WILLIAM PLOMER'S AND SOL PLAATJE'S SOUTH AFRICA: ART AS VISION AND REALITY

THESIS

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ABSTRACT

This thesis essays a comparative study of William Plomer's Turbott Wolfe (1925) and Sol Plaatje's Mhudi (1930). Although writing from very different subject positions within the social order of the time, Plomer and Plaatje embody in their novels a strikingly similar vision of a South Africa free of racial barriers. Plaatje's version of South African history in Mhudi deconstructs colonial binarism by dramatizing not only conflict and difference but also co-operation and commonality. Holding the past up as a mirror to the present, it protests against racial injustice while implying the continuing possibility of reconciliation. Plomer reacts angrily to white hypocrisy and insists on the rights and humanity of his African characters, in the name of imperatives both moral and political. He seeks additional sanction for these by situating the South African race question in the context of a Western world slowly awakening to the consequences of modernity. During a time of political turbulence, both writers speak out boldly and confidently against the rising dominance of segregationist ideology.

The imminent inception of full democracy in South Africa has reanimated the relevance of these writers' vision of a non-racial social order. If one of the challenges facing the South African literary historian today is the reconstruction of a truly national literary tradition, then Mhudi and Turbott Wolfe would appear to be key works in such an enterprise. As different as

Plaatje's epic myth-making is from Plomer's modernist irony, both novels contrive to speak with a new voice: a national voice which expresses the aspirations of all South Africa's people. They are, moreover, novels whose survival seems guaranteed as much by their aesthetic qualities as by their ideological orientation.

The novels are examined against the backgrounds of South African society and colonial literary production. They are seen as milestones in the development of a liberal South African literary tradition. By breaking with the dominant oppositional mode, whether that of "white writing" or an emergent "writing black", Plomer and Plaatje exemplify a literature at once socially relevant and possessed of a prophetic vision that remains of significance in South Africa today.

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The work here is the product of my own effort and imagination; some of my errors were pointed out and I have attempted to rectify them. For such shortcomings as remain, I accept full responsibility.

CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

> There are voices crying what must be done, a hundred, a thousand voices. But what do they help if one seeks for counsel, for one cries this, and one cries that, and another cries something that is neither this nor that.
>
> --Alan Paton, Cry, the Beloved Country

I The Question of Race

This thesis is a study of two South African writers, Solomon T. Plaatje and William Plomer, and their pioneering novels about South Africa, Mhudi (1930) and Turbott Wolfe (1925).[1] The thesis aims to explore the thematic and discursive projects of the novels in their social and socializing engagement with the human problems of South Africa, with particular reference to race relations. The novels are first analysed individually, with attention to themes, style, authorial intention and historical significance, while a subsequent chapter essays a comparison between the two works.

Although these two writers view the divisive and destructive South African racial conflict from different race or group backgrounds, they approach it not as representatives of the one race or of the other, but as individuals. This statement must, however, be qualified. Plaatje states in the Preface to Mhudi

that his "Native venture" purposes "to interpret to the reading public one phase of 'the back of the Native mind'". This apparently biased perspective is denied by the multifaceted integrativeness of the narrative which follows. Plomer, on the other hand, has been accused by several recent critics of being a racist:[2] J.A. Kearney's observation that Turbott Wolfe, Plomer's eponymous hero, "turns out to be only more subtly racist" (64) than the other colonial characters in the novel has some cogency, given the instances he cites in support of his view. Yet Turbott Wolfe is a complex novel in which the author is simultaneously involved and detached, and what remains of greater importance is Plomer's humanizing response to the complexity of South African race relations, and the effects they have on the individual as an individual and not as a representative of a group.

Kearney's observations about Plomer's narrator and hero, although true in matters of fact, have the potential to mislead by embroiling Plomer's 'open' discourse in the quagmire of race as an issue in itself. In Turbott Wolfe, Plomer states quite emphatically through his narrator his anger with the "cumbrous wordy restrictions some oily bureaucrat had attempted to place on the warm heart of any human that saw the black man first not as a black but as a man" (105). The key words here are "man", and "human", and in Turbott Wolfe Plomer attempts to express the response of "the warm heart of any human" to his fellow human beings. If, further, the sort of objection voiced by Kearney is taken too seriously, then Plaatje's purview in his Preface to

Mhudi (21-22) could be read as chauvinist or "racist" also. I shall argue that, on the contrary, the discourse of Mhudi and Turbott Wolfe transcends racial categories and conventions to embrace wider human issues, that it portrays the human struggle to escape the narrow circles of restriction imposed by racial difference, domination, fear, hatred and injustice. Mhudi and Turbott Wolfe express the human will toward freedom and the human necessity for society to recover its true meaning of "the union of many persons in one general interest" (The Westminster Dictionary).

While there is no escaping the fact that Plaatje and Plomer, the one African and the other European, wrote from the perspectives of their group positions, then, what matters in their novels is the way they handle these perspectives. The pivot of both Mhudi and Turbott Wolfe is race relations (more specifically, segregation) in South Africa, and the unhealthy effects of race conflict on individuals and communities. Plaatje writes, in a retrospective fable, about what this has meant for his people; Plomer is concerned with what this situation meant for a particular young European and the people he knew both as companions and as social antagonists. Despite -- almost, to spite -- these situational matrices, Plomer's and Plaatje's novels dwell more on issues of positive human identity and communality than on the barriers of group identity which perpetuate race conflict.

Reference to the writers' backgrounds is necessary because

in the analyses that follow it will be seen that this factor colours their themes and approaches. Plomer's Turbott Wolfe, for instance, is also a response by an intelligent and concerned young man to a post-World War One world. Plomer uses the violence of South Africa's race conflict as a microcosmic instance of the unwisdom and hatred which fired the World War that engulfed Europe in destruction and caused the deaths of millions of men, women and children. The first appendix to Plomer's novel, "The Politico-Aesthete" (212-13), is thoroughly European in its concerns and references: Bolshevism and the Russian situation, Cubism, Dadaism, the works of Sigmund Freud, "post-War" society. But such matters, although primarily of European significance, also have universal implications which Plomer succeeds in weaving into his discourse on the South African predicament.

Plaatje's Mhudi, on the other hand, starts off with a local inter-tribal conflict; the narrative scope subsequently widens as the Dutch Voortrekkers and other groups enter the picture, and the tale becomes exemplary of the South African experience as a whole. In both novels therefore, although on different scales, specific, localized events are circumstantially affected and their broader implications come to assume dominance in the respective narratives.

Mhudi and Turbott Wolfe, then, are both narrated from the experiential perspectives of war and social conflict, domination, injustice, and the wrongfulness of the relationships which they engender. But within these perspectives, Plaatje and Plomer

suggest an alternative polity of relationships based on shared humanity, social justice and mutual interest, in the best humanistic and liberal traditions.

It remains to be answered why, almost seven decades after their publication, the two novels continue to attract as much attention and comment as they do. They were certainly not the only South African books of their day that examined the race issue. Other South African authors of fiction commented eloquently on racism in South Africa, denounced it with conviction and advocated sundry solutions: for instance, Douglas Blackburn, Perceval Gibbon and, of course, Olive Schreiner. (The work of these writers, essential to the emergence of Plomer's and Plaatje's novels, will later in this chapter be contrasted with another genre of South African literature, the novel of adventure.) But Mhudi and Turbott Wolfe remain, arguably, the most outstanding fictional works of their generation, for two reasons: first, the seemingly 'intrinsic' fact of their aesthetic excellence; and secondly, the 'extrinsic' importance of the values which inform them, their social, ethical and artistic convictions. The next section examines the contexts which these values address.

II Mhudi and Turbott Wolfe: Contexts

As suggested above, the importance of Mhudi and Turbott Wolfe

rests on the twin points of the South African national life and history which they engage and the values which inform that engagement.

It is significant that the two novels, both firsts for their respective authors, treat the issue of group (or race) relations in South Africa with a singular attention, and in broad social, political and ethical terms. South Africa is a multiethnic and multiracial nation, and relationships among the several ethnic and national entities have always been, and still are, conflictual. Such intertribal and interracial conflicts embrace every aspect of human life from the material (the land disputes in Mhudi, for instance), through the social and political (as in Turbott Wolfe), to the cultural and linguistic. Difference and conflict have therefore provided the raw material for every stage and movement in South African fiction, from the adventure writings of Haggard, through the folksy satire of Herman Charles Bosman, to the writings of the liberal realist school, black protest literature, and the angst-ridden writing of South African whites today. And what has received the greatest attention in South African literature is the subject of interracial relationships. Whether the theme is driven by the "poetics of blood"[3] in Sarah Gertrude Millin's novels, or the so-called "Jim-comes-to-Jo'burg" trope, or the liberal protest in a novel like Andre Brink's A Dry White Season, race and racialism, with their implications of injustice, anger and despair (and sometimes hope and optimism) remain the pivotal issue and focus of discussion.

As one critic observes in an essay on Turbott Wolfe, just as it is impossible to "discuss Uncle Tom's Cabin without mentioning slavery" (Herbert 171), so too is it wellnigh impossible to criticise or investigate South African literature without coming up against the issue of race:

> Turbott Wolfe must be seen, then, in the South African context, with discrimination, westernization, miscegenation, and all the other endlessly depressing polysyllables of that context never far from one's mind. (Herbert 181)

The hero and narrator of Plomer's novel, Turbott Wolfe, on arriving in South Africa to mend his health and earn a living, notices its polyglot, "extraordinary mixture of races" (62); and observes that "There would be conflict between myself and the white; there would be conflict between myself and the black. There would be the unavoidable question of colour. It is a question to which every man in Africa, black, white or yellow, must provide his own answer" (68). This latter observation also introduces another dimension to the narrative: the psychological consequences of race conflict, in this case, desolation and individual isolation. Kearney's observation that Wolfe is only more subtly racist than the others simply doesn't do justice to the terrible anguish and acute isolation the hero suffers in this fiercely racial setting. It is a setting that makes a jumble of his sense of identity and direction, as he finds himself stumbling from the pillar of one sense of identity to the post of another, going round and round in the circle of his isolation, an isolation bred by race antagonism which denies individuals their

human identity and the basis for a sense of community.

Most critics let slip from view the human anguish expressed in Plomer's novel, the desolate solitude a sensitive individual is forced to endure in the racial division of South Africa. Wolfe recalls of his unconsummated affair with an African girl that he was "so distressed by the steely intangible barrier that had been between me and Nhliziyombi" (105). It is this barrier separating race groups, a social institution invested with the power of taboo, more than any argument that could be put forth, that perpetuates racism and its unwholesome, debilitating effects on individuals. Chapter 2 of this study elaborates this motif of self-identity and loneliness in Turbott Wolfe. Most critics, in their concentration on the political and miscegenatory themes in Plomer's novel, fail to take into account the deeply human implications of the narrative. J.A. Kearney rightly identifies acute alienation as

> the presumed cause of Wolfe's departure, sense of failure, and terminal illness, which I take to be symbolic representations of Plomer's sardonic view of the state and typical role of liberal consciousness in South Africa. (61)

But I would argue that Plomer goes beyond a merely "sardonic view" to a more serious form of protest and critique which responds to the psychological crippling the South African situation inflicts on his hero.

Another important contextual reference in Plomer's novel is to the general question of human society in the world following the First World War. The scope of Turbott Wolfe is

internationalized through the exemplification of South Africa as a strife-filled and explosive situation, wasteful of human potential. In his autobiography Double Lives, published in 1943, Plomer expresses his outrage at the "greatest imaginable horror, that is to say, the war of 1914-18", horror "made possible" by a vaunted "Christian civilization" (158). Plomer argues that narrow-mindedness and its imposition of a blinkered nationalistic view of human nature had created the conditions of possibility for the World War; and significantly, Plomer saw the colour bar in the same terms, and hence the necessity for its abolition. "This was really the theme of the novel [Turbott Wolfe] which I had begun to write", Plomer concludes (Double Lives 159-60).

The myopia of racial/nationalistic chauvinism, and the consequent squandering of human potential in a world slow to wake up to the implications of modernity, are thus concerns at the heart of Turbott Wolfe. It is an essentially modernist novel which, in the best expressionist-modernist tradition, registers a complex response to a complex world. Besides politics, Plomer's novel also discusses religion, psychology, and morality, using the social intercourse of South African society as raw material and South Africa as a kind of laboratory in which these issues are probed and analysed.

Like Turbott Wolfe, Mhudi has implications beyond its immediate narrative engagement. The novel is set in the context of early South African migratory history, and depicts a world in a state of flux generated by competition for land and punctuated

by eruptions of war. The narrative resonates with twentieth-century South African social and political history.

Plaatje begins his story with a set-piece account of the Bechuana tribes, who, with their original, founding stock, the Barolong, are introduced as a settled, agricultural, organized society. Bordering them is the old Cape Colony, where political change will lead to the first contact between the Barolong and the Dutch Voortrekkers, with significant consequences.

Before the arrival of the Dutch, Mzilikazi, as emperor of the Matabele kingdom, controls, with the backing of his large, all-conquering army, the peaceful Bechuana clans. When eventually the Barolong rebel against the king and his taxes, Mzilikazi sacks their community, forcing the Barolong into flight. At the same time, in the Cape Colony, liberalizing English measures, especially the emancipation of slaves, have provoked Dutch farmers to move northwards, where they come into contact with the Barolong and Mzilikazi's roving armies.

The arrival of the Voortrekkers immediately alters the course and flavour of the narrative. The African communities which are sheltering the Barolong also welcome and shelter these fugitives from English rule (83-84), and the first party of Voortrekkers is hospitably treated by their African hosts (87). In Mhudi it is the Boers who first antagonize Mzilikazi by firing at his subjects herding their flocks (100). The first report of Matabele action against the Boers results in a Boer emissary hurrying to their African hosts for assistance (107), and yet

another one arriving to "support his appeal for relief" (111).

The leaders of the Barolong clans, with their Basuto hosts, respond immediately to these human appeals. This marks the beginning of the alliance between the Boers and their African hosts (an alliance which Plaatje in other contexts has suggested the latter have since had much cause to regret[4]). Mhudi is thus the story of an alliance between Africans and Europeans to end a common injustice, and the co-operative effort to defeat Mzilikazi is the most significant development in the plot of Mhudi. The defeat of Mzilikazi, putting to an end nearly a decade's reign of terror, ensures peace for the tribes he once dominated as well as for the Boers, guaranteeing freedom from oppression, and a chance, significantly, for survival.

Mhudi is, however, not merely a historical narrative. Plaatje invests his novel with ideological purpose. Plaatje scholars like Tim Couzens and Stephen Gray have convincingly demonstrated the links between the thematic issues in Mhudi and contemporary South African social reality. In their joint, seminal essay on Plaatje and his novel, they observe that:

> Plaatje's novel is structured so that the 1830s serve as a model for the 1910s (the effects of the 1913 Natives Land Act, for instance). By a process of logic, combined with a belief in the cyclical patterns of history, the 1910s become a time in which the past can be used as a means of predicting into the future, that is, to about now in terms of actual history . . . . historical precedent is always invoked when the action of justice is in question. The book is thus a remarkable achievement, where history is seen as both cause and example. (Couzens and Gray 213)

Mhudi, then, is a reflexive narrative that makes the present

a reflection of the past and the past a reflection of the present, so as to highlight the continuing injustice and the human necessity for all South Africans to collectively stand in opposition to the subjection of one man by another, as Boer and Barolong did against Mzilikazi. As a fictional complement to Plaatje's Native Life in South Africa, Mhudi aims at illustrating the racial injustice of the Natives' Land Act of 1913 which, had, in its effects on Africans, the same consequences that Mzilikazi's invasion of the Bechuanas and raids on the Boers had had on those victims. Thus Mhudi pointedly aims to remind the South African white power structure of the bitter historical irony of its actions.

This moral-ideological imperative is a central feature of Plaatje's narrative project in Mhudi. His significant prefatory statement of the novel's purpose offers a corrective alternative to the official (white) view of South African history, not simply from an opposite African point of view, but seemingly neutrally in terms of the facts as they are. For instance, the narrative will make it clear that it is the numerical superiority of the forces arrayed against Mzilikazi, rather than Boer racial superiority, courage or soldiery, that routed the Matabele. Without the crucial support of the Barolong allies, the Voortrekker parties would have stood no chance against Mzilikazi.

Again, the Voortrekkers, at a desperate, crucial moment, almost ruin their own chances of survival by attempting to cheat their hosts and allies out of the land they all collectively

need. Plaatje's dramatic portrayal of this act and the negotiation which settles the dispute amicably and to the satisfaction of the parties involved, ironically underlines the brutal injustice of the deprivations suffered by Africans through the provisions of the Land Act (see Mhudi 141-42).

Plaatje's stated purposes of adding a "Native venture" to the corpus of European-dominated South African literature (21), to illustrate "one phase of 'the back of the Native mind'" (21), and to encourage African children's "love for art and literature in the Vernacular" (21), are more than successfully fulfilled in Mhudi. Plaatje tells a heroic African tale within a remarkably African set of folkloric conventions, complete with illustrative background and dynamic characters in rapidly changing, often fascinating situations. The narrative is embellished and valorized with didactic, communal motifs and devices, such as proverbs, maxims and songs. In many ways, the story reinforces communal values and often invokes wonder and admiration for its characters' qualities and actions. Mhudi, the heroine of the piece, is an admirable woman of great courage: the story of her bravely facing a menacing lion "only two paces apart", is, according to the admiring Ra-Thaga, a folk legend that will live "as long as there breathes a member of our tribe" (69). (Contrast Mzilikazi's "The Bechuana know not the story of Zungu of old" [174-ff]). The novel as a whole serves to illustrate and reinforce communal values, not only heroic virtues but also shared everday experience, achievements, and even humorous

misadventures.

Plaatje's treatment of the Boers, even where they display their boorish clannishness, is as objective as his treatment of any of the other groups. When, for instance, he describes the Voortrekkers, on their entry into the narrative, as driving "into the hinterland in search of some unoccupied territory to colonize and to worship God in peace" (83), he does not mean this ironically nor invest it with hidden meaning: it is merely a stated fact, a detail among other details in the human tapestry of the story.

Mhudi is deeply humanistic. It values men as men, as humans, not group entities, criticizing only their foolish misdeeds which harm both themselves and their fellows.

Critics have levelled condemnation at Plomer's and Plaatje's thematic and stylistic handling of the subjects their narratives cover. The following chapters, in which the two novels are analysed, will pay closer attention to this. But no criticism has yet seriously undermined the discursive importance of Mhudi and Turbott Wolfe as interpretations of the South African social experience. In this role, as will be seen, both books are compelling, dynamic, and entertaining. In their different ways, the two novels engage the enduring issues underlying South Africa's race conflict. In so doing they have acquired that seeming 'timelessness' that traditionally distinguishes the classic.

The next section will give an overview of a literary genre

very different from the realism and social integrativeness of writings like Mhudi and Turbott Wolfe and the canon of the liberal realist school. This is colonial adventure and 'imaginary voyage' fiction, which is premised on blinkered exclusivity and Other-ing. The purpose of the section is to sketch the essential characteristics of the genre, so as to indicate the tradition of representation against which novels like Mhudi and Turbott Wolfe can be seen as a reaction, at once morally, socially and artistically inspired.

Essentially, it will be seen that, in contrast to the exclusivist racial or national vision of the adventure and imaginary voyage narrative, Plomer's and Plaatje's novels offer a vision of society, of human mutuality in a shared world.

III The Adventure Novel: An Overview

The adventure narrative is not necessarily only, but is chiefly associated with, European travel writing. Thus Anthony Pagden, in the Introduction to his European Encounters with the New World, observes that "Europeans have for long been preoccupied with the difficulties involved in encountering other worlds and their often fiercely 'other' inhabitants" (2). He notes that, for the European migrant, the spaces that separated him from the 'others' he was to encounter were "spaces of dissolution" (3) in which he "immediately found himself in the new and wholly unfamiliar world

on the other side . . . effectively isolated from everything that he had once known" (3). But the clash of cultures is a mutual shock, as Chinua Achebe has illustrated in his Things Fall Apart and Arrow of God. And while the "belief that travel involved not merely migration, but also an entering into 'other universes' is an old and enduring one" (Pagden 3), a perspective which highlights the crucial human element of mutual reaction, negative or positive, when one "other" encounters another "other", is comparatively recent and considerably less well established.

Sarah L. Milbury-Steen states, in her European and African Stereotypes in Twentieth-Century Fiction, that cross-cultural perception is basically a historical, psychological and sociological process where changes occur either internally in the minds of the (fictional) characters as they adjust to individuals of another culture, or externally in their modified behaviour (x). But, she points out,

> Unfortunately, the very complexity of this adaptive process, so difficult for most novelists to articulate, invites reduction through the use of stereotypes which often serve as simplification devices. (ix)

Mick Gidley argues in like manner (in Representing Others: White Views of Indigenous People) and wonders whether "it is ever possible for a member of one culture, perhaps especially a member of a dominant culture, to represent another culture - or even, just to hear the voices and truly see the sights of another culture" (8); he quotes Paul B. Armstrong, who questions if it is possible for one culture to use its own terms to speak about another without engaging in a hostile act of appropriation or

without simply reflecting itself and not engaging the otherness of the Other (8).

Many writers of adventure fiction did not even confront the challenge of representing the Other, and simply drew upon a stock of available stereotypes. The stories they wrote had no necessary relation to their own experience: as P.B. Gove observes, the adventure novel "may further apply to a mental act totally unconnected with physical locomotion" (4). Malvern van Wyk Smith notes that in the South African case, "much of our frontier literature was produced by writers who never or only briefly visited the Cape" (13), and cites Mayne Reid as an illustration of one "who never visited this country" and set his adventures in a "largely fictitious South Africa".

The autobiographic element is nevertheless significant in the interpretation of this writing. Many scholars have argued that colonial adventure novels are fables of identity -- that they work to reinforce the writer's sense of his or her own identity differentially. A case in point is John Buchan's Prester John, a novel preoccupied with "the white man's duty" in what van Wyk Smith calls the "full imperial phase" (12) of "a fierce but relatively short-lived literature of imperial and even jingoistic hegemony" (33). The self-justificatory function of such writing is clear: as Stephen Gray puts it, the imperial adventure romance was (and is)

> devised to propagate a case for the righteousness of white settlement and, in effect, the mandates by which the hinterland could be subdued. This was the stuff of expansionist dreams which, in South African English

> literature saw an end in the First World War, but which persists mildly in the pulp realm in the work of Wilbur Smith. ("Redefining the Canon" 66)

Against this background, Mhudi and Turbott Wolfe emerge as a fundamentally different type of text. Those whom Rider Haggard dismisses as "savages" in "the wide veldt and the mysterious sea of bush" (Allan Quatermain 3), Plaatje portrays in Mhudi as rational and virtuous, for instance the Basuto king Moshoeshoe, revered even by the Boers. It is easy to see why Sarah Christie and her co-authors in Perspectives on South African Fiction, are contemptuous of Haggard's adventure romances:

> Haggard's protagonists are not obliged to feel they have to defend anything to the locals, for the people who really count, the readers at home, will understand without question their intrinsic superiority as Englishmen. Only this sort of individualism is blinkered enough to find Africa romantic. (17)

Haggard's casual, swaggering protagonists, who come and go from Africa at will, vanquishing man and beast alike, are (like Crawfurd in Prester John) individualists whose "particular quests are private rather than socially integrative" (Christie et al. 18).[5]

The wide range of motivations and characteristics of the early adventure novel set in South Africa, can only be gauged from a reading of the texts themselves: they range from the purely psychological to the simple full-blooded quest for heroic thrills. Only the briefest illustration of these aspects has been attempted here, to serve as a background to the "socially integrative" literature that challenged and eventually supplanted the adventure romance.

IV The South African Novel of Social Integration

Gareth Cornwell has recently described this process of change in the conventions of literary representation as the phase of "domestication" of the South African novel. He suggests that between the heyday of the adventure novel genre and the emergence of the liberal tradition proper, there intervened a subgenre, the "genre of the 'tragedy of colour'," "almost wholly effaced in the critical tradition because of its participation in an intellectually discredited and morally tainted discourse: the discourse of scientific racism, the rationalisation par excellence of imperialism, colonialism, of apartheid itself" (75). This subgenre, whose leading exponent was Sarah Gertrude Millin, arose as "conscientious 'domestication' -- as an attempt to win the privilege of moral seriousness for the embryonic national novel tradition" (76). He adds that: "The colonial apologist like Millin discovers in the theme of race a moral vindication, a source of social and political identity with the emerging nation-state, a sense of independence from European cultural and intellectual tradition" (79). Thus while the 'tragedy of colour' had a certain ideological kinship with the adventure romance, it sought to introduce a new realism and moral seriousness, a new sense of social and national responsibility in its representations of South African life.

Among the earliest novels to challenge the blithely

Eurocentric and imperialist discourse of writers like Haggard, Ernest Glanville and Bertram Mitford, are Olive Schreiner's The Story of an African Farm (1883), Douglas Blackburn's Leaven: A Black and White Story (1908), and Perceval Gibbon's Margaret Harding (1911). Plomer and Plaatje, following later, broadened and deepened the scope by embracing the political in an attempt to adumbrate a new socio-political model of national character. Plomer explicity parodies the discursive characteristics of the trader-adventurer novel in Turbott Wolfe; in Mhudi, Plaatje offers a corrective perspective on African society, portraying it as fully human and developing, rather than static, as the adventure stories do. In portraying the 'domesticated' meeting of African and European, the liberal tradition's discourse focuses more on a shared humanity and the mutuality implicit in the very notion of society; it tries to discard the debilitating crudities of race difference and antagonism based on stereotypes. Mhudi and Turbott Wolfe are arguably the first South African English novels to accord full human stature to African characters, thereby initiating a process of dialogisation capable of giving equal voice to African and European in the social encounter in South Africa.

This gives support to the terms in which van Wyk Smith codifies the generic difference insisted on here, as the distinction between what he calls the "colon" and the "settler" impulse in South African literature. The discourse of the colon, who "never gives up his metropolitan identity, yearnings, and

pretensions", stands in opposition to the settler discourse which "encourages a literature of realism", is "rationalist, liberal and progressive", offering a "humanism of transaction and affirmation" (9). Van Wyk Smith points out that the "more realistic mode adopted by Schreiner . . . gradually developed into the socio-politically conscious realism of some white and most black writers" (15).

Douglas Blackburn's Leaven: A Black and White Story is one milestone in this process of development. Leaven, first published in 1908, appeared in a new imprint in South Africa in 1991, with an important and illuminating introductory essay by Stephen Gray. "The whole structure of Leaven, its very domestic geography, speaks of how the destinies of white and black are already interlocked, for ever intertwined", Gray states (xix). The novel is set in Natal and Transvaal and shifts locale as it relentlessly tracks the footprints of its protagonists, especially the African youth Bulalie, who leaves home to seek a living in the towns; it also focuses on the misfortunes of the young missionary Hyslop, whose attempts at "saving" Bulalie are ironically futile. The novel is a very close study of South African society, depicting domestic relations, religion, government, policing, the mines, the media, all the parts of a functional society, with Blackburn marshalling skill and detachment to scrutinize their real qualities, in what Gray describes as an "unflinching, bemused analysis" (65).

When Bulalie escapes from his village to venture into the

city, his steps are dogged by physical and emotional torture: blackmail, intrigue, jail, whipping, are among his experiences, often inflicted by whites in positions of responsibility. As a parallel motif, the zealous ideals of the young pastor Hyslop are thwarted not only by his black converts but by whites who actively try to stop his mission and induce him to act racially. He too is bewildered and defeated by the system. Gray maintains that in Leaven white and black are portrayed as sharing responsibility for the situation: "In Blackburn no one in Natal is exonerated; the system that involves all is diabolically clever; none can escape it. This is more than political satire, which is usually one-sided and partisan; this is the writing of a thorough, angry indictment of the whole" (xiii).

William Charles Scully dedicates his Daniel Vananda: The Life Story of a Human Being (1923) to the memory of the noted liberal politician, William Philip Schreiner; it opens with an important Preface in which the author indicts European attitudes in South Africa: "There is nothing related in this book which has not its counterpart in fact", he states (xii). Daniel Vananda invites comparative treatment with Leaven, for the books share a similar theme, that of the young African who leaves home and is exploited and maltreated at the hands of his white employers and the police, on the one hand, and African bullies on the other.

The narrative is set in the late 1800s in the Transkei region. Daniel's community is invaded by a combined European and Fingo force. In the forest to which he has escaped, the young

Vananda is wounded and captured, but his life is spared. His white master and rescuer sends him to school and Vananda learns a trade. Adventure follows adventure, and Daniel soon finds himself in jail. He also makes the inevitable journey to Johannesburg, to the mines. As in Leaven, the "Black Peril" issue is raised in Scully's book. Both novels challenge the stereotype of the black sexual aggressor by blaming the morally lax housewife who makes designs on young African male servants in her home. The newspapers raise the cry of a black peril and the magistrates duly pass heavy jail terms, and so the hypocritical white sense of outrage is appeased.

In many passages Scully abandons narrative for a thorough criticism of the way Europeans treat their fellow Africans. In such passages (e.g. 182-84) the tone is bitter. Despite this, there are passages of pure poetic beauty: Daniel Vananda's feelings, in their purity and innocence, are sensitively drawn, as are those of his first English master and rescuer, Vardy. Following Blackburn's example, Scully uses the life-quest of a young African to explore and comment on white behaviour, which both writers strongly disapprove.

In Margaret Harding (1911), Perceval Gibbon raises irony upon irony to comment on absurd aspects of the black and white encounter across an unnatural racial, not human, gulf. The novel insists that existence hinged upon an identification with racial difference and not a shared humanity, is the ultimate folly, if not insanity. The novel is set in a remote tuberculosis

sanatorium in the Karoo, run by the alcoholic Hester Jakes. His wife's life is devoted to hiding the shame of his alcoholism. Social relations among the patients in the clinic are equally unhealthy, and become even worse after the arrival from England of the free-minded Margaret Harding, who defies colonial custom by befriending the alienated Kamis.

The ironies in this novel are many, and revolve in the main around Kamis, an English-trained African doctor rejected even by the lowest of his fellow Africans. When Hester Jakes lies drunken in the road on a dark night, it becomes a pathetically absurd drama getting Mrs Jakes to accept the assistance of Kamis in rescuing him (chapter VIII). Again, when Kamis saves the Boer farmer's wife from a certain death out in the veldt, it is embarrassing to her.

The height of human absurdity is reached when a drunken Hester is unable to attend to a dying Margaret. Kamis could, and is present, but he is under arrest -- over nothing; and he is black and must not touch a pure white girl (chapter XVIII). Here pathos turns to bathos as Margaret's life is about to be sacrificed rather than saved by the hand of a black man. In Margaret Harding, then, Gibbon depicts human conceit and folly and holds it up to ridicule. No-one is spared; black and white alike are ignorant and inhuman in their treatment of their fellow man.

With Plomer, Laurens van der Post, Alan Paton and Nadine Gordimer, the liberal realist discourse enters a distinctively

politically-engaged phase of solidarity in the criticism of, and struggle against, segregation and apartheid as a national policy and social norm.

Van der Post's In a Province (1934) engages with the ubiquitous impact of the political on everyday life in South Africa. The novel portrays violent political clashes between black workers and political factions and the state's security forces. It offers a clear picture of how the injustices of state policy, itself violent, and European indifference and connivance, fan the eruptions of violence, and the loss of life and hatred which accompany and maintain these conflicts. In a word, van der Post condemns a system which thrives on the exploitation of Africans. He advocates a respect for human life and feeling, irrespective of colour, class or creed.

Alan Paton's first novel, Cry, the Beloved Country (1948), made an international impact in revealing to the world the state of affairs in South Africa. Its intense lyricism masks the hard-edged political analysis it contains, although Paton's sharp criticism of white hypocrisy is unmistakeable (see e.g. 80-81).

The writings of Nadine Gordimer have been censored and banned, for instance Burger's Daughter, for their forthright political stance. The corpus of her novels has maintained a politically-inspired vision of solidarity with the oppressed against the State's social policies. Of her own convictions as a writer, Gordimer has asserted that "Art is on the side of the oppressed" (243), and maintained that literature in the South

African context has an inescapable destiny: "Whether a writer is black or white, in South Africa the essential gesture by which he enters the brotherhood of man -- which is the only definition of society that has any permanent validity -- is a revolutionary gesture" (247).

What generated and still continues to affect the liberal realist tradition in South African literature, is the clash of cultures and interests in the meeting between African and European. Early European writers treated this contact very differently from the manner in which liberal writing, pioneered by Plomer and Plaatje, later came to treat it. Where the Haggardian romance dealt with an individual pitted against a hostile Other, the liberal tradition offered the "essential gesture" of transaction and affirmation, of a shared human world, a revolutionary social act in itself.

V Conclusion

This chapter has attempted briefly to trace the development of South African fiction, through attention to generic and thematic concerns, from the imperialist adventure novel to the liberal realist novel of contemporary times.

The chapter started by introducing Turbott Wolfe and Mhudi as novels of singular importance in South African literary history. There followed brief discussion of the early adventure

novel in South Africa and its ethos of exclusivity and racial hegemony, which contrasts so starkly with the projects of Plomer and Plaatje. Some of their precursors and successors in the liberal tradition were identified, together with the salient issues addressed in their work.

Plomer's Turbott Wolfe will be discussed in Chapter 2 and Plaatje's Mhudi in Chapter 3.

In Chapter 4, a comparative study of Sol Plaatje and William Plomer is attempted. While the goal is to identify the similarity of outlook in their novels, where contrasts occur, these will be identified and explained.

The study ends with a fifth and final chapter, summing up the goal and aims of the analyses of the previous chapters, indicating how Plaatje in Mhudi and Plomer in Turbott Wolfe have transmuted reality into art in a unified vision of South Africa inspired by humanity rather than race.

NOTES

1. Throughout this thesis, reference is made to the following editions of the texts: Sol T. Plaatje, Mhudi (London: Heinemann, 1978); William Plomer, Turbott Wolfe (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1985).

2. While acknowledging Plomer's humanism, the following have also cast doubt on his non-racism: Matthew Shum, "An Analysis of William Plomer's Turbott Wolfe", and Elizabeth A. Thompson, "Historical Consciousness in the African Poetry of William Plomer".

3. The term, from Coetzee "Blood, Taint, Flaw", is cited in Cornwell (75, 77).

4. Plaatje devoted his life to fighting racism in South Africa, playing a mediatory role between whites and blacks. His non-fiction writings, to which Mhudi is a literary complement,

dwell chiefly on the political and social problems of South Africa's racial conflict. See, especially, Sol T. Plaatje, Native Life in South Africa: Before and Since the European War and the Boer Rebellion (1916; rpt. 1982). The bulk of essays collected in the Plaatje Centenary Issue of the journal English in Africa also focus on race and, interestingly, discuss with rivetting clarity the events, places and central characters that appear in Mhudi. See English in Africa 3.2 (1976), especially 11-15, 20.

5. Concerning this individualism, P.B. Gove notes that the hero in 'imaginary voyage' fiction "questing for material gain through trade or plunder -- often undistinguishable means to the same end -- struggles to better his standing in a hostile world, from which he partly escapes by voyaging, and he may manifest an unscrupulous antisocial attitude much the same as that found in picaresque fiction" (The Imaginary Voyage in Prose Fiction 4).

CHAPTER TWO

TURBOTT WOLFE: THE INDIVIDUAL, RACE AND MODERNITY

> The diminishing of ignorance is, in a sense, the writer's raison d'etre.
>
> --William Plomer

I Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to analyse how William Plomer, in Turbott Wolfe , uses the experiences of an individual in a fragmented and racially polarized society to anatomize the whole of that society's structure in relation to the individual. Employing a mode of modernist expressionism, Turbott Wolfe is arguably the first novel to probe deep into the social and political psyche of South Africa in a formally appropriate manner.

Turbott Wolfe made a great impression on the reading public in South Africa upon its publication. Its significance for its contemporary readers seemed to lie in its pointed attack on racism and those twin pillars of South African society, the Church and the colonial administration. In retrospect we can see more clearly how the novel also went beyond these issues, to tackle the more fundamental, and quintessentially modern, question of the individual's relation to society. Although Plomer throws down many challenges to his readers' preconceptions and confronts a number of serious social issues, his belief -- like

that of his protagonist Wolfe -- in the achievement of an ideal solution to South Africa's intractable race problem seems to waver. By the end of the novel, Wolfe is seen to be suffering from the disease of modern intellectuals par excellence, a paralysis of the will compounded of scepticism and anomie. In its ethos and style, then, Turbott Wolfe is a singular trailblazer for the Modernist sensibility in the South African literary terrain.

Turbott Wolfe is also one of the most important works in what is commonly known as the "liberal" tradition of white South African writing. However politically tame the early avatars of this tradition may seem today, when Turbott Wolfe was first published in 1925, it created something of a sensation, especially -- but not only -- in South Africa. Reviews of the book veered from high praise to vilification. Among the press notices reprinted in Plomer's collection of short stories, I Speak of Africa (259-260), we find: "Full of significance and provocation. A notable book" (The Glasgow Herald); "Unique and new . . . No analysis can suggest the vital force of it. Volcanic, disturbing, almost devastating" (The Nation and Athenaeum).

In South Africa, the journal Voorslag, on which Plomer had worked in collaboration with Roy Campbell and Laurens van der Post, had this to say: "So far this country has produced nothing approaching it . . . . An extremely bold and sincere piece of work . . . . Under its bitter and sardonic exterior the book is a

very tragic and moving poem . . . something more than a portent". The Natal Witness declared it "the most vital novel about this country since The Story of an African Farm". But for the S.A. Nation, it was simply "pornographic", while the Zululand Times repudiated it as "Stinking fish."

Those inclining to this latter vein of opinion seem to have been in the majority, and considerable efforts were made to suppress the novel. Plomer himself records in his autobiography Double Lives that he was "amused to hear that Turbott Wolfe was [still] kept under lock and key in the public library at Durban, sharing that honour with Rabelais, Boccaccio, The Origin of Species and some illustrated books on classical sculpture . . . ." (162).

The heat generated by the early reception of Turbott Wolfe has long since died away, and yet it remains a controversial novel. Today, one might distinguish two broad modes of attention within which the novel may be read and understood, though this division is by no means exhaustive or mutually exclusive. There is a view which subjects the text to a suspicious, symptomatic reading, and comes to the conclusion that it is a thoroughly colonialist piece of work unable to transcend the discursive determinations of its author's race and class identity. This is essentially the conclusion reached by Matthew Shum in his impressive recent study of the novel. On the other hand one can accept the text at face value, as it were, by responding to its urgent authorial conviction and accrediting its liberal political

ethos in which both moral condemnation and political prophecy achieve clear and memorable expression. By choosing the latter of these two basic orientations, the argument which follows is not suggesting that the former is absolutely wrong, but simply less appropriate.

Appropriateness is assumed here, in very broad terms, as having to do with the social, ethical and political responsibilities of the critic working within a particular historical context. The relevant context here is the current climate in South Africa of reconciliation and hope for a future less tormented and marked by injustice than the past. Still less does this study wish to deny that Turbott Wolfe is in some ways bedevilled by indeterminacy: for instance, the novel's emotional investment is undoubtedly quite often at odds with its cognitive or intellectual content. Still, in all its assertiveness and non-assertiveness, determinacy and indeterminacy, and tantalization, Turbott Wolfe does maintain a basic idea: it is a document with a social purpose, a carefully worked novel expostulating political freedom idealistically, remaining at some level of its genesis and substance an affirmative act of faith in our common humanity.

In this chapter Turbott Wolfe will be examined in its political, satirical, symbolical, intellectual and artistic significations, as an example of Modernist literary expressionism. Here too, it is proposed to read the text biographically, in conjunction with Plomer's autobiography Double Lives and the biography by Peter F. Alexander. Where relevant,

other writings by Plomer will also be consulted.

Initial bearings are taken from two recent assessments of the novel. In 1986, Nadine Gordimer expressed these views about Turbott Wolfe and its author:

> Long ago, back in the early Twenties, a young man named William Plomer, who had been born of English parents in Louis Trichardt, educated in England, and then had come back to work for a farmer in Zululand, wrote a novel. It was called Turbott Wolfe, and more or less contemporary with the publication of Thomas Mofolo's Chaka, it was the first fiction to expose race prejudice and in particular racial sexual taboos from the point of view of a white narrator. It contained one sentence that shocked readers more, far more, than the idealized love affair between the narrator and a Zulu peasant girl. One of the characters in the novel says: 'Native question? It's not a question, it's an answer!'
>
> Now this brief statement contained the heresy, the appalling suggestion that blacks would take their lives into their own hands in South Africa, that their presence would not be 'solved' by white oppression, but by their own ending of that oppression. And although, in the 1920s, that must have seemed a remote possibility, sufficient foreboding was present in readers for them to be frightened by that book. I don't specify 'white readers' because I think it goes without saying that at that time, no blacks read the novel. What happened? There was no internal central administration to deal with it, but the library committees responsible for buying books refused to buy it, and if it had slipped in, removed it from their shelves. A number of bookshops refused to sell it. In Durban, Plomer was shunned and reviled, and there were so many threatening letters and vitriolic editorials in the newspapers that it was not possible for Plomer to live in a South African community any longer. He had to leave the country. And the book, never banned, disappeared from our literature for about 30 years. By the time it was republished anti-apartheid fiction was a dominant literary mode here that people had to accept, and his character's prophetic remark had been realized in movements such as the non-violent resistance campaigns, the pass-burnings and bus boycotts, and the rise of mass liberation movements. Events had overtaken prophecy; there was no sense in banning the book since it could not incite people to what they had already done. (11-12)

It has been necessary to quote at such length from Gordimer's essay on censorship in South Africa because it encapsulates the essence of the novel's "message" and succinctly adumbrates Plomer's dilemma at public reaction to Turbott Wolfe; a reaction he may have foreseen, and which, unconsciously perhaps, finds expression in the text as ambiguity. This ambiguity is manifested in the way the protagonist wavers in his commitment to solving the race issue through the "Young Africa" movement and its creed of miscegenation. It is signalled early in the narrative by Wolfe's reference to the failure of the French painter Gauguin in the South Sea Islands (73), who suffered harassment by the colonial authorities for taking sides with the natives against them. Gauguin's health was broken in part by the emotional stress consequent on this confrontation, exaggerated by the sensitivity and volatility of his own temperament. In his autobiography Double Lives, Plomer discusses public response to Turbott Wolfe, saying:

> I took the violence of these various reactions as evidence that the book was not without power, and it was perfectly plain that it had particularly stung the whites in that part of their psychological being where guilt and fear and self-deception in regard to the natives (who greatly outnumbered and surrounded them) had been wrapped away from the light of reason. (162)

Plomer quotes his father's view that he had "stirred up a hornet's nest", though -- he concedes -- it was "not without a sort of pride in what I had done" (164).

Although Malvern van Wyk Smith picks several holes in the text, he accepts nonetheless that:

> Turbott Wolfe, however, remains a milestone in our literature for its sheer exuberance, its bold reflection of the whole bazaar of every South African racial prejudice, its unflinching presentation of that ultimate taboo, a sexual relationship between a white woman and a black man (though even the iconoclastic Wolfe perceives it at first with "a cold physical terror"), and, perhaps most importantly, its registration of a crucial moment in South African English literature where the actual engagement with Africa emerges as a self-evident subject for literary speculation. Like the Fotheringhays, thoughtful readers must suddenly have realized "that although they had spent nearly all their lives in Africa, they had never begun to think of Africa." From now on, this would remain a major theme of South African English writing. (61)

In thus extrapolating Wolfe's comment on the Fotheringhays, van Wyk Smith, like Gordimer, touches exactly on the spot of the novel's main idea, namely the social engagement of whites with Africa, their adopted country, and the need for them to co-exist with African people on terms of mutuality. To adumbrate the context in which such an engagement is proposed, the following section makes a brief examination of the social background of the novel.

II Social Background

In an early commentary on Turbott Wolfe, Nadine Gordimer notes that

> Turbott Wolfe is one of those books that it doesn't seem possible could have come from the environment in and about which they were written and to which one reasonably looks for a clue in the particular, personal situation of the author. (165)

This comment is not just an observation of fact but an acknowledgement of the extraordinary sensibility, indeed sensitivity, of both author and text. William Plomer completed writing the novel at the age of twenty-one at Entumeni in Zululand, where he lived with his parents, running a shop. These facts are recorded in Double Lives, his autobiography published in 1943 (160). Entumeni is without doubt the original of Ovuzane, the central locale in Turbott Wolfe.

A close comparison of Double Lives with Turbott Wolfe indicates striking parallels between characters, scenes, situations and even conversations in the autobiography and the novel. For example, the unnamed congenial "stately old Lutheran missionary, a Norwegian . . . helped in his labours and in his domestic life by two or three Norwegian spinsters or widows and by native converts" described in Double Lives (148) is certainly Nordalsgaard in Turbott Wolfe (66); while Lucas, the Plomers' Zulu shop assistant, is undubitably the model for Caleb Msomi in Turbott Wolfe. Plomer even mentions in the autobiography that there was at least one individual who objected to the "inaccurate" portrayal of himself in the novel!

Peter F. Alexander in his biography of William Plomer reconstructs with care the various settings reproduced in the novel, Plomer's motivation in writing it, and the individuals on whom the characters in Turbott Wolfe are modelled. He writes:

> The details are worth stressing because they demonstrate how closely Plomer based his novel on the reality of South Africa as he had seen it. The plot, the arrangement of the characters, and above all the

> central themes of the book were his, but the characterization and description of Natal society were taken almost entirely from life rather than from his imagination. This makes the novel a peculiarly valuable document, not just as a seminal work of literature.[1] (80)

In Double Lives Plomer describes life in the Natal region as he and his parents saw and experienced it. Plomer excoriates colonial European manners and attitudes as parochial, mean, petty and brutal. He does not spare some of the pretentious Zulu natives, either. These attitudes find corresponding expression in Turbott Wolfe: what community is there more choked with parochialism and slander than that of the inhabitants of Aucampstroom, patterned after the Molteno community recalled in Double Lives (127)? What men are more unrepresentative of the noble traditions of European culture and civilization than Schwerdt and Bloodfield?

Turbott Wolfe is situated in South Africa, and is an observation of life in South Africa, although the novel distorts geographical and physical reality. But of higher import in the narrative is the seeming universality of vision the author expresses through his narrator-protagonist and central characters, especially Friston and Mabel van der Horst. It is undoubtedly this universality of vision, a vision deeply concerned with but simultaneously transcending the local and parochial, that is responsible for the remark by Gordimer quoted earlier: that Turbott Wolfe somehow does not seem to have come from the environment in and about which it was written. Although the pivot of the novel is race relations in South Africa, the

characters also debate wider issues such as Bolshevism, religion, psychology, the world as global village (see especially Turbott Wolfe 138), and -- of particular interest -- the "slow birth of the individual in the modern world" (138).

In the complex, sophisticated, and highly intellectual discourse of Turbott Wolfe, these issues are fused with the focus on race and lend the narrative a particularly humanist and universal ethos imbued with modern thought. For instance, "Christian civilization" and its rigidities are sharply criticized in Turbott Wolfe, and in Double Lives Plomer writes:

> It appeared that Christian civilization had not only failed to prevent but had made possible what seemed to me then the greatest imaginable horror, that is to say, the war of 1914-18; and that through the workings of puritanism, whether of the Catholic or Protestant variety, it had built up a false conception of life and by imposing this conception had widely distorted human nature. (158)

It is just such a false conception of life and its imposition on social interaction, thus distorting human nature, that Turbott Wolfe sets out to expose. Plomer's protagonist feels uneasy in white society in Africa, not because he is unconscionably haughty but because he is too human to live by the inhuman code governing white relations with blacks, or even among whites themselves. Flesher and Bloodfield, a composite type of the white colonial, are mean and uncultured, and have no qualms about destroying Wolfe, or of castrating and murdering a "nigger"; and the Church, represented by the Fotheringhays who are silent accederers to the racist code, is a failure in Africa. Plomer depicts a brutal, repressive society, one that his protagonist is unable to accept,

and which finally disillusions and destroys him. The message seems to be that the power of social institutions is too much for the individual will: a favourite theme of the Naturalist strain in modernist literature.

Plomer recounts in Double Lives discussions with his sensitive and intelligent mother about world affairs and world peace. He writes:

> What was even more admirable was her conviction that narrow patriotism and exclusive racialism or nationalism, both in politics and economics, had led up to the World War and would lead up to another unless some form of internationalism could be brought into being that would enable men to put their energies and apply their science to something better than murdering one another wholesale. She saw clearly that the League of Nations must fail unless there was a change of heart . . . . Any of the saner polities, as we envisaged them at Entumeni, would necessarily provide for the abolition of the colour bar. This was really the theme of the novel which I had begun to write. (159-60)

In the same passage Plomer goes on to remark: "It will be enough to say that Turbott Wolfe himself was an improbable and ineffectual Englishman who made a sojourn in an imaginary African country (not wholly far-fetched) where he became a negrophilist and encouraged miscegenation. There was not much of a story, but the story was not the point" (160). In this view the "story" of Turbott Wolfe is merely the vehicle for the expression of the complex emotional response of a young man to the world of the 1920s. This encompasses not only the colonial experience but also contemporary history, thought and beliefs, perhaps especially the question of the individual's insecurity in the complex and fragmented structures of modern scientific society: concerns at

the very heart of modernist tendencies in artistic form. Both the content and form of Turbott Wolfe conduce to such a reading.

III Plot Development and Theme

Turbott Wolfe, in plot summary, is the story of a lonely, artistic young man who comes to Africa to repair his health, engages in trade in an African community, is alienated by most of his fellow Europeans, loves Africans, and agrees -- at the suggestion of his friends, African and European -- to the formation of a political movement to secure African rights; however, he loses his nerve at the last moment and abandons both project and Africa, returning to England with frayed nerves and deteriorated health to die there.

The story is recounted by the protagonist after whom the novel is named to a frame narrator called "William Plomer". The said William Plomer introduces the narrator as a former schoolmate (57). Beyond this broad but brief introductory framing, there is the barest of authorial intrusion: no more than an occasional interpolation to remind the reader that the narrative is in the actualized voice of the dying Wolfe. At the end of the narrative "William Plomer" announces the inclusion of three poems by Friston, a central character in the novel, as having "their places in Turbott Wolfe's story" (214). The link between the real Plomer as author of the novel (and Friston's

poems!) and Turbott Wolfe as his fictional alter-ego is strong but complicated, and we shall not broach it at this point.

Before investigating the development of the plot in Turbott Wolfe and considering its thematic approaches and concerns, it is necessary to recall Stephen Gray's observation of the difficulties the novel has posed for researchers and the necessity therefore to "respond to the work in the work's own terms". Gray notes that:

> The real shock of Turbott Wolfe is that, while satirizing the society around him, as all agree, Plomer is also sabotaging its most reliable form, realist fiction. The form of Turbott Wolfe itself is otherwise -call it phantasmagoria, a stream-of-consciousness, a dream-memoir, a negrotesquerie - but not a rational realist novel. An alternative type of fiction implies an alternative world view - and, for that matter, an alternative society, racial charter, human marriage, and so on - and, the real point, an alternative sensibility. The failure of many critics to begin to confront this issue is an index of their inability to respond to the work in the work's own terms. (197-98)

What this entails is responding to the novel's intelligence, intuitiveness, super-sensitivity, and sensuousness; in short, to understand it in the manner recommended by Friston, "with the nerves":

> "I do not tell you what I think: I tell you what I feel, which is what I dream, which is what I know. I have reached the pitch of understanding with the nerves. I look forward to the great compromise between white and black; between civilization and barbarism; between the past and the future; between brains and bodies; and as I like to say, between habit and instinct". (188)

In her essay on Turbott Wolfe, Cecily Lockett approaches the novel from a perspective similar to that of Gray, concluding that "Turbott Wolfe expresses with innovation and power the often

subconscious dreams, prejudices, fears and difficulties of the modern sensibility, alert to the complexities of psychological and cultural transplant" (34). Turbott Wolfe's failure, as an individual, stems from his entrapment as a sensitive, idealistic person in a moribund, anachronistic community. In the narrative he is only animated when in conversation with the lively, perceptive and 'modern' Friston and Mabel; with the absurd Fotheringhays and 'uncivilized' types like Schwerdt and Bloodfield, he listens, observes and keeps to himself the pain and degradation he experiences.

The narrative opens with Turbott Wolfe who, "about to die, at no great age, of a fever that he had caught in Africa" (57), is about to tell the story of his life to "William Plomer". The frame narrator listens -- and observes -- as Wolfe recounts his experiences in Africa: "All the time that he was talking he seemed profoundly excited, and now and then his gestures became, like his narrative, erratic . . ." (57-58). The key words here are "profoundly excited" and "erratic", for they characterize the charged emotional quality of the book. Indeed, it is this emotionally pressured and erratic selectivity of recall and narration that has led critics to view the novel as "chaotic in structure", as Roy Campbell put it (126-27); or as "striking zigzag across the plod of events and yet never missing the subtlest paradoxes" (167), as Nadine Gordimer has noted.

The frame narrator indicates, however, that Wolfe's erratic account is not without "an assured grace" (58) in its unfolding.

The narrative's distortion of sequentiality is neither merely perverse nor incoherent: it is logical and organised around a principle, a principle of emotional integrity rather than the physical concepts of space and time, which, appropriately ordered, conventionally accord plausibility to a narrative. This has long been recognized as a typical Modernist aesthetic strategy. In a compendium on Expressionism, R.S. Furness indicates that for the expressionist artist,

> More vital emotions, more dynamic powers of description were extolled, a creation from within, an intense subjectivity which had no reluctance in destroying the conventional picture of reality in order that the expression be more powerful. (3)

The frame narrator William Plomer notes Turbott Wolfe's "intense natural sensitiveness" (58) and transcribes the narrative exactly as Wolfe recounts it, "erratic" but achieving coherence through the feeling that informs it. Again, Furness notes that this attitude portrays the need for

> the expression of a subjective vision regardless of mimesis, a concern for human life, a concern for man crushed by pitiless machinery and ruthless cities which was far more intense and poignant . . . . the emphasis on inner vision, on the creative powers, on the imagination above all . . . . (3)

Wolfe, who describes himself as possessing "an extreme sensitiveness" (58), has been ordered to Africa for health reasons (58), and to support himself is to be "started with a trading-station" (58). The novel's opening gambit parodies the opening formulas of many an adventure and adventurer-trader novel, like John Buchan's Prester John, but its engagement with its subject is quite different from that of the swaggering

heroism and myth-serving of the Haggardian novel. Turbott Wolfe falls within the class of "the political assessment tradition" of European discourse on Africa, as John Cullen Gruesser defines it in a recent study (1 ff., 161 ff). Turbott Wolfe is not included in that study but its broad themes of African emergence from colonialism, and its vision of miscegenation, make it a precursor of many works with similar themes written from a Western point of view.

In Africa, Wolfe immerses himself in various artistic and cultural pastimes, including socializing with Africans. When he visits a fairground in the city of Dunnsport, he is "a little startled to find an extraordinary mixture of races at the fair", a "harsh polyglot gaiety", and it comes upon him "suddenly" that "I was living in Africa; that there is a question of colour" (62). Wolfe reads out the diary entry he made on this decisive occasion, which ends with a description of a social encounter quickly turning into a racial incident: a white man attempts unsuccessfully to flirt with a woman, and "the idle crowd breaks out with lascivious comment, seeing her to be not white" (64).

"I began to concern myself with the colour of people's skins", Wolfe comments (64), and adds that he found himself "looking at the natives with new eyes. I suspected myself of taking sides with them" (64). An incident occurs which "seemed oddly to confirm my suspicion" (64). Leaving Dunnsport where he had gone to keep an appointment with the doomed publisher Tyler-Harries, and returning home to Ovuzane, he is snubbed at the

local train station of Aucampstroom by his white neighbour whom he had attempted to greet. The encounter is shocking to the fastidious Wolfe, and he goes to seek the advice of the missionary Nordalsgaard, who is extensively described in respect of both innate qualities and external features (65-68). Nordalsgaard is reported to have "an immense influence over the natives" (66); and because of his quality and that of his housekeeper Rosa Grundso ("The natives loved her for her good heart. She was as sound as a bell"), Wolfe feels "utterly soothed" (65) and "fortified" (68):

> I was fortified against struggles that I knew would come. There would be conflict between myself and the white; there would be conflict between myself and the black. There would be the unavoidable question of colour. It is a question to which every man in Africa, white or yellow, must provide his own answer. (68)

This observation is significant: it illustrates the existential peril and alienation of modern-day man, here hinging on the issue of colour in a multiracial society. As Wolfe observes, he would find neither comfort nor reassurance from white or black; he is doomed to his individual isolation and helplessness.

After the snubbing at Aucampstroom by a fellow European, Wolfe is again assailed by a European couple, Bloodfield and his sister-in-law. He is confronted for having "blooming niggers" in his home at Ovuzane, when he is working out a musical composition with them (70). Wolfe describes Bloodfield and his companion as "ill-mannered . . . gauche" (69). Then Wolfe commits the offence of attempting to persuade the white lady to sit with an African woman for a painting. The white woman objects; the story "even

got into an offensive little newspaper that they print in Aucampstroom, cautiously and vulgarly worded" (71), and Bloodfield never speaks to Wolfe again in all the years he resides in Lembuland.

Wolfe reports that:

> I began to learn the hard lesson that in Lembuland it is considered a crime to regard the native as anything even so high as a mad wild animal. I was so surprised that I began to seek with keenness for information about the relations between blacks and whites in those parts. I set myself to find out all that I could about the blacks and whites themselves, about their points of view; and about missions and missionaries. I began to ask questions without number, travelling farther afield. (71)

Not only is there a physical travelling farther afield by the narrator, but the narrative spreads out to take in other characters active in the story, like Caleb Msomi (Wolfe's shop assistant), Flesher (another farmer like Bloodfield), the Reverend Justinian Fotheringhay and his wife, the heroine Mabel van der Horst, and Friston, among others; and to include details about the history of Aucampstroom town. This spread of detail is not thrown in haphazardly but elaborately deployed to offer a series of perspectives on the developing theme of the narrative, namely race relations, and beyond that, human relationships generally. For, as we have suggested, in Turbott Wolfe the lineaments of larger universal issues are constantly visible beneath the surface concerns of the narrative.

Turbott Wolfe's deliberate quest for opinions concerning race relationships is a psychic odyssey as well as a search for a social identity. In an essay on Modernism, Peter Faulkner invokes

T.S. Eliot's observation in The Sacred Wood that the "only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an 'objective correlative' . . . a set of objects, a situation, a choice of events which shall be the formula" (25), and notes that "the process by which the writer's emotion is expressed is thus an indirect one" (26). In effect, Faulkner states,

> [The writer] does not merely announce his feelings, he renders them fully and delicately through the appropriate 'set of objects . . . situation . . . [or] chain of events'. This gives an important insight into the way that modernist poems and novels often work, their structure expressing an emotion rather than putting forward an argument. And it also makes clear, what is sometimes not recognized in Eliot's criticism, that the final value is emotion rather than some classical idea of order. (26)

The abrupt transitions and shifts of emphasis in Wolfe's narrative are thus patterned according to emotional symmetry rather than spatial and chronological order. In the course of his mission to seek out all he can about relationships between the various race groups in Lembuland, Wolfe actually goes "to look at Flesher" (72), whom Caleb, Wolfe's shop assistant, had mentioned to him, and reacts convulsively after seeing the man:

> Living alone, I could not help dwelling on those people in my thoughts far more than they were worth. Give me a good old criminal lunatic any day, rather than ask me to breathe the same air as Flesher and Bloodfield: I should feel so much more at ease . . . I turned my feelings, in escape from the unclean idea of Flesher and Bloodfield, far too much into sympathy with the aboriginal . . . . I was losing my balance. I found myself all at once overwhelmed with a suffocating sensation of universal black darkness. Blackness. I was being sacrificed, a white lamb, to black Africa.
>
> It may have been a disorder of the nerves; it may have been prevision. In consequence I went oftener away to Aucampstroom. (73-74)

Wolfe shifts to a description of the town and its inhabitants; but not for the sake of mere social detail: the town of Aucampstroom and its people exist as a source of existential horror for the protagonist. He describes it as a mean and tawdry place defined by "a great deal of backbiting" (75). It is in Aucampstroom that the Reverend Justinian Fotheringhay lives with his wife, and both are satirized as anachronisms. Wolfe goes into considerable detail about the cluttered claustrophobia of their lives, before the narrative's attention shifts to Francis d'Elvadere, the "voluptuous pioneer", "a very different type from the voortrekker". Mrs Fotheringhay had mentioned him to Wolfe in conversation, and he motors up to the mountains "for the sole purpose of meeting the man d'Elvadere" (85). Wolfe admires this somewhat Nietzschean character for the aristocratic contempt he displays toward the other colonials, and for the heroic manner in which he goes his own way (85-87).

Wolfe now gets to a central incident in his life in Lembuland: a love affair with an African girl. In describing her great beauty he launches into a diatribe against the forces which threaten to corrupt it, "the missions, the poor whites and the towns" (87), but particularly the Christian missions which, he claims, have brought benightment rather than light to Africa: "Christianity is dead. It is a lost cause . . ." (88). Wolfe continues his tirade, now directed against science and civilization: science and civilization destroy humanity, the vital beauty of the individual. Again, this Noble Savage

discourse reflects the modernist concern for the survival of the individual as fully human in the modern age. Wolfe views the modern world of scientific civilization as an "obscene civilization that conquers everything" (89), and, significantly, considers that Nhiliziyombi -- as an idea rather than an individual -- would be killed by exposure to this obscene civilization.

The protagonist cannot consummate his love for the Zulu girl because he is prevented by "a great forbidding law, like all great forbidding laws, subcutaneous" (93). Wolfe is rendered impotent by this great unwritten code forbidding inter-racial relationships -- unlike most of his white neighbours, including Bloodfield, he observes, who had black mistresses "and coloured children" (89).

Considerable coverage is given to the "bitter love-making" (92) of Wolfe, recounting his "harrowed feelings" (97) at this relationship blocked by the unwritten code of race ethics which he cannot help but recoil in terror from breaching. Instead he writes down his feelings of torment, "to keep a record of emotion in the form of a journal"(97). The entries in Wolfe's diary are remarkably lyrical and poetic. One entry reads: "Fresh from you I am dazed the wintry sun declining in a thin wind I walked among the mango trees lighting cigarettes under my coat I am dazed the smoke dispersing" (99, italics in original). The entries record the intensity of Wolfe's emotions and the tortured feelings he perforce endures in this unconsummated love affair: the language

is charged, highly subjective, unconventional. In an essay on the language of modernist fiction, David Lodge observes that this language is

> experimental or innovatory in form, exhibiting marked deviations from existing modes of discourse, literary and non-literary . . . it is much concerned with consciousness, and also with the sub-conscious or unconscious workings of the human mind. Hence the structure of external 'objective' events essential to narrative art in traditional poetics is diminished in scope and scale, or presented selectively and obliquely, in order to make room for introspection, analysis, reflection and reverie. (481)

The extracts from Wolfe's diary present in peculiarly concentrated form the subjective pressure felt in the language throughout the novel.

In the novel, at the thematic level, Friston wishes for a compromise between habit and instinct (188): it is clearly instinct which prompts Wolfe to adore and lust after Nhiliziyombi, while it is the (un)coded habit of the colour bar, the lynchpin of a racially divided society, which is forcing him away from her. When, later, the "Young Africa" movement emerges, with its creed of miscegenation, it presents itself as a deliberate effort to smash this bar (141, 144).

The same day that Wolfe receives a letter proposing the formation of the "Young Africa" movement -- from "THOSE WHO KNOW" -- he also gets one from Flesher, presumably, accusing him of "hobnobbing with niggers" and adding darkly that "there are others besides the Government that will get their knife into you" (102). The one praises him for his good work among the native people and invites him to help them politically; the other

threatens him with death. The latter letter can be interpreted as an expression of Plomer's suspicion of authority: thus everywhere in Plomer's work institutional authority -- government -- is an antagonist that would get its knives into individuals, that inhibits rather than furthers social interaction and freedom. Wolfe is incensed by the terms of his trading licence, alerted rather nervously to read it only at that point in time: it is full of restrictions (103-105) which he has been violating in consorting with blacks. He considers this disgusting:

> the cumbrous wordy restrictions some oily bureaucrat had attempted to place on the warm heart of any human that saw the black man first not as a black but as a man; so distressed by the steely intangible barrier that had been between me and Nhliziyombi; that I was almost driven on the hot impulse of the moment to that political interference so expressly forbidden. (105)

When indeed the Government, represented in the person of Colonel Valdarno, designated "Commissioner for Lembuland of the Department of Aboriginal Protection", contacts Wolfe, the communication takes the form of a threat (197). This is the climax of the narrative, and soon after this confrontation with officialdom, Wolfe leaves Africa. Plomer clearly means to satirize colonial authority in the title designation for Colonel Valdarno: when this official accuses Wolfe of making money out of the Africans, Wolfe responds:

> "Yes . . . I have; though it's none of your business. And I have done it with their goodwill, which is more than your Department ever gets, collecting ridiculous quantities of revenue, for alien purposes, from pauperized blacks". (203)

This direct accusation of extortion rather than "protection" is a

trenchant criticism of the self-deception by which the colonialist regime justifies its activities.

Wolfe backs out of the "Young Africa" project mainly because of fear of "official or ecclesiastical or even private rebuke" (145). It is partly this fear of reaction that induces Wolfe to cringe at Mabel's practical implementation of the miscegenation ideal by marrying Zachary Msomi. Wolfe believes she is "going out to suffer" (103) in this liaison deemed by colonial authority a "loathsome unnatural marriage" (207).

Turbott Wolfe departs Africa forever, before officialdom can forcibly eject him "lock, stock and barrel!" (207). He departs because he can no longer tolerate a brainless, parochial society against which, as an individual, he is powerless. He tells his shop assistant Caleb before leaving that in England he will have the freedom to do many things, including paying "a visit to Russia to study Bolshevism" (200), which should help him to understand a little more about the character of the complex, radical and sophisticated young Reverend Friston. Not that England will automatically provide the hapless Wolfe with congenial society: "In England I shall be pointed at as an eccentric, because I try and use my brains" (200). Wolfe then goes on to state that propagation of the species "any fool can do" (200), but he has transcended the mundane plane and "reached a point where life offers nothing but a few sensations, more or less indecent, which I know are only illusions" (200). The unstated meaning behind this assertion is reflected in the

narrative's entire frame of reference: the necessity for Man to transcend the parochial and mundane plane of national and racial identity and aspire to a higher level of awareness, to breathe the air of freedom, to let instinct tempered by reason -- rather than "habit" -- rule his life, and so usher in a new, modern phase of human existence. Although both Wolfe and Friston themselves fail in this project, their example points the way.

In one passage of Wolfe's lyrical diatribe (117-18), he states:

> Even the vast fabric of government, the preposterous structure of officialdom, had been set up to conceal and control what could not be hidden or ordered: it was denied by the mere existence of that which it sought to restrict. (118)

At the level of our reading of the novel, that which "could not be hidden or ordered" is Friston's "nervous" awareness of the emergence of the individual in the modern world (138). This is the vision of the "Young Africa" project, thwarted by preposterous officialdom and its servitors, like the uncultured Flesher and Bloodfield. Friston speaks of the "slow birth of the individual . . . emerging with infinite travail from the womb of time" (138). Scholars of the art of modernist Expressionism emphasize not only its intense energy of expression but its humanist and humanitarian ethos as well. Thus in his book Expressionism, Furness, taking a broad view embracing Dostoevsky, Nietzsche and Strindberg as writers participating in the expressionist project, indicates their

> rejection of normal canons of thinking and feeling, in the need for a daring transvaluation of values . . .

> the need for a spiritual revival, a New Man born of suffering and passion . . . [to stand] beyond good and evil, a frightening, and yet liberating visionary. (10)

The emancipation which awaits the new individual is ambiguous, fraught with the dangers of nihilism.

Wolfe's narrative ends with two appendices which the frame narrator implies shed important light on the novel. Consisting of two poems and a satirical sketch, they are writings, purportedly found among Friston's papers, which relate obliquely to the quotation from Furness, above. One of the poems goes as follows:

> MANIFESTO: BY A MAN IN A TRAP
>
> With monkey shadows on a screen
> You mock me now, but I can wait.
> I cease to be, as I have been,
> Intimidated by a fate.
>
> I yawn, when I was used to wince,
> At such clandestine vileness done -
> Fear has withered swiftly since
> HORROR was written on the sun.
>
> Doors, mouths, and periods open, shut:
> Time will not give what time has lacked.
> I am constrained to play a part -
> An actor, only free to act. (215-16)

The poem evokes the figure of the new man emerging in modern times, who will cease to be intimidated by a fate; he is in a new period that is opening; he can think, he is fearless. The only cloud on the horizon is his own self-reflexive awareness of the degree to which he is an "actor, only free to act" -- his awareness, perhaps, of the disjunction between his 'inner' freedom and 'outer' social persona. In the resulting alienation and self-fragmentation, he is:

THE POLITICO-AESTHETE

> a man, fortunate or unfortunate, whose existence is hemmed in by wireless telegraphy . . . He staggers, poor man, under the weight of the past; and he struggles, poor man, under the load of the future. He has not got over the French Revolution when he is faced with the Russian. He has not digested the Renaissance before he is confronted with Cubism. Dadaism he finds easier. He would like to focus his attention on the point where the rational in his character coincides with the concupiscible; but is it really his character, he wonders - ?
> . . . "Post-War", murmurs the Politico-Aesthete . . . . (212-13)

The appendices indicate the scope of the charged metaphors the narrative in Turbott Wolfe is made to bear. The Politico-Aesthete is the new, modern man emerging from the ruins of post-World War One Europe. As a figure he may be directly linked to the remarks by Plomer in Double Lives about the misadventure of the First World War (158), the desire for a new world order of co-operation among men, and the utilization of science and knowledge for men's advancement rather than "murdering one another wholesale". Such a vision would necessitate the elimination of the barriers that prevent men from unfettered mutual interaction, including the colour bar; and this, as Plomer said, "was really the theme of the novel which I had begun to write" (160).

IV Conclusion

The first truly modernist South African novel, Turbott Wolfe is also the first to situate its speaking voice in a deep engagement

with evolving modern Africa.

The novel takes as its point of departure the position of the individual in relation to the "question of colour". But this, in more ironic ways than one, is not its central engagement: Plomer is ultimately concerned with the broader question of the individual in society, struggling to cope with the complexities and ambiguities of his situation. This individual battles to come to terms with a self fragmented by the multiplicity of frequently conflicting signals beamed at him; and further fragmented by the myriad impulses emanating from himself and others like himself in society. In Peter Faulkner's terms, the early twentieth century, with rapid changes and the disintegration of many traditional institutions, presented itself as a uniquely complex era, and "the sense of complexity was to be the modernist writer's fundamental recognition" (14).

In Turbott Wolfe, life confronts Wolfe (and characters of his 'intellectual' ilk like Friston) in the form of a bewildering array of disabling obstacles: the need to perform a prosaic task in order to earn a living; having, for the sake of conscience, to endure or try to circumvent "official or ecclesiastical or even private rebuke"; enduring the forced intimacy or interference of the "unclean" Fleshers and Bloodfields and Schwerdts; acceding to the moral obligation to embrace demands for African political liberation, although the cause is not one's own; enduring encagement behind "the steely intangible barrier" that separates white and black; coping with the imperious demands of the flesh,

so often at odds with one's social identity; fretting under the more general thwarting of healthy impulses towards being fully human and free; labouring under the lonely knowledge that society and its institutions mostly work to curtail human freedom, not promote it.

To conclude, despite the gloomy fate of its hero, Turbott Wolfe embodies a utopian impulse, an impulse toward liberatory feeling and action. Although this impulse is mediated by a highly specific context and set of experiences -- of institutionalized racism in a colonial dispensation -- the narrative constantly reaches toward wider issues of universal significance in the modern world that South Africa was then poised to enter. By so doing, Plomer -- while not diminishing its tragic consequences -- places the white South African preoccupation with race in proper perspective, as something absurdly petty and demeaning of human potentiality.

For all his protagonist's lonely, individual failure, Plomer's outlook is broadly humanist and progressive. As Roy Campbell succinctly expressed it, "Turbott Wolfe . . . is a very cheerful sign" (126-27).

NOTES

1. See especially chapters 3 and 5, and pages 345-48, in Peter F. Alexander, William Plomer: A Biography.
   It is conceivable that Turbott Wolfe is modelled after the Johannesburg artist, Edward (Teddy) Wolfe. Alexander describes this "small intense man" (42) as one who through his paintings of Africans, influenced Plomer to consider African subjects as fitting for "art of any kind" (44).

CHAPTER THREE

MHUDI: AWARENESS THROUGH HISTORY

I Introduction

Sol Plaatje's Mhudi addresses issues of crucial concern to both black and white readers in South Africa. Chief among these are the issues of social justice and harmonious co-existence. The novel offers a corrective reinterpretation of history from a black or African point of view, adopting a cooperative -- rather than conflictual -- perspective which is foreign to colonial historiography. In this perspective, the survival of European settlers in southern African is attributable in the first instance not to their moral, economic or military superiority, but to the crucial support and hospitality of the natives they first came into contact with. The historical interest of the text is enhanced by its narrative mode: the events it recounts are purportedly gleaned from the actual stuff of historical experience, by a narrator who either witnessed the events or had them told him by the protagonists concerned.

Mhudi was written in the wake of the Natives' Land Act of 1913, an act which made it difficult for black South Africans to acquire land or even, as share-croppers, to work the soil outside of designated 'tribal' areas, and which caused much physical and emotional pain. The novel clearly bears the traces of its context

of composition, and yet concerns itself with fundamental human and political issues still current in South Africa today.[1] And although the historical ground which it covers is ostensibly regional and tribal, the novel's thematic range and magnitude of vision is epic, for it recreates the beginning of European domination in South Africa in order to awaken the conscience of its readers to the possibilities for peace and co-existence among the various peoples who reside there.

The narrative recounts a crucial phase in the wars following the Barolong rebellion against Matabele domination. It focuses intensively on the adventures of Ra-Thaga and his wife Mhudi, who were both victims of these wars and active agents in shaping history. The story also concerns the first Dutch Voortrekkers, who were attacked by Mzilikazi as they moved northwards from the Cape. The Barolong came to their assistance, and the combined Dutch and Barolong armies defeated the Matabele. Parallel with this is an account of events in the Matabele court and kingdom of Mzilikazi. The novel is vivified by detailed accounts of life and customs among the various groups, some of them mundane, but all adding to the human quality of a simultaneously realistic and mythical evocation of an important moment in South African history.

II Publishing History and Critical Response

Failing to appreciate that the novel's narrative form is

inseparable from its "message", the publishers of Mhudi made several substantive changes to the text prior to publication. These may have rendered the novel more accessible to the majority of its contemporary readers, but are clearly in part to blame for an early review which complains that Mhudi is not an authentic African utterance, accuses Plaatje of not having "thought and written 'like a native'", and considers the novel as reading like "the first novel of a European writer of promise".[2] Subsequent recuperations of the original text of Mhudi have resulted in several variants, with different chapter titles, structural features and narrative contents, which in turn have caused textual and interpretive confusion among critics and issued in disparate critical approaches to the book.

Originally published in 1930 by the Lovedale Press in the Eastern Cape town of Alice (with another impression in 1957 under the same imprint), Mhudi has subsequently appeared in other editions published both in South Africa and overseas. Tim Couzens and Stephen Gray refer rather humorously to the "American version" of Mhudi (the first American edition was supposedly a pirated publication, though there is now a "legitimate" American edition, published by the Three Continents Press in 1978). In addition to the original Lovedale Press edition, two other South African "versions" exist. The Quagga Press published an edition of Mhudi in 1975, "with speculative corrections of many hundreds of literals, typos, inconsistencies, and awkward phrasing that were made without manuscript authority, but nevertheless in

accordance with standard principles of collation and edition". The intention was to give "the substance or tone of Mhudi; we were concerned that it be republished in the reading it should have had forty-five years earlier" (Couzens & Gray 200-201). In 1989 the Johannesburg publisher Ad. Donker came out with an edition which made similar such "corrections", but like the Quagga Press edition retained a basic fidelity to the Lovedale text.

Meanwhile in 1976 the original typescript of the novel had been unearthed, and was subsequently deposited in the Cory Library for Historical Research at Rhodes University in Grahamstown. The definitive Heinemann edition of 1978 was derived from this typescript. According to its editors, "the Plaatje typescript reveals that there is a considerable difference in intention, in tone, in style, and in form between the Lovedale Press edition, and its variants that we have, and the work as earlier conceived" (Couzens & Gray 201).

A comparison of these Lovedale variants with the Heinemann edition reveals many inconsistencies. There are discrepancies in chapter configurations, chapter titles (sometimes with whole phrases omitted, or an article missing or a punctuation sign altered), and different narrative contents within chapters. Of more critical importance, perhaps, is the expunging from the novel of the narrator, that "hoary octogenarian", Half-a-Crown. For example, the fifth chapter in the Heinemann text begins "That exactly is how my father and mother met and became man and wife".

The same incident in the Ad. Donker version reads: "That exactly is how our hero and heroine met and became man and wife". It is quite clear that the presence (Heinemann edition) or absence (e.g. Ad. Donker edition) of the narrator, Half-a-Crown, gives a markedly different tone to the narrative. Again, where in the Heinemann version we have "Half-a-Crown may be permitted to digress and describe the beauty and virtues of one of King Mzilikazi's wives", the other text offers the impersonal and much blander "Here, we may be permitted to digress and describe the beauty and virtues of one of King Mzilikazi's wives". The discovery that the story of Mhudi is a first-hand account by an elderly descendant of its protagonists offers, in the words of Couzens and Gray, an "illumination". The two editors are sharply critical of the elision of the narrator in the received text of Mhudi:

> The implications of this view of Mhudi, a view that Lovedale possibly did not understand and persuaded Plaatje to eradicate, have profound repercussions: the shape of the novel suddenly leaps into focus. Since the narrative is, in fact, in the voice of an actualized character, several of what otherwise might be considered uncomfortable parts become meaningful. (Couzens & Gray 207)

According to Malvern van Wyk Smith,

> There is evidence in the files of the Lovedale Press that submissions by aspirant black authors were substantially revised and edited to make them acceptable. Among these the best known is Solomon T. Plaatje's Mhudi (published in 1930, but written at least ten years earlier), a romance epic of Tswana life with much indication of coming disruption which acquired an elevated post-Victorian literary register in preference to the modes of oral narrative which appear in the extant manuscript. (Van Wyk Smith 38-39)

It ought to be said that, while the evidence of heavy and damaging pre-publication editing of the novel is incontrovertible, it is not conclusively clear whose decision it was to make the emendations and under what circumstances. It is not impossible that Plaatje himself was responsible; but logic and commonsense, given the available facts, point to the publishers, Lovedale Press.

Critical perspectives on Mhudi vary, partly, it would seem, according to which version of the text is under scrutiny. These perspectives hinge mainly on questions of the intent, form and language of the novel, and the commentary which follows will arrange itself around these questions. They are not easily separable: reviews and criticism of Mhudi tend to issue in a nexus of evaluation which entangles the intent of the novel with the theme(s) of the narrative, and involves also the question of Plaatje's use of language and the supposed derivativeness of his novel. It is perhaps worth pointing out at this stage that, the matter of textual variation aside, Mhudi remains an ideologically complex and ambivalent work, and that any reading must grapple with contradictory evidence as to what ends the narrative purports to serve. Nevertheless an attempt will be made to point a clear way towards what the work is about and what it signifies, indicating also how its signification is achieved, via an intra- and intertextual investigation of Plaatje's use of language.

Although Couzens and Gray possibly overstate the importance of textual variation in an understanding of Mhudi, their argument

must be taken seriously. They state that "the text of the first edition of Mhudi, the text on which some sweeping critical judgements have been based, is in some places garbled, inconsistent, erroneous, and possibly even changed for ideological reasons" (198). Summing up the factors that may have influenced the pre- (and hence post-) publication "reception" of Mhudi, they contend:

> The problem encountered here is the general one of trying to disentangle ideology, perceptions, and interests as they affect author, editors, publishers, and readers . . . . mistakes, conscious or subconscious prejudices, and a realm of potentially contradictory preconceptions may exert a distorting influence on the final printed product. The case of the publishing history of Mhudi is an interesting example of some, or all, of these facets at work in the shaping of a final text. (198)

The factors enumerated here indeed seem to have affected critical response to Mhudi, notably, for instance, Janheinz Jahn's disparagement of it as politically "neutral" and as "mission literature" (1966). Such dismissive judgements, based on the Lovedale text, are to a certain degree challenged by the recuperated "original" text and require re-assessment. A caveat against the textual authority assumed by such reinterpretation has, however, been offered by A.E. Voss. Voss contends that the Couzens-Gray argument for the original typescript "suffers" by implicitly conceiving of the author as having "at some fixed moment in time, a clear and equally fixed original intention for his novel" (Voss 21). He claims that a text is likely to have a more dynamic and ironic existence than that, and that Plaatje was too mercurial a character to fit into a preconceived role.

This last point alerts us to a second interpretative consideration just as important as the narrowly textual. The mass of information about Plaatje that has come to light in the past two decades as a result of the diligent research of Brian Willan, Gray and Couzens, needs to be taken into account. This biographical and contextual information encourages a view of the novel as a tying-together of many of Plaatje's wide-ranging and diverse interests and endeavours, which can now be heard to resonate within a specific historical context in this, his last major work. It is through such a contextual understanding of the novel that we can both make sense of its original "meaning" and come to appreciate why it remains of enduring interest.

Couzens's elaborate "models theory" (1973) persuasively relates the novel to Plaatje's opposition to the Natives' Land Act of 1913 and a concern with the relationship between black and white in South Africa at the time of writing. Couzens traces the connections between Mhudi and Plaatje's other major work, Native Life in South Africa (1916), linking the 1830s, the era in which the novel is set, to the decade 1910 to 1920, even associating Mhudi, the heroine of the piece, with Plaatje's wife Elizabeth. Couzens's analysis has been influential, and is accepted by almost all subsequent critics of the work (e.g. Vivan). The discussion of the novel which follows assumes Couzens's insights and will not engage directly with South African social history of the 1920s. In the light of what has been said above, the choice of the Heinemann text for present purposes requires no further

justification.

III Plaatje's Sources for Mhudi

The Heinemann edition reveals that Mhudi purports to be a factual narrative by a witness to the events recounted. Plaatje also gathered accounts of Barolong history from, among others, his mother and great-aunt, and it is obvious that these accounts are worked, in various ways, into the narrative. Brian Willan, Sol Plaatje's biographer writes:

> Plaatje's great-aunt . . . was a fund of family history and tradition, and it was from her, so Plaatje recalled later, that he first derived "complete information" about the details of his own ancestry. When he wrote later of having been "taught almost from childhood to fear the Matabele", of being frightened by stories of "the unreasoning ferocity" of their attacks upon the Barolong in the 1820s and 1830s, part of the reason why these stories left such an imprint was that he had very probably heard them from a woman who had either witnessed these scenes of devastation herself, or had been told about them by her parents. (Willan 15)

Plaatje claims that his mother is a direct descendant of a grandson of Mhudi (Willan 4). Plaatje's tracing of his ancestry (as reproduced in Willan's biography) includes Chief Tauana of the Barolong, mentioned in Mhudi.

In a biography of Moroka of the Seleka Barolong, who rallied to the assistance of the Boers against Mzilikazi's army (an episode recounted in Mhudi), Plaatje says: "I once met an old man who, in his youth, participated in these terrible sacrifices of men and material, exacted by the Boer-Barolong treaty" ("Moroka"

13).

The sources of Plaatje's vivid and detailed accounts of life in Mzilikazi's court and kingdom have not been satisfactorily explained as yet. These accounts tend to exhibit the characteristics of oral history, and we might assume that word had passed from mouth to mouth and the information fixed in the memory of hearers, until Plaatje wrote it down. It is possible that in the sweep of events, Matabele informants, for instance, Mzilikazi's wife Umnandi, who once fled the court and sojourned with Mhudi and her camp, could have provided details which subsequently became fixed in the oral lore of the Barolong.

Mhudi is certainly accurate in matters of historical fact and detail. A book on a different but related subject, Lobengula, by Hugh Marshall Hole (1929), for instance, offers striking parallels and similarities to details and personalities in Mhudi, and neither the historical authority nor the verisimilitude of the evocations of tribal life in Mhudi have been challenged. Yet, finally, what is at issue is not the historical accuracy of Mhudi's narrative content, but its objective significance.

IV Objective Significance of Mhudi

It helps to approach Mhudi with some awareness of its author's wide-ranging cultural interests and activities. Sol Plaatje was -- among other things! -- a politician, journalist, pamphleteer,

diarist, historian, biographer, linguist, public speaker, interpreter and musician. But what united these different roles was a passionate concern for the welfare and upliftment of his people. Thus it is that he announces in the Preface to Mhudi that his novel has been written "with two objects in view": first, "to interpret to the reading public one phase of 'the back of the Native mind'" (from this we may deduce that he envisaged his readership as predominantly European); and secondly, to earn money to publish a collection of Sechuana folktales for Bantu schools, to arrest their attrition by the spread of European ideas and thus nurture Africans' appreciation for their own vernacular art and literature.

Plaatje's statements in the Preface to Mhudi serve as a reliable though partial guide to his objects in writing, which are undoubtedly more complex than the pair outlined above. At the beginning of the Preface he indicates that since South African literature has always been exclusively European, he is compelled to "give reasons for a Native venture". From this apologetic start he proceeds to the provocative opinion that in all the tales of battle he has ever read or heard of, "the cause of war is invariably ascribed to the other side". This is a viewpoint which is borne out by the rhetoric of several characters in the novel, but is often countermanded by a more balanced perspective and finally challenged by what we might call the "dialogic principle" structuring the narrative as a whole. For instance, after the Barolong have executed Mzilikazi's tax collectors

rather than pay tributes to the emperor, Gubuza, the Matabele military commander, questions the sacking of the Barolong. He argues that the Barolong might have been molested and provoked to such a desperate measure (54). Ra-Thaga too, at times feels inclined to the opinion that his people had provoked Mzilikazi (66). Plaatje's narrator seems to imply that both the murder of the tax collectors and the subsequent revenge attack were violations of some shared though unstated human contract, though he concludes that the first was justifiable, while the Matabele swoop on his people was motivated merely by "bloodlust".

Next in the Preface to Mhudi, Plaatje recounts how he stumbled by chance on an account of the Barolong-Matabele war, and elicited from old people details of the event which occurred about the year 1830 and which provides the basis for his narrative. With its oral narrative style, songs, proverbs, wit, extraordinary characters and events, and sense of wonder, Mhudi therefore serves as an important role model for Plaatje's second stated objective, namely, the preservation and appreciation of folk arts in the vernacular.

But to return to the first objective expressed by Plaatje, the mysteriously couched "to interpret to the reading public one phase of 'the back of the Native mind'": While the wording suggests a European perspective on the inscrutable African who is unable to speak for himself, it is clear that Plaatje felt he had some important message to convey, one which was apparently not getting through to the white colonial. What was this? The idea is

open to speculation. But it is not unreasonable to regard it as the post on which the significance of Mhudi hinges, and to identify it, as Couzens has done, with reaction to the provisions of the Land Act of 1913, and more generally, with revelations which the narrative makes concerning an African perspective on the history and ethical foundation of relations between Europeans and Africans in South Africa.

Elsewhere, Plaatje makes the following interesting observation. Recalling the alliance between Chief Moroka and the Boers recounted in Mhudi, he writes:

> It is mortifying to the descendants of the allies of the Voortrekkers to find themselves ostracized and outlawed by the sons of their whilom friends, banished from lands for which they had helped to despoil the Basuto, forced to seek a refuge in the attenuated holdings of the mountain folk, and the Basuto magnanimously offering them an asylum; now too late, they rue the misplaced friendship of their fathers. How different was the action of his brother, Chief Montsioa, to the blind friendship of Moroka, some of them moan. ("Moroka" 13)

Plaatje directly connects this situation to Act 27 of 1913, the Natives' Land Act. The nature and shape of Mhudi, then, suddenly leap into focus, to use Couzens and Gray's expression. Mhudi is a protest novel -- a protest against the human betrayal represented by the Natives' Land Act of 1913. This, more that anything else, is what Plaatje has in view when he speaks about interpreting to the reading public "one phase of 'the back of the Native mind'".

In Mhudi, it is Mzilikazi's domination and injustice that instigated revolt against him; when he extended the same treatment to the Voortrekkers, they, in alliance with the

Barolong tribes, resisted it. In Mhudi, the Voortrekker party state clearly that they are fleeing English domination (83-84). The question of natural justice is central to the novel, and Plaatje's aim is to alert the public to the dangers attendant on the Land Act by virtue of its violation of natural justice.

The prologue (or first chapter) of Mhudi is a piece of critical value in Plaatje's prosecution of this aim. It provides a proleptic backdrop to everything the novel is about. About the tribes whose "deep peace" was soon to be violently shattered, Plaatje writes:

> Of monetary wealth they had none except their flocks and herds. A little bartering was done with neighbouring tribes in exchange for other commodities and none could be so mean as to make a charge for supplying a fellow-tribesman with the necessaries of life. (27)

The evocation of this pastoral idyll challenges the premise that "civilization" was something external to southern Africa which arrived with the coming of the white man. It proposes that a humane, self-sustaining and efficient socio-economic system with a solid ethical foundation was in fact disrupted by the self-aggrandizing greed of the Matabele and Boers. Plaatje's straying on the piece of historical evidence about the day Mzilikazi's tax collectors were murdered provided him with an armature to link the events of the 1830s with the contemporary post-1910 scene in South Africa. In the biographical essay on Moroka, Plaatje states: "But the acme of the ingratitude of the sons of the Voortrekkers came painfully into prominence in 1913 when, under Draconian pains and penalties, natives were debarred from even

hiring the land for which their fathers bled (Act 27 of 1913)" ("Moroka" 13) and concludes: "Thus, the life-story of Moroka is really the genesis of Barolong education as well as the history of their friendship with the Boers" (15).

In Mhudi, then, Plaatje uses the past to comment on the present. Couzens (1973) notes that doubts about Mhudi serving as a model for the situation created by the Land Act should be assuaged by the dedication of the novel, "a dedication very much against the land settlement scheme".

> Indeed, the whole theory that Mhudi is a model for 1918 can be checked by reference to pages 105 to 111 of Native Life, where the whole background plot of Mhudi is specifically recounted as leading up to and foreshadowing the Land Act. (13)

The charge by Jahn and others that Mhudi is politically quiescent "mission literature" has been challenged by several revisionist accounts since Couzens and Gray's. According to Piniel Shava (1989):

> Though Mhudi is not as openly committed as the "skokiaan" literature, its portrayal of the arrival of the Boers and their subsequent clashes with blacks may be sufficient testimony of its political nature. The "skokiaan" culture that Jahn deems the only committed writing is, after all, the outcome of the events which Plaatje so thoroughly examines. (7)

But to describe Mhudi as simply "political" does not do justice to its politics, which go beyond the gesture of protest which was later to characterize so much writing by black South Africans, and offer a vision of a "solution". The novel ends on a note of conciliation and mutual satisfaction between the allies in a task well-accomplished (defeating Mzilikazi and ending injustice), as

they share the gift of friendship and acknowledge their mutual interdependence. The reader does not go away from the text feeling he has been exposed to one view only against the other. He has had both views, indeed all three views, Matabele, Barolong and Boer, and although their views conflict at times, they all have only one and the same ambition, the achievement of peace and survival.

Thus although Plaatje wishes to set the facts straight and is protesting against dominant misapprehensions, he is also looking at the nature of human relations and their positive potential; and it is this note that he sounds the strongest. Tim Couzens stresses this when he writes:

> It seems to me that he extends this idea into both the theme and technique of the novel. Although the book is clearly an epic praising the Barolong, through the technique of shifting perspective, we come to have a certain sympathy with the Matabele; we see, in fact, the final battle through their eyes not through those of the favoured victors . . . . The technique, then, in the novel, is of shifting perspective; what both sides are given through this technique is a reinforcement of one of the major themes -- that there <u>are</u> two sides to every argument. (7)

<u>Mhudi</u> is a deeply human narrative, passionate in its expression of the human spirit and its capacity to love and, unfortunately sometimes, to harm. In the novel, Plaatje's narrator comments: "The Boers are cruel but they sometimes breed angels" (162). In the Matabele camp, Umnandi is in every way as noble as the heroine Mhudi, of the Barolong; the Boer girl Hannetjie is not far behind them.

In <u>Mhudi</u>, then, Plaatje addresses issues not only political

but essentially human. To see these issues more clearly, it is to the narrative itself and Plaatje's narrative strategy that we must now turn.

V Narrative Strategy

What makes Mhudi so remarkable a novel is its human quality. In its epic sweep and range it embraces the totality of social experience in South Africa at the period of its situation; but its observation and expression of every nuance and detail of human conflict are enduring and not time- or space-bound. Plaatje's novel is unique in South African literature at the time for presenting various groups -- Barolong, Matabele, Boers -- as simply different, culturally different from each other. What is conspicuously absent is the racial or biological discourse of binary opposition, the discourse of "othering" which is the trademark of colonial literature and -- with the axis of superiority/inferiority inverted -- of much subsequent black oppositional writing. Mhudi indicates the sameness of these many groups, their fundamental humanity, perhaps hinting at their African-ness. The essence of the novel is humanity, an ethno-political heteroglossia, to use Bakhtin's term, matched at various levels by a plurality of narrative voices and points of view.

Although Plaatje aims to tell the story of the Barolong, he

uses the novel to present many other issues immediate or tangential to, or even relatively remote from, the unfolding of a tribal chonicle, yet all are of moment and make a dramatic impact on the focus and shape of the book. The moral integrity and authenticity of Plaatje's narrative enables it to embrace the Bakhtinian "fundamental compositional unities with whose help heteroglossia can enter the novel" (263). In Bakhtin's terms, Mhudi is a very novelistic novel, for

> each of [these unities] permits a multiplicity of social voices and a wide variety of their links and interrelationships (always more or less dialogized). These distinctive links and interrelationships between utterances and languages, this movement of the theme through different languages and speech types, its dispersion into the rivulets and droplets of social heteroglossia, its dialogization -- this is the basic distinguishing feature of the stylistics of the novel. (263)

In Mhudi, these multiple discursive strands are allocated a functional place in the narrative. There are inserted genres, like drama, and oral narrative features such as songs; and Plaatje's speech styles range from the Biblical to the Shakespearean to the colloquial, embracing in their inflexions elements of the various languages spoken in South Africa.

Mhudi, as we have seen, is a narrative derived from factual, historical events, but these are subjected to a complex set of mediations. The narrative is relayed and re-relayed in series. Mhudi tells her story to Ra-Thaga, who in turn also tells her his story. Either and/or both of them relate the story of their experiences to Half-a-Crown, who in his turn relays it to Plaatje, who transcribes the narrative as we have it. Beyond the

introductory, background first chapter, the rest of the narrative is in topical segments as originally reported by either Mhudi or Ra-Thaga.

The first chapter of Mhudi provides a background against which the events of the ensuing narrative occur. It evokes the life and tradition of the pastoral Barolong, an agricultural people in a self-sustaining society. This historical reconstruction is so celebratory that it sounds a mythical note and reads like oral history. While it is quite possible that parts of it are authentic oral evidence, perhaps from Ra-Thaga, father of Half-a-Crown, the informant in the second degree of Mhudi, its nativist nostalgia poignantly measures the extent of the degradation which Plaatje felt his people had suffered over the previous century.

The novel opens:

> Two centuries ago the Bechuana tribes inhabited the extensive areas between Central Transvaal and the Kalahari Desert. Their entire world lay in the geography covered by the story in these pages.
>
> In this domain they led their patriarchal life under their several chiefs who owed no allegiance to any king or emperor. They raised their native corn which satisfied their simple wants and, when not engaged in hunting or in pastoral duties, the peasants whiled away their days in tanning skins or sewing magnificent fur rugs. They also smelted iron and manufactured useful implements which today would be pronounced very crude by their semi-westernized descendants. (25)

This is Plaatje the historian and social anthropologist speaking, but already a bold ideological move has been made, of which narrative capital is soon to be made. Before long, Mzilikazi will upset this structure, when, breaking away from Shaka, he sweeps

up the tribes in his path and dominates them (28), including the Barolong, "the original stock of the several tribes, who also followed the humdrum yet interesting life of the other Bechuana Natives" (27). On the level of contemporary "allegory", the Natives' Land Act would have the same effect as Mzilikazi's offensive.

Mzilikazi subjugated the Bechuana tribes and made them vassals, imposing taxation on them. It was the refusal of chief Tauana to pay tax to Mzilikazi, instead ordering the execution of the emperor's tax collectors, that led to reprisals against the Barolong (28-33). Mzilikazi is described as "a powerful usurper of determined character who by his sword proclaimed himself ruler over all the land" (28).

Ra-Thaga, son of a wealthy Barolong chieftain, is one of the few survivors of the Matabele invasion of Kunana, capital city of the Barolong, the head of whom was Tauana. He escapes into the forest, where he leads a Robinson Crusoe-like existence, until he is joined by Mhudi, the beautiful, intelligent, self-reliant and courageous heroine, who becomes his wife and is the mother of Half-a-Crown, the narrator of the novel.

Chapters two to eight are filled with details of the difficult but equally idyllic period of Ra-Thaga and Mhudi's forest existence. Both Mhudi and Umnandi, Mzilikazi's queen, are of discursive importance. Plaatje was concerned about the morality of African men and women in the new urban areas, forced thither because of the damaging effect of the Land Act, and where

their landlessness and poverty tempted them to engage in crime and prostitution.[3] Mhudi is characterized in the novel as an example of African womanhood, sober, industrious, and of clean and virtuous habits.

Plaatje breaks the narrative in chapter four to examine events in the Matabele kingdom of Mzilikazi after their victory over the Barolong. It is agog with celebration, but of particular interest is Gubuza, Mzilikazi's commander-in-chief, who questions the reprisals against the Barolong. He is portrayed as wise as well as courageous. Although Mzilikazi's responses to Gubuza are clever and not unreceptive, it is clear that he values his military might above all else (54-59).

In chapter seven, a group of hunters meet Ra-Thaga and Mhudi, and they leave the forest with this group for the town of Mamuse. Here, the leader of the hunting party attempts to murder Ra-Thaga and seize Mhudi for himself. Being unsuccessful, he is forced to stand public trial. Chief Massouw, leader of the Qoranna tribe where this happens, recounts his own conversion to Christianity and reminds the public that the missionary Moffat of Kuruman had asked him to cease capital punishment. Imposing a stiff fine, he asserts that "every person in my dominion, whether a Bldi, a Hottentot, a Griqua or anything else, is one of us. My home is his home, my lands are his lands, my cattle are his cattle, and my law is his shield" (80). It is striking how in these words an implicit dialogue between African custom and Christian principles -- and perhaps even an embryonic "Bill of

Rights" -- achieves an identity of purpose, as the rule of law, of natural justice, is invested with a universal validity.

At this point the Voortrekkers, led by Sarel Cilliers, are introduced. Mention is also made of the magnanimous King Moshoeshoe of the Basuto, "the land of plenty" (81, 84). The Dutch claim they are "after freedom" (83), and that "No man or woman can rule another" (84). King Moshoeshoe they praise as "noted for his fair dealing and sound judgement" (84), in contrast to Mzilikazi whom the tribal chiefs consider a "pest" (86). The Boers, leaving the Cape and moving inland, are attacked by Mzilikazi and send a request for help from Chief Moroka (111), who responds. This is the beginning of the alliance between Moroka and the Boers.

After initial difficulties over land ownership, which are satisfactorily settled (141-42), the combined armies of Boers and the African tribes finally defeat Mzilikazi. The novel ends on a note of passionate farewell between friends whose loyalties have been tested very strongly, as the various groups and families disperse to their chosen places of abode.

Limitations of space preclude further detailed examination of examples from the text; this will be done in the section on Plaatje's use of language in Mhudi. In the passages selected for comment in this chapter, Plaatje's social concerns in South African public life emerge clearly: the issues of land ownership, justice, the rule of law, and the possibilities for freedom through harmonious co-existence. The pattern of the narrative

gives expression to Plaatje's moral and political vision, as he elaborates, from that chanced-upon information about the day Mzilikazi's tax collectors were murdered, a resonant historical parable. Each new development in the story has social implications beyond its immediate context: the novel is finally about the consequences of the past in the present, about the shaping of contemporary South Africa and the ethical validity of that process.

Besides the opinions, arguments and counter-arguments articulated by the characters in the novel, whose voices often reflect Plaatje's own concerns in his active life as a South African public role-player, the author also employs a narrative technique of significance. This is the technique of parallelism, which works in two ways. Given Plaatje's liberal understanding that there are two sides to every argument, his characters and their dialogical engagements serve to model this. An example is the balanced, principled wisdom of the magnificent Basuto king Moshoeshoe, which is deliberately contrasted with the impetuous self-seeking of the pestilential Mzilikazi. Equally memorable is the wrangling over how to restore property expropriated by Mzilikazi to its rightful owners. Plaatje notes that the Voortrekkers, after a last council of war with the Barolong before the final assault on Mzilikazi,

> [give their] word of honour that after killing off the Matabele and looting their property, they would make a just division of the spoil by keeping all the land for the Boers and handing over the captured cattle to the Barolong.
>
> "What an absurd bargain!" exclaimed Chief Tauana

> of the Ra-Tshidi, "what could one do with a number of cattle if he possessed no land on which to feed them? Will his cattle run on the clouds! and their grass grow in the air? No, my lords; I would rather leave the Matabele where they are and remain a sojourner with my people in the land of the Selekas under my cousin, Moroka". (141-42)

Plaatje makes it clear that this scheming by the Boers is no different from Mzilikazi's actions, but parallels them, and it is consequently judged with like severity.

But perhaps the most important features of parallelism that Plaatje employs are narratological, in the forms, variably, of intermissions, interludes, or narratives within the narrative, which while apparently digressive, actually echo and give resonance to the main narrative. This is a stylistic feature serving to reinforce the moral or thematic thrust of the narrative (see especially Chapter 13 of Mhudi). Harold Scheub, a researcher in oral folklore, gives an instance of the "finest example" of "the use of parallel image sets" in a narrative by a Xhosa artist. He states that:

> The images are parallel sequences, the one set reflects the other, commenting on it, symbolically clarifying it. The one affirms or explicates the other, sees the other from a different perspective. There is not necessarily a one-to-one relationship between the two image sequences; rather, the second exists to speculate upon the first. (136)

An explicit example of this rhetorical parallelism in Mhudi is Mzilikazi's story about "Zungu of old" who caught a lion's whelp in the hope that he could make it into a useful hunting mastiff by feeding it with the milk of his cows. But one day the cub devoured Zungu's children, chewed up his two wives and Zungu

himself barely escaped being mauled. This story is inserted by Mzilikazi in his address to his nation after their defeat by the Barolong alliance. He prophesies that the Boers with whom the Barolong have allied to despoil him will, in their turn, like Zungu's whelp, eventually turn against the Barolong. In a narrative full of supernaturalism and prophecies, this is one prophecy that did come true, in the form of the Natives' Land Act of 1913 which denied the Barolong any rights to even the land they had helped the Boers capture. Suffice it to say that this last oration by Mzilikazi, so full of prophecies and dire warnings, is a keystone in the thematic patterning of Mhudi (174-75).

These elaborate structural parallels are a feature of the novel's narrative strategy borrowed from oral narrative. When Mzilikazi refers to "Zungu of old", his audience immediately responds: the experience recounted is close to them because it has occurred within a familiar social framework. But they also know that its meaning is capable of displacement onto other circumstances. Similarly, when Plaatje, early in the novel, introduces the folly of Motonosi in cross-breeding an eland and an ox, the result proving so disastrous that it was tabooed (27), he again has recourse to a device found in oral literature in which stories, whether mundane or supernatural, generate symbolic meaning through reference to the listeners' own actual lived experience. When they enter folk literature, such symbolic characters are instantly recognized. Plaatje is thus educating us

in a typically African way of encoding and decoding meaning.

VI Language in Mhudi

In this section, language in Mhudi will be examined at two levels, as rhetoric and as style: as rhetoric in the effect that the author wishes words to make, and as style in the particular mode and manner of expression.

Mhudi is a work purportedly translated from Setswana into English, keeping alive not only its rhetorical style as in proverbs and songs, but also the original speech modes of the narrator's cultural consciousness. The work, in translation and narrative exposition, of course also bears the imprint of Plaatje's own artistry.

Language in Mhudi is variously personal, adapted, transformed and multi- or inter-lingual. It is also, so say the critics, clichéed, Biblical, Bunyanesque and Shakespearean. "The language is stuffy, learned (albeit impeccably) . . .".[4] In this regard we must recall the substantial re-writing that Mhudi underwent at the Lovedale Press's editing desk. On this ground Couzens and Gray carp against the "prettifying" of Mhudi noticeable in the Lovedale versions, on the basis of which, they point out, "some sweeping critical judgements have been based" (198). They suggest that:

> In the process of "prettifying" Mhudi, the Lovedale edition has, in part, emasculated it. These tiny

> revisions, hinging doubtless on points of supposed literary correctness, are the stylistic features that have given the well-known Lovedale Mhudi a slightly bad name . . . . The difference is one of tone: the tone of factual authenticity rendered in English as against the tone of the Bible, Bunyan and the English hymnal. (210)

There is a multiplicity of linguistic usage in Mhudi. There is Plaatje's individualized, authorial, contemporaneous expressivity in the narrative, side by side with Tswana expressive modes which, in translation, Plaatje takes pains to tell his reader, lose much of their charm (Mhudi, Heinemann edition, 111-12). This implicit dialogue is significant when it is recalled that one of the aims of Mhudi was "to cultivate a love for art and literature in the Vernacular". Plaatje's object was both to preserve and to translate, to negotiate, to open up. Extending this notion to the themes of the novel, we see that for Plaatje to render not only one view but a multiplicity of views, favouring principle above faction, is to express his vision of South Africa as a unity in diversity. Mhudi is "translated" into English for the dialogic reason of revealing to a wider audience "one phase of 'the back of the Native mind'".

Language use in Mhudi, then, is multi-dimensional and multilingual. Plaatje uses straightforward, standard English (impeccably, as Sarah Christie and her co-authors note in Perspectives on South African Fiction 82), interweaving the more poetic voice of the oral storyteller with fanciful expressions in places, and effortlessly admixing snatches of the Tswana and Dutch languages. In the words of A.E. Voss,

> Mhudi is a vivid and surprising linguistic experience

> . . . . [Plaatje's] epic changes style as it changes perspective . . . . The reader coming to Mhudi for the first time will be surprised and perhaps delighted by Plaatje's idiom, by a style which announces itself as a style. Only the individuality of a particular sensibility at a particular moment of class and history could unify the wide range of tone and register that Mhudi contains. (19)

Plaatje's interlanguage usage in Mhudi may well earn it the credit of being the first truly South African novel. The harmony of vernacular and English and Dutch is so smooth and natural that no jarring or discordant effect is noticed by the reader (though Plaatje is generous to the reader in offering translations of his vernacular phrases -- in the Lovedale editions these are rendered separately as notes at the bottom of the relevant pages). The particular register of language employed usually reflects the mood of the narrative. In the exchange between Mzilikazi's runaway wife Umnandi, and Mhudi, the register is entirely Biblical. The emotional intensity at the parting of ways the two heroines feel, at the closing of the narrative, is matched by the passion and near-religious fervour of their dialogue. Mhudi's use of the word "ardent" is typical:

> "That thou wouldest find him is the ardent wish of Mhudi. Urge him, even as I would urge all men of my acquaintance, to gather more sense and cease warring against their kind. Depart in peace, my Sister. Tsamaea sentle" (farewell in Rolong). (167)

In this extract the intensity of feeling is aptly conveyed by the archaic English; the Rolong phrase at the end is easily assimilated but at the same time reminds us of the "difference" of the speakers, that their dialogue is translated. Umnandi's response is also in heightened prose, in a register appropriate

for a queen, but also includes some vernacular, in this case, Zulu.

A useful key to understanding the effects of Plaatje's multiple, diverse, language use is provided by Bakhtin's theory of language and discourse in the novel (1935, 1985). According to Bakhtin, "the language of the novel is a system of languages that mutually and ideologically interanimate each other. It is impossible to describe and analyse it as a single unitary language" (47). In other words, languages and meanings are not absolute in their supposed differentnesses but function in a mutually interdependent way. What the linguistic form of Plaatje's novel embodies is the dialogic principle itself. Different voices speak, sometimes simultaneously, sometimes defining each other's difference, producing a kind of hybridity which is the textual equivalent of the thematic drive of the novel, the textual expression of Plaatje's vision of the (emergent) South African cultural identity.

Thus the language of Mhudi expresses its ideological content more subtly and perhaps more effectively than its obvious narrative content. Given Plaatje's intention "to interpret to the reading public one phase of 'the back of the Native mind'", which obviously is the Native's discontentment with the existing state of affairs in the South African polity, and equally necessarily, to reinterpret history from his own point of view, an entirely appropriate and effective language is employed to register this feeling and to express it. This is not an altogether recent

insight: Stephen Gray, commenting on a passage in Mhudi, states rather humorously that "the invisible Imperial censor caught him at it", and the passage was considerably diluted (Gray 181). This is the passage where Plaatje records and comments on Mzilikazi's dejection after the defeat of his army (170-71). According to Gray:

> Mzilikazi's rhetoric of the 1830s bears a marked resemblance to the rhetoric of his successor, Rhodes, whose dream of super-expansionism and annexation had been codified in words like 'crown', 'ambition', 'empire' and even the inevitable 'pluck'. Plaatje was wittily parodying the language and thought of the British supremacist. (180-81)

Such parodying Bakhtin describes as parodic-travestying, which thrives "under the condition of thoroughgoing polyglossia". According to him, "every parody is an intentional dialogized hybrid. Within it, languages and styles actively and mutually illuminate one another". Although parody is normally associated with laughter, ridicule and travestying, Bakhtin's comment reveals the underlying rhetorical strategy of paralellism at work in Plaatje's text. Language use in Mhudi, then, involves a conscious linguistic style as well as an expository stratagem.

VII Conclusion

The substance of Mhudi is the struggle, on both personal and political levels, between might and right. Plaatje dramatizes this universal human struggle in the context of the debate in

South Africa -- just as topical today as it was in the 1920s -- over land ownership. The central focus of the narrative is thus the question of rights to the land, and the violation of these rights by violent usurpation. Early in the novel Mhudi argues these subjects with Ra-Thaga: "Fancy my husband justifying our exploitation by wild Khonkobes who fled from the poverty in their own land and came down to fatten on us!" (66). Ra-Thaga responds to this by asserting that Mzilikazi by dint of "might . . . is right"! On the other hand, Sarel Cilliers, spokesman of the Boers who allied with the Barolong against Mzilikazi, argues the wrongness of domination by man over man. He maintains that "No man or woman can rule another" (86), and rejects foreign dominance over his tribe.

The debate over land is intensified at the moment of the formation of the alliance against Mzilikazi, when the co-leader of the Boers suggests that his people keep the land recovered from Mzilikazi while the Barolong chieftains retain the rest of the booty. The chieftains reject this as absurd, and a compromise is agreed between all parties. There seems little doubt that Plaatje is arguing for just such an equitable compromise as a solution for the South Africa of his own day.

The ending of Mhudi has strong social, political and psychological implications. Mzilikazi, the symbol of tyranny, is defeated and flees; the alliance against him recoup their losses, and Mhudi and Ra-Thaga bid a warm farewell to their Dutch friends, going home on a gift of a waggon. The ending of the

narrative is in a sense open, not yet closed by subsequent historical developments, and marked by happy compromises and the seal of real friendships: African and European alike have gone through very difficult tests of endurance and human trial, and have stood resolutely with one another.

As a "fictional" companion to Native Life in South Africa, Plaatje's historical narrative serves as a reminder of the betrayal of a trust. It also serves to bring to mind an ideal that has been lost: that African and European could have lived and worked the land on terms of mutual co-operation. At the same time, Mhudi points the way ahead, offering a possibility for the future. It ends on a strong note of human solidarity, and this holds out hope and confidence for the future.

NOTES

1. Sol Plaatje commented eloquently on the effects of the Natives' Land Act of 1913 in his Native Life in South Africa: Before and Since the European War and the Boer Rebellion (1916; rpt. 1982). In consequence, most critics regard Mhudi as a kind of fictional companion to Native Life in South Africa, and reasonably so, provided the novel is not thereby reduced to the status of a supplement to Plaatje's non-fictional text. See, for instance, Tim Couzens, "Sol Plaatje and the First South African Epic".

2. These comments appear in a review of Mhudi in Times Literary Supplement 31 Aug.1933: 574.

3. See English in Africa 3.2 (1976) for various comments by Plaatje on these subjects.

4. See Matthew Parrot, "From Mhudi to Mine Boy: The Development of Black South African Writing"; T.J. Couzens, "The Dark Side of the World: Sol Plaatje's Mhudi"; and Stephen Gray, "Sources of the First Black South African Novel in English: Solomon Plaatje's Use of Shakespeare and Bunyan in Mhudi", respectively.

CHAPTER FOUR

MHUDI AND TURBOTT WOLFE COMPARED

> Contraria non contradictoria sed complementa sunt
> (Opposites are not contradictory but complementary).
> --Niels Bohr

This chapter aims to examine the close connections among the moral, social and political concerns of Mhudi and Turbott Wolfe. No comparative study of the work of William Plomer and Sol Plaatje seems yet to have been attempted, although recent comparative studies cognate to this one include J.A. Kearney's on van der Post and Plomer (1992) and Stephen Gray's "Redefining the Canon: The Case for Douglas Blackburn, Stephen Black and Sol T. Plaatje" (1992).

To avoid the unnecessary repetition of material already covered in previous chapters, this chapter will specifically address the question of the factors which seem to have motivated Plomer and Plaatje to write their first novels, which is also a question about their social importance.

Several striking parallels between the novels have already been noted: for instance, the criticism of empire-building (Mhudi 170-71; Turbott Wolfe 137-39); the assigning of dominant roles to heroines endowed with courage and vision (in Plaatje, Mhudi

herself, and in Plomer, Mabel van der Horst); the pervasive preoccupation with anti-racism, anti-aggression and anti-chauvinism; and, significantly, the parallel closure of the novels on a coda of "post-war" (Mhudi 187, Turbott Wolfe 213).

Mhudi and Turbott Wolfe are direct responses to social reality and human experience in the South Africa of their time, to the extent that a much later observation by Njabulo S. Ndebele seems apposite:

> The visible symbols of the overwhelmingly oppressive South African social formation appear to have prompted over the years the development of a highly dramatic, highly demonstrative form of literary representation. ("Rediscovery of the Ordinary" 434)

Ndebele's recognition that "protest" writing is in the first instance "spectacular" and didactic rather than social-realist encourages us to view a novel like Turbott Wolfe as an early exemplar of this literary mode; and Mhudi, too, by virtue of its "demonstrative" selection of the "typical", appears to be written in the conscientizing mode of what will later come to be known as protest literature.

In Chapters 2 and 3 of this study, the issues which drove Plaatje to write Mhudi and Plomer to write Turbott Wolfe were outlined. Plaatje, we noted, mounted an ironic critique of current government policy by offering an alternative view of a phase of nineteenth-century South African history; while in Turbott Wolfe, the "final and lasting impression" the narrative records is of the role of "the Government . . . the rulers and taskmasters of the unfortunate natives" (105). The novels thus

have clear propagandistic purposes which are borne out by authorial statements of mission. Plaatje enunciates his "objects in view" in publishing Mhudi: as he spells them out in the novel's Preface, these include the addition of a "Native venture" to the national literary heritage of South Africa, and a 'true' record of the history of the wars between his Barolong clan and the Matabele. But perhaps the most important objective is announced in the desire "to interpret to the reading public one phase of 'the back of the Native mind'". As an enabling device and controlling motif, this objective 'manages' every aspect of the novel. It might at first glance appear to participate in an inchoate form of black nationalism (which, to a certain extent, it does), but the real emphasis in Plaatje's words falls on the act of interpretation, on negotiation between rival tribalisms in the name of a more inclusive nationalism.

We have already demonstrated in Chapter 3 how Mhudi proposes an unbroken sociological link between past and present, intimating their intertwining and mutual influencing of each other. Stephen Gray has recently recorded his conviction that Mhudi is nothing less than an "act of historical revelation":

> Mhudi is organised on the basis of historical recurrences. Just as in the 1830s alliances overthrew tyranny, so in the 1910s tyranny overthrew alliances. Extrapolate this eighty-year cycle forward, and we arrive at the present, where Plaatje locates the restoration of the original turning point. Like much heroic African poetry, Mhudi was written to have predictive function. (Gray, "Redefining the Canon" 72)

Gray notes that the double-pronged thrust of Plaatje's project includes the exploding of imperialist, Haggardian historical

mythmaking, which registers the European consciousness by 'othering' the African; and, importantly, the desire to "preserve and animate black thinking even if that meant 'interpreting' it, using the frozen and 'authoritative' formats of white written literature itself" (71). Plaatje's Mhudi therefore "has the effect of underlining that in his contemporary South Africa, if the parable be correctly interpreted, not race but mutual interest should be the policy of state, as it had been in history" (70).

Like Mhudi, Turbott Wolfe is a reaction and protest against the distortion of reality by official colonial discourse -- even though the weapon of Plomer's choice is the elaborate counter-distortion of reality for satirical purposes. In Chapter 2, reference was made to the autobiography Double Lives (1943) and the biography by Peter F. Alexander in order to suggest Plomer's motives and concerns in writing the novel, which at least in part went beyond the merely literary or aesthetic. In his study of the author, John Robert Doyle Jnr. recalls Laurens van der Post's convictions in this regard:

> That the impact of the book was extra-literary is made quite clear by van der Post: ". . . Turbott Wolfe had a marked sociological and political as well as literary import." Significantly, van der Post is much more concerned with the former than the latter. At another point in his introduction he asks, ". . . what was it in the book itself that could render it capable of influencing my generation so profoundly and of having consequences so far beyond the fields of art and literature?" He answers his own question by saying, "The explanation . . . is centred in the fact that Turbott Wolfe was a book of revelation to us." (William Plomer 63)

In Doyle's own words:

> What the book revealed was that race relations in South Africa could be discussed in a novel and that a hitherto unstated point of view could be offered the reader -- offered by an author born in South Africa and with a knowledge of the country far more extensive than that of the average person. More profoundly, the book revealed to many readers attitudes which until that time they had not known they held. (63)

For van der Post, Turbott Wolfe is "a book of revelation" whose importance reached beyond the merely literary; for Gray, Mhudi is "a social document . . . not . . . the autonomous artwork so beloved of the old school of canonisers" and "an act of historical revelation" ("Redefining the Canon" 72).

Why Mhudi and Turbott Wolfe should be credited with this revelatory capacity has no doubt ultimately to do with the deeply (and revolutionary, in the colonial context) humanising ethos with which they are imbued. It may also have something to do with the fact that both novels employ plot formulas and narrative structures similar to the jingoistic adventure novel but to radically different effect. Instead of a narcissistic, self-congratulatory fable of identity, they offer a perspective on the potential for black and white co-operation in building a shared society. Where the competing strand in the emergent "settler" or "domestic" tradition, the "tragedy of colour", saw any type of fraternisation between black and white (not necessarily sexual even) as undesirable, Mhudi and Turbott Wolfe depict a different world in which Africans and Europeans can live and work together as equals, or fall in love and marry if they so desire. It was the radical shift of perspective in the plausible and realistic

documentation of these social situations, however marred by the intrusion of prejudice and discrimination, that rendered Mhudi and Turbott Wolfe works of "revelation".

In effect, both novels present an alternative view of South African reality. Mhudi presents African people as real communities with a social validity at least equivalent to that of whites. For all the historical remoteness of its setting, the novel portrays Africans and Europeans with modern psychological, moral and social attitudes. In Plaatje's portrayal of the Boer-Barolong alliance to defeat Mzilikazi, the actions of the alliance's members, despite Boer clannishness and insularity, show a mature, forward-looking vision. The last act of sharing, where De Villiers presents a wagon to Mhudi (187), is a dramatic illustration of the marriage of budding technology with pastoralism. It could lead to progress, but in retrospect, as Plaatje writes in the novel, "Was it real, or was it just an evanescent dream?" Later events in South Africa, alas, seem to have shown it to be only an evanescent dream, but it remains, undiminished in a sense, as a permanently available possibility.

The issue of miscegenation in Turbott Wolfe has been overemphasized. The novel suggests several other aspects of black and white social interaction which could potentially undermine segregation, but which individual and governmental myopia actively prevent. For example, when Wolfe has been "working out some Lembu folk-tunes" with "four natives" (69), the bloody-minded Bloodfield takes exception to this social activity

(69-71). Bloodfield's behaviour patently reflects the "cumbrous wordy restrictions" of the oily bureaucrats from whom, Wolfe pathetically notes, "there was no escape" (105). The official and private sanctions against cross-racial relationships reduce Wolfe's attempts at fraternizing with Africans to an "evanescent dream" also, a dream necessarily deferred.

Although Turbott Wolfe's attempts at broaching the race barrier end in personal failure and official sanction, they nevertheless imply that such an effort is not only desirable but humanly necessary, that to transcend race and embrace universal communality is essential for human progress and happiness. Wolfe, Mabel van der Horst and Zachary Msomi in Turbott Wolfe, and Ra-Thaga, De Villiers, Mhudi, Hannetjie and Umnandi in Mhudi, demonstrate the human capacity to rise above race and class difference and discover (as Darwin predicted!) a truer and more evolved humanity in the wider community of society rather than that of the tribe. Thus the possibility of inter-racial relationships, broken and prohibited by prejudice or official decree (as in Turbott Wolfe, e.g 102-105), or by bigoted elders, like the Boer fathers in Mhudi (184), is a matter of concern central to both novels. In both novels, the despair that race segregation gives rise to, its smothering of individual will and freedom of choice and action, are vividly portrayed.

A concern with "feeling" and "charity" informs, in a general way, the texts in question. When Wolfe first meets Friston, to whom he spontaneously responds, he tells the young minister that:

> You are quite refreshing. It's rather a shock to find anybody like you here. I'm not used to people who are in any way frank or open. The farmers of Ovuzanyana (of whom our mutual friend Bloodfield is a specimen) and the inhabitants of Aucampstroom don't generally have much feeling, and their knees are as little worn with prayer as their hearts with charity. In this part of the world we only look for anything like spontaneity in the natives. (Turbott Wolfe 121)

This passage is a direct rendering of an impression which Plomer records in his autobiography Double Lives:

> Of most of our other white neighbours, who were few and scattered, it cannot be said that their characters were liberal, their treatment of the natives good, or their behaviour to one another polished. Some of them oppressed and cheated the natives as a matter of course, were at times cruel to them, and would even boast of it to one another but not -- after one attempt -- to us. (148)

In Mhudi, Plaatje records many instances of Boer cruelty to Africans (e.g. 116-17), and Mhudi is forced to regard them as "wild men" (117), except for De Villiers, "the one humane Boer" of his tribe (117). In the last chapter of the novel, where the young Boer gives presents to Mhudi "in token of their friendship" (184), the other Boers are "outraged at . . . these acts of generosity . . . and held that it was unnatural to reward a Kaffir for anything he did as liberally as if he were a baptized Christian" (184). And this, as Plaatje puts it, come from "a race of proverbial Bible readers, who profess Christianity to the point of bigotry" (184).

What I am trying to suggest by these illustrations is the extent to which the fictional events are mediated by personal experience. The extract from Mhudi underlines, with heavy irony, the moral significance of an event like the Land Act of 1913,

which meant that, for all that "Kaffirs" had suffered in the cause of Boer (or white) survival, they were not to be rewarded for anything. Painful personal experience, full of bitter irony, went into the writing of Mhudi and Turbott Wolfe.

Plaatje's biographer Brian Willan, in his chapter on Mhudi, cites some of Plaatje's motives in writing the novel. He states:

> It had long rankled in Plaatje's mind that the Boers, to whom he attributed so many of the later misfortunes of his people, owed their survival to the succour and help which one section of the Great Trek had received at the hands of the Barolong Chief Moroka at Thaba Nchu. It was a point to which he had often drawn attention in his political writings. (353)

Willan records Plaatje as stating that "'tradition abounds with the stories of battle after battle carried by native legions in the cause of European colonisation in South Africa'" (354), and describes Plaatje's anger at the distortion of historical truth and reality for political purposes. Accordingly, Willan writes, "in Mhudi it was one of Plaatje's main intentions to counter this kind of distortion by writing of a familiar historical episode from a novel perspective" (354), to counter the "'colossal ingratitude'" of the Boers (353).

Similar considerations colour Plomer's project in Turbott Wolfe. Plomer records in Double Lives the difficult personal relationships his family had had with "Colonial South Africans born and bred", whom he depicts as "ignorant and uncouth, and trying to make up for these deficiencies by bumptiousness and petty spite" (84). Plomer identifies as particular sources of inspiration for his novel's attack on racism in South Africa the

writings of the poet Thomas Pringle (134) and "the brilliant Lewis Nesbitt", from whose book Gold Fever he extrapolated a mordant record and indictment of white oppression and black exploitation (121-22). But these were merely precedents enabling the expression of deep feelings of anger and revolt:

> Had I yet done anything more concrete to show what I thought of a country run in such a way as to pander to race prejudice? I was not the kind of person who takes to political action or propaganda; my business in life was to write, and I conceived of writing as a making of images -- anything I had to say must be said in the line and colour of the written word. In spite of the unending work at Entumeni I had managed to find time to both read and write . . . and had also begun that commonplace task, the writing of a novel; but it was not an altogether commonplace novel . . . . (Double Lives 157)

In the novel, race and prejudice, oppression, cruelty, intolerance, "these ugly things had been dragged out into the sun"; and "it had particularly stung the whites in that part of their psychological being where guilt and fear and self-deception in regard to the natives . . . had been wrapped away from the light of reason" (162).

Another point of resemblance between the two texts is their concern with mission religion. If Africans had hitherto been largely depicted as savage heathens, both Mhudi and Turbott Wolfe counteract this image by portraying Europeans themselves as barbaric types, not in the least guided by Christian ethics in their social and personal conduct and dealings with Africans. It is not Christianity as such that is criticized, but the hypocrisy which wears a mask of godliness. As Plomer frankly states through his narrator, in a European community of no less than three

churches, several ministers and many professing Christians, "their knees are as little worn with prayer as their hearts with charity" (75). Plomer has Wolfe blame the missionaries for corrupting the natives, using their women and exploiting their gullibility. And Plaatje notes in Mhudi how the cruel Boers are a "race of proverbial Bible readers, who profess Christianity to the point of bigotry", but are incapable of accepting with the apostle Paul that all are "'one in Christ Jesus'" (184).

As is the case in Douglas Blackburn's Leaven, the Church is just one target in these novels' attack on the social institutions which support colonial domination. Both novels also examine the arbitrariness of European justice. In Mhudi, rigid Calvinism is contrasted with the African sense of fairplay, as illustrated in the case of Mrs Poe and Mrs Noko, who desire to switch husbands with each other. The Boer judgement rigidly invokes canonical law in decreeing that their wishes should not be satisfied (123), but Chief Moroka, understanding human nature better, judges differently, and the "two women could scarcely hide their satisfaction with what appeared to them the only wise decision", "for the two husbands also shared their views" (124).

In Turbott Wolfe, Plomer has Wolfe draw attention to the absurdly captious codes pertaining to his trading licence (103-105); while the crude aggression which characterises Colonel Valdarno's confrontation with Wolfe (196-97, 201-207) underlies Wolfe's feelings about the "uncleanness" (105) of the Government and its system of justice, which is to be his "final and lasting

impression" (105).

The political agenda of both Mhudi and Turbott Wolfe was unmistakeable, it seems, to contemporary readers. Plomer's novel was 'proscribed' by many libraries and prevented from circulation in Durban: as he notes in Double Lives, Turbott Wolfe was "kept under lock and key in the public library at Durban" (162). Assaults on his person by outraged whites forced Plomer to leave South Africa, and he did not return for a long time. The ubiquitous censor also "caught" Plaatje "at it" in Mhudi, to use Stephen Gray's words. Gray's sharply critical, humour-tinged account of the "psychological war that took place between Plaatje and his editors" (177) at Lovedale Press, a Christian institution, suggests that Plaatje was obliged to settle for "a bowdlerized version of his novel" (172) to secure publication at all (see Southern African Literature: An Introduction 171-82).

But political anger and negative critique do not provide the sole nor lasting flavour of these narratives. Both Mhudi and Turbott Wolfe are imbued with the creative human values of charity, justice, truthfulness and, above all, social/racial harmony. As Gray says of Mhudi:

> The 'universals' in Plaatje are very specific -- personal happiness, fidelity, social justice to all, honouring the past in its true forms, rejecting the distortions of expedient politics, letting the 'voice' of literature be heard in its fullness and richness. Any of the older 'universal values' are to be derived only once these preconditions are met. With Plaatje in mind, and his showing us that literature is a vehicle for achieving a sense of those ultimate values, we are in a new position to re-read the canon, and to find that it was always a richer, more diversified and

> challenging affair than we had been led to believe. ("Redefining the Canon" 72-73)

In conclusion, Sir Laurens van der Post offers the most succinct account of the significance of Turbott Wolfe, in terms that may equally be applied to Plaatje's achievement in Mhudi:

> For the first time in our literature, with Turbott Wolfe, a writer takes on the whole of South African life. Suddenly the barriers are down and imagination at last keeps open house in a divided land. (32-33)

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

> But we will always be able to turn a minus into a plus.
> We can turn a stumbling block to a steppingstone.
> -- Martin Luther King, Jr.

The purpose of this study has been to explore the non-racial philosophy expounded by William Plomer and Sol Plaatje in their novels about South Africa. Our exegesis of their literary enterprise in Turbott Wolfe and Mhudi has laid bare the non-racial vision of social harmony both writers embraced as a humane alternative to the destructive racial hegemony which characterised the South African polity of their day.

The South Africa Plomer and Plaatje describe is one in which African and European lives are intertwined but precariously balanced on the edge of racial separation and tyranny. Thus their novels are concerned not only to explore race relations in South Africa; they also project a humane and humanizing attitude in seeking to indicate how Africans and Europeans can come to terms with each other by recognising the extent to which their lives have already become inextricably imbricated.

Broad reference has been made to the adventure novel of imperial times, probably still the major vehicle for the popular representation of Africa in the 1920s, from which Plomer and Plaatje's works so patently differ. In this novelistic tradition, typified by the work of H. Rider Haggard, there was no question

of seeing the Other in human terms as a fellow man or woman, a partner in the struggle for survival: in the economy of representation typical of the colonial adventure novel, the Other, usually the African, was viewed only as a utility for European purposes, to be exploited, patronised or subjugated in a master-servant relationship.

The literary enterprise of the liberal school of thought, also investigated in this study, has been seen as reversing the trend of the imperialist discourse in literature about Africa and Africans and their relationship to Europeans. The crucial difference between the liberal novel and the colonialist narrative rests on the socializing spirit of the liberal novel, which, as van Wyk Smith has commented, is "rationalist, liberal and progressive, even when offering a gloomy social prognosis" (Grounds of Contest 9). In contrast, the typical imperialist or colonialist novel deals in the exploits of solitary adventurers against the backdrop of an exotic wilderness in which barbarous or abject savages are frozen in a mythical past, like figures in a landscape painting. There is no question of "society": point of view in adventure narratives like Allan Quatermain and Prester John is so subjective that the landscape and its inhabitants exist only for the narrator's terror or as an environment to be "mastered" and exploited. At the same time, the trader-adventurer deems himself the bringer of the light of "civilization" to dark, barbaric Africa. The human qualities and virtues of the African, except for his obedience to and admiration of his European

master, go unnoticed.

In a word, stereotyping, connoting a lack of social depth and a failure or refusal to recognise the African as fully human, characterizes the imperialist adventure novel. As Sarah L. Milbury-Steen notes in her European and African Stereotypes in Twentieth Century Fiction,

> The novels . . . tended to utilise Africans as shadow figures in an imperialistic drama of heroism in which natives were to be conquered and civilised. Accordingly, the African characters who played more than the role of knick-knacks were either loyal servants, cunning villains, Westernised Africans or uncivilised primitives. (15)

Where, for instance, Haggard writes in Allan Quatermain about "savages" amidst "a sea of bushes", Plaatje describes in Mhudi organized African communities; and significantly, the Boers in Plaatje's novel, for all their clannish shortcomings, are allowed to see in the Basuto King Moshoeshoe a man who "is noted for his fair dealing and sound judgement" (84).

"Fair dealing and sound judgement" indeed constitute the signature of the South African liberal novel of which Plaatje's Mhudi and Plomer's Turbott Wolfe are notable examples.

Although J.P.L. Snyman maintains that "[I]t is difficult to decide what Plomer wishes to reveal" (137), he recognises the "protest" function of the novel by remarking the "many instances of European misdemeanours and of official tyranny" (138) portrayed in Turbott Wolfe. We have argued that Plomer goes beyond mere anti-colonial diatribe, and that the subtlety of his vision is far in advance of its time. Wolfe rejects narrow

European race prejudice but finds it impossible to embrace its reverse, "Euroafricanism", which "doesn't come up to expectations" (Turbott Wolfe 189). In Chapter 2 it was noted that Plomer spoke of his novel as mediating a higher vision of internationalism which should come into being by the dismantling of narrow social prejudices, including the colour bar, in South Africa and elsewhere in the world. The portrayal of South Africa as a microcosm of internationalism, marred by race prejudice, is on occasion made explicit in the novel (for example 62ff.), but permeates the entire narrative through symbolic references with global implications.

A higher moral vision of unity despite divisibility informs the design of Plaatje's Mhudi also. The novel not only recounts an African civilization's destruction by colonization, but argues powerfully for the possibilities of joint action between African and European, as in the Boer-Barolong alliance to defeat the common tyranny of Mzilikazi and the Matabele. The goal, significantly, is the purchase of peace with justice, which makes for long-term peaceful co-existence as mutual needs are acknowledged and skills are shared between African and European (cf. the last chapter of Mhudi).

At the heart of Plaatje's and Plomer's novels is the recognition that racism is a form of tyranny, and as such, a question of power used for destructive, not constructive purposes, or for the benefit of one group at the expense of another. In Mhudi this tyranny is exemplified in Mzilikazi and

ruthless ethnic chauvinism, in sharp contrast to the noble Moshoeshoe, or Moroka and Massouw, who generously shelter all who enter their kingdom.

In Turbott Wolfe, Plomer illustrates the double-edgedness of power, its potential to cut both ways. In the story of Max Dunford and his servant Simon, Plomer shows how, when the whip of power and cruelty, the sjambok, passes, ironically, into Simon's hand, Dunford realises its effects on his own skin, a matter he had hitherto never considered (154-58). It is a casual, jokey story, but it is charged with symbolic import. In effect, the degradation and punishment Dunford had always visited on Simon, is no different from what Simon inflicts on him. The reversal of roles seems historically inevitable, and yet both are wrong and equally inhumane.

The liberal tradition in South African literature, as embodied in some of the other texts mentioned in this study besides Mhudi and Turbott Wolfe, and continuing in the present, works to expose the configurations and workings of power in South African society. In the main, this power expresses itself as race prejudice, a defensive rationalization of the domination of the "weak" by the strong. Essentially, contemporary liberal writing in South Africa (as distinct from some black resistance literature, which itself bids for power) reveals how power separates black and white in the country. The list of authors concerned is very long, including virtually all white canonical writers from Alan Paton to Nadine Gordimer. Andre Brink, for

example, the author of many novels, essays and other writings is, above all, an Afrikaner, who has said that the Afrikaner, "like it or not", is linked "to the power Establishment" in South Africa, and that "the Afrikaans writer has a special responsibility in this context" (Mapmakers: Writing in a State of Siege 151). That sense of responsibility has gone into a book like A Dry White Season, a re-creation of the Soweto riots of 1976, which spread across South Africa and caused many deaths and much destruction. In this book, since made into a film, Brink shows how a white family, "like it or not", are caught in the drama of riots and police repression, indicating how, in South Africa, black and white lives are intertwined. About this vivid, powerful book, its author says:

> In A Dry White Season I have tried to accept that responsibility one owes to one's society and one's time; it was conceived in anguish and written in pain and rage, but not in hate. Even when one's conscience drive's one to a position of J'accuse, it can be valid as a literary experience only if it derives not from the sterility of a merely negative attitude but from an all-consuming belief that man can be rescued from his blindness and his follies; and that the world can be a more just and a more free place to live in than it is. If one is driven to say "No" it should transcend the immediacy of denial to become an affirmation of something more just, more true, and more compassionate than whatever one has been allowed to experience in the past . . . .
>
> In these circumstances the act of writing becomes an act of defiance, inasmuch as it challenges the absolute right of an authority either to prescribe or to proscribe the creative process. Writing is an affirmation, not only of the individual, but, through him, of the nameless and voiceless multitude who must rely on him to define the validity of their right to be (Mapmakers 204-205).

André Brink's credo may serve as an apposite coda to this

exploration of the liberal, humanizing enterprise of the realist, socially constructive South African novel of race relations. The prophetic vision of Mhudi and Turbott Wolfe is fast becoming living reality in South Africa today, or at least has the opportunity to become so, as the country, by African and European joint initiative, seeks a common human, national identity.

Mhudi, the first novel in English by a black South African author, performs a dual function as both sectional protest and universal humanist vision. The novel responds to a specific tyranny while at the same time indicating the necessary grounds for the avoidance of all tyranny. In some ways, Mhudi is prototypical of the role and stance which was to characterize writings by later black authors in South Africa: the assertion of African identity and the criticism of the injustices of white power, designed as Jane Watts notes, to "[bring] about a movement towards commitment on the part of the readers" in the struggle against apartheid and its brutalities (Black Writers from South Africa 211). This later black South African writing Watts describes as a "literature of combat" (211), pertaining to "the whole body of the people, rather than an individualistic struggle" (212), and expressing "a more direct, less mediated relationship with the forces of history and politics" than is customary in imaginative or fictional writing. Among the many examples of such literature, The Children of Soweto by Mbulelo Mzamane (1982), a direct re-creation of the series of events culminating in the 1976 Soweto riots, seems paradigmatic in its

urgent engagement with social and political reality. Its direct, explicit discourse contrasts in many ways with Plaatje's more implicit political agenda in Mhudi. Yet it cannot be denied that Plaatje's Mhudi anticipates the fiery protest characteristic of black fiction in South Africa from the 1960s on.

Mediating historically between the lives of Alex La Guma, Bloke Modisane, Can Themba, and later writers were Peter Abrahams, the Dhlomo brothers and Ezekiel Mphahlele, who -- during the 1930s, '40s and '50s -- explored the implications of the socio-political clash of African and European interests. Peter Abrahams' Marxist-inspired writings portray urban situations and the economic exploitation and social repression that blacks have to endure.

His humanism shines through in a novel like Mine Boy where, although the focus is on blacks, he also embraces whites as potential fellow-victims of the system capable of showing understanding and sympathy for human pain. But while Abrahams, H.I.E. and R.R.R. Dhlomo, and the early Ezekiel Mphahlele, still worked within a broadly liberal ideology, this began to yield, after Sharpeville and its aftermath in 1960, to a far more militant Black Consciousness aesthetic. This produced what Njabulo Ndebele has described as a "literature of spectacle", a literature which reproduces spectacular scenes of racial oppression. Such writing has no interest in the humanity of whites, and rejects liberalism itself as a hypocritically manipulated tool of oppression. It is only now that the

structural inequalities in South African society are being redressed that Plaatje's vision may again be countenanced.

This study has emphasized the modernist sensibility and style of Plomer's Turbott Wolfe; it has also indicated how Plaatje in Mhudi returned to "pre-modern" times in order to talk about modern South Africa. Can Plaatje's novel be regarded as modern, if not "modernist"? I believe a good case can be made for the modernity of Mhudi. Modernism in literature is notoriously difficult to define. But most critics would agree that a modern novel, modern in outlook and orientation, is one which, as Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane note, is imbued with a social vision, of

> confident faith in social advance, a readiness to believe that to expose abuses was to invite their annihilation, that to repudiate the conventional past was to clear the way for a healthy moral growth, for welcome ideals. Hard work, clear vision, courage, purposefulness -- these were the keys to the future, to the evolution of new types of men, of society, of art (41).

In such terms, there can be little dispute that Plaatje wrote with a modern sensibility about a historical situation and context in Mhudi. His non-racial philosophy, at a time when racism was entrenched in popular European thought, his 'internationalist' belief in community, in progress and in the necessity for change are all evidence of a modern outlook. Even the symbolic nature of the narrative and Plaatje's linguistic experimentation strike a distinctly modernist note. Plaatje's novel shows African communities as welcoming change, embracing Christianity and new technologies; it embraces relativism in

portraying communities based on different but equally valid social, moral and judicial principles, for instance, the Qorannas, the Barolong and the Basutos. And finally, in its search for a truly national story and a national voice to tell it with, it was surely attempting to fulfil one of the basic requirements of the modern nation-state: that unity of historical experience and culture on which the concept of nationhood is based.

It is hoped that this study has succeeded in describing the vision and philosophy shared by the novels of Plomer and Plaatje, and in demonstrating their vital relevance to the South Africa of today. In the words of T.R.H. Davenport, it is hoped that this study has evinced

> an awareness . . . that the study of the past is not merely a device to help to perpetuate a world of make-belief, but a cumulative experience to be drawn upon honestly and put to proper use. (South Africa: A Modern History 578)

In the end, the real value of these two novels has nothing to do with make-belief: it consists in their continued relevance to South African society and, perhaps, to the world at large. The issues Plaatje and Plomer address in their novels are still current in South Africa today; their prophesies have at last a chance of becoming reality.

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