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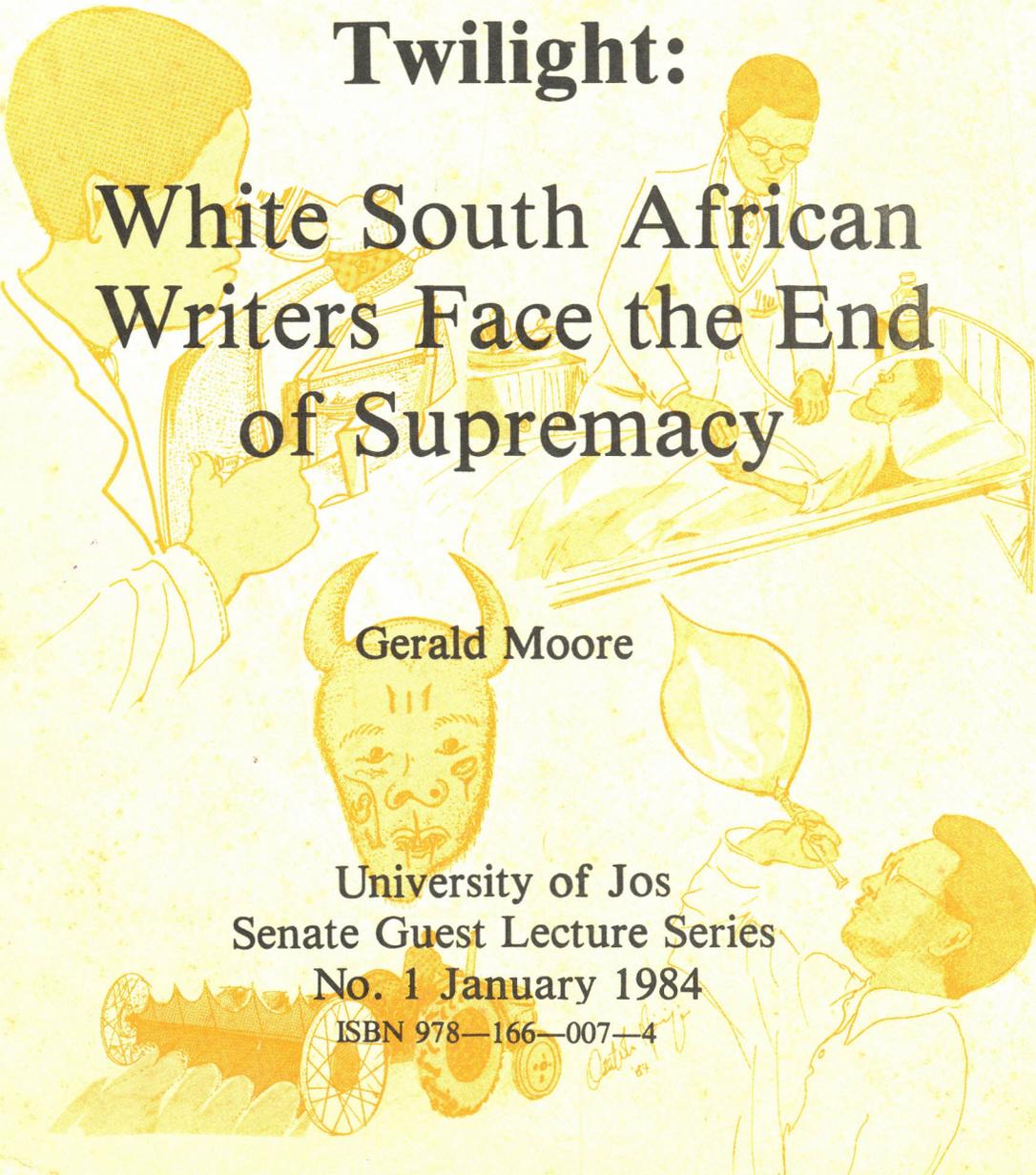
The Literature of Twilight:

White South African Writers Face the End of Supremacy

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The Literature of Twilight

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In the Introduction to his Port Elizabeth plays, Athol Fugard observes:

a complacency among the majority of whites in South Africa that threatens our future more certainly than any of the dire Communist plots the Government keeps warning us about My point is obvious. Anything that will get people to think and feel for themselves, that will stop them delegating these functions to the politicians, is important to our survival. Theatre has a role to play in this.¹

Fugard speaks here of 'survival' but does not define who or what is to survive. At the end of the same Introduction he sounds an altogether more pessimistic note: 'Like everyone else in this country, black and white, my horizons have shrunk and will continue to do so. Today's future barely includes tomorrow'.²

Today's future barely includes tomorrow. That resonant phrase hardly sounds like the credo of someone who believes in survival. And his claim that everyone's horizons have shrunk is also highly disputable. One might summarize the present situation better by saying that the whites enjoy everything except hope, and the blacks suffer the deprivation of everything except hope. Looking across their northern borders to newly independent Angola, Zimbabwe and Mozambique, not to mention the ever-increasing contradictions in their own society, they can hardly doubt that the future is on their side, that for them it *does* include tomorrow. That certitude cuts through all the anger, bitterness and frustration of contemporary black writing.

But Fugard's concern for penetrating the layers of white complacency certainly accounts for some of the desperate eloquence of his plays. Take this speech of Buntu's in *Sizwe Bansi is Dead*, when Sizwe objects to becoming a 'ghost' by accepting a dead man's identity card:

When the white man looked at you in the Labour Bureau what did he see? A man with dignity or a bloody passbook with an N.I. number? Isn't that a ghost? When the white man sees you walk down the street and calls out 'Hey John! Come here' to you, *Sizwe Bansi* isn't that a ghost? Or when his little child calls you 'Boy' you a man, circumcized with a wife and four children isn't that a ghost? Stop fooling yourself. All I'm saying is be a

real ghost, if that is what they want, what they've turned us into. Spook them into hell, man! 3

The spooking of the South African whites into hell is precisely what I want to trace here. And it is certainly not concealed, one might rather say it is revealed, by the ever-mounting aggression of the Government towards its neighbours and its own population. The hysteria of meaningless reprisals like the recent raids on Maseru and Maputo betrays a regime which is reduced to beating blindly about itself. The witness of this desperation is to be found not only in its critics but in the work of its writers. Most interestingly of all, it is to be found increasingly among Africaner writers, who use the language of white ascendancy (Africans) to challenge the whole basis on which that ascendancy was built.

But I want to look first at one of the earliest manifestations of a 'dead-end' prospect in White South African writing, to be found in Nadine Gordimer's novel *The Late Bourgeois World*, published as long ago as 1966. The title itself is a kind of invitation to a wake. The novel concentrates on the dilemma faced by a liberal white widow, Liz van den Sandt. Her late husband Max has been an activist against the regime, involved in the sabotage plots which proliferated during the early 60's. Arrested, interrogated, and doubtless tortured, he has ended by turning state witness against his former collaborators. Unable to face himself after his release, he has committed suicide by driving his car into Cape Town harbour (a symbolic leap over the edge of the continent?) and drowning himself.

Liz's reaction has been an attempt to cut herself adrift from too much involvement with anyone or anything. Critical of Max's failure, she is still reluctant to change her social world which includes occasional visits from black friends (never reciprocated). She replaces her husband with an altogether non-committal relationship with a white lover. But inexorably she is drawn into accepting a role much less flattering to the white ego than that of Max. He belonged to an era of active white participation, which too often meant white leadership, in the struggle. She gradually comes to accept that she can only serve, at some risk but with total anonymity, in a campaign with a much longer fuse. The strategy now is to send guerillas abroad for military training, preparing for a struggle to come. This demands funds, and her allotted role is to replace another white sympathiser who has already been jailed for unwittingly channeling 'welfare' funds through his account to the guerillas.

The first step in this process is her recognition of the 'evil innocence' in which she and virtually the whole white community has lived for so long:

Time is changed; we measure its passing by how much things alter. Within this particular latitude of space, which is timeless, one meridian of the sun identical with another, we changed our evil innocence for what was coming to us. 4

When Luke, a black friend, gallant but cautious, come to visit her one night in her flat, she plays her allotted part, with fewer and fewer illusions about how ancillary that part now is. He has asked her to act as a channel for those overseas funds and she has pretended, even to herself, that she has no intention of getting drawn in. She is haunted by the fate of Max, who rejected the elitist white role which was his by inheritance, but ended by betraying his revolutionary purpose and his chosen companions. Her refusal even to attend his funeral was meant as a gesture distancing herself altogether from his fate. Yet, having once lost her 'evil innocence', there is no way she can ever recover it:

We kept up the talk on a purely practical level - like the holding and the flirting. The flirting is even part of the other game; there was a sexual undertone to his wheedling, cajoling, challenging confrontation of me, and that's alright, that's honest enough

And while we talked, the thought grew inside me, almost like sexual tumescence, and like it - I was nervous - perhaps communicating its tension: there's my grandmother's account. She always has had dividends coming in from all over the place. For more than a year now I have had her power of attorney. 5

And as she is silently yielding beneath her surface current of resistance, Luke is thinking out his strategy beneath his current of gallant raillery:

Sometimes when his great eyes are steady with attention to what I'm saying, there's a flicker that makes me aware that he's thinking fast, in his own language, about something else.

When Luke leaves her, running the gauntlet back to a world which she can never penetrate, she continues to persuade herself that she has made no commitment. Certainly she has made none verbally. In a remarkable finale, she thinks of the American astronauts who at that moment are voyaging in space far overhead; of Max, whom she somehow imagines as still sitting in his car beneath the clear waters of the harbour; and herself, poised somewhere in between. Poised between spatial adventure and harbour stillness; she knows that a moment of decision is stealthily approaching. And it's a decision which she cannot present to herself as heroic. It is, at the best, no more than useful. Useful to a purpose now determined and controlled by others. Already that bourgeois world in which she sought to wrap herself is doomed:

A sympathetic white woman hasn't got anything to offer him—except the footing she keeps in the good old white Reserve of banks and privileges. And in return he comes with the smell of the smoke of braziers on his clothes. Oh yes, and it's quite possible he'll make love to me next time, or some time. That's part of the bargain. It's honest too ... it's all he's got to offer me You can't do more than give what you have.

.... the slow even beats of my heart repeat to me, like a dock; afraid, alive, afraid, alive, afraid, alive. 7

Nadine Gordimer, being descended of Russian Jewish immigrants, is not herself an Africaner; nor really a member of the English minority which more or less dominated the Boers from 1815, when the British bought the Cape from Holland, until the Nationalist election victory of 1948. But it is no accident that she chose Africaner identities for Max and Liz. Nor that it is an Africaner writer, the poet Breyten Breytenbach, who comes up with an insight like this:

It still surprises to realise to what an extent liberal Anglo-Saxon ideas impregnate South Africa. And the protest of white people seems to spring from what they consider an abuse of Western, Christian, parliamentary democracy. It's just not *right*. It follows from this that if changes were to take place, it must be in the hearts and minds of the whites. A subtler form of discrimination? And a disregard for the fact that Africa may come up, is coming up, with an African solution. One protests because one finds it unfair that so many Africans who are ready and able are not allowed to fit into *our* world. One doesn't think of fitting in to an African world. 8

Breytenbach, recently released from a long prison term for 'terrorist' offences, is an interesting example of the diversification which has recently taken place in Africaner society. Born on a remote farm and brought up in the traditional rural isolation, he fled to Paris at the age of nineteen, and spend a decade there as a painter and poet, gradually becoming a focus for exiled South Africans in Europe. In 1973 he was at last allowed to visit South Africa with his Vietnamese wife, classed as a 'non-white' by the race laws in force, and hence 'illegally' married to her husband. Two years later Breytenbach returned to South Africa, alone and in disguise. The security police had clearly been tipped off before he even arrived. They followed him everywhere, picked up all his contacts, and finally arrested him at the airport when he was boarding the plane for Paris. When he was brought to trial months later, he received a crushing sentence of nine years under the Terrorism Acts.

The fruit of the 1973 visit was a remarkable journal, ironically called *A*

Season in Paradise, which was translated into English in 1980 during the author's imprisonment. One of the many poems in the journal juxtaposes the Robben Island of the amateur yachtsman, merely a landmark on the route to Rio de Janeiro, and the Robben Island of the prisons, symbol of suffering and grim endurance for the 'ashen patriarchs' who have been there some twenty years already: The poem is entitled 'Cape to Rio':

A great and bitter and barren land ...
 a land where the earth shudders and jolts...
 and volcanoes have newly become cold...

Table Mountain the brow bracing itself against the foam of oceans
 Sending the white sails fluttering against the peak the surf is higher
 here and wilderness and desert much closer to the body.

there is little refinement
 no kings mourning dead civilizations
 and the only make-up is the white blind of death

and yet, as butterflies from an airy poem
 the yachts dart from the Bay towards joy
 The *Old Glory, Jakaranda, Concorde*
 ships and wings and flags sails birds to Rio
 past Robben Island:

where prisoners surely can hear the sails
 flapping against the sun
 where eyes search against the sun
 so often and so far
 that like water they may pursue
 the specks of freedom to the horizon...

tanned youths adjust the sails
 and topple the waves
 it trembles and throbs
 like the rhythms of a poem
 and past Robben Island past past
 Sweep *Old Glory, Jakaranda, Concorde...*
 ashen patriarchs stoop

to count and arrange the grains of salt. 9

As the Africaner community becomes more diversified, moving into the cities, into industry, commerce and the professions, so its old monolithic political and religious cohesion is lost. So, also, it throws up increasing numbers of dissidents like Breytenbach. And such dissidents are unlikely to stop at the half-way house of liberalism, so much associated in Africaner minds with the hated English dominance of the century preceding 1948. Liberalism is an exotic bloom which has always failed to strike proper root in

that 'great, bitter and barren land'. For the emancipated Africaner, it seems, the choice is a more drastic one - conformity or rebellion.

The voices of Fugard and Breytenbach have been joined during the 1970's by two outstanding new novelists. The first of these to emerge was André Brink, a close friend of Breytenbach's. His first novel, *Looking on Darkness*, was published in Afrikaans in 1973 and immediately banned. The English version appeared a year later and met a similar fate. Unlike Breytenbach, who has spent half his adult life in exile and the other half in prison, Brink has pursued an academic career throughout the same period. He has taught literature at Rhodes University since 1961, but has remained aloof from the liberal, Anglophone traditions of that place. He is very much an Africaner, **not least when he writes in English**. Like Fugard and La Guma before him he peppers his English dialogue with Afrikaans words and expressions, giving a much sharper impression of real speech than 'straight English' could offer. Here is the hero's mother talking in *Looking on Darkness*:

Latertimes I thought yes, I must maar have gone. Ollytime he gave me the word of don' you do as those other skollies, my chile, you got class, yo' body is a temple of the Lawd. But he would hef teked me beck. Ennyway, it's now too late ... En' that's where Braamplie was borned. I thought I was dying out that night, hell, men, it's mos a bed to be alone' en me not quite seventeen, jiss. 10

Looking on Darkness was doubtless banned because of its theme - a love affair culminating in murder, between a coloured actor and an English girl visiting South Africa. But I want here to dwell upon Brink's fourth novel, *Rumours of Rain* Published in 1978, this is a more majestic and more original book, which registers all the pressures now bearing upon an embattled community that obstinately refuses to change. Yet it is being changed, by forces beyond its consciousness or control.

The novel is dominated by the images of drought and of the frontier. The drought is both literal and metaphorical, it eats up the farms and the souls of the upland farmers, forcing more and more of them to sell out. As they do so, some of their farms are added to the dessicated and overcrowded 'homelands' like the Ciskei and the Transkei. Thus the frontier between black and white which dominated nineteenth century South African experience is re-emerging both on the map and in the consciousness of the Africaners, who can no longer trek onwards in search of new lands and new horizons. Now both the horizons and the lands are slowly contracting.

The impact of all this is shown to us through the unlovely person of Martin Mynhardt, a wealthy mining magnate. The story is told by him, with

the greatest complacency. His determination to remain uncommitted to anything or anyone but himself involves him in successive acts of betrayal. His mother, his wife, his son, his oldest friend, his lover, the African who befriended him in London, are sacrificed one by one on the altar of his selfishness. All these respond to the pressures upon their lives, showing some capacity for change as they shed their illusions about Mynhardt or about the country. He drives blindly on, in his gleaming grey Mercedes, leaving everyone who has loved him scattered in his wake.

Here he argues with his childhood friend Bernard, a radical lawyer who has become involved in the underground resistance to *apartheid*. Bernard is on the verge of confessing his role to this unwilling listener:

"Martin, these people I'm talking about: they would also like to relax in this lovely flat and have a drink. Some of them have wives and children."

"Then they're being grossly irresponsible"

"Don't you think a man, especially if he's a highly sensitive and intelligent man, can be driven to a point where he sees violence as the only solution for a situation in which he has become expendable?"

"Surely it's no excuse for becoming as evil as the thing you're opposing
Then your man begins to regard his opponent as equally expendable ...

And how can you defend that in the name of 'humanity'?
You're glorifying an ignoble cause, Bernard."

"And then you pretend to know me," he said from the window ...¹¹

Soon after this conversation, Bernard is caught and condemned to life imprisonment. When called upon to help him escape arrest Mynhardt had feebly pleaded that he could not risk getting involved. He refused even to give the key of his love nest flat for a few days.

The metaphorical dimensions of the drought become clear when Mynhardt remembers something told him by his dead father, someone whom he has never respected as he deserved during his lifetime:

There has been nations in history before, he told me, who'd disappeared from the face of the earth, without leaving any trace at all

It is a strange and awesome thought: if such an apocalypse were really imminent and unavoidable, then every day and every trifling action we perform, brings us closer to it ... It was inevitable as the flood that would end the drought.

And suddenly the mere sound of a teaspoon against an empty cup acquired a terrifying significance.¹²

When the novel ends, Mynhardt has just sold the ancestral farm over his old mother's head, hereby contributing to the contraction of the eastern frontier (the farm adjoins the Ciskei). He has also decided to renounce his only son, Louis, who has been radicalized and embittered by the suffering he saw when fighting in Angola. The refugees, says Louis, were perhaps the most harrowing sight of all:

We saw them every bloody day, right up from the border to Luanda, and back again. It felt like something dying inside one, seeing them like that. Because one knew: One day it will be our turn to take to the road like that, with our little vans and our cardboard suitcases and our rolled blankets and our water bottles. And who will help us!¹³

Remarks like these, so near the reality which Mynhardt continually evades, can only deserve Louis's renunciation. As the Mercedes hurtles back towards Johannesburg, news comes over the radio of the uprising in Soweto in June 1976. Simultaneously, the rain begins to fall:

Ceaselessly, irresistibly, it came down from the dark skies. In a blunted stupor, I resigned myself to the thought that it would never stop again. I didn't care any more. Let it go on, I thought, let it increase and grow worse and worse, a flood to soak the earth and uproot trees and split rocks; causing the red earth to run down the hills, streaming, endlessly, red water as if the earth itself was crying, as if the earth itself was crying blood, *Nkosi sikele' iAfrika*.¹⁴

The apocalyptic ending of *Rumours of Rain* prepares us for the even more apocalyptic plot of J.M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*. This novel, published in 1980, is the most resonant work yet to come to us out of the twilight. By a brilliant stroke of imagination Coetzee has decided to give his story the remoteness of allegory; yet like all good allegory it continually reverberates within the present and the actual. He entirely renounces the topical realism which is so dense in the texture of Brink's novels. Here is no Angola, no Soweto, no Treason Trials, no prosperous mining magnate. We are on the frontier of an unnamed Empire, far from the capital. Beyond the gates lies a vast emptiness, fitfully occupied by 'barbarian' nomads and fishermen. Both the time and place of the action are deliberately left vague; the frontier is that or any and every empire approaching its fall. The frontier has for years been peaceful, long period of barter and interchange alternating with a little cattle-raiding. The elderly civil Magistrate who tells us the story in the first person has the life-style and interests which go with someone who has spent his whole adult life on the frontier. He dabbles in ar-

chaeology and ethnology, drinks and plays cards with his cronies, pays an occasional visit to the brothel. Suddenly the uneventful life of the frontier town is shattered by the arrival of the security police, headed by the sinister Colonel Joll the archetypal torturer and interrogator. The capital is stirring into life and determines to take the defence of its frontiers seriously. After a satisfactory punitive raid, leading to the arrest and torture of many prisoners, Joll is preparing to return to the capital.

He has an air of sternly controlled triumph. I nod my understanding. "Anything that I can do to facilitate your journey" I say. There is a pause. Then into the silence, like a pebble into a pool, I drop my question.

"And your inquiries, Colonel, among the nomad peoples and the aboriginals - have they been as successful as you wished?"

He places his fingers together tip to tip before he answers. I have the feeling that he knows how much his affectations irritate me. "Yes, Magistrate, I can say that we have had some success"

"That is good. And can you tell me whether we have anything to fear?"

Can we rest securely at night?"

The corner of his mouth crinkles in a little smile. Then he stands up, bows, turns and leaves. 15

After Joll's departure from the town, an uneasy peace returns. Most of the prisoners, except those who have died under interrogation, leave. The Magistrate becomes obsessed with a barbarian girl who, lamed and blinded by Joll and his henchmen, has been left behind to beg for a living. He takes her into his room and begins to wash her broken feet daily. As time goes on, he washes higher, until in a curious blend of compassion, penance and eroticism, he is washing her entire naked, sturdy body. She shares his bed at night, waits upon him yet never really becomes his mistress. He is unable to separate compassion from desire, and she perhaps despises that inability. Meanwhile he neglects his friends, his old habits, even his visits to the brothel. He becomes closed in an enigmatic relationship to the girl he can neither possess nor renounce. Finally, he determines to take her back to her own people; a long and hazardous journey at the wrong season. Whilst in the desert, he finally possesses her with real passion, yet cannot bring himself to abandon his crazy journey and presses on to meet the barbarians. Returning without her, he finds Joll in full possession of the town, preparing for a big offensive into the unknown. The Magistrate is accused of 'conorting with the enemy', stripped of his powers, thrown into jail, humiliated in every possible way and, worst of all, finally released to wander about the

town as a harmless buffoon. Meanwhile Joll and his glittering army ride off into the wilderness. Few of them return, and when they do it is to abandon the town to its fate and ride off towards the distant capital, trailing a wretched line of refugees behind them. Only a few, the Magistrate among them, linger on the frontier to face the coming winter and, perhaps, the still invisible barbarians. The latter, we come to suspect, are more of an idea than a reality; an idea against which Joll and all his glittering instruments of torture struggle in vain. But perhaps the idea has produced the reality, creating a 'barbarian menace' by its very need for one.

Meanwhile, the Magistrate has grown immensely in spiritual stature and understanding with every apparent step in his fall from status and power. At the end of the novel he ponders upon the concept of Empire and all that is sacrificed to it. Considering the courses now open to him, he reflects:

Without exception they are dreams of ends dreams not of how to live but of how to die. And everyone, I know, in that walled town now sinking into darkness ... is similarly preoccupied ... What has made it impossible for us to live in time like fish in water, like birds in air, like children? It is the fault of Empire! Empire has created the time of history ... Empire dooms itself to live in history and plot against history. One thought alone preoccupies the submerged mind of Empire: how not to end, how not to die, how to prolong its era. By day it pursues its enemies. It is cunning and ruthless, it sends its bloodhounds everywhere. By night it feeds on images of disaster. A mad vision, yet a virulent one: I am no less infected with it than Colonel Joll as he tracks the enemies of Empire through the boundless desert, sword unsheathed to cut down barbarian after barbarian16.

This bleak, austere fable makes Brink's novels look, by comparison, elaborate and contrived. Brink likes to locate his narrator in a specific place and time (a London hotel suite, a condemned cell) and then roam up and down through space and time explaining how he got there. The Magistrate unfolds a plain, unvarnished tale which resonates in the mind. But the comparison is perhaps unfair, since Coetzee is unlikely to continue writing in this terse, allegorical mode. *Waiting for the Barbarians* is probably a 'one-off' novel, but nonetheless powerful or memorable for that.

Considering this literature of twilight, as I have called it, reveals much to us about how literature works. As the French Marxist critics have observed, it is a deeply subversive art. Running counter to all the public bombast of the South African establishment, to its ever-increasing violence against neighbours abroad and opponets at home, runs this clear current of im-

imaginative truth. Perhaps we can take comfort in the words of the great Victorian poet, A.H. Clough:

The truth is strong, end shall prevail,
When none cares whether it prevail or not.

NOTES

1. Athol Fugard, *Boesmon and Lena and Other Plays* London, Oxford University Press, 1974 pp. xviii-xix.
2. *Ibid.*, p. xxv.
3. Athol Fugard, *Statements* London, Oxford University Press 1974, p. 38
4. Nadine Gordimer, *The Late Bourgeois World* London, Gollancz, 1966 p. 12.
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 146-7.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 130.
7. *Ibid.*, pp. 159-160.
8. Breyten Breytenbach, 'Of Myth and Men', *The New African* London, June 1965 p 92
9. Cape to Rio, *Season in Paradise*, (London, 1980), p. 86.
10. Andre Brink, *Looking on Darkness* London, W.H. Allen & Co., 1974 pp. 50-51.
11. Andre Brink, *Rumours of Rain* London, Star Paperback, 1978 p. 163.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 258.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 331.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 446.
15. J.M.Coetzee, *Waiting for the Barbarians* London, King Penguin, 1982 pp. 23-4.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 133.

