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Beyond the Limit: The Social Relations of Madness in Southern African Fiction

- Stephen Clingman

> A person who thinks that he is empowered to separate his inner world from the outer one has no inner world from which something might be separable.
>
> - Elias Canetti, commenting on Kafka.(1)

I.

It turns out that the darkness at the heart of the colonial experience may be a certain history of madness. Other features of colonial history are familiar: its origins in an age of European expansion, its forms of economic exploitation and political subjugation, the social history of communities in transition, modes of cultural imperialism and cultural resistance. These emerge month by month, year by year, as our knowledge of the past grows fuller and more accurate. Yet, half-buried, half-revealed - as phenomena relating to the unconscious usually are - the theme of madness emerges as adjunct to, and part of, these other histories.

It is there, for example, in two founding texts of the colonial era. At the centre of Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness itself is the vision - and spectre - of madness. Here are the supposedly 'unspeakable rites' of the indigenous inhabitants (the representation which so enraged Chinua Achebe). What happens to Kurtz as he 'goes native' is that, it seems, he simultaneously goes mad. The accountant whom Marlowe meets at the river station retains his sanity, but he does so, significantly, by clinging religiously to the rules and regulations of his European framework, including the starched white shirts he insists on wearing daily. Yet it seems safe to surmise that he would not have to do this if he did not feel under constant threat. Even the narrative framing of the novel mimes this sense of danger, as the text proceeds (analogically) to deeper and deeper levels and more interior modes, where fact and fantasy mingle licentiously. There are ways of 'universalising' these issues - a standard critical procedure - but why ignore the fact that they emerge so strongly from the colonial setting?

E. M. Forster's A Passage to India reveals this same feeling of threat. From the first page of the novel there is a carefully articulated sense of the tumult and riot of the Indian continent, overburdening the linear, sparse lines of the European mental

framework. At the heart of this book, too, there is a moment of madness. For this is what happens to Adela Quested ('addled quest': her name sounds sufficiently like a summary of the whole colonial undertaking) in the Marabar Caves - that interior setting without an exterior, where all normal shapes and points of coherence become void. This setting is also one of projection, where Adela's own sense of threat rebounds upon her; yet in her mind it is displaced onto Aziz, and the accusation of a sexual attack formulates. In a novel where 'nothing' means 'everything' and 'everything' comes to 'nothing' we have a world turned upside down and inside out - which is one, albeit literary, definition of madness.

One should distinguish between instances where madness appears as a theme, and is perhaps categorised as such, and those where it in a sense takes control of the text. Labels of 'madness' are notoriously imprecise, and may be stylised or misleading; they are easily prone to rhetorical manipulation for other purposes. Shoshana Felman remarks that 'to talk about madness is always, in fact, to deny it.'(2) From this point of view cases where madness seems to take control of the text may be more reliable as an index of a real threat of mental destabilisation. Yet even of instances which are plainly thematic and 'under control' of the writer, as it were, we should ask a simple question: are writers entirely at large to choose whatever themes they wish? Is it not also true, as Nadine Gordimer has remarked, that 'themes choose writers', and that writers are 'selected' by the 'consciousness of [their] era'?(3) If so, we emerge with a minimal observation at least: that the theme of madness does seem to be connected with colonial history, and is revealed as such in fiction.

It is one thing to say this, quite another to establish with any reliability the shape, trajectory and transformations of this theme in its successive appearances in colonial and - now I might add - post-colonial fiction. What, indeed, are its patterns of cause and effect within the broader history of which it is a part? What - if any - are its structural relationships within this setting, which might also account for the inevitability of its appearance? Why is fiction the privileged site where this theme is set into motion? These of course (the usual disclaimer) are large questions and cannot be answered in full here. What I propose to do instead is to limit myself to the southern African setting at certain moments over the past hundred years, and make a preliminary approach to some of these issues. For within southern African fiction it is a remarkable - but not accidental - fact that the theme of madness has arisen again and again, though in different forms, over the past century. It is my suggestion that the theme of madness is itself something which has a history within this setting, albeit one which is not linear, nor even, necessarily, progressive. All I want to do is dip into and out of this history, raising certain hypotheses which might then be the bases for further exploration. My aim is to highlight various aspects of, and within, this theme.

In doing this I should make my position clear. It does not seem to me to be finally helpful to essentialise either the condition of madness or the work of literature, or - most especially - the relationship between the two, as Shoshana Felman does in her book Writing and Madness. For Felman 'writing' and 'madness' are nothing other than mutually referential: 'if something like literature exists,' she remarks, 'only madness' can explain it'; similarly she maintains that 'madness...can be defined as nothing other than an irreducible resistance to interpretation' - which is what she assumes literariness to be also.(4) But is it true that madness cannot be interpreted - perhaps not as a thing in itself, but in terms of the conditions which promote its appearance and the context in which it gains its significance? Why should all literary works be 'mad'? Are they all equally mad, mad in the same way, or products of the same kind of madness? If one does not grant these questions one loses all sense of distinction, of historicity, of politics, ultimately - I would suggest - of significance itself. The position here, then, is very different. It is that madness - at least in the literature we are considering - is the product of social relations, albeit varying and shifting ones. Also that the works under discussion are themselves 'social' relations - narratives deeply embedded in the history of their societies, and fashioned to grapple at both conscious and unconscious levels with issues emerging from substantial social perturbations.

II.

Let us begin with the first of these works.

Olive Schreiner is widely credited as being the writer who originates modern white South African literature: her novel, The Story of an African Farm, published in 1883 when the author was in her early twenties, is sometimes seen as a kind of genetic blueprint, containing within it the basic patterns of all later developments in white fiction.(5) Yet, in both Schreiner's life and work, the issue of mental instability arises immediately. She herself suffered from a form of psychosomatic illness all her adult life. Her biographers, Ruth First and Ann Scott, point out that this had a sexual dimension, insofar as she was compelled to play a male role in a man's world as a female. Also, there was a deep ambiguity of belonging: in England, where she was lionised upon publication of her novel, she longed for South Africa; in South Africa, for England. Ultimately she came to feel that she was in no real relationship with life or thought 'in England or Africa or anywhere else'.(6) Committed intellectually to ideas of freedom - Schreiner was friendly with Havelock Ellis, Edward Carpenter, Eleanor Marx; she wrote Woman and Labour, one of the founding texts of modern feminism; she grew ever more fervent in her anti-imperialism - nonetheless the presiding feeling of her life is one of constriction. In that very early novel of hers this is represented with great power. Here we see her main female character, Lyndall - a woman of the utmost intelligence -

offer an entirely damning attack on the nature and effects of sexual oppression; but she dies as its victim, oscillating on the edge of mental breakdown, a life of the greatest promise snuffed out by the stifling environs of the colony.

This is essentially a feminist anguish, albeit within the colonial setting. However, inseparably surrounding this theme is a larger and encompassing topic. The novel is presented as 'the story of an African farm'; as Schreiner herself pointed out, it was a novel of belonging to Africa, of 'settlement', as it were. But how deep does its belonging go? Colonial history tells the story of a different kind of belonging, in which foreign land is appropriated and is said to 'belong' to the colonising power; at the same time the land and its indigenous inhabitants alike become 'subject' to the colonising authority, part of its own subjectivity. But - to adapt Robert Frost's comment on a different colonial history - can the land belong to one if one does not belong to the land?(7) This is essentially the problem raised by The Story of an African Farm. For, despite its claims to 'settlement', the tale the novel tells is more properly one of alienation: surrounded by a hostile - or, at best, indifferent - universe, there is no sense in which the novel or its characters feel really 'at home' in their setting.(8) We watch the spiritual trajectory of the characters, from the rough and ready comedies and brutalities of their childhood on the Karroo farmstead where the novel is set, to the kind of 'transcendental homelessness' of which Lukács speaks in his The Theory of the Novel.(9) The 'subjectivity' of the novel - far from being proud or self-confident - becomes a deeply ambiguous one, unsure of its past, its present or its future. Yet the novel still remains 'the story of an "African" farm': this is the informing ethos of the work, the containing setting for its themes of mental anguish.(10)

What emerges from this for a broader history of the theme of madness in colonial fiction as a whole? Simply this: that insofar as alienation - from the foreign land, the continent, and its peoples - is the reality of the colonial project, what takes the place of any real relationship for the colonisers is projection - the projection of subjective feelings onto that alien setting, or people. Thus, whereas it is the colonisers themselves who are alien, they present it as the foreign continent or its people which are so; where the colonisers themselves present the real threat in that situation, it is the continent, or its people, which are felt as threatening. Indeed, the less real and equitable contact there is with the colonised, the more scope there is for various mythic imaginings and projections about them. And it is here that the space is created for forms of mental instability - either by way of projection, or else because of a sense of threat. Conrad's Heart of Darkness, incidentally, reveals both. Thus we see how the theme of madness is linked to an ambiguity at the core of colonial history.

Let us consider the theme in a different form, as it appears in two South African novels written in the 1920s: here I want to

explore certain connections between race, sexuality and madness. It is no accident that these issues appeared in South African fiction at this time, for the 1920s were a decade in which questions of race assumed an unprecedented importance. After the First World War, as South Africa settled into its patterns of modern development, racial legislation proliferated, dealing with labour relations on the mines and in industry, regulating living areas, and even sexual relations.(11) Race, we might say, was becoming the major ideological instrument of organising class structures. South Africa was no longer a colony - it was becoming a modern industrial state, and was indigenously governed - and its focal issues were, equally, transforming.

In this setting Sarah Gertrude Millin's God's Stepchildren(12) was written as an 'experimental' novel, that is a novel which quite literally sets up a social 'experiment' to see what happens when the races mix. Like many such experiments, its findings are included in the form in which it conceptualises the problem. The tone is set from early on. Set (to begin with) in the first half of the 19th century, it shows the Reverend Andrew Flood (the name is significant) who has come out to South Africa as a missionary. From the start he is presented as degenerate, physically, morally, mentally, and when he finds that even the local Hottentots, whom he wishes to convert, deride him, he decides he can only achieve his objective by converting to their condition. He marries a Hottentot wife, who bears him a (racially mixed) child. This by no means helps Flood make any more converts, and he soon realises the futility of his ways. He ends literally mad, rambling and bumbling, mumbling to himself in his decrepitude. As for his 'sin', however - for that is partly the framework within which Millin considers his history - it continues. 'Aprés moi le Flood', we might say: Millin then explores the effect of this original act of miscegenation through four generations, and as might be expected, it is wholly decisive. Whereas in the fourth generation the last character she creates is 15/16ths white, the truth of the matter is that 'blood will out': this character, who suffers from shell-shock in the First World War, derides himself miserably because, he feels, it is his black blood which has let him down (the fact that huge numbers of white men suffered the same fate is something which appears to have escaped Millin's consciousness). He decides to terminate the degeneracy he carries, and expiate the sin of his fathers, by having no more children; instead he returns as a missionary to those self-same people whom Andrew Flood first fell among.

There is an obvious lunacy in all of this. Here we see the linkage between racism and sexual projection, between miscegenation and the labelling of 'madness', which in themselves appear obsessive, compulsive and rather pathological. Indeed, the imagery Millin uses to describe her 'coloured' characters is quite remarkable if we take it as an index of projection. Much of it seems to derive from standard 19th-century notions or icons, such as the Hottentot Venus, which, as Sander Gilman has shown, was a primary marker, as an image, of a supposed black

sexual degeneracy and biological inferiority.(13) But this in turn suggests that it would be a serious mistake to take Millin's projections as a sign of an 'individual' madness - that is, her own. For when the book was first published it was received to substantial acclaim: this occurred both in Britain and the United States (where, as a bestseller, it was lauded as 'beautiful and memorable' and 'an absolutely first-rate contribution to the sum of human knowledge')(14) and then later, predictably, in Germany where a pirated edition was hailed - or should I say heiled - as a Rassenroman by the Nazis.(15) Someone of Sander Gilman's perception and acuity would see here a further subtle interplay of paradoxes and dynamics, for Millin herself was Jewish: where that same intellectual tradition she was drawing on had seen Jews as associated with blackness and sexual degeneracy - as Gilman shows in his Difference and Pathology - perhaps this was Millin's way, in the African setting, of displacing those attributions. Or perhaps the starker identifications of colour in South Africa meant that Millin simply could not credit the logic of wider associations: certainly it was a matter of absolute mortification to her that the Nazis liked her novel. But the fact nonetheless remains that her work was taken up, internationally, within a dominant framework of racial conceptualisation. The simple, though significant point, then, is that in following this theme we are not dealing with individual conditions alone, but with larger mental frameworks of which they are a part. What is seen as normal within such a framework can appear highly abnormal from without, and vice versa, as we shall see later. In Millin's case we see the inner 'madness' of the South African racial framework at a particularly expressive - but because of that also particularly vulnerable - moment.

Millin's novel is implicitly concerned with science - the pseudo-science of race.(16) William Plomer, whose Turbott Wolfe is the second major novel dealing with race in the 1920s, presents another view: 'The chief tendency of modern science has been to produce noise.'(17) In other ways, too, his novel seems diametrically opposed to Millin's: iconoclastically thumbing its nose at the sacred beliefs of white South African culture, it presents miscegenation not as a problem to be solved, but as the solution to South Africa's problems. An organisation in the book called the Society for Young Africa puts this forward in fairly enthusiastic terms.

This does not mean that the novel has thereby emerged into the clear light of day in mental or political terms. On the contrary, its vision is a fraught one, mixing dreams, nerves, visions and deep-seated fears, in equal proportions. The character, Friston, who is most deeply affected by all of this, remarks:

> I am obsessed...with dreams and visions, mostly of the future Africa. 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 civilisation and barbarism; between the past and future; between brains and bodies; and, as I like to say, between habit and instinct. (102)

Whites, it appears, have habit, and blacks have instinct. But when Friston sees his vision become reality - that is, when two of the (racially distinct) characters do fall in love - he cannot take it: he goes mad (and incidentally becomes a Bolshevik agent) before being killed. So the theme of madness enters once again, and the book ends in a state of formal disruption, with no clear logic to its dénouement. There is some sense that the work's incoherence at the end has to do with a different dynamic, relating to Plomer's own homosexuality, which could not be expressed straightforwardly, but which may have been exercised in the novel partly as an allegory of 'miscegenation' - mixing what should not be mixed.(18)

With or without this dimension, however, there is only one explanation for what we see in the novel: that we are dealing in the widest sense with a framework of reality and what is permissible and impermissible within it. Notions of miscegenation, normally repressed, are deeply subversive in relation to this framework. Fantasy can be tolerated, but as soon as it is translated into reality it appears fatal to the framework itself. Friston's madness, and the novel's incoherence, are due to the force of the 'return of the repressed'. Strange as it may seem now, we get some sense of the presiding power of the South African racial framework (and, for Plomer, sexual framework) at the time when the novel was written - even for those who rejected it. And I think we learn that Fredric Jameson's notion of the 'political unconscious'(19) is an actual, psychological reality in South Africa, not only for individuals, but within wider mental frameworks at large.

What happens, however, when you are on the other side of this line of repression, when you are condemned, so to speak, to the 'unconscious' of a dominant society? Peter Abrahams' novel, The Path of Thunder, published in 1948, provides something of an answer.(20) Abrahams was himself, in South African terms, a 'coloured' - a person of mixed race. As far as 'official' white consciousness is concerned the 'coloureds' themselves are the objects of a repressed sexual history. This was especially true at the time the novel was written: as the Afrikaner nationalists were coming to power with their doctrine of apartheid, enjoining white supremacy and the purity of the white race, the existence of the 'coloureds' - in part the historical offspring of encounters between (in the main) white Afrikaner men and black women - was an official embarrassment. The idea of a 'return of the repressed' in this context would have had a political as well as psychological import. The Path of Thunder deals with that threat, as well as what it means for those who have to struggle back from the netherworld of an unacknowledged identity.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the possibility of madness again lies at the centre. The novel is set in a rural area of South

Africa - once again, as we find so often in these novels, in a symbolic heartland - where a wealthy white farm is juxtaposed with a poverty-stricken 'coloured' village nearby. Here, madness has actually occurred: one of the characters is called 'Mad Sam', and through the course of the book we discover why. In an earlier time - almost a previous life, it seems - he had loved a white woman from the farm. One of the sons from the farm had discovered this, and literally beaten Sam into madness. The logic of this is clear: for a 'coloured' person to claim his identity in relation to whites is a form of madness, and he must actually be mad if he is to survive in this alien framework at all. Also, Sam remembers the past: another form of madness in this context.

In the second generation the tragedy seems to be reworking itself. A young man, Lanny Swartz, born of the village, but educated in Cape Town, also falls in love with a young white woman associated with the farm, and she with him. Their love affair is discovered, and in the gathering crisis of the novel's ending Lanny finds out a secret relating to his own identity: that his own father was white, indeed that he was the old farm-owner himself. Symbolically the model of a fractured family distils a whole racial history in South Africa: the white father refuses to recognise the identity or existence of his own 'coloured' offspring; the typology of disinheritance takes on a deeply intimate, colour-coded form. One may take it further: the new white 'father' (the legitimate son of the old, and inheritor of the farm), representing the political as well as familial 'law', 'castrates' the 'coloured' son in refusing to allow him to marry a white daughter from the household. In these ways, it is clear, a crucial gap is embedded in Lanny's identity which cannot be healed within existing reality. This might in itself produce madness, but Lanny's end is a different one: he and the woman he loves die in gunbattle with marauding white avengers from the farmhouse who cannot tolerate the fact of their cross-racial love affair. They transgress the law of this father, but are not able to overcome it.

The plot is a complex one and - again - fraught with deep emotion. Yet a number of points seem to emerge. The first is that where a dominant framework of reality allows no existence to any alternative, those whose reality is that alternative face a kind of madness or - symbolically - death; that is annihilation or disabling in some form. The shambling figure of Mad Sam, physically as well as mentally crippled, is a central symbol in this regard. By contrast, Lanny and his woman attempt to claim their identity and humanity through physical (ultimately violent) resistance - something which Frantz Fanon later recommended as the solution to exactly the same problem.(21) But in The Path of Thunder we see what the South African half-life does to the personality and identity; also, that no full redemption of humanity seemed possible to Abrahams at the time when he wrote the novel. Incidentally, something else is revealed. At key points, as secrets from the past or present are being uncovered, the mode in which the novel is written becomes Gothic, which is

after all the genre of mental edginess, hidden secrets, repressed desires and deep-seated fears. This explains for me why much of South Africa in general - with its own secrets, forbidden realities, skeletons in the cupboard or in the jails - seems to exist in a Gothic mode.

It is all very well to talk of racism and madness, and of their interconnection, but how do these syndromes originate? Granted that racial prejudice existed before the colonial era and that colonisers arrived in Africa with a repertoire of images and expectations which they may have been only too eager to see fulfilled. But can racism by itself explain <u>everything</u> that happened in the colonial context? Do we not also have to explain the <u>endurance</u> of racism in this setting?(22) Marx points out that a simple appeal to an 'original' state of affairs is often futile:

> Let us not be like the political economist who, when he wishes to explain something, puts himself in an imaginary original state of affairs. Such an original state of affairs explains nothing. He simply pushes the question back into a grey and nebulous distance. He presupposes as a fact and an event what he ought to be deducing, namely the necessary connection between...two things...(23)

If we are taking the topic of madness seriously, it seems to me we have to try to determine the precise points at which it intervenes, and why, and how, rather than simply ascribe everything rhetorically to the 'obvious' madness of racism. Racism, like madness, should also be seen as an <u>effect</u> of the colonial or apartheid situation, and not simply as an all-encompassing cause.

It is the great virtue of Doris Lessing's <u>The Grass is Singing</u> (first published in 1950) that it provides the basis for an explanation in these terms.(24) Like Schreiner and Plomer, Lessing was very young when she wrote her novel - and this is important, because it means that all three writers were open to the symbolic dimensions of their immediate worlds, which in a sense were expressed through their writing, and which they had not fully controlled or distanced in their own lives. At the same time Lessing's novel provides a <u>material</u> setting, and a set of material explanations, for the growth, presence and force of that symbolic dimension in her world.

My account here can by no means be exhaustive; as the novel is reasonably well-known, all I shall do is point out a number of patterns. The story concerns a young white woman, not very talented, not well educated, who marries a young farmer in one of the rural districts of Southern Rhodesia (Zimbabwe) some time before the Second World War. The farmer has bad luck; he has bad vision economically; he falls prey to illness. The wife, largely confined to her run-down household, has a series of servants come to work for her; most leave because of her ill-treatment of them. The last one she had once whipped on one of her rare forays out

into the fields, when her husband was ill. When he arrives the air becomes full of sexual and psychological threat and promise. The woman falls into bouts of projection and fantasy; she sleeps longer and longer hours; the servant has to take care of her physically. Ultimately she descends into madness, and when the servant finally kills her it comes as the climax to which her whole life has led, but also as a release.

Given thus plainly the story may appear melodramatic, but at deeper levels themes of some substance emerge. First, the novel re-establishes and then elaborates the colonial problematic identified earlier. Mary Turner, the white woman, is deeply alienated from the African continent. She hates it, she fears it, she avoids any real contact with it. In place of contact then comes projection: she feels the bush creeping in towards her (the significance of the title of the book, 'the grass is singing'). At the same time - and this is crucial for a history of colonial consciousness - there is a symbolic displacement in her mind: the continent and its indigenous inhabitants become identified, so that the idea of the bush creeping in to get her is the same as that of the Africans doing the same. Colonial consciousness feels an overwhelming need to tame the foreign environment - Mary Turner had whipped the fieldworker in the fields - but when he comes inside her household - untamed, she fears - this symbolic hierarchy is overturned: another definition of madness.

Economically, the novel is astute. It is set in a context of agricultural recession for the small, undercapitalised farmer in Rhodesia, where feelings of depression or despair were likely to be at their height;(25) this is a significant aspect of the processes we are describing. The question of labour then also becomes central. A white political economy allows no equitable working relationship with the local people. Therefore no common culture can develop: one of Mary Turner's greatest fears is that her husband will become just like the blacks who work for him. In the space which then opens up between employer and worker all kinds of racist imaginings and projections proliferate, especially in a period of 'primitive accumulation', which is what we see on the farm. In addition, as discursive counterpart to the lack of equitable working relationships there is in no sense any real 'dialogue' on the farm. Colonial consciousness indulges in an obsessive, echoing monologue which, in its vertiginous anxiety, reinforces the patterns of oppression and exploitation from which it derives.

In Mary's case these issues are conjoined with that of her gender. For in the colony white women are the most fetishised of objects, but this, equally, cuts them off from any real contact with local environment or people. In her own household Mary does no work: she stands and watches her servant as he does it all, again a situation of potentially very great tension. What takes the place of work is fantasy, projection, displacement, repression - all of which are deeply embedded in Mary's framework of reality, which is itself embedded in the economic and social

relationships of her situation. In this setting we see an aetiology of racism and madness - an extraordinary achievement on Lessing's part. In itself her book is like a symbol - something which concentrates and distils what is going on beneath the surface in a wider context at large. Here we see again that the 'return of the repressed' can signify on political and psychological levels at once. And we realise that for an oppressive colonial society what lies beyond the edge of its framework of reality is quite literally the threat of the 'unknown', or madness.

One clarification on this threat: I do not think it is a real one, that is, when liberation or the revolution come that all the oppressors will suddenly go mad. But it is their perception or projection of that threat at whatever buried levels that matters, that produces the theme of madness in the present. Similarly, not all colonial women explicitly suffer from Mary Turner's syndrome; but here we see the power of fiction to present in condensed form a contemplation of patterns more broadly or weakly dispersed through society, which may be activated under certain conditions, or else subliminally present all the time.

No account of this theme in the southern African setting would be complete without mention of Bessie Head's A Question of Power,(26) a novel which gives one of the most stunning depictions of madness in African, if not in all, fiction. The difficulty here is that this book requires exegesis all of its own. However, a few observations may be appropriate. As in Schreiner and Lessing, the madness of Elizabeth, the central character of A Question of Power, relates to a fundamental alienation from her environment - but not as a white, since Elizabeth is a 'coloured' who has felt at home neither in South Africa, where she was born, nor in Botswana, where she has settled. As in Peter Abrahams's book, also about 'coloureds', she too faces a crisis of identity, but not in relation to whites: Elizabeth's anguish lies in the fact that she does not feel properly 'African'; and, according to all the patterns we have seen so far, she is also consequently susceptible to all sorts of projections, distortions, fears and fantasies about African men particularly - manifested, again, in the form of her own obsessive monologue, rather than in any real 'dialogue' with the characters who seem to plague her. As in Schreiner or Lessing, the fact that Elizabeth is a woman then is crucial - but not because she is an oppressor or even half an oppressor. On the contrary, as someone who is not white, not African, and is a woman emerging out of the half-life of South Africa, Elizabeth is trebly a victim. Indeed, it becomes clear that Elizabeth's madness is inseparable from an entire social ethos and history of victimisation - that the rawness of her exposed inwardness is the internal incarnation of external realities. Insofar as the novel offers a diagnosis for all of this it is that unwarranted assertions of power produce madness; but so too does unwarranted subservience to it, or too much goodness or oversensitivity in response - which may equally be tempted by a form of psychic power. The solution, interestingly

enough for the patterns we have been describing, is one of ordinariness and belonging. The final lines of the book read as a prescription to remedy all the ills we have seen so far: 'As [Elizabeth] fell asleep, she placed one soft hand over her land. It was a gesture of belonging' (p. 206).

The question - and I say this without trying to sound ironical - is how we all get to that state.

III.

At the outset of this paper I said that I would be raising certain hypotheses regarding the recurrent appearance of the theme of madness in southern African fiction. I believe that some of these should by now be clear, from questions of alienation from the colonised environment for the colonising culture, to alienation in working relationships. From Schreiner to Bessie Head issues of gender have been crucial. The syndromes associated with the theme of madness in these settings have included patterns of projection, displacement, and symbolic association - for instance, of the colonised people with the colonised continent. We have seen how an oppressive mental framework is subject to the threat of a 'return of the repressed' - which signifies on political and psychological levels simultaneously. For the oppressed we have seen what relegation to the 'unconscious' of a dominant culture signifies, and the difficulties and ambiguities involved in any 'return'.

To these ideas I should like to add that the concept of 'limits' or 'limitation' seems crucial. For this is what defines a framework of reality, what lies inside its boundaries and what outside, what is counted as sane and what is counted as mad, how far coherency is maintained and where it begins to break down; what exactly is beyond the limit, as it were. Indeed, one might say, following Foucault, that the concept of madness is inseparable from the concept of a limit: as he sees it, 'madness', as the object of policy and knowledge within Western culture, is the product of an historical division at the end of the Middle Ages which separated out the spectre of the mad from the enclosure of the sane.(27) Even as far as an analysis of this 'madness' is concerned, Foucault remarks that 'what is constitutive is the action that divides madness, and not the science [of psychopathology] elaborated once this division is made and calm restored'.(28)

While broad references to 'Western culture' may sometimes be rather sweeping, nonetheless it does appear that in the colonial setting the analytical consideration of 'madness' is intrinsically connected with a search for significant limits. Thus, as a partial explanation for the recurrent appearance of this theme in the fiction we have been discussing, one might point out that seldom has the idea of 'limits' been so important as it was in colonial cultural formations in Africa. Mannoni

suggests that the incipient colonial consciousness is on the contrary characterised by its quest for limitlessness - that is, that in the colony the (usually male) coloniser seeks a world of limitless play and power unchecked by customary moral authority or any other form of reality principle.(29) While this may be the case in the prospective imagination (Mannoni draws interestingly on Shakespeare and Defoe to make his point) it may on the other hand be argued that once the colony is in operation it depends profoundly on the idea and reality of limits. Indeed, the colony is founded upon delimitations which divide the colonisers from the colonised. This is true in terms of land ownership; of economic and political rights; of living areas and forms of social interaction; of cultural patterns of behaviour, attitude and response. Without this the whole raison d'etre as well as modus vivendi of the colony falls apart, if one thinks of anything ranging from the extraction of surplus value (land appropriation, the control of resources, control of labour) to forms of local, global and strategic power (similar). In this context, for those within the colony, it is no surprise that lines of symbolic demarcation form an integral part of these other kinds of delineation.

Any number of examples, both general and particular, reinforce the point. In his discussion of the 'invention of tradition' in colonial Africa, Terence Ranger points out that what characterised colonialism on that continent was that it was a colonialism of settlement; therefore what it required in order to establish both legitimacy and effectivity were traditions of mastery and control.(30) Implicitly and explicitly this involved the setting up of boundaries where the symbolic dimension was significant: thus, there was a need for white farmers to represent themselves as 'gentlemen farmers'; even lower-order occupations in the home countries, such as those of hunters, traders, store-keepers, policemen and missionaries were gentrified in this way in the colony.(31) As well as inventing traditions of control, dialectical consistency meant that traditions of subordination, too, needed to be invented:

> Embedded in the neo-traditions of governance and subordination, there were very clear-cut requirements for the observance of industrial time and work discipline - the neatly, even fanatically, prescribed segments of the schoolboys' day at Budo; the drill square as source and symbol of punctuality. On the other hand, the invented traditions which were introduced to Africans were those of governance rather than of production.(32)

The fact that these rituals were of 'governance rather than production' does not contradict the point being made here: that the 'symbolic economy' of the colony is productive in its own way; moreover, that it is one which puts a premium on limits, boundaries and order in time as well as social space as part of an extended, overarching, everyday allegory of control. Ironically, even in terms of indigenous African 'tradition', Ranger points out that colonial administrators were induced to

invent all sorts of fixities of identity and social hierarchy - for instance the concept of a 'tribal' identity itself - where the reality had been much more fluid in the past.(33) Again the logic of subordination produced the compulsion of delimitation.

If these generalised accounts seem inadequate, one might turn to more particular analyses. Thus, through Charles van Onselen's discussion of the social history of domestic servitude on the Witwatersrand at the turn of the century (although set in a different time and place, this is of some relevance for The Grass is Singing) it becomes evident that the idea of limits (or, conversely, transgression) was central to it as an institution. Where white female servants were meant to work alongside black males, the logic of racial boundaries overrode those of gender and class: the females were soon supervising the blacks at their labour.(34) Where, because of demographic necessity, white children were initially looked after by black male nurses, as soon as conditions changed the symbolic limits were erected once again, and the feeling became that 'the Kaffir is not the person to be placed in charge of young children.'(35) In any number of ways servants were marked off from their employers: degrading uniforms and names, even a degraded language of command and response (the kitchen-language of fanakalo), demarcated zones and forms of interaction.(36) The fact that these limits were significant is attested to by the response when they were transgressed: one letter to a Johannesburg newspaper complained about the behaviour of domestic servants on Sundays, 'attired in the most up-to-date costumes, and carrying canes and sticks...swaggering along using English language of the most appalling description.'(37) Almost inevitably, however, the greatest symbolic weight was attached to the boundaries around white womanhood. So-called 'black peril' scares, concerning the rape of white women by black men, were as regular as the economic crises which attacked the Witwatersrand;(38) and where sexual relationships across the colour line did take place (usually between white women and black men), a Commisssion of Enquiry in the wake of one 'black peril' scare put these down to 'sexual perversion on the part of the female.'(39) The only way, it seems, in which white women could transgress the limits set up to protect them was through abnormality and deviance.

It is at moments such as this that one gets an idea of the anxiety underlying the enforcement of limits in the colonial or developing apartheid situation; indeed, it seems that we can speak of an anxiety of limits in general, both promoting and then reinforced through these demarcations. If the colonial powers contracted and rigidified indigenous African identities, they certainly did the same for themselves: one gets here a sense of the potential repression and self-alienation attendent on such processes and which, we might say, emerges in the fictions of transgression and limitation we have discussed. If white farmers felt themselves ipso facto 'gentrified', what emotional and psychological pressures were put on those who were demonstrably not gentry, such as the couple Lessing depicts in her novel? Surely this adds to our sense of the intensity of the struggle

over limits in that book. In a different context George L. Mosse has shown that nationalism and sexuality, when yoked together by bourgeois morality in the guise of 'respectability', have constituted an alliance of tremendous social and cultural force in Europe since the late eighteenth century.(40) In nationalist movements the idea of womanhood was held up as the epitome of virtue; but where an unlicensed sexuality threatened the 'respectability' of the status quo, this was also a mode of social control.(41) How much worse then in the colony, where the fervour underlying the symbolic allegiances of nationalism was intensified, and where the constrictions upon women, enforced with greater strictness because of the increased need to be 'respectable' and uphold limits, were correspondingly increased? Does this not help explain the fact that it was in the form of her womanhood that Olive Schreiner experienced her colonial alienation (unredressed in both respects of course when she went to London)? Indeed, if sexuality is where desire is active and transgression controlled, it becomes a key symbolic marker for colonialism, not only because it upholds the boundaries preventing miscegenation, but because it represents also the limit and shape of a whole 'order' of being. Yet, if there is such intensity about the limit, one may surely posit a sense of potential crisis which underlies it - the everpresent threat of transgression in the colony - usually displaced, in the symbolic order of things, onto the role and position of women.(42)

From this point of view everything about colonialism was ambiguous and self-contradictory, promoting its own anxiety at the same time as it enforced its dominance. Indeed, there was a contradiction at the heart of the 'nationalist' endeavour in the foreign environment. Mosse points out that European nationalism drew heavily on ideas of 'nature':

> Nature symbolized a healthy world...Indeed, nature was perceived as the native landscape, its mountains and valleys inspiring the members of one particular nation but alien to all others.(43)

To this one might add that the three keywords associated here, 'nation', 'nature' and 'native' all come from the same Latin root, 'to be born'. Yet if nationalism attached itself to a native environment, hence its doubled anxiety in the colony, where nature was alien. The logic of nationalism, which by extension is the logic of colonialism, contradicts itself in the colony: here the 'natives' were not the European nationalists, and vice versa, and 'nature' was certainly not perceived as 'healthy'. Instead of an autochthonous, self-verifying identity, European nationalism had very shallow roots in the colony; hence the symbolic slippage, identifying the 'natives' with their local nature, which so threatened the hierarchies of the colonists. By its own symbolic rules, then, the colony conceded its illegitimacy on foreign ground (an illegitimacy clouded over by generations of bluster, which did not of course necessarily reduce the anxiety underlying it). Ironically, the colony was excluded externally and threatened internally through its own

initiating and inspiring sense of limits. The deep-seated crises associated with this pattern are activated in the fiction because fiction mediates between the conscious and unconscious, limit and transgression, the unsaid and the sayable, and because it in turn activates potential history as a site of display and displacement.

Finally, one might take from Mosse the point that what European nationalism did attempt to set up outside its limits were interchangeable categories: the inferior races (Jews, blacks, etc.), homosexuals, the criminal and the insane.(44) Where inferiority, deviance or insanity defined within a whole mental framework what lay outside its boundaries, is it any wonder that fictions that approached the edges of those limits - such as the works we have been considering - should appreciate the stakes in terms of an allegory of (or in some cases the reality of) madness? Or that works approaching these limits from the 'other side', as it were, should be traversing, in a different direction, the same ground? From this point of view the notion of limits is crucial to our theme.

IV.

It will be a matter of exploration to see whether the limits of particular texts - defining their 'unconscious', so to speak - will always coincide with the limits of the broader frameworks of which they are a part, and define accurately questions of madness. For the moment, however, I want to develop the idea of limit in one more sense - the historical sense. For the question becomes: what happens to a society in conflict as a dominant framework of reality reaches its limits in time, and begins to break down? All I should like to do in conclusion then is address this question briefly by bringing the story I have been tracing up to date, suggesting what is happening in South Africa in the current period, and indicating some notable patterns.

As far as white writing is concerned, the pattern is roughly as follows. In the 1970s, as Mozambique and Angola were liberated, and the war in Zimbabwe began, a phase of resistance in South Africa was initiated which has lasted to the present day. In these circumstances it became apparent that the dominant order was beginning to crumble. Once again the theme of madness entered South African fiction, and what it signified now was the ending of that order. Gordimer's The Conservationist linked the notions of political oppression and psychological repression, and foretold the doom of its white-capitalist central figure, Mehring, who ends up in total crisis and/or mad.(45) In Coetzee's In the Heart of the Country (again that sort of title) his central character Magda lives out a psychofantasy on a deserted white farm, having reached, among other things, what appears to be the end of a white mental line.(46) In both writers there was an interesting shift. Where the dominant form of South African fiction up to then had been realism, both writers were now using

symbolism.(47) We might say that realism represented the world as it existed, while the symbolic was coming to signify the repressed, the 'unknown' or the future. Madness was always presented in a symbolic mode.

Black writing was beginning to tell a different story. Thus, in Mongane Serote's To Every Birth its Blood, it is the framework of the present which is madness.(48) In the first half of that novel its central character, Tsi Molope, is caught in a world of degradation and breakdown from which there appears to be no escape. In the second half, however, there is a shift. There the book focuses on a group, who work collectively, as members of the underground, towards a new political dispensation. Here is the recovery of sanity and humanity which was foreclosed to Peter Abrahams. Significantly, there is a modal reversal as compared to the white writing. Here it is symbolism which conveys the madness of the present - the 'unknown' present for blacks, so to speak - while it is a new realism within and towards which the second half of the book moves, signifying, I think, the idea of a new and rational future.

I should like to end with one observation. For all South African writers at present, black and white, there is a shift in their fiction from representations of mental conditions to a focus on physical realities or resistance: that is, a shift from mind to body. In Gordimer's July's People its central character, Maureen, escapes the mental as well as social breakdown of her world by running towards the future;(49) Hillela, in A Sport of Nature, finds the future entirely through her body.(50) In both of J. M. Coetzee's latest works, Life & Times of Michael K and Foe, the fundamental reality of the body represents his last word, so to speak.(51) In both Serote and Njubelo Ndebele's collection of short stories, Fools, it is the collective black social body which prepares the ground of its own future.(52) What is the significance of this? I think it is that for blacks as well as whites the limits of a dominant framework of reality have been reached. Beyond a history which has in part been one of the fact or potential of madness, it is time for a new reality, physically, to be made.

Notes

1. Quoted by John Bayley, 'Canetti and Power', London Review of Books, vol. 3 no. 24 (December 1981-January 1982), p. 6. In a slightly different translation in Elias Canetti, 'Kafka's Other Trial', The Conscience of Words, translated by Joachim Neugroschel (New York: The Seabury Press, 1979), p. 99.

2. Writing and Madness (Literature/Philosophy/Psychoanalysis) (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 252.

3. For the first statement see Nadine Gordimer, 'What Shall I Write About?' (unpublished typescript, c. 1961), p. 15: 'We do not choose themes because they are topical or timely, they choose us because they are the very stuff of our lives.' For the second, see 'Selecting my Stories', in Nadine Gordimer, The Essential Gesture: Writing, Politics and Places, (ed.) and introduced by Stephen Clingman (London: Jonathan Cape; New York: Knopf; 1988), p. 116.

4. Felman, Writing and Madness, p. 254.

5. Olive Schreiner, The Story of an African Farm (1883); with an introduction by Dan Jacobson (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971). For the 'anticipatory' nature of this novel see Stephen Gray, Southern African Literature: An Introduction (Cape Town: David Philip; London: Rex Collings; 1979), ch. 6, 'Schreiner and the Novel Tradition'.

6. Olive Schreiner to S. C. Cronwright-Schreiner, London, 30 November 1914, quoted in Ruth First and Ann Scott, Olive Schreiner (London: Andre Deutsch, 1980), p. 335.

7. 'The land was ours before we were the land's': Robert Frost, 'For John F. Kennedy His Inauguration', in In the Clearing (London: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1962), p. 31.

8. See Nadine Gordimer, 'English-Language Literature and Politics in South Africa', in Christopher Heywood (ed.), Aspects of South African Literature (London: Heinemann, 1976), p. 103.

9. Georg Lukàcs, The Theory of the Novel, translated by Anna Bostock (London: Merlin, 1971), p. 41.

10. For further discussion on this see Stephen Clingman, The Novels of Nadine Gordimer: History from the Inside (London and Boston: Allen & Unwin; Johannesburg: Ravan Press; 1986), pp. 135-6.

11. Legislated variously by the Mines and Works Amendment Act (1926), the Natives (Urban Areas) Act (1923), and the Immorality Act (1927).

12. Sarah Gertrude Millin, God's Stepchildren (1924); reprint, with an introduction by Tony Voss (Johannesburg: Ad. Donker, 1986).

13. Sander L. Gilman, Difference and Pathology: Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race and Madness (Ithaca, N.Y. and London: Cornell University Press, 1985), ch. 3.

14. The second comment in a letter from H. L. Mencken to Sarah Gertrude Millin. In England H. G. Wells compared the novel to A Passage to India. See Martin Rubin, Sarah Gertrude Millin: A South African Life, pp. 83-5.

15. Ibid., p. 174.

16. On the background to this see Nancy Stepan, The Idea of Race in Science: Great Britain 1800-1960 (London: Macmillan; Hamden, Ct.: Archon Books; 1982).

17. William Plomer, Turbott Wolfe (1925), (ed.) Stephen Gray (Johannesburg: Ad. Donker, 1980), p. 31; further page reference in text is to this edn.

18. On the concealed topic of homosexuality in Plomer's novel, see Peter Wilhelm, 'Mask and Reality in Turbott Wolfe', ibid., pp. 180-5.

19. Fredric Jameson, The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1981).

20. Peter Abrahams, The Path of Thunder (1948; Cape Town: David Philip, 1984).

21. 'The colonized man finds his freedom in and through violence': Frantz Fanon, The Wretched of the Earth (1961; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967), p. 68; and ch. 1, 'Concerning Violence', passim.

22. A question asked in a different context by Stanley Trapido, 'South Africa in a Comparative Study of Industrialisation', Journal of Development Studies, vol. 7 no. 3 (1971), p. 313.

23. Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts, in David McLellan (ed.), Karl Marx: Selected Writings, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 78.

24. Doris Lessing, The Grass is Singing (1950; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961).

25. For the overall impression of perennial crisis for small farmers in Zimbabwe from the 1920s to the 1940s (particularly for those who did not participate in the irregular tobacco booms of the period), see Ian Phimister, An Economic and Social History of Zimbabwe: Capital

Accumulation and Class Struggle (London and New York: Longman, 1988), chs 3-5.

26. Bessie Head, A Question of Power (London: Heinemann, 1974); page reference in text is to this edn.

27. Michel Foucault, Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason, translated by Richard Howard (1965; New York: Vintage, 1973), ch. 1.

28. Ibid., Preface, p. ix.

29. O. Mannoni, Prospero and Caliban: The Psychology of Colonization, translated by Pamela Powesland (London: Methuen, 1956), pt. II, ch. 1, 'Crusoe and Prospero'; to this extent the colonial project is also, for Mannoni, inherently infantile.

30. Terence Ranger, 'The Invention of Tradition in Colonial Africa', in Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (eds), The Invention of Tradition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp. 211-12.

31. Ibid., p. 218.

32. Ibid., p. 228. The school referred to was the famous King's College, Budo, Uganda, especially established for the sons of the Baganda aristocracy: ibid., pp. 221-3.

33. Ibid., pp. 248-51. Some of Ranger's more categorical statements on the extent to which colonial administrations 'invented' the African cultural past should perhaps, however, be treated with caution.

34. Charles van Onselen, 'The Witches of Suburbia', in his Studies in the Social and Economic History of the Witwatersrand 1886-1914, vol. 2, New Nineveh (London and New York: Longman, 1982), p. 24.

35. Quoted, ibid., p. 28.

36. Ibid., pp. 38-9. Uniforms for domestic labourers were introduced later than the period van Onselen deals with, but he demonstrates a manifest anxiety on the part of employers over the symbolism of 'equal' clothing. He also indicates that one of the limits in this setting had even to do with speech and silence: 'masters and mistresses spent an endless amount of time talking about their servants - and not infrequently...in the presence of an apparently deaf-mute "houseboy"' (p. 40).

37. Bertie C. Simes to the Editor, The Star, 8 May 1912, quoted ibid., p. 33.

38. Ibid., pp. 45-54. One of van Onselen's many successes in

this essay is to demonstrate that these scares coincided with periodic economic crises. Interestingly in this connection, The Grass is Singing appears to have been generated out of an ethos of 'black peril' scares.

39. Quoted, ibid., p. 47.

40. In his Nationalism and Sexuality: Respectability and Abnormal Sexuality in Modern Europe (New York: Howard Fertig, 1985). Though Mosse's book is, as it states, about modern Europe, when applied to the colonial situation the patterns he demonstrates are sometimes extraordinarily suggestive.

41. 'If a woman was idealized, she was at the same time put firmly into her place. Those who did not live up to the ideal were perceived as a menace to society and the nation, threatening the established order they were intended to uphold': ibid., p. 90.

42. I am partly indebted for this point to Donna Harraway. For a recent article exploring this issue, see Dorothy Driver, '"Woman" as Sign in the South African Colonial Enterprise', Journal of Literary Studies, vol. 4 no. 1 (March 1988), pp. 3-20.

43. Mosse, Nationalism and Sexuality, p. 183.

44. Ibid., ch. 7, 'Race and Sexuality: The Role of the Outsider', esp. pp. 133-40; see also Gilman, Difference and Pathology, ch. 5, 'On the Nexus of Blackness and Madness' and ch. 6, 'The Madness of the Jews'.

45. Nadine Gordimer, The Conservationist (London: Jonathan Cape, 1974; New York: Viking, 1975). For extended commentary along these lines see Clingman, The Novels of Nadine Gordimer, ch. 5, 'Prophecy and Subversion: The Conservationist'.

46. J. M. Coetzee, In the Heart of the Country (London: Secker & Warburg, 1977; Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1978).

47. This section of my paper draws on work I have done elsewhere: see Stephen Clingman, 'Revolution and Reality: South African Fiction in the 1980s', in Martin Trump (ed.), South African Literary Culture of the 1970s and 1980s (provisional title) (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, forthcoming, 1989).

48. Mongane Serote, To Every Birth its Blood (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1981; London: Heinemann, 1983).

49. Nadine Gordimer, July's People (London: Jonathan Cape; New York: Viking; Johannesburg: Ravan Press; 1981). For commentary along these lines see Clingman, The Novels of

Nadine Gordimer, ch. 6.

50. Nadine Gordimer, A Sport of Nature (London: Jonathan Cape; New York: Knopf; Cape Town: Philip/Taurus; 1987).

51. J. M. Coetzee, Life & Times of Michael K (London: Secker & Warburg, 1983); Foe (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1986).

52. Njabulo S. Ndebele, Fools and Other Stories (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1983; London: Longman, 1986).