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Mongane Wally Serote is recognised primarily as a poet, and his six volumes of poetry to date have received acclaim both in South Africa and internationally. His single novel, has, however, provoked a more equivocal response from critics.

Some have praised the work. Doriane Barboure believes it 'the most powerful and penetrating exploration of the Power period' in South Africa (Barboure:172); and Jane Glegg claims that Serote manages to write about a whole community involved in political struggle in a manner which shows up the failure of English working class novelists to do the same (Glegg:34).

Other critics have, however, been less convinced. Lewis Nkosi feels the work 'too chaotic, too dispersed, to offer anything more solid than mere moments' (Nkosi:45); Barbara Harlow states that the novel remains content with the portrayal of racial conflict in the country, with little attempt to show internal contradictions within the black community itself (Harlow:108); and Njabulo Ndebele remarks that, despite the author's attempts to deal with the everyday concerns of people within a broader political canvas, in the end 'the spectacle takes over and the novel throws away the vitality of the tension generated by the dialectic between the personal and the public' (Ndebele:156).

To Every Birth Its Blood's critical reception has been so diverse (and, it must be said, confused) that one notices more than the usual variety of possible interpretations at play. It was speedily apparent that the evaluation of this novel was implicitly bound up with each critic's own formal and ideological assumptions to an even greater extent than usual. This uncertainty of opinion, indeed, seems to be caused by the peculiar nature of the novel itself. It seems to hinge around potentially divergent understandings of the work's bipartite structure, especially the manner in which the two sections of the book are to be read off against each other. Further confusion is due to the relative weight different critics attach to the differing narrative techniques used in the book, whereby Serote appears to whet opposing literary appetites and assumptions only to refuse complete satisfaction to any of them.

Despite the diversity of critical attitude, however, only two critics have up until now subjected To Every Birth Its Blood to anything approaching detailed scrutiny. These critics are Barboure and Nick Visser. As my argument partly relies on and partly disagrees with the insights of both, it will be necessary to paraphrase some of their conclusions.

Composition and Unity in the Novel

Barboure argues for the aptness of the novel's structure. She sees Serote as explicating a process which moves from the individual consciouness of Tsi and the more subjective mode of the first half, to a second half which spreads the focus away from a single char-

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acter to a group of Movement activists and a more objective mode. Barboure argues that the novel should be read as an internally consistent narrative moving from individual alienation to group political commitment. She stresses that her understanding of the relationship between Parts 1 and 2 is integral to a full discovery of the author's purpose, both politically - the passage from Tsi's alienated anguish to comradely commitment and armed struggle; and formally - the movement from first to third person, which encapsulates in turn a thematic movement from subjective isolation to objective social engagement.

Using this explicatory framework, she explains further complexities and features of the novel. For instance, she believes that Serote's deployment of Tsi's 'defeated' family in Part 1 is set against the 'very different' Ramono family, politically active and psychologically strong, in Part 2. Furthermore, Barboure tries to explain areas of the novel which appear to jar against a simplistic understanding of the relationship between the two parts, agreeing with Schoon (35-8) that Tsi's one political effort at the end of Part 1 is doomed (and apt in terms of the structure of the novel) because he makes the wrong choice and joins a liberal organisation.

Moreover, the political denouement of the work is prefigured early on by events which determine Tsi's anomie, such as his assault at the hands of the police and his brother's detention. The transition to political revolution in the second half is carefully phased by Serote through the new lease of life the advent of Black Consciousness gives to the community, the uprising of 1976, and the angry sense of purpose this uprising leaves in the black community due to the deaths of loved ones at the hands of the police.

Visser takes issue with Barboure's interpretation. He suggests that there is an inconsistency and fluidity in both the structural and ideological processes of the novel, which serve to undercut the judgment of those critics who assume that the work has a unified and consistent narrative. Much of what emerges structurally in Part 1 escapes these critics. In addition, there are further complexities covert in the work as a whole, which are not identified correctly. In particular, Barboure's assumption of the text's essential unity is mistaken.

He shows that much contradiction and confusion occurs due to a lack of consistency of temporal vantage point in the action as a whole. The chronology of Tsi's main experiences are easy enough to follow, but the closer the reader tries to plot these experiences the more they start to blur. Despite references to events in recent South African history, the assigning of dates or any satisfactory duration of time to episodes in the text becomes increasingly arbitrary and difficult.

Visser explains the discrepancies and contradictions of To Every Birth Its Blood with reference to its time and process of composition. It was written during a tumultuous time in South Africa's recent past - the five years between 1975 and 1980. He suggests that Serote tried to incorporate extra-textual elements into a

novel he had already begun to write; especially the Soweto uprising of 1976, and his own change of allegiance from a Black Consciousness viewpoint to membership of the non-racial ANC. As each new phase of struggle and repression occurred during this period,Serote opened up his narrative still further to incorporate it. Political events and ideological changes compelled him to abandon one type of novel (the modernist,existentially-orientated first part) for another (the social realism and overt political commitment of the second part). Yet there is a problem in that the author does not completely abandon the first fictional project or fold it satisfactorily into the second. The two sections remain incompletely integrated, and the transition is never finally accomplished.

Visser's own case cannot be proved without manuscriptural evidence,as he himself acknowledges. Yet he convincingly shows that Barboure's totalizing proclivities distort or ignore those parts of the text which run counter to her explanatory framework. For example,her setting forward of the Ramono family as a counterpoint to Tsi's is seriously compromised by Ramono's harsh treatment of his son Morolong,a treatment she cannot explain away adequately (to her, Morolong is "ironically not able to cope with the pressures of succeeding,and becomes a street youth dropout" (Barboure:176)). Moreover,if the thrust of the novel is towards political radicalisation and the successful taking up of arms against the oppressor, the re-introduction of a relatively unchanged Tsi at its end needs more careful thought than she seems prepared to give it,as it seriously disrupts the political process she believes the novel has.

The Arming of Logic

Visser's points are both correct and themselves problematic. His own reading does appear to leave several issues either pending or not discussed. His conviction that features of structuration of the novel are of considerably less importance than what happens due to the clash of two incomplete fictional projects leaves a great number of not only formal but also ideological and thematic intricacies of To Every Birth Its Blood unexplored. His deconstruction of the text's irregularities of composition is in my opinion largely accurate: yet it potentially forecloses the necessity to further examine the text in order to discern the author's conscious use of stylistic and structural features.

This task of re-examination is made imperative by a recent statement of Serote with regard to black South African literature over the past three decades:

> When oppression is very intense(as in the early sixties and mid-seventies),when there is no political activity to give release to oppression,people become much more conscious of the might of the state. This also imposes certain types of censorship,limits access to world literature,there is a lack of skills and tools to read, analyse and create. So poetry,at a certain point,did provide an expression for people affected by this. And while it is

> not possible to compare the novel and poetry, they do make different demands on people. Poetry can be condensed and the writer can use imagery very extensively, which means you can remain obscure, perhaps unclear, but give a feel of what you want to say and it can be identified. But while you can do that with a novel, in truth it cannot be recognised as a novel. A novel depends a lot on logic, on creating a logical process of development.
>
> (Serote 1988b)

Some historians of South African literature will dismiss this viewpoint as idiosyncratic. Yet it contains several statements which occur constantly in Serote's non-fictional articles and interviews, and which can be found in his poetry and fiction in a mediated form as well.

Firstly, he has stressed throughout his career that politics and literature are inextricably intertwined, and that the writer is responsible and responsive to his or her community and its social realities. The writer, in his view, is a 'mirror of society' (Kuhn: 41) and should 'articulate the experience of our people through whatever language, in whatever form' (Serote 1988b). Shifts in his perspective are relatively small and measurable against his own political development. Earlier interviews, prior to his departure from South Africa in 1974, evince the inhibitive and fear-inducive nature of the country's socio-political circumstances on the black writer of the 1970s, and hint at some social withdrawal and alienation. Later statements, made after joining the ANC (which he frequently identifies as 'the Movement' in his non-fictional writings) identify the writer closely with political commitment, organisation and collective endeavour (1). Indeed, Serote comes close to implying that membership of 'the Movement' will give the individual unproblematic access to a close relationship with 'the people'. At the same time 'alienation for a cultural worker is shame and death' as far as he is concerned (Ngugi\Serote:33). What is significant for the purposes of this essay is the stress Serote places again and again on the writer needing to act within the political world, and the degree to which he believes political change occasions not only ideological but also formal and generic changes in literature in an immediate, reflexive manner: the black writer must tailor his or her work to circumstances, as form is functional to purpose (Seroke:30).

Secondly, Serote's highlighting of the logical demands made by the novel form becomes, in the light of the above, illuminating. His choice of form for <u>To Every Birth Its Blood</u> must have been at least partly made due to the novel's facilitation of logical process. This is in fact vindicated by the author's statement that the emergence of a political struggle against apartheid in its most recent phase of armed struggle joined together with mass participation has 'taught us logic...armed us for storytelling in a logical manner" (Serote 1988b). What needs to be ascertained then in this novel is, I would maintain, just such an attempt at logical development. Whether such an undertaking is contradictory or not due to its circumstances of production is not (yet) here the point - the

point is that it was attempted. For the author to stress so emphatically that at least some process of logical argument is at work requires further elucidation. Visser, perhaps, leaves us with a sense of the relative inadequacy of all explanations which attempt to read the novel for thematic and ideological overview. The disjunctures and paradoxes which riddle Barboure's interpretations are obvious: indeed, Visser is lenient in the number of inconsistencies of temporal vantage point and denouement he points out that she is oblivious to (2). Yet there is an alternative reading of the text possible which suggests that the author's control of his material was up to a point much more sure than is generally now assumed.

The Novel's Double Logic

Serote's statement about the relative strategic spaces open to poetry and the novel are reminders that he is both a poet and a prose writer. This has relevance for the study of To Every Birth Its Blood which tends to be overlooked. All of its critics have been hamstrung by a fundamental assumption that the work is, when all is said and done, a work of realism: and, at least until its last episodes, a work of realism which tries to mime contemporary events in South Africa. This belief is to some extent justified by the novel's stylistic predilections and by the overwhelming number of references to extratextual events, especially with regard to the period stretching from the early 1960s to the late 1970s. Yet this mimesis goes only so far. The action of the novel stretches into an immediate future as it is imagined by the author, when the Movement's political struggle is ever intensifying but (crucially) as yet inconclusive. Furthermore, the mimetic urge is elsewhere ruptured by inconsistencies in the relation of textual events to historical events too numerous to ignore.

These inconsistencies point to the fact that there is another form of temporal and political logic at work in the text than the simply mimetic. Some critics have perceived this aspect of Serote's writing in passing, remarking on the 'poetic qualities' of the novel (Klaaste) or (with regard to a recent volume of his poetry) noting that his uses of imagery are 'strategic interventions in the political arena, of inspirational myth' (Chapman 1988:27). Indeed, both Barboure and Visser edge in this direction, the former by discussing the development of symbolism in Serote's poetry as a way means of exploring stylistic complexity and political growth which reach their 'culmination' in Birth (Barboure:179); the latter by commenting that the role of the Movement in the novel is eventually shifted from the realm of the analytical and political to that of the metaphoric (Visser:75). Yet it seems to me that these insights can be taken further.

Serote's 'Felt Thought'

It can swiftly be seen that the novel is marked stylistically by a constant shifting interplay of symbols and motifs: references to rivers, journeys, silences, storms, eyes, holes and music (to name only the most intrusive) abound. Such an interplay is also characteristic of the author's poetry, even to the point where the novel

uses significantly similar symbols to his other genre. Mphahlele describes this interplay, with reference to the poetry, as part of a strategy of compulsive explorative development:

> Serote records 'felt thought' almost as if he were transcribing directly from a response mechanism within, while it was registering impressions and flashing its messages... There are words and images that he uses and frequently returns to. Again, he does this relentlessly, compulsively, as if to extract the last drop of meaning from them... These repeated images are turned around and inside out in as manner that quite clearly portrays a poet searching for meaning up and down the vertical and horizontal planes. (Mphahlele:67-8)

A similar usage of symbol and motif can be discerned in To Every Birth Its Blood. To some extent, such commonly used symbols and motifs change meaning as their contexts in the novelistic action changes, and the text acquires added resonance and emphasis as a result. Thus, in a few short pages at the novel's end where Tsi continues his drinking spree in Botswana, the reader will compare Tsi's memory of his sister's eyes 'staring straight at me' with the adjacent remark that fellow drinker Yao does not wish to lift his head 'for then he would not know what to do with his eyes' (Birth: 352,354) and realise that eyes are here meant to function symbolically as an index of shame and reproach. Obviously, there are moral implications the author wishes to highlight from such a juxtaposition.

However, each symbol which is continually used becomes operative in rather contradictory ways as the action progresses. It is very difficult to see, for instance, how at various points in a single literary work the motif of the 'journey' can be used to refer to such differing incidents as the sexual act, the trek towards liberation, the journey of the individual through life, the journey into political exile, the experience of being tortured and the music of Dollar Brand and still maintain any overall coherence (Birth: 3,23, 69,112,249,346,357,367). When this can be seen to happen with a series of symbols and motifs, the metaphorical and quasi-poetic language they are expressed in starts to form intrusive patterns of its own, pulling the novel into several possible readings simultaneously. Rather than adding to the meaning such protean, contradictory patterns act as a hindrance to any sense of final symbolic pertinence, in terms of the denouement of the novel on a realistic level. Any controlled accuracy of usage begins to bleed away, and it would appear that the novel is pulled into two different forms of logic - the one linear, realistic and analytic and the other imagistic, repetitive and intuitive.

Serote, in my opinion, disrupts generic convention and critical reception by using two systems of narrative logic throughout the book - the realistic and the metaphoric. This is more than the mutual interference of two critical projects: I would argue that the realistic and the metaphoric collapse into each other at every point, intertwined in a conceptual unity which is directly the terrain of

Serote's own ideological idiosyncracies. It is only through an exploration of this conceptual framework that the nature of the ideology, and subsequent problems of the novel, can be brought satisfactorily to view.

While the mimetic paralleling of textual to extra-textual events, and the temporal sequencing of the narrative are undeniably a problem, it is nevertheless possible to ascertain an overarching schema of To Every Birth Its Blood in which these two levels of language operate. Critics such as Barboure and Glegg mistake the work, as Visser has pointed out, by assuming an unruptured organic unity and logic of narrative process and language. Yet some of the points they make cannot be cast aside - their insights make partial sense in the unfolding of the novel. One needs, initially, to try and discover the authorial ideology which allowed Serote to believe he could publish the novel in the precise format in which it appears, whatever disjunctures of composition it might have gone through. The decisive contradictions in the novel are fundamentally ideological and political in origin. These contradictions are interlaced with the novel's stylistic and structural processes in a complex manner, but a manner which is definitely not outside the ambit of critical scrutiny. A suggestions as to authorial intention is of course not a sufficient exposition of the text's character in itself; but is a necessary first step towards revealing the novel's contradictory presence, in all its implications.

The Emptiness of Time

Temporal indicators and diectics abound in the work: indeed, they are so plentiful that they act as a source of confusion rather than clarification. Yet on closer reading it appears that the structure of the novel does indeed yield evidence of a consistency and logic of authorial intention, a consistency best read off in terms of the temporal sequencing of the novel. Rather than dismissing the uncertainty of temporal vantage point and the existence of anachronisms as impediments to the author's purpose, it is more fruitful to understand that time - however unfixed and paradoxical the manner in which it is expressed - is the presence which dominates and ultimately delineates the narrative body Serote constructs. It is here, too, that the dual existence of the poetic-symbolic and socially realistic logics of the text can be seen to weave into some sort of concurrence. The most important presence which structures To Every Birth Its Blood is the temporal perspective and logic in which the characters, depictions and actions operate. It is in these terms that the narrative logic of the text can to some extent be explained, but this can only be done if one perceives that Serote shuttles continuously between his two systems of temporal-ideological perception.

One can, in other words, to some extent discern a fabula on which to ground the discours of the novel: and this fact in part strengthens Barboure's viewpoint, unconscious as she seems to be of some of the work's intricacies and dislocations. The temporal looping employed by the author in Part I is the key to this process of understanding, and contains strong indications as to the author's ideological

and conceptual choices. The formal structuring and temporal sequencing of this or indeed any quasi-historical novel can never be a completely mimetic imitation of what has happened in reality, but embodies and implies a choice of both what events to highlight and when to highlight them. Thus,sequencing in fiction implies a necessary principle of order and choice of values - in short,of ideologically motivated selection - on the part of the author (Izevbaye: 75) (3).

The novel starts,as far as Tsi Molope is concerned,in media res. The first three chapters present him after his days as a journalist,yet before his time at McLeans College. Tsi is presented as an individual dislocated from,but ineluctably held within,his own marriage as well as the body of the Alexandra community - its streets, crowds and violence. Tsi's depicted alienation at the beginning of the novel causes him such anguish because he is not only aware that he is alienated but also,implicitly,what the causes of his alienation are. "I have never walked with crowds,I walk into them",says Tsi (Birth:5); but there is no place in South Africa for him to escape his social community or the reality of apartheid either. Politics so overdetermines the individual lives of black people,due to the particular nature of apartheid and its interference in private life,that individual activity and psychological trauma can never be seen in isolation from political events. Even in the most anguished section of Tsi's early monologues the reality of detentions,permit raids,social violence and despair are ever present. He cannot escape the painful memory of the political history which has constructed a 'people's defeat' in Alexandra,nor the meaninglessness of individual life and death within such a history. Even his drowning himself in music and drink cannot stop Tsi's obsessive political-cum-existential reflections: while these reflections,despite their cogency,cannot bring him to act. The first chapters of To Every Birth Its Blood depict a painful dissolution,which effects the broader community as much as it affects Tsi. When one realises that Alexandra is not only a specific community near Johannesburg but a synecdoche for black existence in South Africa as a whole (4),and when one realises that Tsi is at this stage both protoypical of the black person in Alexandra and symbolic of its wider reality as a community (5),the general nature of this defeat at the novel's beginning comes into sharper focus:

> We together,looked like that,by time,place,blood and a moment of life,by sweat,and by all that makes us think and wish we could know each other,love each other,care for and respect each other; if we were now,once more,to rise,to move closer to each other,in fear,desperation, uncertainty,moved by a sadness,helplessness,hopelessness,by a wish to know what it is we could do,we were capable of doing: so that,once and for all,we would be with those we love,those we have as our families,to begin a journey. Where,where does a river begin? We were born,and we had come to be witnesses of life, distorted by time and by place. Everything that we could claim immediately left bloodstains on our fingers. (Birth:69-70)

In the early parts of the text,time is experienced as repetitious, all but circular, as Tsi and the other characters live in the continuous,indeterminate past of his,and his community's,pain. They are all,as Boykie and Tsi just before their assault at the hands of roadblock policemen,'lost in the night,and the drama of our time was this time set again..It was us who were the issue of the drama, of the vicious hatred white people have managed to have against black people' (Birth:84). The author works stylistically at this point predominantly in a continuous,recently past but non-specific tense,constructing the plot via Tsi's memory and repeated authorial and narrator asides (the two often indistinguishable) to make sorties into personal and community history. The endless circularity of defeat and the hopeless temporal swamp it occasions is not allowed to last,however. The temporal schema of the first part of the novel moves from the emptiness of Tsi's post-assault agony to a recollection,over several chapters (Birth:71-134), of the assault in question and its surrounding circumstances. While hints have occurred before,it is in this section first apparent what a powerful presence the act of remembering occupies in the novel as a whole. Memory may indeed be an 'unreliable mirror',as Tsi points out (Birth:29) - and it is generally speaking a painful process as well:it revivifies the defeat of the indigenous inhabitants of the country. Since whites and blacks began a 'serious game of centuries' (Birth:119) in South Africa,all memory can bring about is an acknowledgement of defeat: "you know that it is only in our memory that this is our land", as Boykie remarks to Tsi. Military defeat and the advent of capitalism have made blacks 'all manacled by time,by the cruel And real time of moments,when machines demand attention because something called gold demands to be crushed and sifted and sold' (Birth:111).

The normalcy of a country under white minority rule is revealed as masking an intense experience of disorder for black South Africans, a profound dislocation of black selfhood and nationhood (6). Throughout,the South African State is typified as inverting normal standards and values,controlled as it is by 'mad men' (Birth:166) whose statements about the 'lawlessness and disorder' and 'crazy' nature of black aspirations are always deployed ironically by Serote (Birth:235;359). Their power is both absolute and morally arbitrary: as Nomsisi points out to Tsi,they can do 'anything' at all to his brother Fix in detention (Birth:41). The ultimate immorality of apartheid makes the social and experiential order it upholds destructive. It disrupts social space and time for the people it oppresses,and demands an overturning by them of its false notions of order - literally,a revolution - for a proper sense of order to be established. Those blacks who do not see or wish to see this fact will remain permanently in a state of false consciousness and escapism,unaware of the objective disorder of their day-to-day lives, 'at ease as if owning time' (Birth:341).

Tsi's dilemma,and the dilemma of his family and those like him,is that they either cannot or will not change their circumstances,or otherwise do not understand the truth about South Africa and see the necessity for change at all. Those who do act in the first part of the novel - such as Fix,Nomsisi and the Tsi of the McLeans

College episode - either make the wrong political choice or find their actions too uncoordinated and dispersed for success. Tsi is passive: he is effectively 'lost in the streets' of Alexandra because he believes social intercourse can only destroy him (Birth: 34;45) and remains lost, walking against the communal direction (Birth:5 cf.348). He thinks all action is worthless because it will end in defeat, and this lack of belief in his community and himself makes certain that he cannot change his own character or his circumstances. In a situation of generational conflict and political oppression, all he can say to his mother when she questions his activities is "Mama, truly I do not know what I have been doing" (Birth:27). It is this inability to take the first step towards change which makes Tsi 'an observer rather than a participant' (Birth:71). In such an ambience, Serote seems to suggest, any social relationship the individual undertakes of a sexual, familial or political nature is eventually doomed. Yet, despite this, Tsi is simultaneously aware of the need to act, and to act in accordance with a generational and communal concord that might work against the external destructive political conditions:

> I was sitting on the grave of my grandfather. I fought the thought that nagged me, which wanted to know whether he heard me when I asked about Fix; and also, when I told him that I was getting tired of going to the shebeen; and that I wouldn't go to church. I will fight, fight it forever. By coming here, every Sunday, I will fight it, for I know he is listening, and asking whether I was willing to change. That is where the trouble started - was I willing to change?
>
> (Birth:11-2)

Memory has at least one other important function for all of the characters. Tsi's sketching out of the history of Alexandra (Birth: 28-31) and the assault scene in the following chapter act in part as an explanation for how the state of affairs at the novel's beginning came into being, for both Tsi and for his community. The reason for the street violence, Tsi's drunkenness and his family's marital problems are to some extent clarified. He is lead to think about the past, and the significance of his life. At the same time, Tsi's state of mind is made more understandable, if not permissible, for the reader. It is noticeable that it is in this section of the novel that its initial style and perception of time first gradually begin to be undercut, and the definite past tense and a greater use of the active voice start to intrude (Birth:71ff.). These changes are associated with a shift towards a more linear chronology, as well as a gradual shift towards causal process and explanation.

The recollection of history allows bonds of causality to be established in the novel. Painful or not, such recollection is the only way of understanding the present - and understanding the present in terms of its generation by the past is the only way for black people, individually or communally, to start moving into a future that is <u>not</u> meaningless or repetitive. This theme is hinted at from early on. Even when Tsi is being assaulted, the grandmother he remembers in his imagination utters significant words: "Child you

must know...that your past is so scattered,nothing could hold it, that you have a future to build" (Birth:88).Right throughout the novel the act of remembering is potentially redemptive as well as immediately disruptive,as history and memory bear the seeds of victory in the soil of defeat. Old people,defeated though they may be,are also the bearers of a proud history of resistance to white encroachment: thus the desire by Onalenna to question an old woman 'for record, for history,for memory' in order to understand why she is 'still a fighter" (Birth:282). There is an imperative for the characters to remember the past in order to break with its negative aspects: thus,not only the introspective Tsi but also the Movement fighters in the second half of the novel attempt to understand their own and their people's history (see Birth:28-30;326-8).

'Now We Enter History'

Understanding the truth of history beyond colonial falsification is not enough in itself,however. Practically all the black characters in the novel achieve this,as it is an unavoidable truth for the author. Crucially,changing the nature of time and reality is the next step needed,and this is not possible from a passive standpoint. Tsi's parents are 'trapped in a painful terrible knowledge' (Birth:53); and even in the midst of the growing awareness brought about by the 'days of Power',he and his family remain passive in the face of detentions and police incursions into their house:

> We waited,while time mercilessly sped by,or mockingly tortoised by,and all of us got older:Fix,my father,my mother,myself,while we waited to hear what Vorster had decided to do with my brother.
>
> (Birth:138)

Tsi may realise,consoled by his dead grandmother,that 'I have a journey to make,and the journey has to be made with and among other people,and...I was the only one who would know which people I could make the journey with' (Birth:88), yet his eventual choice of social collectives to make this journey with is mistaken. Even though he is advised by Nolizwe and Onalenna to join McLeans College,And achieves some meaningful work there,the choice proves to be wrong because McLeans does not address fully enough the political issues at stake in the country,especially the need for a complete overturning of the status quo.

The novel's characters who begin to move beyond the impasse of repetitive time are those who arrive at a clarity of understanding, not only of the causes and existence of black oppression, but also of the need to take radical action to change it. The one without the other is insufficient. The connection of memory with change, and a concomitant need to disrupt the endless 'forever' of apartheid South Africa is already hinted at during the police assault:

> 'What the hell do we do when things are like this?' Boykie said. He said that with a controlled voice. It was a voice saturated with memories,a voice brimful

> of and spilling with despair,it was a voice determined to live,determined to die if need be,if indeed the cycle would be broken,once and for all.
>
> (Birth:85)

and becomes more explicit as the action proceeds.

Time begins to move forward again in a meaningful,linear direction for those who desire freedom; who have gained a knowledge of the awful reality of the country's political and social order and realise that normalcy for black people requires an inversion of that order in all its aspects. The 'days of Power' (referring to the days of Black Consciousness which result in the 1976 uprising) are crucial for Serote in his transfiguration of circular to linear time. Indeed,even a post-Black Consciousness activist such as Tuki later acknowledges that it is the activities of Black Consciousness militants which first begin to turn South Africa into a 'different country' (Birth:330). The 1976 uprising makes many of the characters realise that there is no turning back,and that organised political insurrection is unavoidable.

> The days of Power had passed. Some people had cleaned up the blood,on the stoeps and floors; some cleaned their guns. A relationship had been established; time was to nurture it.
> John moved his face away from the window. His eyes were a little wet when they met the face of the clock...if anything was needed now,it was clear vision.
>
> (Birth:169-70)

This conviction and understanding must go hand in hand,according to Serote,with an exercise of willpower and a choosing of sides. John has been made a 'deadly man' (Birth:168) by his lover's death: and in the first chapter of Part 2 he comes to a full knowledge of the political and racial dichotomies of South Africa,and a realisation that political commitment is required to change these dichotomies. John,like many of the characters in the second half of the novel, accepts the burden of public expectation and behaves adequately, according to Serote's logical schema. He abandons his 'sitting-forever'posture when he begins to realise that black people can use their intelligence and knowledge correctly. (Birth: 183;188). After the object lesson of Ramono's trial he joins the Movement.

John's process towards a clarity of vision and action is the first exposition of clear thinking we are offered in To Every Birth Its Blood. Part 1 ends with Tsi making the wrong political choice; Part 2 begins with a period of quiet, the last before the burgeoning of resistance and civil strife with which the rest of the novel deals. A crucial point of ideological belief in the work as a whole here emerges again,this time in a more overt manner: John realises that it is not possible for a black South African to separate the personal from the political,the private from the public. In a sense the disruption of John's love relationship allows him the clarity

he needs for action,although his final decision to join the Movement still takes two chapters. As he muses on the death of Nolizwe,his lover,he realises

> The one thing he wanted her to know was that he did not only possess a heart of steel because they had killed her,but mainly because their love,like all love in this country where there was 'no crisis',would otherwise rot and be vulgar.
>
> (Birth:168)

Knowledge of the social truth and the clarity of mind which allows one to make the correct political choice are therefore essential to the action of the narrative. As the fighter Tuki stresses,for centuries black South Africans have fought 'for what seemed to us a very simple and easily understood reality: this is our land,it must bear our will. South Africa is going to be a socialist country,this is going to come about through the will,knowledge and determination of the people'(Birth:330). In opposition to those critics who argue that To Every Birth Its Blood reveals a 'comprehensive picture' of a whole community of people (Glegg:34),it appears that the author manipulates his characters in terms of whether they make the right political choice or not. The only correct choice is to become 'clear-minded' (Birth:249) and exercise individual willpower to join the Movement and liberate the country.

The Retrieval of Historical Time

The Movement is both the bearer of and process towards true consciousness and human and political fulfillment. While McLeans College and the BSO are both, in different ways, wrong political choices, the right political choice is the one the Movement offers and absorbs. The political realisation which occurs to the Movement characters,and the change which moulds the novelistic action in Part 2, is the need for revolution and a complete overthrow of the apartheid State. This need for drastic change, hinted at strongly even in the negative social and psychological portraits of Part 1, is made a potential reality by the growing strength of the Movement.

From the first time it is mentioned by name, every utterance and scenario in the book is aimed at facilitating the qualitative political leap into Movement politics. The Movement is seen as a culmination in epistemological as well as political terms: with the 1976 revolt the historical occurrence which finally makes this clear to many of the characters. This Onalenna gives voice to during a Takalane Theatre performance shortly after the uprising:

> We remove the blood,it's not nice to walk on
> We remove the bodies
> It would be terrible to see dogs eat them
> And then we have
> Hope for what?
> That they won't come again

That they know we don't like what they are doing.'
No
I know we know much more than that
We are people
Who have struggled a long long time
Now we have to use the lessons of our struggle!

(Birth:173)

The Movement is,without fail,referred to as purposeful and correct. In its active and militant opposition,the Movement unmasks the truth about South African oppression (Birth:290) and sets in motion a process of polarisation whereby more and more of the country's inhabitants choose one side or the other,until the final apocalyptic confrontation looms near (Birth:360-7).

If the application of knowledge and willpower by various characters - in short,the decision to join the Movement - is what makes the crucial political transformations possible,then political change in the novel is based on a notion of individual transformation spreading quickly and organically through the community; a community which in turn becomes completely directed by the Movement. Political transformation is the consequence of a growing number of individual transformations taking place. The opposite is also true: individual transformation cannot begin without an acknowledgement of the need for political transformation, and the (for the author) logically consequent decision to become a Movement member. It is not enough to rely on oneself,as Tsi's father does (Birth:61); or make the wrong decisions,as Tsi does; or drown in self-pity at the horror of apartheid,as Tsi,Yao and the pre-Movement John do. To make the wrong choice is,in effect,to remain passive; to remain on the periphery; to remain a victim.

Serote does not minimise the difficulties that may be encountered once this choice has been made. Indeed,the success of the enormous venture initiated by the Movement is left hanging in the balance. Yet it is noticeable that the Movement transmogrifies the characters who accept its inevitability into calm, dignified and disciplined individuals with a sense of purpose. This correct deportment insures that the larger community will feel and exhibit 'respect' for the individuals who make the correct choice (Birth:239). The characters in Part 2 are all measurable against the degree to which they become fearless and decisive (with Ramono and Oupa as their models for this) and join the effort to regain socio-political dignity and psychological completion by the overturning of white and capitalist (Serote seems to see no distinction possible between the two) rule. The quintessential nature of this choice can be seen in the manner in which the Movement can alter the perception of time for the novel's characters. When Dikeledi,for instance,learns that her friend Onalenna belongs to the Movement,she thinks of the previous day - before she had this knowledge - as the 'old past' (Birth:271). Subsequent militant activity increases this sense of a rupture in the fabric of time. When the first bomb (planted by Onalenna) explodes, 'for a second,it was as if Johannesburg,for the first time since it was created,stood still;just for a second. Then

it get into action' (Birth:269). The meaningless forward motion of white capitalist time (non-progressive in terms of black experience) is disrupted.

Simultaneous with the process of increasing dislocation of apartheid South Africa, the emptiness of 'conquered time' is nudged into progressive, linear time by and for the supporters of the Movement. Human will alters the experience of time, so that the truth of social reality in the country is slowly revealed and the inexorable process of liberation put into movement. Individuals such as Onalenna, Dikeledi and the other fighters set time free, and set loose a chain of events which finally can no longer be controlled by any individual. The ineluctability of these events overcome even non-members of the Movement, such as Tsi. The Movement effectively speeds up time: Oupa's and Mandla's decision that the black policeman Mpando must be assassinated is not only juxtaposed with the happening of the actual event in a narrative sense, but is depicted as happening almost instantaneously in real time (Birth :258-64). The speed, inexorability and facility with which individual characters are quickly and thoroughly integrated into the Movement is also striking. Towards the end of the novel time accelerates even further: the montage effect prevalent in the last three chapters indicates a headlong rush into the future, occasioned by the activities of the Movement and the decisiveness of its supporters. In contradistinction to the early passages, the crowd at the political funeral in Part 2 (under cover of which the Movement assassinates several policemen) are singing "Vorster, you own guns, we own history" (Birth:304). Time, and history, are through this work of fiction retrieved by the author for the black inhabitants of the land. The events the Movement puts into operation will, finally, change the pattern and experience of time for black people.

'The First Leg of the Journey'

The logical motion of the novel, at the sweeping level of abstraction I have outlined above, is thus from individual alienation towards social involvement; and from the meaningless circular time this alienation both occasions and is occasioned by, to a progression towards the birth of freedom through determined willpower and dire struggle. Tsi's post-assault recollections are, in my opinion, placed first and outside of the 'proper' temporal sequence of the fabula as part of a teleological logic towards social and personal liberation and fullness, whereby the most alienated and individualized depictions of the action are placed first and the implications of the 'false consciousness' they embody made explicable by subsequent events. In the process, time is transfigured by human agency and made to work for, rather than against, black South Africans. The second part of the novel begins, again, with the recollections of an individual character: but these are recollections of a social turmoil which prompt him, and the from then on equally important other characters, to action. From this point the plot moves steadily forward into the future via an exposition of Movement setbacks and victories, and the experiences of people caught up in this logic. This process is favourably portrayed, despite the unavoidable personal suffering it must needs bring with it. For black South

Africans,the choice is between the living death of apartheid and the possible death of trying to end it. The second choice is always preferable. (Birth: 167;249). As Tsi realises with finality in the beleaguered Gaborone at the end:

> The first leg of the journey is now well and truly in progress. There is no safety anywhere - not for anyone. The pilots who fly these planes - like these mothers and their children and their bundles - stare and stare and stare,in the way that only a human can,in the only way that a human fears. At a certain point,the stares of fear and of hunger look alike. It does not matter whether one flies a plane or stands in a queue. Now and then we look at the mighty planes with their mad speed,hovering and swooping above us. But we also know that,while we fear them,they also are in great fear to fall. We know - as they roar above our heads - that since we are human and they are not,we can wait and they cannot. They cannot fly and wait. In the same way that we cannot wait and starve for a long time. We can fall,and they will fall. We see their huge shining bodies whizz past and roar afterwards,and before we know where they are they come back. But that is because they do not see us,or know us, or want to know us. The strongest will win this game. It is costly.
>
> (Birth:367)

Yet the narrative breaks off at some point in the future,before liberation has been achieved. The novel is projected towards a desired but as yet unrealised future: a future which has also not as yet been realised in the South Africa the novel represents. It can be argued that the push towards this future is so strongly willed by the author and his characters as to be inexorable. Indeed,towards the conclusion there is an instance where the mere resurrection of a person's name in one of the character's memory is enough to bring that person into view himself as an active character in the novel within a few pages,in a sequence which appears to overcome the exigencies of space and time (7). However,authorial desire is not enough to complete this future. This suspension of denouement results in an eventual gesturing towards an uncertain future in the real world as well as in the world of the novel. This uncertain overall narrative vantage point is final evidence of the paradoxical temporal character of a text whose thematic and narrative closure is in a very real sense incomplete,despite the ideological closure occasioned by the author's commitment to Movement politics and the promise it brings. The fact that this future is, in the text, last hinted at through (the non-Movement) Tsi's struggle to keep his family alive in between bouts of drinking in Gaborone, and by a nameless birth which seems to happen, significantly,on a symbolic rather than a realistic level,leads to further uncertainty and disjuncture at the novel's end.

Time,Apocalypse and Nationalism

> A new power which wants to assert itself must also enforce a new chronology:it must make it seem as though time had begun with it...For a civilisation,as for an individual, periods when the awareness of time is lost are periods of shame...which are forgotten as soon as possible.
> (Canetti:462-3)

In order to sunder the false time of white minority rule,Serote asserts the need for a new type of social order and a new,non-shameful (he opposes 'shame' to 'respect' throughout the novel) experience of self and time. This highlights Serote's manichaean viewpoint that there is an absolute dichotomy potentially present between pre- and post-liberation experience in South Africa. This dichotomy has little to do,despite his occasional use of the terms, with questions or arguments about the potential for capitalism or socialism in a future political dispensation,or an attempt to use the novel in terms of debates around these issues. It is,rather,an utopian and apocalyptic projection on Serote's part which,in my opinion,undercuts any realistic underpinnings or politically relevant purpose of the novel,underscoring instead the metaphoric. His argument is most explicable and easy to comprehend on a symbolic level,and remains most easily the political interpetation of a sweeping,radical but ultimately symbolic third world nationalism.

A linear perception of time,such as Serote works with in the second half of the novel,is essential for the psychology and ideology of national liberation to operate. National identity is built around a self-conscious community,inclusive of its members and exclusive of its mooted 'others',who progress and develop together simultaneously along a linear time measurable by calendar and clock. There is,in other words,a presupposition of linearity and logicality to the time individuals in any defined nation possess. Similarly,the realist novel which emerged coterminously with the new nations of Europe and the burgeoning power of capitalism from the late eighteenth century onwards,frequently depicts its hero or characters moving towards their denouement against a fixed sociological background in a 'precise analogue of the idea of the nation,which also is conceived as a solid community moving steadily down (or up) history' (Anderson:30-1). This principle is,in various forms,also discernible in some anti-colonial novels of South-Eastern Asia and South America from the early nineteenth century;and I would argue that examples of this conceptual trend can be found in much early black fiction in Africa and South Africa, s well as some examples of indigenous orature being performed by time wage-labour was beginning to enforce new temporal rhythms of computation and demand on the inhabitants of the country in the nineteenth century (see Jordan:22). It is interesting to note that novels elsewhere in Africa also regularly evince the notion that linear time is the modality which best expresses the push towards independence and the progression towards a socio-political destiny which has not been fulfilled by earlier generations (Izevbaye:90).

Perhaps,then,Serote's choice of the novel as the privileged vehicle

for that which he depicts in To Every Birth Its Blood is not so strange; and neither is the fusion of linear time with national aspirations and national identity among black people in the latter stages of his narrative. The regulation - in this case re-definition and re-regulation - of time can bind together groups of people and individuals who conceive of themselves as part of the same social entity, even if they are strangers to each other (Canetti: 463). The same conception of identity among strangers who nevertheless identify themselves as part of a common social bonding is essential to nationalism (8).

Time is not only a thematic presence in To Every Birth Its Blood, but also a conceptual dimension which shapes the plot structure into logical form and which predetermines the relatively unimportant nature of the microcosmic inconsistencies Visser has isolated. The circularity of pre-revolutionary time makes any anachronisms within it seemingly unimportant to the author; in much the same manner in which the accelerated passage of revolutionary time into the future predetermines the author's increasingly brief and laconic sketching of different scenes in a series of pastiches towards the end. Time is essential to the author's overview: the manner in which he develops time becomes a fundamental means whereby his ideological message and political viewpoint are formally articulated. An accurate approach to politics and history, managed via human willpower and correct knowledge, will change the nature of social and personal livelihood and simultaneously transfigure the self. The element of time - at the same time both intrusive theme and underlying framework - is crucial to an understanding of the purpose of the novel; and in the long run overshadows any dislocated attempts the author might make to mimic the real time of contemporary South Africa, or to give his characters any autonomy of political vision and purpose outside of the confine of Movement politics.

The Role of the Movement

None of the elements of the novel has a fixed purpose and position except the Movement. The Movement transmogrifies anti-apartheid activism from the ineffectual to the effectual; it absorbs the history of all previous resistance to apartheid, including the 'days of Power'; and finally it acts on behalf of and begins absorbing and changing the entire social body of the oppressed, even those who have not completely recognised its truth (rather than set themselves against it) and vacillate in their allegiance. While contemporary South Africa is 'in that moment when nothing is left unquestioned' (Birth:243), these questions can only reveal the truth of Movement operations and goals and are (once the apartheid enemy has been understood) subsequently unnecessary in terms of major political debate. Only minor debates as to tactics are necessary once the Movement is in place (see Birth:243,290,329). At times questions can become dangerous to the Movement's security (Birth:193). Questions only serve to further validate the Movement, as the Movement - rather than any individual character in the story - possesses both the correct ends and the correct means. All that is at issue for the author is to gain a true consciousness and knowledge

of South Africa,and then act on it by Movement membership.

The Movement blurs into and absorbs other opposition political tendencies and groupings (references to 'any Movement' in the novel quickly become references to 'the Movement' \isser:74 see Birth:247,252). The Movement exists fictionally to smooth over disparities of individual and group behaviour and the historical and contradictions of South African oppositional politics. It is seen both as the political catlyst which will transfigure the oppressed people of the country and the result of that transfiguration at the same time. It is simultaneously one distinct political organisation (presumably the ANC) and the combined weight of historical resistance to white rule: and comes close to being conceptualised as all that is needed to solve South Africa's social,political and psychological chaos by its overdetermining presence (9). Serote seems to believe that debate can only cause agreement on the side of the oppressed. Agreement on the need to destroy apartheid and on the central operative role of the Movement become, unwaveringly,agreement as to the means involved under the auspices of the Movement. Such a conception is circular and self-justifying. Here, most tellingly,the problems caused by the ambiguous presence of the Movement (simultaneously organisation and mass of people) can be seen. The process of logic the author argues seems to be as follows: the day-to-day success of and\or individual commitment to the Movement may vary: but as a means it is in place and incontestable; and the decision as to what means are most efficacious are taken outside of the action of the text on an undisclosed level. The end of this process is open only to doubt in the length of time it may or may not take.

As an understanding of politics, this is by and large positivist and nationalist,stressing that the common goal of ending foreign (in this case white) domination in itself brings about a unity among colonised (or,in this case,oppressed) people. Politically,it is not a thorough enough perception of political power to be called socialist: perceiving the liberation struggle as eventually merely a means of restoring what are posited as 'normal' relations to a society (10). There is,finally,an implication that the linear and meaningful progress of time is only a temporary state for Serote: and this is further indicative that his understanding of the process of political struggle in effect stops at the beginning of liberation,whatever disclaimers to the contrary he may make outside of his fictional and poetic persona (11). The author appears to believe that the Movement,the political struggle against apartheid, the oppressed community and the individual committed to combatting apartheid are entirely synonymous, acting within the text as virtual tropes for each other. Other characters,political groups and choices (whether in accordance with the apartheid State or not), stand outside this closed and charmed circle.

The Fixed Movement of Political Struggle

One may well wonder what the implications will be for those readers who believe Serote's novel to be more than just a fiction: in other words,who respond to it as a realistic novel with resonances and

influences in the world outside the text. The utopian and apocalyptic dimensions accorded To Every Birth Its Blood by its poetic strain pulls it into the direction of an organic,symbolic depiction,which begins to overdetermine the realistic presentation. Rather than the reader being able to integrate the poetic-symbolic and the realist- mimetic as two interwoven but mutually assistive levels of the text,they blur into each other in a manner which disrupts and obfuscates; a manner which nevertheless accurately identifies the limitations of Serote's own ideology. The results of this mystifying propensity has grave results for the effectiveness of Serote's political thrust. We are left,puzzlingly enough,in the end with a political future which is simultaneously hinted at being both in the balance and assured for the Movement and its followers. We are left,furthermore,with symbols which battle against their own clarification, working simultaneously on mutually contradictory levels. We are left,finally,with a 'poetic' sense of politics which falls short of being able to deal with the struggles and contradictions likely to occur in a post-apartheid South Africa.

Serote's sweeping,poetic logic of human emotion and resistance overpowers the analytical,mimetic parts of the novel in its effect. This has a crippling effect on the potential of this text to act in the real world as Serote - from his disclaimers about art - would want it to. Moreover,it draws attention to his inability to distinguish between the different 'demands' of poetry and the novel as posited by him. The fluidity of metaphorical language in To Every Birth Its Blood is further troubled by a fluidity of reference, where metaphors simultaneously stand for the political and the existential; for private and public spheres of existence. This indeterminancy of motif reference has telling consequences. For instance,the journey of the river (initially symbolic of individual destiny and fate on the journey through life) has been transmogrified by Part 2 into the river of the Movement on the path to political liberation (see Birth:65;272). One could enquire whether,in its political context,the river's end is perceived as ending in freedom or death,and whether the two are synonymous for Serote (12). Perhaps the river of the struggle towards liberation is meant to end in the sea of post-apartheid harmony (13).

The 'stubbornness to search for meaning,for the logic of history and experience' (Kgositsile:25) of Serote's body of work is bound by the limiting nationalism of his thought. Furthermore,there is more than just an implication that the political unity of the sea's harmony he posits is also an interpersonal unity on an immediate level. His liberation is ultimately a utopian project which will solve personal dilemmas completely by political solutions. Revolutionary commitment is a cure for the divided self (Visser:73). In a country where it is an act of willpower not to go mad (Birth: 130),the Movement brings calmness,discipline and an organic unity of all its members. The Movement is a means of resolution of a world vision which simply projects the psychological unproblematically as a factor of political commitment,opposing membership as human knowledge plus willpower against the false consciousness of non-participation. Interpersonal and psychological processes are transplanted wholesale onto the realm of political relationships,

and psychic repression and disjuncture are merely seen as an index of the socio-political. The political reality of the country, according to Serote, traumatises all individual and social relationships: the social life of the oppressed is a mass psycho-pathology. The Movement, and the liberation it foresees and bears within itself, does more than begin to reverse this pernicious process. Liberation does not so much allow as guarantee a 'healthy' human subject at the same time as it guarantees a 'healthy' post-liberation politics. The slippage from profundity to over-statement in such a conceptualisation occasions much of the problematic processes of the novel: and gestures outside its own narrative confines to the problems similar conceptualisations of the politico-psychological interface bring about in the work of theorists of national identity and psychology such as Fanon, who was an important influence on Black Consciousness writers in South Africa (14). The idea of harmony being the socio-political state following on the defeat of colonialism is again common to much African fiction immediately before and after formal independence (Izevbaye:78); a conceptualisation compellingly inadequate to subsequent political and economic events on the continent.

Surprisingly enough for a novel which has been more or less characterised as the bildungsroman of a whole community (Glegg:34), the right course of action is implied throughout. When, early on, we are told that the BSO is mistaken in its strategies, there is a character in no way connected with the Movement, Boykie, to explicate the correct path; a feat also accomplished by the pre-Movement Onalenna (Birth:78-9;173). The reader, perceiving that there should be a transformation from less effective to more effective forms of political consciousness and activity in the novel, will in such cases come to perceive that very little actually changes in the conception of correct political action put forward. It is almost as if the author cannot allow false consciousness to exist textually for too long without a corrective - even the alienated Tsi is aware what he should be doing. Serote's political compulsions thus come to interfere with his narrative logic: in this regard events also sometimes can be seen to occur in the text outside of their 'proper' temporal sequencing. For instance, there is a precursor to developments around Ramono in John's thoughts, prior to the actual event and therefore inexplicable (Birth:186); the discussion of 'slave names' (Birth:130) precedes the emergence of Black Consciousness with which it should be interlinked, and so on.

The fact that the truth is to some extent ever-present and discoverable by the discerning reader makes the forward progress of To Every Birth Its Blood as a narrative more halting and circular than it at first appears. There is a tendency for the process of narrative logic to be more minimal and incomplete than an overview of the story and its desired political maturing would indicate. Due to the political compulsions overdetermining the text, and due to the fluctuating and interwoven presence of symbols and motifs, the novel relentlessly at each point foreshadows or contains lingering traces of its final argument. Neither can this be accurately characterised as a use of pro- and analepsis on Serote's part: the near repetitions and echoes are too insistent and uncontrolled to be eased

away by such an explanation. The author's themes and language come to possess an autonomy beyond their functional and contextual relevance,and the retrieval of the past and construction of the future by memory and desire pervasive and repetitious beyond Serote's narrative and political schema. This is nowhere more clear,on a structural level, than with the reintroduction of a practically unaltered Tsi in the last pages: an event which is foretold in the very first sentence of the novel ('when she and I walked into the house after we had been in the street so long,I knew that another time was coming when we would have to be in the street again');and when even towards the end we have the transformed Movement figure Themba 'trying to summon his mind,his memory,his knowledge from past to present' (Birth:317).

This frequent patterning of an interrogated past,uncertain present and desired future in terms of each other appears to determine the conceptual structure of the narrating self and the the author as well. These aspects hint at continuities in the author's own patterns of perception and understanding,despite his change in political allegiance in the mid-1970s. Despite a change in formal and ideological direction in To Every Birth Its Blood,underlying facets of the author's own philosophical,political and stylistic habits recur. The repetitive nature of some of his motifs and explications,as well as the formal and ideological fluidity Visser has so aptly described,eventually militate against a simplistic acceptance of the logic of the work's bipartite structure put forward by some of its critics. All desire is chanelled into the symbolic figure of the Movement. In effect,however,the myths and practical necessities of political practices within the Movement - according respectively with the poetic-symbolic and realist-mimetic expectations the novel simultaneously opens itself to - begin to clash with one another. The political telcology of the text is undermined by the very issues in the novel Serote simultaneously puts forward for autonomous contemplation and tries to explain in terms of their relationship to Movement politics - issues of social,familial and psychological experience and conflict. While the Movement and its politics can give succour to the human subject psychologically and socially dismembered by apartheid,there is evidence in the text of remaining contradictions,repressed yet still lingering beyond the author's explanatory powers (15).

Conclusion

Interpretation is one of the major problems of To Every Birth Its Blood because,on one level,the book lends itself to being read as,and is in fact read as,a realist fictionalisation of major aspects of the last quarter of a century of the history of black experience in South Africa, refracted through the eyes of a number of characters originally cohering around the township and community of Alexandra. On the other hand - and this is first implicit as the reader is faced with the temporal disjunctures and generic multiplicities of the novel - it gestures simultaneously towards a symbolic level of interpretation with the transforming presence of the Movement as the key signifier: a level which,in my opinion, burgeons in importance in the eventual conceptualisation of poli-

tics the author rests with. This difficulty is compounded for the reader because these two modes of portrayal and assumption are neither in synchronicity nor thematic and logical harmony with each other. The novel embodies concurrent and mutually interefering modes of fictional portrayal in its espousal of the long trek from false consciousness to true consciousness,from social disorder to order. The 'true consciousness' of authorial ideology eventually suppresses the arbitrariness of individual life experience Serote is striving to give expression to,and the Movement ends with a weight of transforming potential it cannot adequately bear.

The need for a political liberation to normalise human life and allow new egalitarian and democratic structures to emerge in South Africa cannot be gainsaid: and the baleful influence of apartheid cannot be exaggerated. Serote convincingly demonstrates the absolute necessity of political liberation from apartheid structures in To Every Birth Its Blood. Yet for Serote,as for all of us,post-liberation South Africa will be a country of contestation and struggle too. Immediate political liberation might well be the sine qua non and seminal event allowing the realms of psychic satisfaction and democratic,non-exploitative relationships to emerge as possibilities. Yet liberation cannot in itself guarantee this emergence. For Serote,as for all of us,the revoltuion that breeds social harmony and the satisfaction of individual desire, that smoothes over political and social contestation and cures the divided self,is still very far away.

References

1. 'It is not possible...to have cultural workers in South Africa who create art for art's sake,or cultural workers who have taken no side in this serious conflict.Nor is it possible to be alive and creating in a world which is,on a daily basis,fighting for peace for all in it,while its other part creates means and prepares for the complete annihilation of human-kind,if the majority refuses to succumb to oppression and exploitation. We,as cultural workers,like everybody else,must take positions on these matters' (Serote 1986: 194).
2. Such as Oupa's almost miraculous growth from boy to young man (Birth:141,190)and the narrative speed with which Tsi moves from outsider to family man with three children (Birth:149). Note that page references are to the Ravan Press edition of the novel.
3. To put it more fully: 'in discriminating the types of anachronistic deviations that a narrative text makes from the underlying story,all our observations are relational.That is,we proceed not with the goal of simply unravelling the sequential jumble..(and)restoring the wholesome chronology that might satisfy a scientist.Certainly unravelling is involved and is important,but equally so is a sense of the relations between the various chunks of the text' (Toolan54-5); 'to tell and to follow a story is already to reflect upon events in order to encompass them into successive wholes' (Ricouer:178).
4. 'Alexandra was for me a definition of the way blacks lived in

our country as a whole'(Seroke:30).See also Visser:68.
5. For example,Tsi and Alexandra experience 'stomach pains' at the same time (Birth:31,32). For this observation I am grateful to Mark Sanders.
6. For a clear non-fictional expression of this point,see Serote's statement in Wilkinson:104.
7. I am thinking of the use of the character Hlase. Birth:319,322.
8. 'An American will never meet,or even know the names of more than a handful of his 240 million-odd fellow Americans.He has no idea of what they are up to at any one time.But he has complete confidence in their steady,anonymous,simultaneous activity' (Anderson:31).
9. Serote evinces this belief even more tellingly outside of his fiction. 'What is going to change the social landmarks of South African literature,the shebeens etc.?What is going to tear the insulation of Whites and the suspiciousness of Blacks?..The broadest anti-apartheid mass movement,linked to the underground and to the armed struggle,will change the character of the shebeens,the church,street violence and relationship between Black and White.The strongly progressive politics of the Movement;the discipline required to be a member and to participate in the demands of the underground and the armed struggle,where the operative words are discipline and sacrifice;these will change the quality of the individuals participating,and,since it will be a people's war being fought,the quality of the social life will also change'. Serote 1988a:30-1.
10. Revolution thus *merely* comes to mean the restoration of an ill-defined social 'normalcy'. For instance,Serote believes 'the aspirations of my people can be said in one word - happiness. That is all that people want:happiness' ('Exiled')
11. See Serote 1988c.
12. For the most forceful expression of his conviction that,for black South Africans,the choice is (literally) 'freedom or death', see Serote 1989:14-6. And again;'The ANC demands from each individual the highest form of discipline so that their actions define them as freedom fighters,so that each South African forges a lifestyle which equates freedom with life' Serote 1986:193. It is my belief that the critic who dismisses such language as merely sloganised and superficial to the thrust of his writing is mistaken.
13. From a viewpoint less critical of and more in concordance with Serote's than mine,Levumo observes on Serote's frequent use of the river motif in his poetry as follows:"The movement to the sea reflects the space that has to be traversed by the masses in "body and soul"in order to consummate the time of oppression in the time of liberation yet to come...a sustained traversing of the distance between the personal experience,development and formation of the subject and the total mass of history that the subject at times appears to be entombed in.The subject is inseparable from the masses,and if the subject is entombed,it is the dead weight of the collective experience of the masses that appears as the subject's burden. The subject cannot personally transcend this burden.The only hope of transcendence into the time of liberation lies with the "river";with the subsumption of the subject to the flow of the river,in which the black man is seen as the inevitably rising tide."(Levumo:77;*emphasis mine*).
14. For an excellent critical discussion of this,see Couve 1988.

15. For a fuller discussion of this,see my '"But Then,Where is Home?"Time,Disorder and Social Collectives in Serote's To Every Birth Its Blood' Centre for African Studies seminar paper,University of Cape Town,27 September 1989 pp.32-8.

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