is highly problematic. How can we identify the offspring if we cannot name the father?

Michael Chapman regards Campbell as a key figure of the modernist imagination in South African poetry, saying that he had realised the possibilities "of utilising in tandem a sophisticated European imagism and the vitality of indigenous settings." (Chapman, 1984: 60) He argues, however, that the tradition of African exotica (which can be traced back beyond Rider Haggard to Pringle) is also an important feature of his poems:

And if Campbell is more assured in his use of language, more technically proficient and more cosmopolitan than earlier South African poets, his affinities are not simply with an avant-garde European symbolism, but in no small measure with the codes of hunter romance common to the last century. In reacting against the idylls of 'veld and vlei' poets, for example, he transformed such rural retreats into an equally romantic hunter's paradise, thereby displaying a flamboyancy which had antecedents within a British-South African Imperial tradition of African exotica (found especially in novels of Rider Haggard and the diaries of the frontiersman, R.C. Cumming). (ibid. 63)

While accepting that Campbell draws on the Imperial tradition of African exotica, I would argue that he portrays an Africa that has been wrenched from the pastoral idyll not simply by the Imperial hunter code but also by the disruptive and alienating violence of the industrial age. It is specifically this aspect of his work and its implications that I wish to explore.

In an article attributed to Campbell, limp Victorianism in South African poetry is denounced in favour of energetic expression. The creed announced here describes accurately Campbell's own poetic practice, and indicates by way of Nietzsche and Rimbaud two important influences on his poetry and thought:

It is curious that our country, so rugged and massive, should have produced such a polite, meagre, peeping, creeping, stealing style of poetry. The bushveld and the Karroo are no place for garden-rollers. . . . Nietzsche and Rimbaud with their

tremendous zest and vigour would do much to relieve the emasculation that Afrikaans and English-African poetry seem to have suffered from too close a contact with Victorian literature. (Campbell, 1926: 1,2, 65–66)

In respect of this glorification of energy in nature, Campbell is perhaps best approached by way of contrast with Slater. Writing within a predominantly Romantic idiom, Slater conceives of nature in terms of the organic unity of the instinct spirit. Thus nature is often personified. It is alive, in the same way as man is alive, by virtue of the spirit. In Slater's poetry man perceives his own being in the being of nature and discovers the volition of the spirit in both (as in the case of *Drought* for instance). Campbell, on the other hand, finds in nature not the spirit but brute energy. He conceives of this energy, however, in terms of technological society with its electrical power and distinct objects driven by their own engines. Thus the stallion in his poem "The zebras" is described as a self-contained and self-generated "Engine of beauty volted with delight" (13). Nature's energy is therefore portrayed in ambiguous terms. Like the Zulu girl and the serf, the zebras symbolise a type of primeval power. But in some or other way they are assimilated into or conquered by European technological society. Thus even the cobra, one of Africa's most lethal offspring, has been domesticated, has become a pet whom the poet engages in a dangerous game of seduction:

With breath indrawn and every nerve alert,  
As at the brink of some profound abyss,  
I love on my bare arm, capricious flirt,  
To feel the chilly and incisive kiss  
Of your lithe tongue that forks its swift caress  
Between the folded slumber of your fangs,  
And half reveals the nacreous recess  
Where death upon those dainty hinges hangs. ("To a pet cobra", 1–8).

This is an apt image of the colonialist's flirtation with Africa. Africa has been conquered and tamed. Savage nature has been outrivalled by the energy of advanced industrialisation. The cobra is awesome in so far as its elemental power is ultimately comparable, as in the case of the zebra stallion, with electrical voltage:

Dainty one, deadly one, whose folds are panthered  
With stars, my slender Kalahari flower,  
Whose lips with fangs are delicately anthered,  
Whose coils are volted with electric power (25-28)

The snake is frequently used to represent Africa's menacing aspect. In Pringle's poetry, for instance, it is used as a metaphor of the outcast bushmen with their poison arrows. Commonly it inhabits a desolate landscape of bare rock and burning sun. The speaker uses these associations but attempts in addition to bring about an identification with the snake on the basis of a shared experience as lonely and reviled outsiders:

I wish my life, O suave and silent sphinx,  
 Might flow like yours in some such strenuous line,  
 My days the scales, my years the bony links,  
 The chain the length of its resilient spine:  
 And when at last the moment comes to strike,  
 Such venom give my hilted fangs the power,  
 Like drilling roots the dirty soil that spike,  
 To sting these rotted wastes into a flower. (41-48)

The "rotted wastes" symbolises colonial society, what the speaker refers to earlier on in the poem as "men of my dull nation" (29). The poem overtly celebrates the revolt of the individual who in his solitude has built "a tower of pride" (40) from which to strike out at colonial society. By way of identification with the cobra it also enacts, however, a narcissistic fascination with the alienated self. The speaker engages in sexual play with an Africa that has been colonised, tamed, and reduced to the co-ordinates of his own being.

A fascination with primordial Africa as the epitome of primitivism is characteristic of the modernist imagination. In a sense the modernist imagination operative in this poem is neo-colonialist in that Africa is exploited for poetic ends. Contrary to its overt intention of intimacy with Africa and with nature, the poem registers their reification. Accordingly the tone, the style, the point of view, and the sentiment is detached, metropolitan.

The preface to the first issue of *Voorslag* magazine, co-edited by Campbell, asserts that one of the primary aims of the newly-launched publication is "to keep in contact with contemporary thought in Europe and America" (1926: 1,1, 5). Campbell was deeply offended by what he perceived as the bovine torpidity of South Africans. In an article published in the second issue of *Voorslag*, entitled "Fetish worship in South Africa", he argues that whereas Europe has reached consciousness as a result of its social complexity, South Africa is still unconscious: "There is no circulation, no nerve-telepathy. One aching stomach and that is all. The cells cohere in some sort of slipshod fashion but they all function in the same way. Mentally we have just arrived at the protozoic stage." (1926: 1,2, 11-12) The energy of Africa, which he had celebrated in the poem "The flaming Terrapin", written when he was abroad in soggy England, has proved on return to South Africa to be fanciful, a myth cherished by exiles and romantics. Once here Campbell ironically turns to Europe for intellectual voltage. What he finds in South Africa is merely a mindless and enervating prostration at the feet of a colour fetish.

These texts are characterised by a contradiction between the metropolis and the province, Europe and Africa. This contradiction finds focus in the image of nature galvanised by industrial energy. Further instability occurs in that each of these two topographies embodies, at different stages, shifting and conflicting values of freedom and restriction, energy and emasculation. These texts speak therefore of rupture, uncertainty, and transition. South African writing is moving, as is the society, from one formation into another, from the rural/agricultural to the urban/industrial, and in the process is reorganising its co-ordinates.



Increasingly South African English poetry by whites shows awareness of a basic contradiction. The poetry becomes increasingly conscious of its colonialist status, its European identity. It becomes selfconscious. Guy Butler (1918–) mythologises the contradiction, the inner conflict between Africa and Europe, as a cosmic battle between Dionysus and Apollo. His poem “Home thoughts” declares its intention to integrate the two modes of being, but succeeds only in defining their difference and upholding their mutual exclusion:

Apollo, come!  
 Oh cross the tangled scrub, the uncouth ways,  
 Visit our vital if untamed abysm  
 Where your old rival in the lustrous gloom  
 Fumbles his drums, feels for a thread of rhythm  
 To dance us from our megalithic maze. . . .  
 Oh let the lightning of your quickening eye  
 And his abounding darkness meet and mate,  
 Cleave, crack the clouds! From his brimming drum  
 Spill crystal waves of words, articulate! (125–130, 137–140)

Without Apollo’s lightning intervention, Dionysus is clumsy: he “Fumbles his drums”. Apollo is invoked because he represents articulation. He will give shape and life to Dionysus’ formless rhythm. His is a “quickenning eye” which will penetrate Dionysus’ “abounding darkness” and give birth to language. Apollo, who is aligned with the sun, is the active agent. Dionysus is passive. He is female, Africa as mother. The drum is his womb. Apollo is called upon to penetrate it violently: “Cleave, crack the clouds!” This is a sort of rape of Dionysian Africa by Apollonian Europe. Once the womb, which is likened to clouds, has been violently penetrated, it will produce “crystal waves of words”. What will have been born is discourse.

What has been born is the poem. The merging of Europe and Africa has not materialised. Instead it has been substituted by the poem. The poem is simply a metaphor of the union: it does not constitute it. Apollo and Dionysus, Europe and Africa, remain distinct, for they have been defined by the poem in mutually exclusive, dualistic terms. Their fusion is a linguistic sleight-of-hand, a myth. What is announced by the poem is their difference, their otherness, from each other. It is a poem of separation and longing. Europe yearns for, and simultaneously violates, its estranged other.

The poem was first published in Butler’s *Selected poems* (1975). Several years before this publication Butler had delivered a paper, entitled “The republic and the arts” (1964), in which he examines at length the relationship between European and African in terms of Apollo and Dionysus, and avers that “they cannot do without each other . . . they are complimentary” (Butler, 1964: 9). In dealing with conflict between black and white Butler invokes the Jungian notion of archetypes and sees the conflict in South Africa as generated primarily by the projection of the shadow archetype: “The characteristic emotion of South Africa is Fear. We are terrified of each other, not because we are so different, but because we are so alike . . . [W]e dread the

Black man because he symbolizes an anti-self, a portion of our natures suppressed and starved; and the Black man dreads us because we symbolize other human traits, mainly rational and intellectual, which his tribal culture did not develop." (ibid. 4)

Butler's paper illustrates the danger of the archetype petrifying into the stereotype. We are less inclined today to ascribe superior rationality to whites on the basis of a seemingly formal archetypal opposition derived from the Apollo-Dionysus myth. We see in it yet another evaluative Eurocentric conception in which the superiority of an intellectual Apollo over a bestial Dionysus is asserted.

The first book-length study of South African poetry is Miller and Sergeant's *A critical survey of South African poetry in English*, published in 1957. Miller and Sergeant argue that the early poetry is derivative in style, but that it slowly gives way to a poetry that is individual and authentically South African. An important element in the attainment of this authenticity is said to be the ability to identify with the plight of blacks and the incorporation into the poetry of indigenous forms of literary expression:

It is important to call attention to the truly significant note that was struck whenever the more outstanding of these poets contemplated the situation of the black races in a society organized and controlled by people of European descent. There is a curious sense of sympathy – one might even describe it as an intuitive understanding – which . . . finally appears at a later date as the aesthetic identification of the poet with his subject. . . . (Miller and Sergeant, 1957: 101–102)

Significantly the phrase "a society organized and controlled by people of European descent" is not developed. Instead liberal sentiments of identification with, and incorporation of, African perspectives are dwelt on. Yet it is the key phrase in this formulation. However earnestly the white poet sympathises with blacks, and however skilfully he incorporates elements of their culture into his own, he operates from within a social formation which is organised and controlled by whites. By virtue of this social formation, whites are placed in a position of superiority over blacks. By speaking on behalf of the oppressed, and by co-opting their discourse, white poets merely demonstrate the complete power exercised by whites to the exclusion of blacks.

It is only when blacks begin to speak for themselves – that is, when they renounce white patronage – that Eurocentricism in South African poetry in English begins to be replaced by Afrocentricism. The transition from European to African frames of reference involves a displacement of the established signifying systems rather than their extension. This transition enacts a rupture with the colonial past.

My analysis has confined itself, though, to the poetry of white English-speakers, and specifically to leading figures of the dominant liberal-humanist tradition. I have argued that the different conceptions of Africa in the poetry of Pringle, Slater, Campbell and Butler should be understood as predicated on differences in modes of articulation. I have tried to show that these modes of articulation are closely aligned with British and European modes, whether

picturesque, Romantic, symbolic or mythic. Because they are employed in a colonial context, they constitute a colonial discourse which enforces an ideology of white/European supremacy. This supremacy is mediated through seemingly neutral aesthetic procedures and is therefore perceived as "natural". It forms part of the discursive unconscious which is inscribed in, and motivates, the textual articulation.

The ideology of white supremacy should not be seen, however, as a monolithic doctrine centred on an essential meaning. I hope that my readings of the texts have made clear that white supremacism has as many meanings as there are texts which maintain it. It cannot be abstracted as a unified theme for it exists in the textual event itself, which cannot be repeated.

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