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THE WHITE ENGLISH-SPEAKING SOUTH AFRICANS : CONTEMPORARY DILEMMAS AND RESPONSES IN SOUTH AFRICAN ENGLISH POETRY

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A Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of Arts, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, in fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts.

Johannesburg 1990

DECLARATION

I declare that this dissertation is my own unaided work. It is submitted for the degree of Master of Arts in the University of the Witwatersrand. It has not been submitted before for any degree or examination in any other university.

.....
(Andrew John Foley)

..... day of 1990

ABSTRACT

The aim of this dissertation is to offer a close, critical examination of the particular dilemmas and responses of contemporary white English-speaking South Africans as these are reflected in South African English poetry. This aim ought not to be construed as a denial of the legitimate claims of other ethnic groups for attention; nor should it in any way be interpreted as an attempt to reinforce artificial racial categories or to bolster restrictive barriers between communities. The purpose, rather, is to help advance mutual understanding and awareness by focussing on the specific problems of a complex and intriguing, yet strangely neglected, group of people in this country.

By examining the difficulties facing the white English-speaking group as registered and articulated in the work of South African English poets, this dissertation moves beyond a purely sociological account of the group. The dissertation will include both a study of the direct critique by South African English poets of the dilemmas and responses of their white English-speaking countrymen, as well as an investigation of the ways in which the poets themselves, consciously or otherwise, have responded as white English-speaking South Africans in their poetry to these dilemmas. The understanding of the white English-speaking group to be gained in this fashion, though differing from that to be derived from a sociological study, need not be any the less authentic or assiduous. In particular, the ability to examine the group from both subjective and objective points of view may enhance illumination. As such, in order to comprehend fully what the poetry

reveals about the white English-speaking South Africans, it is necessary to investigate how it does so, and so this dissertation will adopt a primarily literary critical approach to the poetic texts under consideration.

This dissertation will isolate and examine four of the most important and characteristic dilemmas confronting contemporary white English-speaking South Africans. After an introductory chapter, the second chapter will focus upon the "crisis of identity" experienced by modern-day English-speakers, and will discuss the disturbingly incohesive and vague nature of the English-speaking group, as well as what has been seen as its uncertain and precarious position within the wider South African social context. The third chapter will concentrate upon English-speakers' "damaged sense of plac their feelings of alienation both from the land of their birth and from the European source of much of their cultural heritage, their sense of having no true home. The fourth chapter will be concerned with the feelings of profound dread which seem to have permeated the white English-speaking South African consciousness: both the fearful anticipation of violent political upheaval as well as a less explicit anxiety about some undefined menace or force which threatens to breach the white South African "laager". Finally, the fifth chapter will examine the attitudes, conduct and political orientation of contemporary white English-speaking South Africans, and will suggest that while a large aggregate of English-speakers may be conservative and apathetic, there exists nonetheless a substantial minority within the group (including most poets) who are enlightened, progressive and activist in outlook and who thus represent a significant "tradition of dissent" in white South African thought.

This dissertation is dedicated to the memory of my father, James O'Connor Foley, 1915-1988.



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ANTHOLOGIES OF SOUTH AFRICAN ENGLISH POETRY
INDIVIDUAL VOLUMES OF SOUTH AFRICAN ENGLISH POETRY
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GENERAL

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.

Of all the groups which comprise South Africa's notoriously complex ethnic imbroglio, the most intriguingly paradoxical and inconsistent must surely be the white English-speaking South Africans.

Not to be dismissed as merely "a vague communion"[1] or "a fragmented population category",[2] they nevertheless lack a clear, cohesive identity and remain elusive of precise definition. Fearing displacement and urgently in need of location, they continue to experience a deep cultural schizophrenia, unable absolutely and finally to affirm their Africanness, but feeling equally alienated from the European source of much of their cultural heritage. In several ways exerting an influence as a benign and creative minority, they reveal themselves in other ways to be politically ineffective and even parasitical, deriving considerable material benefit from their partnership in the racial oligarchy. At times eager to arrogate to themselves the role of mediators and conciliators in a divisive society, they find themselves rendered increasingly marginal and otiose in the struggle for power between the opposing forces of Afrikaner and African nationalism. Attempting to represent a rational, humane position, they cannot completely purge themselves of feelings of deep-rooted guilt at their privileged status within society, or of fear-filled expectations of imminent and inevitable political cataclysm in South Africa.

They are, thus, "a people a paradox",[3] but a people whose particular attitudes, anxieties and aspirations need to be elucidated as part of a general development of self-awareness and mutual understanding in South Africa. And yet, symptomatically perhaps, the paucity of comprehensive research on contemporary white English-speaking South Africans seems to be rivalled only by the lack of detailed critical scrutiny afforded to white English-language South African poetry. This scholarly velleity, which may be part of a wider cultural malaise, appears all the more conspicuous in contradistinction to the relative abundance of attention given to other ethnic groups in this country, in terms both of socio-political analysis and literary criticism.[4]

The purpose of this dissertation, then, is in some measure to redress the balance by focussing on the peculiar problems of white English-speaking South Africans, as reflected in South African English poetry. It most certainly ought not to be construed as a denial of the legitimate claims of black South Africans or Afrikaners for consideration; neither should it in any way be interpreted as an attempt to reinforce artificial racial categories or to bolster restrictive barriers between communities. The aim, rather, is to advance common understanding by critically examining an important, yet strangely neglected, group of people.

In briefest outline, this examination will isolate and focus upon four of the most important and characteristic dilemmas confronting the contemporary English-speaker. These dilemmas are sufficiently distinct to be treated separately, though it must be noted that there do naturally exist a number of links and

connections between them. The "crisis of identity"[5] experienced by white English-speaking South Africans forms the subject of the second chapter of this dissertation, which will examine the disturbingly incohesive and indistinct nature of the English-speaking group, as well as what has been seen as its precarious position within the wider South African social context. The third chapter will concentrate on English-speakers' "damaged sense of place":[6] their feelings of not belonging completely to the land of their birth, of being continually torn between Africa and Europe, of existing always in one or other state of alienation, of having no true home. The problem to be investigated in the fourth chapter concerns the feelings of profound dread which seem to have permeated the white English-speaking South African consciousness, both the fearful anticipation of violent political upheaval as well as a less explicit anxiety about some undefined subversive menace or force which threatens to breach the white South African "laager".[7] Finally, the fifth chapter will examine the attitudes, character and political orientation of contemporary white English-speaking South Africans, and will suggest that while a large aggregate of English-speakers may be conservative, apathetic and even racist, there exists nonetheless a substantial minority within the group (including most poets) who are enlightened, progressive and activist in outlook and who thus represent a significant "tradition of dissent"[8] in white South African thought.

2.

It must be noted at the outset that the primary intention of this dissertation is not to construct a systematic sociological account of white English-

speaking South Africans. The aim, rather, is to examine the contemporary dilemmas and responses of white English-speaking South Africans through the medium of South African English poetry. It is to be expected, therefore, that the kind of understanding of English-speakers to be gained here will differ in crucial ways from the kind to be derived from a sociological study. This is not to say, however, that sociological data germane to the subject is to be disregarded. In fact, the general procedure to be followed in each chapter is to begin by identifying and describing in some detail the particular dilemma under consideration. This description, despite the relative lack of sociological studies on white English-speaking South Africans, will make use of what empirical evidence there is available in order to present an objective outline of the nature of the dilemma as well as the specific context out of which it arises. The examination will then turn to the main focus of concern, the response of white English-speaking South Africans to these dilemmas as registered in South African English poetry.

The way in which the poetry reflects these concerns is, in fact, two-fold. In the first place, it involves the direct critique by South African English poets of the contemporary dilemmas and responses of their white English-speaking compatriots. In the second place, it involves how the poets themselves, consciously or otherwise, have responded in their poetry, as white English-speaking South Africans, to these dilemmas. In Gareth Cornwell's terms, the poets speak both "to and for" their social group.[9] This distinction is far from mere pettifogging, for it is evident that there exists among these poets multiple gradations of awareness, or

acknowledgement, of themselves as belonging to the white English-speaking group. Indeed, the very need to make such a methodological distinction is indicial of the problem of identity among modern English-speaking whites in this country. These points also raise the question of distinguishing, in a good deal of the poetry under consideration, between the poet as the author of a particular poem and the speaker as a distinct persona in the poem. No general rule applies to all the poetry, whose range extends from fairly straightforward autobiographical expression to the heavily ironic use of distinct personae. In this regard, each poem must be treated individually, and special explicit attention will be given to the issue where it is crucial for an understanding of the poem.

The examination of an ethnic group through the medium of poetry may appear initially to be inappropriate and inadequate. Such an examination, however, need not be any less authentic or assiduous than a sociological investigation. Lionel Abrahams has made the point cogently in his acceptance speech for the 1986 Olive Schreiner Prize for Poetry:

> "In a uniquely focussed, uniquely intimate, uniquely articulate way, poetry embodies something of the history of what humankind has felt.
>
> Poetry has to go where journalism and historiography do not have to go - into the core of the individual experience, where the politics, the economics, the conflict and disruption are not just thought but undergone and felt."[10]

In contrast, thus, with certain radical deconstructive critical approaches,[11] an underlying theoretical assumption of this dissertation is that literature, and perhaps especially poetry, is able to reflect how men and women have experienced and reacted to the problems and concerns of their social world. As such, the claims being made for poetry in this study are similar in some respects to those which a critic such as Stephen Clingman has made for fiction in what he has termed "history from the inside".[12] Clingman's introductory comments to his examination of Nadine Gordimer's novels may be applied more generally:

> "The novel can present history as historians cannot. Moreover, this presentation is not fictional in the sense of being 'untrue'. Rather, fiction deals with an area of activity usually inaccessible to the sciences of greater externality: the area in which historical process is registered as the subjective experience of individuals in society."[13]

In a related way, this dissertation would claim that poetry is able to offer genuine and often unique insights into the experiences and responses of people as social beings. Moreover, with specific reference to the subject matter of this dissertation, contemporary South African English poetry, taken as a whole, may be regarded as providing a reasonably complete and reliable picture of the white English-speaking group generally, in all its inconsistency and heterogeneity.[14] At the same time, however, it must be pointed out, as Clingman does,[15] that the sort of subjective response embodied in literature is at least potentially fallible since the writers are themselves caught up in

the historical processes which they are describing. Here again, it is useful to have at hand empirical sociological data which may serve as a guide in detecting errors, lacunae, evasions or distortions in the poetry's perceptions and observations.

The critical approach to be adopted by this study does, however, differ in a number of important ways from that of Clingman. Fundamentally, it does not share the materialist orientation of Clingman's work, and, consequently, the orientation of materialist criticism of South African English poetry generally.[16] As a result, this study will be far more cautious in drawing inferences from the "limitations" and "limits" affecting writers' work, since it seems that a critic's responses are no less potentially fallible than a writer's, particularly when dealing with a contemporary situation.[17] Its "morality", in terms of ideological predilections, will also differ from the perspective of the materialist critic, and it will seek to remain open to a range of ideological viewpoints rather than striving for closure.[18] And its chief motivation is not to gauge a writer's work in relation to the historical processes of his or her environment, but rather to gain an understanding of the particular dilemmas and responses of a certain ethnic group within South African society by examining the relevant poetry of and about that group.

Very importantly, this study will also differ crucially from materialist critiques of South African English poetry in that its approach will be mainly of a literary critical nature. In the highly volatile critical scene in South Africa at present, the most balanced and fruitful approach, at least for the

purposes of this dissertation, seems to be of the kind advanced by Michael Chapman in his introduction to The Paperbook of South African English Poetry. His position is fairly succinctly formulated:

> "While I regard poems as sociolinguistically constrained, I also conceive of particular qualities as inherent to certain artefacts, so that particular kinds of aesthetic experience seem valid within the sphere of social reality. I would agree with literary sociologists that poetry is not 'mystery' in any naive sense, that it is not ahistorical, and that in trying to understand its character we need to discover what languages of ideology and culture were being considered, named, enunciated and conceptualized at any given period within discursive and institutionalized practice. At the same time, however, I would as a literary critic want to respond to and understand the gestures of poetry - the power of voice, rhythm and image convincingly to articulate actions, emotions and attitudes in the material world."[19]

In similar fashion, this study will take into consideration the pertinent insights and understanding provided by literary sociological sources, but will focus primarily on the poetic texts themselves. The point is that to appreciate fully what the poetry reveals about the problems and reactions of white English-speaking South Africans, it is necessary to examine closely and extensively how the poetry has been written. This study will therefore be strongly concerned with the various and often highly divergent formal devices, techniques and methods employed by the

poets. The intention, however, is not to make some aesthetic evaluation of the poetry, but rather to examine how these formal features serve to convey an understanding of the English-speaking group.

On a more pragmatic note, part of the reason for selecting poetry as the medium of investigation in this study resides in the fact that of all the different modes of literary expression in South Africa, poetry seems to be the only one in which a large number of local writers have reacted candidly and comprehensively to the experiences of the white English-speaking South Africans. This may be partly attributable to the idea that poetry, at least in the Western tradition, has encouraged self-reflection, and a personal, intimate investigation of experience (either as an individual or as a member of a group) in a way that other genres have not. It may also be partly a result of the fact that white English poetry in this country, in relation to other literary modes, reaches a smaller and more specialised audience of mainly white English-speakers so that it is here that many of the contemporary sues affecting this group have been articulated and debated.

3.

The word "contemporary" requires clarification. It would be erroneous to suggest that the problems facing white English-speaking South Africans today are completely novel, or that the dilemmas evinced by recent poets are utterly without precedent. Several of the concerns to be treated in his study may well be considered, in a sense, as continuations and extensions of earlier ones. There will, in fact, be an attempt to demonstrate these historical connections and to discuss

briefly the extent to which these former predicaments have influenced present thinking. Nevertheless, the contemporary period differs essentially and substantially from previous times. The term "contemporary", for the purposes of this dissertation, is taken to represent the period from 1970 to the present in 1989. This time is distinguished by the culmination of decisive changes in the social, political and cultural circumstances of white English-speaking South Africans, and by a consequent alteration in their perception of their position and function in society; it is also marked by a transformation of poetic attitudes and a modification of the treatment of traditional motifs and preoccupations. In the 1970s and 1980s, the dilemmas and responses of white English-speaking South Africans, as focussed by poetry of the period, take on a distinctively and radically new character.

The series of events which produced this manifestly new era need to be adumbrated. The first of these came undoubtedly with the shock of the 1948 general election in which Afrikaner nationalism in the form of Malan's National Party displaced Smuts's English-orientated United Party. Suddenly the English-speaker found himself politically incapacitated, unable to control the destiny of his country, increasingly at odds with a government which seemed impervious to his wishes and interests and whose policies and practices were to a large degree anathema to him. Although it is inaccurate to view 1948 as the sudden descent of "an age of darkness"[20] in race relations, and although United Party strategies of segregation had been far from enlightened, it is nonetheless true that the apartheid policy of the Nationalists drastically intensified and embedded discrimination at all levels

in society. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, then, many English-speakers became increasingly alarmed and alienated by the entrenchment of the Afrikaner-dominated apartheid state, with the concomitant decline of traditional British liberal humanist ideals, the demise of multiracialism, the horror of Sharpeville, the passing of ever more draconian racial legislation, escalated bannings, imprisonments and censorship, and South Africa's rapid slide into international isolation and opprobrium. The political and cultural evisceration of the English-speaker was perhaps most effectively precipitated by South Africa's withdrawal from the British Commonwealth and the establishment of the Republic in 1961, an event whose ramifications were being felt fully by the end of the decade.

If the white English-speakers resentfully believed that their position of dominance had been usurped by Afrikaner nationalism, it is equally true that they felt their existence increasingly threatened by the rising forces of African nationalism. The emancipation of African states from British imperial rule, the general post-colonial mood in the southern African sub-continent, and the supplanting of traditionally British (or European) institutions in the newly independent countries, were all palpable evidence of the erosion in the 1960s of the influence of English-speaking whites in the region. More specifically, the growing militarisation of black South African resistance organisations in reaction to massive government repression, and the rise of an aggressive black consciousness movement, rendered the position of white English-speakers ever more precarious.

At the end of the 1960s, thus, white English-speaking South Africans, in general, found themselves bewildered by their political impotence, ineffectual against firmly anchored Afrikaner domination, fearful about mounting black militant opposition, distanced from the international English-speaking community, and marginalised in a situation of increasingly polarised and radicalised thought.

There were, however, some unexpectedly positive consequences of these altered circumstances. Many white English-speaking South Africans were forced, for virtually the first time, to take cognizance of themselves, to revaluate their function in society, to address themselves directly to the problems facing their community.

This generally awakened interest was carried over into the literary domain. South African English poetry, which had long been regarded as bearing little more than curiosity value,[21] gradually came to be esteemed as of genuine worth and significance. The 1960s had at any rate been a comparatively unproductive decade for local English poetry in terms of the concerns of this study. The period had been characterised by the private, confessional verse of such writers as Ruth Miller, Sydney Clouts, Anne Welsh and Perseus Adams - poetry which, whatever its considerable intrinsic merit, had little or no societal reference.[22] Now, however, as social and political issues obtruded ever more exigently, poets began to concentrate their attention on more public matters. At this same time, a number of South African publishers who were willing to promote indigenous English poetry came forward - Ad. Donker, Ravan Press, David Philip, the Bateleur

venture, among others. Writers were thus not only far more easily able to publish their poetry and so reach a much expanded regional audience, but were also liberated from the often severely constricting expectations of an overseas market and so were enabled to treat specifically local themes and to utilise authentically local material.

This tentative movement towards self-awareness among white English-speaking South Africans, and this trend towards an enlivened poetic output, reached conflux and were given focus and direction by a number of crucial conferences held at this time. The first of these was that of the English Academy of Southern Africa, held at Grahamstown from 7-11 July 1969, on the theme "South African Writing in English and its Place in School and University".[23] This rather preliminary and provisional exercise, in which a variety of conservative attitudes still prevailed,[24] was followed by two seminal conferences: "Poetry '74", hosted by the University of Cape Town Summer School in February 1974;[25] and then, a few months later, "English-speaking South Africa: An Assessment", held at Grahamstown from 15-19 July 1974 to mark the opening of the 1820 Settlers National Monument.[26] These events heralded a new sensibility among English-speakers, and provided at least partly the impetus for the corpus of poetic activity which constitutes the subject of this dissertation. Other events which acted indirectly as spurs to white English poetry included the series of lectures and discussions held at the University of Cape Town Summer School in February 1973, which served to confirm the end of the Sestigers,[27] an Afrikaans literary movement which in several ways had tended to overshadow local English poetry of the 1960s. Of even greater importance was

the emergence of "Soweto poetry", an astonishing rebirth of black poetic activity in the 1970s which served as both a challenge to, and a stimulation of, white poetry at the time.[28] Thus, although critics such as Stephen Gray[29] and Michael Chapman[30] have tended to set the beginning of the modern era of South African English literature at 1960, it seems more practically accurate here to date the contemporary period from 1970. This would, indeed, accord with the perceptions of numerous critics writing at the time, including Lionel Abrahams,[31] Cherry Clayton[32], Christopher Hope,[33] and, notably, André Brink, who observed in his introduction to the 1976 anthology, A World of Their Own (ed. S. Gray), that the 1970s were witnessing "a most remarkable new explosion of vigour and talent" in South African English poetry.[34] The fact that the number of practising poets with at least one published collection had risen from 16 in 1975 to more than 60 in 1984 bears testimony to the accuracy of Brink's observation.[35]

There have, of course, been several important events and developments - poetic as well as political - within this post-1970 contemporary period, and these will be taken into consideration by this study. Nevertheless, in broad outline, the period seems sufficiently consistent and self-contained, at least as far as the purposes of this study are concerned, to be treated as a single, separate era.

(As an addendum to these introductory remarks, it has become necessary in the light of very recent political developments, to point out that this thesis will cover the period only up to 1989, when the writing of this thesis began. As such, it will not include an examination of the events of early 1990 (especially following President F.W. de Klerk's landmark speech of

2 February 1990) which signalled a radical transformation of the South African political situation. These events - including the unbanning of political organisations such as the African National Congress, the release of political prisoners such as Nelson Mandela, and the beginning of the negotiation process - seemed to be indicative of a wholly new era in South African history and, consequently, in the history of white English-speaking South Africans. For these reasons, it is, perhaps, in any case, useful to limit the focus of this thesis to the pre-1990 period, and to regard the years 1970-1989 as forming a distinct and self-encapsulated era.)

4.

It is necessary to define the range of poetry to be investigated in this thesis. In the first instance, the term "South African English poetry", will refer, in general, to white South African English poetry, since it is the white poets, predominantly, who have focussed on the subject of white English-speaking South Africans. Nevertheless, the racially inclusive form of the term has been preferred in order to accommodate those black poets whose work does deal with the subject of white English-speakers, as well as those black poets whose responses may fruitfully be compared and contrasted with those of their white counterparts. By the same token, although the concentration is on English-language poetry, the general responses of Afrikaans poets, where these are directly relevant, will also be taken into account.

Furthermore, this thesis will attempt to deal with as wide a range of poetry on the subject of the English-speaking group as possible,[36] rather than limiting itself to a few selected poets. The intention is not

so much to evaluate the individual achievements of certain poets, but rather to investigate how the dilemmas and responses of white English-speaking South Africans have been reflected in contemporary South African English poetry. This is not to say that individual differences between poets are to be neglected or ignored. On the contrary, these need to be carefully considered, for it is often these differences, stylistic as well as ideological, which help to provide a comprehensive picture of the English group. At the same time, however, it is part of the purpose of this thesis to demonstrate that many apparently divergent poets may be linked by their orientation, consciously or otherwise, towards the white English-speaking community. It is their attitudes towards their ethnic group (whether these be in the form of acknowledgement, rejection, even deliberate avoidance), and their responses to the particular dilemmas of the group, that make them different in a very real sense from Afrikaans or black poets,[37] and may provide the key to a more complete understanding of their poetry.

5.

Although this thesis is to concern itself with the particular experiences of white English-speaking South Africans, it ought in no way to be construed as an effort to elevate the status of English-speakers in this country, or as a wish to see created some jingoistic South African English nationalism. Guy Butler remarked on the occasion of the conference entitled "English-speaking South Africa: An Assessment" that the conference was most certainly not "an attempt to launch a paranoid cultural movement or political party by stirring appeals to sentiments, traditions and grievances", but was instead "a search for enlighten-

ment".[38] In a similar way, this study seeks to gain a fuller and deeper understanding of the dilemmas and responses of white English-speaking South Africans as these are reflected in South African English poetry, not in a spirit of sentimentality or ethnic exclusivity, but rather in an attempt to clear up some of the confusion and imprecision which currently characterises critical thinking about this particular group of people.

Perhaps the most signal indication of this confusion and imprecision is the absence of a name for the group. No like problem exists for any other ethnic group in South Africa;[39] it is only the English who are known by a descriptive phrase rather than a name. Continually to employ this phrase is, however, both clumsy and distracting, and it seems preferable, therefore, to devise an acronym. This has, indeed, been previously mooted, and some of the suggested formulations include I.D. MacCrone's WESPs (White, English Settler, Protestant);[40] Arthur Ravencroft's "tag of convenience", WESSAPs (White English-speaking South African Protestants);[41] and Guy Butler's ESSAs (English-speaking South Africans).[42] For the purposes of this thesis, however, the most appropriate such designation is WESSAs: white English-speaking South Africans. This acronymous label must not be allowed, however, to imply that the paradoxical and inconsistent group to which it refers enjoys anything like a fixed and unproblematic identity.

It is, in fact, the problem of identity which forms the subject of the first chapter of this thesis.

CHAPTER 2

A CRISIS OF IDENTITY

1.

"These million English are a vague communion ...."[1]

Anthony Delius's wry *obiter dictum* in *The Last Division* expressed succinctly in the late 1950s what was becoming an ever more disturbing feature of the white English-speaking section of the South African population: its lack of a clear, coherent identity. At about the same time, Guy Butler too voiced disquiet at the nebulous character of the English-speaking group:

> "our small numbers and exposed position have prevented us from developing as strong a national sense as our cousins in other dominions .... As a group, we lack cultural awareness."[2]

Conspicuously few minds, though, seemed then to share Butler's unease. The 1960s, however, witnessed a radical alteration in the socio-political circumstances of white English-speakers, with South Africa's descent into international isolation, the increasing polarisation of Afrikaner and African nationalisms, the post-colonial mood in the southern African subcontinent, and especially South Africa's withdrawal from the British Commonwealth.[3] As a result of this transformation, a significant number of white English-speaking South Africans began to apprehend the severity of the predicament confronting them. For example, Christopher

Hope and Guy Butler, in a conversation recorded in the early 1970s, agreed that

> "there is a problem community called English-speaking South Africans. How we define this is a difficult problem because it is only in the last decade or so that people have started to worry about themselves. You see, while you are safe in the envelope of the great empire or vast commonwealth, your identity is always looked after by this vast, almost cosmic thing you belong to. When that goes for a bender, stage one is a feeling of loss, of anger, of being cut off ..."[4]

By the mid 1970s, this anxiety had become widespread. Several conferences were arranged at the time to evaluate the position of the English-speaking group, the most important of which was that entitled "English-speaking South Africa: An Assessment", held at Grahamstown in July 1974. As Andre de Villiers, editor of English-speaking South Africa Today, a collection of the papers delivered at this conference, points out in his introduction, "the identity of English-speaking South Africans is the fundamental problem which the ... papers set out to tackle."[5]

Yet despite numerous efforts to determine and delineate the identity of English-speakers, it appears that the difficulty remains as intractable today in 1989 as ever. David Welsh, professor of Southern African Studies at the University of Cape Town, has lately maintained that "we are a fragmented population category, and not a 'group' with any identifiable cultural characteristics apart, of course, from language."[6] And Guy Butler, in a recent leading

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article in the Sunday Star has asked, "what about the English-speaking South Africans? ... Why does one hear so little about them? ... It seems we prefer to be an anonymous minority."[7]

2.

It seems evident that white English-speaking South Africans, or WESSAs (as this study will now refer to them), have, over the last twenty years or so, suffered from "a crisis of identity".[8] The purpose of this chapter will be to examine this identity crisis by showing how a number of South African English poets have responded to it, particularly in terms of the various possible solutions to the problem which these poets have advanced. Before proceeding to an investigation of the poetry, however, it is necessary to consider carefully what is meant by the crisis of identity experienced by contemporary WESSAs.

To begin with, the concept of group identity itself requires clarification. Lawrence Schlemmer, in his seminal study of WESSA identity, "English-speaking South Africans Today: Identity and Integration into the Broader National Community",[9] emphasises at the outset the fundamental and ubiquitous human need for group membership and the importance of ethnic group consciousness in providing individuals with a sense of belonging, security and orientation. Following other prominent studies of group identity, including those of Akzin, Geertz and Trevor-Roper,[10] Schlemmer goes on to indicate that the identity of ethnic groups derives not only from such "primordial" factors as common origins, customs and mother-tongue, but also from shared values, ethics, traditions and beliefs. It is these latter factors which help to provide members of the group with

a guide to attitudes and conduct, especially with regard to the wider social context in which the group finds itself. There is thus a close link between the concepts of "identity" and "role": the nature of a group's identity will influence how it perceives its role in society. While the need for a clear and unambiguous group identity is present in the most homogeneous and stable societies, it is all the more pronounced in poly-ethnic communities which are marked by inter-group tension and conflict, for it is in these latter communities that groups are often forced into deciding on specific and urgent socio-political courses of action. In such circumstances, the absence of a clear identity may lead to a great deal of confusion and indecision over the role the group should play or the course of action it should pursue.

In the light of this, it is possible to begin to understand the basis of the identity crisis facing the WESSAs today. In the first place, as a group, they lack a clear, consistent identity. In the second place, they exist in a society characterised by a high degree of ethnic diversity and strife. The essence of their dilemma, therefore, is that in a time of profound social and political conflict, uncertainty and change, they lack precisely the sort of cohesive and coherent identity which could give them a meaningful sense of direction and resolve. More specifically, as Schlemmer points out, the central issue in South African society is "the challenge of encouraging changes in dominant political, social and cultural values leading towards a more creative, equitable and less repressive social order".[11] Without a clear identity, the WESSA group, generally, has found it very difficult to play a positive and constructive role in meeting this challenge.

To gain a fuller understanding of this dilemma, it is necessary to examine in more detail the two related issues of WESSAs' identity and their position within South African society.

In the first place, it is claimed that WESSAs lack a clear identity. They possess scant awareness of themselves as a group; they have failed to develop a distinctive ethnic consciousness; they have no indigenous tradition with which to identify; they cannot be said to constitute a "nation" in the sense of a closely integrated people; they are divided by regional, territorial, class, religious, ideological and other differences. The point has been made sharply by Brunhilde Helm in a sociological study of WESSAs, which concludes that WESSAs lack

> "a unifying sentiment, and a sense of solidarity ... there is little in the way of cohesion or cohesiveness that draws or holds the members of the English-speaking South African population together. The forces that attract them, one member to the other, are weak; the controls they share are likewise. Not recognizing a separate, clear identity, there is among them no binding set of common values and a low level of commitment."[12]

Nevertheless, a number of sociological and demographic surveys, including those conducted by Schlemmer,[13] H.L. Watts,[14] and Henry Lever,[15] confirm that there does exist a body of people who can be identified, and who would regard themselves, as white English-speaking South Africans. According to official census data for the contemporary period, the numbers of these people has been calculated at just over 1.4 million in 1970

rising to approximately 1.9 million in 1989.[16] Such statistics must not be taken to suggest complete homogeneity in the composition of the group. Although about two-thirds of the group is of British or Irish descent, a number of WESSAs today are, in fact, anglicised Afrikaners, while others are of German, French, Dutch, Italian, Greek, and Portuguese origin.[17] In addition, a significant portion of the WESSA group would see themselves primarily as South African Jews.[18] Nevertheless, what such statistical data establishes is that WESSAs do form a distinguishable section within South African society, and that they are not entirely amorphous. The problem, therefore, is not that they have no group identity at all, or that they are altogether without group consciousness, but rather that the identity which they do have is unclear, confused and even ambiguous.

The problem of WESSA identity may be explained partly by reference to its historical background.[19] From the very outset, the patterns of WESSA settlement have never been conducive to the realisation of an integrated group consciousness. The several thousand officials and soldiers who arrived at the time of the second occupation of the Cape Colony by the British in 1806 - the first English-speaking presence of any considerable size in the region[20] - regarded themselves in the main as impermanent. The organised immigration schemes such as the 1820 settlement, the assisted immigration scheme of 1848-50, the efforts associated with Sir George Grey, and in Natal the Byrne scheme, all proved to be relative failures. Many of the settlers soon abandoned agriculture and drifted to the towns, remaining unorganised and diluted among the existent population, while other potential immigrants

were consequently discouraged, so that the number of settlers stayed disappointingly low. The heterogeneity and incivism of the transient diggers, and later of the more stable mining population, attracted by the diamond and gold discoveries in the late nineteenth century, also ensured an absence of solidarity. The fact that continuing immigration throughout the present century has been constant but unexceptional, and has included many people of diverse linguistic and national origins, as well as many British people who have retained strong links with Britain,[21] has further militated against deep feelings of unity. One other factor which has served to weaken WESSAs' sense of fusion has been the steady rate of emigration, which, over the past few decades, has more or less equalled the scale of immigration.[22]

Other identifying characteristics which might have provided the basis for a definitive WESSA awareness have proved equally inadequate.[23] The English language itself, which perhaps differentiated a set of people in the 1820s, has today been adopted by numerous ethnic groups as a lingua franca and even as a preferred tongue. In terms of religion, WESSAs have always been divided among a variety of creeds and denominations - tending, in any event, to be secular in temperament - and have certainly never enjoyed the binding force which the Dutch Reformed Churches afforded the Afrikaner. WESSAs, moreover, have been an essentially urban species, and are currently clustered in four main urban areas: the Reef, the Cape Peninsula, Natal, and, less densely, in the Eastern Cape. The distances between these centres, however, and the hybrid cultural character of the cities, have inhibited powerful neighbourly sentiments. WESSAs' occupational concen

tration in the professions, mining, finance and industry, generally at white-collar level, together with a relatively high degree of spatial and social mobility, have further induced a cultural atomism. In addition, WESSAs have never had the benefit of a political party devoted entirely to their interests, and, certainly since 1948, have had very little say in the running of the country as a whole. Apart from these factors, Denis Worrall makes the point that from shortly after their arrival in South Africa until the late 1940s, WESSAs enjoyed a position of superiority in South African society:

> "culturally, constitutionally, socially, economically, it was their kind of society and their social and political values were 'givens' in the situation. It is this which explains the extraordinary absence of self-consciousness which was such a marked characteristic of English South Africa until fairly recently."[24]

The fact that the WESSA group lacks the conventional identifying qualities and integrating properties which serve to give ethnic groups a clear identity, means that perhaps the only practical way of determining who WESSAs are today is to differentiate them within the wider South African social context by a process of elimination. Thus, firstly, as South Africans, they are distinguished from other English-speakers in the international community, particularly those in Britain and other British dominions. Here "South Africanness" refers to their residence or presence in this country, rather than to official citizenship, since a large number of WESSAs have retained foreign passports.[25] Secondly, as whites, they are obviously separated, in

all kinds of ways, by official legislation from other racial groups. In any event, however much portions of the WESSA population may have sympathised with black aspirations, as a group their historical circumstances have differed vastly from those of black South Africans. Thirdly, as English-speakers, they are set apart within the white community from Afrikaans-speakers. Despite sharing in white supremacy and despite co-existing socially and regionally, various studies have revealed that the cleavage between the English and the Afrikaans is the second main axis of conflict in South Africa (after racial divisions).[26]

The need for such a "negative definition", that is, defining a group by what it is not rather than by what it is, brings out clearly the crux of WESSAs' identity crisis. Not only do they lack a distinct identity, as this brief examination has shown, but they exist in the sort of conflict-torn and divisive society in which an unambiguous and lucid identity is essential.

To clarify this point, it is necessary to examine the second factor which has contributed to the identity crisis of WESSAs: their position within South African society.

In general terms, contemporary WESSAs tend to see themselves as caught up in the struggle for power between the opposing forces of Afrikaner and black nationalism. From the WESSA perspective, South African society continues to be perceived in terms of W.H. Macmillan's trinity of "Bantu, Boer and Briton".[27] The current tendency, however, is not to view these three as equal protagonists in the unfolding drama (or tragedy) of South African history, but rather to see

the weakened "Briton" as increasingly pressurised between the ever more polarised and radicalised forces of "Bantu" and "Boer". It seems that Guy Butler's assertion has gained additional credency in present circumstances:

> "the Settlers of 1820 were placed on the frontier between the Dutch pastoralists and the African tribesmen, and, metaphorically speaking, that is where we still are: in the middle".[28]

While such a statement is an over-simplification and has been justifiably attacked on a number of counts,[29] it nevertheless encapsulates a very real paranoia of many contemporary WESSAs. For example, Christopher Hope has recently described the parlous situation WESSAs believe themselves to occupy:

> "white English-speaking South Africans (witness the ungainly description of the species) are trapped between competing nationalisms: the Calvinist, racial pathology of the white tribe Thomas Pringle called the 'African Boers' on the one hand, and rising black nationalism on the other; despised and detested by the former and increasingly marginal to the ambitions of the latter."[30]

This perception is, in fact, not without some empirical substantiation. Lawrence Schlemmer reminds us of Benjamin Akzin's definition of nationalism:

> "where an ethnic segment presents political claims in regard to the basic values and organizational structure of the state, then such an ethnic group can be regarded as a nationalism".

He then goes on to point out that

> "in both the Afrikaans-speaking Whites and the various Black segments, the English-speaking Whites face peoples who, during the turbulent history of our society, and currently in the case of Blacks, face or have faced threats and attacks upon their collective identity, dignity and sense of self-worth. For Afrikaners this occurred in their conflict with British imperialism and colonialism and in their poverty and dislocation during the period of early urbanisation and industrialisation. For Blacks these same threats arise out of their subservient position in a highly discriminatory race oligarchy".

Schlemmer concludes, thus, that

> 'Afrikaner and African populations, partly as a result of 'wounded' identity ..., and partly shaped by external European and American ethnic ideologies respectively, have become self-conscious groups 'for themselves'".[31]

On the one hand, then, the WESSA faces the Afrikaner community, which is, according to Lever, epitomised by "a heightened in-group solidarity", "considerable homogeneity" and the "strong sense of Afrikaner nationalism which is perhaps the most salient characteristic of the group".[32] Archibald's analysis of Afrikaners as an "emergent minority" also testifies to the "remarkable intensity of Afrikaner nationalism".[33]

On the other hand, the WESSA confronts the black South African peoples, who have, despite their rich

linguistic and cultural variety, been united into a nationalism by the apartheid system. As E.A. Tiryakian puts it, "racial oppression has unwittingly made for cohesion among otherwise disparate elements of the African population".[34] This unifying impulse has been reinforced by the African resistance movements themselves, and especially through the rise of Black Consciousness in the early 1970s with its "insistence that the appellation 'black' applies not solely to Africans, but to all the disenfranchised in South Africa".[35]

The social situation in which WESSAs have found themselves over the last twenty years has been uniquely problematic. They are, in a very real sense, caught in the middle of a bitter and violent struggle for power between two opposing nationalisms. It is a situation which calls for decisive and urgent action. Yet, as a group, WESSAs lack the sort of clearly-defined and unambiguous identity which would enable them to take decisive action and to play a meaningful and constructive social role. Instead, the WESSA group, as a whole, has seemed to lack direction, to lack purpose, to lack conviction. WESSAs suffer, in other words, from a crisis of identity, a crisis summed up by Christopher Hope:

> "the English-speaker in this country feels increasingly cut off from everything. He has no touchstone, no criteria, nothing with which he can gauge his own position, his own identity. With a rising black nationalism and a rampant Afrikaans nationalism, he finds his position difficult, to say the least."[36]

3.

From this brief account of the background to the crisis of identity experienced by contemporary WESSAs, it is clear that the problem is as complex as it is important. The primary purpose of this chapter, however, is not to conduct a sociological investigation into the problem, but rather to examine the ways in which South African English poetry has responded to the problem.

In turning to this examination of the poetry, it is perhaps necessary to make some preliminary points. In the first place, to state that South African English poetry has responded to the WESSA identity crisis, is not to imply that all South African English poets have deliberately and collectively set out to solve the problem. What is meant, rather, is that a significant number of poets have exhibited a concern with the problem in their poetry.[37] Although these poets approach the issue in a variety of ways and explore a variety of possible courses of action, what this chapter aims to show is that, taken together, this body of poetry can be seen as offering a detailed insight into the nature of the problem, and that, as a whole, the poetry succeeds in identifying a number of the factors which seem necessary in making up an effective solution to the problem.

In a sense, therefore, an underlying motive may be detected in the poetry, in that it seeks to suggest how WESSAs should develop a positive and meaningful identity within South African society, one which will prove valuable in contributing to a solution to that society's difficulties. Again, however, this is not to

imply that the poetry ought to be regarded as arrogantly pontificating on social or political issues, nor that it should be viewed as grimly advancing a particular, simplistic ideological programme. On the contrary, the character of the poetry remains for the most part tentative, provisional, exploratory, informed by an acute awareness of the complexity of the issues with which it is dealing.

Similarly, the fact that the poetry addresses a dilemma specific to the WESSA group does not mean that it may be accused of self-indulgence, racial prejudice, or of promoting ethnic exclusivity. As Guy Butler has pointed out, the WESSAs' search for identity

> "is surely not a matter of approximating to a stereotype: it is quite as much a matter of conscience, of being able to live with oneself, of knowing where one stands. We are not, as a people, looking for a folk hero or an ideal English-speaker to model ourselves upon: we are rather looking for a map of the territory through which we are moving haphazardly, and with mounting unease."[38]

It is this "map of the territory" which the poetry under consideration in this chapter may be seen as helping to provide.

The response of South African English poetry to the dilemma of the WESSA identity crisis has taken a variety of forms, testimony, perhaps, to the highly refractory nature of the problem. In general, however, this response can be divided into three main areas:

(i) the poetry has explored the position and character of contemporary WESSAs by measuring them against the other major ethnic groups in South African society - particularly in terms of their relation to Afrikaans-speaking whites and to black South Africans;

(ii) the poetry has sought to illuminate the present situation of WESSAs, and the options open to them, by examining the past - either through an investigation of the individual poets' own personal histories or through a critique of the previous conduct and character of the WESSA group on a national level;

(iii) the poetry has, in a way, linked these two areas of response, by considering the implications of the WESSAs' position, both in the past and the present, of being "in the middle" between the opposing forces of Afrikaner and African nationalism.

Each of these areas of response will be examined in turn.

(i)

Given the vague and uncertain identity of the WESSA group, it is perhaps predictable that there should have been an attempt to clarify this identity by examining the nature and position of the group in terms of its relation to the other main ethnic segments in South Africa. A number of poets have turned their attention, in particular, to Afrikaners and to black South

Africans, not so much to describe these groups for their own sakes,[39] but rather in an effort to gain a deeper understanding of their own group.

Firstly, with regard to Afrikaners, several social and political studies have shown that despite sharing in white power, and despite living among each other and not in more or less separate geographical regions,[40] there remain significant divisions between the English and Afrikaans.[41] In fact, one of the most strikingly consistent findings recorded by studies such as Schlemmer's is the "great measure of resentment towards Afrikaners" felt by many WESSAs.[42] This conflict and resentment results partly from the dominant political position of the Afrikaner,[43] partly from a degree of discrimination against the English community,[44] and partly from WESSAs' generally more benign and enlightened racial attitudes towards black South Africans.[45]

In view of these divisions, a number of South African English poets have explored the relationship between the English and the Afrikaans. Christopher Hope, for example, has made such an exploration a central feature of his poetry. Hope avers that "the Republic of today is a creation by Afrikaners for Afrikaners" and sees "the English-speaking South African as having been displaced - flotsam left high and dry after the tide".[46] Sensing, thus, that the WESSA group, lacking a clear identity, "has long since ceased to be a part of the world," Hope feels his poems "reflect the struggle of one English-speaking White South African to become part of the world again".[47] An important way of achieving this is to clarify the position of WESSAs against the dominant Afrikaans group.

This is what Hope sets out to do in the title poem which opens his collection, Cape Drives (1974). The poem deals with a nameless representative of traditional Afrikanerdom whose inflexible determination to maintain power and control is systematically condemned in a series of appropriately rigid and austere sonnets. The first of these sonnet sections shows that this cold patriarch's risible attempts to give artificial vintage to his Cape Dutch home are no less unauthentic and futile than his efforts to prove the racial purity of his lineage. The exposure of both these attempts at "Restoring whitewash to a stained facade" cuts deep at two fundamental urges, or "drives", of the Afrikaner: to be indigenous and to be racially unmixed. The next sections of the poem reveal other dubious "drives" of this kind of man: his cruel, oppressive treatment of his farm labourers; his loveless and resentful attitude towards his more progressive daughter; his fierce and vehement chauvinism. Yet, in spite of his will to dominate, his decline seems inevitable. He cannot hold back "Constantia's development" which is reducing the old vineyards to plots, and he is defeated by even the "Drunken Coloureds" who set alight the farms in order to be paid for fighting the fires.

Throughout the poem, Hope seems determined not merely to show objectively the nature of Afrikanerdom, but to take an active delight in iconoclastically highlighting its weaknesses and hypocrisy and decay. More importantly, however, Hope is eager not so much to grind an axe on behalf of his fellow WESSAs by censuring the Afrikaner, but rather to provide a means of measuring the failings of his own ethnic group. Indeed, far from endeavouring to exculpate WESSAs from racial and political blame by condemning the

politically dominant Afrikaners, this condemnation seems in essence to be a way of gauging the culpability of the English. This becomes clear in the sixth and final section of the poem where the focus shifts suddenly away from the Afrikaans farmer and onto the affluent, supposedly enlightened area of Hout Bay:

> "New tarred, smelling of steam, this road leads where
> Barred gates gleam brassed against the sea that shifts
> In picture windows, meets the face fore-square,
> Feints at eyes but always strikes the cliffs.
> In Khaki shirt and shorts the foreman hustles
> Between theodolites, the noon heat shakes
> The air before his face, his cropped hair bristles
> Back of his neck where goes the white man's shade,
> A coca-cola beach umbrella that thin
> Boy totes who runs as fast as Sambo could.
> Day's coming when a growling limousine
> Sideswipes and lays out both beside the road:
> And yet, the tar set hard, this way we'll choose
> To drive, each blackening where the other goes."

Significantly, this section of the poem considers not the Afrikaner alone, but white South Africans generally, English as well as Afrikaans. The section utilises the metaphor of a newly tarred road (a further connotation of "Cape Drives"), built under the supervision of the white foreman, to suggest the political route which white South Africans have elected to follow. It is the way of the white wealth, of black subservience, of racial domination. It is also, however, the way of white fear, as the necessity for "Barred gates" suggests, and ultimately of widespread destruction for the "Day's coming" inevitably when both the white boss and the black worker will be laid out by the "growling limousine". Importantly, in the final two lines of the poem, Hope's deliberate use of the first-person plural pronoun emphasises WESSAs'

complicity in white domination and exploitation as well as their responsibility for their imminent destruction: it is the English no less than the Afrikaans who have chosen to drive the way that leads to a violent and "blackening" future for their society. Seen in this light, therefore, the poem as a whole seems less an attack on one particular ethnic group than a denunciation of the white man in general, and a revelation, therefore, not of the differences but of the similarities between the Afrikaans and English whites of South Africa.

A similar idea obtains in Hope's poem, "Kobus le Grange Marais" (Cape Drives, 1974), a wickedly funny lament of an "oudstryder" whose physical and social decline symbolises the disintegration of the traditional Afrikaner volk as a whole. Despite Marais' embattled position, he is allowed a telling jibe at the apathy and debility of the WESSA who, in the face of the tensions and conflicts of contemporary South Africa, "sits with moffies and piepiejollers and primps his nice long hair" in some chic "ladies' bar". Moreover, Marais' allusions to Slagtersnek, Sonderwater and Koffiefontein (scenes of English brutality in South African history) serve as a chilling reminder that Afrikaners do not have a monopoly on state violence and oppression. In an important way, thus, Hope's investigation of the Afrikaner can be seen, in fact, as an attempt to delineate and evaluate his own WESSA group within the broader context of South African society.

The same sort of motive underlies the work of many English-language poets who have reprehended the intolerance and bigotry of Afrikaner nationalism.

Chris Mann, for example, in "To my English-speaking Countrymen" (A World of Their Own, ed. S. Gray, 1976), condemns the oppressive nature of Afrikaner apartheid rule -

> "the prejudice of one tribe
>
> Turning to a sjambok
> In the law" -

but the poem functions more essentially, as its title implies, as an excoriation of those WESSAs who have mutely allowed this to happen. Mann warns such WESSAs

> "That to indaba their beliefs
>
> At home, inside their heads,
> (Is) as good as sitting down
> To pick a bone with death." (my brackets)

Geoffrey Haresnape, likewise, concludes a meditation on the "Voortrekker Monument" with the "fearful thought" of how "men who try to sail alone are rammed / by your blind prow". But he is quick, in "Family Visit", the next poem in his collection, Drive of the Tide (1976), to consider the Rhodes Memorial in Cape Town, which is still charged with "the threat of power" and which he rejects "for a more liveable hour",

> "something valuable which happened
> in the wake of the Imperial Dream".

The unorthodox, experimental poetry of Walter Saunders exhibits a similar orientation. In a poem like "Vrystaat!" (Faces, Masks, Animae, 1975), a fictitious rugby commentary is employed to satirise the Afrikaner's obsession with "purity" and "nationhood". If the Afrikaans rugby-playing "Vortzogs" are the

central figures of ridicule, however, the poem lampoons just as severely the WESSAs, who seem destined to remain forever on the sidelines of political activity in the role of eternal spectators. In this case, they are represented, significantly, by the commentators "Chick" (Henderson) and "Charles" (Fortune), who remain uninvolved observers rather than participants in the political game being played out in front of them.

This refusal to exclude their own kind from moral censure, and this readiness to use an examination of other groups as a means of testing the ethical failings of their own group, seem to be almost universal characteristics of the poetry under consideration here. That being the case, Mike Kirkwood's acerbic judgement of the WESSA, in his influential paper at the "Poetry '74" Conference, needs to be reconsidered.[48] Kirkwood offered a critique of what he regarded as "the English South African culture theory", as formulated, in particular, by Guy Butler.[49] Kirkwood's conclusion was that WESSAs have ulterior motives for "theorizing that there is an identity crisis" and then grasping at an identity as "the man in the middle" between Afrikaners and Africans in South African society. These motives include "the salving of pride hurt by the revelation of impotence" with regard to Afrikaner political dominance, and, especially, "since that impotence derives from the overriding identity of interests within the racial oligarchy", the separation from the Afrikaner also affords the WESSA "a means of evading guilt which is gifted to the triumphant Afrikaner".[50] Kirkwood's analysis is indeed accurate in a number of respects, particularly in detecting that many WESSAs seek to disguise their condoning of apartheid rule by superficially distancing themselves from Afrikaner

culture, and that an apparently neutral political position can allow WESSAs to evade political responsibility while continuing to enjoy the material benefits which apartheid affords them. Kirkwood is wrong, however, in seeing the WESSA search for identity as automatically spurious, especially when this search for identity is characterised by a willingness to acknowledge the liability of WESSAs, and is aimed at encouraging the development of the sort of positive identity that will enable WESSAs to play a meaningful and progressive role in South African society. Indeed, the exploration of WESSA identity conducted by the poets examined here, reveals a determination to expose WESSAs' implication in apartheid rule rather than an attempt to conceal that fact.

Interestingly enough, some of Kirkwood's own poetry may be read, like that of Hope, Mann, and others, as an investigation of the WESSA identity crisis, in so far as it seeks to clarify the present position of WESSAs in relation to Afrikaners.[51] His poem, "Boers" (Between Islands, 1975), for example, is not so much interested in repudiating the crepuscular attitudes of Afrikaners "in the kroeg / in a dorp like Warden" and their "burgher wives" as it is in revealing the uneasy timidity of WESSAs in such places. (The same may be said of a poem like Chris Mann's "Zastron" in First Poems (1977).) More pertinently, whatever castigation Kirkwood offers of intransigent Afrikaners, "mouth set to the long grimace / of possessing history", is balanced by the poem's final section which caustically examines WESSAs in English-dominated Durban and finds their obsession with money and cricket indicative of their unsubstantial identity and torpid character:

"From beyond, on slow ferries,
the city consigned its sounds.

Board-room blague was minuted
in secretarial snickering
at Collingsby, Coombe, and Co.

Somebody's cover drive
reverberated off the splice:
around the stupefied ground
a sudden trot of cavalry;
and, in Field Street, the presses
registering adulation."

In their search for identity and orientation within the broader social framework, South African English poets have also focussed on WESSAs' relationship with black South Africans. The main aim here has not been to depict the injustices of apartheid nor, at this point, to empathise with black suffering under apartheid. Rather, the poetry attempts to uncover many WESSAs' deep sense of estrangement and remoteness from black South Africans, as well as their consequently distorted perception of blacks.

Chris Mann is a poet who has frequently and forcefully disclosed the prejudices of the WESSA upper classes, as in poems such as "The Wives' Tales" (A World of Their Own, ed. S. Gray, 1976), "Tea for the Joburg Lady Visiting Plet" (First Poems, 1977), and "Mr Morgangeld and Two Women" (New Shades, 1982). In "Whistling in the Dark" (First Poems, 1977), he concentrates specifically on the grave difficulties involved in overcoming the gulf that exists between the races in South Africa. The poem presents a discussion, or argument, at a suburban tea party between the liberal, progressive speaker (closely associated with Mann himself) and a cultured, but conservative and cynical woman.

"Even with the window open,
and the rock of a calm mountain
filling half the sky,
the conversation turns to them.

And someone has a new theory, someone
dibbles her fingertips in the fingerbowl
and dabs them dry on the linen,
explaining what it is that is so
different, what makes them them.
I half-expect to hear the clunk-clunk
of someone beating a lamp-post
while a mob of drunken strikers
gesticulate in the garden
or storm up the drive. The moment passes,
but not before she has hinted
at such a virtue in those tender tips
it makes us us.

Even with the window open
and the rock of a calm mountain
still catching the sun
I hear myself whistle in the dark
once more, that we are they and they
are we. Perplexity
and indignation.
'Try that on them', she remarks,
and I know what she means.

Even with the window open
and the rock of a calm mountain
filling half the night,
neither side can allow
myself to be me."

At this party, the conversation turns, inevitably it seems, to the question of black South Africans, who are never referred to directly, however, but rather as merely "them". Through the use of this deliberately vague pronoun, Mann emphasises not only the tendency of many WESSAs to lump all black people into one undifferentiated mass but also their tendency to see blacks as fundamentally different or other. These racist attitudes are clearly evident in the views expressed by the anonymous female protagonist in the poem. In fact, although this woman supposedly has "a

new theory" of racial differences, her reasoning is never articulated, for her attitudes are based less on logic than on such artificial differentials as manners, taste and degree of refinement. What really "makes us us", she suggests through her actions rather than her words, is our refined social manners, and here her own deliberate display of etiquette is conveyed tellingly by the delicate diction and rhythm of lines such as

> "dibbles her fingertips in the fingerbowl
> and dabs them dry on the linen".

By contrast, "what makes them them", is their crude, brutish, savage behaviour, and she conjures up images of drunken hordes rampaging through the suburbs, her vision reinforced now by the use of such violent diction as "clunk-clunk", "beating", "mob", "storm". The liberal speaker of the poem cannot let this pass, and although it will probably mean a futile "whistling in the dark" among such company, he insists resolutely on the principle of common humanity contained in the tautologous formulation, "we are they and they / are we". The poem takes an unexpected turn at this point, as the speaker is forced to acknowledge the cogency of the woman's uncharacteristically blunt retort: "'Try that on them'". The poem ends on a pessimistic note, with night falling on the mountain which, aptly, divides the view through the window. The speaker's efforts at racial reconciliation, baulked by the mistrust and hostility of both sides, leave him unsure of his position in society and of his own identity:

> "neither side can allow
> myself to be me".

Sheila Roberts, too, has explored the pressures encountered in trying to close the gap between the races. Instead of using a first-person speaker, however, she has created the persona, Lou, a well-intentioned but timorous and diffident woman, whose experiences of racial alienation and conflict mirror those of many such WESSAs. In the series of poems which make up "Lou's Life" (Lou's Life and Other Poems, 1977), Lou is consistently revealed to be more enlightened than the rest of her "circle", yet she finds herself helpless and afraid when confronted by the harsh reality of black poverty and suffering, as in the poem "Lou Taking Therees, the Maid, Home to Sir Lowry's Pass Township at Twilight". Even more alarmingly, the situation brings out her deep-rooted stereotyped perception of blacks as animalistic and savage, as the imagery and diction of the poem reveals:

"Children like rats
conies
swarmed, skimmed
grouped along troughed lanes,
eyes iridial,
like cats'
in her headlights.

Gaptoothed laughter
seemed to Lou to halve the menace
of unsuspected living,
of loungers
against drunken outhouses
and sagging porch-supports,
with, Lou was sure,
knives and ready picks".

Her relief when Therees gets out of the car stresses the superficiality of her social conscience:

"(Thank God!)
Lou swung the heavy car
and breathed.

The senile day
spelled the shacks and pens,
and Lou forgot
Therees had said they slept eleven
in a room.
Hoodwinked, she gaped,
inane,
at the dusty halflight stippling the bluegums
and at the pale, lead, nighting sky."

Indeed, despite Lou's more sympathetic attitude towards blacks, she dumbly acquiesces in the vicious racism of her husband and friends, as in poems like "Weekend in Maseru" and "Postscript", until eventually her diluted liberalism becomes indistinguishable from their rank prejudice. In the final section of "1970 Picnic", for example, Lou's former moral perspective is no longer evident at all:

"the truck owner's wogboy
cleaned the faded duco
dipping his hand and rag
in a bucket of river water
hot face in grin or grimace?

A waste of time, said Lou,
seeing he's got to go back over
that suffocating sand road.
Yes, but, said Duffer,
if you don't keep them busy
they take advantage."

Clearly, the inevitable consequence of the great distances and differences maintained between most whites and blacks in this country is the xenophobia and deep lack of understanding displayed by many WLSSAs towards black South Africans. A number of English-language poets have, like Mann and Roberts, made their compatriots' distorted perception of blacks the subject of their poems.[52] Thus, the way that WESSAs' tend to conglutinate all blacks into one

African society. They concur, especially, in their rejection of the use of nationalistic force as a solution to this country's problems, and in their endorsement, implicit in Skinner's poem and explicit in Hope's, of the need for mediation and negotiation. The implication of both poems, indeed, is that it is precisely this process of negotiation that WESSAs today find themselves in a position to assist. Relatively free of the rigidity and extremism which used to characterise the British in South Africa, and which continues to characterise Afrikaner and African nationalism today, WESSAs may find a positive identity and role as mediators and conciliators in the polarised South African conflict situation. Like Hope's grandfather, WESSAs occupy what is in many ways a middle ground between two opposing forces, and so, as a group, seem to be most favourably developed and placed to aid in bringing about conciliation and a just compromise in South Africa. As Peter Randall has pointed out, WESSAs

> "have a unique role in that we are the only population group which speaks with everyone ... This position vis-à-vis the other groups in our country gives us a unique and tremendous responsibility to keep channels of communication open, to keep the dialogue going."[55]

In order to achieve this positive identity and to fulfil this valuable role, however, WESSAs, generally, would have to learn from the mistakes of the past and act with the courage and integrity of Hope's grandfather, something which they have not, as a group, managed thus far to do with much success.

of these poems is their complex tone both of nostalgia and of moral condemnation: the poets recall their ancestors with fondness and fascination at the same time that they convey a determination to learn from the mistakes of the past.

This is true, for example, of both Douglas Reid Skinner's "Post Mortem" (The House in Pella District, 1985) and Christopher Hope's "Grandfather" (Cape Drives, 1974). Both poets write of forbears who arrived as immigrants from Ireland and who sided with the Boers against the British. Skinner, in fact, knows little more about his "Grand Uncle" than that he died at Spioen Kop during the Boer War, and the poet, intrigued by this "mystery", tries to reconstruct his relative's thoughts and feelings. Beneath this personal interest, however, lies a more serious social concern. Through this examination of the past, Skinner seeks some "instruction" for the present. Even though his uncle left him no articulated message - "Your mouth opens / but nothing's voiced" - nevertheless, Skinner finds in that earlier conflict a reflection of his own time:

> "the fight
> for Imperial dreams
> and salvation of the Volk
> compounds our madness
> in a barbarous dawn light".

And the poem ends with a bluntly expressed repudiation of a people who have learnt nothing from the insanity of the past:

> "Nothing's gained,
> nothing solved;
> there is no voice.
> With guns deployed
> still we mutually destroy

for a glitter of stones
and metals to hoard,
ash and dust
and human expediency.
Possession, they tell me,
is nine points of the law;
it's also the reason
others come to make war."

A similar combination of personal nostalgia and social conscience informs Hope's poem:

"Came barefoot from Waterford
To Balfour with Baden-Powell:
A gambling man,
Eventually he owned the town's hotel
Where his credit was legendary
Among his Boer clientele
Who force-fed me peppermints and lemonade
In the public bar.
And for whom he mixed his Irish and his alcohol so well
That they sent him to Pretoria
As their ambassador
More than once.
There, no one stuck his nose up
When he rose up reproachfully
In the covens of the Union Buildings
Mistaking Milner's youngest reincarnation
For the ghost of Cromwell,
Fattening with romantic unguents the imperial perfume.
For all that, he declined to stand for parliament -
Then was ill for three days when Smuts went.
Marriage was the last gamble he lost;
At Turffontein his horses grew neglected
He himself went lumberingly, with the aplomb
Of an old bear,
Leaving these few memories twittering
In the gruff forests of his moustaches
Long after he wasn't there.
And the clouds grew over his face like grass.

And Baden-Powell? More was heard of him
From Kimberley and Mafeking."

In this poem, Hope moves beyond a mere recounting of his "few memories" of his grandfather to explore, like Skinner, a wider social theme. In particular, the poem

indiscriminate mass is attested to not only in Mann's "Whistling in the Dark", but also in Christopher Hope's "In the Middle of Nowhere" (In the Country of the Black Pig, 1981) and Geoffrey Haresnape's "Nightmare" (Drive of the Tide, 1976). WESSAs' offensive and fearful apprehension of blacks as "barbarians" is revealed in poems like Mike Nicol's "After Cavafy" (Among the Souvenirs, 1978) and William Eranford's "Colonial Experience: Four Fragments" (A Century of South African Poetry, ed. M. Chapman, 1981). And WESSAs' alarmed perception of blacks as some dangerous natural power is portrayed in Robert Greig's "The Cloud" (Talking Bull, 1975), David Wright's "Notes on a Visit, November 1976" A Century of South African Poetry, ed. M. Chapman, 1981) and Francis Faller's "As if it Mattered" and "Storm in the Suburb" (both in Weather Words, 1986). In each of these poems, black people are shown to have been, in one way or another, dehumanised and de-individuated in WESSA perception. A critic like Jeremy Cronin is surely wrong, therefore, to assume that it is the poets themselves who regard blacks in this way. In a very narrow interpretation of this poetry, he has claimed that

> "it's tremendously insulting to the majority of people in South Africa to treat the long tradition of resistance to colonialism and to racial oppression as some kind of natural force, or brewing storm, or something stalking away at the bottom of the garden, or in the night, or whatever".[53]

Such criticism as this hardly seems fair to the many poets who have attempted, as Cronin himself has, to expose the distorted perceptions and prejudices of their fellow whites. As was the case with Mike Kirkwood, Cronin seems not to have discerned that the

purpose of the poets' examination of WESSAs is not merely to describe the nature of the WESSA group identity, but also to evaluate it critically. As such, far from undermining the tradition of resistance to oppression, the poets can in this instance be seen, in fact, to be combatting that oppression.

As mentioned at the outset of this chapter, the examination by South African English poets of the WESSA group may be regarded in some ways as an attempt to resolve the crisis of identity currently experienced by the group. The poetry does this by suggesting how the group can develop the sort of identity - in terms of its values, orientation and attitudes - which will enable the group to play a meaningful and constructive role in addressing the problems of South African society in general. In this sense, the examination of the relation of the WESSA group to Afrikaners and black South Africans may be read as an endeavour to identify at least some of the factors required to develop this new identity. The broad conclusions of this examination would be, on the one hand, that WESSAs need to acknowledge the extent of their involvement, covert at times, in the unjust practices of the Afrikaner-dominated race oligarchy. On the other hand, WESSAs must realise that their estrangement and separation from black South Africans - in terms of both physical and social distance - has served to instil deeply racist attitudes in many members of the group. The eradication of racial prejudice and the rejection of participation in the system of apartheid rule are two elements which would seem to be indispensable in developing a new, positive and progressive WESSA identity. These are not the only elements, however, and so it is necessary to consider what other factors

have been identified by South African English poets as essential in resolving the WESSA identity crisis.

(ii)

The second main way in which South African English poets have responded to the identity crisis of WESSAs is through an exploration of the past.

As the WESSA group, in general, finds itself in an increasingly tenuous position in the present, facing what seems to be an uncertain and perhaps disastrous future, so a number of poets have turned to the past in order to try to discover a more meaningful identity for the group. This investigation of previous times is not to be construed as an attempt to elevate the status of WESSAs in some way by recalling their former power and political superiority; on the contrary, the principal motivation of the investigation is to clarify the present position of WESSAs within South African society and to illuminate the possible constructive courses of action open to them. As André Brink has observed, "the exploration of the past is part of the larger quest for identity", and he has rightly noted that such a quest forms a major theme of the "formidable body of new poets" who emerged in the 1970s.[54]

The first and most immediate manner in which recent poets have explored the past is by tracing their own personal histories through their families. This investigation is conducted not out of a concern with discovering their individual origins, but rather to gain a sense of the identity and purpose of the community at large. As such, a common feature of many

focusses on various modes of political action adopted in the past, in order to explore the options available in present-day South Africa. Such an exploration is signalled by the way in which the poem has been structured. At the beginning and end of the poem, references to Baden-Powell, with whom Hope's grandfather had emigrated, and who became a key British commander during the Boer War, serve as unobtrusive yet ominous reminders of one method of dealing with political problems: through the use of brute military force. However, between these parenthetical allusions, and among the poet's personal recollections, another more encouraging mode of political action emerges. Hope's grandfather, who had come to own the hotel in Balfour, was recognised by his devoted Boer clientele as a man of generosity and integrity, and was thus often sent to Pretoria as their ambassador. It was in this capacity that he acted with courage and honesty by indignantly challenging the oppressive imperialism of the day, and by opposing the vicious and exploitative policies of "Milner's youngest reincarnation", policies reminiscent of Cromwell's oppression of the Irish. Through an engaging and undogmatic narrative poem, Hope is thus able to present an essentially political message. Although power has shifted from the British imperialists to an Afrikaner-dominated apartheid government, the imperative to stand up against injustice and exploitation - whatever the source - remains clear. And the persuasive example of Hope's grandfather as a political mediator suggests that such political tactics remain the proper course of action to pursue, particularly in the light of the tragic Boer War battles fought at "Kimberley" and "Mafeking".

Both poems employ personal family recollections as a means of conveying an evaluation of contemporary South

To fulfil this role effectively, WESSAs will also have to renounce the narrow-minded prejudice of their colonialist predecessors. This is the task which both Patrick Cullinan and Jeremy Cronin set themselves, in their different fashions, in their explorations of their personal family histories. Cullinan, for example, in "The Billiard Room" (Today Is Not Different, 1978), recalls vividly the virile colonialism and self-assured sense of superiority of his father, but does so in order to reject these dubious qualities. Descended from a famous and wealthy pioneering family, Cullinan finds himself in the part of an epigone, having inherited the unresolved "conflicts" of his ancestors, but without their love of power and without their desire for conquest. His late father's billiard room concretises the poet's deeply ambiguous inheritance:

"The play of his power,
the living, you can smell
it in this room: the cues glitter like weapons,
the green nap of the table
was a battleground for him where conflicts broke
in the strategy of a game.

And I remember hearing,
at night above my head,
the sound of a glass breaking, and a burst
of rich laughter; then silence,
except for the powerful tread, the pacing
from angle to angle,
and the crack of a cannon
as the white slammed into the red. It's

all snuffed out now of course, like a long
Havana cigar, a Hoyo de Monterrey perhaps,
smoked down for an inch or two, and never
much more. The act has gone, his gesture
casual on an evening thirty years ago
is obsolete; now
only a sense of ritual pervades the room and feeds
familiar on the tokens of his power:

a German ceremonial sword
he captured in South West stands rigid
in a shell case, against one wall an old
propeller rots (and somewhere stuck in a drawer
there's an album showing photographs of the crash),
so that objects of steel and brass, records
of dead encounter have made this room
a potent place, the temple of my caste

Where I must pay homage, the sour pietas
of son to father, the unforgiving
love that looks for only one thing in the past:
conflict as barren as dust. I have no god
but a giant who paces above my head,
who blusters nightly that in his turn
my son shall have his saga of Fee, Fie, Fum,
to grind my bones to make his bread.

Though I stand by a half opened window
and breathe in the air
the dust still stirs about me,
raised by a step on the floor,
and the smell that comes up is the smell of old power,
unbreaking love, unfinished war."

In a similar way to the poems of Hope and Skinner discussed above, the tone of "The Billiard Room" is a complex amalgam of deep, even awed personal nostalgia, and emphatic condemnation of oppression and domination. The poem dramatises Cullinan's struggle to free himself from his father's bitter legacy of aggressive colonialism and the fierce urge to dominate, a legacy symbolised by "the tokens of his power" which fill the room: cues glittering like weapons, the table itself a battleground for conflict, a captured German sword rigid in a shell case, as well as, of course, the memory of his father's immensely powerful personality. The poet's attempt is to forge for himself a new and more humane identity as a WESSA in contemporary South Africa. The co-ordinates of this new identity are suggested in the final lines of the poem: it is an identity which needs to reject "old power" and "unfinished war" and which needs to be based instead on

"love". Love itself, however, as the subtle and equivocal language of the poem reveals, requires careful redefinition. The love that is to be sought is not the "unforgiving love" that produces and perpetuates "conflict as barren as dust"; neither is it the austere "unbreaking love" which is focussed as a love of power or a love of one's own "caste". Instead, another kind of "unbreaking love" is needed: a firm and resolute love which may be extended to all South Africans, whatever "caste" they may belong to. It is only through this sort of love, Cullinan suggests, that WESSAs will be able to develop a new and meaningful identity, thereby purging themselves of the feeling that they "must pay homage" still to the "old power" of the past; and it is only through this sort of love that they will be able to contribute to ending peacefully and justly the "unfinished war" which continues to characterise modern-day South Africa.

Although the Marxist ideology which informs Jeremy Cronin's work is very different from Patrick Cullinan's liberal humanist orientation,[56] a number of Cronin's poems resemble "The Billiard Room" in that the poet seeks to free himself finally from his colonialist patrimony. In "Granpa Kemp" and "Granma Kemp" (Inside, 1983), for example, he recalls his grandparents with genuine affection, and admits that he is still "joined / by some uncertain wires" to his family, but he firmly repudiates the "narrow mind" and "the pulse of colonialism" which have typified their generation. He recollects with similar tenderness his childhood and the premature death of his naval officer father (in the section, "The Naval Base", in Inside (1983)); like Cullinan, however, he disavows completely his father's tainted bequest of

"the naval salute, the sign of the cross,
the servant's proper place, and our father who art".

Several of Cronin's poems are, in a sense, thus, both expiscatory and expiatory, as he scrutinises his past in order to distance himself from it and, thereby, to confirm his commitment to the struggle for liberation of the oppressed in South Africa - what he calls in "Our land holds ..." (Inside, 1983) "this unfinished task".

The second way in which a number of poets have explored the past is through an investigation of the WESSA group as a whole on a national level. Once again, the underlying intention of the poetry is a moral one, only now the moral purport of the verse is not tempered by personal nostalgia. On the contrary, these poets have subjected the attitudes, aspirations and actions of former generations of white English-speakers in South Africa[57] to an extremely severe and strict examination, free of any bias in favour of their own ethnic group. The point is that the recollection of mistakes and iniquities committed by the English in the course of South African history can act as a potent didactic stimulus for contemporary WESSAs, who need to discover a proper and positive role and identity in the troubled social context of present-day South Africa.

The instructive purpose of this poetry is exemplified by a poem such as Patrick Cullinan's "The Steadying Effect" (The Horizon Forty Miles Away, 1973), which narrates a little known but highly illuminating incident which occurred shortly before the first Boer War. With masterfully controlled irony, Cullinan recounts how the British forces tried to intimidate the Boers by inviting them to witness a display of their new fire power. Their reasoning, expressed in monstrously arrogant terms, was that

"What the Dutchman needs is a
Steadying Effect".

The exercise, which takes the form of bombarding some goats from a distance, turns out, however, to be a complete and absurd failure. Not only are no goats killed, but one pregnant nanny goat gives birth in her excitement during the shelling to twins. Yet, "strangely enough", the Boers are still impressed, concluding that "Guns were the thing". The result, of course, of this reliance on military force and weaponry to settle disputes was the Boer War:

"All that hatred
And all that slaughter".

Cullinan's moral, articulated at the outset of the poem, is that all this horrific destruction could have been avoided, if only the British and the Boers had followed the rational and reasonable example of Sir William Butler, from whose autobiography Cullinan has quarried the incident. In suitably plain, almost prosaic lines, the poet contrasts Butler's unpretentious, common-sensical outlook, with the devious scheming of Rhodes and Kruger:

"Occasionally, there is a good General:
One who can use his head,
Like you, Sir William Butler,
An Irishman,
Ironic and sane, who could see
The disgrace that was coming
In Eighteen Ninety Nine to the British
And their Empire. You said so:
But nobody liked that line.
They were plotting in Cape Town and London,
Pretoria was playing its game.
They were all too busy plotting
To consider the cost of it all:
That would come later,
At the end of a damn stupid war."

Through this examination of a past tragedy, therefore, the poem carries an implicit message to present-day WESSAs and, indeed, all South Africans. As the contemporary South African political conflict seems, as in 1899, to require violent resolution, so the poem warns of the futility of military confrontation and asserts the need for a rational, negotiated settlement. The example of Sir William Butler remains utterly relevant: all parties involved in the conflict would benefit from the true "steadying effect" of using their heads rather than reaching for their guns. More specifically, it is in providing this sort of steadying effect, by encouraging and assisting in the process of peaceful negotiation and conciliation that WESSAs may play a valuable role in the modern-day South African milieu.

Chris Mann's poem, "Rorke's Drift a Century after the Battle" (New Shades, 1982), also explores past conflict in order to illuminate present difficulties and to clarify the options open to contemporary WESSAs. Unlike "The Steadying Effect", however, the conflict that is recalled is not that between the British and the Boers, but rather that between the British and the Zulus. And if Patrick Cullinan's poem stresses the need for people in South Africa today to use their heads, Chris Mann's poem emphasises the need for them to use their hearts.

> "Rorke's Drift? That mission place, where one fine day
> Zulus and Brits tore each other's heads off?
> Ja, I've been to Rorke's Drift - a bit of wild
> with sandbags and old biscuit-boxes on,
> and glass-cases, full of models and toys,
> to show where the one lot hammered in from,
> where the others slammed bolts, and hammered back.
> Poor sods, all of them, the Redcoats cursing,
> sweating and cursing in the laager wall,
> the impis, as usual, trotting forward,

clubbed down again and again by hot lead,
each man stunned, caught up in something huger
and fiercer than himself, made murderous,
exhausted, terrified; and, if he lived,
changed into Hero - a role he doubtless
scoffed at, and yet, on the q.t., enjoyed.
Ja, I've been to Rorke's Drift. Where modestly,
but relentlessly, the Calls of Nature
began to Un-brace the Mighty Embrace
of History: after a genuflection
of sorts, inside a sort-of shrine raised up
for Corporal North, who'd crimsoned near the spot,
food. Two cheese sandwiches, one cold beer, and phut,
History, the stress of it, diminishes,
and starry blossoms, melodious tweetlings
embroider the charming, 'denuded' terrain.
Ja, I've been to Rorke's Drift. Where two students,
amiably, like Shaka's ghost in handcuffs,
enquired, their radio roaring Afro-pop,
what Umlungu wanted there, and whether
a job, or lift to Joburg, was, with praise
and thanksgiving for his kindness, at hand.
Umlungu, the Steel-eyed Conqueror, Beast
hadn't come to gloat, nor, his shades be blessed,
to count corpses and Bewail, sniffily,
his fate. Compromised, scared, he'd come to prise
a Nowness from that Then. Instead of which
above an altar, woven in russet,
in black and russet clotted wools, the Now
disentangled, Himself, from out his Church,
that sometime harbinger, and accomplice
of conquest, and, in spiky letters, spoke:
THANDANANI. 'Love One Another'! The frail
futile, yet without which nothing. We can't.
And won't. But must. Ja, I've been to Rorke's Drift,
and in a way return there often, to stand
beneath the sighing-widow pines, and affirm
that guidance exists, and, it may be, redemption."

The speaker recounts in the course of the poem how he has travelled to the memorial of the battle of Rorke's Drift neither to gloat nor to mourn but rather to seek some sort of instruction for the present out of that historical moment:

> "Compromised, scared, he'd come to prise
> a Nowness from that Then".

However, instead of managing to wrench some artificial and portentous meaning from "the Mighty Embrace / of History", he receives an unexpected epiphany of sorts in "the NOW" which positively synthesises Christian and Zulu ethical imperatives,[58] as he reads the inscription above the altar:

> THANDANANI. 'Love One Another'!"

The speaker's disarmingly colloquial explanation of the implications of the inscription, expressed in the most straightforward, down-to-earth terms, removes the meaning from the context of forgotten historical events, or of empty political rhetoric, and transplants it directly into the context of ordinary, everyday life:

> "The frail
> futile, yet without which nothing. We can't.
> And won't. But must."

In fact, an opportunity to put this new understanding into practice occurs almost immediately when two westernised Zulu students request a lift with him to Johannesburg and he glimpses the potential for much greater direct and practical co-operation, mutual assistance and love across the colour line. This is

perhaps a weakness in the poem in that it renders it vulnerable to accusations of paternalism: tellingly, it is the blacks who must respectfully ask the white man, "Umlungu", for the assistance which he is in the economic position of being able to provide. Such flaws in the poem are balanced, however, by the subtle and complex mood evoked by the final lines. Far from lapsing into a naive political chiliasm, the poem's ending confirms quietly the reality of guidance, while at the same time it suggests that redemption - political or religious - is neither certain nor inevitable. The poem's final, sombre image of the sighing-widow pines, recalling those who died in the battle, serves as a chastening reminder of the uncertainty of redemption, and reinforces the muted quality of the optimism with which the poem ends:

> "Ja, I've been to Rorke's Drift,
> and in a way return there often, to stand
> beneath the sighing-widow pines, and affirm
> that guidance exists, and, it may be, redemption".

An even more sceptical attitude informs Douglas Reid Skinner's examination of the past. This examination takes the form of an austere and bitter scrutiny of two leading figures in the Boer War, and his castigation of them serves, in a manner similar to that of Cullinan and Mann, as a warning and a counsel to his contemporaries. Firstly, in "Milner" (The House in Pella District, 1985), Skinner recounts how the arch imperialist of the title provoked the Boers into war in order all the more effectively to subjugate them:

> "to pierce
> the country's heart with an empire's dreams".

Milner's personal demise, however, is not so much the working out of justice as it is the result of the general, implacable hostility of Africa, whose

> "hard ironies always wait
> for those who seek to impose their will;
> in the end they go but the place remains
> what it has always been. A difficult dream."

All that is left of his efforts are some yellowing papers and an old hotel bearing his name where men drink and speculate on the fundamental alternatives of

> "freedom and tyranny, love and hate".

The ability to choose between such alternatives may still be at least potentially available to men today, but in a poem like "Geometries" (The House in Pella District, 1985), Skinner leaves little doubt as to which options men continue to prefer. In this poem, Skinner describes the ruthless strategies employed by the autocratic, unyielding Kitchener to end the war begun by Milner. The poet's disapprobation of Kitchener's method of finishing "the country, the people, the whole thing", is clear:

> "The war was won, but at what cost when
> so much hatred and bitterness persists".

Ultimately, indeed, nothing has been solved at all, since

> "the killing continues in a country divided
> by strange geometries".

The clear moral lesson to be derived from this astringent examination of the past, therefore, is that

no real or lasting peace can be achieved through violence. Skinner remains pessimistic, however, that his message will be heeded, and the poem ends with the numbing thought that no one knows "how long the killing will go on".

A similar scepticism permeates Christopher Hope's long poem, Englishmen (1985). The poem is made up of fourteen fragmentary, discontinuous sections, in the course of which Hope offers a sardonic and darkly comical potted history of the involvement of the English in South Africa. The incohesive structure of the poem, moreover, reflects the imprecise and incoherent identity of the contemporary WESSA group, an identity which the poem seeks to clarify through an examination of the group's past. The poem "head(s) out into history", therefore, in order to "put some meat on these old bones" of the WESSA past, to trace "the imperial anatomy" (section I). The reconstructed body which emerges, however, is far from impressive, as the English are revealed to be a corrupt, vicious and mercenary people. The poem's condemnation begins with the colonialist cupidity of Queen Victoria - "a queen who has eaten too rich" (section VI). It extends to the military commander, Sir Harry Smith, who brings to his campaign of ruthless and rampant expansionism a chillingly callous detachment:

> "First blood is tell-tale to bluff Harry.
> Placing the enemy by the direction of his dead,
> he commends the sharpshooting Boers
> even as he brings up his big guns
> and blasts the rebels to Winburg.
> Fair-handed
> Harry is shooting a prisoner here,
> a deserter there. Bone like nutmeg on the wall,
> his slugs lift half their heads away" (section VI).

And it includes the bumbling minor bureaucrats, Hogge and Owen, sent to represent the British at the Sand River Convention with Boer leader Andries Pretorius. These two absurd officials, whose ineffectual progress the poem loosely follows, may be figures of fun, but they participate in the fundamental duplicity of the empire which they serve:

> "the Dutch may fight the Kaffirs for (the land):
> Why should we worry? Whoever wins will end up
> Englishmen" (section VI). (my brackets)

The fruits of this reckless and arrogant imperial brutality and dishonesty are the strife-torn chaos of modern South Africa in general, and the identity crisis of contemporary WESSAs in particular. These WESSAs are represented in the poem by Mrs Oribi, an eccentric, virilescent huntress, and Mr Silvero, a melancholic and diffident café owner. They may initially appear to be unlikely candidates to represent the WESSA group, and yet in a strange way they perfectly embody the WESSAs' sense of having been marginalised and alienated by the process of South African history, of having become people with no clear identity whatsoever. Mrs Oribi, for example, longs wistfully to be able to feel as much part of the land as the gorge or the animal which share her name, while Mr Silvero, lacking a fixed, distinct personality, remains as insignificant as small change at the café and as shadowy as his namesake in T.S. Eliot's "Portrait of a Lady".[59] Hope's poem charts their attempt to discover a meaningful identity for themselves in the present by exploring the history of the English. At the outset of the poem they set out desperately

"to find all we left behind,
travelling the road we did not take,
on the bus we did not miss
backwards
into times we must have read about ..." (section I),

but they soon learn that their task is not an easy one:

"from rib to rib we map the skeleton
but no one knows, or those who know
won't say
where this poor body's flesh has gone" (section I).

As the poem progresses, however, this "journeying into their own interiors" (section I) does provide them with some insights into their condition; in particular, they are resolved not to emulate the power-mad imperialism of their predecessors:

"The place of power is not its own
but the places it makes others fill;
its instruments are tetherings, sniffings out
of witches,
expeditions of the screwed-up will" (section XI).

Ultimately, though, there is no guarantee that others will share this resolve, just as there is no guarantee that the WESSA group will solve its identity crisis, and so the poem ends, at least as far as Mrs Oribi and Mr Silvero are concerned, with the prospect of a bleak future:

"A long trek into winter" (section XIV).

Although written in a very different style, Alan James's equally original long poem, "At a Rail Halt" (At a Rail Halt, 1981), like Hope's Englishmen, attempts to clarify the identity of WESSAs in the present by examining their history within the wider

context of South Africa's past in general. This poem, a "study of the unwept inheritance" of South Africa, is a meditation on South African history, occasioned by a brief stop at a siding in the remote north-eastern Transvaal. The speaker, a WESSA from the "green cities", awed by these "wild lands, / the lost country", is led to consider the contribution of all people in the past to the development of South Africa. Alternating with the central narrative consciousness of the poem, are a variety of extracts from historical texts and snatches of dialogue, which reflect the struggles and hardships of this great heterogeneous body of people: Dutch trekkers, English travellers and adventurers, African pastoralists, the "coloured man", Afrikaans farmers, British missionaries. The poem is, thus, in a sense, "An aerial photograph" which attempts to provide a sense of orientation and direction to WESSAs, and South Africans generally. As the poem tries to demonstrate, if men are "honest" and "brave", and do not simply accept "what truths seem easiest", but acknowledge the contribution of all to the formation of the country, then there is a chance that they will discover "structures of obscure affinities". It is, however, no more than a chance, and the poem, like those of Cullinan and Mann, dares not conclude on a note of anything more than the most cautious optimism:

> "Stranger things have come to
> pass in the world than the
> discovery of diamonds
> in South Africa".

Through a critical examination of the futile destruction wrought by the English in the past, a number of poets have endeavoured to provide a clearer

sense of identity and direction for contemporary WESSAs. The underlying assumption common to most of this poetry is that the use of violence as a means to political ends ultimately proves to be a futile and counter-productive tactic, and that lasting solutions can be achieved only through a process of peaceful and rational negotiation. Such an assumption, based on a continuing faith, however tenuous, in the possibility of an evolutionary rather than a revolutionary solution to South Africa's problems, suggests that WESSAs may discover a positive identity in this regard. As outlined earlier, the WESSA group today remains relatively free of the inflexibility and extremism which has tended to characterise both Afrikaner and African nationalism, and so WESSAs may play an active and positive role in encouraging and facilitating this process of negotiation. Indeed, the poets themselves, by seeking to clarify these issues and by arguing for peaceful settlements, are, in a sense, fulfilling this role and acting as WESSA mediators, so that the poetry itself may be regarded as a dynamic part of the very processes it describes and promotes.

There are, however, a number of dangers and problems involved in occupying this middle position between opposing forces, and these will be explored in the following section of this chapter.

(iii)

The third main way in which South African English poets have responded to the identity crisis of WESSAs is by examining the position of WESSAs, both in the past and the present, as being "in the middle", between the opposing forces of Afrikaner and African nationalism.

Mike Kirkwood, in his paper, "The Colonizer: A Critique of the English South African Culture Theory" (mentioned earlier in this chapter), argues that such examinations of WESSAs which view them as occupying this middle position, stem from a desire to promote the ethnic exclusivity of the WESSA group. These examinations, according to Kirkwood, recall with fond nostalgia a time when the English South African could "cast as tall a shadow as any on the middle ground", and then seek to encourage the embattled WESSA of today "to stand up and be a man" again in some jingoistic, neocolonialist sense.[60] A careful reading of the examination conducted by contemporary South African English poets reveals that in their case this is not so. Instead, the poetry aims to highlight the potential problems and pitfalls involved in WESSAs maintaining this middle position.

Ideally, as already suggested, being situated between the opposing forces of Afrikaner and African nationalism means that WESSAs are uniquely placed to facilitate the processes of negotiation and to stimulate the changes needed to bring about a more equitable social order. On the other hand, maintaining a middle position may be used as a means of hiding a covert resistance to political change behind a mask of fake neutrality or apoliticality, or of simply withdrawing from the challenges facing this society into the sidelines of political indifference. The intention of the poetry is, firstly, to expose the underlying hypocrisy and cowardice of many WESSAs who have tried to claim for themselves an unengaged, aloof stance, and, secondly, to outline the dangers that result from their consequently peripheral social function and vague, incoherent identity.

William Branford's poem, "Colonial Experience: Four Fragments" (A Century of South African Poetry, ed. M. Chapman, 1981), expresses obliquely yet lucidly the timorous attitude and tenuous situation of many WESSAs. As its title suggests, the poem, which will be discussed in more detail in the third chapter of this study, is made up of four separate, discontinuous sections. Like Hope's Englishmen, the fragmentary structure of the poem reflects the incohesive identity of the WESSA group. The first "fragment", set in an indeterminate past, describes a literal colonial sunset as a rather ridiculously lachrymose, "civilised" speaker tries to reassure himself that the imminent "barbarian" takeover will not prove too traumatic. This situation finds its modern counterpart in the third "fragment" where a WESSA motorist is relieved to be, for the moment, "safely separate" from seven black workers travelling on the back of a lorry in whom he recognises the "Impassive faces of Dingana's spearmen". On the other side of the fence, the WESSA is confronted, in the second "fragment", by a defiant and intractable Afrikanerdom, to whom the old colonial motto, "Despereert Niet", remains valid and meaningful. Essentially, the WESSA finds himself, in the middle, desperately trying to hold himself free of any conflict, not realising that it is his own diffidence and cowardice that is liable to destroy him. The final "fragment" captures succinctly and sardonically the reality of many WESSAs' situations:

> "Humpty Dumpty sits on the fence
> Thinking of his impermanence
> Since he'll fall by his own volition,
> We'll leave him scheduled for demolition".

Branford's adaptation of the well-known nursery rhyme seems a particularly appropriate way of describing those WESSAs who try to maintain an uninvolved, artificially neutral position in the politically volatile South African situation, sitting not on the wall, as in the original, but on the political fence. The nursery rhyme form emphasises the naïvete and even absurdity of this endeavour, since to be indecisive in such a situation is almost a guarantee of one's own "impermanence". By likening these WESSAs to Humpty Dumpty, Branford stresses not only the precariousness of their position, but also their fragility in the face of the inevitable upheaval about to take place in this country. Their "fall" and "demolition" will occur, thus, as a direct result of their own voluntary actions, a fact underlined by the jingling rhyme link between "volition / demolition". The final implication of the poem is that, once fallen, like Humpty Dumpty, it will be impossible to put the WESSAs back together again.

A similar theme is expressed by Stephen Gray in "The Beast's History" (It's About Time, 1974), a poem which in the course of seven distinct sections offers a virulently satirical synopsis of South African history. The third of these sections wryly adapts the title of René de Villiers's book, Better Than They Knew,[61] which sought to celebrate the achievements of English South Africans. Gray's version, "Fatter than They Knew", focusses, instead, on the avarice, sanctimoniousness and bewildered alienation which he believes have characterised WESSAs since the 1820 Settlers:

> "In eighteen sweet and twenty
> where the sun would never stop
> they planted flags in the land of plenty
> and sold the Beastly crop

saved up souls in mission stations
counting merinos in their sleep
did their best to break the nations
nobody's knowing the troubles I heap

Still my skin is white and strange
my haloed neck is bloody red
I'm turning blue in winds of change
it isn't like Home Office said

old soldiers never die
they tell you how it should have been
clubbed to death with memory
going to London to tell the Queen."

Through a series of puns, quibbles and witty allusions, Gray presents a portrait of a people whose inability to move with the times and whose unwillingness to involve themselves in the processes of history has left them a ridiculously self-pitying, marginalised group. Playing on the colours of the British flag to which many of these WESSAs still look with nostalgia, Gray suggests in the third stanza that they remain rednecks and strangers in post-colonial South Africa, and that the "winds of change" have left them "blue", that is, both sad and coldly exposed, a people with no clear identity. As in ~~South African~~ society, these WESSAs are positioned in the poem between the Afrikaners (the section entitled, "The Horny Crew") and the blacks (the section entitled, "Night the Negro"). Like Branford's poem, Gray's suggests that it is the WESSAs' attempt to sit on the fence between these two opposing forces, and their unwillingness to involve themselves in seeking to remedy "our history of sorrow" that will lead to their eventual demise. As the title indicates, Gray views this country's history as a "beast", and the final section of the poem predicts grimly that it will probably be purged, or "tamed", only by the "apocalypse" of "South Africa's eclipse", a fate to

which politically indifferent and self-seeking WESSAs will have in no small measure contributed.

Chris Mann, in "A Prayer for My Work" (First Poems, 1977), also reveals an awareness of the WESSAs' sense of occupying a troubled middle position between black South Africans and Afrikaners.

"If I do not speak of suffering
it is because
those who know its darkness do so.

If I do not mourn the hungry
it is because
they have no appetite for tears.

And since I produce my mutter
in the same tongue
as those I wish to see give place,

I will grumble and mock, although
each time too late
I realise I waste my breath.

I can discomfort them as well
by loyalty,
until it disrespects the truth

which all of our ancestors share.
May Dingane
The Somersets, and Piet Retief,

and all of you who have found peace,
keep reminding
us your children of your unity;

embrace us in the permanence
of a friendship
we need not wait for death to find;

And may you all speak through my work,
lest silence be
the sweetest song I ever wrote."

In contrast with Branford and Gray, however, Mann seeks in this poem not so much to repudiate WESSAs for their

political uninvolvement, nor to warn them of the dangers attendant upon maintaining a hypocritically "neutral" political stance. Rather, he is characteristically determined to accentuate "the truth // which all of our ancestors share". The poem becomes in its final stanzas an invocation to these ancestors - black (Dinganes), English (the Somersets), Afrikaans (Piet Retief) - who are united in death, to effect the same unity among the living. What Mann's poem offers, is a glimpse of a future South Africa in which Afrikaner and African nationalism, as well as the WESSA group, have been united into a common South African national culture. It may be said that this is the goal for which all South Africans ought to be striving. It is, however, a goal which remains for the time being some way off. In the interim, as has been suggested throughout this chapter, WESSAs may find a meaningful role as mediators in the continuing process towards conciliation and unification. In fact, this is precisely the sort of role that Mann himself has been fulfilling through this poem, and the sort of function that he prays his work as a whole may perform in South Africa.

Christopher Hope's poem, Englishmen (1985), as discussed earlier, may be regarded as an attempt to discover a positive and meaningful identity for WESSAs, who find themselves marginalised and alienated in a South African society characterised by the continuing conflict between Afrikaner and African nationalisms. In a similar way to Chris Mann in "A Prayer for My Work", Hope suggests, in Englishmen that the ultimate goal of the attempt to resolve the WESSA crisis of identity is to create a united national culture in South Africa, and so in this poem Hope considers the

possibility of uncovering a fundamental unity between WESSAs and their African and Afrikaans counterparts. He does so, however, in a rather less confident and unequivocal manner than Mann in "A Prayer for My Work". In the course of Englishmen, Hope, like Gray, casts a jaundiced and satirical eye over South Africa's history, weighing up Bantu, Boer and Briton and finding each of them equally wanting in their bloodthirsty obsession with power. Thus, Andries Pretorius's merciless execution of Dingaan's sons (section VIII) is performed in the sort of spirit that still informs Afrikaner radical nationalism today, symbolised as it is by the Voortrekker Monument where every year

> "the Boers kneel at the altar of memory:
> dreaming
> of frying Englishmen basted with Zulu fat" (section XI).

Similarly, the ruthlessness of Dingaan's murder of Piet Retief -

> "Dingaan's warriors
> threaded Retief until the sharpened stake burst past
> his breastbone" (section IX) -

is likely to characterise the efforts of modern-day "warriors" in the approaching "Armageddon" (section XIV). And the machiavellian callousness of Sir Harry Smith, unfeelingly executing prisoners and deserters alike (section VI), finds its debased counterpart in Pratt's bungled assassination of Prime Minister Verwoerd:

> "the last
> known attempt by an Englishman
> at expropriating Boer property" (section XIII).

Ironically, however, Hope discovers some cause for optimism in all this bloodletting since it at least demonstrates common ground between the groups, right down to the essential fact of their mutual vulnerability:

> "Folks kill easiest
> when they're laying ghosts
> Dingaan, Prevorius, Sir Harry Smith, the same ..."
> (section IX).

This mutual vulnerability is suggested at a basic semantic level, in fact, through the ambiguity of the phrase, "Folks kill easiest", which can be read either as "Folks find it easiest to kill others" or as "Folks are easiest to kill": the linguistic equivocation underlines the elementary and undeniable link between the three groups. Indeed, the poem builds up to a graphic vision of the mortality which, at the most fundamental level, is proof of shared humanity:

> "These
> graves here
> unmarked for Christian slaves and coloured servants.
> Across the way you see headstones of the citizenry,
> broad as culverts, tall as outhouses.
> They keep their distances even underground
> but mix in the bone, as the mole knows,
> crossing the line
> and is pitied for his blindness"
> (section XII).

Englishmen suggests, thus, that WESSAs do have a meaningful place in South African society, and that all may yet turn out well for the country. Like most of the poets examined in this chapter, Hope has attempted to outline some of the various factors which have contributed to the WESSA identity crisis, and to suggest some of the means by which that crisis may be

alleviated. Like many other poets also, however, Hope is realistic enough and practical enough to understand that there is no guarantee that WESSAs generally will be able to resolve the problems facing them. Similarly, he is realistic enough to understand that there is no guarantee that the problems of South Africa as a whole will be resolved, and so the final vision of Englishmen remains, appropriately, irreducibly uncertain and inconclusive:

> "Look, there is pink in the sky.
> Dawn or Armageddon?" (section XIII).

4.

Over the past twenty years or so, a significant number of South African English poets have responded, in various ways, to the crisis of identity experienced by white English-speaking South Africans, as a group, during this period. This chapter has attempted to examine the various forms which this response has taken in order to gain an understanding of the crisis, as well as an idea of at least some of the means, suggested by the poetry, of how it may be resolved.

Briefly, the broad conclusions of this examination would be that WESSAs, generally, need to acknowledge the extent of their involvement in the injustices and exploitativeness of the apartheid system of government, as well as their own continuing racial prejudice and xenophobia. More positively, in seeking to bring about changes that will lead to a more open and less repressive social order in this country, WESSAs may find for themselves a valuable role as mediators between the opposing forces of Afrikaner and African

nationalism, and so help to encourage and facilitate the processes of peaceful negotiation and conciliation. As such, WESSAs may leave behind the political diffidence and ineffectiveness which has tended to characterise the group in recent years, and begin to work actively and meaningfully towards the creation of a more equitable and free society and a unified national culture.

As the poetry has shown, the task facing WESSAs at the present moment is to develop a clear, unambiguous identity - in terms of its attitudes, values and orientation - that will enable them to work decisively and purposefully in bringing about positive changes in South Africa. At the same time, however, such an identity needs to be kept free of the sort of inflexibility, extremism and exclusivity which has tended to characterise both Afrikaner and African nationalism, and which has served to make South Africa the violently divisive and polarised society it is today in 1989. Similarly, while WESSAs ought to strive towards national unity and conciliation, they need, for the time being at least, to maintain a certain independence of identity in order to play an effective and viable role as mediators between the conflicting groups in this country. To allow their autonomous identity as a distinct group to be subsumed into either of these other opposing groups would entail forfeiting the very opportunity for critical objectivity and authentic political mediation which they are currently in a position to be able to supply. And, indeed, it is precisely this kind of alternative tradition which is clearly becoming increasingly important, particularly in view of the destructiveness and apparently deadlocked futility of the continuing struggle between African and Afrikaner nationalisms.

The task facing WESSAs is obviously not an easy one; it remains, nevertheless, one of great importance. Both the difficulties and the significance of this task have been recently adumbrated by Guy Butler. Having begun this chapter by noting Butler's explication of the WESSA identity crisis, it is perhaps appropriate to end with his view of the way many WESSAs, or "ESSAs", as he calls them, are currently responding to the crisis:

> "The ESSAs' refusal to be categorised, to withdraw into their own little laager, to clamour for certain rights, may mean a certain anonymity, a psychic uncertainty, even a hunger for the assurances that come from a closer sense of belonging; but this lack of doctrine and definition makes the ESSA group hospitable to those not ESSA by birth.
>
> Small as we are (not more than two million - less than the city of Birmingham), we do provide the base for a respectable alternative tradition to racist politics.
>
> ESSAs ... have sustained a climate in which alternatives can be thought, creative discussions can take place, and minds meet outside the sanctified racial structures: an open market ... where a more rational political dispensation is, perhaps, struggling into being."[62]

CHAPTER 3

A DAMAGED SENSE OF PLACE

1.

Much South African English poetry over the past two decades or so may be understood as a vigorous and various response to the "crisis of identity" experienced by white English-speaking South Africans. In a society marked by a great deal of conflict, instability and uncertainty, the WESSA group's need for a clear, positive identity is fundamental, and so it is not surprising that the subject has engaged the attention of many poets. This identity crisis, however, constitutes but one of the contemporary dilemmas confronting the WESSA group. A related predicament, and one no less severe, involves what Christopher Hope has termed the WESSAs' "damaged sense of place".[1] What this means is that if WESSAs tend to be unsure of who they are, they are equally uncertain about where they belong. On the one hand, they are unable to affirm wholly and finally their Africanness, feeling essentially alienated from African nature and incapable, generally, of authentically assimilating indigenous culture and traditions. On the other hand, they find themselves becoming increasingly distanced and estranged from the European source of much of their cultural heritage. The result is that they have become a people without roots, without fixity, without a home.

The proposition that WESSAs suffer from a lack of belonging may appear superficially to be an established theme in South African English poetry, having been

diagnosed and described in some detail, inter alia, by Guy Butler and others of his generation.[2] In actuality, the dilemma has taken on a distinctively novel flavour in the 1970s and 1980s, becoming both intensified and expanded. Consequently, the poetic responses to the dilemma have differed significantly and crucially from those of earlier periods.

Essentially, this contemporary poetic response has followed two simultaneous yet differing courses. Firstly, in what may be regarded as the negative form of the response, a good deal of South African English poetry has sought not so much to resolve the dilemma, but has served rather to clarify its full extent and to explore the specifically contemporary aspects of the problem. In particular, such poetry demonstrates that, in contrast with former times, the predicament confronting the modern-day WESSA is no longer that he is forced to choose between the two alternative homes of Africa, the land of his birth, and Europe, the land of his origins. Rather, his problem is that he seems to belong neither in Africa nor in Europe, that he appears to have no home at all.

At the same time, a number of poets have offered a more positive response to the dilemma. Here the poets seek to find location for the WESSAs neither in the context of the cultural traditions of Europe, nor in the context of African nature, as had tended previously to be the case. Instead, in a way quite unprecedented in South African English poetry, they have begun to explore the possibility of finding a valid and unique sense of place for WESSAs in the cities of South Africa. It is especially in Johannesburg, Cape Town, Durban and Grahamstown, as opposed to the cities of

Europe or the African landscape, that contemporary WESSAs may, perhaps, be at last able to discover a true feeling of belonging in South Africa, to achieve rootedness and location, to find an authentic home.

2.

Before examining the contemporary poetic response to the dilemma of the WESSAs' damaged sense of place, it is necessary to provide a brief account of the background to the problem. English-speaking whites, it seems, have never felt truly at home in southern Africa, experiencing rather what Stephen Gray has called "the uneasy feeling of the white man's failure to belong to the land".[3] As Noel Garson observes in his historical survey of the English in South Africa, "English-speaking South Africans and the British Connection: 1820 - 1961", from the time of the earliest settlements, English-speakers have tended to consider themselves to be merely sojourners, interlopers, temporary colonists, or representatives of foreign powers, whose real home lay in Europe, or more particularly as a rule, in Britain.[4] These tensions, experienced by white English-speakers in South Africa, between their Eurocentric cultural orientation and the immediate demands of African natural and social realities, are reflected throughout South African English poetry from the 1820s to the 1940s, as Michael Chapman has shown.[5] To take some widely scattered though reasonably illustrative examples, such tensions are apparent in Thomas Pringle's attempts to attune his English romantic-idealistic temperament to indigenous physical and social conditions; in the cultural and stylistic multiplicity of Albert Brodrick's verse; in Francis Carey Slater's preoccupation with cultural

dislocation; in William Plomer's grave disenchantment with Africa;[6] and in Roy Campbell's iconoclastic intolerance for the parochial insularity of local society. And yet, despite these tensions, the issue during this period seems to have been fairly uncomplicated, involving a more or less straightforward choice between giving one's allegiance either to Europe or to Africa, between leaving for the "mother country" (as Pringle, Plomer and Campbell, for various reasons, chose to do) or staying on in the "colony" (as was the case, for the most part, with Brodrick and Slater). Certainly there appears to be little evidence of a widespread feeling of complete homelessness among English-speakers; at most there is a certain indecision over where their true roots lay, or where they finally owed their loyalties.

A marked alteration in sentiment occurs, however, during the period of the second World War and the years immediately following it in which the National Party assumed power in South Africa. It is a development which has been well documented[7] and therefore requires only a compressed account. The war took many WESSAs to Europe, to the continent, supposedly, of their origins, where they quickly discovered, however, just how foreign that world really was to them. On their return to South Africa, though, they soon found the country controlled by a government whose policies seemed for the most part in utter opposition to those humanitarian principles and ideals for which they had fought. Their experience, therefore, was of the nature of a double exile. Guy Butler makes a related point in his introduction to A Book of South African Verse:

> "The clash of cultures forces us to ask questions about culture itself, and makes us rootless. A

> South African aware of his European origins, and impatient with much that seems anachronistic in his environment, may disavow the country of his birth and return to the country of his traditions. Once there, however, he may find himself to be an anachronism, and that the England he had sought exists only, say, in Hardy's novels. This may force him to a second disavowal. He ends up outside the consolation of any tradition, with an increased self-knowledge, but stultified by doubts."[8]

Butler's grievances are clearly more serious than those of the pre-war period, but the problem to which they refer, in comparison with the dilemma confronting the contemporary WESSA, is not of a profoundly disruptive nature. The consequences of this "clash of cultures", for example, amount to little more than a baulking of creativity, a disillusionment, a cynicism, all of which are at least partly assuaged by the acquisition of heightened self-awareness. The tone of the passage, moreover, is one merely of frustration and annoyance, and as such remains faithful to the poem Butler has been paraphrasing, John Peters's "Estrangement" (A Book of South African Verse, ed. G. Butler, 1959):

> "... anachronism and disavowal
> Blurred in the mind and set us to explore
> Our vision turning curious and dual ...
> Shutting us out in the vacancy of truth
> And the present tense
> Where bare feet groped in a donga-bed of drought
> Marred with the forking thorns of our self-pities
> The litter and trash of doubt."

Similarly, Butler's comment that "South African English poets never talk about being rooted in African soil"[9]

seems more an expression of aesthetic displeasure than of deep anxiety, while Anthony Delius's satirical observations in The Last Division (1959) are of the character of moral censure rather than evidence of serious cultural unease:

> "Their most accomplished children flee the Union,
> Search other countries for their cause and soul,
> And to the pioneer premise of their fathers
> Add on no better moral, finer story,
> Leave our crude glaring sun and savage weathers
> To bask, reflect in other people's glory." [10]

Delius's remarks highlight the fact, moreover, that at this time, no matter how discontented they may have felt, a number of viable options remained available to WESSAs. They could still regard themselves as respected members of an international community of English-speakers, and, more particularly, as an accepted part of the British Commonwealth. Consequently, the opportunity for emigration was both politically and culturally relatively unproblematic, an idea attested to, for example, by the large number of poets who embraced this course of action themselves, including Currey, L[illegible]ner, Madge, Peter, Prince and Wright. Moreover, although much was made at the time of "the English schizophrenia",[11] that is, the sense of being torn between two countries, this is in itself an indication that WESSAs had a choice of at least two alternative homes, rather than none at all. Those, like Butler, Cope and Paton, who remained in South Africa, could continue to feel confident that WESSAs had an important role to play in the country's unfolding social process, especially in terms of synthesising their European and African experiences and influences into a unique amalgamation which would be of benefit to the society as a whole.

These modes of thought are reflected throughout the poetry of the 'war generation', but they are nowhere more forcibly demonstrated than in the work of Guy Butler, the leading poet of the era. The theme of the poet's unsettling division "between two worlds"[12] emerges repeatedly in poems such as "Karoo Town, 1939", "Stranger to Europe", "Myths" and "Tourist Insight into Things", but receives perhaps its most comprehensive and definitive articulation in "Home Thoughts" (all poems in Selected Poems, 1975; the poems date from the period of World War II onwards). The WESSA speaker, in Europe, concedes that

> "Long years drifting through African dark
> Bred dreams that I might find, once here,
> A burning beacon, a gyro-setting mark".

Convinced, thus, that "man's task is to get such dark things clear", he attempts to emancipate himself from the tramontane, instinctual energies associated with Dionysian Africa, and to align himself with the civilised, intellectual forces of Apollonian Europe. He is soon compelled to acknowledge, however, that he cannot completely abandon Africa for Europe, Dionysus for Apollo:

> "I have not found myself on Europe's maps,
> A world of things, deep things I know endure
> But not the context for my one perhaps.
> I must go back with my five simple slaves
> To soil still savage, in a sense still pure:
> My loveless, shallow land of artless shapes
> Where no ghosts glamorize the recent graves
> And every thing in Space and Time just is".

Furthermore, instead of trying "To civilize my semi-barbarous land", he has come to understand that Apollo and Dionysus are equipollent - "neither could / Conquer the force in which the other stood" - and that

they can and indeed should be resolved into complementary wholeness:

> "Oh let the lightning of your quickening eye
> And his abounding darkness meet and mate,
> Cleave, crack the clouds! From his brimming drum
> Spill crystal waves of words, articulate!"

Butler's envisaged programme, therefore, is to overcome the dichotomy between Africa and Europe by uniting them into a new cultural combination which will not only prove creatively and artistically productive, but which will also afford the schizophrenic WESSA a sense of location and security. As Michael Chapman puts it, Butler's enduring interest lies

> "in the attempt by white English-speaking South Africans to find for themselves a home in this country, while remaining sensitively aware of their European traditions."[13]

In general, thus, the attitude of Butler and his coevals may be taken as one of relative optimism and confidence in the possibility of a satisfactory solution to the problem of the WESSAs' impaired sense of place, however intractable the problem may have seemed. Since the 1960s, however, the difficulty has not only intensified markedly, but has also acquired other quite new dimensions. These would include, from the European perspective, South Africa's withdrawal from the Commonwealth, its increasing isolation from the international community, and its pariah status in world opinion, so that WESSAs have felt themselves becoming alarmingly cut off from the source of their traditions and from their cultural associates.[14] From the African point of view, the rapid polarisation and

radicalisation of the forces of Afrikaner and African nationalism has rendered the WESSAs ever more marginalised in the ongoing social processes of the country and has left them in a precarious position within South African society.[15] The fundamental difference, therefore, is that the modern-day WESSA, rather than feeling divided between two separate homes, has begun to believe that he has no home at all.

Noel Garson, for example, asserts that before South Africa's withdrawal from the Commonwealth, the WESSA group was characterised by "a strongly British outlook" and a keen awareness of its connection to Britain, but that in the years since the establishment of the Republic WESSAs have become increasingly uncertain of where they belong or what they belong to. On the one hand, their connection to Britain has diminished to little more than "a historical oddity and a mere symbol of cultural and economic contact"; on the other hand, their identification with the Afrikaner-dominated Republic remains unenthusiastic and their support for the South African "state" is at best qualified.[16] Similarly, T.R.H. Davenport, in his history of South Africa, records that many WESSAs "resented the severing of the umbilical cord which tied them to Britain", particularly because it meant that they were forced to choose betwsen the equally insufficient alternatives of either British or South African citizenship alone.[17]

These historical accounts are supported by the empirical sociological evidence presented by Lawrence Schlemmer in his detailed study of contemporary WESSAs, "English-speaking South Africans Today: Identity and Integration into the Broader National Community".[18]

For example, Schlemmer reveals that when asked to select descriptions of themselves as a group, WESSA respondents betrayed a high degree of uncertainty and confusion, with the response percentages spread widely among the various alternatives: "English-speaking South Africans" (40%), "South African" (28%), "White South African" (12%), "British / European" (13%), together with some other minor categories.[19] What such data shows is that while most WESSAs are no longer able to regard themselves as British in the way that previous generations could, they also seem unwilling to give an unqualified formal acknowledgement of affiliation to the South African "state". In another area of the study, respondents were asked to select the alternative which best described their own culture and outlook. Again, a broad spread of responses occurred: "Specifically South African" (46%), "Of the English-speaking world in general" (20%), "Of the modern Western world" (19%), "Specifically British" (6%), "European" (6%), with some other minor categories.[20] In sharp contrast with Afrikaners and black South Africans, who virtually unanimously regard their own cultures as specifically South African, the WESSA group reveals a great deal of disagreement and unease over its cultural orientation and roots. Perhaps most significantly, Schlemmer's survey indicates that only about 38% of the WESSA sample would be committed to remaining in South Africa if the economic or political situation in the country worsened,[21] and only 24% of WESSA respondents possess strong emotional ties with South Africa.[22]

It seems evident that in the modern period the WESSA group as a whole, has found it most difficult to maintain an intact, genuine sense of place. Becoming

increasingly distanced from the British or European source of its cultural origins, the group generally remains unwilling or unable to affirm its commitment, socially or psychologically, to the country of its present residence. As Christopher Hope colourfully puts it, the WESSA has become

> "displaced - flotsam left high and dry after the tide. If he belongs to this country nowadays it is in the same way as the marooned sailor belongs to his island".[23]

The WESSAs' "damaged sense of place", thus, is no longer a matter merely of frustration and inconvenience; it has become a source of psychological disorientation and cultural anxiety. There is not so much as post-colonial nostalgia for the mother country, as there is the realisation that one has no mother country at all. There is not so much the urge to confirm roots in the country of one's birth, as there is the shock of discovering that one has become almost totally deracinated. There is not so much the option of emigrating freely and easily to another country of one's choice, as there is the sense that one is escaping desperately to an unfamiliar place where one will be neither welcome nor comfortable. And there is now not so much the question of where to place one's loyalties, as there is the question of whether the loyalties of WESSAs, as an identifiable ethnic group, are of any significance whatsoever in the modern South African context.

3.

The damaged sense of place experienced by contemporary WESSAs represents a far more serious problem than any like difficulty which had confronted previous generations of English-speakers in South Africa. Ironically, however, as WESSAs' sense of place becomes increasingly impaired, so their need for location and placement becomes ever more urgent. Stephen Gray makes the point with specific reference to South African writers, but the idea has a much broader social relevance and may be applied to modern WESSAs generally:

> "'a sense of place', today, has gone far beyond the tourist view of things, and far beyond the polemical emotionalism of founding texts. The 'sense of place' is no longer a geographical condition, or a classificatory principle. It is located at the heart of a writer's society, his or her class, and culture, and his or her very being ...."[24]

Given this need for a clear sense of place, it is not surprising that South African English poets have responded earnestly to the dilemma facing the WESSA group.

As mentioned earlier, this poetic response has followed two different courses, the first concerned with clarifying the full nature and extent of the problem in the contemporary context, the second suggesting a possible solution to this problem from a quite novel direction. These two forms of response are not mutually exclusive, and have developed more or less concurrently in contemporary South African English

poetry generally, and even within the work of individual poets. For the purposes of this study, however, they may be dealt with separately.

In the first instance, in what may be considered as the negative form of the response, the primary focus of the poetry is on exploring and demonstrating the particular character and the full dimensions of the WESSAs' damaged sense of place as it occurs within the context of present-day South Africa. It may be divided into three distinct areas:

(i) the ways in which the fears and uncertainties of WESSAs, finding themselves alienated from both Africa and Europe, are reflected directly in the work of a number of poets;

(ii) an exploration of the difficulties experienced by contemporary WESSAs in attempting to abandon Africa for Europe;

(iii) an exploration of the difficulties experienced by contemporary WESSAs in attempting to abandon Europe for Africa.

Each of these areas will be treated in turn.

(i)

As WESSAs in the 1970s and 1980s have found themselves estranged both from Africa and from Europe, so this sense of homelessness and lack of location has resulted in a distinctively contemporary alarm and uncertainty, feelings which have been explored by several recent South African English poets. Frequently, these

feelings are not simply described by the poets in an objective and impersonal way, but are registered in the poetry at a basic linguistic level. In other words, the poets here speak not only to and about the WESSA group, but also speak for the group. Although this might be said of much of the poetry under discussion in this study, it seems particularly evident in this case, where the acute and pervasive sense of rootlessness of WESSAs has elicited a strongly personal and subjective response from many poets.

As this chapter will show, these typically WESSA feelings of alarm and uncertainty manifest themselves in the poetry's obsessive use of equivocation, the continual questioning, the stark, violent imagery, the hesitant rhythms. As such, this poetry is of a quite different order from earlier verse dealing with the WESSAs' problematic sense of place characterised as it tended to be by calm, measured and generally assured tones. A fairly representative example of such earlier poetry, as Michael Chapman has noted, is R.N. Currey's "Durban Revisited" (A Book of South African Verse, ed. G. Butler, 1959; the poem dates from 1948), where its "simple openness", its "sense of sanity", and its "reasonable voice" suggest a state of mind far less troubled than that typifying recent poetry:[25]

> "After these weeks at sea, my native land:
> I stand and stare at the remembered Bluff;
> Enough of that long green skyline for a boy,
> The joy of those high breakers, their huge roar
> Upon the shore, the lift-in of the tide.
>
> A forefather in eighteen forty-eight
> In state landed his family here; his blood
> Has flowed up almost every fertile valley;
> But many of his sons, through circumstance,
> Lost his intense and civilised tolerance.

By chance we ride the anchor in the Bay
A day or two, and may not go ashore;
Once more between me and this lovely land
There stands a barrier; it used to be
My childhood, now its my maturity."

Currey's poem is a straightforward and collected discussion of the "barrier" which he finds continues to separate him from his "native land" on the occasion of a visit from his alternative, adopted home of England. Its relatively relaxed and unruffled atmosphere stands in sharp contrast with the anxious and apprehensive mood which permeates the work of contemporary poets faced with the prospect of having no home at all. Anticipating this radical alteration in mood,[26] Patrick Cullinan's "Exiles" (The Horizon Forty Miles Away, 1973) expresses the feelings of a people who discover that they are exiled not simply from their "native" country, but from all possible homes:

"We shall try not to remember
The politics, the quarter truths
That made a total truth to us.
We shall try to remember our own
Temptation, when we had the power
And used it; when we had
It like a handkerchief
In the corner of our sleeves.
And if there was something absurd
About tennis on the equator,
It was the absurdity we drowned
With long drinks in the evening.

It is true they have a personality
But not, it seems, the one we saw.
Can any race have two
Personalities? There is something
Mad about facts when they diverge.
We remember what we saw. We knew them.
We knew them well enough to want their good.

And now we talk too much about it
The dialects bore our countrymen.
Words that once meant boy or farm
Irritate our flesh and blood.

We are easily forgotten
By them. Could they have done better?
For there was one thing we ourselves
Could not understand.
We were native from the start.
With brown bush and the blue
Mountains, from the first moment
With wood smoke at dawn
That no one can describe, the birds,
The sticky heat we grew to love.
We thought we were exiles,
We are certainly exiles now.

The worst lie was our hope:
Perpetual teatime and the colour green.
Fantasies always suffice
But we returned to the lie,
The dirty towns, the insensitive people,
Endless teatime and the colour green.
But we can forgive this remembering
One promise: driving through
Long grass at night, the scratch
Of the grass on the truck,
And in our headlights a continent,
An Africa within. An Africa beyond."

The poem posits two alternative physical and cultural homes: the one is that of the Africa which the speaker and his kind have recently felt compelled to leave; the other is that of Britain from which they have derived their cultural traditions and to which they seem to have returned. The dilemma with which they are confronted is that they are unable finally to find an authentic and satisfactory home in either place. In Africa, apart from the political difficulties suggested in the opening stanza, they have been unable to sustain their British traditions and activities, forced to admit that the absurdity of the attempt cannot indefinitely be ignored or concealed. Yet, having returned "home", they find that they do not belong

there either, haunted by memories of the African land and people which they are unable to share with their putative "countrymen". Gradually they struggle towards some sort of éclaircissement:

> "... there was one thing we ourselves
> Could not understand.
> We were native from the start ...
> We thought we were exiles,
> We are certainly exiles now."

Out of Africa, now, they think back,

> "remembering
> One promise ...
> An Africa within. An Africa beyond."

It is wrong to suppose that the poem concludes with the speaker asserting once and for all his African identity. On the contrary, the final vision of the poem remains irreducibly equivocal, comprising little more than a vague and rather improbable "promise". The enduring impression is not so much that WESSAs and those like them really do after all belong somehow in Africa, but rather that they do not belong anywhere. The fact of their utter homelessness is underscored by the poem's continual employment of deliberately imprecise terms such as "countrymen", "flesh and blood", "native", and perhaps especially "exiles" itself with its implication that those like WESSAs are destined to remain in a perpetual state of exile. Even the apparently hopeful last line of the poem is undermined by an ironic, final ambiguity: at the moment when the speaker feels able to acknowledge the Africa "within" him as well as that which once lay before him, he is forced also to concede that that Africa now lies "beyond" his reach.

Cullinan's poem, through its use of an involved first-person speaker, its series of unanswered questions, its bitter self-directed ironies, and especially through its slippery, equivocal language, conveys directly the feelings of perplexity and anxiety of a people who have found themselves suddenly and unexpectedly exiled from all possible homes. A similar poem - in terms both of mood and technique - is Christopher Hope's "The Flight of the White South Africans" (Cape Drives, 1974), one of the most seminal expressions of the problem of the WESSAs' damaged sense of place. This problem forms a central theme in Hope's poetry, as he made clear in his introduction to his first collection:

> "my work is an attempt to gauge the stress under which the English-speaking White South African exists. For all his claim to belong to Africa, he is not part of it .... He is under pressure. So much so that he has long since ceased to be part of the world. Rather he sees the world as going on alongside him. He is defensive, fearing displacement, not realising that he is already displaced."[27]

"The Flight of the White South Africans" focusses precisely on this displacement which contemporary WESSAs have suffered. The poem takes for its epigraph the vaticination of the Xhosa prophetess Nongquase in 1856 that all Europeans would be driven into the sea, a prophecy which Hope suggests is today coming true as scores of WESSAs take "flight" from South Africa.

I

"Kinshasa, we feel, is not the place to reach
At noon and leave the plane to endure inspection
By a hostile ground-hostess, observing the bleach
On her face, her cap tacked with leopard skin,
Faked, and far too tired for the erection
A good bristle requires. We make no fuss,
However, knowing why she snarls at us;
But proffer our transit cards, and march in

To stand at the urinal complaining aloud
Of filth, flies and spit, amazed that this
Is it, an Africa the white man bowed
Before, growling outside the walls of the Gents:
We fumble uncomfortably, unable to piss
Till a soldier, bursting from a booth, clodhops
Past, still buckling up and the talking stops.
Steady yellow stains white marble in silence.

II

Perhaps, Nongquase, you have your revenge. Tell me
Why, when surf rides like skirts up a thigh, we bare
Ourselves, blind behind black glass, bellies
Up, navels gaping at the sun? We lie
Near ice-cream boys, purveyors of canvas chairs:
While they and the fishermen who stand
Off-shore, shooting seine, busily cram
Their granaries: we gasp, straining to fly:

While in the upstairs lounge, our waiting wives
Caress expensive ivory souvenirs;
By rights, white hunters' spoil; and home-made knives.
We flounder about, flying fish that fail,
Staring with the glazed eyes of seers
At our plane, hauled from the sky, lying like dead
Silver on the tarmac, feeling hooks bed
Deep in our mouths, sand heavy in our scales.

III

Our sojourn: what might dear Milne have made of it
Or Crompton, Farnol, even the later James,
Who promised homely endings, magi who lit
The lamp we wished to read by, gave us The Queen,
A Nanny we almost kissed, our English names?
We blink and are blinded by the Congo sun
Overhead, as flagrant as a raped nun.
Such light embarrasses too late. We've seen

So little in the little time spent coming
To choke on this beach of unbreathable air
Beyond the guns' safety, the good plumbing;
Prey of gulls and gaffs. We go to the wall
But Mowgli, Biggles and Alice are not there:
Nongquase, heaven unhoods its bloodshot eye
Above a displaced people; our demise
Is near, and we'll be gutted where we fall."

The setting of the poem at Kinshasha airport - where the escaping WESSAs have disembarked from their aeroplane which has stopped over for refuelling - is most appropriate, for it symbolises physically the WESSAs' alienated middle position between South Africa, where they found it impossible to survive, and their destination in Britain, which they will most likely find to be equally inhospitable. The first section of the poem describes graphically the "Africa the white man bowed / Before", characterised as it is by squalor, searing heat, ubiquitous soldiers and hostile "natives", represented in this case by a ground-hostess whose antipathy towards South Africans further depletes the resources of the already fatigued and defeated men. The WESSAs have thus been driven from Africa not by the might of indigenous armies, but rather by their inability to attune their Europcentric temperaments to the harsh physical and social conditions of Africa. The second section recalls, like Cullinan's "Exiles", the absurdity and desipience of WESSAs' lifestyles in Africa. Trying to darken their skins by suntanning (as the ground-hostess tries to lighten hers with bleach), they inevitably end up seeming to "flounder about, flying fish that fail", desperately "straining to fly". The recurrent punning on the word "fly" reinforces the WESSAs' urgent desire for escape, while the pathetic and probably futile nature of their attempt is suggested through the derisory alliteration of the weak, soft "f" sound. Their wives, in the airport lounge, meanwhile reaffirm their foreign and exploitative character as they caress covetously the expensive souvenirs, "By rights, white hunters' spoil", even as their own vulnerability is underlined by the indigenous "home-made knives". The section ends grimly with the possibility of successful "flight" subverted by the stark image of WESSAs as dying fish,

"feeling hooks bed
Deep in our mouths, sand heavy in our scales".

The final section considers the WESSAs' "sojourn" generally, and emphasises their alienation by adverting to formerly popular British writers such as A.A. Milne, Richmal Crompton, Geoffrey Farnol and the early Henry James, whose "homely endings" now seem irrelevant and inapplicable to a fleeing people who have no home. The section is filled with images of eyes and sight to represent understanding and the ability to find one's way in the future. Significantly, the bewildered WESSAs have little insight into their own condition: having "seen / So little" in their time in Africa, they now feel totally "blinded" by the African sun. Even more alarmingly, there seems to be little likelihood of their prospering in Europe, as they begin to see that their superficial British cultural heritage and upbringing - represented by "Mowgli, Biggles and Alice" - will prove of little avail in the forbiddingly unfamiliar conditions in contemporary England. They are forced to confront the idea that they belong neither in Africa nor in Europe, that they have become estranged both from the country of their birth and from the country of their traditions. The poem ends with the ominous suggestion that their flight will lead not to sanctuary, but rather, as Nongquase prophesied, to extirpation:

"Nongquase, heaven unhoods its bloodshot eye
Above a displaced people; our demise
Is near, and we'll be gutted when we fall".

Quite clearly, Hope's poem defines a condition far more grave than anything imagined by writers of Butler's generation. The socio-cultural disruption, the psychic

uncertainty - communicated not only through the poem's imagery and narrative, but also at a fundamental linguistic level through the obsessive equivoques and quibbling - all contribute to what Geoffrey Haresnape has recognised as "a most disturbing vision".[28] The WESSAs' damaged sense of place is the central theme also of Hope's later poem, "Blisters" (In the Country of the Black Pig, 1981). The title and focal image of the poem indicate both the WESSAs' painful alienation from Africa as well as the minimalistic quality of their existence in that continent, while their estrangement from Europe is apparent in their tenuous relationship with their "cousins":

> "Who is to say from where the pressure will come
> or how mad we will be by then?
> When our cousins from Europe visit, this year
> or next, they will be pleased to see us. Pray!
> After each day's sun we will live on -
> a little water under a white skin."

Significantly, Robert Greig's poem, "Settlers' Story" (Talking Bull, 1975), bears affinities, in terms both of vision and imagery, with "Blisters". Greig sets his poem at some indeterminate date in the settler past in order to convey the essence of the WESSAs' imperilled position as a people who

> "sleep armed,
> distrust the timorous guard
> and dream of home".

It soon becomes apparent, however, that "home" no longer functions as a practicable option, since they are "Confined by the island" (a metaphor for South Africa) and must "reject / northern seasons that rhymed poems". If they no longer belong in Europe, however,

they are certainly not at home in the harshness of Africa: the violence of the imagery, as in Hope's poem, communicates an alienation far more intense than that experienced by a previous generation of WESSAs:

> "We hide from the vigilant sun
> That strips and explodes pale skin".

Ultimately, they find themselves barely managing to survive, lost in the sort of social and cultural limbo which Hope has outlined:

> "Groping,
> we prey and confirm isolation"

Mike Nicol, too, has made the acute alienation of the contemporary WESSA a central theme in his poetry. In "Livingstone" (Among the Souvenirs, 1978), he discovers in the figure of the celebrated explorer a highly apt symbol of the WESSA's schizoid nature, for while most of Livingstone's remains are buried in Westminster, his "worthy few" followers

> "left his heart
> And guts to find new life
> In Africa".

In the title poem of his collection, "Among the Souvenirs", however, Nicol suggests that the modern-day WESSA is not so much divided between two continents, as he is reduced to a state of utter homelessness. Travelling through the Karoo, the WESSA persona feels like a tourist in what is supposed to be his own country. Made to feel foreign and estranged "among the souvenirs" and "strange provinces" of a curio shop in "a country where all that moves turns curious", the

WESSA, it is implied, seems doomed to an existence as a cultural nomad, aimlessly and endlessly

> "travelling where
> dust never settles, disturbed by wind".

Much of Stephen Watson's work dramatises the tormenting sense of isolation experienced by the modern WESSA. Although Watson has sought to excoriate, and even dissociate himself from, the WESSA sub-culture,[29] his attempt, as Susan Gardner has pointed out,[30] is, in fact, symptomatic of almost universal disaffection among WESSAs. Indeed, a poem such as "Years" (Poems 1977-1982, 1982), in its rambling syntax, its incomplete repetitions, and its seeming inability quite to find any set structure, conveys accurately the WESSAs' rootlessness and lack of direction generally. Recognising the lack of a centre to his life, Watson comes to see that he is drifting

> "in an emptiness already
> there like an enemy,
> in the homes
> unhousing all memory ...
> The homes
> of my kind,
> the white suburbs
> like coastal resorts
> in their off-season air
> of colonial decay ..."

The aimlessness of his life, like that of Nicol's persona, is measured by

> "Years
> rootless as this wind
> amidst its footloose dust".

And as life goes on among "that barbarous and murderous Babel / of men" that is South Africa, so WESSAs

generally, and not just Watson alone, find themselves increasingly "powerless" and "rootless", accumulating "years / lived in the sun / as if under a stone", years, alarmingly, which seem destined to continue:

> "those are the years
> which are also these,
> now dead beyond memory,
> beyond meaning,
> dead in me forever,
> these years
> which are not ended".

Most recently, Alan James has focussed on the acute alienation of the contemporary WESSA, in "Landscape at Kwaaihoek Dunerock" (Producing the Landscape, 1987). Written in the year of the quincentenary of Bartholomew Diaz's rounding of the Cape, the poem describes a visit to the place where Diaz erected his famous cross, and records the poet's troubled response. James finds himself utterly alienated from both his European heritage and the immediacies of Africa, and does indeed seem, as Malvern van Wyk Smith asserts, the "most bemused of all commentators confronting the cryptic message" of Kwaaihoek.[31] The poem's conclusion, conveyed in a series of jarringly blunt statements, encapsulates the mood of alarm and uncertainty of contemporary WESSAs suffering from a badly damaged sense of place:

> "So then. Strangers here. At
> a place, aliens. What
> to make of that."

(ii)

The contemporary WESSAs' sense of dislocation and alienation, as reflected in much recent South African English poetry, is clearly of a far graver nature than anything experienced by WESSAs in the past. The problem, indeed, is even more acute than it may as yet have appeared in this study, since the traditional "solutions" to the problem - abandoning Africa for Europe, or Europe for Africa - no longer seem feasible in the contemporary context. A number of poets have attempted to demonstrate just how fraught with difficulty such options are today.

The most obvious and predictable mode of reaction to the feeling of not belonging in South Africa is to emigrate, to go into exile. This is, of course, an option which has been frequently exercised by WESSAs in the past. In fact, a considerable number of South African English poets have themselves emigrated over the years, including Campbell and Plomer in the 1920s, and later Currey, Delius, Lerner, Madge, Peter, Prince and Wright. Previously, however, the decision to leave South Africa could be taken freely and with relative facility.[32] In the 1970s and 1980s, however, emigration has for a variety of reasons become a far more complicated course of action. On the one hand, WESSAs' social and cultural ties with Britain and the rest of the English-speaking world have been considerably weakened, so that they find it increasingly difficult to adapt to life in other countries which are, in any event, antipathetic towards white South Africans. On the other hand, WESSAs are being placed under additional pressure from a number of quarters to leave South Africa. Apart from their own political

scruples[33] or, more frequently and more powerfully, their fears of an imminent political cataclysm, WESSAs have been urged to leave by sources ranging from the more intransigent elements of black nationalism, to Afrikaner right-wing extremism, and even including liberal commentators such as Pierre L. van den Berghe who has advocated white emigration as a possible solution to South Africa's political conflict.[34] The upshot, thus, is that instead of operating as a free and unprompted decision, departure from South Africa has come to seem an act of compulsion, of fear, of desperation.

This altered perception of the idea of exile is clearly in evidence in poems such as Patrick Cullinan's "Exiles" and Christopher Hope's "The Flight of the White South Africans". Cullinan has, in fact, addressed a poem on the subject to Hope, on the occasion of the latter's emigration in the mid 1970s. "Madagascar" (Today Is Not Different, 1978) exposes the neurotic condition of the WESSA mind in the face of the brutality and harshness which characterises present-day South Africa. The speaker, in the simple act of "walking by the sea", finds his consciousness assailed by a welter of images of violence and destruction in the midst of an apparently ordinary seaside scene:

"I am walking by the sea,
The sun is hot enough:
It warms the sand,
The wind blows along.

A black man is fishing
From a rock. The fish
At his feet are dead.
Today is not different.

A bamboo stem
Is running gripped by
A dog's jaw. The legs
Are moving.

Nothing is said as things
Are done. This is
The natural way
Things go on."

It is precisely the normalcy of such violence, emphasised by the strangely unemotional, matter-of-fact tone of the poem, that is perhaps most disquieting. Yet, despite the obvious incentives to leave a country such as this, Cullinan remains sceptical of the prospect of some promised land overseas, some "Madagascar", a scepticism stressed by comparing Hope and his wife to two frail butterflies in the remainder of the poem:

"Two butterflies before me
Fly up and down.
They are gold or red.
Two or three steps
Then the wind takes them;
They drift in air and light
Toward the surf.
It is clear
They'll never make it
To Madagascar."

Hope's own poems dealing with this "British experience" - for example, "Britannia Post Imperium", "Sunday Morning Among Bayswater Hotels" (Cape Drives, 1974), "Sterling", "On Highgate Hill" (In the Country of the Black Pig, 1981) - do indeed testify to the difficulty of transplantation. And Hope has recently commented that (in contrast with his predecessors such as Prince, Madge and Lerner) he continues to regard himself as "a South African abroad", rather than an Englishman.[35]

Hope's persistently equivocal feelings about his status are not unique. A common characteristic of many poets exploring the idea of contemporary WESSA exile, is

their deeply ambivalent attitude towards South Africa. Naturally, these poets, whether in permanent exile or merely temporarily abroad, tend to refer in their work to the difficulties involved in adaptation to a new and different country: for example, Sheila Roberts, in "Exile", "Drought", "Exiled from Sun" (Dialogues and Divertimenti, 1985), Peter Wilhelm, in "London Letter" (White Flowers, 1977), and Mark Swift, in "London '74" (Treading Water, 1974). At the same time, however, most of these poets reveal strangely ambiguous and uncertain feelings towards South Africa, a curious mixture of resentment and affection, of loathing and longing, as if they wished neither to abandon nor to return to the country. As such, they would seem to have identified another aspect of the peculiarly contemporary WESSA condition, in which the WESSA is unable to achieve a proper sense of place either in South Africa or overseas.

Both Peter Wilhelm in "London Letter" and Mark Swift in "London '74", for example, during periods in London, have recoiled from the icy bleakness of Britain, and yet simultaneously have displayed deeply ambivalent feelings towards the country of their birth. Wilhelm asks

> "... What is there to remember
> or celebrate?
> Dogs in the smoke, a stone on a roof,
> the cold eternities of home ...
> Who gave me this Africa,
> the terror and encumbrance?"

Swift meanwhile discloses that

> "In foreign ravines I shake the walls
> with a smatter of Xhosa, loving a hated terrain.
> Hyena, face-snatcher, I am born to deserts
> and the towers of the south - rearing up
> on the bones of the living."

Douglas Reid Skinner, having lived overseas for ten years, has displayed in his work of that period a similar uncertainty in his attitude towards South Africa. Asserting in "Home" (The House in Pella District, 1985) that modern man has "a mind not quite / at home here or any place", he nonetheless finds his thoughts, in "Nostalgias" (The House in Pella District, 1985), tending towards South Africa:

> "Who would have thought it
> the jacaranda's purple blossoms in late November
> an inexplicable weight on your mind?";

while in "A Parting" (The House in Pella District, 1985), he fondly remembers

> "watching the day
> paint endlessly changing seascapes
> across the expanses of False Bay".

Perhaps even more disturbingly, C.J. (Jonty) Driver, who was forced into permanent exile, divulges that he writes with his head "still buried in Africa", in "Letter to Breyten Breytenbach from Hong Kong" (The Paperbook of South African English Poetry, ed. M. Chapman, 1986). He admits, moreover, that he cannot finally commit himself to his adopted land, for he feels as if his "home is always somewhere else" ("Somewhere Else", in The Paperbook of South African English Poetry, ed. M. Chapman, 1986). Try as he may, he is forced to concede that there is no consolation that can "break one bone of exile" ("Poem in England", in Occasional Light, 1979). As his friend Jack Cope has pointed out, in "Silence" (Recorded in Sun, 1979), the exile of those like Driver "is no more than a part of death", compelled as they are to subsist in the arid obtumescence of a "homeless land".

In each of these poems, thus, the poet's highly uncertain attitude towards South Africa, not to mention towards the foreign country in which he finds himself, is an indication of the contemporary WESSA's damaged sense of place generally. Peter Wilhelm's grim conclusion in "London Letter" perhaps most accurately summarises his fellow WESSAs' condition:

> "exile is where we are,
> here or there, anywhere".

The contemporary poet who has focussed most intensively on the difficulties and dangers of WESSA exile, in whatever form, is Mike Nicol. Throughout his work, there is among the WESSA characters and personae who populate his poetry a mood of bleak despair, of scarcely controlled panic and desperation, as one after the other they find that they have left South Africa only to become even more alienated and lost in the austerity and hostility of their new environment. This "feeling of isolation, of the options closing in one by one",[36] is expertly captured in Nicol's hard, terse style. "The Last of the Sun" (Among the Souvenirs, 1978), for example, recounts the suicide of a young man forced to leave South Africa and "never able to return", who simply could not endure life in a "distant country":

> "It was a long, cold year:
> The pipes froze; his spirits sank in the dirty snow;
> He drank late into the bleak, white night
> Remembering the bare island, the stone courtyard
> Where he stood alone gazing at the empty sky".

Christopher Hope, arguing, in the course of an introduction to Nicol's poetry, for the distinctively novel character of the contemporary WESSA's damaged sense of place, has claimed that

"South Africans seem destined to travel ever more widely in the coming years. This is not a new movement, of course, but it's more pronounced and more complicated. So much so ... that when people go abroad it will become increasingly difficult to decide whether they are touring or escaping".[37]

As Nicol suggests, however, an even more alarming prospect is that such "escape" will ultimately prove futile, that emigrating WESSAs will find their sense of dislocation heightened rather than eased. In "Ihla Do Sal" (Among the Souvenirs, 1978), the WESSA speaker feels more like an "alien" than a legitimate immigrant, and finds he has escaped "the empty politics / and the growing noise" of South Africa only to be confronted by the enervating desolation of his new environment:

"Here is nowhere. The future
waits in narrow houses,
up foreign streets,
seeing the first snows fall;
knowing with a sore despair
the power we stood for;
the guilt we couldn't ease.

Behind us are the suburbs
we spent our lives in,
and friends left to their
hard destiny on a balcony
with a view."

Typically, the speaker finds himself utterly homeless; alienated from both South Arica and Europe; caught between two equally unpalatable alternatives:

"Official voices summon us
to grey European skies
while, somewhere, far
to the south, the sky darkens
over the discordant cities".

from the edge of the highway,
bleating the loud ironic
blessings or curses of a
temporarily deprived
if most patient Lucifer."

Very few WESSAs indeed have authentically assimilated local traditional cultures. As an indication of this, it is significant that a very small number of white English-language poets have managed effectively to absorb indigenous cultural influences into their work. Wopko Jensma, although he hardly qualifies as a typical WESSA poet,[50] is one writer who has demonstrated an ability to fuse, linguistically and experientially, astonishingly diverse elements of a variety of cultures, especially in his collection, Sing for Our Execution (1973). In rather less heteropractic fashion, Mark Swift has endeavoured to render Xhosa mythology into English verse, in his "Seven poems from a cycle" in Seconds Out (1983). In this case, however, the authorial consciousness remains essentially outside the experience of the poem, so that Swift seems a WESSA spectator, or perhaps translator, rather than participant, in a style reminiscent, perhaps, of Francis Carey Slater's Dark Folk (in Collected Poems, 1957; the Dark Folk poems date from 1935). Swift's status is clear in the final poem of the cycle, "Amandla", which looks to a revolutionary future:

"The hills are bound
with bright wire; its metal
thorns have pierced the lip
of the sacrificial goat.
Sons of the pale rider
shrug farewell to a land
drenched with the blood
of giants. Nonquase's visions
fire new dreams
of the dead in battle
beating down
to restore a lost horizon."

More earnestly, Chris (Zithulele) Mann has striven, in life as well as in art, for a synthesis of his Christian European heritage and his adopted Zulu traditions.[51] "In Praise of the Shades" (First Poems, 1977) recalls a time when Mann[52] hitched a ride with a black man who shared with him his belief in "the shades", ancestral spirits who continue to guide their descendants and to help them.[53] Mann's deeply sympathetic poem ends in lyrical celebration of the shades and the "gentle, balanced man" who communicated the concept to him:

> "When all I ever hear about these days
> is violence, injustice and despair,
> or worse than that, humourless theories
> to rescue us all from our human plight,
> those moments in a bakkie on a plain
> make sunflowers from a waterless world".

As the title of his second collection, New Shades, indicates, Mann's novel fusion of Christian and Zulu doxology has developed successfully, but it is his African traditions which serve him best when he searches for some ceremony to mark "making a land, where lands have never been", in the poem "New Lands" (New Shades, 1982):

> "Surely, I think, there must be a ritual,
> some deepening prayer or rite for this?
> I search my European bones, and find
> the patchwork quilts and eiderdowns retain
> no chants, no dances from their origins.
>
> I listen to my African sinews
> and hear, as faint as the whistle of birds
> in reeds across a vlei that can't be crossed,
> the praise-poets reciting the dead, bringing
> the old into the presence of the new."

While similar sentiments are expressed in poems such as "The Emigrants", "Going Back" and "The Tourist" (all in Among the Souvenirs, 1978), Nicol's most powerful evocation of WESSA alienation and the impossibility of escape emerges in "The Refugees" (Among the Souvenirs, 1978). The poem is not set specifically in South Africa, but in some post-revolutionary state from which the speaker and his people have barely managed to flee. Nevertheless, like Robert Greig's "Settlers' Story" (discussed earlier), the very indeterminacy of the poem's setting enables it to convey the essence of the contemporary WESSAs' condition. The refugees of the poem find themselves in a position of extreme disorientation and deracination: never able to return to their former country, they remain deeply pessimistic about their ability to adapt to their new surroundings; knowing that their previous life has been utterly destroyed, they are forced to acknowledge that they have, in their flight, found no refuge at all. And thus they find themselves totally homeless and lost, facing a most uncertain future. Nicol's austere, blunt, almost prosaic poetry of statement, devoid of any embellishment, grimly conveys the despair and hopelessness of a people suffering from an irreparably damaged sense of place:

"We have been through it all
and cannot face the going back.

The officials at the border posts,
the miles of railway and the cicadas
loud in the bush when the train stops.
How will we get used to the soldiers
and the threat of death?

We were too long beneath
the palm trees, too content
in the warm waves for this.

When the heat brought the leguans
out on the pavements we thought
no more of them than did the natives.
We were at home there.

Yet we cannot face the going back.

Some will return. The idealists
and the old who have always been there,
have known no other way of life.

But what is there to return to?
The palm trees and the tropical sea.

The city we built, the life
we knew is no longer what it was.
One week changed everything.
We lived out those days in
locked houses, listening
to sporadic shots in distant streets.

Even the day we left, in the train
our shirts wet against the plastic
seats, there was no relief.

And here we are still uneasy. Rumours
reach us of more trouble, more deaths.

There is no relief from that."

The mood in Nicol's poetry of bewilderment, of barely suppressed panic, is shared by Stephen Watson's poem, "Exile" (In This City, 1986), dedicated, aptly enough, to former exile, Douglas Reid Skinner. The poem's epigraph, a quotation from Simone Weil, identifies precisely the basis of the WESSA dilemma:

"To be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognized need of the human soul".

The "exile" here is a "jaded" WESSA, miserable and alone in a bleak German city, aching for something he cannot quite grasp. His longing is, in fact, to be rooted - in his case[38] in Cape Town, romantically

recollected as "a city of the southern hemisphere, more full of sky than streets". Characteristically, this WESSA had not so much chosen to leave as been forced to do so; we meet him "years later, years after he had to leave, to flee". Although no definite reason is provided for his defection, it clearly had a good deal to do with

> "... the people
> the vile, pretentious rich, corrupted poor, those politic
> that beggar all description, that all but beggared him".

Having saved himself from that, however, he now finds himself driven by "this mad longing / to know that there is still a place" where he can belong, since he certainly cannot attune himself to the "dead things" of his present surroundings. Like so many other modern WESSAs, thus, he has become hopelessly and helplessly alienated:

> "He's still lost in it, in his estranging gape, one of many
> a man without a wife, a child, arms wrapped round himself
> a man who has been left behind. And now he's
> growing smaller,
> is no larger than his pipe's glow as the river fog moves
> flows over the embankment, blanking out what he once saw,
> blotting out a figure, thin and frosted, dwindling quickl
> an exile, solo, incognito, in transit through another nig

(iii)

Unlike their precursors, for whom emigration constituted a feasible course of action, contemporary WESSAs have been much less successful in relocating themselves. In fact, far from serving as a catholicon, exile or emigration has often seemed not *a* solution, however partial, but a compounding of the problem. And far from providing WESSAs with *a* sense of place, it has

instead confirmed the severity of their alienation. Yet the obvious alternative to emigration has proved equally ineffective, as a good deal of recent South African English poetry has demonstrated.

This alternative to abandoning Africa for Europe is to renounce one's primary allegiance to Europe (which for contemporary WESSAs has in any case become ever more dubious) and attempt instead to align oneself more completely with Africa, emphasising the African dimension of the WESSAs' historical and cultural experience. Such a deliberate programme would appear utterly supererogatory to black South Africans and Afrikaners, both of whom regard themselves as fully indigenous, if not autochthonous, inhabitants of southern Africa. Their total and irremissible commitment to the region continues to be reflected, albeit rather less polemically than before, in recent poetry. Some scattered examples of this in Afrikaans poetry would be Lina Spies's "'n Paternoster vir Suid-Afrika" (Digby Vergenoeg, 1971),[39] Antjie Krog's "lofsang" (Mannin, 1975),[40] M.M. Walters's "Waarom is ek tog 'n Gewone Man?" (Heimdall, 1974),[41] and particularly a poem such as Johan de Jager's "Bylkop" (Haggada vir 'n Wit Afrikaan, 1974)[42] which stresses the Afrikaner's profound, elemental relationship with Africa:

"Bylkop
rooikolos
oermoeder
Afrika ...
... vanmôre
toe ek opstaan
weet ek ek klou
want daar is niemand
wat soos jy kan beletha
soos jy kan troos
en buitendien
ruik jy
na misrook
en soetdoring."

The abundant examples in recent black South African poetry would include Ingoapele Madingoane's black trial (Afrika my Beginning, 1979),[43] David Moja-Mphuso's "Old Homes" (Voices from Within, ed. M. Chapman and A. Dangor, 1982),[44] Zinjiva Winston Nkondo's "Africa" (The Return of the Amasi Bird, ed. T. Couzens and E. Patel, 1982)[45] and Eugene Skeef's "Afrika" (The Return of the Amasi Bird, ed. T. Couzens and E. Patel, 1982),[46] which evinces the black South African's deep reverence for, and dependence upon the continent of his birth. The poem is quoted here in full:

"Afrika
You are the horizon
To which I turn
To see the sun rise
To wean the poet
Who prises you daily
For baring your breasts
To these my seasoned lips
Do not desert me
For I love you
I want to cherish you
Take me into your heart
For you are the path
Whereupon treads my pride
Do not beguile me
For you are the sky
That measures my manhood
And spares me stars
To kindle my soul
Let me drink of you
For you are the river
That flows with vigour
Carrying the taunting tale
Our forefathers died to tell ...
Afrika
You are my peace with life ..."

Obversely, of course, the intense pain of exile from South Africa, as experienced by an Afrikaans poet such as Breyten Breytenbach, and by black poets such as Arthur Nortje, Mazisi Kunene and Keorapetse Kgositsile,

also testifies to their profound attachment to the country.

For WESSAs, however, wholesale identification with Africa has been far less simple and straightforward, in terms either of relating to African nature or of assimilating indigenous cultural traditions. In the past, certain efforts were made to try to encourage WESSAs to establish closer links with the African landscape, to seek a "return to Nature".[47] In the contemporary period, however, as recent South African English poetry reveals, WESSAs have found the African bush even more inimical to them than did their predecessors. There is, in contemporary poetry, little evidence of WESSAs' love of or reverence for the land. On the contrary, African nature is treated throughout the poetry as something threatening, violent, destructive; as unlovely and inhospitable; and, perhaps most significantly, frequently as alien, unknown and unfamiliar.

A prime example of this WESSA estrangement is Peter Wilhelm's "Karoo Derailment" (White Flowers, 1977). The speaker is forced, during an interrupted train journey through the Karoo, into a consideration of his relationship with African nature. Far from discovering a meaningful bond with the land, the speaker, in his response, underlines the contemporary WESSA's inability to find any point of contact whatsoever with the maddeningly hostile emptiness of the African landscape. The lack of movement, of action, of change, of any kind of development at all, becomes almost unbearable, even in this short poem, and forces one to acknowledge experientially the suffocating bleakness of the region. Similarly, the jarring rhythms, the short, abrupt

phrases, and the numerous caesurae and heavy pauses, reinforce the sense of barren inertia and stasis, and reproduce the enervating effect which the area has on the speaker. Indeed, the "scream" at the end of the poem could well be the most appropriate response to the terrifyingly "empty horizon" of the Karoo:

> "Two great white spiders bake on rail,
> watching, watched.
> each weaves nothing, woven
> into the watchers, the wind.
> In dreariness we stifle.
>
> The insect inherit[illegible]e stirs, consumes
> dust, bone, the shrill interludes.
> Eight hours now, disinherited:
> rigid steel to an empty horizon
> bends to a scream."

Jean Lipkin, likewise, expresses in a poem such as "Homeland Prodigal" (With Fences Down, 1986), the feeling of finding [illegible]f irrecusably a "stranger" when confronted by the "Barren ground" which "Lies flat / To eternity", or when faced, as in "Geboorteplek" (With Fences Down, 1986), by a country characterised by

> "Acacia thorn, anther, talon
> And fang. Dongacrust
> And corrugated iron".

The idea that the WESSA sensibility simply cannot locate itself or endure in the sheer inhospitability of the African landscape, is at least one reading of Douglas Reid Skinner's "The House in Pella District" (The House in Pella District, 1985). The house's former inhabitants are long since "packed-up and gone away" and now

"The house, emptied of human concerns,
yields itself to derelict splendour,
the garden is reclaimed. And a slight wind
sings in the long, rusted fence-wires

to pass the time, to pass the time."

Christopher Hope makes a similar point in "African Tea Ceremony" (In the Country of the Black Pig, 1981), where the inexorable eradication of European influence in Africa is signalled by the insidious progress of the grass:

"... the grass which has always seemed
poor yellow stuff, somehow too hot to live, forever
dying back,
was drinking it all in and everything that had been solid
was liquid and shifting ...
Only the grass is winning, its rich circuitry of
yellow roots
is spreading, digging in. The evening light settles
in waves;
a straw-coloured infusion that darkens as it draws
night in."

If WESSAs have been unable, generally, to relate to African nature, to "take root" in African soil,[48] they have proved equally incapable of comprehending and assimilating African traditional cultures. As earlier poets such as William Plomer described the WESSAs' fearful recoiling from the dangerous, Dionysian forces of Africa in poems like "The Devil Dancers" (Selected Poems, 1960; 1973; the poem dates from 1936), so too in contemporary times have several South African English poets exposed their countrymen's even deeper mistrust and dread of such unfamiliar forces. The idea is explored, for example, in William Branford's "Colonial Experience: Four Fragments" (A Century of South African Poetry, ed. M. Chapman, 1981), Patrick Cullinan's "Devils" (Today Is Not Different, 1978) and "Cold Blood" (The White Hail in the Orchard, 1984), and perhaps most strikingly in Douglas Livingstone's "Under

Capricorn" (The Anvil's Undertone, 1978).[49] Livingstone's poem captures accurately, through its startling and frightening images, the deeply troubled consciousness of the modern day WESSA in the face of "primitive" Africa. A quotidian rural African scene seems to a white motorist to transmute hallucinogenically into a vision of the dark, diabolical forces lying just below the surface reality:

"The first dominated from
the crest of a roadcutting.

Fecund, fornicatory;
hairy flanks tun-tight; yellow
mad intelligent eyes bright
under quick horns; shaft damp still
from spraying his angled wives,
he wheeled and the last of him
was a leathery scrotum.

The road doubled back down and
there he was, or his brother,
rocking-horsing it down then
up the scarred enbankment face.

As mist boiled up, they were all
about: rearing, threatening,
menacing the car windows
with split hooves; Fu Manchu tufts
below foolish horse faces
bobbing and weaving, bat ears
flapping until the car seemed
ringed, by short ardent devils."

Although the perspective normalises in the final stanza, the neurotic driver continues to feel threatened, physically, politically, culturally, by the figure of an old black peasant:

"Another turn of the road,
And only an old man there:
mist coiling his thin ankles,
headdress flapping, both arms raised
like Moses; smiling, bowing

Chris Mann, in his ability to combine African and European cultural principles, is nevertheless conspicuously unusual among WESSAs and, indeed, among white poets. The far more common WESSA rection to African customs, and to Africans themselves for that matter, is at best one of wariness and uncertainty, at worst prejudice and bigotry. These are attitudes with which Mann is not unacquainted. In "The Servant's Toilet: a Neighbour Speaks" (New Shades, 1982), Mann describes astutely the gulf that exists between most WESSAs and Africans. He takes the apparently nugatory and yet highly apposite example of the familiar servant's toilet; some young white boys have been forbidden to play there, and so it has become an object of almost numinous fascination:

> "The crooked door one day blew in. Paper
> lifted in one corner, the bowl was cracked
> but nothing else, no horror smears - and yet
> by choice, we couldn't squat inside. The spell
> had roots."

It is part of the South African problem in general, and part of the reason for the WESSAs' persistently damaged sense of place, that so many WESSAs continue to live under precisely this sort of "spell".

4.

Unable to locate themselves either in Europe, the continent of their origins, or in Africa, the continent of their birth, the majority of contemporary WESSAs are confronted by a potentially acute cultural luxation. As this chapter has shown, this sense of dislocation is reflected in recent South African English poetry both subjectively and directly in the very language of much

of the poetry itself as well as through the poets' more objective analysis of the futility today of the solutions which once were available to previous generations of WESSAs.

Yet at the same time as the poetry has confirmed and described the nature and extent of the modern day WESSAs' damaged sense of place, it has also since the 1970s begun to suggest a more positive response to this dilemma. A number of contemporary poets have started to investigate the idea that it is possible for WESSAs to achieve a valid sense of place, though it is to be found neither in the context of European culture nor in the African veld. It may be discovered, rather, in the modern cities of South Africa.

In fact, sociological evidence records that the English in South Africa have a long tradition of being an essentially urban species. M.L. Watts, in his seminal social and demographic portrait of English-speaking white South Africans, states that almost from the outset

> "White English-speaking immigrants came to the country mainly as urbanites with skill and abilities to develop an urban industrial economy in South Africa. Even today amongst Whites they are in the majority in the cities."[54]

His research shows that contemporary WESSAs are "almost entirely" urban - more than 95%, in fact[55] - a finding supported by Henry Lever[56] and by Huber, Charton and van der Merwe.[57] Given this overwhelming urban predominance, historically and indeed much more so today, it is not surprising that WESSAs should feel out

of place in the African veld. What may seem surprising, however, is that WESSAs have not previously expressed a sense of place in their cities. Although they have as a group obviously tended to choose to live in the cities, any sense of love or reverence for, or deep attachment to, these cities has been conspicuously absent from South African English poetry, or from any other medium in which the sentiments of the group have been articulated.[58]

Part of the reason for this lies in the general fact that feelings of group pride or patriotism are usually associated with the idea of land or soil rather than cities. This would hold true particularly for a country such as South Africa which is renowned far more for its natural features than its urban ones.[59] Compounding the issue, WESSAs have typically felt much less close to the soil than their Afrikaans or African counterparts, and have been subjected to taunts by both these groups about their lack of permanence in, and loyalty to, South Africa.[60] Consequently, many WESSAs have felt compelled to assert their bond with the land by trying literally and psychologically to strike root in African soil, rather than by exploring their relationship with the country's cities.

In the past, South African English poetry has, in fact, not simply reflected these attitudes, but has served to bolster them, as is made clear in Guy Butler's introduction to his 1959 anthology, A Book of South African Verse.[61] As Butler points out, most local English-language poets, starting with Pringle, tended to follow the English literary tradition that "God made the country, Man made the town".[62] As a result, it became an established theme that in seeking meaning and

orientation man should be led to a "return to Nature", representing as it traditionally does innocence, cleanness, completeness.[63] Obversely, the cities are regarded as inimical to this meaningfulness. With urbanisation and industrialisation having eroded the purity and vigour of nature, the tendency was to see the cities as "not populated by the protagonists of a vital culture, sure of its values, but by those of a decaying one".[64] Furthermore, as Butler goes on to point out, it may be inferred from the poetry that when WESSAs did feel alienated from African nature, they turned for orientation and stability not to the cities, but rather to "certain basic conceptions" and moral principles associated with European "civilisation".[65]

This is not to suggest that earlier South African English poets never focussed on the urban environment of South Africa. A number did. Such poetry, however, did not seek to explore the cities as potentially providing a sense of place, but tended in the main to condemn city life in a universal sense as a source of despair and alienation, without specific and primary reference to the South African urban landscape itself. For example, although the digger poets, such as Albert Brodrick, turned in the latter part of the nineteenth century away from the veld and towards industrial and urban themes and settings, their chief motive in so doing was not to seek placement. On the contrary, the central concerns of this poetry are ones to be found in mining literature generally: laments about the fickleness of fortune; descriptions of stereotypical characters associated with digging; universal fears of ruin and hopes of riches.[66] Brodrick's poem, "The Wheel of Fortune" (A Wanderer's Rhymes, 1893), dealing with the Johannesburg goldfields, is a fairly represen-

tative example. The first stanza of the poem may serve as illustration:

> "Round goes life's wheel, with constant spin -
> some 'fellces' up, and others under;
> And those who lose, and those who win,
> And those who're right, and those who blunder,
> Succeed each other, day by day,
> Till all, in time, are whirled away!"

A similar point can be made about the poetry of the rather inappropriately named Johannesburg-based writers circle, the Veldsingers Club, whose membership, from about 1908 to 1915, included Mabel Alder, Denys Lefebvre, Charles Ould and Francis Ernley Walrond. Although they shifted the focus of their poetry from rural settings to urban ones, they tended to derive their models from European writers and to avoid specific delineation of Johannesburg for its own sake. As Michael Chapman asserts, the members of the club

> "did not see the necessity of providing an authentically South African urban alternative. As the 'literary-European' townscapes (emphasised at meetings of the Veldsingers Club) appeared to confirm, it was to prove easier to imitate the registers of a Baudelaire or an Eliot than to invent for poetry the tones and images of a brash Johannesburg - a city-in-the-making that possessed the mentality not of the boudoir, but of the mining camp."[67]

Denys Lefebvre's "A Reminiscence" (A Century of South African Poetry, ed. M. Chapman, 1981; the poem dates from 1907) illustrates the point usefully:

"... The woman poured a cup
and waited,
Smiling across the table:
'Last night, I passed her
Beneath a street lamp;
Waiting for love,
As I did once ...
Like some men, she thinks more of money.'
(His paper rustled) ....

... 'You married me,
You may remember?'
(Her voice laughed smoothly)
'Not for my wrinkles.
How fortunate when love is wealthy!'
Her tone purred at him:
'Pâté-de-foie, dear
Or eggs and bacon?'"

It is perhaps William Plomer who comes closest to exploring the idea of the South African city as a source of placement. He does so only infrequently, in a few of his early "African" poems, however, remaining too much of an alienated individualist to pursue the concept in detail.[68] Probably the best-known of his urban poems is "Johannesburg" (Collected Poems, 1960; 1973; the poem dates from the 1930s):

"Along the Rand in eighty-five
Fortunes were founded overnight,
And mansions rose among the rocks
To blaze with girls and light;

In champagne baths men sluiced their skins
Grimy with auriferous dust,
Then oiled and scented, fought to enjoy
What young men must;

Took opportunities to cheat,
Or meet the most expensive whore,
And conjured up with cards and dice,
New orgies from new veins of ore;

Greybeards who now look back
To the old days
Find little in their past to blame
And much to praise -

Riding bareback under stars
As lordly anarchs of the veld,
Venison feasts and tribal wars
Free cruelty and a cartridge belt;

Pioneers, O pioneers,
Grey pillars of a Christian State,
Respectability has turned
Swashbuckler prim and scamp sedate;

Prospecting in the brain's recesses
Seek now the nuggets of your prime,
And sift the gold dust of your dreams
From drifted sands of time."

For the most part, however, there is in South African poetry up to the 1960s virtually no conception of the city as a source of belonging or location for the embattled WESSA.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, as the earlier part of this chapter demonstrated, WESSAs found themselves increasingly alienated from both their European cultural origins and the African veld, and in a state, thus, of apparently complete homelessness. It was at this time of radical socio-cultural upheaval that a number of poets began to consider the possibility of finding a sense of place for themselves, and their displaced countrymen, in South Africa's cities. As the compilers of the Companion to South African English Literature correctly point out, it was Douglas Livingstone's collection, Eyes Closed Against the Sun (1970), which

> "gave significant impetus at the time to a general shift of direction in SA poetry of the 1970s - from rural-based to urban-derived perceptions and descriptions."[69]

Although the central vision of this collection is of the isolation and fragmentation of city life rather than the possibilities of finding a home in the city, the poetry did nevertheless confirm the pertinence and importance of an urban focus. This shift in white English-language poetry has been matched, among black writers, by the emergence in the 1970s of the Soweto poets - chiefly Mtshali, Serote, Sepamla, Gwala, van Wyk, and others - who also began to locate their work in an essentially urban context. To a lesser degree, Afrikaans poetry too has witnessed the appearance, in the post-Sestigers era, of a number of writers dealing with a specifically South African metropolitan environment, including André le Roux, Chris Pelser and E.W.S. Hammond. The tendency towards city poetry has, however, been most widespread and intense among white English-language poets, since it is their group which has, unlike Afrikaans and black South Africans, proved chronically unable to find a sense of place in any other location.

The fundamental change in emphasis which has occurred in this contemporary poetry, therefore, is that the poets are not merely using the city environment as a setting or background for themes not directly related to the city. Instead, the poets are concentrating specifically on the cities themselves, in a conscious endeavour to discover a sense of location. Their attempt is to establish their city as a home, as a loved place, a familiar and recognised environment where its inhabitants can feel a sense of belonging, of attachment, of orientation. This is not to say, however, that the poets simply ignore the negative aspects of their particular city. On the contrary, the poetry emphasises the dual nature of the cities, their

beauty and ugliness, their warmth and hostility, their sustaining and destructive qualities. In a very real way, however, it is perhaps precisely because of the manichean nature of South Africa's cities, that they can offer their inhabitants a uniquely valid sense of place.

Significantly, this more positive form of response to this WESSA dilemma has produced a very different kind of poetry from that reflecting and describing the WESSAs' alienation and dislocation. This city poetry, in contrast with the uncertainty, the ambivalences and the tenebrous mood of the poetry discussed earlier, is characterised by clear, sharp imagery, strong, confident rhythms, assertive and assured tones, and a general atmosphere either of excitement or contentment. More particularly, the poetry is typified again and again by a meticulous attention to intricate descriptive detail, as the poets strive to evoke the unique character of their city, to convey their intimate relationship with it, and to confirm their authentic knowledge of its peculiar sights and sounds. In so doing, the poets do not merely identify and affirm their city as home for themselves alone, but for all its actual and potential inhabitants, and especially for those like the WESSAs who are able to find location and belonging in no other place.

The focus of this poetry corresponds to the four main urban clusters where WESSAs are concentrated:

(i) Johannesburg and the Reef;
(ii) Cape Town and the Peninsula;
(iii) The Durban-Pietermaritzburg axis;
(iv) and the Eastern Cape region around Grahamstown.

The rest of this chapter will deal with the poetry associated with each of these urban centres in turn.

(i)

Of those poets living in, and writing about, Johannesburg, without doubt the most ardent and prolific is Lionel Abrahams. Over and over he returns in his work to the city in which he has lived all his life,[70] sedulously exploring and confirming his intimate and complex relationship with it. As Patrick Cullinan has noted,

> "it is not as though the city is just there to provide a background or convenient setting. For him his life is embedded in these minedumps, suburbs and high buildings";

it is here that he finds "explicitly, 'the residence of truth'."[71] This does not imply, however that Abrahams accepts Johannesburg uncritically or that he is unconscious of its darker aspects. On the contrary, it is these very aspects which form part of Johannesburg's unique reality; as Abrahams himself points out,

> "To me, Johannesburg with all its famous defects and bad associations, represents the given world, the hopeful mess that we have to make our lives out of".

Cullinan is again accurate in his observation that "it is in Johannesburg that life in full reality happens to Lionel Abrahams" and that Abrahams's work is informed throughout by "his comprehending commitment to his native city".[73]

This "comprehending commitment" is perhaps most forcefully [illegible]tised in "The Fall of van Eck House" (Journal of a New man, 1984), where the poet, on the occasion of the demolition of the building named in the title, is led to a meditation on its significance for him. It is essential to follow the development which takes place in the poem as Abrahams describes how he gradually and at first reluctantly comes to realise the depth and intensity of his identification with the building in particular and with Johannesburg in general.

"Sixth November 1983 -
van Eck House was demolished
by a method now routine
in advanced parts of the world.
About the razing of a scarcely distinguished
office block that had become
no longer vast, was not yet venerable
there isn't much to say
except what sentiment may add.
It used to be Escom House,
at twenty floors the tallest pile in town,
also, as we were told in school,
tallest in the world built with no steel.
I salvage a little store of memories
around that bone-white stepped-back shape,
stripped to vertical strips
of light and green-runged shade,
that auditorium where, a youth,
I took in mystic lectures,
a young man, saw a festival of films,
that skyscraper backdrop when I witnessed
my mentor in shirtsleeves on a corner balcony
spreading food for the pigeons...
Mainly mere background, a simple piece
of Johburg's businesslike unspecialness.
it had a way though, Escom House, of lifting
its pointed head clear of intervening blocks
into the skyline again and again as my tram,
in later years my bus, dipped and climbed
along Main Street between town and Jeppestown -
a shape with a name
long after it was overtopped and dwarfed,
long after the name was changed
(while time and contrast mellowed
once starkly modern lines to something
near to character).

My father remembers what stood on the site,
cottages, shops, before the deep
ambitious foundations were laid.
To him - demolishing contractor
who earned innocent profits by wrecking
the Standard Theatre, the Old Magistrates' Court -
to Dad, the sheer concrete mountain Escom House
held no great temptation, promising little
to salvage; this was one, we fantasised,
they'd have to pay him heaps to chip away,
storey by storey, month after month.
Now like an abscessed tooth
it's been ripped from the skyline
in less than half a minute.
I went to watch that Sunday morning happening
less sad than curious - but found,
as summit tipped, windows shuddered,
walls opened and fell
amid yelling pigeons and applause,
I was strangled with sobs.
Memory takes root only half in the folds of the brain:
half's in the concrete streets we have lived along.
Implosion, abrupt negation, amputates flesh of dreams.
van Eck House - I'd hardly been aware
it bore this newer name: of I."

The importance of the poem's meaning emerges clearly through a careful tracing of the poem's subtle developmental structure. The unemotional, matter-of-fact tone of the opening lines suggest the poet's initial lack of understanding of his connection to the building and his apparently rather coldly detached attitude to Johannesburg as a whole. This casual dismissiveness of the seemingly ordinary, unremarkable office block is misleading, however. As the poem progresses, the poet's initial detachment becomes increasingly and almost unconsciously, undermined by the accumulation of personal, detailed memories, vividly and vitally recalled. These memories of the building which he manages to "salvage" are, in fact, memories of his own life: learning about the building in school, attending "mystic lectures" there as a youth, or a festival of films as a young man,

having the building as a backdrop to a recollected scene of his mentor, Herman Charles Bosman. As if startled by the unexpectedly sentimental nature of these memories, the poet tries briefly to dismiss the building as a commonplace part of an unexceptional city:

> "Mainly mere background, a simple piece
> of Johburg's businesslike unspecialness".

The attempt proves futile, however, as, almost in spite of himself, the poet is compelled to acknowledge the particular identity of the building and his personal relationship with it. Gradually, the tone of the poem softens into something approaching affection as the poet begins to see van Eck house in almost human terms - its way of lifting its "head" after him as he commuted around town, its personal "name", its distinctive "character". By the time he considers his connection to the building through his father's occupation as a demolishing contractor - a particularly appropriate career in a city in such constant flux as Johannesburg - Abrahams's attitude has changed radically. His initially detached perspective has given way to one of deeply felt involvement, reflected in the emotionally charged simile which he now uses to describe the building's demise:

> "Now like an abscessed tooth
> it's been ripped from the skyline
> in less than half a minute".

Finally, on the day of the implosion, the poet goes along to witness the event in what he believes is a spirit of inquisitiveness rather than sadness, but finds himself shocked by the force of his own reaction.

The pain he feels at the building's destruction, conveyed through images of physical violence such as "strangled" and "amputates", reveals his deep and intimate relationship with it. Indeed, the word "fall" in the title, with its connotations of a descent from a state of grace, or innocence, or power, suggests that the event possesses a significance for the poet far beyond the brief spectacle of the implosion of an old building. In particular, he comes to understand that the building, as its name implies, is part of him; that the Johannesburg urban landscape, as Mareia Leveson has pointed out, "is part of the structure of memory, of what makes him what he is":[74]

> "Memory takes root half in the folds of the brain:
> half's in the concrete streets we have lived along.
> Implosion, abrupt negation, amputates flesh of dreams,
> van Eck House - I'd hardly been aware
> it bore this newer name: of I."

Abrahams's employment of a developmental structure in the poem, dramatising the growth in his awareness of his relationship with the city, is crucial. It takes cognizance of the fact that few Johannesburgers are fully conscious of their bond with their city, but suggests that such bonds and attachments are real and important and ought to be closely explored. For Johannesburgers like Abrahams, it is not in the natural African landscape, but in the landscape of Johannesburg's concrete streets and buildings, that an authentic sense of place may be found.

The same sort of epiphanic realisation of a true sense of place for WESSAs in Johannesburg forms the central theme also of the poem, "Place" (Journal of a New Man, 1984). Abrahams recounts how he with "A party of white

Johannesburgers" used to gather "near a mine dump" to read poetry. However, while he does recall appreciating "the humane affirmative thrust" of the Eastern European poets, Herbert and Holub, he remembers the readings

> "rather for the place itself
> than for the poetry or exactly who was there".

Indeed Abrahams focusses minutely on "the place itself" as he describes their unexpected, even accidental, "discovery" of this their real "home".

> After the raid of the thunderstorm -
> our scramble to the cars, one Volksie
> bogging down in a spilling drift
> of milled quartz and rainwater,
> a book lost, a camera splashed -
> we forgot our half-formed plan
> to woo our audience for poetry-readings
> outdoors to the site that Neil had found
> while living on the mine estate.
> Yet we liked it best, to say the least,
> of all the settings we used or thought to use,
> liked it enough to have driven out
> beyond the tinny rows of old mine cottages,
> past a plantation of tattered gums and round
> behind the straggle of cyanide dams and dumps,
> bringing our books and typescripts
> for two or three trial readings.
> These I remember seven years after
> rather for the place itself
> than for the poetry or exactly who was there.
> I'd think that goes for all who came:
> we felt, like Neil, discovery
> at the foot of that beach-white truncated pyramid
> dominating emptiness on an unguessed-at plain,
> its space defined and stressed by the distant block,
> cathedral sized, of a solitary corrugated iron shed.
> Discovery we felt in the sloping soar
> of the built cliff, sterile and brilliant
> with residual poison and gold;
> in its silky drapes of man-made sand that hung
> like skirts on the clodded ochre ridges
> gathered to bones and muscles of the mound's anatomy;

in the precarious brick-and-concrete
of a remnant too unseasoned to be called a ruin
whose lintel served as our proscenium
framing the backdrop of flat veld,
tall-grassed but greyish, in nature minimal -
a wasteland secreted in the suburbs' groin.
No doubt, from the hill-high mine dump's table top
the rearing core of town would show close by,
but down in this deserted lee
was huge surprising privacy, an intensity
of quiet air and naked sky, whitening with sunlight
on one day once piling plum-dark clouds.
A scene that should have meant familiar ugliness
made us freshly familiar with the ignored
persistent residue of primitive Johannesburg,
and something more, the very local savour:
this to us was palpable beauty -
thin, durable as tin, and much too strange,
too firmly bedded in the stark neglect
of that near-featureless enclave, too true
of a city all too easily contemned,
for description, explanation, recognition shared
with any who've not known the Rand as home.
The salt of it grew sharp with poems that ran
more piquant on our tongues
in that incongruous air. And finally
the drama of cloud and wind, lightning flares,
bombs of thunder and sudden sniping drops
exhilarated us, and the rain we fled
washed the last of those rare afternoons
down into crevices of gilded memory.

I half forget what poetry we read
(our own? new Sound Mtshali's? Plath's?)
but clearly recall the humane affirmative thrust
of two scientist-poets out of Europe's east;
and now reflect how alien our scene -
shallow, violent, bleak, a drained and shadeless
wedge of earth, uncultivated, mired by money-miners -
would be to them, whose translated lines
we were, with voice and ears and hearts,
lent scope and life, brought strangely home:
Herbert, familiar of Warsaw,
Holub of unimaginable Prague."

The poem functions primarily as an evocation of the unique character of a place at once strange and yet representative of Johannesburg. What they discover, for example, in the "built cliff" of the mine dump is a

symbol of the essence of Johannesburg in all its duality as both "sterile and brilliant", as containing both "residual poison and gold". Throughout the poem, in fact, Abrahams is careful to present this place as in no way ordinarily or conventionally beautiful, yet at the same time he succeeds in rendering its eccentric and powerful fascination. Abrahams sums up the paradoxical nature of the place in his description of it as "a wasteland secreted in the suburbs' groin" which bears implications both of infection and disease as well as of pleasure and even fertility. The word "secreted" is perfectly chosen, for it suggests, firstly, both unhealthful excretions and pleasurable ejaculation; and, secondly, both the furtive concealment of something illicit or unwholesome and the safeguarding of something valuable or extraordinary. In acknowledging the dual qualities of this place, Abrahams and his companions are put directly in touch with the essential nature of Johannesburg itself and begin to see the city as their "place". It is significant that the events narrated in the poem are dated 1969: a time when, as this chapter contends, WESSAs began to experience a particularly contemporary sense of displacement and dislocation. The poem can be viewed, thus, as the record of the discovery by a number of modern-day WESSAs of a sense of place in the urban landscape of Johannesburg. The excitement of the discovery comes through not only in the mood of wonder and delight which pervades the poem, but also in the pleasure the poet takes in his meticulously detailed and scrupulously accurate descriptions of the place and the typical Reef thunder storm which occurs. The central passage of the poem encapsulates these WESSAs' awed recognition of Johannesburg as their uniquely valid home:

"A scene that should have meant familiar ugliness
made us freshly familiar with the ignored
persistent residue of primitive Johannesburg,
and something more, the very local savour:
this to us was palpable beauty -
thin, durable as tin, and much too strange,
too firmly bedded in the stark neglect
of that near-featureless enclave, too true
of a city all too easily condemned,
for description, explanation, recognition shared
with any who've not known the Rand as home."

The idea of Johannesburg as home, physically and psychologically, informs much of Abrahams's work, in poems such as "Birds about Johannesburg" (Thresholds of Tolerance, 1975), "Shapes of Order" (Journal of a New Man, 1984), "Death of a Johannesburg Bookseller" (The Writer in Sand, 1988), and is explicitly asserted in "Views and Sites" (The Writer in Sand, 1988), particularly in the final section of the poem where the poet's relationship with his city is seen as an integral part of his sense of psychic completeness:

"From being too much alone in my room,
my breath enclosed in my unwell flesh,
I was severed from all the selves I had been,
falling sick in my mind.
Then my niece took me driving
to Mayfair and Judith's Paarl,
so that I could show her the geography
of her family's history.
Thirty-five and fifty years
had little changed those modest streets.
The houses we lived in stood;
the fronts and kerbs of those streets
substantiated memories precise as dreams.
To the girl the pilgrimage could mean
only as much as I could tell,
but for me the calling on my little past
re-opened a skylight to my wholeness
in the outwardness of things."

The movement in this poem from the severence of self to integration, from the confined darkness of a sickroom

to the openness and light of outward things, is characteristic of the optimism and confidence which underlies Abrahams's city poetry. As such it forms a clear contrast with poetry such as Mike Nicol's "The Refugees" and Christopher Hope's "The Flight of the White South Africans" (discussed earlier) which describe the panic and desperation of a displaced people whose options are rapidly and inexorably closing in. In the face of this much less sanguine alternative scenario, the importance of Abrahams's discovery of a sense of place becomes all the more clear.

Abrahams's most notable poem about Johannesburg is probably his prize-winning work, "Thoughts on Johannesburg's Centenary" (The Writer in Sand, 1988). The poem, a complex and serious meditation on the city, goes beyond a critical examination of the city's obvious faults, to define what Johannesburg means to the poet, and what it could potentially mean to all its inhabitants.

"There is no city as old as a river,
as old as this minor stream
whose millennia have sculpted the veld.
The wiser cities lie down with great rivers
to learn what rivers teach of time,
or with the timelessness of seas;
but my city's mazed metal of hurried streets
has buried the small white waters.

What if my wandering clan had given me
one of those old wise cities to be born in?
I would have claimed the borrowed ancestry
of mellow stones and streets, embraced
the longings and learning of that home,
spelled my name in its memorial marks.
Instead they gave me to raw spawn of payable lode,
attracting loose acquisitive pioneers,
the hungry and threatened, chancers and transients
- swelling by gross promises and harsh divisions
over unhistoric farms and hills.

Born but never Native here (of Europe-stranger kin,
that skin), I've known no other place to claim.
Heir to the Book, I find and lose my living myths
more in these too changeable streets.
I learned to spread from hollow roots a patched
familiarity:
time gave my stories to some names and contours;
certain settings of my years, my selves, won my affection,
enrolled me in a Masonry of esoteric love.
I belong with the unbelonging, and this world
of second generation strangers, all its cheap renewal,
gives me my only earthed tradition,
all prospect of a self-built meaning I can claim.

How can you love what changes too swiftly,
too swiftly changes and changes again?
A river is momently different, and daily,
but the slow living banks hold the shape of memory -
the self can stay while the river runs
and we can love the river.
But these streets hardly
survive their shouting rivers of traffic;
this place owes too little to time,
too much to appetite and rage
and guilty self-contempt -
it eats and tears itself ... renews ... renews ...

A man stays naked at the dumb mouth of the cave,
shivering like a dog beneath thunder -
a man and his streets are disposable trash
if the town does not bequeath to his passing eye
old shapes told about in tales,
histories held visible in shapes
that he knows will still be seen beyond his time.

If all who must leave
take their insights and go,
take the innocence they will not lose
and go,
and the rage burns out,
and the gold gives out,
yet the Name of the city endures -
magnet and conduit of memory's gathering -
this place may draw together, discover
the richer reasons of its century,
may hear the singing of its hundred-year-old course.

Sub-titled "while by the Jukskei River at Broederstroom", the poem begins by censuring Johannesburg for lacking the sense of time which other, "wiser" cities

have acquired from their contiguous rivers. Instead, Abrahams feels, Johannesburg has in its frenetic and chaotic development quite overrun "the small white waters" of the Witwatersrand. Again, unlike such older cities, Johannesburg can offer the poet little in the way of historical significance or wisdom; Johannesburg's heritage is one of greed, injustice and unsophistication, embodied in the sorts of character who first were attracted to the goldfields: the "raw spawn of payable lode" whose numbers increased not because of the beauty of the area or the opportunity to be part of a harmonious and mutually co-operative community, but rather because of "gross promises" of wealth and the "harsh divisions" imposed by a racially exploitative labour system. Yet, having acknowledged these well established flaws, Abrahams begins in the third stanza of the poem to assert the city's more positive features. In particular, the poet, in seemingly resigned tones, points out that since he has known "no other place to claim" as home, Johannesburg provides him with his only possible source of a sense of place. In characteristically WESSA fashion, Abrahams, on the one hand, feels alienated from Africa, the continent of his birth where he has, nevertheless, never seemed "Native"; on the other hand, he feels estranged from Europe, the continent of his ethnic origins. His anomalous position is adroitly formulated in the phrase, "Europe-stranger kin", which permits the readings "a stranger <u>from</u> Europe" as well as "a stranger <u>to</u> Europe". His derancination seems exacerbated by the fact that his Judaic inheritance has become diluted, as he finds his "living myths" more in the streets of the city than in the scriptures. In the face of this intense psychological and cultural dislocation, it is Johannesburg which is able to supply

him with a sense of belonging and significance. He affirms this unorthodox yet valid sense of place in lines of simple, quiet, but clear certainty:

> "I belong with the unbelonging, and this world
> of second generation strangers, all its cheap renewal,
> gives me my only earthed tradition,
> all prospect of a self-built meaning I can claim".

Johannesburg proves a difficult city to love, however, and the poet's frustration and discontent emerge forcefully in the jolting, jarring rhythms and syntactical circularity of the fourth stanza which are mimetic of the city's state of continual, anarchic flux:

> "How can you love what changes too swiftly,
> too swiftly changes and changes again?"

Nevertheless, Abrahams, implicitly likening himself in the next stanza to primitive man at the mouth of a cave, confesses that he shares the ancient and powerful urge to belong somewhere and to have his "histories" concretised in familiar, enduring shapes. Despite his keen awareness of Johannesburg's manifold imperfections, Abrahams remains confident that the city can satisfy this urge. The final stanza of the poem is an earnest and resonant affirmation of Johannesburg's potential to offer its inhabitants a sense of rich historical meaningfulness and an authentic sense of place. The city's ability to do so will derive not from those idealistic critics who feel compelled to leave the city nor from its gold-based wealth, nor from its raging energy. Instead, this ability will derive from the unique identity of the city itself - focussed by its lasting "Name" - which over time may become

deeply embedded in the collective memory of its inhabitants and so supply them with a binding sense of belonging, of tradition, of harmony. The final lines of this meditation on Johannesburg's centenary do not look back at the city's obvious failings over the past hundred years, but rather look forward to the city's potentially rich future, in a mood of serious, profound celebration:

> " If the Name of the city endures -
> magnet and conduit for mem[illegible]'s gathering -
> this place may draw togethe[illegible], discover
> the richer reasons of its century,
> may hear the singing of its hundred-year-old course".

If Abrahams's tough humanistic exploration of Johannesburg makes him original in South African poetry, he is by no means alone in his endeavour to discover a sense of place in the city. Stephen Gray, who is perhaps more aware of the importance of location than most poets, has described his Johannesburg world in assiduous and affectionate detail in poems like "Mayfair" (A World of Their Own, ed. S. Gray, 1976) and "The Tame Horses of Vrededorp" (It's About Time, 1974), poems which, despite their satiric flavour, function as a personal delineation of home. Indeed, a remarkably diverse group of poets have, at one stage or another, directly or indirectly, sought to orientate themselves through a study of Johannesburg, including Patrick Cullinan ("Spring Coming: Zoo Lake", Today Is Not Different, 1978), Mike Nicol ("1976" and "Urban Renewal, Fourteenth Street", Among the Souvenirs, 1978), Peter Wilhelm ("Driving Home to Drinks", White Flowers, 1977), Cherry Clayton ("Braamfontein Funeral Parlour", Modern South African Poetry, ed. S. Gray, 1984) and Kelwyn Sole ("Troyeville/Bertrams", The Blood of Our Silence, 1987). Even Jonty Driver in exile

overseas, can recall Johannesburg vividly, in "Early Morning, From a Train, Near Johannesburg" (Occasional Light, 1979), as a place of "a life in my past", a place (like Abrahams's "Place") of unique and special contrasts:

> "... all I remember now is that sun:
> How it looked like the singular eye
> Of wicked, exciting Johannesburg,
> While I watched from a train in a past
> That is poisoned and holy, a dream
> Of the dead awaiting their dead, and the gold
> Coming down through the air, like gold".

More recently and more fully, Francis Faller, like Lionel Abrahams, has made a meticulous exploration of Johannesburg in all its variety and multeity, a central preoccupation of his poetry. Like Abrahams also, the Jukskei River has provided him with the inspiration for a prize-winning poem. In "The Jukskei River" (Weather Words, 1986), he at first finds the eponymous river a rather lamentable, polluted trickle in comparison with the famous rivers of great European poetry or classical mythology. A sudden Highveld storm, however, not only transforms the river into "a torrent of raging love", but enables the poet to recover his sense of location and orientation:

> "My head is cosmos-clean,
> and numbness, like the last roll of thunder,
> dies. Now there's a new tattoo upon my lips:
> initiation of the rain. On everything, the
> pattern's cut."

Faller is, in fact, fascinated by the fauna and flora of suburban Johannesburg, not only for their politically symbolic reverberations, but also in a quite literal sense as recognisable and familiar

objects with which to gauge his sense of place, as in poems such as "Storm in the Suburb", "As If It Mattered", "Hamadryads", and "Sparrows in April" (all in Weather Words, 1986). Faller has also subjected the city centre of Johannesburg to close scrutiny, in poems like "Noord Street", "Alien", "Our Lady of Hillbrow", and "Joubert Park" (all in Weather Words, 1986). At times, these latter poems appear to derive rather unfruitfully from the waste land of Eliot's London or from Baudelaire's vision of urban alienation.[75] Where they succeed, however, is in their minute attention to details specific to the Johannesburg townscape, so that rather than drifting into some vague universality, they remain rooted in the uniqueness of Faller's own city. As such, they are able, no matter how debased and squalid the scenes they depict may be, to provide an authentic and immediate sense of place, and to evoke Johannesburg in the minds of its inhabitants as a known and recognisable home, as in this extract from "Noord Street":

> "In the evening polyphony
> a sweat-streaked giant strains
> and pleads with his gasping squash-box
> to let one drop of baptism
> fall on the metal city rushing home.
> His cracked voice sings
> of peace, murder and mystery
> entering in the pocket of the night.
> But he sings to plate-glass hostility,
> stiff, dignified, all wound up.
> And from my balcony
> I smell the incense of the street
> rising with that giant's hymn
> to charm this corrupted crossing,
> where skeined paths recoil
> like cobras stiffening to strike."

(ii)

Poets such as Abrahams and Faller have sought to discover a sense of place in Johannesburg, and to demonstrate the availability of that sense of place to all the city's inhabitants, particularly their fellow WESSAs who are confronted by the threat of utter displacement. The fervour of their commitment to their city is equalled, however, by that of Stephen Watson to Cape Town, what his friend and fellow-poet Robert Berold has called Watson's "beloved city".[76] To suggest that Watson has endeavoured to provide a sense of place in Cape Town for his fellow WESSAs may at first seem surprising, since it has been his wont to excoriate, and distance himself from, his WESSA sub-culture.[77] More recently, however, he has conceded that he did not fully understand

> "the degree to which many of my apparently personal problems were really an expression of a collective cultural dis-ease. My sense of personal loneliness was, in reality, often nothing more than one expression of a larger isolation in my sub-culture in this country."[78]

As such, his detailed exploration of Cape Town in his work may be seen, as he himself has indeed forthrightly stated, as an attempt to offer a sense of belonging and location to his countrymen:

> "my ultimate muse is Cape Town and all that this city has meant to me. Increasingly, involuntarily, I have found myself working in that very, very old tradition of the city-poet, of city-poetry. I've wanted to capture Cape Town, to

> people it, to write about it in such a way that it is no longer that merely drab, wind-scoured settlement on the baby-toe of Southern Africa, but a place, a loved place, in the hearts and minds of its inhabitants ... Far more than any politicizing or political role, it is just this which I believe to be the deeper cultural role of the writer."[79]

This concern with finding a sense of place in Cape Town clearly informs early poems such as "Cape Town Days", "Years", "The Silence" and especially "Reconciliation" (all in Poems 1977-1982, 1982) where the city acts as an anodyne, at least temporarily, for the restive and discontented poet:

> After the years
> you would come home again,
> you would stand on the mountain of the slender Cape,
> above a peninsula city you now could call yours;
> and you'd be given to it as it was given you,
> and you'd be given to yourself, and could give ...
>
> And you would have peace,
> because a man cannot live without peace,
> because he cannot live for always like this ...
> yet a peace in the future, and of you alone?...
> there is no separate peace, not any now,
> and you're dreaming again ..."

An atmosphere of deep calm and serenity suffuses the first stanza of the poem, reinforced by the soothing effect of the gently swaying rhythms. The partially repetitive and symmetrical structure of the last two lines of the opening stanza, in particular, convey a sense of Watson's symbiotic, reciprocal relationship with his home city, as well as of the harmony both within himself and with others that his bond with his city has enabled him to attain. In the face of the

volatile, unpredictable situation in contemporary South Africa, however, such a state of inner and outer peacefulness cannot last very long, and so in the final three lines of the poem the restless questioning and scepticism which typifies much of Watson's poetry emerges once again. As such, the possibilities for placidity and concord, both personal and political, glimpsed in "Reconciliation", provide only a brief respite from the mood of anxiety and desperation which pervades poems such as "The Age", "The Burnt Ones", "What the Wind Tries to Tell" and "Under the City" (all in Poems 1977-1982, 1982), whose images of violence and fear are fairly representative of the darker aspects of Watson's work:

"Under the city
the real life runs
secretly pounding
the blood's old drum;
it's there beneath
that all lives meet
who diverge above,
separate, discreet ....

... It's here where the real life
has its secret way,
where the dream behind it
has full way
and all are coupled
by the same ill:
rejected, rejecting,
man wants to kill."

The idea of a sense of place in Cape Town influences Watson's later poetry even more powerfully, as the title of his second collection, In this City, suggests. It is present throughout the volume, explicitly or implicitly, particularly in such poems as "The Mountain", "Afternoon Light in April", "Early One Evening", "Late at Night", "A Soldier Returns" (all in

In This City, 1986). As was the case with Abrahams and Faller, however, Watson is deeply conscious of the grimmer side of his city. Taken as a whole, his poetry does indeed present what he himself has referred to as his "dualistic vision" of Cape Town as both "beautiful" and "appalling",[80] thus remaining "faithful" to both the "beauty" and "the humiliated" of the city.[81] Aesthetically and morally ambiguous though the city may be, however, it still represents a real and unique home, psychologically as much as physically, for the poet. Ultimately, Watson's work may be regarded as a search for a sense of place in Cape Town, not only for himself, but also for all those, like his fellow WESSAs, who have found themselves in danger of becoming irreparably alienated and deracinated in the contemporary period. As Gareth Cornwell has observed,

> "in its engagement no less than its evasions, in its quest for permanence, in the sense of rootedness and spiritual belongings which it earns in spite of itself, In This City speaks eloquently to and for a social group almost defined by its alienation from the historical process and its increasing bafflement before the demands of that process."[82]

Appropriately enough, In This City ends with a poem which acknowledges the profound and indelible influence that Cape Town has had on Watson, and which describes and defines his complex, intimate relationship with the city. "Coda" is a passionate and serious statement in which the poet confirms to himself as much as to the reader all that Cape Town has meant to him. The poem moves from an initial mood of awed wonder and reverence for the majestic beauty of the city, through feelings

of personal anguish at the pain, both individual and collective, both private and political, which undeniably form part of the city's life, and ends on a note of transcendent love for the city which is uniquely and originally and ultimately his. What "Coda" affirms is that in Cape Town WESSAs, like Watson, may find not merely a sense of place, but a place to make sense of life:

"This city that you've lived in for all of thirty years,
that gave you from the very first its elements, archetype
of mountain-line and sea-line, salt-water and sandstone;
that granted through a forest deep in pine with its brigh
drifts of stars,
what you first knew of earth and sky, would ever
know of love ...

This city on a peninsula, between the mountai
and the sea,
that in the decay of its greying wind, its
monotonies of rain,
that through its endemic vacancy, the solitudes
of its lives,
of its great dualities, divided peoples,
darkening the future,
gave you early on, over and over, a very clear
idea of hell...

Knowing there was a light in it, that could not
be disowned,
knowing there was a crime in it that could never
be denied,
you were always leaving, for years were always returning,
torn between its cloud light, pine-light, the
serene nihilism
of its skies,
and its unending, all-negating, word-exhausting
human cries.

For years you've walked a place, through a peninsula
of light,
passing through days and lives that are nothing but
their pain.
For years you've lived divided, darkened by the same
divisions,
have lived so long with these extremes torturing each oth
tearing you apart,
that a city now can start, can finally speak through you.

> Of that bleakness like no other in its wind and
> blander lives,
> of the beauty that is seasonal in its big-clouded winters
> of this city of your origins, this city where you'll
> surely end,
> and of the life it gave you, that, for the first time nov
> lives joined in you, is life itself: painful, incomparabl

Lionel Abrahams sets out to describe Johannesburg in meticulous, almost scientifically accurate detail in order to convey its unique and essential identity through the concrete reality of familiar and recognisable shapes and objects. His tough, sinewy, unembellished verse allows him to acknowledge the city's faults with scrupulous honesty while at the same time enabling him to assert forcefully and plausibly the city's practical potential as a source of location and orientation. Stephen Watson, on the other hand, attempts to convey the spirit of Cape Town through a romantic, visionary evocation of its archetypal, elemental features: it is a city "on a peninsula of light", "between the mountain and the sea", a city "of earth and sky" and "bright drifts of stars"; it is also a city of "greying wind", of "monotonies of rain", "darkened" by "its endemic vacancy, the solitudes of its lives", its "divided peoples". In place, therefore, of Abrahams's sober, plain style, Watson's poetry is typified by grand verbal opulence, uninhibited sentiment, great imaginative vigour, and the almost mythic scope of its vision of Cape Town. At bottom, however, no matter how diverse their poetic styles may be, the content of the two poets' utterance is the same: both assert the possibility for all their countrymen of finding an authentic sense of place in their home cities. The final lines of "Coda" are, in fact, very similar in tone and resonance to the final lines of Abrahams's "Thoughts on Johannesburg's

Centenary" (discussed above) as they affirm the complex sense of belonging and existential meaningfuleness that the city of Cape Town can provide: they speak

> "of this city of your origins, this city where you'll surely end,
> and of the life it gave you, that, for the first time now
> lives joined in you, is life itself: painful, incomparable

Importantly, the syntactical flexibility of the lines allows the subject of the phrase, "is life itself", to be taken as either "this city of your origins" or "the life it gave you". The implication is that for Watson (as for Abrahams) the two are identical: his life is his city, and his city is his life.

Although Watson's work represents the most thorough and ardent attempt, several other poets have considered the possibility of locating themselves through an exploration of the urban co-ordinates of Cape Town, including Mark Swift, in poems such as "Mother-city", "Fruit and Thorn", "Public Gardens, Cape Town" and "In the Cafe Royal, Cape Town" (all in Seconds Out, 1983), Roy Joseph Cotton, in poems such as "A South African Day" and "Cape Town Dusk" (all in Ag, Man, 1986), and, notably, Jeremy Cronin. Although Cronin's materialist ideological perspective is very different from that of the Watson of In This City, and although he is obviously not specifically concerned with the dilemmas of the WESSA group, it is significant that he too should turn to the city of Cape Town in seeking to find a sense of place. Perhaps even more so than Watson, Cronin is keenly aware of the simultaneous beauty and desolation of Cape Town, yet he continues to affirm the city as a source of orientation and location, in a personal sense as much as in a political one. While

the overall vision of the poetry might be on social relations and on collective experiences and actions, the core or focal point of a number of poems is on the poet's personal, individual relationship with the city, as the recurrent use of the first person possessive pronoun reveals, in poems like "Faraway city, there ..." (Inside, 1983):

"In that most beautiful
desolate city of my heart
where if staying on were passive
life wouldn't be what it is ...
... unshakeably
Defiant, frightened, broken
and unbreakable are the people of our city";

and "Removed from the city ..." (Inside, 1983):

"Removed from the city now I live
an exile from confirmation
in a thousand reflective plate-glass fronts,
in ten thousand human faces, out of habitat
I've shrunk.
But how once I moved on escalators!
City, I lived your vibrance, once,
I, multiplicand, you the power of ten.
Yet not yet beyond division, both,
simple and long ....
Yet Walt Whitman this unity is not yet worn.
Our essence the aggregate of social relations,
I live divided
from my city: my city
not yet
diversely one."

(iii)

For some reason, Durban has tended not to excite quite the same sort of feelings of attachment or affection in its poets as have Johannesburg and Cape Town. The tone is set, perhaps, by Douglas Livingstone's collection, Eyes Closed Against the Sun (197), whose predominantly

perjorative view of Durban is continued in poems like Christopher Hope's "The Old Men are Coming From the Durban Club" (Cape Drives, 1974) and "At the Country Club" (In the Country of the Black Pig, 1981), as well as Peter Horn's "Morning in Durban" (Walking Through Our Sleep, 1974).

Yet Durban does feature as an important point of reference in the work of several poets. In his collection, Between Islands (1975), Mike Kirkwood is highly disparaging of Durban generally, and makes no overt attempt to claim it as a source of placement for the WESSA group; yet his bond with the city comes through clearly as poem after poem takes its impetus from the poet's detailed focus on the specifics of the city, including "Durban Verandahs", "Boers" and "Gulliver's Day" (all in Between Islands, 1975). In the first section of a poem such as "Sugar Sunday" (Between Islands, 1975), in particular, the poet's intimate knowledge of, and close relationship with, Durban is revealed in the meticulous descriptive detail and the minutely accurate observations of the unique sights and sounds of the city:

> "A mad blue wind is blowing, the smiler
> whose grin lasts days; a speechless gull is rocked
> miles inland with specks of sand and sea-salt;
> a beak, eyes needle the green depths of cane;
>
> by thousand on thousand, impeccably
> massed and squared on the small coastal hills
> Of Umdloti, Tongati, Umhlali tilting northward,
> march the infallible green impis waving
>
> southward to the mouth of Durban where Umgeni
> spreads her lap to salmon and drowned seamen,
> by the densely fleshed parade and the city's
> banks, car-marts, anciently rapacious drapers,
>
> and beyond to the terminal's twin silos,
> each perfected by a tit of white gold
> untouched by human hand nestling roof-high
> in the clasp of its stainless-steel voluptuary,

while slowly between bluff and breakwater
a long belly slides in, sounds as of ghosts
cheering in the riveted steel hollows."

Kirkwood's own personal sense of place in Durban is revealed poignantly in "The Gamblers", "A City Doctor" and "Old Salt" (all in Between Islands, 1975), poems dealing with his father's death, which take their particular emotional charge from the specific references to the city and the imagery derived from the city. In "Old Salt", for example, it is the son's and father's shared sense of place which serves to concentrate the poem's emotive impact and which gives orientation to the poet's feelings of grief:

"Sedated by breakwaters and today's
mild westerly, your ocean gives itself
up quietly to seven city beaches.

The room they've given you on the 14th floor
is all windows. All your visitors look out
and give you, over their shoulders, bulletins
on seabirds, shipping, the weather, surfing form.

You pretend to read the papers, never leave the bed,
knowing to the last fathom how much water is out there

Today I count a dozen ships queueing in the anchorage.
Every couple of hours a tug comes, and another one goes in."

In contrast with the generally hard, ironic edge of the majority of Kirkwood's verse, Ruth Keech's poetry is deeply personal, compassionate and Christian in nature. She, like Kirkwood, makes no sustained attempt to provide a sense of place in Durban for her fellow WESSAs. Nevertheless, much of her work is, like that of Kirkwood, closely bound up with her awareness of her city. In poems such as "Waiting", "Natal Coast Settlers" and "Change of View" (all in Regarding, 1981), it is her sense of location in Durban that gives

focus to the experiences described in the poems, while in "Durban Streets" (Regarding, 1981), it is her relationship with her city that enables her to achieve a meaningful perspective on her life:

"These steep suburban streets in shade
of trees drawn up on either side
have added up my days for forty years.

Their spreading alphabet was first
to give my wonderings the words
that taught me happiness and tears ...

... Only when I inanimate am driven
up the last hill will the invisible cordon
snap, these streets stand still, these trees stampede,

their focus lost, my fetters faded,
their taunting with my craving ended,
my life at last an eternal flower."

(iv)

Like Durban the population of Grahamstown has over the years tended to be predominantly WESSA, and the city has, again like Durban, tended to have been seen, rightly or wrongly, as having retained something of a British colonial character. Grahamstown has also, of course, come to be recognised as the focal point for the historical origins of a permanent English-speaking presence in South Africa. Significantly, however, Grahamstown's poets, in their recent treatment of the town, are not concerned with evoking a colonial tradition which seems rather irrelevant and inapplicable to the deracinated modern WESSA; neither are they interested in recalling the partial origins of a people whose identity and relationship with their country has undergone massive changes in the contemporary period. Instead, the perspective of recent poets has centered on the possibility of

forging a new and meaningful relationship with the city, free of the associations of an outworn cultural tradition. Such relationships tend, in practice, to be complex, difficult, and personal. Yet, in exploring in detail and articulating this sort of relationship, the poets seem also to speak to and for the inhabitants of Grahamstown generally, in that they confirm the ability of contemporary WESSAs to discover a valid sense of place in this town in the face of the threat of widespread cultural dislocation.

Robert Berold, for example, is a poet whose work is heavily influenced by psychoanalytical theories,[83] and who seeks to discover his origins in terms not simply of the physical, but ultimately of the metaphysical and the collective unconscious, as a poem such as "Map" (The Door to the River, 1984), indicates. A reference at the end of the poem to the Kowie River suggests, nevertheless, that he finds himself drawn to the Grahamstown world in which he did, indeed, choose to locate himself in 1982. In one of his few poems in which he deals with recognisable external specifics, "Settler Country" (The Door to the River, 1984), he, in fact, describes, as a recent settler himself, his complex and in many ways difficult relationship with the town. To the poet, Grahamstown seems a most forbidding place, devoid of obvious natural beauty, resistant to modernisation and progress, a closed community riven by religious and racial prejudice:

> "The soil's black
> and into it we die.
> It is a miracle
> how soil is structured.
>
> In Grahamstown the leaves frown,
> turn brown, fall down,
> the street tilts blackly towards them
> and men hold tightly onto their words ....

... In Graham's Town
the leaves run down.
No mines. No factories.
No Jazz. No Jews.

Just broken houses
painted green, a township scene.
No yellowwood or climbing rose.
There were arrests. Nothing shows."

And yet it is here, in this place, that the poet is able to discover a sense of place. At the heart of the poem, he declares his capacity (and the capacity of all of "us") to find, in the context of the Grahamstown world, a source of orientation and location and creative energy. Significantly, this declaration is articulated in what is for this generally rather cryptic and riddling poetry an uncharacteristic pellucidity:

"but some of us wake warmed
by the mere thought of sunlight,
and others are just too tired
and turn back ill, to make their resolutions:

No more hiding. No more half-lights.
No more twilights. No more shadows.

Today I make my promises:
I will learn the curve of the lamp
or how these shells were deposited on the beach.
It has something to do with currents
freezing creatures in their shells
we are not too far from the anarctic are we?"

Without doubt the poet with the closest and deepest attachment to Grahamstown, however, is Don Maclennan. Interestingly enough, the Scottish-born poet is, like Berold, by no means a native Grahamstonian, having settled in the town in his late thirties. Like Berold also, his relationship with the town is complicated and problematic, and yet it operates as the basis of a

profound and authentic contemporary sense of place. As Douglas Reid Skinner has pointed out, Maclennan's poetry is characterised by the sense of "a voice rooted in a particular place and a particular time".[84] In the poem, "Grahamstown II" (Reckonings, 1983), for example, the focus is neither on the city's historical cultural associations nor on some vague idea of the African soil. Rather the poet derives his sense of location and belonging from his intimate knowledge of the unique sights and sounds of the city. In this case, the natural and man-made aspects of the town merge in the combined music of its indigenous birds and its famous church bells:

> "City of bells
> and birds:
> hornbills squeaking
> in the loquat tree
> their voices too absurd
> for such intrinsic dignity;
> a rainbird and his bottle
> bubbling down the scale.
> City of gentle mediocrity,
> your birds and bells
> obliterated me."

The phrase "gentle mediocrity" is crucial, for it captures concisely the poet's comprehension of the city. On the one hand, he is well aware of its ordinary, mundane, apparently unspecial nature; on the other hand, the word "gentle" suggests not only his own tolerant and affectionate attitude towards it, but also his understanding that in some respects the city is very special, particularly in the way that it has provided people like him with a home and a sense of belonging. Indeed, the powerful and extensive influence of Grahamstown is communicated by the multiple connotations of the word "obliterated". At

first, the word seems inappropriately violent, though it is quite feasible that the town has been the scene for the poet of certain thwarted ambitious or painful emotions. More importantly, though, particularly since the grammatical subjects of the word are the birds and bells, the word relates to the idea of the poet's sense of place: Maclennan has been obliterated in the sense that his personal identity, his individuality, has been subsumed into the larger category of the city's relationship with its inhabitants. He has, in other words, become part of the city, mingled with it like the fused music of the birds and bells. Such a reading seems far more consonant with the sound patterns of the poem generally, where "obliterated me" forms part of the gentle, unobtrusive rhyme of the poem, suggesting not violent destruction but harmonious integration. This reading would also admit the further implication that the poet's relationship with the city is so strong that it will endure until the poet's death, and will be broken only by death.

Maclennan's deep attachment to the world of Grahamstown is revealed again and again in his work through his intimate and detailed understanding of its character, in poems such as "Mid-winter", "Ceremony" and "Insomnia" (all in Reckonings, 1983). It is a city, of course, which is not always gentle: it can at times prove most inhospitable and harsh. Yet Maclennan, in the opening lines of a poem like "Grahamstown I" (Reckonings, 1983), could be speaking for all its inhabitants when he states unequivocally and with resolute finality that it is in this city that he has as a contemporary WESSA, found a "home" and a valid and meaningful sense of place:

"Coming home
here to oven heat,
houses cracking in the sun,
forty degrees
and tar melting,
the road an ineffectual
stick run.
From a raked-out corner of the sky
a dove wild-throated cries.
The hills are umber
under withering fire:
orphan columns of smoke
declare the forests's tired desire.

My place, here."

CHAPTER 4

A POETRY OF DREAD

1.

Were one to isolate the single most pervasive and powerful feature of the consciousness of contemporary white English-speaking South Africans, it would surely be their feelings of intense, seemingly unassuagable dread. The origins of such feelings may be found, at least partly, in the context of the deeply troubled general South African situation. Acutely aware of living in a time when widespread social, political and economic injustice has produced a climate in South Africa of unprecedented radicalisation, polarisation and extremism, of grave popular discontent, and of simmering aggression and violence, the WESSAs' expectations for the future are fearful, to say the least. The dread caused by such anticipations of imminent disaster has been aggravated by several specifically WESSA dilemmas already explored by the present study. These would include, firstly, their lack of a clear, cogent identity which has heightened their precarious position within South African society and which has inhibited their ability, as a group, to pursue decisive and positive courses of action; and, secondly, their damaged sense of place which has given rise to feelings of alienation and disorientation as well as to fears of dislocation and displacement.

Deriving, thus, from a variety of sources, the dread experienced by contemporary WESSAs is both complex and multiplex. On one level, having attempted to establish a home for themselves in the affluent suburbs of South

Africa's major cities, WESSAs now find themselves practically besieged in those very suburbs, needing to barricade themselves behind high walls, locked gates, guard dogs and burglar alarms. Not unlike their Settler predecessors, present-day WESSAs appear to exist in a frontier situation, only now the laager has been transferred from the African hinterland into the neatly-trimmed neighbourhood of the modern metropolis. In a wider sense, the confrontation between Africa and Europe, the clash between black and white, has shifted from the context of the frontier wars to that of the current political struggle, the most likely outcome of which seems to many WESSAs to be a potentially cataclysmic social and political upheaval. Consequently, the form which these feelings of dread may take varies widely, ranging from a straightforward fear of personal attack, to a vague terror of some unnamed menace lurking in the darkness, to an anxiety about the human and social cost of political violence, to the nightmarish presentiment of a national apocalypse.

The severe and diverse nature of the dread felt by WESSAs has produced an energetic and extensive poetic response. Virtually without exception, South African English poets writing in the last twenty years have, at some stage, turned their attention to the mood of tense apprehension and grim foreboding which so thoroughly permeates WESSA society. The purpose of this chapter is to examine in detail the many different ways in which poets have treated this central contemporary WESSA problem.

2.

It would be misleading to suggest that feelings of fear or apprehensiveness among WESSAs as a group is a uniquely contemporary condition, or that South African English poets have never previously made such feelings the subject of their work. Virtually from the beginning of an English-speaking presence in the Cape, the English have found themselves in situations which have produced fearful reactions, and English-language poets have consistently articulated these reactions in their poetry. What the present study does claim, however, is that in the contemporary period the nature of the dread experienced by WESSAs has changed substantially, undergoing both a radical intensification and a transformation of its content, both of which are the result to a large extent of the utterly altered social and political circumstances of modern-day WESSAs. This study would also claim that the nature of the "poetry of dread" to be examined in this chapter is of a quite different order from comparable earlier poetry.

A brief survey of some representative examples of this earlier poetry, as well as the historical circumstances which gave rise to it, may serve to illustrate the novel character of the contemporary poetry of dread.

From the time of the 1820 settlers, a certain degree of fear and trepidation has characteristically informed the thinking of white English-speakers in South Africa. The position of the Albany settlers (and similar, later settlements) on an exposed frontier, in the midst of an unexplored, potentially dangerous terrain, confronted by what they regarded as savage, hostile African

tribes, was clearly one which encouraged feelings of fear.[1] For the most part, however, "Settler verse" tends to take the form of a panegyric upon the indomitable spirit and fortitude of the British settler in the face of adversity, rather than an examination of the dread experienced by those settlers. What feelings of fear there were, may be discerned more in the sub-text than in the surface content of poems like Charles Barter's Stray Memories of Natal and Zululand (1897),[2] and the Reverend H.H. Dugmore's "A Reminiscence of 1820" (Verse, 1920; the poem dates from 1870) with its rather too insistent asseveration of the facility with which the settlers were able to make a "home" for themselves in "the lone wilderness" of the Eastern frontier. In rather different fashion, the very real hardships and fears of the settlers may be detected beneath the caustic sarcasm of Andrew Geddes Bain's "The British Settler" (A Century of South African Poetry, ed. M. Chapman, 1981; the poem dates from 1844), particularly in its fourth stanza:

> "Of fortune's frowns, smiles, ups, and downs,
> I had a great variety;
> I smouching drop. I open shop,
> then buy a farm;
> Doing charming with my farming,
> blest with friends' society,
> When all at once, the Amakosa
> break the charm!
> Assegaaing, yelling, crying -
> murder! fire! and revelry!
> Stealing cattle, bloody battle,
> every kind of devilry, -
> Helter-skelter, seeking shelter,
> wives and children rustling in!
> Husbands wounded, - lost, confounded,
> tender friends are justling in!"

Despite the manifold problems and dangers of frontier life, there generally remained among the settlers a confidence that what they saw as their superior British

culture and civilisation would inevitably triumph over the darkness and savagery of Africa - a confidence attested to by the majority of Settler writers.[3] As such, the dread felt by the Settlers seems largely tempered by a resilient faith in the ability of the English not merely to survive in Africa, but to prosper.

A similar moderation of fear is evident also in poems dealing with the frontier wars, especially the Zulu wars. Though the poems record the fear of the soldiers in the face of extreme danger, the principal motivation of the poetry is to communicate the heroic valour of the British forces and to affirm the inevitable victory of European light over African dark.[4] Albert Brodrick's "Rorke's Drift" (A Wanderer's Rhymes, 1893) is fairly typical. The opening stanza of the poem expresses the dread of the British at the prospect of imminent Zulu attack:

> "On the wild river's bank two horsemen appear-
> They are bearers of tidings that fill them with fear.
> Haste! Put us across and prepare for the fight,
> The Zulus are out in their uttermost might,
> They rushed on our camp like a dark hungry flood
> And their spears are all red with our countrymen's blood."

The rest of the poem, however, pays glowing tribute to the courage and skill of the soldiers and ends on a note of patriotic pride and confidence:

> "In the heart thrill of nations will live your reward
> Oh brave 24th, oh brave Bromhead and Chard".

The turn of the century predictably witnessed a concentration on the subject of the Boer War, and the struggle for white supremacy in the sub-continent.

Despite the bitter and often bloody nature of the war, British imperial interests and the English-speaking population were hardly under threat of destruction, and so feelings of dread are generally absent from poetry of the time.[5] Influenced, however, by the establishment of a white-dominated Union and the consequent protest of blacks against their exclusion from the processes of government, as well as by the revolutionary mood prevalent in Europe and elsewhere, South African English poetry began to take on an incipiently contemporary political character in the first decades of the twentieth century. As Guy Butler has observed, Roy Campbell was the first poet to introduce this "new dimension" in his work, concluding several of his "African" poems on the "ominous note" of an impending people's revolution.[6] For example, "The Serf" (Adamastor, 1930) ends with a prophetic vision of

> "The timeless, surly patience of the serf
> That moves the nearest to the naked earth
> And ploughs down palaces, and thrones, and towers",

while "The Zulu Girl" (Adamastor, 1930) finds in a scene of a young black girl breast-feeding her child a symbol of the transmission to future generations of the insatiable thirst for liberation:

> "Yet in that drowsy stream his flesh imbibes
> An old unquenchable unsmotherable heat -
> The curbed ferocity of beaten tribes,
> The sullen dignity of their defeat.
>
> Her body looms above him like a hill
> Within whose shade a village lies at rest,
> Or the first cloud so terrible and still
> That bears the coming harvest in its breast."

Despite the apparently liberal sentiments expressed in these poems, Campbell's temperament, generally, tended to be conservative and anti-democratic.[7] Even in these poems, traces of a xenophobic prejudice towards the "primitive" and "savage" forces of Africa, may perhaps be detected not only in the animalistic imagery used to describe the girl and her child, for example, but also in phrases such as "unsmotherable heat" and "curbed ferocity". WESSA dread and unease towards what is regarded as the uncivilised darkness of Africa - an attitude fairly typical of WESSAs in general at the time[8] - is expressed clearly in "Rounding the Cape" (Adamastor, 1930), which resurrects the myth of Adamastor, from Campbell's reading of The Lusiads by the sixteenth-century Portuguese poet, Luis de Camoes. The myth of Adamastor, glossed by Guy Butler as "the spirit of a barbarous continent resentful of any attempt to disturb its ancient ignorance and gloom"[9] serves, as Stephen Gray points out, to express "the white man's anxieties about Africa".[10] Campbell's poem, a farewell to the "hated" and "adored" continent of his birth, offers in its final stanza a foreboding glimpse of the awakening darkness of the Third World:

> "The prow glides smoothly on through seas quiescent:
> But where the last point sinks into the deep,
> The land lies dark beneath the rising crescent,
> And Night, the Negro, murmurs in his sleep".

In similar vein, the sense of dread in the poetry of William Plomer takes the form of a deep-rooted mistrust of the dark, Dionysian forces of Africa. In "The Devil-Dancers" (Collected Poems, 1960; 1973; the poem dates from 1936), for instance, the apprehensive WESSA speaker, having witnessed a "primitive" African dance, warns his countrymen not to be seduced by these forces:

"Let us take care - that flake of flame may be
The butterfly whose bite can kill a man".

By and large, however, the feelings of dread expressed by poets like Campbell and Plomer are of a relatively low intensity, as the white oligarchy remained firmly and securely in place, and the chances of a successful black uprising on a large scale taking place continued to seem only a very remote possibility, at least in the foreseeable future. Indeed, poems dealing with the fearful anticipations of whites form only a very small part of either Campbell's or Plomer's canon, and even a smaller part of South African English poetry generally at the time.

The years of the second World War naturally turned the attention of poets away from specifically local dilemmas and towards the experience of global conflict, as the work of the "war generation" poets reveals. Immediately following the war, however, the idea of dread in something approaching the contemporary meaning of the term begins to emerge forcibly. The fear of ruthless, vengeful African powers, or of specifically political violence and upheaval, becomes increasingly severe with the victory of the National Party in the 1948 election and their entrenchment of the policy of apartheid, which served even further to polarise and militarise the conflicting parties in the South African situation. This intensified dread was particularly, and perhaps mainly, prevalent among WESSAs, who now believed, generally, that they were no longer in a position to control events in South Africa, and so felt ever more helpless and anxious. This WESSA dread is expressed in a number of poems of the 1950s, including John Peters's "Reading Tolstoy" (A Book of South

African Verse, ed. G. Butler, 1959), where the speaker recalls the politically symbolic advice of his "nursegirl":

> "My nursegirl used to tell me when
> Thunder began to shake the trees
> It was a time to pray and then
> Wait for the sky to fall".

A similar fear, also conveyed in images of a violent storm, is treated in R.N. Currey's "Landscape of Violence" (The Africa We Knew, 1973; the poem dates from the 1950s), quoted in full:

> "Where racial attitudes, like snakes,
> Coil above children as they play,
> And every brown and white child wakes
> Beside a sloughed-off love one day;
>
> Where politics like hailstorms ride
> And tear the future from the trees,
> And every rider caught outside
> Must pray between his horse's knees".

It is, however, only in the last few decades that the feelings of dread among WESSAs have taken on a distinctively contemporary character, becoming considerably intensified and extended in wholly new directions. The initial impetus for this trend came from the incident at Sharpeville on the 21st of March, 1960, where 69 people, involved in a peaceful protest against pass laws, were shot dead by police. For many people, Sharpeville signalled the beginning of the end for the politics of multiracialism and gradualism; it precipitated the shift in black opposition policy from passive protest to active resistance, in particular the commitment of the African National Congress to the armed struggle; and it confirmed, for many, the lengths to which the ruling regime was prepared to go in defence of its interests. Although the Government's

massive security clampdown in the years following Sharpeville proved grimly effective, the mood of white South Africa continued to darken, so that by the late 1960s and early 1970s, WESSAs' feelings of dread reached a recognisably contemporary intensity. The reasons for this included the independence of neighbouring states (Mozambique, Angola and Zimbabwe) following successful revolutionary movements; the escalation of hostilities on South Africa's borders, culminating in the full-scale guerilla war in South West Africa - Namibia and Angola from 1975; the acceleration of the terror campaign within South Africa; and the rise to prominence of militant black consciousness organisations. The reasons also included, from the other side of the political fence, the continuing repressiveness and intransigence of the National Party, which served to provoke increasingly radicalised opposition and to create a climate of fear and anxiety. These tensions came to a head on the 16th of June, 1976 in Soweto, where a student march demanding the abrogation of the compulsory use of Afrikaans as a medium of instruction in black schools led to a bloody confrontation with police, which in turn sparked off a sequence of violent events in which some 200 people were killed by the 24th of June, 1976. The horror of Soweto left an enduring mark in the minds of black South Africans, and provided the impulse for the continuing sporadic unrest of the following years, as well as the nation-wide disturbances of 1984 and 1985 to which the Government reacted by imposing the State of Emergency in June, 1985, a draconian measure which remains in force today in 1989.

For WESSAs, therefore, recent South African history has been a source of acute anxiety. This anxiety has,

moreover, been exacerbated by their own peculiar dilemmas. Apart from their precarious identity and their impaired sense of place, these would include the guilt of many WESSAs at being accomplices in the racist hegemony, as well as their unease at seeming prime targets because of their material prosperity. H.L. Watts, in his detailed sociological study of WESSAs, has found that "English-speaking Whites still numerically dominate the upper occupational categories", that WESSAs "as a group have the highest social status in South Africa", and that, taken as a whole, WESSAs as a group "come from the most culturally advantaged home background of any ethnic or sub-cultural group in South Africa".[11] The average WESSA's position of socio-economic superiority in a society characterised by vast discrepancies in wealth and standards of living would seem, in other words, to have contributed to his already strong feelings of dread.

It is, naturally, difficult to evaluate scientifically the degree of dread experienced by an ethnic group in a society. What empirical data there is, however, suggests that WESSAs are more fearful about the future than other groups in the country, and that their level of fear is among the highest in the world. In the mid 1970s, for example, Bettina J. Huber, an American sociologist, conducted a detailed study of South Africans' "images of the future".[12] This investigation of South Africans' attitudes towards the future of their country is based on an internationally recognised method of evaluation[13] whereby respondents are asked to describe the best and worst possible future they can imagine, as well as the most likely future. The findings of the study are very revealing. Among whites, Huber concludes that "the English-speakers are

more likely to exhibit a low level of expectations" and "are more likely to be pessimistic about the future than are the Afrikaans-speakers".[14] Very interestingly, WESSAs were equally fearful about "repression and discrimination" (on the part of Government) and about a "general threat to existing stability" (that is, black political violence),[15] which would confirm the contention of the present thesis that WESSAs see themselves as occupying an impossible position between the opposed forces of Afrikaner and African nationalism.[16] Apart from the internal comparisons of Huber's investigation, she also provides an international comparison, in which the attitudes of white South Africans are compared with the attitudes measured in thirteen other countries using the same method of evaluation: Brazil, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Egypt, India, Israel, Japan, Nigeria, Panama, the Philippines, the United States, West Germany and Yugoslavia.[17] Bearing in mind the significantly higher level of fears among WESSAs than among Afrikaners, the fears of white South Africans as a whole rank as among the highest in the world. White South Africans, according to Huber's statistics, have the highest level of social fears of all the countries measured; they have the third highest level of political fears (behind the Dominican Republic and Nigeria); and the second highest level of national fears (behind Egypt).[18] In addition, they have the lowest level of expectations for the future, of all the countries in the survey.[19] Though the specific arithmetical values provided by Huber's study may be questioned, the general implications seem fairly clear: contemporary South African society is one characterised by a high degree of fear and anxiety; and WESSAs, caught up in the struggle for power between a repressive Afrikaner-

dominated government and a revolutionary black liberation movement, reveal perhaps the highest degree of fear and anxiety of all ethnic groups in this society. Indeed, Huber's conclusions are supported, albeit with rather less statistical precision, by other studies, such as that conducted by Hudson, Gideon and Biesheuvel.[20]

The purpose of the rest of this chapter is to examine the many varied ways in which contemporary South African English poets have responded to the feelings of dread experienced by their countrymen in the violent and troubled terrain of present-day South African society.

3.

The deeply troubled nature of contemporary South African society has encouraged a profound sense of dread among South Africans, and particularly among WESSAs, in a way which is unprecedented in South African history. This pervasive mood of trepidation has elicited a response from South African English poets which is, in its extensiveness and diversity, also quite unprecedented in indigenous English-language poetry in this country.

This poetic response has been noted by a number of critics. Michael Chapman, for example, has observed that

> "just as radical cultural shifts in Europe and the United States at the turn of the century gave impetus to apocalyptic visions, so the southern African climate of the last twenty years has increasingly favoured an 'imagination of disaster'."[21]

a defining symbol of the entire WESSA sub-cultural group. Almost immediately, however, the pleasurable associations of the scene begin to be undermined: the fact that the WESSA speaker is "alone", for example, suggests not merely his placid seclusion, but also his potential vulnerability; the qualification of the phrase, "signs of peace", by the epithet, "official", implies that there are other, unofficial signs which point to the far from peaceful state of the nation. As the poem progresses, so the speaker's deep-seated dread becomes increasingly evident. He is aware of the typical group of black servants and workers in the white suburbs, whose label, "boys", attempts to categorise them as both undeveloped and harmless. Now, however, he begins to suspect that the "business" upon which they are bent is anything but innocent. In the fourth stanza, he fears that his defences have been breached, the laager infiltrated, and that the enemy is within the gate, as he imagines the various subversive activities of these undercover suburban assassins and terrorists. Fearfully conscious of the ubiquitous presence of this clandestine enemy, the speaker finds that his previously leisurely swimming becomes "difficult" and that the pool itself transmutes into a horrifying instrument of violent death. Moreover, his cultivated summer garden assumes terrifying, hallucinatory qualities as his suburban idyll becomes "a nightmare at noon". Within this nightmare, the basis of the WESSA's fears is subtly suggested through a vision of a post-revolutionary South Africa in which the current racial plutocracy has been replaced by an egalitarian system that would strip whites of their privileges:

> "Spiders dream
> Conjuring the time
> When a messenger may look at a prime minister".

(iii) the psychological effect of dread on the consciousness of WESSAs, expressed in terms either of horrifying, nightmarish visions of violence and destruction, or of a subconscious fear of some vague, undefined menace;

(iv) the fears of WESSAs used by several poets as a means of warning them of the dangers of continuing social and economic injustice.

Each of these categories will be dealt with in turn.

(i)

The most immediate and obvious aspect of the contemporary WESSA's dread involves his sense of being under constant threat of attack in his own suburban home. The WESSA, having managed to discover a sense of place in an apparently civilised, secure urban environment, away from the dark, dangerous forces of the African hinterland, finds his position still to be precarious. Ironically, it is the very material success which has facilitated his suburban location that has made him a potential victim. His inability or, possibly, refusal to see this has been the focus of a number of poems. Such poems, as Christopher Hope has adroitly put it, study the "uneasy leisure, uncomfortable affluence and bewildered prosperity" of the contemporary WESSA.[24]

As mentioned earlier, social scientific research has confirmed that WESSAs are the most economically advantaged group in the country,[25] and recent poets have been quick to seize on to the symbols of their

notorious materialism. Robert Greig, in "Never Golden" (A World of Their Own, ed. S. Gray, 1976), recalls "the servants, the pool, the vast garden" of his affluent childhood; Mike Nicol sees WESSA life as characterised by "Money and / Perfect skies", in "1976" (Among the Souvenirs, 1978); Christopher Hope, in "Notes for Atonal Blues" (In the Country of the Black Pig, 1981), lists the typical WESSA accretions - "Barbered lawn, hoovered court, sanitary pool".

It is, in fact, precisely these familiar status symbols which Hope utilises in the poem, "In a Swimming Pool in a Garden in White South Africa" (A World of Their Own, ed. S. Gray, 1976),[26] in order to explore the confused dread of the average modern-day WESSA.

"I am alone in a swimming pool:
This smear of water, clear and antiseptic,
Is the cool focal point of a garden.
I am alone in a swimming pool in a garden
In white south africa.

All around me are the official signs of peace:
Tell-tale birds, an obsequious breeze,
Mute, attendant trees.

Around me, also, orbit carefully out of earshot
Without once obtruding,
Houseboys, garden boys, dry cleaners' boys, milk boys,
Butchers' boys, ice-cream boys bent upon their business,
Out of mind, beyond the hedge.

Several grind glass in the kitchen; another hones
A panga in the tool shed; in the laundry room
A couple slit the seals of pouches of poison;
Some fiddle with the milk; a gang vaguely
Fingers prams in the park;
One unhurriedly pulls a home-made rifle through.

Boys will be boys.

They disturb nobody.

Chris Mann, moreover, interviewed as co-editor (with Guy Butler) of A New Book of South African Verse in English, has affirmed that "we are living in a time of great social change where people's values are being severely questioned", and he has suggested that "this historical context is a crucible from which much verse is being produced". This verse, according to Mann, expresses, on the one hand, the emotions of "self-pity and determination amongst the oppressed", and, on the other, the "feelings of tremendous fear and dread and uncertainty and self-dislike amongst those who see themselves as oppressing".[22] The contemporary South African situation, and the WESSAs' position within it, thus, has led to the emergence of what Mann has pithily labelled "the poetry of dread".[23]

In spite of this critical attention, however, no attempt has been made to explore systematically the full range of this poetry of dread, or to demonstrate its particularly contemporary quality. This chapter aims, therefore, to examine in some detail the various forms which this poetry has taken in the contemporary period. Though there is naturally some overlap, four broad categories will be identified and discussed:

(i) the dread of WESSAs living in the modern cities of South Africa, as they nervously wait for their suburban "laagers" to be breached;

(ii) the fearful expectation of a specifically political apocalypse in South Africa on a national level;

Instead, they genially observe their decreed profile,
Etching it in flesh with tender scruple:
The boy on the bicycle
Is eternally set upon
By the neighbourhood's dogs
(Of which he has been warned to BEWARE).

Swimming is difficult.
Breathe, arm, kick, breathe, arm.
The water in the pool congeals into
Sheets of glass grinding, each against the next,
With me sheathed opaquely between.

The garden is gripped in the strident
Notes of a high summer sun. Tossing
And sweating it emits a dozen
Competing scents like a man frantic
In a nightmare at noon.

The sun trumpets out its brassy heat
Terrifying the shrubs, bleaching the roses,
Turning even the grass hot
And uneasy underfoot.
Spiders d eam
Conjuring the time
When a messenger may look at a prime minister.

Swimming is difficult.
Breathe, arm, kick, breathe, arm.
Bone tested against glass wins a small shriek.

I am alone in a swimming pool in a garden
In white south africa.
Turning brown.

Hope's poem, which is at the same time highly witty and severely critical of WESSAs, depicts a scene of typical WESSA comfort in order to subvert it. One by one, the customary, seemingly innocuous images and objects of the domestic WESSA lifestyle are dissected to reveal the barely repressed paranoia beneath, as the poem moves from a portrayal of apparently undisturbed suburban tranquillity to a vision of deeply neurotic dread. The central image of the poem, a white man relaxing in his swimming pool in the carefully maintained garden of his plush suburban home, could be

The poem ends on a mordantly ironic note, as the initial description of the speaker's peaceful solitude becomes invested in the deliberately ambiguous final lines with a far more ominous significance:

> "I am alone in a swimming pool in a garden
> In white south africa.
> Turning brown."

The full-stop at the end of the penultimate line allows for the phrase, "Turning brown", to be applied either to the speaker or to "south africa", so that the stanza refers not simply to the speaker's acquisition of a fashionable suntan, but, more pertinently, to South Africa's progress towards a more democratic, non-racial political future. ("Brown" suggests an integration of black and white.) It is to the discredit of WESSAs like the speaker of the poem that this political prospect should be a source of dread rather than enthusiasm.

A poem which evinces similar political sentiments while exploring the nature of contemporary suburban WESSA dread, is Patrick Cullinan's "Spring Coming: Zoo Lake" (Today Is Not Different, 1978). The poem is set during winter in the affluent Johannesburg northern suburb of Parkview, adjoining Zoo Lake, and looks forward to the advent of spring, both literally and, in the sense of a more equitable society, figuratively. Throughout the poem, in fact, the natural and human landscape is used to symbolise the socio-political realities of South Africa, as the poem moves through its three sections from a description of the current winter days to an imaginative evocation of what the coming summer could be like before returning finally to the bleakness of the persisting winter. The first section suggests some

of the reasons for the WESSAs' feelings of insecurity and dread. One is the difficulty WESSAs still experience in finding a home in Africa. Like the bare foreign trees - "jacarandas, London planes" - they have tried to make "This hinterland their home", and yet, when they hear from the nearby zoo, "a cold hyena whoop, / Alien, feral in the smokeless zone", it seems from the WESSA perspective that there is "For Africa no hope". The yapping of a senile dachshund in reply supports the idea of the WESSAs' tenuous sense of place, especially through the incongruously jingling rhyme:

> "The suburb's dogs were barking back.
> This is the echo
> We never lack."

The barking of the dogs suggests another, more disturbing reason for the WESSAs' dread: the vast discrepancy in wealth between the races, which necessitates the keeping of guard dogs by whites to protect their property and possessions from the materially disadvantaged blacks. This discrepancy is adroitly symbolised in the fact that the whites return from work in cars to their comfortable houses, apparently oblivious to the

> "taxis,
> Buses crammed with blacks
> Who somehow here have found
> Backyard rooms
> To make their lives and ours".

The second section turns away for the moment from the harsh present circumstances to convey a vision of the future. It begins by articulating a yearning for the growth and plenitude of summer, in terms both of nature as well as the material and social upliftment of black

South Africans, such as those who frequent the lake:

"Black families
So well dressed
It seems they come instinctively
To act a dream of middle class,
And here they find it,
Warm and modest,
Gentle by the lake".

Cullinan remains sceptical about the actualisation of this vision, however. Such a natural reformation of society seems unlikely, for, although it is a "time of change", what is wanted is

"Something that's not here, not quite
The thing we're going to get".

An important part of the reason for the poet's scepticism lies in his awareness of the continuing paranoid insecurities of his fellow WESSAs. The final section returns to the reality of present-day apartheid South Africa; instead of suggesting the possibility of racial harmony and equality, the poem presents a brutal picture of black frustration and white dread. The section is quoted in full:

"But now
Cold afternoons
And wind along the streets;
Crates of empties pile
And crash upon the pavement
Outside the bottle store.
Half drunk, black workers
Curse all passers-by.
Somewhere beyond the shops
Metallic and monotonous,
A burglar siren starts,
It rises to crescendo, falls
Away, then starts again
To sound across the sky.
Another false alarm,
Or is it real this time?

The noise persists
And will not fade
Or falter in the weakening light;
As cars come home
And buses fill the streets.
Above the blue gum tops
The sun begins to sink.
Held for seconds in a branch
It glows like fruit
Then drops below the houses.
In sudden dusk
Lights jump at the fountain,
Gloss the trees; light covers
The darkness of
This urban
Artificial lake."

Once again, Cullinan points up the disastrously different circumstances of blacks and whites. The anger and despair of black workers finds expression only in futile drunken cursing, while the fear of whites in the face of this scarcely controlled violence is communicated in the wail of a burglar siren, another part of the vast security apparatus needed by WESSAs to safeguard their prosperity. The implication of the poem is that until the coming of South Africa's political spring, WESSAs are destined to continue to huddle fearfully in their suburban laagers. Such a spring, unfortunately, seems very distant, and the poem ends with a series of deeply melancholy images: the sinking of the sun; the "sudden dusk"; and, despite the superficial glitter of the man-made lights,

"The darkness of
This urban
Artificial lake".

Cullinan's poem expresses the idea that the English in South Africa continue to exist in a "frontier situation", only now the frontier has been relocated in the modern cities. It is an idea which recurs often in

the poetry of dread, and clearly represents a potent imaginative source for South African English poets. The idea has also been explored by a number of critics. Michael Chapman, for example, has noted that "the laager has moved into ... the northern suburbs of Johannesburg",[27] and Christopher Hope has pointed out that the Africa which contemporary WESSAs fear is no longer the dark, unexplored interior but

> "the Africa that waits just beyond the glare of the electric lights in our trim suburbs; the Africa against which we triple-lock our doors, buy guns, keep dogs".[28]

One poet who understands this form of dread intimately is Francis Faller, in whose work urban natural phenomena, simmering political unrest, and images of frontier conflict, conjoin to produce a penetrating insight into the deeply troubled WESSA psyche. In "Hamadryads" (Weather Words, 1986), for instance, familiar suburban sights and sounds assume a terrifying strangeness, so that despite "The dogs patrolling the suburb's barbican", the residents know no rest. Similarly, in "Barriers" (Weather Words, 1986), a series of bizarre, violent images confirm cumulatively that the modern suburban laager is by no means impenetrable. In fact, the "barriers" which WESSAs have attempted to impose between themselves and bloody, anarchic retribution seem quite ludicrously ineffective. Faller's poem seems to take an active, macabre delight in exposing the fearful vulnerability of his privileged fellow WESSAs:

"What, then, is severed by glass and steel?
When I open the window I cut a vein
and the street's blood gushes through
my eyes and ears. They gurgle like drains.

The spike-topped fence holds nothing out.
The house, stripped naked, is trembling
from this assault on its privileged
address. Nothing is repulsed by memory.

It's open warfare with a past that huddles
in gloom. It's comradeship with fists.
It's meekness to anarchy, and surrender
to the pressure of the morning's kiss!

So much happens, opening a window.
And friends, why are you still asleep?
The sun's rinsing your dream in blood
and that wall you've built, a corpse could leap."

It should not be thought, however, that the dread described by the poetry under consideration is limited to a few paranoid individual WESSAs; it appears, rather, to be a pandemic condition of WESSA society. Chris Mann, for example, in "The Wives' Tales" (A World of their Own, ed. S. Gray, 1976), makes the point that even ostensibly liberal, progressive WESSAs are not exempt from dread. In the final section of the poem, the liberal WESSA protagonist displays familiar contradictions:

"In the drawer above the thumbed
Subversive literature
Lie laundered cuffs
And collars
Smelling of Soweto wood smoke".

Despite his sympathy with the oppressed, he is alarmed by the "frightful" noise of the black labourers in the street outside his window, and cannot shake off the fear that the picks breaking the tar could at any moment become weapons in the hands of a savage mob:

"seben ... ZA seben ... ZA seben...ZA

On the za the picks
In line across the road
Swing with a splash
Of sparks into the tar".

It is indeed, the extensiveness of this dread that is, perhaps, its most disturbing feature. As Robert Berold has maintained, "the darkness of war has descended not only onto the borders of this country and into its prisons, but also into the hearts of those who go about their daily tasks".[29] The idea is expressed tersely by Mike Nicol in "Private Wars" (Among the Souvenirs, 1978):

"In the dark streets
Of city or [illegible]
Everybody [illegible] guerilla".

This poetry of dread has at times been subjected to a severe critical condemnation. Perhaps the most extreme of these attacks has come from Stephen Watson, in an article entitled, "Recent White English South African Poetry and the Language of Liberalism".[30] In this article, Watson vilifies the poetry of, among others, Hope, Nicol, Mann and Gray for being nothing more than "situation reports of the phenomenal world" with their "interminable depiction of the well-heeled decadence of the English". He avers, moreover, that however ironical or sceptical the poetry's intentions may be,

"the social reality it is seeking to describe is itself so debased, so tawdry and superficial, that the poetry almost inevitably ends up inheriting its banal tone and being undermined by it".

Finally, he asserts that while the poets may seem to be condemning this social reality, the inevitable conclusion is that they are "fundamentally in agreement with that which they might wish to subvert".[31] The central problem with this argument is that Watson's ideological standpoint in this article is a Marxist one of a very narrow kind, which tends to see human consciousness and its articulation as inescapably conditioned and determined by social context. His basic premise, for instance, is that the poetry being discussed has been "disastrously influenced" by "the very nature of the English-speaking sub-culture in South Africa".[32] This sort of argument is clearly most contentious and, indeed, seems quite misrepresentative of the poetry itself. For example, Watson seems unable to appreciate that, far from being tonally banal or linguistically dead, the poetry of dread discussed above displays a vigorous diversity and richness of expression, ranging from Hope's wickedly pungent wit to Cullinan's urbane sophistication to Faller's macabre imagination to Mann's carefully worked ironies. Moreover, far from merely producing situation reports of phenomenal reality, these poets have creatively and subversively utilised the familiar symbols of WESSA affluence in order to offer an incisive diagnosis of the dread-filled psyche of the modern WESSA. And far from finding themselves ineluctably in agreement with the prejudices of the WESSA sub-culture, their analysis is a candid and critical exposure of the limitations of their countrymen's reaction to a complex contemporary situation. It would seem, thus, inaccurate to view this poetry of dread as merely reproducing the social attitudes it describes; rather, it may more properly be seen as offering a critical response, through the medium of poetry, to the problem of the modern-day

WESSAs' feelings of dread and anxiety. A critic like Michael Chapman has given a much more reasonable account of this poetry in identifying poets such as Cullinan, Hope, Mann, Nicol and Gray as "the ironical, sceptical heirs of the Settler inheritance",[33] whose poetry subjects "old forms to contemporary pressures",[34] and in whose hands many traditional motifs (such as the archetypal partitions of 'Africa' and 'Europe', or the frontier situation) have been "adroitly adapted to changing circumstances which have constantly cut across the old stereotyped divisions".[35]

Chapman's perspective on these poets provides a useful basis for understanding a good deal of poetry dealing with the dread experienced by contemporary suburban WESSAs. An example of this would be the examination by several poets of their countrymen's feelings of being under threat by the "barbarian hordes". As Chapman notes, given the tendency to conceptualise the modern WESSA's condition in terms of an early, embattled settler on the frontier, "it is perhaps not altogether surprising that the idea of the barbarian invasion has often been deployed as a controlling metaphor" in recent South African literature.[36] The well-known motif of the Greek poet, Constantine P. Cavafy, of "waiting for the barbarians" has, for example, been used by J.M. Coetzee in his novel of that name,[37] as well as by poets such as Mike Nicol and William Branford. In Cavafy's original poem, an ironic distance obtains between the fearful, unenlightened speaker of the poem, and the critical poet exploring the anxieties and prejudices of his countrymen. At the end of the poem, the speaker's dread of the imminent invasion turns to confusion and disappointment when the barbarians do not after all arrive:

"... it is night and the barbarians have not come.
And some men have arrived from the frontiers
And they say that barbarians do not exist any longer.
And now what will become of us without barbarians?
They were a kind of solution." [38]

In South African English poetry, the same sort of ironic distance is often employed as the poets investigate some of the dubious motives behind their fellow WESSAs' persistent "laager mentality".

Mike Nicol's poem, "After Cavafy" (Among the Souvenirs, 1978), exemplifies this "poetry of the besieged", as Christopher Hope has termed it.[39]

"For years I have been preparing to leave.
That way it will be easier when the time comes:
The change will not be so absolute and
I shall have familiar comforts in my new life.
Yet, after all these years, it is worth waiting.

There may be a chance that things won't change.
But I have watched people on the streets
And listened to conversations on the bus.
The people are a good indication, never still:
In their talk I have sensed a troubled mood.

There is great excitement on the mines. Strikes.
Fights and occasionally deaths. Nothing too
Serious but a new insolence has vocalised.
There are always small signs that mean nothing
At first, but gain authority with time.

... was not always like this: when the great
City was quieter and only the trams worried us,
A man could do with less and still enjoy
The weather. Then there was no threat.
Each year now I pack more things in readiness.

I have read the papers and heard the stories
Of those who returned older and greyer
From the north. They have seen the danger
Beyond the river. Have caught some walking
With packs and guns through our mielie fields.

Yet here we sit waiting for them on stone
Verandahs in the long evenings, with nothing
To interrupt the dark but the voices
Of neighbours and others we do not know:
All waiting for the inevitable over cold beers.

It has been months since our border
Countries last sent word. For many years
There was no hint of unrest, just the isolated
Murder on a farm somewhere in the bush.
Those were small signs, not often repeated.

After the wars that lasted no longer than
A few weeks, there has been only the silence:
Not even rumours of what has happened since.
What are we to read into that?
If not that the barbarians are coming.

It is night again and perhaps they have come.
Tomorrow in the rose-beds there will be
Strange footprints. But the dogs do not bark
And if they have come it will be weeks
Before we know. The signs will be small.

Whatever has happened we carry on building.
Each year we have better roads and business
Prospers: it is a way of ignoring defeat.
Without work, waiting would be impossible:
Defeat would be always before our minds.

In "After Cavafy", there is a clear and deliberate disjunction between the speaker of the poem and the poet himself, and it is in recognising this disjunction that the full meaning of the poem emerges. In the first place, the speaker is fearful, uncertain, prejudiced, xenophobic, and although he is never identified specifically as a WESSA, his situation and attitudes are typical of contemporary WESSAs. The opening lines establish the speaker's anxious and indecisive state of mind as he wavers between the belief that it is necessary "to leave" and the faint hope "that things won't change". Caught between these two alternatives, he finds himself nervously "waiting" for "the barbarians" even though he has apparently

already prepared for emigration. Importantly, his knowledge of the existence of the barbarians and of the likelihood of their invasion is based on no empirical evidence whatsoever. On the contrary, his opinions are derived from hearsay, rumours and "small signs": he has "sensed a troubled mood" in the talk of the people on the streets; he has learnt of some disturbances on the mines; he has "heard the stories" of those who have seen the danger in the north; he seems to remember occasional murders on isolated farms. As the poem progresses, he begins to draw his inferences not even from small signs, but from no signs at all. He concludes that "the barbarians are coming" because of "the silence", the absence of rumours, the complete ignorance "of what has happened". And finally he starts to invent his own evidence, as he predicts imaginatively what signs will be discovered in the future. The slide from the possible into the realm of pure speculation is signalled by the sudden, confusing shifts of tense in the penultimate stanza:

> "It is night again and perhaps they have come.
> Tomorrow in the rose-beds there will be
> Strange footprints. But the dogs do not bark
> And if they have come it will be weeks
> Before we know. The signs will be small"
> (my underlining).

The poem ends with the speaker and his countrymen continuing to wait, while they and the country in general continue to function and even prosper.

Taken on the level alone, the poem would seem to be merely a provocative dramatisation of the confused and troubled consciousness of the contemporary WESSA. It would, however, provide little insight into the reasons and motives for this confusion and anxiety, and many of

the problems raised in the course of the speaker's monologue would remain unresolved. In fact, the poem functions on a deeper level, as the reader is encouraged to look beneath the surface content of the speaker's words and see the underlying motives for the attitudes and actions. Firstly, the poem lists in an unobtrusively comprehensive way the superficial reasons for the dread of modern WESSAs: the fear of internal unrest sparked, for example on the mines, by "a new insolence" among black workers; the fear of an external military attack from "the north"; the fear of a less conventional, stealthy guerilla incursion "through our mielie fields"; the even more acute fear that the invasion will not take the form of a violent, obvious assault, but rather an insidious and sinister infiltration detected only by "strange footprints" in the garden. (The poem never overtly refers to the specific South African situation, but, through its techniques of defamiliarisation and allusion, the essence of the dread-filled South African scene is all the more clearly and objectively conveyed.) Indeed, by listing these causes for WESSA fear, the poem seeks to analyse some of the undisclosed and even disguised motives underlying this fear. For example, the root cause for the country's internal economic unrest is to be located in a rising black consciousness which is in turn a response to the exploitativeness of the apartheid capitalist system metonymically suggested by the mines. Similarly, the initial reasons for the border war in "the north" may be found, for example, in SWAPO's decision to fight against the occupying South African military forces for the independence of Namibia. Again, the insidious "terrorist" incursions into South Africa itself are part of the African National Congress's armed struggle waged in response to

the political intransigence and violent repressiveness of the South African Government. And the sinister infiltrations into the very gardens of ordinary WESSAs occur, at least partly, because of the discrepancies in wealth between the privileged WESSAs with their "familiar comforts" and those who have been prevented by apartheid from acquiring such affluence. In the light of these fairly obvious reasons for the conflict in modern-day South Africa, the bewilderment and confusion of the speaker of the poem begins to seem rather suspect. In fact, the crucial point which Nicol's poem makes is that this confusion is merely a mechanism deflecting attention away from the real causes of discontent and unrest in the country. As in Cavafy's poem and Coetzee's novel, the implication here is that it is really the WESSA's paranoid guilt that has led him to believe that "the barbarians are coming". The suggestion is that WESSAs have insisted on the existence of "barbarians" and the imminence of a "barbarian invasion" as a justificatory myth to legitimate their own racist practices and attitudes. Rather than acknowledge the rightful political and economic claims of black South Africans, WESSAs, like the speaker, have instead cast these claims in the form of a "barbarian" threat and so have felt vindicated in defending themselves against this threat. In this poem, therefore, Nicol has employed a limited, unreliable speaker to dramatise the gulf between the justificatory myth of apartheid, represented by the dread-filled speaker himself, and the politico-economic reality of the South African situation, represented by the ironically distanced stance of the poet. The final and most disturbing implication of all is that the barbarians have indeed already come to South Africa, and these barbarians are the WESSAs themselves.

Like Nicol's poem, William Branford's "Colonial Experience: Four Fragments" (A Century of South African Poetry, ed. M. Chapman, 1981) employs the metaphor of a barbarian invasion to examine contemporary WESSAs' feelings of dread. Once more, techniques of defamiliarisation and inference are used to convey not merely the phenomenal reality of the WESSA world, but the psychological reality of the WESSAs' attitudes and emotions. And once again, these attitudes and feelings are subjected to a strict and critical examination. The first "fragment" of the poem, entitled "The Barbarians", is set at an unspecified outpost of the Roman empire, and the parallels with contemporary white South Africa are revealing:

> "The evening the legion sailed, I didn't go down to the harbour.
> It was excessively hot, and military ceremonial
> Though I despise it in theory, makes my eyes water.
> So I sat at the end of the garden and watched the transports
> Edging out of the river. The westerly wind
> Came up at sunset and they hoisted sail,
> Heaving into the dusk, and I went indoors.
>
> Of course, some of our closest friends are barbarians.
> I remember that very evening, old Armoricus
> Brought us a couple of chickens and told us not to worry:
> 'Now we need Roman settlers more than ever; besides
> The Chief is such an exceptional man, so cultured
> And quite incapable of bitter feelings.'"

Just as this outpost seems about to be overrun by barbarians, so white South Africa might be on the verge of revolution. The rather ridiculously lachrymose speaker of this fragment seems strangely typical of those WESSAs who try to believe that they will be pardoned in a post-revolutionary South Africa because of their relatively less repressive racial attitudes.

Such hopes are sardonically undercut in this poem. For example, the name of the speaker's barbarian "friend" contains several implies: "Armoricus" suggests, firstly, the aristocratic armorial bearings of the colonists which are about to be obliterated; it suggests, secondly, the love which the fast-approaching barbarians will probably not display towards the colonists; and it suggests, thirdly, the armour which the colonists are likely, consequently, to require. Old Armoricus's consolation at the end of the "fragment" seems particularly unfounded in the face of the departure of the legion, the westerly wind coming up at sunset, and the gathering dusk, all of which are suggestive of the colonists' demise. Indeed, the fragmentary structure of the poem as a whole reinforces formally the disintegration of WESSA society. The implication of the "fragment", therefore, is that WESSAs need to work towards conciliation and justice now rather than waiting fearfully in the white laager for the inevitable "barbarian" invasion. Thus, whereas Nicol tends to see WESSA dread in large measure as a justificatory mechanism, Branford regards it more specifically as a debilitating and self-destructive feeling which needs to be overcome for the good of WESSAs and South African society in general.

This is once again the clear implication of the third "fragment" of the poem, entitled "Fellow-travellers", which transfers the situation of the first "fragment" into a recognisably contemporary urban context:

> "Seven on a lorry,
> Swing in the tail of the traffic in the rain,
> Impassive faces of Dingana's spearmen
> Under municipal oilskins; travellers
> On the same road as I.

Start[illegible] and stopping
Behir[illegible]em at the traffic lights, I take
The c[illegible]esies of the road for signals, counting
A widening eye, a flash of teeth, the shout
Ntshebe! as communication.

Thus safely separate,
Behind the windshield, in the certainty
Of a parting of our ways not far ahead,
I to the office, they to the marshalling yard -
Phatic communion has its satisfactions.

If it were otherwise?
Finally face to face unshielded, with
No alternative route:
Fraternal grasp on terrible collision,
Blood-brotherhood or blood?

Seven on a lorry,
Vanish under the bridge at the road's fork.
Hermes, master of the ways,
Protect all travellers
On the same road as I."

The dread-filled consciousness of WESSAs is revealed in the way this WESSA motorist, driving in city traffic behind seven black municipal workers on a lorry, sees in them the "Impassive faces of Dingane's spearmen". Although he feels for the moment "safely separate", he is acutely aware of the probability that it will one day be "otherwise", and he is desperately unsure whether that day will bring "Blood-brotherhood or blood". The debilitating and undermining nature of this WESSA dread emerges in the final three lines of the "fragment". The speaker's supplicatory apostrophe to Hermes seems, firstly, more an appeal for self-protection than for the working out of social justice. The apostrophe also contains a subtle and ironic reference to the alchemical process of constructing air-tight closures (the "hermetic seal", for example), and hence suggests the speaker's subconscious longing for the continued separation of the races, the continued exclusion of the "barbarians"

from the white laager. The fourth and final, untitled "fragment", encapsulates Branford's central theme in this poem. Taking the form of a distorted nursery-rhyme, it compounds the sense of the WESSAs' mental disruption. It confirms the point that WESSAs, paralysed by dread, are unable to work towards a more equitable society in South Africa and so, left sitting on the fence, have contributed in large measure to their own downfall:

> "Humpty Dumpty sits on the fence,
> Thinking of his impermanence
> Since he'll fall by his own volition,
> We'll leave him scheduled for demolition".

The idea, expressed in both Nicol's and Branford's poems, that WESSAs are, to a great extent, responsible for causing their own feelings of dread, is conveyed also in Patrick Cullinan's "The First Danger" (Today Is Not Different, 1978). At the end of the poem, a frightened, dying people eventually come to realise that they have, in fact, destroyed themselves. The "first danger" is not so much the menace of some vague barbarian enemy that they feared, but rather the dehumanising effect of their own paranoid, xenophobic absence of charity and compassion:

> "We had ambushed the shadows,
> Stuck knives into the shades of ourselves.
> A threat was not caring; power was
> Lightning that bloomed on the horizon,
> A fire that left us arid, untouched."

(ii)

In order to communicate the complex psychological quality of the dread experienced by contemporary suburban WESSAs, many poets have resorted to an indirect and even allegorical poetic mode, utilising metaphors and images of the frontier wars, the laager, siege and imminent "barbarian" invasions. Other poems of dread, however, dealing specifically with particular events in recent South African history, have tended to favour a more direct, literal form of expression. In such poems, there is often explicit reference to actual places and events as well as, at times, overt political and social comment. This is not to suggest that this poetry is little more than a journalistic recording of events or a simple advocation of certain political beliefs. On the contrary, white English-language poets have focussed on specific contemporary political and other occurences very often in order to explore and evaluate the reactions to these occurences of their fellow WESSAs. As such, the apparently simple, straightforward nature of the poetry belies a subtlety and complexity which requires close and careful examination.

A useful way of approaching this poetry and of assessing its particular qualities is to consider it in comparison with recent black South African poetry which deals with the same events, in particular the Soweto uprising of June, 1976, which stands as a landmark event not only in contemporary South African history but also in contemporary local poetry. In the first place, black poetry in South Africa, generally, had undergone an astonishing renaissance in the late 1960s and 1970s, with the emergence of such poets as Oswald

Mtshali, Mongane Serote, Sipho Sepamla, Mafika Gwala and Chris van Wyk. This "Soweto poetry", as it came to be called,[40] took its name initially from the poets' graphic depictions of township life, but also later from their horrified and outraged reactions to the events of Soweto, 1976, in which bloody clashes between police and inhabitants left more than two hundred people dead. Notwithstanding the many individual differences between the poets, a certain unity may be detected in their response to Soweto. The language tends to be stark, direct, unembellished, yet emotionally intense, as the poets express their grief and anger and bitterness in the cataclysmic immediacy of the present historical moment. A few brief, relatively representative examples may illustrate the point and serve as summary:

"Sons,
They are gunning down
our children
in Soweto;
What more
are we still living for?"

(Mafika Gwala, "Old Man Nxele's Remorse: 20 June 1976", in No More Lullabies, 1982);

"... school children took to the street one day. there will never be another Soweto. nor, south africa. there are many kinds of deaths, and soweto knows them all, south africa too, and southern africa. you cannot kill children like cattle and then hope that guns are a monopoly ..."

(Mongane Serote, from "Time Has Run Out", in Selected Poems, 1982);

"The sun has gone down
with the last doused flame.
Tonight's last bullet
has singed the day's last victim
an hour ago.
It is time to go home.

The hippo crawls
in a desultory air of triumph
through, around fluttering
shirts and shoes full of death.
Teargas is simmering.
Tears have been dried by heat
or cooled by death.
Buckshot fills the space
between the maimed and the mourners.
It is time to go home ...."

(Christopher van Wyk, from "A Riot Policeman", in It Is Time to Go Home, 1979).

If the Soweto poets have responded to Soweto, 1976, with grief and horror, they have also reacted with indignation and wrath, conveying the black people's increased determination to liberate themselves. The poetry does not merely look back to Soweto, 1976, but also looks forward to a final, triumphant uprising which will end apartheid rule and usher in the Azanian future. The coming conflict is viewed not fearfully but with courage, resolution and even enthusiasm, expressed in a rhetoric of resistance and mobilisation. Again, some well-known and representative examples, taken from the climaxes of long, oral-based poems, may serve as illustration:

"too much blood has been spilled. please my
countrymen, can someone say a word of wisdom.
it is too late. blood, no matter how little
of it, when
it spills, spills on the brain - on the memory of a
nation - it is as if the sea floods the earth, the
lights go out. mad hounds howl in the dark; ah,
now we've become familiar with horror. the heart
of our country, when it makes its pulse, ticking
time, wounds us. my countrymen, can someone,
who understands that it is now too late, who
knows that exploitation and oppression are brains
which, being insane, only know how to make
violence; can someone teach us how to mount the
wound, and fight.
time has run out -
period."

(Mongane Serote, from "Time Has Run Out", in Selected Poems, 1982);

"Then I smell the jungle
I get the natural smell of the untamed jungle;
I'm with the mamba
I learn to understand the mamba
I become a khunga-khunga man
I'm with the Black Ghost of the skom jungle
I get the smell of phuthu in a ghetto kitchen
The ghetto, a jungle I'm learning to know
I hear the sound of African drums beating
to freedom songs;
And the sound of the Voice come:
Khunga, Khunga!
Untshu, Untshu!
Funtu, Funtu!
Shundu, Shundu!!
Sinki, Sinki!
Mojo, Mojo!
O-m! o--o--m! O----hhhhhhhhhhmmmm!!!
The voice speaks:
'I'm the Voice that moves with the Black Thunder
I'm the Wrath of the Moment
I strike swift and sure
I shout in the West and come from the East
I fight running battles with enemy gods
in the black clouds
I'm the watersnake amongst watersnakes
and fish amongst fish
I throw missiles that outspace the SAM
I leave in stealth
and return in Black anger.
O---m! Ohhh---mmmm! O----hhhhhhmmmmmmmmm!!!'"

(Mafika Gwala, from "Getting Off the Ride", in Jol'iinkomo, 1977)

"i would be glad if i could be buried like a true african
of african definition
when i take my soul
to its destination
when the gong of departure
reaches my eardrum
and the cloud of death dominates my eye
wrap me safely
with the hide of an african ox
i will be glad
deliver me to the ancestral village
cast no flowers on my soil
i am an african as for beauty
i never had a chance to admire it 'cause
africa was not free
i will join the masses that went before me
and as one we shall fight
the ancestral war until justice
is done"

(Ingoapele Madingoane, from "black trial" in Afrika my Beginning, 1979).

This vision of a liberating confrontation, which Michael Chapman has termed "unorthodox celebration",[41] has very seldom been taken up by white English-language poets. In fact, it is really only in the poetry of Peter Horn that such a vision is consistently and enthusiastically presented. Horn's ideological position is very much in line with that of the revisionist, neo-Marxist historiographers - including Frederick Johnstone,[42] Martin Legassick[43] and Stanley Trapido[44] - who came to prominence in the 1970s. Horn, following the social analysis of this school of historiography, seeks not the piecemeal reform of existing social structures, but the complete annihilation of those structures; not the partial modification of the capitalist system in South Africa, but the utter destruction of that system in order to establish a classless, socialist community. Anticipating the violent defence strategies to be employed by the ruling classes, Horn would acknowledge the painful necessity of forceful revolution to achieve these aims. Because of its ultimately regenerative nature, however, Horn regards such revolution not with dread, but with the eager anticipation of much Soweto poetry. Horn's vision is most fully conveyed in his long poem, "The Plumstead Elegies" (Silence in Jail, 1979). In a poetry (or anti-poetry) of austere, simple language, the poem looks ahead anxiously yet hopefully to a radical and even violent restructuring of South African society. In the sixth elegy, for example, such revolution is sought not only for the emancipation of the masses but also for the punishment of the fearful, hypocritically guilt-ridden bourgeoisie: the freedom song of the oppressed is heard

"... hammering against the walls of our crumbling fortress
filling us with hope and fright.
Fright in the hearts of those who do nothing,
see nothing, feel nothing, whose hearts are filled with
prudence and common sense: who have nothing but a touchi
sense of guilt, and who wash involvement off their
white hands.
Awaiting the last judgment they protest their
flabby good will,
Wide-eyed, staring at the twin-headed terror,
biding its time."

The ninth elegy, moreover, ends with a vision of the workers rising up against the prevailing order, and emerging victorious:

"I listen to the crowds marching through the streets,
shouting we want bread, in front of the city hall, I see
millions of workers, awaking, discover the truth,
whispering that the days of Master and Servant are
numbered,
even if, shouting desperately, a few of the
shaking aristocracy
of white labour demand: 'Shut your trap, Kaffir!'
and tremble,
revolver in hand; lying, accuse the bearers of
truth of lying ....
If there is injustice in a town, there must be rebellion,
where there's no rebellion, it were better the town
perished
by fire, before night. 1 ...."

For the most part, the reaction of WESSAs to events like the Soweto disturbances has been quite different from the "unorthodox celebration" felt by many black South Africans and articulated in the work of the Soweto poets or Peter Horn. WESSAs' reaction has been complex, uncertain and even, at times, ambivalent, containing, on the one hand, the expected feelings of fear and dread and anxiety, but also, on the other hand, some measure of sympathy and support for those involved in the fight against the oppressive system of which WESSAs are part. Similarly, while most WESSAs

long for peace and order and an end to violence, there is at the same time an awareness that such peace can only exist in a just and free South Africa which can only be brought about, seemingly, through violent insurrection. It is precisely the complicated and ambiguous nature of the WESSA response that a number of white English-language poets have attempted to delineate.

Mike Nicol's "1976" (Among the Souvenirs, 1978), despite its terse title, is concerned with exploring in some detail the complexities of the WESSA position with regard to the apocalyptic events of that year. The contradictory elements of the WESSA lifestyle are immediately evident in the first section of the poem, which opens on a typical, apparently leisurely WESSA middle-class scene. Despite the superficial calm of this "green suburb", however, the "insecure and troubled" emotions of the WESSAs inevitably emerge:

> "Clink of ice in tall glasses and
> Laughter from the stone verandah
> On a hot night. Talk of good life,
> Swirling a dry martini,
> In the still garden of an evening.
> All day we lay in chairs pulled
> Up against the sun, alongside
> A sparkling pool,
> Hearing the drone of lawn-mowers
> The shouts of children in water:
> Sinking unpleasant thoughts
> In shandies beneath cool trees.
>
> Not a sign of the desperate trouble
> Shows in our lives, yet it is not
> Easy to relax knowing that up
> Dark streets in dingy suburbs comes
> An explosion of glass, a retort of stens.
> There white is the colour of hate.
> The evening carries a hint of jasmine,
> Of bare arms and bra-less women:
> Summer in October after a winter
> That scorned our privileges
> And opened a gate in a distant wall
> To the notes of a grim music."

The difficult, ambivalent reaction of WESSAs to Soweto is expressed in several ways. Most obviously, the WESSAs' enjoyment of the "good life", concretised in the garden, the "sparkling pool", the expensive drinks, and so on, is undercut by their knowledge that they enjoy these privileges at the expense of those forced to live in the "dingy suburbs" of the black townships. They find that it is "not / Easy to relax", therefore, not only because their privileges are being threatened, but also because they are guiltily aware that it is these very privileges that have contributed to the "hate" and the "trouble". Nicol conveys the ambiguities of the WESSAs' response also through the diction of the poem itself. The phrase, "desperate trouble", for example, refers, on one level, to the desperation and fear experienced by WESSAs as well as the trouble which they know may soon erupt into their lives, despite their surface composure. On another level, however, the phrase refers to the "desperate trouble" experienced by the inhabitants of Soweto, and thus suggests the WESSAs' sympathy for their suffering and pain as well as a supportive understanding of their desperate efforts to free themselves of oppression. The unresolved tensions in the WESSAs' attitudes towards the unrest emerges even more clearly in the language of the final lines of the section. The gate which has been opened in the wall suggests, firstly, the WESSAs' fear that the white laager has been breached and that their political and economic privileges are under attack; it also suggests, however, a movement towards a more free, open and equitable society. The music, moreover, which is now to be heard may be "grim" in the sense that it signals the beginning of the end of white domination and control, but it is still "music", and it may be an

indication, from a more positive perspective, of the beginning of a harmonious, integrated, balanced and creative social order.

The middle sections of Nicol's poem examine the "difficult loyalties of a twisted / Land": the radicalism and extremism of both African nationalism and Afrikaner nationalism; the problems of trying to sustain the "high ideals" of liberalism; the rigidity and intransigence of established political attitudes; the "essential lies" told by all sides. The poem testifies that throughout the country "A kind of tension charges the air". The final section of the poem, however, returns to the opening scene and once again emphasises the complexity and ambiguity of the WESSAs' position:

> "Our white skins prickle with sunburn.
> A Coppertone bottle lies discarded
> On the lawn. Not a leaf moves.
> Chilled by the presence of rain
> We draw together. For a moment
> Free from the new images
> Of this dreadful year, taking
> The chance to forget the city,
> The streets of wild eyes.
> Across the calm I hear
> The hall-clock's powerful tread;
> And far-off, dogs begin to bark."

Although the WESSAs may momentarily feel "free" (notice the loaded implications of the word) of the disturbing significance of Soweto, 1976, they are aware that it will prove to be but a temporary respite. Even in the present calm, they are conscious of the relentless intrusion of minacious portents. "The hall-clock's powerful tread" stresses the inexorable historical process which must lead to a radical transformation of South African society; the distant barking of dogs

suggests the steady advance of black nationalism past the barriers and defences of the white laager. Finally, the poem does not predict either catastrophe or salvation for South Africa, but remains poised within the ambivalent WESSA consciousness. 1976 has been a "dreadful year" in terms both of the horrors of the Soweto clashes and of the dread experienced by WESSAs; on the other hand, "the new images" which the year has brought suggest not merely the unprecedented horrors of Soweto, but also the new vision of the possibility of a peaceful, just, liberated South Africa.

Like Nicol, Lionel Abrahams in "After Winter '76" (Journal of a New Man, 1984) explores the complexity of the WESSA response to the Soweto disturbances. In rather less overt fashion than Nicol's poem, Abrahams uses the familiar Johannesburg image of jacaranda blossoms as a composite symbol of political unrest and the reaction of WESSAs to such unrest. The poem is quoted in full:

"Jacaranda purple lends
a regal show to sunlit well-off streets,
burning and smoking among roofs,
splashed bright across gutters.
The blossoms, each a little air
sealed in a velvet trumpet,
make silent fanfare
and fall whole.
They burst underfoot as we pass.
Predicting their tough seeded legacy,
history should make something
of their present soft reports."

The apparently innocuous scene depicted in the poem reveals, on closer reading, a warning message to all those who are becoming complacent in the relative quiet after Soweto. The blossoms' metaphorical "burning and smoking among roofs" suggests that literal urban unrest

is by no means a thing of the past, a fact stressed by the way they seem to "burst underfoot as we pass". Thus, although WESSAs may wish simply to forget about Soweto and although they may crave calm and order in their "well-off streets", they know that the simmering popular discontent is far from over. The "present soft reports" of the blossoms, like the political equivalent in the aftermath of Soweto, ought to be heeded now in order to avoid a predictable recurrence of violence.

Interestingly, Patrick Cullinan, in "Johannesburg November" (The White Hail in the Orchard, 1984), also utilises the image of jacaranda blossoms bursting as a symbol of political unrest. Cullinan's poem is one of the few in his canon that treat political issues specifically, and even here there is a certain obliquity in the poem. Though there is no direct reference, the poet has stated that the poem deals with Soweto, 1976 and its repercussions.[45] The poem is, in fact, made up of a series of short, terse, even wrenched phrases, which, through permutation, repetition and combination, cumulatively build up to an alarming vision of WESSA dread. At the same time, running through the poem is a contrapuntal theme of hope and the possibility of human contact and love. Together, the two themes suggest that out of the horror and terror of the Soweto cataclysm, a new understanding of human needs and aspirations may emerge. For this to happen, however, WESSAs, and all South Africans like them, will have to move away from their present ambivalent responses to political issues, and commit themselves to a programme of love, contact and reconciliation with all who live in their city and their country:

"The winter gone in hate.
The summer.
Invisible in sunlight,
tongues of flame
crawl the street.

Maddening, the city swelters,
the suburbs deep in roses,
jacarandas.
The hovels and high-rises steam,
squat,
as old as ovens, bread,
as old
as smoke and ashes,
sweat.

And somewhere in the city
you are waiting:
your eyes are grey, they see
the smoke and ashes.
You madden in the heat.
I write of you.
I touch you in the city.

Dogs shamble in the yard,
fly blatant at what passes.
This is rage.
So; falling back, sequestered,
they crouch among the flowers.

The stink of blossom. Wind,
sour,
comes breathing into lives.
Pours off.
It pours across the maps
and these are streets.

I touch you in my life, the city.

Giving and taking, nothing and glut,
it is older than itself.
Fattening, it squats upon itself
in flames that burn
Invisible in sunlight: streets
on fire where a child's hand,
black, a fist is raised against the flowers,
dog-nosed, the blatant
glut and sweat.

I touch you in the heat.

Doors opening and closing.
Contracts, bread.
The jacarandas squat and flower.
The wasted petals, purple
on the street,
explode and stink.
The wind is hot. An oven.

Giving and taking, all was here,
here in the coming.
It was human. It was bread.
They crouch among the roses.

I touch my sweat. A concentration.
I live within the city in my love.
I touch you now:
the wind is in your eyes, the flame
that crawls the street,
the blossom.

The city is my life and you are in it."

With the gradual recession of the Soweto tensions, and the comparatively low level of unrest in the early 1980s, South African poetry of dread tended to shift its attention away from specific events. But the nationwide unrest and violence of 1984-5, resulting in the declaration of a State of Emergency in 1985, saw poets once again begin to focus on the explicit socio-political situation and to describe specific occurrences. Once again, the complex responses of their fellow WESSAs form the main substance of the poetry.

Francis Faller's collection, Weather Words, for example, is permeated by an imagination of disaster. In poem after poem Faller explores WESSA reactions to the unrest and the implications of this unrest on the WESSA sub-culture. Like the poetry of dread of the 1970s, poems like "Mimic", "Storm in the Suburb", "To My Son Asleep", "Sparrows in April" (all in Weather Words, 1986), examine the curiously ambivalent WESSA attitudes towards the disturbances - a mixture of dread

and uncertainty with a sympathy and even a strange admiration for those seeking to liberate themselves. Similarly, the possibility of a radical transformation of society is anticipated fearfully and yet with a certain excitement and hope. Despite these links with the earlier poetry, Faller's verse introduces some unmistakeably current details as well as a noticeably novel perspective on the significance of the unrest. Such features are particularly prominent in the poem "As if it Mattered" (Weather Words, 1986).

"You dress in ice, or drought. You never sweat.
Even in love you practise orderly death,
and hour by hour your presence withers.
Ha, your passion! Your clockwork breath.

The morning sun performs its D & C,
scouring your sleep for little terrors, now defunct.
You wake too late to hear your dreams discussed,
the trees' gossip with a rainbow, drunk.

Just weather words. Nothing more
than gusts that flip the pages of your hair
which you have permed with tidy proclamations.
Today, a storm. Your garden craves a share.

It's time to go. What's this argument
that scrapes against the wind? Is it true?
See how the grass bends in compromise
and the door squeaks. They're quarrelling over you.

And dogs won't help. Thunder's prising loose
the terrified bricks like a hammering-jack.
The voyeur lightning puts it all on film;
here, snotty little breezes plotting ransack,

there, clouds in uniform sulking at the gate.
So, step outside. Screw your face in delight.
As if it mattered now. You so barren, a storm
will drown you. A storm will set things right."

The "you" to whom the poem is fundamentally addressed is WESSA suburbia in general in all its affluent enervation and political introspection, symbolised, as

is characteristic in Faller's work, by the deadened, withering, tidily sterile suburban nature of the first few stanzas. Sustaining the metaphor, Faller suggests that a political storm is necessary to purge WESSAs of their barrenness, and to "set things right" in South Africa. That storm may well be the present unrest, and Faller adroitly portrays the recognisably current details of the unrest in terms of familiar aspects of an electric storm. The controversial media coverage, which many felt had a negative influence, is seen as the "voyeur lightning"; the extreme youth of many of the rioters is conveyed in the image of "snotty little breezes plotting ransack"; and the grim involvement of the police and the army is suggested in the idea of "clouds in uniform sulking at the gate". Despite the seriousness of the subject matter, the mood of the poem is not deeply pessimistic. Instead, an atmosphere of excited anticipation verging on "delight" accompanies the confident expectation that things will indeed be put right by this storm. As such, the poem reveals a quite novel perspective on the significance of the unrest, a perspective which represents a movement beyond the WESSA uncertainty and confusion towards the Soweto riots delineated in earlier poetry. Here, Faller suggests that there is no longer any place for ambiguous feelings and that the present storm should not be dreaded but welcomed for it is part of the catalyst that will lead to a more equitable social order.

Not everyone shares Faller's optimism. Chris Mann, for example, in "State of Emergency" (The Paperbook of South African English Poetry, ed. M. Chapman, 1986), voices the continuing dread and uncertainty of many WESSAs towards the unrest. Though the poem recognises

the importance of the events, the outcome remains unclear, and the poem, having considered the various possibilities, ends on a note of grim incertitude:

> "... Some call this the stench of civil war,
> others the incense of the revolution,
> all reading from the stones,
> all knowing in their bones
> something irrevocable is underway,
> an immeasurably complex matrix of emotions
> incident by incident, gathering anger
> has gathered reasons
> to cease its reasoning,
> and tear itself to pieces in a sty ....
>
> ... And perhaps there will be victors, at least
> a peace less cruel and partisan than before.
> Or perhaps there's only conflict interminable,
> a struggle splintered into a hundred struggles,
> confused, fleeing groups,
> drunk, anarchic troops,
> the purging of purges by anonymous squads ....
>
> ... And shall there ever be jubilation,
> and shall a golden Afrika arise?
> History with its portents,
> the nearpast with its prophets,
> like the derelict phone on the station wall,
> crackles unanswered in the dark."

The urgency and tensions of virtual civil war also pervade Kelwyn Sole's volume, The Blood of Our Silence. The perspective which Sole presents in his poetry is not, however, a typically WESSA one. Instead, his standpoint is that of a sophisticated, highly contemporary and informed materialist poet, whose ability to analyse the complexities and intricacies of the situation extend far beyond the rather simplistic revolutionary romanticism of, say, the Peter Horn of "The Plumstead Elegies". From Sole's point of view, the real fear is not the usual WESSA dread of revolution per se, but rather whether the revolution, which seems a necessity, will prove not worth the cost,

a concern expressed in "My Countrymen", "Celebration", "Pregnancy" and particularly in the first half of "The Blood of Our Silence" (all poems in The Blood of Our Silence, 1987):

"Everyone
uses words these days
as a flag to stuff inside
the abscess of their skin,
a medal.

Without seeds to scatter,
without love,
lips gape apart as overripe fruit
cavernous:
still air
of mouths opening and shutting,
opening and shutting

Then bullets speak like wind.

In the hatreds of us
between us in a history
made malignant in the heart,
where I seek you
seeking a lost harmony of tongues
avoiding my eyes
our bones creak
towards
the choir of their massacre -"

The second half of the poem, however, moves beyond this concern, to present a vision of a post-revolution South Africa, in which dread has been replaced by "laughter" and the racial segregation of black and white has given way to a truly non-racial, "polychrome" society:

"it is surely time
to throw away the icons
of memory, to paint
the flags red again
not with blood
but with the laughter
of a new surreal dawn

throw away
the crayons of rhetoric

in this country where I die
alone with everyone
a voice still comes to me,
whispering a world
of riotous, mingling colours
I can no longer imagine,
the murmur in your veins,
the weight between my legs,
the brave, dumb, despairing
uttered polychrome of our people

the blood of our silence."

Sole's vision, however, is neither simplistic nor obvious, and he remains fully conscious of the enormous problems that continue to hinder the actualisation of this ideal. The complexity of his vision is underscored by the complexity of the poetic expression itself. For example, the world which he looks forward to, and which he can barely imagine at the moment, is not depicted as some impossible utopia but rather as a world "of riotous, mingling colours". The phrase suggests, firstly, a place of joyous celebration and harmonious racial integration, but through the word "riotous", it also suggests the possibility of continuing racial conflict and political unrest. Similarly, the positive connotations of phrases like "the murmur in your veins" and "the weight between my legs" are counterbalanced by other, negative implications. The cumulative effect of the epithets "brave", "dumb", "despairing", "uttered", is virtually oxymoronic, and reinforces the immense difficulties involved in creating a socially practical "polychrome" of people. Finally, the phrase "the blood of our silence" is most elusive of specific explication. It is a phrase of great importance to Sole's work, forming as it does the title of this poem as well as of the

entire collection, and placed by itself at the end of both this poem and the collection as a whole. Its multiple possible meanings include ones which are both positive and negative, optimistic and pessimistic, hopeful and dreadful. On the one hand, it may be taken to suggest a vital life-force which may invigorate a future South Africa of peaceful silence and tranquillity; or the common blood flowing through the veins of a calm, polychrome society; or even the heroic sacrifices made to ensure the establishment of a just society where noisy protest and resistance are no longer necessary. On the other hand, however, it may connote the cowardly absence of protest which has led to the necessity of violent insurrection; or the silence of those who have died in bloody political conflict; or the continuing violent, brutal repression of the views and expression of those who have attempted to challenge and change the unjust political system in this country. The profound ambiguity of the phrase is a key to understanding Sole's vision fully. It is, indeed, a key to understanding the socio-political situation in South Africa generally, which remains a source of both hope and despair. Through an exploration of the responses of WESSAs to this specific situation, white English-language poets, whatever their ideological standpoint, have helped to clarify the complex nature of political activity in South Africa, and have affirmed that while dread is perhaps an inevitable element of the WESSA response, there remains room for hope and even optimism.

(iii)

The dread experienced by contemporary WESSAs represents a highly complex and pervasive phenomenon which has manifested itself in a variety of forms. This chapter has thus far examined the dread which is, firstly, linked directly to the WESSAs' typical position of privilege in the affluent suburbs of South Africa's major cities, and that which is, secondly, associated with specific socio-political events, such as the 1976 Soweto disturbances or the nationwide unrest of the mid 1980s. The WESSAs' feelings of dread do not, however, always derive quite so obviously from such specific sources. Very often, their dread may be understood as a general response to the gravely troubled South African situation as a whole, a situation in which complete disaster seems both inevitable and imminent. In the face of this seemingly certain disaster, WESSAs' dread may find expression either in terrified apocalyptic visions of the future, or, less graphically, in subtle psychological fears and aberrations which bear testimony to the deeply disturbed condition of the modern WESSA psyche. These various forms of WESSA dread have been both articulated and analysed by a very broad spectrum of South African English poets, including many whose work does not normally treat WESSA concerns, confirmation, perhaps, of the powerful and pandemic nature of such dread.

In the first place, a number of poets have picked up the idea of their fellow WESSAs' dread-filled belief that a final, apocalyptic confrontation is looming in South Africa, in which WESSAs, and perhaps all South Africans, will be utterly extirpated. The most obvious and striking way in which the poets have expressed this

form of dread is through nightmarish visions of violence, destruction and bloodshed. It is as if the poets, speaking, as it were, on behalf of WESSAs generally, are simultaneously fascinated and appalled by the possibility of a cataclysmic blood bath in South Africa. Struggling to come fully to terms with the true horror of such an eventuality, they seem compelled to produce lurid, hyperbolic spectacles of horrendous carnage and devastation. In order to illustrate the point, poems by three poets of vastly differing temperaments will be placed alongside each other. The similarities in vision, style and technique are striking, and indicate the universality of such dread among contemporary WESSAs. In all of the poems, there is, firstly, great similarity in imagery, which is of blood, wounded flesh, pain, death and widespread destruction. There is, secondly, a similarity in treatment, in that the poems do not present a realistic depiction of a recognisable scene, but rather describe in surrealistic, hyperbolic fashion a vision of hallucinogenic, nightmarish horror. And there is, thirdly, a similarity in the scope of the vision of the poems, as the action seems to take place on a cosmic scale, involving not simply a single city or country, but whole worlds, whole universes. The particular effect of each poem is forceful enough, but taken together as a body of work, such poetry constitutes a virtually apocalyptic view not only of the anticipated extent of the destruction, but also of the burning intensity of the WESSA dread of such destruction. The implication is that the coming cataclysm is seen not merely as a political upheaval, but as some form of divine or cosmic retribution, and that the basis of this WESSA dread is to be found in large measure in their own feelings of deep guilt and shame at being

involved in the grave social and political injustices of South Africa. The three selected poems follow immediately.

(a) Geoffrey Haresnape, "Nightmare", in Drive of the Tide (1976):

"From bush, from gutters,
from the high trees,
they watch with eyes of neon
or funeral stone.

What can the Boss say?
His hands are two flat spoons held wide:
with slack jaw jelly eyes
he blabbers that this is his country.

He swings from his thigh
a six-shooter, its snout a skull:
BLAM! BLAM! (belching nitre)
the Boss is potting them down.

Corpses reel,
pour blood by the mouth,
mute broken cisterns,
rubble up to his hips.

There are bird cries
squeaks from wrenched limbs,
on softer flesh the ants:
nightlike carnage shutters the sun.

Drowned in helpless dark flesh
the Boss goes deep
sucking the death
offered sardonically in wounds.

From bush, from gutters,
from the high trees,
they watch with eyes of neon
or funeral stone.

(b) Wopko Jensma, "the head", in Sing for Our Execution (1973

"1

the head will march forward
over plains of desert
our souls will scream with pain
but the head will march

we will chant a song together
and sing of what we are waiting for
we will wonder why we are treated
like our own underdogs

we will wonder again
when they barge into our house
what was the sense in singing
to the marching head

2

we cut off the head
of our redeemer
his disciples run from all sides
and lick up his blood

we praise the knife
as we are on the staircase to heaven

and one by one
in the glaring light around them
we gobble up the disciples
and we file in row upon row

waiting
hungry for the flesh of tomorrow"

(c) Stephen Watson, "The Burnt Ones", in Poems 1977-1982 (198

"The burnt ones
are on the run
through the ransacked city;
with eyes
like chancres
burning red
deep in beards of smoke,
with skin
that's scalded
from the flesh -
through cindered blood
and simmering sky,
now you see them come.

A maimed one
whispers: "please,
please, it hurts ...",
as she is dragged along.
Another, naked,
on ashen legs,
stares back
like Lot's wife
turned to salt:
the city stones,
the much-loved ones,
have altered into glass.

But no
swart tanks,
no shock troops
are hot
upon their heels;
they flee
the black suns
falling
like trap-doors
through the sky;
they flee
the global scheme
of blood
you've dreamed,
which once again
is curdling
then atomizing
in their scream."

This WESSA dread of the coming apocalypse, of a violent and massive social and political upheaval in South Africa, has not always been articulated by South African English poets in terms of nightmarish visions of bloodshed. It has also found expression, in rather more subtle fashion, in dark, brooding predictions of pending conflict and destruction. A pervasive theme in local English-language poetry, it is to be found in the work of poets who are not usually, or in the usual sense, politically orientated; for instance, Jean Lipkin's "Apocalypse" (Among Stones, 1975), Jack Cope's "The Terror Within" (Recorded in Sun, 1979), Ridley Beeton's "Patriotism Rushes in" (The Landscape of

Requirement, 1981), Roy Macnab's "Dark Stranger" (Winged Quagga, 1981), Robert Berold's "The Farmhouse" (The Door to the River, 1984). As might be expected, such predictions appear frequently in the work of those poets whose preoccupations are of a more consistently societal nature. Peter Wilhelm's poem, "Driving Home to Drinks" (White Flowers, 1977), crystallises the fearful, pre-revolution mood of so much WESSA thinking:

"I
Darkness sweeps the M1:
the loveless Fun Bugs straddle rain
in their remorseless Northward drive.
The cocktail hour is spent in the cockpit
without cocktails.

In my Boeing console instruments spell
my consumer's liberation.
North in the green,
blue pools restless in winter
ornament isolation with dead frogs and birds.
The affluent cat paws images of infinity.

II
In the bronze evenings of Azania
we see the city hold back the sky.
Look: one bird flies from the centre of the sun
straight as a guerrilla's bullet
to nest in our memorials,
Apollo's nightingale.

Lions are scorpions to the stone god, it tells,
when the fireweb falls.
In the bronze evenings of Azania
the black stars are shining:
the city waits for war.

In the bronze evenings of Azania
we drink
annihilation."

The movement from the first to the second section of the poem is crucial, as the focus shifts suddenly and unexpectedly from a fairly ordinary, workaday WESSA scene in the prosperous, secure northern suburbs of Johannesburg to a dark augury of impending war. A realistic depiction of such familiar objects as the M1 motorway, cars and swimming pools, gives way startlingly to a highly wrought symbolic representation of South Africa's grim future. Once again, as in the poems of Haresnape, Jensma and Watson quoted earlier, the coming conflict is viewed not on a merely political level, but rather in much more extensive, even cosmic terms. The threatening sky, the ominous single bird likened to a guerilla's bullet, the references to Apollo and the stone god, the shining of the black stars, all suggest that the approaching "annihilation" of affluent WESSA society possesses a religious, transmundane sanction and support. Likewise, the idea of "the bronze evenings of Azania", repeated three times in the poem, suggests that the establishment of a post-revolutionary, post-apartheid state in this country represents the working out of a divine justice. Unlike the poems of Haresnape, Jensma and Watson, however, the violent annihilation remains implied rather than graphically portrayed, and is, in a sense, even more terrifying as a result.

A poem in which implication and suggestion, rather than plain detail, are used to equally disturbing effect is Christopher Hope's "In the Country of the Black Pig"

(In the Country of the Black Pig, 1981). Instead of painting a lurid picture of the approaching cataclysm in South Africa, Hope utilises various defamiliarising techniques and an almost allegorical mode of narration to communicate the atmosphere of doom-laden dread suffusing WESSA society on the brink of violent destruction. Although the poet himself denies it,[46] the poem is uncannily reminiscent of W.B. Yeats's poem, "The Valley of the Black Pig",[47] which describes imaginatively the final, violent liberation of Ireland. As Yeats commences,

> "all over Ireland, there are prophecies of the coming rout of the enemies of Ireland, in a certain Valley of the Black Pig, and these prophecies are, no doubt, now, as they were in the Fenian days, a political force".[48]

The poem itself portrays the battle vividly:

> "The dews drop slowly and dreams gather: unknown spears
> Suddenly hurtle before my dream-awakened eyes,
> And then the clash of fallen horsemen and the cries
> Of unknown perishing armies beat about my ears ..."

No less vividly, Hope's poem describes the disintegration of a society into violent anarchy:

> "Wet, this is instantly mud country, and then as suddenly
> dust again; the sun comes out to show how the floods pu
> whole river-beds into the sweltering bay. The wild,
> black pigs
> are a terror, barrelling out of the coarse green bush
>
> and stampeding down the main street, cutting across
> the traffic in the town which shrinks, like an old
> man, unwell
> and deaf in one ear, always inclining towards its neglect
> port, the undredged harbour silting up, a choking shell,

The pigs seem to go dancing on the perfect beach:
not far from here the Grosvenor drowned in all its gold.
The future fattens on the terrible rumour that the pigs
will snatch a great treasure from the rotten hold.

The settlers are leaving and the pigs grow even bolder;
unmoved by exploding aerosols, they make mad bombing runs
among the bulging, smoking dust-bins. In the church porch
a pregnant sow shows her brilliant teeth. Children
carry guns.

A few stay on, tending the cemetery on the hill, their
of a cannon in Soldiers' Corner defends the honoured
They'll be safe enough here, they say, as if these gr
were primed and waiting shells, arsenal of headstones

Everyone says beyond the town lies freedom, a new
hinterland
but difficult to identify because its name is
changing constantly.
You are Leaving the Official Zone: the warning signs
proclaim.
On the road out of town a black pig has been nailed
to a tree."

Though the poem is not set in a recognisable contemporary South Africa (despite the reference to the wreck of the Grosvenor), it manages, like Nicol's "After Cavafy" (discussed earlier), to convey the underlying violence and fear in present day South Africa, as well as suggesting the country's bloody and chaotic future. The rapid descent of the country into a state of utter confusion and disorder is signalled, firstly, by the disruptions and upheavals taking place in nature, as a season of mud suddenly becomes one of dust, and as sweltering sunshine accompanies devastating floods. It is also signalled by social disruptions, with the shrinking town, the neglected port and the undredged harbour indicating the breakdown of the social and economic order. But the central symbol in the poem of the destruction of this society are the pigs themselves, "wild, black pigs" that seem to embody terrifying savagery, wanton destructiveness, irrational

primitiveness, the complete negation of all civilised norms and values. Against such an onslaught, the settlers seem doomed: a few try to defend themselves militarily, the majority take flight. The final stanza of the poem, however, presents several horrifying ironies. Firstly, the fleeing settlers find, like those in Mike Nicol's "The Refugees" (discussed earlier), that there is nowhere to escape to. Despite the rumours of freedom, all the signs suggest that the "new hinterland" is merely illusory, or, at least, unattainable. But the real horror lies in the final image of a black pig nailed to a tree on the road out of town. The implication is that this brutal atrocity has been perpetrated by the settlers themselves, and that it is they who are truly savage and uncivilised, their sinfulness underscored by the similarity of this atrocity to crucifixion. The further implication is that the pigs themselves are not a real, external threat, but rather a symbolic representation of the settlers' own internal state of corruption. In that case, the destruction of the settlers' society is self-inflicted and the impossibility of escape a result of their refusal to acknowledge their culpability. Finally, taking the poem as an allegorical examination of WESSAs' fear of impending destruction, the implications are grimly clear, and offer a new and most damning perspective on the idea of the feelings of dread experienced by contemporary WESSAs.

A number of South African English poets have sought in their poetry to construct a vivid and candid examination and assessment of the nature of WESSA dread, either through the expression of explicit, nightmarish visions, or through less overt, symbolic techniques. But these are not the only ways in which

such dread manifests itself in South African English poetry. At times it appears that the feelings of dread experienced by some poets themselves, as WESSAs, emerge in a seemingly involuntary manner in their poetry. It would seem that the WESSA mind has been so saturated with fear and apprehensiveness that this at times seeps, apparently in an unconscious or unintentional way, into the verse of several poets. This poetry, ostensibly dealing with subjects unconnected with WESSA dread, either becomes infiltrated by images of violence, war or disaster, or becomes infused with a strange, nameless mood of fear.

In the first instance, an inexplicable, creeping dread of the ineffabile, of some unnamed menace, reveals itself in several contemporary poems. An early example of this is Jeni Couzyn's "The Beast" (Monkey's Wedding, 1972), where some unidentified monster comes to hold violent and powerful sway over a household. Similarly, a peculiar, undefined anxiety lies just beneath the surface of Robert Dederick's "Grandfather" (Bi-focal, 1974), while a fear of some lurking menace in the dark permeates Nik Constandaras's collection, Dark Room (1983). In Alan James's "Drinking-Time" (At a Rail Halt, 1981), the sense of primitive danger underpins an apparently quotidian existence:

> 'Towards sundown some of
> the women climb from
> blue swimming pools
> to spend half-an-hour
> watering plants by
> means of long green
> plastic hose-pipes ....
>
> ... At their pool
> all are meat.

The animals sniff;
they scan and listen
they sip cautiously.

Blood is in
the water."

And a strange mood of incogent dread informs Patrick Cullinan's "A Dream of Guests" (The White Hail in the Orchard, 1984) and "Just Outside" (Today Is Not Different, 1978), where a description of a convivial social gathering gives way to an eerie account of the mantic utterance of a contemporary sibyl:

"The warm room pours out its sanity;
We have our friendship and the wind.
All's well in the firelight:
Music, talking; then she
Loyal among shadows,
At vigil,
Breathing in darkness will say
This is the end of it all.

And who shall notice just outside
The stars reopen as a door;
Or that a comet
Falls across the sky and burns
And is nothing?"

Apart from such dread of the ineffable, a number of poems unexpectedly, and in a seemingly unconscious fashion, employ images of political violence to describe supposedly neutral subject matter. It is as if South African society has been so charged with the fear of violence, that metaphors of war, terrorism and social unrest come spontaneously and almost automatically to the English-language poetic imagination. Again, an early instance of this, is David Farrell's "Interfaces" (A World of Their Own, ed. S. Gray, 1976), where the description of a seaside scene suddenly becomes the account of a prosopoeic landscape of violence:

"Uninvited among dancing octogenarians
in the café on the beach
I write no letters to the missing
only messages to myself, burning
in a portrait all of glass:
the swimmers bear their heads
across a sliding minefield
the mountains drop camouflaged shoulders
into the sniper's position
and sight across the bay".

Likewise, in Mark Swift's "Public Gardens, Cape Town" (Seconds Out, 1983), an apparently innocuous depiction of the city centre becomes unexpectedly charged, in the final stanza, with a mood of deep fear and anxiety:

"Nothing here deceives the eye
or ear. Jack-hammers natter
in the city, guerilla-bursts echo
through the roses. The wreckers
intrude on parapets; frozen huge
against the sky."

The poetry of Roy Joseph Cotton is filled with images of bizarre disruption and violence, which are partly the expression of a suicidal man's personal pain, but also are an indication of a wider, societal neurosis. Gus Ferguson's phrase, "apocalyptic lyricism",[49] is an apposite description of the nature of poems such as "Indigenous Letters from Hell", "South African Pulse", "Barren", "Ageless", "S.A." and "A South African Day" (all in Ag, Man, 1986), and perhaps most of all "South African Landscape" (Ag, Man, 1986), where a fairly random view of buck and kloof becomes invested in the final stanzas with a peculiarly local and contemporary political anxiety:

"in the kloof a buck
presses its tongue

white lymph is flowing,
the buck sips, returns for more

there is nothing
unusual about tonight;
only the milk that is sour

there are barriers,
past the shadow of the clock
a fence is looming

in the kraals
dark dreams flash

o why this shade
this ticking?"

Moreover, while the poetry of Francis Faller often uses natural phenomena as a metaphor for impending political upheaval, just as frequently it employs images of the armed political struggle to describe the processes of nature. The effect is alarming since it suggests that the poet's consciousness is so steeped in violence that he almost instinctively perceives the world around him, political and natural, as endemically destructive and brutal. This sort of perception emerges in poems like "Mimic", "Sparrows in April", "When Days are Torpid, the Cuckoo Kills", and especially the deeply disturbing "Honeysuckle" (all in Weather Words, 1986), which recounts the grimly determined blooming of the honeysuckle in terms of a violent people's revolution:

"It is only August and the war
against winter's cruelty
has scarcely raised its head.
We've not yet seen the riot of the storm
nor black frost burn its revenge
but already, up the wall
the honeysuckle blooms,

Up the face-brick garage wall
from a patch of sand grey as ash
the honeysuckle liberates its soul.
It's oblivious of drought
that turned the tough kikuyu into straw,
of frost that ripped
the bamboo sprouts to shreds,
ignorant of all emergency
but its own.
It blooms as proud and pink
as eyelids at a funeral
and its clammy smell
pretends to scupper gloom.
An overwhelming aromatic arsenal,
as strong as teargas,
intoxicating as a people's dream.
Unabashed, the honeysuckle blooms.
It blooms, exudes its ecstasy,
a trivial barrier between the senses
and the curled withered death all around,
a barrier too firm
this early August day
for prejudice to hammer down.
When stalks droop and hope buckles
the crime of joy is all the honeysuckle's."

Perhaps most disturbing of all, however, is the way in which several poems describing intimate love relationships mutate into terrifying expressions of fear and violence. For example, Robert Greig's "Love Poem" (Talking Bull, 1975) subverts conventional expectations by using images of savage cruelty and pain to explain the composition of a love poem, so that a supposed act of love is twisted into a macabre ritual of terror:

"To write a love poem
first you must burn her letters
razor away her face from the photo
now the frame
take up your laser and move
like a surgeon or soldier
remove her name from agates,
clear afternoons and the like
now open your mouth gasp and train
the ray on your brain: the parts
that scream must be martyrs if you
are to write a love poem.

Now where her fingers touched
cut. Nose, the toothbrush, carpets.
She must go too, you know that:
tell her it happened to Laura
Beatrice and Juliet. Others too,
and gently consign her to space
that waits at the window.
If this is to be a love poem
there should be space now.
In time it will thicken like a scar
of dried blood, in time she will grow
as full as a page
of words."

And in Stephen Gray's "Love Poem, Hate Poem" (Love Poems, Hate Poems, 1982), the fearful pressures and dangers of the immediate historical moment intrude into the most intimate aspects of the speaker's life. The true horror of the dread-filled consciousness of the contemporary WESSA is crystallised in the way in which the passions, fears and anxieties of an erotic relationship are almost automatically conceptualised in terms of socio-political violence and destruction:

"Now of all cruel times loving seems
a guilty luxury
why when I look forward to
pouring dry inside your arms
should I ring bells and trigger alarms

I would rather the sirens called for you
and that when a line pulled straight
urgently telling all those I hate
to slacken their dreadful hold
another line could be about only you

as time clicks by like a grenade
a fuse of crackerjacks
passions exhaust their casings
and a kiss bangs into fire
and loving you becomes their obliteration."

It would seem, thus, that no area of WESSAs' lives, no matter how private or personal, can remain free of the intense and deep-rooted dread which has pervaded their society as a whole, and which continues to do so.

(iv)

Throughout this chapter, emphasis has been placed upon the many different forms which the "poetry of dread" has taken in South Africa over the last twenty years or so. Implicit in this discussion has been the idea that underlying the poetry are a variety of fairly specific intentions, that the poetry has sought to fulfil several important purposes. In the first place, the poetry examined in this chapter has functioned as a detailed record, both subjective and in a more objective manner, of the various kinds of dread experienced by contemporary WESSAs. Secondly, the poetry has frequently served to identify and evaluate critically the reasons for these feelings of dread, in many cases suggesting that such feelings are either unfounded or the result of the WESSAs' own ignorance, guilt or prejudice. Thirdly, the poetry has indicated that where cause for fear among WESSAs does exist, this may in large measure be attributed to the politically and economically privileged position of WESSAs in a highly discriminatory white-dominated political system. A central intention of a good deal of this poetry has been to censure WESSAs and to advocate a fundamental change of attitude and conduct in the face of the real possibility of violent social upheaval. At times such premonitory intentions have been implicit in the poetry; at other times they have taken the form of explicit warnings, and it seems appropriate to conclude this chapter on this clear, unambiguous note.

A number of South African English poets have attempted to warn their fellow WESSAs of the inevitably disastrous outcome of the hesitancy, and even refusal, to accommodate the legitimate political claims of the

majority of South Africans. A recurrent device in such poetry is the use of some strange, prophetic figure to articulate the warning. The purpose of this device is two-fold: firstly, to heighten and to exploit for dramatic reasons the prevailing sense of imminent cataclysm; and, secondly, to bolster the cogency of the message by transferring it from the sphere of the poet's own personal opinion to a more universal context. In both cases, the urgency and plausibility of the utterance is enhanced. The technique is employed, for instance, in Patrick Cullinan's "Just Outside" (discussed earlier), in which a contemporary sibyl announces to an affluent WESSA social gathering that "This is the end of it all", the implication being that the coming annihilation will occur as a result of the injustices of that society. Even more explicitly, Christopher Hope's "A Crazed Soothsayer Addresses the Ephors" (Cape Drives, 1974) serves as a warning to the privileged to prepare for violent confrontation:

"Time, fathers of the windy
Cities, to tighten your trusses,
Straighten topees, apply smiles and allow to harden;
To leave plinth and pedestal and stand by the
voorlaaiers; to think
Khaki; time, fathers, to
Allot yourselves a mood.

The pigeons have crashed, please see
Your squadrons are better rehearsed;
Review your many divisions, stifle your pre-war loves,
Visit the neighbours and declare white Christmas every-
Where; fetch in the children;
Allot yourselves a mood.

For they rise like gorge, hunger
Hid behind wind-polished and
ed faces that conjugate the smile; their dreams piquant
With vistas. The fox gnaws beneath the shirt. Fathers,
As you prepare their food,
Allot yourselves a mood."

The apparently deranged seer displays a most sane presience as he cautions the orotund, neo-colonialist city fathers of the approaching danger. The linguistic equivocation, the macabre imagery, the thrilling tone of the speaker's voice as he relishes the prospect of the imminent reckoning, all accumulate to convey the desperate, panic-stricken "mood" of this community. Yet, as Hope makes clear, the community has brought this danger upon itself. The outmoded, coloniser orientation of the city fathers, embodied in the "trusses", the "topees", the "voorlaaiers" and the "khaki", is one contributing factor to the conflict about to take place. Another is the segregationist, racist attitudes of the community in general, expressed in such deliberately ambiguous formulations as "Review your many divisions" and "declare white Christmas every- / Where". Yet another is the material deprivation of the coming forces, suggested in the simile used to describe their approach - "they rise like gorge" - as well as in the final stanza's recurrent references to "hunger", "food" and "piquant" dreams. Though the poem is charged with Hope's characteristically caustic wit, and though there is no direct mention of WESSAs, the situation is quite recognisably South African, and the poem serves as a serious admonition of the prejudice and unfair privilege of WESSA society, and as a warning of the inevitable consequences of such social injustice.

A comparable message is communicated in Stephen Gray's "Adamastor's New Year Bulletin 1976-1977" (Love Poems, Hate Poems, 1982), which exploits the fear of WESSAs in the aftermath of the Soweto disturbances of 1976 to warn them of the potentially terrifying future awaiting them.

"'O my people this is going to be a bad year
you've heard my doomcast before
take heed of my spilling of unrest
for God will never change
your souls without their really changing

at sunrise we pray for you
in the land of the hippo
the land of the R1 and Star 45
the Alouette pouring
down gas for the lungs of the people

we pray in our tear-sodden voices
that the helmets and batons hold
that the barbed-wire keeps in the prisons
that the dawn may not come
without knuckles and lamp-posts and fear

we pray for the Phantoms and Hotshots
heeling havoc underfoot
spidering over the lawn of beige
cueing your heads across
to roaring hungry Alsatians

for the Mongrels patrolling in gangs
blue with resinous juices
cutting you down in your asbestos suits
flamethrowing down arcades
cleaning out all ash of housewives

and for the stalags invested with bankers
we pray you shall make it
as the Rothschilds withdraw their investment
the vaults fill with debt
and securities char beyond recognition

from Angola to Zambezi a plague on
your shuttered white houses
may you be circled by man-eating sharks
may your air fill with the drone
of repeating machine-guns like rain

may your sanitary belts fester
with landmines like boils
and your trenches be greedy for death
may war blacken your walls
and you stick in the throat of your bugles

may all that befalls you this season
as you turn in mad circles
to gnaw at your guts like a leopard
strewing out poison
be your own people's happy new year.'"

In this poem, Gray deploys the myth of Adamastor, invented by the sixteenth century Portuguese poet Luis de Camoes in Canto V of his epic poem, The Lusiads. The poem as a whole deals with the heroic voyage of Vasco da Gama to India and the Spice Islands, and Canto V narrates da Gama's rounding of the Cape. As Gray himself has explained in Southern African Literature: An Introduction,[50] the figure of Admastor is an anthropomorphic representation of the tempestuous Cape in particular and of the vast, dark and frighteningly unknown African continent in general. The idea of his "doomcast" derives from Adamastor's cursing of the Portuguese and his prediction of the disasters they would undergo. Gray's poem adapts this doomcast to a specifically contemporary South African situation, enumerating in detail the various aspects of dread experienced by modern day WESSAs, so that the poem becomes, in a sense, a summary of the WESSA condition of dread. In broad outline, the poem is made up of three sections, each related to a particular area of South African life. The first section (each section comprises three stanzas) deals with the unrest in the townships; the second treats the upheavals in urban white South Africa, in terms both of the suburban fear of attack and the disruption of the economy; the third focusses on the military conflict on South Africa's borders. Importantly, in each case, Gray makes clear that the trouble and violence has been brought about by whites themselves. The township unrest, for instance, has been sparked off by the brutal repression of black political aspirations; the urban unease has been precipitated by the white laager mentality and the economic disparities between black and white; and the border war is largely the result of South Africa's occupation of Namibia and its aggressive military

orientation towards its neighbours. In Gray's hands, Adamastor's doomcast serves a double purpose: firstly, it warns WESSAs of the impending catastrophes that will befall them should present circumstances continue; but, secondly, it confirms that the solution lies within their own hands, and that this solution is the need for them to change:

> "for God will never change
> your souls without their actually changing".

Such a transformation of attitude and conduct is clearly not easy, but the alternative, outlined in the final stanza of the poem, is unthinkable: without change, white South Africans seem doomed to destroy themselves in an insane act of animalistic violence:

> "may all that befalls you this season
> as you turn in mad circles
> to gnaw at your guts like a leopard
> strewing out poison
> be your own people's happy new year."

A number of other poets, although not utilising the device of prophetic speakers, have issued equally grave warnings to their countrymen about the future of South Africa if injustice persists. David Wright, in "Notes on a Visit, November 1976" (Selected Poems, 1980), like Gray, takes the aftermath of the Soweto uprising as the focus for his admonition to WESSAs. The final section of the poem, entitled "Weather Report", employs the familiar symbolism of an approaching highveld storm, in an unobtrusive and original way, to objectify the potentially disastrous future. The references to Pretoria (the seat of government) and the police (often an instrument of political repression in South Africa) identify some major factors contributing to the

approaching upheaval. Even the mention of the name of the brandy - "Oude Meester" - suggests in one sense the exploitative relationship between white "master" and black servant. The particular message of Wright's poem is that just as the darkness of storm or night comes quickly in Africa, so too will political cataclysm:

> "Thunder masses in the air
> Northward, toward Pretoria;
> The sun, about to disappear,
> Sharp on the sun-coloured bricks
> Of a long slab, the police barracks,
> Throws a black shadow of some trees,
> Oude Meester brand, in my glass,
> I contemplate a summer
> Storm assembling. Heavier
> Cumuli range a fading sky.
> The sun rolls under suddenly.
> Has the night come, or the storm?
> A flicker-crackle of lightning
> Illumines a falling curtain,
> Rain spilling on Magaliesberg
> From the burst belly of a cloud.
> 'How fast the darkness falls,' we say.
> 'There's no twilight in Africa.'"

In similar fashion, Anthony Delius has also used the imagery of approaching night and violent highveld storm to direct a premonitory address to WESSAs. In the long poem, "Meditation on Main Street" (Modern South African Poetry, ed. S. Gray, 1984), he locates the culpability for the "general unease" squarely in the domain of economic injustice. Setting the poem in the financial nerve centre of Johannesburg and thus South Africa, he suggests that it is the shocking disparity in wealth between black and white, Soweto and Saxonwold, "old boss-boys" and "ranked executives", that is leading towards "a coming of collision". Throughout the poem, it is made evident that the enormous affluence of whites - symbolised by Johannesburg's luxurious skyscraping hotels and office blocks - is derived from

and progressive role in South African society. At least part of the reason for WESSAs' damaged sense of place is to be found in their general alienation from indigenous political culture and their anxieties and uncertainties about South Africa's political future. And their pervasive and intense feelings of dread derive in large measure from their political insecurities and fears and their imperilled political position within society. Implicit in much of this study so far, the political dilemmas and responses of modern-day WESSAs now require full and direct examination. Noel Garson has made the point forcefully in remarking that "no assessment of the English-speaking community can escape the challenge of delineating its place relative to the plural and multiracial character of South African society."[2]

What makes such an assessment particularly difficult is the fact, noted at the outset of this dissertation, that WESSAs are "a people of paradox".[3] Their paradoxicality is, indeed, more pronounced in the sphere of politics than in any other. As this chapter will demonstrate, the WESSA group consists in general terms of at least two antithetical political sub-sections: in the first place, there is a substantial number of WESSAs who are either conservative and reactionary in their politics, or apparently indifferent and apathetic towards political matters; in the second place, there is also a smaller but nonetheless significant percentage who are progressive, enlightened and even radical in their political thinking. It is this latter group of liberal and radical thinkers who continue to comprise what Noel Garson has referred to as a "tradition of dissent"[4] within the WESSA sub-culture; that is, a group of WESSAs who deviate from, defy and

> concerned with improving the government of the country, improving race relations, and combating race discrimination".[11]

It is the severe disjunction within the WESSA group between these two political orientations that has given rise to what has been recognised as a characteristic feature of the group, what David Welsh has aptly termed "the political schizophrenia of the English".[12] Both of these sub-groups must be taken into account for a comprehensive understanding of the WESSA group.

In the first instance, it would seem that many and perhaps most WESSAs, despite being relatively more enlightened in their political attitudes than Afrikaners, must still be regarded as politically conservative or apathetic. They are conservative in the sense that they wish to retain the current political system of apartheid, based as it is on the fundamental tenets of racial segregation (to at least some significant degree), a white-controlled government, and the present superior social status of whites in South Africa. They are politically apathetic in the sense that they tend to adopt a stance of party-political non-participation, they are uninterested in improving the government of the day, and they seem unconcerned about the socio-political situation of black South Africans. Lawrence Schlemmer classifies this kind of political standpoint as "political introversion", by which he means that

> "political introverts are <u>less</u> concerned with encouraging a practical solution to South Africa's problems, <u>more</u> concerned with preserving a 'white' heritage, <u>more</u> concerned simply with leading a quiet respectable life and <u>more</u> concerned with protecting the standards of the social class to which they belong".[13]

The results of his detailed empirical study of WESSAs' political views suggest that approximately 60% of WESSAs may be regarded as clear "political introverts", and a further 25% may be viewed as at least partly "introverted" on political matters.[14] Schlemmer's conclusion is that "there appears to be far from a majority recognition of the specific need for improved race policies in South Africa" among WESSAs, and that

> "the more conservative, politically apathetic section of the community weakens considerably the general consciousness of the need for renewal in South African life and politics".[15]

Schlemmer's findings are supported by a number of other social commentators. Denis Worrall, for example, notes "how unenterprising and conservative WESSAs have been on the major issues of our politics".[16] David Welsh, similarly, points out that, traditionally,

> "the large majority of English have refused to countenance a political alliance with Blacks. However much Boer and Brit might fight and feud with each other, both were White groups and both benefited materially from privileges that White supremacy conferred upon them."[17]

Noel Garson, too, claims that

> "English-speaking South Africans have always understood that their identification does not end with their position as non-Afrikaners. They have been conscious of their membership of a privileged White minority, perhaps even of a White nation that was given its self-determination at the time

section of the WESSA group which has gone against the conservative political attitudes of the majority of WESSAs and which represents a progressive and enlightened political standpoint. As Noel Garson points out,

> "Strong dissent on the part of independent-minded minorities from attitudes otherwise typifying the group has always been a feature of the collective thinking of the English-speaking South Africans".[20]

And he goes on to assert that

> "the tradition of dissent and the capacity for self-criticism make up one of the more vital if seldom recognised contributions of English-speaking South Africans to the quality of our public life".[21]

This "tradition of dissent" within the WESSA group has been recognised by most studies of contemporary WESSAs. David Welsh, for instance, observes that "a substantial majority of the Whites who oppose racial discrimination are English-speaking".[22] Colin Gardner maintains that of

> "the comparatively small amount of liberalism and openness that has existed amongst Whites, a great deal has been found in the English-speaking community".[23]

And Guy Butler notes that within the WESSA group there continues to exist a tradition of "less conservative, progressive and liberal" political thought.[24]

the exploitation of cheap black labour - symbolised by "the townships camped on the cluttered plains" around the city. Even more graphically, the wealth of the Anglo-American mining corporation, its building rising high above the ground, is seen as deriving directly from the poverty of the miners working "two miles below our feet". And it is precisely because of this injustice and exploitation that catastrophe is looming. The poem concludes with an appeal to WESSAs to avoid such catastrophe:

"Listen Johannesburg,
listen my childhood,
heart needs horizon
as horizon heart,
invert us as you will
the rough world rights itself,
who is rejected in return rejects,
though victory is always a disaster.
Who with a winning violence to his hand
withholds from a most terrible defeat?

By what God's authority
do I say this now
though none is listening?
Aloof grey angles make
their code against the sky,
but let me break it
though the Stock Exchange continues quoting
assurances that diamonds are forever.
So many eyes are hard, or blaze with hatred
yet so many pounds of measured rock revive
with grass and trees like a Mayan altar -
there is this will to love in men and earth.

I'll ask my question -
can it be forgiven
so profligate a poisoning
of heart and reef?
Here falls the shadow now,
the ground trembles
as we tremble at foreknowing buried
deep inside ourselves. Grey flanks
stand about us, a sad h n trumpeting
darkens the air. Oh, Mr Oppenheimer,
mahout of these concrete elephants, which way
now to escape the lightning? It will surely
strike somewhere out of these loving skies."

Like Mongane Serote's "City Johannesburg" (Yakhal'Inkomo, 1972), the poem implores Johannesburg itself to listen, to acknowledge its wrongdoing and to change. Such a radical change of heart and mind may, as Stephen Gray's poem also suggested, right "the rough world" and avert widespread suffering. The alternative, whether it be successful revolution or continuing oppression, will be to the detriment of all South Africans, for this sort of "winning violence" is really "a most terrible defeat" and this sort of "victory is always a disaster". Delius persists in making his appeal to Johannesburg, despite the hatred everywhere, because he remains convinced of man's essential goodness: "there is this will to love in men and earth". Nevertheless, he also remains acutely aware of the real possibility of social and political cataclysm. Like Wright, Delius symbolises this eventuality by means of an electric storm. In this case, appropriately, the lightning will strike those very embodiments of WESSA wealth, the huge grey concrete buildings of Johannesburg's business centre. The implication of such symbolism, moreover, is that the lightning is directed by a "loving" God who has finally lost patience with the social injustice of white-dominated South Africa and has intervened in history on behalf of the oppressed. Even more so than the prophetic utterance of Hope's crazed soothsayer or Gray's Adamastor, the possibility of such action must be seen as a source of intense dread on the part of many WESSAs, as well as the direst of warnings to them.

CHAPTER 5

A TRADITION OF DISSENT

1.

To live in South Africa today seems necessarily to mean being immersed in politics: it means being confronted on an almost daily basis by political issues and problems; it means being forced continually to make political choices and decisions; and it means being compelled to view events in general from a political perspective. The deeply entrenched racial stratifications of South African society, the vast discrepancies in rights and privileges between blacks and whites, the harshly oppressive apartheid system practised by the Government, the unwavering determination of the African resistance movements, have all ensured that politics has permeated virtually every area of life in South Africa and has become incontestably the most significant aspect of the contemporary South African experience. The modern South African exists in what Michael Chapman has deftly termed "a politically saturated milieu".[1]

Given the cardinal importance of politics in South African society, any consideration of contemporary WESSAs must attach crucial value to their political attitudes and actions. How WESSAs have responded to the demands of the political situation must influence in a fundamental way all other features of their collective character. Thus, a critical factor in the crisis of identity experienced by WESSAs lies in their problematic political identity, especially their inability as a group to commit themselves to a positive

challenge the predominant ideas and attitudes of the majority of WESSAs in particular, and of white South Africans in general.

As will become evident in the course of this chapter, most if not all South African English poets would seem to be part of this tradition of dissent and to write from an enlightened, liberal or radical political perspective. This examination, therefore, will focus on contemporary South African English poetry as an expression of this dissent and an articulation of this progressive political orientation. The poetry falls into two categories which may, for the purposes of this study, be explored separately:

(1) criticisms by the poets of the political conservatism or apathy of many of their fellow WESSAs in the face of widespread social and political injustice;

(2) criticisms by the poets of the injustices and oppressiveness of the South African political system in general.

Before proceeding to an examination of this poetry, it is necessary to provide some understanding of the background to the political attitudes and beliefs of WESSAs.

2.

An examination of the political attitudes and beliefs of WESSAs over the past twenty years means, generally speaking, an examination of their attitudes and beliefs on the subject of apartheid, or the enforced separation of the races in South Africa. Without exception, sociological and political studies conducted in the last two decades indicate that the question of apartheid is by far the most important political issue confronting contemporary WESSAs and, indeed, all South Africans. For example, Henry Lever, in a survey of recent political opinion polls, finds that over 80% of white South Africans regard the "race problem" or related issues as "South Africa's greatest problem".[5] Similarly, Huber and van der Merwe demonstrate that the most important issue in South African political life is the question of "the degree to which various racial groups ought to be separated by law".[6] And Lawrence Schlemmer, in his examination of WESSAs within South African society, concludes that the central issue facing this country today is that of "relations between black and white South Africans" and, consequently,

> "the challenge of encouraging changes in dominant political, social and cultural values leading towards a more creative, equitable, and less repressive social order."[7]

Given this understanding of what is meant by the idea of the political attitudes of WESSAs, it is to be noted that in general terms their attitudes differ quite markedly from those of Afrikaners. As David Welsh has observed, "every survey of white attitudes shows that the English are generally more liberal in their racial

attitudes than Afrikaners".[8] This is not to deny that, as Welsh goes on to state, these differences are often "a difference of degree and not of principle" or that a number of Afrikaners share some of the enlightened views of the English.[9] Nevertheless, as ethnic groups, WESSAs can and ought to be differentiated from Afrikaners on the basis of their political attitudes, and may be treated as a separate and distinct group within the white population.

Even in the context of the relatively more enlightened attitudes of Wi[illegible]s, there exists within the WESSA group a fairly wide range of political orientation. Noel Garson points out that

> "In the case of both individuals and organizations, the attitudes of English-speaking South Africans have spanne[illegible]e widest possible spectrum, from near lunatic [illegible]ifestations of jingoism and racism on the right, through a more or less orthodox and conservative centre, to liberal, radical and communist views on the left".[10]

Despite this range, however, the attitudes of WESSAs towards the central and paramount political issue of apartheid, or racial segregation may be seen to fall in general into two main groupings. In the first place, as Schlemmer, for example, notes, there is within the WESSA group "a large aggregate (almost a majority) which is characterized not only by conservatism but also by apathy and political 'introversion'", while in the second place,

> "another (but smaller) aggregate of people exists which is progressive and activist - people

> of Union, and with this the title to rule the subject races. Generally, English-speaking South Africans have endorsed the doctrine of White supremacy."[18]

Christopher Hope makes the point incisively: the WESSA's

> "institutions are continually attacked: press, schools, universities and churches. The outside influences which he represents merely by being here are resented and where possible suppressed. And his protest in the face of all this is a muted, clandestine murmuring. Yet if he is ever to make a place for himself he will have to resist. And herein lies his dilemma: how can he fight the people who abuse him without jeopardizing the privileges which his white skin has traditionally given him?"[19]

The political portrait which emerges of the majority of WESSAs appears, thus, to be of a reactionary and racist people. They seem to be a group content and even eager to retain a system based on oppressive, minority rule in order to share in the material and social benefits of such a system. They seem unconcerned about the political morality of a system based on racial discrimination and exploitation. And they seem indifferent to the political, social and economic disadvantages experienced by the majority of South Africans as the result of such a political system.

Yet such a portrait does not provide a comprehensive delineation of the WESSA group as a whole. There has traditionally always been, and continues to be today, a

Once more, these views find support from several empirical studies of contemporary WESSAs. For example, although Lawrence Schlemmer's research reveals that only about 15% of WESSAs may be classified clearly as "politically activist" (that is, the opposite of the "political introverts" defined earlier),[25] it nevertheless suggests that "broadly one-quarter of English-speaking respondents deplore the patterns of division and discrimination in society"[26] and that almost 40% displayed general characteristics of "political pragmatism, coupled with a feeling for social justice."[27] Schlemmer's conclusion is that there may be detected "the presence of a fairly well-formulated social conscience among a substantial minority in the English-language group."[28] This conclusion is endorsed by Huber and van der Merwe who found that a "fairly large" number of WESSAs (approximately 20% of the sample) are in favour of the complete abolition of legal racial segregation and display a high tolerance of political radicalism in South Africa, suggesting once again the existence of a strong tradition of dissent within the WESSA group.[29] Indeed, a number of similar studies of the ethnic attitudes of WESSAs, including those conducted by Mann,[30] Kinloch[31] and Lever,[32] concur in identifying a relatively powerful liberal sentiment within the WESSA group, one which also runs counter to the prevailing political attitudes of white South Africa generally.

It is to be noted, however, that this tradition of dissent among WESSAs has had little impact on the party-political situation in South Africa. Given the numerical predominance among the white electorate of political conservatives, particularly within the ruling, Afrikaner-dominated National Party, this is

perhaps not surprising. Even though the English-dominated political parties - the United Party, the Progressive Federal Party, and more latterly the Democratic Party - have a history of opposition to the National Party's apartheid policies, these parties have not been the only, or even the main, channels for the articulation of the WESSA tradition of dissent. Rather, liberal or radical thought among WESSAs has tended to find expression in areas of life not directly associated with parliamentary politics, but which nevertheless exert a significant influence on the politics of this country. These areas would include the legal profession and the judiciary; the English-language press; certain sections of the business world; the English-language universities; the predominantly English-speaking churches; and such voluntary social organisations as the Black Sash. It is these professions, institutions and organisations that maintain and perpetuate the values, attitudes and ideas of the WESSA tradition of dissent, and that serve as an important source of opposition to the dominant political order. Thus, David Welsh's studies of WESSAs have confirmed what he regards as

> "the commonly noted discrepancy between the views of English church, academic, student, journalist leaders and those of the rank-and-file members of the community",[33]

Similarly, both Colin Gardner[34] and Guy Butler[35] see the "party-political ineffectiveness of WESSAs" as being offset by the "considerable influence" of the English universities, churches, industries and newspapers. Jeffrey Butler, Richard Elphick and David Welsh, co-editors of Democratic Liberalism in South

Africa, an evaluation of the history and prospect of liberal thought in this country, would concur with these judgements:

> "counterbalancing the weakness of liberals in formal politics is their disproportionate presence in powerful and prestigious institutions important both to the present government and to any black-dominated successor ... These institutions are conduits of liberal values to citizens who would never describe themselves as liberals",

and include the legal profession, the press, education, business and the churches.[36]

In addition to these formal sectors of society, the WESSA tradition of dissent has also been articulated in the work of the majority of South African English writers, including many, if not most, contemporary English-language poets. What this chapter seeks to do, therefore, is to explore the ways in which recent South African English poetry functions as an expression of the tradition of dissent among WESSAs, particularly in its criticism either of the conservatism or apathy of many WESSAs, or of the injustice of the current political system in South Africa generally.

As was the case with the "poetry of dread" examined in the previous chapter of this dissertation, it may be noted that the precedents for this tradition of dissent among South African English poets emerge at the very outset of English-language poetic activity in this country. Thomas Pringle goes directly against the dominant political order of his time, and commits himself in his poetry to an uncompromising opposition to injustice and oppression. This opposition, which

informs virtually all of his African poems, is made nowhere as explicit as in "The Emigrants" (Poems Illustrative of South Africa; African Sketches, 1970; 1834; the poem dates from approximately 1828):

> "Sweet Teviot, fare thee well! Less gentle themes
> Far distant call me from thy pastoral dale,
> To climes where Amakosa's woods and streams
> Invite, in the fair South, my venturous sail.
> There roaming sad the solitary vale,
> From native haunts and early friends exiled,
> I tune no more the string for Scottish tale;
> For to my aching heart, in accents wild,
> Appeals the bitter cry of Afric's race reviled.
>
> From Keissi's meads, from Chumi's hoary woods,
> Bleak Tarka's dens, and Stormberg's rugged fells,
> To where Gareep pours down his sounding floods
> Through regions where the hunted Bushman dwells,
> That bitter cry wide o'er the desert swells,
> And, like a spirit's voice, demands the song
> That of these savage haunts the story tells -
> A tale of foul oppression, fraud, and wrong,
> By Afric's sons endured from Christian Europe long.
>
> Adieu, ye lays to youthful fancy dear!
> Let darker scenes a sterner verse inspire,
> While I attune to strains that tyrants fear
> The deeper murmurs of the British lyre, -
> And from a holier altar ask the fire
> To paint the indignant line with heavenly light,
> (Though soon again in darkness to expire,)
> That it oppression's cruel pride may blight,
> By flashing TRUTH'S full blaze on deeds long hid in night!

This tradition of dissent continues in the work of such poets as Arthur Shearly Cripps ("Resurgat" and "The Black Christ's Crusade", from African Verses, 1939; the poems date from the early 1900s), Kingley Fairbridge ("Magwere, Who Waits Wondering" and "Burial", from Veld Verse, 1909), and Francis Carey Slater ("Captive" and "The Return", from Dark Folk (1935); see also his Collected Poems, 1957). It is given a fresh accentua-

tion and dimension in the South African poems of Plomer and Campbell during the Voorslag period in the 1920s. And it is powerfully maintained in the poetry of the "war generation", in particular Anthony Delius (The Last Division, 1959; The Black South-Easter, 1966), Guy Butler (especially "The Servant Girl", "Cape Coloured Batman", "The Underdogs", "Whoever-whatever-you-are", from Selected Poems, 1975; the poems date from the 1940s onwards), and Alan Paton ("Dancing Boy", "To a Small Boy Who Died at Diepkloof Reformatory", "Could You Not Write Otherwise?" from Knocking on the Door, 1975; the poems date from the 1940s onwards).

Although it would seem that a tradition of dissent in English-language poetry in this country has existed from the very beginnings of an English-speaking presence in the region, it is the contention of this chapter that this poetic tradition has undergone a decisive transformation in the contemporary period. As was again the case with the poetry of dread, the radically altered socio-political circumstances of hodiernal South Africa have meant that a very different kind of poetry is produced in opposition to both political injustice and WESSA conservatism. Without repeating unnecessarily the nature of these altered circumstances (already delineated in detail earlier in this study),[37] it may be useful to note some of the central features of the period which are particularly pertinent to the poetry under consideration in this chapter. Firstly, and most importantly, the contemporary period has witnessed a drastic polarisation and radicalisation of thought in this country, which has manifested itself in widespread unrest and increasingly desperate action on the part of the oppressed, and even more brutal and draconian measures on the part of the oppressing regime in order to maintain power and control. In the context of this

escalated political volatility and civic violence, and the dramatic erosion of human rights and liberties, the need for determined, effective and responsible opposition has become more urgent than ever before. Moreover, with the radical Marxist revaluation of the South African political situation, and the subsequent liberal response, the political awareness and understanding of opposition groups has become both heightened and more sophisticated. With specific reference to the WESSA group, the rise to power, and to virtually complete dominance, of the National Party, together with South Africa's withdrawal from the British Commonwealth, meant that WESSAs found themselves effectively in a position of party-political powerlessness within South Africa, and deprived of direct support from outside the country. At least partly as a result of these quite novel socio-political conditions, the poetry expressing the WESSA tradition of dissent has become much more urgent in its response to current events, much more sophisticated in its social and political analysis of the situation, and much more varied in the ideological nature of its perspective, than any previous English-language poetry in South Africa. It is a poetry which, in terms both of the nature of its dissent, as well as its means of expressing that dissent, invites careful and comprehensive examination.

3

Earlier in this chapter, it was stated that the tradition of dissent as articulated in contemporary South African English poetry finds expression in two central ways. In the first place, a number of poets have offered a severely critical appraisal of their

fellow WESSAs, condemning in particular their countrymen's political conservatism or apathy in the face of widespread injustice and oppression. In the second place, many poets have focussed on the current political system in this country in general, and have condemned this system in a variety of ways and from a variety of perspectives. In each of these areas of focus, the poets may be seen collectively as part of an independent-minded minority dissenting strongly from attitudes otherwise typifying the WESSA group, and therefore part of the wider tradition of dissent within the contemporary WESSA sub-culture.[38]

An examination of the poetry under consideration in this chapter serves two purposes. Firstly, it will provide an understanding of some of the salient features of the attitudes held by the majority of WESSAs. Secondly, through the revealed views of the poets themselves, it will function as an example of an alternative set of attitudes held by a dissenting minority of WESSAs. The examination should, in other words, afford some valuable insights into both antithetical sub-sections of the WESSA group: the "political introverts" who make up the majority of WESSAs, as well as the "politically activist" WESSAs who comprise "a substantial minority" within the group.[39] In addition, some understanding may be gained of the differing theoretical positions within progressive WESSA political thought, particularly that between "liberal" thinking on the one hand, and "radical" or "Marxist" thinking on the other.

For the purposes of this study, it would be most useful to focus firstly on the poets' critique of their fellow WESSAs.

(i)

The critique offered by South African English poets of their fellow WESSAs examines, in the first place, the nature and potentially destructive effects of their countrymen's political conservatism. It also attempts to identify and explore some of the major reasons for this conservatism. As such, it provides a usefully comprehensive understanding of the political attitudes and conduct of many, if not most, WESSAs in the contemporary period. This understanding goes beyond the merely sociological in that the poets seek not simply to describe the actions or ideas of WESSAs, but also to assess and judge them, and to do so through images and metaphors which are both provocative and evocative. Unlike other accounts of the political orientation of WESSAs, which strive to maintain a neutral and objective distance, the account given in South African English poetry may often be seen as actively criticising WESSAs from particular, committed political positions.

In the first place, the examination of the nature and possible effects of WESSA political conservatism is exemplified by two specific poems, each written from a different ideological perspective. The first is Chris Mann's "To My English-speaking Countrymen" (A World of Their Own, ed. S. Gray, 1976), which embodies a liberal perspective; the second is Kelwyn Sole's "My Countrymen" (The Blood of Our Silence, 1987), which offers a materialist, or Marxist, perspective. What seems most remarkable about these poems, however, is not so much their differences, but rather their many similarities, in terms both of vision and of expression.

Chris Mann's poem, "To My English-speaking Countrymen", takes the form of a direct address to Mann's fellow WESSAs and censures them for apathetically allowing political oppression to take hold in their country.

"Whether we're plump,
And stretch the leather of the Rand Club
Waiting for a chauffeur

To take us from the wine,
Or, skinnier, queue for the bus
That brings us to suburban meat,

Respectability rules the day. Some
Like Peter Brown, Ballinger and Paton,
Saw the prejudice of one tribe

Turning to a sjambok
In the law, and threw that
To the wind. Couldn't there come a year

When we cannot be both
Honest and respectable? They knew
That to indaba their beliefs

At home, inside their heads,
Was as good as sitting down
To pick a bone with death."

Mann's poem consists of three central elements: an amount of apartheid; the response of WESSAs to apartheid; and the effects of that response. The starting point of the poem, and the context in which it takes place, is the political system of apartheid practised by the ruling National Party in South Africa. Mann's attitude towards the apartheid system is expressed emphatically and unequivocally in the central image of the poem - its centrality underlined by its position in the poem's middle stanzas. Apartheid is seen as

"the prejudice of one tribe

Turning to a sjambok
In the law".

In this densely compressed image, Mann identifies apartheid not simply as an expression of prejudice, but as a prejudice which has its origins in the ethnic exclusivity of "one tribe", the Afrikaners. Mann is not simplistically and inaccurately suggesting that racial segregation and prejudice did not exist before the rise to power in 1948 of the Afrikaner-dominated National Party. What he does assert is that after 1948, racial segregation took on its particularly harsh apartheid character by being extended to all aspects of social life in South Africa, by being entrenched in the laws of the land, and by being ruthlessly and violently enforced, as the emblem of Afrikaner might and control, the "sjambok", implies. In the light of this central image, the poem asserts that the response of WESSAs to apartheid is not simply a question of reacting to prejudice, but of reacting to a prejudice based on a particularly virulent form of ethnicism. To accept apartheid, therefore, means for WESSAs submission to Afrikaner nationalism and complicity in the political policies of the National Party. Yet, the opening stanzas of the poem suggest that most WESSAs have, indeed, accepted apartheid. The differences between the "plump", chauffeur-driven, Rand Club elite, and the "skinnier" suburban bourgeoisie are negligible: it is not a matter of rich WESSAs and poor WESSAs, but rather a matter of rich WESSAs and very rich WESSAs, relative to general wealth of the whole South African population. Mann's point is that WESSAs choose to be "respectable" rather than "honest" because of the material privileges conferred upon them by apartheid.

By "respectability", Mann means, in Lawrence Schlemmer's terms, "political introversion": "a negative, apathetic socio-political orientation" which stresses "minding one's own business" and "leading a quiet, respectable life".[40] Most WESSAs elect to be politically conservative and to appear respectable, for fear of jeopardising the benefits they derive from apartheid. Such conduct Mann finds reprehensible and he asserts that WESSAs ought instead to follow the alternative course of action outlined in the poem, which he terms "honesty". By "honesty", Mann means taking a politically active stance against apartheid and striving to create a fairer, more equitable political system in South Africa. The poem suggests that the specific nature of that anti-apartheid stance and of that new system is to be based on liberal values. The reference to well-known liberals, such as Peter Brown, Margaret Ballinger and Alan Paton, who actively opposed the implementation of apartheid, indicates that Mann shares their political attitudes. Without becoming embroiled at this point in the details of liberalism, it may be preliminarily stated that the basis of Mann's liberal stance would be a belief in the fundamental political rights and freedom of all individuals in the country, as well as a rejection of violence as a means to political ends. For WESSAs to be "honest", therefore, they would need to reject apartheid, be prepared to give up their unfair material and social privileges, and strive peacefully yet powerfully for political justice in South Africa.

In a subtle yet highly effective way, Mann's poem conveys the nature of apartheid, and also the two possible WESSA responses to apartheid, suggesting that WESSAs should follow the liberal, "honest" course of

action, rather than the conservative, "respectable" one. Mann needs to provide some justificatory motivation for his assertion, and this he does in the third element of the poem outlined at the beginning of this analysis, namely the effects of the WESSA responses. The final lines of the poem stress that liberals like Paton knew

> "That to indaba their beliefs
>
> At home, inside their heads,
> Was as good as sitting down
> To pick a bone with death".

The first implication of these lines is that the attempt by many WESSAs to be politically conservative and "respectable" in order to maintain their apartheid privileges will prove ultimately futile, since the political dissatisfaction and discontent of the majority of South Africans will inevitably result in violent revolution, widespread death and destruction, and, consequently, the eradication of those very apartheid privileges the WESSAs sought to maintain. The second, and more direct, implication of these final lines, however, is that it is equally futile for liberal WESSAs not to strive actively for the implementation of their "beliefs". Simply to hold these beliefs privately and inactively - "at home" or "inside their heads" - will achieve nothing, and will also certainly not prevent the destruction and deaths of the impending political cataclysm. The poem's final image of picking a bone with death conveys in graphic terms not only the inevitably destructive effects of such inaction, but also the uselessly pettifogging character of such a political response. Having delineated the effects of these negative responses, the

final positive vision of the poem is that WESSAs ought to struggle for the liberal values of justice and fairness for all through peaceful means. The crucial word in this regard is "indaba", an African word which means "negotiation", or "discussion", or "talks". The fact that Mann has used an African vernacular term within an English poem suggests that any political settlement in South Africa must be non-racial and must include the interests of all South Africans, black and white. The word itself suggests, semantically, that such a settlement must be achieved through open, fair and peaceful negotiations, rather than through violent force. And, perhaps most importantly for WESSAs, the fact that Mann has used the word as a verb, suggests strongly that WESSAs must shrug off their general apathy and inactivity, and participate actively in the processes leading towards social and political justice.

Kelwyn Sole's poem, "My Countrymen", like Mann's "To My English-speaking Countrymen", condemns the political conservatism and apathy of contemporary WESSAs, though it does so from a fairly explicit Marxist perspective. Yet, despite the ideological differences between the two poems, it is their many similarities which seem most striking, and which invite investigation.[41] Like Mann's poem, "My Countrymen" is made up of three central elements: an account of the political improbity of apartheid; the responses of WESSAs to apartheid; and the likely effects and consequences of those responses.

"As our treacherous land spins now
away from the sun, and a carpet of stars
descends on the cold floor
of winter

we, separately, yawn
brush our teeth with the defence budget
and go to bed without each other -
the Magopa patriarch flung at Pachsdraai
a clod of crumbled soil;
the cleaner who'll climb the skyscraper night
now cooks her husband's supper
already sick with tiredness

and old and powerful men
sucking their thumbs in sleep, one hand curled
round the cuddlesome security of the Nkomati Accord,
faces blissful

and the rest of us

the many lessons we haven't learnt
the courageous stands we never took
the synapse between pain and knowledge
of ourselves, our nerve ends bathed
in acetylcholine and history

where fate plays roulette with our skin
(but we daren't call it russian)

my countrymen

of the homespun hopeful visions
we wear as underwear this season

our night has come again"

The poem, like Mann's, has as its focal point the apartheid system of South Africa. Here the issue of apartheid is introduced immediately and explored in the opening stanzas of the poem. In the first instance, South Africa, under the apartheid system, is seen as a "treacherous land", a point illuminated metaphorically by the setting of the poem during winter, with its conventional connotations of the coldness and frigidity of a country where people are forced to live "separately". The poem then examines the nature of life under apartheid from the opposite extremes of oppressor and oppressed. The plight of the oppressed is exemplified by the suffering of those, like the

Magopa patriarch at Pachsdraai, who are subjected to forced removals, and by the sickening fatigue of those, like the skyscraper cleaner, who are compelled to work hours at menial tasks in order simply to survive. Implicit in both these examples are instances of the unfair privileges enjoyed by the oppressors: the social power to force people to leave their traditional homes and live elsewhere; and the economic power to build expensive and luxurious skyscrapers while many people barely earn enough money to buy food. The opening stanzas also identify the military strategies employed by the state in defence of its interests, through reference to "the defence budget" and the Nkomati Accord, a non-aggression treaty between South Africa and Mozambique.[42] The implication is that true "security" is to be found not in the militaristic defence of apartheid, but in the creation of a just and equitable political order.

Having delineated impressionistically the opposite political poles of the powerless, oppressed majority on the one hand, and the all-powerful, oppressive Government on the other, the poem then turns to a consideration of "the rest of us". By "us" in this context, Sole means those of his countrymen who are neither automatically part of the oppressed nor the oppressing, and who therefore are confronted by a choice of responses to the problem of apartheid. Such countrymen would seem particularly to be Sole's fellow WESSAs, who, as in Mann's poem, have the choice of adopting a progressive and active political role or a conservative and apathetic one. Sole, once more like Mann, is only too aware of the political pusillanimity and indifference which characterises the majority of WESSAs:

"the many lessons we haven't learnt
the courageous stands we never took
the synapse between pain and knowledge
of ourselves, our nerve ends bathed
in acetylcholine and history".

The wearily pessimistic tone of the lines, reinforced by the negatives of "haven't" and "never", emphasises how conservative and unenterprising most WESSAs have been on political issues. By negative implication, however, the stanza also suggests the course of action WESSAs ought to pursue. They ought to learn the lessons of history and act courageously in the light of those lessons. They ought to bridge the gap between mere pain or fear, and knowledge of themselves, acknowledging in the process the fundamental fact of the similarity between themselves and the rest of their fellow South Africans. And they ought, in particular, to assimilate the Marxist idea of the alterability of "history", and so come to understand that they can play a meaningful role in the unfolding political and historical process in South Africa.

In a manner again reminiscent of Mann's poem, "My Countrymen" moves from this account of apartheid and the possible WESSA responses to apartheid to a depiction of the potentially disastrous consequences of WESSA conservatism. In the first instance, the WESSAs' attempts to defend their race-based privileges through politically conservative action or inaction seem very ill-advised and hazardous. The idea of fate playing roulette with WESSAs' skin suggests that WESSA racism is likely to backfire to the extent that a white skin may prove to be most disadvantageous in a post-revolution South Africa. The implicit reference to russian roulette suggests not only the dangers of

continued WESSA racism, but also that a true solution for South Africa's problems is to be found in the values and social theories propounded by Soviet-style ("russian") Marxism. Again, without becoming entangled at this point in the details of Marxist social thought, Sole would seem to be suggesting that in addition to the extension of political rights to all South Africans (which Mann called for), there would need to be a fundamental redistribution of wealth, the nationalisation of most of the economy, and the elimination of the exploitative economic and social practices outlined in the second stanza. The final lines of the poem reiterate the warnings already advanced, asserting the futility of the "false security" in which so many WESSAs believe - "the homespun hopeful visions" that white supremacy will last perpetually. For such WESSAs, the poem predicts the return of their "night", implying both the darkness of their political ignorance and also their inevitable political extirpation.

Chris Mann's "To My English-speaking Countrymen" and Kelwyn Sole's "My Countrymen" clearly deal with very similar subjects, but are written from the differing ideological perspectives of liberalism and Marxism respectively. The differences between liberal and Marxist ideologies ought not to be underestimated. In contemporary South Africa, these differences have been the source of much acrimony not only between writers, or between literary critics, but in the wider social and political sphere between all those of differing progressive political positions who are involved in seeking solutions to this country's problems.[43] Nevertheless, it may be regarded as encouraging to note, in an examination of the two poems under consideration, that despite their ideological

discrepancies, there is much common ground between them. For example, both poems express an articulate anger and disgust not only at apartheid generally, but specifically at those WESSAs who have overtly or covertly accepted apartheid. Furthermore, both poets are willing to acknowledge their own complicity, as WESSAs, in apartheid - however partial or limited that complicity may be - by their use of the personal plural pronoun, "we", throughout the poems. Both poems, moreover, concur in their vision of the inevitably disastrous consequences of continued WESSA political conservatism, and both convey this vision by means of similarly generalised imagery, Mann through the personification of "death", Sole through the metaphor of the fall of "night". In both poems, the imagery suggests the universality and ineluctability of such disaster unless steps are taken to avoid it. Indeed, it is only in the question of what particular steps to take that the poems differ to any degree. Naturally, the ideological nature of the solutions to be offered for South Africa's problems is important. These two poems, however, as examples of an analysis of the political attitudes of WESSA , may suggest that the distance between liberalism and Marxism is not necessarily as great as is often supposed. And the poems may also suggest, therefore, that there is a good deal of scope for much closer co-operation between liberals and Marxists generally in the wider and crucially important struggle facing both parties: the struggle against apartheid.

The critique of the political attitudes held by the majority of WESSAs, offered by poets such as Chris Mann and Kelwyn Sole, would seem to provide a concise and precise understanding of those attitudes. Mann and

Sole are not, however, the only South African English poets to have examined the attitudes and actions of their fellow WESSAs. A number of poets have made a severe critical appraisal of their countrymen a central concern in their poetry. In particular, while Mann in "To My English-speaking Countrymen" and Sole in "My Countrymen" suggested briefly some of the underlying reasons for WESSAs' political conservatism or apathy, a number of other poets have explored in rather more detail the nature of, and the reasons for, the particular form of conservatism or apathy displayed by many contemporary WESSAs.

Christopher Hope is one poet who has focussed frequently and in detail on the political conduct and attitudes of WESSAs and who has attempted to reveal the underlying motivation for such conduct. In his poem, "The Old Men are Coming from the Durban Club" (Cape Drives, 1974), for example, Hope concentrates on the highly affluent members of the elite Durban Club as extreme examples of the sort of political indifference which characterises WESSA society in general:

"After lunching agreeably but not too well,
The old men are coming from the Durban Club
Breathing easily and just nicely full.

They pass the Natal Building Society
And the Netherlands Bank
Where the tellers are giving out money.

They pass the phthisical hag who laughs
By the wall of the Protea Assurance Company
And coughs her difficult cough.

The old men's bellies show like whales
Above their waistlines, their eyes
Are oysters, their laughs are snails.

You'd never say that before dawn each sits
On a lavatory seat, expensive trousers
Around his ankles, and hawks and spits.

Long after the drinkers have left their pubs
And sat down at their desks again,
The old men are coming from the Durban Club."

It is not the prosperity per se of the old men that Hope condemns, but rather their callous indifference to the poverty and suffering which surrounds them in South African society. Such indifference is made all the more reprehensible in view of the vast discrepancies in wealth between the old men and the majority of South Africans. The poem dramatises this indifference by revealing the old men's shameless ability to ignore completely "the phthisical hag" begging on the street outside the Club, even though they have just enjoyed a full and satisfying meal. The poem moves beyond a mere description of the old men's callousness, however, and suggests that at least part of the reason for their callousness lies in the fact that their wealth is derived from the apartheid system. They, as whites, have full and easy access to the banks, "Where the tellers are giving out money", and can therefore afford the benefits of "the Protea Assurance Company", whose patriotic name signals its exclusively white membership. Conversely, the hag, because she is presumably non-white, has no recourse to the aid of such institutions. The old men, like the WESSAs in Mann's "To My English-speaking Countrymen", have chosen a course of deliberate political indifference to the injustices of apartheid in order that they may continue to enjoy the material advantages of such a system. The very names of the banks - "the Natal Building Society" and "the Nethe lands Bank" - suggest the collusion of WESSA and Afrikaner capital respectively in the development of the apartheid economy. Hope's manifest disgust at the old men's inhumanity is conveyed through a series of images in which they are likened to bloated

whales and slimy snails and oysters, and in which they are pictured sitting on lava dry seats, hawking and spitting, with their thin veneer of respectability utterly stripped away. Yet Hope's criticism is not aimed solely at the very affluent WESSAs. The implication of the final stanza is that the political indifference of the old Club members is shared by the majority of WESSAs. The average, middle-class drinkers may not be as wealthy as the old men, but they too, as whites, enjoy the unjust advantages of the apartheid system, and they, too, it seems, are content to ignore the suffering of those like the phthisical hag in order to maintain those advantages.

Hope's objurgation of WESSA political apathy continues in poems like "At the Country Club", "In the Middle of Nowhere" and "Black and White Beaches" (all in the collection In the Country of the Black Pig, 1981), but finds its most extended expression in the darkly satirical "Notes for Atonal Blues" (In the Country of the Black Pig, 1981). Here, in a sequence of thirteen loosely connected verse paragraphs, he exposes the hypocrisy, plutolatry and superficiality which seems to characterise most of WESSA society. With a satirist's eye for detail, Hope holds up for ridicule WESSAs' crassly materialistic obsession with expensive cars and houses, their aimless leisure and high society despipience, and their paranoid insecurity and shallow, insincere guilt. Once again, however, Hope's purpose is not to condemn affluence or political conservatism in and of themselves. Rather, his concern is to demonstrate how WESSAs, in order to maintain the unfair privileges bestowed upon them by the apartheid system, have elected to pursue a path of political indifference. At strategic points in the poem, therefore,

the reasons for WESSA apathy are made starkly clear. The third verse paragraph, for example, bluntly states WESSAs' convenient acceptance of official mendacity:

> "Truth always lies, our civil servants tell us,
> in the next suburb but one. Official
> inquests are the funeral of truth."

The ninth paragraph macabrely focusses on WESSAs' affluent unconcern with the horrifying facts of state brutality and repression:

> "Besides the magnificent view, they say
> that from this spot, when the wind
> is right, on quiet afternoons you can
> hear the screams of men being put to
> The Question".

Hope's final point is, once more, that WESSAs have opted for the wrong course of political action. Instead of using their political and economic privileges to fight apartheid and create a fairer, more equitable society in South Africa, they have chosen to engage in a futile and destructive war of attrition against the underprivileged, the battleground being the affluent white suburbs themselves:

> "Barbered lawn, hoovered court, sanitary
> pool. Or put another way - having's lovely
> but the upkeep kills you. The largest
> rosegarden cannot withstand the aphid's
> hunger. Only remember this, while
> stocks last and wherever grass is mown,
> the roots are woven tightly and dug
> in for the duration."

Like Hope, Francis Faller is only too aware of the hypocrisy, and superficiality, and even, perhaps, self-deception which permeates WESSA society. In "At

the Restaurant" (Weather Words, 1986), he uses a subtle form of irony to corrosive effect in exposing the preached but unpractised altruism of many WESSAs. In the poem, a WESSA couple discuss over an expensive dinner, among other things the "duty" of whites in South Africa, yet they remain essentially untroubled by the hugely unjust privileges which they enjoy, or by the suffering of the victims of oppression:

> "When we leave, we'll suck [illegible]r mints and window-shop,
> avoiding all the omens of the street: the smell
> of violence, the torches prodding huddled aliens,
> the starving wind. We'll skirt all these, go home,
> and sleep."

In similar fashion, Stephen Watson has pointed an ironic contrast between affluent WESSAs self-indulgently pursuing lofty spiritual ideals, and poverty-stricken blacks desperately striving to meet basic, bare needs, in "Years" (Poems 1977-1982, 1982):

> "Time of contradictions;
> of servility in the well-manured suburbs
> where the bloated hungered for ideas
> of the soul;
> of clamour in the locations
> where their servants hungered for food; ...
>
> ... living corpses bloated on beer and fat meat,
> and lean brains grown loveless and hungry
> for blood."

The shallow hypocrisy and apathy of affluent WESSAs has, in fact, formed a recurrent theme in South African English poetry, and has been treated in varying degrees of detail by a large number of poets, including Robert Greig in "Suburorama", "Junior Executive" and "Parties" (all in Talking Bull, 1975), Sheila Roberts in "Clifton

Sketches" (Lou's Life and Other Poems, 1977), Mike Nicol in "New Men" (Among the Souvenirs, 1978) and Chris Mann in such poems as "Portrait of a Director of Companies" (First Poems, 1977) and "Mr Morgangeld and Two Women" (New Shades, 1982).

In addition, several poets of a materialist, or socialist political orientation have subjected WESSA society to a particularly harsh scrutiny. Peter Horn, for example, has issued a philippic against politically conservative or indifferent WESSAs of all descriptions. In poems like "Sunday, Sunday, Sunday" and "Morning in Durban" (both in Walking Through Our Sleep, 1974), he inveighs bitterly against those bourgeois WESSAs who place their own trivial suburban comforts over social and political justice, whereas in "A Modest Proposal for the Universal Benefit of Mankind" (Walking Through Our Sleep, 1974), he turns his attention to conservative WESSA leaders in universities and government. In this latter poem, he employs a crude language of insults, expletives and blunt demands to convey not only his anger and disgust at the political wickedness of such WESSAs but also his impatience with their continuing leadership in society:

"These old men are gold-toothed animals
with a gigantic noise
in their bowels before they die
with the great words of great men
on their lips.

We insist that they disappear.
They eat too much. They use too much air.
They take up too much space.
This profound conservative rabble
occupies chairs in universities and seats
in parliament, straddle-legged they spread
themselves out.



They enunciate with violet lips and turbid eyes
seven times seven commandments.
They write books which make us puke.
Whey do these men still stand in the market,
rubbish bins, waiting to be emptied of words,
shop-soiled, mass-produced litter?

Prize-winning block-heads with Ph.D.s.
They don't understand the simplest things,
like love or laziness. It is time
that they grew speechless
for want of an arse and a mouth
after all the stench they have created."

In rather different fashion, Wopko Jensma, in a poem like "Middelclass Highlife" (A World of Their Own, ed. S. Gray, 1976), has ridiculed the materialism and gimcrack amorality of suburban WESSA gigmanity. Utilising the diction and rhythms of the blues, a deliberately proletarian idiom, he lampoons the pretentiousness of the middle classes:

"ol soul brother jones next door - yes he
has dough
a split-level-house
has dough
backyard barbecues
has dough
books he dont read
has dough
a swimming pool
has dough
antique furniture
has dough
original paintings
has dough
etcetera etcetera
an mows his lawn asleep in a deck-chair"

Despite its jaunty style and wittily colloquial flavour, the poem has a serious edge. It serves as a subtle yet insistent reminder that the majority of South Africans do not have "dough", that there is little sense of "brotherhood" between the races in this

country, and that while WESSAs like the one described in the poem can wastefully neglect their luxuries, many other South Africans can hardly afford the bare necessities. Seen in the specific socio-political context of contemporary South Africa, the poem seems less a light-hearted dig at meretricious WESSA suburbia than a scathing criticism of WESSA indifference to widespread social injustice.

But perhaps the most disturbing view of WESSA political apathy is provided by Peter Wilhelm in "John Harris Bombs Johannesburg Station" (White Flowers, 1977). Wilhelm takes the incident in 1965 when John Harris in a confused act of sabotage planted and detonated a bomb in the Johannesburg railway station, as the starting point for an exploration of the severely deleterious effects of sustained WESSA apathy:[44]

> "Rivers become borders but we do not care,
> Strong disasters inflame our rigid minds.
> Now our images are glass and dust,
> glass and dust belong to crimes.
> Rivers become borders but we do not care.
>
> Who can live in this brutal land
> Where all beliefs descend to the beast?
> When prisons blacken our minds and sex
> (The madder you are the stricken the least)
> Then who can live in this brutal land?
>
> What can we do to escape from the fear
> That poisons the roots of all things?
> When rivers become borders and we do not care
> Then what can we do to escape from the beast
> That feeds on the roots of all things?

The terrifying proposition that the poem advances is that after years of political indifference, WESSAs' moral sense has atrophied to the extent that not even the most brutal and insane acts of violence in their

very midst can stir them into a moral response. Their sense of political morality has become so numbed, their sense of justice so paralysed, that not even nation-wide brutality and "Strong disasters" can induce them to care. Wilhelm's use of strange, incantatory rhythms and elemental, apocalyptic imagery conveys a feeling of blank horror not so much at events taking place in South Africa, but at the moral anoesis of most WESSAs in response to such events. The final horrifying implication of the poem is that it is directly because "we do not care" that there can and will be no "escape" from "the beast / That feeds on the roots of all things". In a very real sense, it would seem that for contemporary WESSAs the wages of political sin is, indeed, death.

(ii)

The WESSA tradition of dissent, as articulated in the work of a large number of South African English poets, involves not only a reaction against, and criticism of, the prevailing conservative or apathetic political attitudes of the majority of the members of the WESSA group; it also involves a comprehensive condemnation of the current political system in South Africa in general. In a variety of ways and from a variety of differing perspectives, South African English poets have provided a stern and explicit denunciation of South Africa's apartheid policies. The rest of this chapter aims to explore the various ways in which these poets have criticised the current order, as well as the various perspectives from which they have done so.

As Jeremy Cronin has pointed out, it would be difficult to find any South African English poets who openly and

enthusiastically endorse the apartheid system in their writing.[45] This is not to say, however, that all English-language poets in this country have made political analysis or protest a predominant or even recurrent concern in their work. Several poets have, in fact, written little or no poetry that could easily be categorised as political. Douglas Livingstone, for instance, frankly disparages what he terms "Polit-Lit",[46] and eschews in his work a treatment of narrow political specifics. Other poets, such as Ridley Beeton, Peter Strauss and Michael King concentrate mainly on personal and private concerns rather than more general, social issues, so that political themes are treated, if at all, only in a tangential or incidental manner. Other poets still, such as Michael Macnamara and Robert Berold, tend to focus their work through the filter of the philosophical and psychoanalytical respectively, rather than the strictly political, with the result that strictly political concerns emerge, if at all, in subsidiary forms. The debate over whether poets, particularly poets writing in the South African context of political injustice, have an obligation to write protest and resistance poetry, remains a heated and unresolved one. Powerful arguments have been produced by both sides. On the one hand, it is argued that there is an urgent moral need for commitment in combatting oppression, for solidarity with the oppressed, and for a contribution to be made, however apparently insignificant, towards liberation. On the other hand, it is argued that the primary and principal values to be upheld are those of artistic autonomy, the freedom of expression, and the right of individual choice. The debate clearly cannot be resolved here once for all. Perhaps the most practical interim position is to maintain a dynamic balance

between the idea of the usefulness and effectiveness of art in combatting political injustice on the one hand, and on the other the need to avoid becoming culturally oppressive in the attempt to forge collective artistic resistance to injustice. It would after all seem equally incomplete and destructive either to assert that art can ever be totally separated from the socio-political circumstances in which it is produced, or to assert that the only relevant or meaningful art is that which addresses specific political issues and which conforms to certain preconceiv ideological formulae.

In the light of this debate, it is necessary to emphasise that this study will examine the poetry under consideration not from any ideologically motivated literary critical position, but rather as part of the task of understanding the dilemmas and responses of contemporary WESSAs as these are articulated through the medium of South African English poetry. As such, this study will attempt to provide an objective synoptic account of the kinds of political poetry produced by contemporary South African English poets, without evaluating their content from prior political perspectives.

In providing this synopsis of the poetry, it becomes apparent that over the contemporary period two major forms of politically charged poetry emerge. In the first place, there is a "Marxist" or "materialist" poetry,[47] whose political content corresponds fairly closely to the Marxist or materialist (or even revisionist, or radical) school of thinking which came to prominence in South Africa in the late 1960s and 1970s. And in the second place, a large body of poetry

exists which tends to be quite heterogeneous in style and thought, but whose political content approximates roughly to the general sense of liberal values espoused by the majority of politically progressive WESSAs in the recent period. While there are certain points of concurrence between these two groups, and while there is a degree of heterogeneity within them, they may for the purposes of this study be treated separately and as two distinct groupings. This study will begin with an account of the Marxist group.

(a)

In order to grasp the essential elements of the Marxist or materialist poetry of contemporary South African English poets, it is necessary to have some understanding of the rise to prominence in the late 1960s and 1970s of Marxist thought as an intellectual force within the WESSA group. In the years following the victory of the National Party in the 1948 election, white opposition to that party's apartheid policies had tended to be focussed generally through the principles and values of liberalism. In broadest outline, such liberalism either took the rather diluted form as practised by the official opposition United Party or was more strictly and rigorously applied as in the policies of such more marginal groups as the Liberal Party. During the 1960s, however, liberalism, as a coherent ideological force, came under heightened pressure both from an increasingly repressive Government as well as from ever more radicalised opposition movements. In the massive security clampdown implemented by the Government following the Sharpeville massacre and the commitment to the armed struggle of the ANC and PAC, liberalism began to seem

an ineffective and even inappropriate basis for working towards social and political reform. Liberalism's oppositional strategies and methods simply seemed powerless in the face of the increasingly brutal oppressive mechanisms of a Government which appeared to have scant regard for even the most basic of human rights and civic liberties.[48] At the same time, a significant number of intellectuals and political commentators began to question the validity of the liberal analysis of the South African political situation.[49] In the classic liberal account, it was argued that the root of the apartheid evil was racism which could be countered either by allowing full and unfettered sway to free enterprise market forces, or by the stringent application and maintenance of human rights, or by a combination of these two principles. Now it began to be argued, firstly, that capitalism, far from serving to undermine and eventually destroy apartheid, in fact worked in many ways to support apartheid and acted in collusion with apartheid to perpetuate white political and economic supremacy. Secondly, it was argued that the liberal emphasis on human rights and civic liberties, so far as these were striven for within the prevailing system and laws of the land, would prove useless in breaking down that system or altering those laws which were unjust.

In place of the traditional liberal diagnosis of the apartheid problem, this new school of thinkers argued for the validity of the Marxist paradigm as a way of understanding the South African political system and combatting it. In brief, it was asserted that capitalism served covertly to maintain the status quo and so had to be replaced as an economic system by one based upon the classless, socialist community which

alone would ensure the equality of all South Africans and guarantee full political justice. Moreover, it was suggested that since the ruling classes would use violence to protect their privileged position (and, indeed, were already doing so), it would be necessary in all probability to bring about effective political change through violent revolutionary means.

This revisionist, Marxist school of thought, led by inter alia Frederick Johnstone, Martin Legassick and Stanley Trapido,[50] began to exert a powerful influence on political thinking in this country, and came to be adopted by a variety of historians, economists, sociologists and literary critics.[51] It also came to be adopted by a number of writers in this country, and in particular by several white English-language poets. Given the long association of the African resistance movements with the South African Communist Party, it was perhaps not surprising that this revisionist school of thought should readily find favour among proponents of the ANC and PAC; consequently, it was not surprising that this revisionist thinking should have rapidly come to influence the work of many black protest and resistance writers of the 1970s. These writers included, in particular, many of the so-called Soweto poets who burst into prominence in the early 1970s - Serote, Sepamla, Gwala, Madingoane, Mutloatse, and others.[52] As far as white poets were concerned, there was by no means a wholesale adoption of Marxist principles, though Marxian thought certainly presented a strong challenge to all contemporary poets. Nevertheless, there have been a number of white poets who have over the last twenty years or so adopted Marxist modes of thinking and writing and whose work requires careful consideration.

Of those Marxist poets who emerged in the early 1970s, the most notable is probably Peter Horn. Born in Czechoslovakia, and having emigrated to South Africa in his early twenties, Horn hardly typifies the modern WESSA. Nevertheless, having established himself permanently in South Africa, his work articulates one possible response of white South Africans towards the dilemmas facing them in the contemporary period. Horn's analysis of the political situation in South Africa and his critique of the country's political system follows a rigorous and uncompromising Marxist line, expressed in an austere, unembellished language of simple, plain statement. Such "anti-poetic" language deliberately eschews what would be regarded as the obscurantism and evasions of elitist bourgeois poetic expression, in order to offer a critical understanding of South African political conditions which is straightforward, direct and accessible. Horn's ideological and artistic credo could be summed up, as Michael Chapman points out, by Brecht's formulation in "To Posterity":

> "Ah, what an age it is
> When to speak of trees is almost a crime
> For it is a kind of silence about injustice."[53]

Horn's work consistently embodies this strict Marxist mode, as in poems such as "I'm Getting Famous Sort Of", "The Poet as a Clever Invention", "Poems at Bargain Prices" (all in Walking through Our Sleep, 1974), where he outlines the proper function of poetry and art in general under apartheid; or in poems such as "Morning in Durban", "Sunday Sunday Sunday", "Daydream" (all in Walking through Our Sleep, 1974), where he inveighs against the capitalist acquisitiveness and exploitativeness of bourgeois WESSA society. His artistic and

ideological position is perhaps best capsulised, however, in the long poem, "The Plumstead Elegies" (Silence in Jail, 1979). The poem presents in the course of ten "elegies" a sustained Marxist critique of the politico-economic conditions prevailing in contemporary South African society, highlighting in particular the often quite subtle causal connections between the deprivation suffered by the majority of South Africans and wider political and economic forces in the society. The concluding section of "The Ninth Elegy" may serve as summary of the poem's central thematic thrust, as well as of its characteristic stylistic features:

"Instead I listen to the crowds marching through
the streets,
shouting we want bread, in front of the city hall, I see
millions of workers, awaking, discover the truth,
whispering that the days of Master and Servant
are numbered
even if, shouting desperately, a few of the shaking
aristocracy
of white labour demand: 'Shut your trap, Kaffir!'
and tremble,
revolver in hand; lying, accuse the bearers of truth
of lying.
But now those are about to speak who have been silent,
afraid to say, what they knew was right, in the wrong way,
because they have been told their English was bad,
and that they knew nothing. No longer prepared to shut up
or to voetsêk they open their trap and say what they've
got to say.
And they find that that is simple, and their inadequate
English
suffices: We want to be paid for our work. We want work.
We are going to appoint the government to look
after our interests.
We want good schools for our children
so that they can look after their own interests.
If there is injustice in a town, there must be rebellion,
where there's no rebellion, it were better the town
perished
by fire, before nightfall.
Simple language is sometimes tremendously effective.
No beating about the bush: agitation, propaganda, Yes.
Now it is necessary. Later again we will talk about
trees and birds.

The poem identifies the class struggle as the central point of conflict in South African society - a struggle between the "aristocracy / of white labour" on the one hand, and "millions of workers" on the other. The underlying nature of the conflict is thus economic: capitalism, far from undermining the apartheid system, has acted in collusion with it to perpetuate a social code of "Master and Servant". The wealth of the country is located in the hands of the privileged minority who maintain their supremacy through their control of the institutions of "work", of "government", and of "schools". The unprivileged masses, meanwhile, are kept subservient through inadequate education, censorship, state-sponsored mendacity and violent repression. In the light of this understanding of the mechanisms of social control, the poem suggests that the attempt to create a more equitable social order through evolutionary means will inevitably prove futile. The ruling classes possess the means either to silence protest altogether or to deflect the possibility of real change into meaningless cosmetic reforms. The simple, inescapable truth is that justice and equality can only be achieved through the complete destruction of the capitalist system by violent, revolutionary mass action:

> "If there is injustice in a town, there must be rebellion,
> where there's no rebellion, it were better the town perished
> by fire, before nightfall".

This notion, expressed in blunt, unequivocal language, not only encapsulates the central message of the poem, but also conveys, in the very form and style of its utterance, the essentially egalitarian nature of the Marxist vision. It is one in which class stratifica-

tion has been replaced by a classless, socialist system in which all citizens, workers and intelligentsia alike, can participate equally without the barriers of academic or financial elitism. It is, indeed, part of Horn's main poetic intention to create a language of conscientising and mobilisation which is accessible to all and assimilible by all, and which will enable all South Africans to play their part in bringing about political justice in this country.

In many respects, Horn's poetry is similar to a good deal of the Soweto poetry produced in the 1970s. There is a similar employment of plain, blunt language designed both to shock an apathetic and complacent white audience out of their political torpidity as well as to enlighten and conscientise an educationally disadvantaged black audience. There is the use of a militant, mobilising rhetoric aimed at helping prepare the masses for a necessarily intensified armed struggle. And there is the underpinning and informing ideology of Marxism. As is the case with the Soweto poets of the 1970s, it is possible to criticise Horn's poetry on a number of levels. In the first place, despite its apparently detailed social analysis, the Marxism informing Horn's poetry may be regarded as providing a rather narrow, simplistic and even incomplete account of the South African political situation in the contemporary period. In a critique of the kind of Marxism which underpins Horn's social analysis, Butler, Elphick and Welsh point out that

> "the danger of the Marxist vision is that one pattern, the 'capitalist relations of production' or the class structure, tends constantly to be brought into relief, so that all of the

> distressing features of South African society - racism, human exploitation, inequality, poverty - are repeatedly attributed to 'capitalism'. This attribution, more often than not, derives more from the model itself than from argumentation or evidence."[54]

For example, David Welsh argues that in South Africa "the present racial categories long antedate the development of the class system of modern capitalism" and goes on to assert that

> "capitalism did not create South African racism; rather it adapted to it, and profited from it, fitting a class structure upon a racial hierarchy."[55]

Similarly, David Yudelman denies that the state should be conceived as subordinate to the dominant, capitalist class. His argument is that the state and capital form two relatively autonomous spheres each with its own interests, though in South Africa there is a history of mutually beneficial interchange between these two spheres.[56] Apart from its ideologically simplistic perspective, Horn's poetry is stylistically problematic. As is again the case with the Soweto poets, Horn's use of plain, direct language and anti-poetic forms meant eventually that the expressive and technical possibilities of the poetry were exhausted, and his work began to become repetitive, clichéd, and ineffective. As a result, like many of the Soweto poets,[57] Horn eventually lapsed into silence. No doubt poetry like Horn's[58] had an energising and provocative effect during the 1970s, not only upon an audience whose responses to political

poetry had become stultified and even moribund, but also upon other poets who had tended to remain locked within traditionalistic and conventionalised modes of thought and expression. The particular nature of Horn's poetry, however, proved itself to be severely limited, and later poets tended to return to more flexible, diverse and sophisticated poetic forms and political analyses.

In the 1980s, two other prominent poets emerged whose work, while remaining within a broadly Marxist perspective, advanced beyond Horn's relatively vulgar and rigid ideological and stylistic constraints. The first of these is Jeremy Cronin, whose collection, Inside, is constructed around the time of his seven year jail sentence for ANC activism, and is at its very core political. At the same time, however, as Cronin has claimed, the poetry is written "very much from a subjective, personal position" and involves what Cronin calls his "aesthetic predilection for the lyrical mode".[59] Similarly, while the poetry remains rooted in an unequivocally materialist ideology, it moves beyond mere propagandistic rhetoric and angry sloganeering and is concerned at all levels with what Peter Weiss has termed the "aesthetics of resistance".[60] Thus, while the poetry strives honestly and earnestly to describe the reality of oppression and the resistance to that oppression, it also seeks to provide an artistically expressed affirmation of the fundamental materialist values - the egalitarian, collective and militant principles which will most effectively end oppression and replace it with reason and fairness. If poems like "Walking on Air" and "Motho ke Motho ka Batho Babang" (both in Inside, 1983) confirm in grim detail the facts of oppression, they also affirm the hope and endurance

of the oppressed in the face of oppression and look forward to the eventual triumph - moral no less than narrowly political - over the evil of apartheid. In the same way, a poem like "Our land holds ..." (Inside, 1983) is as much an affirmation of values as it is a call for resistance to imperialism and capitalism:

"Our land holds its hard
Wooden truths like a peach
A pip:
    Out at Athlone
By the power station
Over two cooling towers, the wind
Turns visible in its spoors.
Skin and bone, zig-zag,
Through the khaki bush
It hums, the wind tongues
Its gom-gom, frets a gorah,
In a gwarrie bush the wind,
So I fancy, mourns, thin
Thin with worries:
    Goringhaicona
Goringhaiqua Gorachouqua: sounds
Like at the back of our sky
Cicadas' songs ache: Hessequa
Hacumqua, like vocables swallowed
In frogs' throats: Cochoqua,
The names of decimated
Khoikhoin tribes - their cattle stolen,
Lands seized
As their warriors died
Charging zig-zag into musket fire,
Those warriors who've left behind
Their fallen spears that our land
Like a peach its pip
    Holds now:

This unfinished task.

The poem presents a clear, though understated account of the manner in which exploitation follows the colonialist dispossession of autochthonous people like the Khoi, turning their original land, conquered through military force, into a site for power stations and cooling towers. In a subtle, yet most effective

way, the poem challenges its readers to pick up the "fallen spears" of the dead Khoi warriors and assist in the struggle to return the land to its rightful possessors. Rejecting the bitter (and futile) outbursts of Horn's poetry, the poem states with pristine reasonableness the "hard / Wooden truths" of the Khoi people's rights, as well as the need to help complete "This unfinished task" of ending exploitation. The poem's recurrent inclusion of Khoi words and tribal names is itself an attempt to liberate the Khoi language and so help sustain the Khoi culture, so that this culture may also make its contribution to the shared "national South African culture" which Cronin would like to see develop in this country.[61] As such, this poem, a characteristic example of Cronin's work, offers a far more sophisticated, and humane, materialist vision than did many poems by earlier Marxist poets.

The second important materialist poet to emerge in the 1980s is Kelwyn Sole, whose poetic critique of his fellow WESSAs, "My Countrymen" (The Blood of Our Silence, 1987), has already been examined in detail earlier in this chapter. As is evident in the poem, Sole's work represents a considered and sophisticated materialist perspective, one not altogether distant from that of liberal poets such as Chris Mann. This is not to suggest that all Marxist writers have moderated or softened their stances,[62] but that there does appear to be a movement away from rigid and doctrinaire thinking towards more creative and flexible modes of thought. Sole is not by any means slow to offer graphic, realistic descriptions of the horrors of oppression and unrest and political violence, in poems such as "Celebration", "The Discourse of History" and

"Praxis" (The Blood our Our Silence, 1987). He is also ready to identify and describe the triumphs, great and small, of the oppressed, in poems like "Tiny Victories" and "Old Man with Pencil" (The Blood of Our Silence, 1987). But perhaps his greatest strength lies in his ability to think critically about ideological perspectives, to assess political assertions, and to refuse to be lulled into simplistic and naive social and political analyses of what remains a complex and multifaceted set of conditions in contemporary South Africa. So much is evident throughout Sole's work, but especially in poems such as "Hewat", "Dangling Poem" and "Pregnancy" (The Blood of Our Silence, 1987). In this last-mentioned poem, the poet's complex and even ambivalent response to the nation-wide unrest of the mid 1980s, as well as his artistic dilemmas in the face of this unrest, is expressed with honesty and clarity:

"'A poem should be palpable and mute
As a globed fruit

Dumb
As old medallions to the thumb

... A poem should not mean
but be.'

Archibald MacLeish believes
a poem should not mean
but be (as a dumb fruit,
I think he said)

but sometimes I think
a poem must be mean
to be intelligible

here.
For instance
my wife seems to be pregnant,
expanding parcel of flesh
in which the bomb of the future
kicks its tiny feet

(I write this down to form it:
anneal to husband and poet
in the cosy mansion of the poem
when the outside world is too cold
or hectic to love her in.)

But today war has descended on us
suddenly and finally.
Tongues lash out at enemies,
the radios one can buy
goosestep as soon as plugged
their collective noise popping
my speech's flimsy bubble.

From this poem

the news is I am warm,
and sit in front of a veering fire
which used to be
my house

while words' meanings tick in my throat,
nervously."

The poem begins with a consideration of the appropriate artistic response to South Africa's politically volatile circumstances, and suggests that MacLeish's credo that "a poem should not mean / but be" requires reformulation:

"but sometimes I think
a poem must be mean
to be intelligible

here."

In South Africa today, MacLeish's desire for the mere ontological presence of a poem seems of little pertinence, if not, at times, quite unintelligible. Instead, Sole picks up the semantic diversity of the word "mean", and assets that "here" a poem often needs to be mean - in the senses both of harsh and austere - in order to mean. Such harshness and austerity, however, is far from the plain language and militant