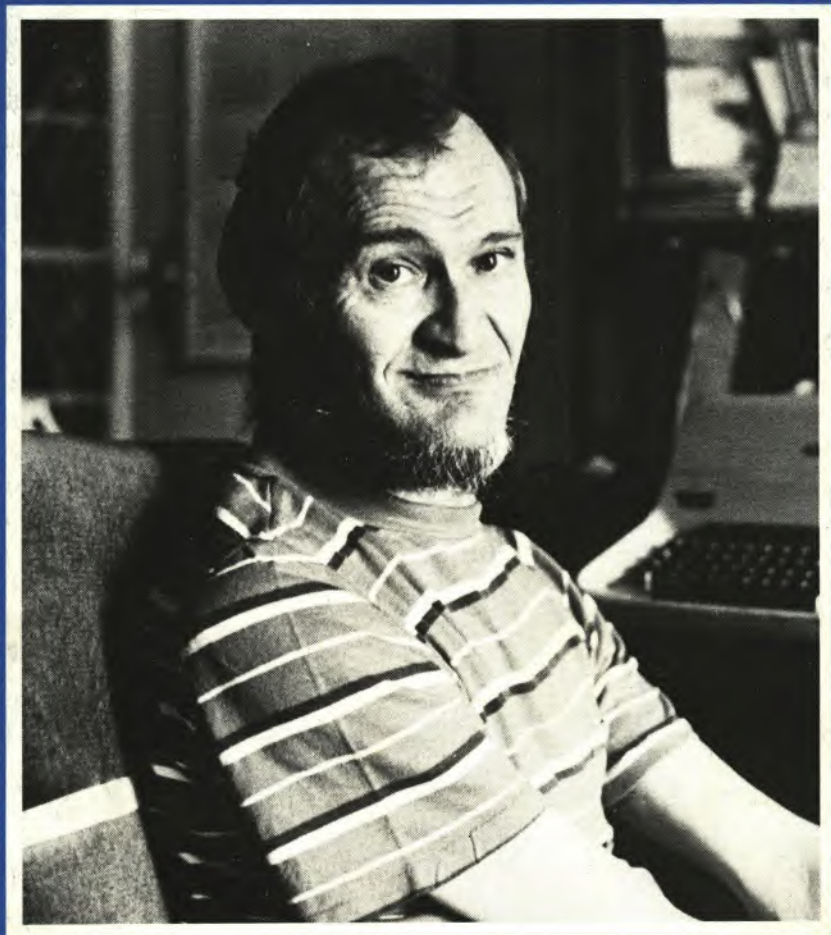


**37<sup>th</sup> Alfred and Winifred Hoernlé Memorial Lecture**

# **The Democratic Chorus and Individual Choice**

**Lionel Abrahams**

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Alfred and Winifred Hoernlé  
Memorial Lecture

*Delivered in Johannesburg on 12th October 1995*

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**Dr Lionel Abrahams**



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C W de Kiewiet, *Can Africa come of age?* (1960)  
D V Cowen, *Liberty, equality, fraternity — today* (1961)  
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D H Houghton, *Enlightened self-interests and the liberal spirit* (1970)  
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P Mayer, *Urban Africans and the bantustans* (1972)  
A Pifer, *The higher education of blacks in the United States* (1973)  
M Buthelezi, *White and black nationalism, ethnicity and the future of the homelands* (1974)  
M Wilson, “...So truth be in the field...” (1975)  
M W Murphree, *Education, development and change in Africa* (1976)  
G R Bozzoli, *Education is the key to change in South Africa* (1977)  
H Ashton, *Moral persuasion* (1978)  
A Paton, *Towards racial justice: Will there be a change of heart?* (1979)  
L Sullivan, *The role of multinational corporations in South Africa* (1980)  
A Paton, *Federation or desolation?* (1985)  
C E W Simkins, *Liberalism and the problem of power* (1986)  
M M Corbett, *Guaranteeing fundamental freedoms in a new South Africa* (1990)  
R J Goldstone, *Do Judges Speak Out?* (1993)

## **THE ALFRED AND WINIFRED HOERNLÉ MEMORIAL LECTURE**

The Alfred and Winifred Hoernlé Memorial Lecture commemorates the work of Professor R F Alfred Hoernlé, president of the South African Institute of Race Relations from 1934 to 1943, and his wife Winifred Hoernlé, also sometime president of the Institute.

Reinhold Frederick Alfred Hoernlé was born in Bonn, Germany, in 1880. He was educated in Saxony and at Oxford and came to South Africa at the age of 28 to be professor of philosophy at the South African College. He taught in Britain and the United States of America from 1911 to 1923, returning to become professor of philosophy at the University of the Witwatersrand, where his South African wife was appointed senior lecturer in social anthropology. His association with the Institute began in 1932, and it was as its president that he died in 1943. His Phelps-Stokes lectures on South African native policy and the liberal spirit were delivered before the university of Cape Town in 1939.

Agnes Winifred Hoernlé entered the field of race relations after the death of her husband, joining the Institute's executive committee in 1946. She worked for penal reform and to promote child welfare and the welfare of Asians.

## INTRODUCTION

### BY PROFESSOR WALTER SAUNDERS

I'm sure very few of you need an introduction to Lionel Abrahams, so I feel a bit like a dangling superfluity; but I shall at least be brief. You are here partly to honour the memory of a great South African liberal, partly to honour a liberal man-of-letters, who is still very much alive, but principally because you know that what he has to say is always worthwhile listening to.

Let me say this: of all South Africa's men and women of literature, past and present, there is no-one I admire more than Lionel. As a critic of the contemporary South African literary scene, he has no equal; as a poet he has few peers; and his masterpiece *The Celibacy of Felix Greenspan* is a *tour de force* of astonishing uniqueness.

But I don't only admire Lionel for these achievements, and for a life that has been a triumph over the cruellest kind of adversity. I admire him as a person: warm, engaging, challenging, always interesting and with, on occasion, a mischievous sense of humour. But standing above all these qualities is his love of people. It is this that has made him one of the main focal points of literature, not only on the Rand, but in the whole country. Think of those he has encouraged and inspired, and of his magazines, *The Purple Rhenoster*, *Quarry* and *Sesame*, which were to a large extent witnesses to that inspiration. And the poetry readings! In the 70s it was impossible to imagine a poetry reading here without Lionel.



# The Democratic Chorus and Individual Choice

The first of my very eminent precursors in this tradition of the Hoernlé Memorial Lectures was Jan Hendrik Hofmeyr, in 1943. He then declared that we have to justify ourselves by service. Those who followed him, in the act of presenting their lectures, demonstrated their desire to do the beloved country some service, and as judges, administrators, educationists and the like, all were by their very professions fitted to serve. A way of being useful is rather less apparent for a writer of essays, verses and stories. How is it to be done when one's very *modus operandi* involves privacy and something like self-indulgence? How is it to be done in an era of South African history that has been described as 'sociological times'?

Alfred Hoernlé's analysis of a problem on a different scale from mine, that of race relations in South Africa, gives me a preliminary clue. He assessed the various possibilities available in the realm of social engineering (parallelism, assimilation, total separation) and rejected them all. Instead he chose a solution that relied on gradual moral and philosophical transformations within the will of individuals. I take it that the work of the South African Institute of Race Relations is one example and proof of the practicality of that approach. But apart from practicality, his reliance on the individual heart encourages me.

But this still leaves my riddle largely unanswered. Even if one harnesses one's heart and imagination to a great and decent cause and designs one's stories and poems to serve the well-being of one's fellow creatures, the usefulness of it all remains questionable. One may find oneself preaching to massed congregations of the converted. Or one may languish in one's gallant publisher's warehouse, neglected by all but an indomitable coterie of bibliophiles. And even if one avoids both these forms of futility, one's well-intentioned enterprise lies open to question on grounds of artistic integrity. Has one distorted the voice of one's inspiration in the service of moral duty?

Some exceptionally gifted writers transcend these contradictions. They achieve works of outstanding aesthetic validity that embody great, healing ideas and that successfully impinge on the world by winning (and winning over) millions of readers. One such giant, of course, was the representative of literature among my precursors, Alan Paton. But his achievement in

*Cry, the Beloved Country*, both in respect of its inspired composition and its extraordinary political effects, is too exceptional to be a model one could decide to emulate.

In any case, it is not Alan Paton the artist that I look to for a guiding example. Instead, I turn to his political career — his leadership of the Liberal Party from 1956 until its dissolution in 1968 when a new law robbed it of meaning by prohibiting multiracial membership. He was well aware from beginning to end that the party stood no chance of attaining power, yet he remained convinced that its existence was necessary to the moral health of the country. So he dedicated energy, thought, time, and money to keeping the party alive, and in doing so had to endure harassment and menace from the right, suspicion and contempt from the left, and defections by some of his less patient and steadfast membership. His doggedness and patience — like Helen Suzman's — eventually bore fruit when the Liberal Party's principles were adopted for the national transformation announced on the 2nd February 1990.

Paton's insistence on continuing to do the unpopular, untimely, ostensibly useless thing because he believed it was the right and necessary thing, presents a case of dwelling with paradox which I find inspiring. Perhaps it is perverse to emphasise the element of quietism in his political programme, but I am looking for the comfort of reassurance, and I find it in his patience: continuing to do the unpopular, untimely, ostensibly useless thing...dwelling with paradox...

Of course, however, what was the right and necessary thing for Paton as the leader of a political party is not the right and necessary, or even possible, thing for me at my word processor and in my creative writing workshop. In Hoernlé and in Paton I have found examples that seem to license the spirit of my approach to the problem of usefulness, but the how and what remain to be discovered.

I want to shape my answer in three sections. The first, based on the past, will be a sort of story. The second will consider the present and take the form of a critique. The third concerns the future in that it contains a sort of resolution. There will be some overlapping.

Perhaps at this point I should acknowledge the very personal emphasis that will appear in this address. I shall be speaking of individualism, as an individual. I shall be tracing what may sound like the escape route of the ego, in the belief that I am not alone in choosing it, and that eventually it leads back out into the world.

## The Past

Forty-four years ago Herman Charles Bosman died. I am lucky enough to have had him as my mentor during the last few years of his life. Three of many principles he taught me were:

- a celebratory humility towards the world's heritage of great art;
- a disciplined and patient attitude in the struggle to master one's literary craft; and
- a trust in one's own tastes, impulses and affinities.

He was a great humorist and social tease, who had toyed at times with fairly mischievous ideas, and generally avoided seeming in earnest about anything except, say, the sound of a poetic phrase or the atmosphere of a street. For example, when he pamphleteered for the abolition of the death penalty in about 1933, he disguised his seriousness behind a display of romantic admiration for the condemned poisoner, Daisy de Melker. Similarly, his playful stories and essays seem to have been designed to conceal a store of wisdom far ahead of its time.

Something he believed in was the present interest and potential greatness of South African literature. According to his vision, the arts in South Africa would draw on the creative potency of Africa as a whole. He believed also that our institutions of learning ought somehow to be acknowledging the existence of our growing body of letters, instead of ignoring it. This is a commonly accepted notion today. But in his day, and for many years after, it remained controversial — a provincial daydream, capable, surprisingly, of arousing certain mild-mannered teachers of English to rage.

At a conference in 1956 I saw a troop of earnest academics fall on one of their colleagues, Guy Butler, and savage him mercilessly with indignation and sarcasm. This was because he had invited them to consider some of the problems local poets encountered in their efforts to write, in English, poetry that was authentically African in character. His attackers scorned the local endeavour as trivial, inferior, unworthy of their notice. In trying to bring it to their attention, Butler was posing a threat to the metropolitan standards of the received canon of English literature they were committed to propagating and defending.

Butler's own devotion to the classics was as deep as theirs, but his vision was broader and their attack in no way weakened his commitment to the creation of a South African literature. Indeed, he continued to dedicate himself to its advancement in every way possible. Mainly, of course, by writing some of it.

One of his marginal contributions was helping to polish and publish

that unique and charming novel, *The Marabi Dance*, an intimate re-creation of black working class life in the Johannesburg of the 1920s to the 1940s. Its publication in 1973 was the culmination of a remarkable cultural collaboration. During most of the 1960s the process of editing it went on. A dynasty of editors bit by bit ascertained the author's intentions and negotiated with him to clear the obscurities, fill in the lacunae, and sort out the confusions. They did not form a committee, but worked separately, individual by individual, liberals and Marxists, academics and activists, from Guy Butler, Don Maclennan and Monica Wilson to Ruth First, Valerie Phillip and Norman Levy. It was Levy who first recognised the merits of Marks Rammitloa's manuscript, and who recruited me to help with the editing. If Rammitloa's name is unfamiliar that is because the author had been 'named' under the Suppression of Communism Act of 1950 and thus automatically prohibited from publishing anything whatsoever as himself. His way round this cruellest and silliest form of censorship was simply to deceive the authorities by taking the now famous nom de plume, Modikwe Dikobe. The need for this little expediency was not known to everyone who took a hand in *The Marabi Dance* project.

I believe the magnetism that drew such different people to that novel came of its newness, its fresh testimony of African experience, its authentic South Africanness, its wonderful aliveness and humanity, all in all, the rich *literary* quality visible in the manuscript even in its first, roughest form. Those were innocent days, when there was a certain consensus about literary excellence and its human value, when it was permissible to trust one's own taste.

I was disconcerted, some years after its publication, when an influential academic critic suggested to me that the editing of *The Marabi Dance*, and indeed the work of any black writer, constituted a kind of improper interference by whites in the documentation of black experience. But without that interference this valuable novel would not have found a publisher. Or if it had, it would have remained a garbled curiosity, of interest to none but an academic elite. South African literature would have lost out.

This stricture was a sign of a changing fashion in criticism. Another sign of it quite hurtfully affected Guy Butler. Eighteen years after the conference at which he had been battered by his colleagues, I saw him come under heavy fire again. He had not changed his stance vis-à-vis South African literature. But by 1974 the English departments had begun to be radicalised. So the second attack on him came not from conservative Afrophobes, but from the revolutionary New Left. From that angle, his sin was not a mere *faux pas* indicative of philistine provincialism. The

crime consisted rather in an entire career and philosophy, labelled 'Butlerism' and interpreted as a form of elitist eurocentric neocolonialism.

Within a few years this emphatically political outlook was affecting the literary scene in a variety of ways, some good, most bad. In 1977 white and black writers resuscitated the Johannesburg branch of the international writers' guild, PEN, and thus formed an association which defied and transcended the apartheid barrier, so that they could learn to know each other, learn from each other and support and protect each other in resistance to the ravages of censorship and police bullying. And then, within three years, I saw the flux of political motivations within the membership destroy the organisation on account of the very thing that was best about it. Its multiracial composition had become repugnant to the black consciousness faction in the anti-apartheid struggle.

Meanwhile, more generally, as the political influence intensified, many critics, editors and publishers became increasingly indiscriminating and patronising in respect of work by black writers. Those who resisted this trend were criticised for their elitism, their lack of relativism, their failure to move with the times. Simultaneously, at the academic level, the theorists of literature, carried away by a bizarre international fashion, were overthrowing the whole tradition of beauty, subtlety, profundity, originality, complexity, humanity and truth — dismissing it all as some kind of primitive, capitalistic, romantic hoax. Much of the thinking was rooted in Marxism, and one reason for the spread of the trend was that liberal writers who should have been the natural critics of their Marxist-inspired colleagues, were in a paralysing dilemma. The Suppression of Communism Act would have given their intellectual attacks the force of denunciations liable to attract the attention of the political police. So the liberals found it morally impossible to voice their criticism with due vigour. Thus, the Marxist influence, under the paradoxical protection of the anti-communist laws, flourished largely unchallenged. Dutiful scholars were producing studies whose chief concern was to unearth the dark roots of hidden history; to expose bourgeois literature's secret complicity with social evil. Thrilling work, conducted in a thrillingly esoteric terminology.

Stories, poems and plays were demoted to the status of documents. In common with all artifacts and relics — from fossils to potsherds, from dwellings to clothing, from newspapers to graffiti, from tools to toys — literary texts were to be interpreted as items of historical and sociological evidence. The author's unintentional revelations became important, to the exclusion of his design. His mistakes became more fascinating than his achievements. His or her class, age, gender, racial identity and ideological

orientation became more worth noticing than his or her creative gifts.

Aesthetic evaluation was no longer the central function of criticism. In fact none of the qualities you and I look for when we exercise our unprofessional freedom to seek the pleasures and fulfilments of the printed page — none of the rewards we hope for when we read poetry, fiction, drama or essays — remained of any account. Critic and reader had lost each other. Author and critic had become profoundly, I would say inimically, divided.

Among other results, this meant that useful criticism had become almost impossible to find. South African literature, previously ignored but now shot through with political relevance, became a focus of special attention. But by the time the English departments deigned to recognise the existence of South African literature, they had, to a large extent, cast aside their ability to pronounce on it as literature.

Nothing could have been less timely. The 1970s and 1980s were an era of major growth for English writing in our country. Work appeared under hundreds of new names. For the first time the contribution of black writers was prominent. New styles, new attitudes, new regions of experience were being brought within reach of potentially literary expression. There were innumerable experiments. At the same time there was a vast amount of uninformed floundering, hopeful striving, fashionable posturing, opportunistic copying — writing which did not achieve the human connection.

More than ever, there was a creative role for discriminating criticism. Rubbish had to be winnowed out; what was promising had to be distinguished, assessed, guided, tested. The new critical approaches were, and remain, disabled from fulfilling these functions. The large majority of the new aspirant writers probably enjoyed their fleeting exposure in print, the uncritical attention accorded them, but the few with talent and potential were cheated of the discriminating recognition that was their due, the critical guidance by which they might have grown.

A bloodier result has been pointed out by the essayist and poet, Stephen Watson. He has reviewed the rhetoric of violence in the political verse of the 1970s and 1980s, and its critical — or rather, its uncritical — reception in a climate of romantic sympathy with the armed struggle. And he has persuasively argued that that failure to condemn rhetorical viciousness is causally linked to the moral malaise inflicting the country, and thence to the epidemic of murder that has continued on into the 1990s.

Ironically, in dismissing the received standards of literary excellence as merely a Eurocentric cultural convention, the white critics were in effect saying to the black newcomers to the disciplines of print: 'The best is not expected of you; the best is not for your enjoyment.'

I will be accused of an inability to see beyond a narrowly Eurocentric aesthetic. My answer is: the new writers, black and white, were essaying an entry into the world of books and magazines, the world of printed literature addressed to literate readers. To that extent the traditional literary aesthetic *is relevant* to their undertaking. Its labelling as 'Eurocentric' is crude and erroneous. The traditional aesthetic is vastly capacious, multi-form, ever-evolving, and it defines the means by which the new writer may invent his individual style, may discover his own way of touching and moving his reader. Indeed, the essence of this aesthetic is that the reader *shall* be touched, shall know himself to have been touched.

More than that, the traditional aesthetic is what connects all the elements of the world of printed literary art into, indeed, a *world*, a human habitation. Abjure it and you abjure language in the fullest sense, you attenuate or even break your connection with humanity.

## The Present

'It was the best of times. It was the worst of times.' On 2nd February 1990 President FW de Klerk waved his all-transforming wand. Bitter antagonists sat together and negotiated; the people peacefully voted; Mr Nelson Mandela gloriously became president. 'Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive.' And yet today, the feeling of emergency persists. The cataclysm we may have feared has repeatedly been averted. We are spared the earthquake, but we live with a continuing, accelerating avalanche of change and destruction. The new world taking shape on our soil demands space for itself. Many old institutions, practices and values will be swept away. Not a comforting prospect.

And yet, the temptation to speak of miracles is irresistible. With startling suddenness we are rocketed beyond the grim contingency of 40 years. During the time of disfavour our national 'soul' was in crisis. Perhaps more precisely, we sank into a numb despair about our right to claim a soul at all. But now, all at once, our society has transcended its psychic humiliation. We do have, we are allowed to have, a moral identity. And we can turn again to more interesting issues; for instance, to a possibility that fascinated Bosman — that of eventual cultural and artistic greatness for a South Africa embracing its African destiny.

Guy Butler's recently published *Essays and Lectures 1949-1991* reflects a very different approach from Bosman's. But here is a reminder that, in his liberal and scholarly spirit, Butler has given himself to the same bold and generous dream as Bosman, the dream of cultural greatness, based on

an invigorating fusion between the western heritage and the potent secrets and energies of Africa.

This is a form of patriotism which the next wave of reflective writers would not deign or dare to entertain. I am thinking of a range from Nadine Gordimer, Athol Fugard, André Brink, J M Coetzee, Njabulo Ndebele, and Breyten Breytenbach, on down to Christopher Hope and beyond. These became our Jeremiahs. They were all dominated by an idea of South Africa in a state of political and moral sickness.

On the other hand, we do have our Isaiahs. I think something related to visionary patriotism is to be found in Alan Paton as well as in Adam Small, Es'kia Mphahlele, Olive Schreiner and Jan Smuts. Now suddenly Bosman's and Butler's visions are permissible and accessible again — visions that do not simply demand for South Africa rejection, punishment, correction or medicine, but instead inspire transformation, growth, flight. And indeed, on that extraordinary day of President Mandela's inauguration, what was the prevailing public mood if not visionary patriotism — a patriotism of a kind that a hundred other nations were eager to share?

Now suddenly all sorts of possibilities present themselves that were unthinkable during the past 30 years or so. Think of the Rugby World Cup and the Olympic Games. Another, more complicated one, is truth. Amid all the other miracles, will the South African body politic succeed in accomplishing the miracle of truth? The desire for truth is felt, the need to be cleansed of dirty secrets generated by four decades of oppression and the resistance to it. So we have a Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

But truth is not easy to lay hold of, especially in times like these, when we have, in Jill Wentzel's words, 'a crusade of good against evil'. Truth then loses its neutrality and complexity. Whatever proposition serves the crusade is a weapon against evil, and hence by definition becomes the truth. The result is that public life becomes pervasively unauthentic. Two examples illuminate each other.

In 1966 the Rev Beyers Naudé, in his urgency to instil a full sense of the evil South Africa had fallen into, likened the apartheid state to Nazi Germany. No longer could one dismiss this comparison as just a journalist's piece of tasteless hyperbole: a courageous, saintly man had lent it his authority and endowed it with the power to reshape perceptions of what was wrong in South Africa and what ought to be done about it. The Nazi analogy surely helped to justify violence in the struggle against apartheid, as well as the policies of isolation and ungovernability, destructive methods which, I suggest, helped to cause some of the serious ills that still afflict and threaten us.



Then in 1994, President Mandela, on a mission to enhance United States financial support for the new South Africa, enforced the urgency of his moral claim by declaring in a speech at the White House that apartheid had been the worst instance of racial oppression ever. So by now the mirror of political rhetoric had dwarfed the Nazi archetype.

The discrepancy between Mandela's version and Beyers Naudé's is a slippage born of the difficulty of holding the truth while grappling for the advantage of the political moment. But does our understanding of how unauthenticity comes about clear it of consequence? Does a high politico-moral purpose excuse reducing the Nazi holocaust to a rhetorical mustard pot? Does it excuse a general blurring of history? President Mandela's audience on the White House lawn might well have challenged him for a judgment on the slave trade.

But when history flares up even unengaged writers who recount the public events they have lived through are tempted to produce colourful, sympathetic stories with the aid of convenient false assumptions, inaccurate emphases and heroic half-fibs. Does it matter? The popular attitude is that what gets written may safely be ignored. Some sophisticated debaters argue that there is no truth, there are only useful fictions. Neither of these evasions lifts us toward greatness.

The motive to retrieve the truth about the crimes of apartheid and the struggle against it is not retribution or revenge, but reconciliation, to which the prerequisite is knowledge. Archbishop Desmond Tutu points out that forgiveness must be preceded by confession, since we can't forgive without knowing what we have to forgive. Reconciliation between erstwhile political enemies is a splendid, forward-looking, life-enhancing thing. President Mandela's brave, determined and generous endeavours in this direction are the surest evidence of greatness in him. His gracious gestures toward the wives and widows of his former oppressors presented a rare instance of imaginative generosity in politics.

But what are we to say when the price of reconciliation includes the pardoning of crimes like murder and torture? We have the precedent of recent amnesties associated with the settlement negotiations. President de Klerk went some way toward nullifying the decent effects of his liberal revolution when he pardoned and freed certain violent idealists on various sides. The cause in which they inflicted misery on their fellow creatures is given as a justification for their crimes. So these crimes become non-crimes, and these morally unreconstituted murderers recover their innocence. Bearing in mind nothing loftier than my own safety, how can I countenance the freeing of activists tainted with viciousness, heart-

lessness, delusion? But what especially troubles me is the singling out for excuplation of one class of criminal, the politically motivated.

Why is it more morally blessed to forgive a bomber or torturer with a cause than a burglar, a car hijacker or a rapist with an appetite? Causes, you might say, are higher than appetites, less merely animal, more human. Well, I want to know, how often is what they call a cause actually a disguised appetite for power or approval or acceptance? Motivation is inscrutably complex. Therefor I prefer to judge a motive neither by its visceral origin nor by its philosophical intention, but by its methods and the visible effects it brings about. If the higher cause employs the same brutal means as the lower appetite, then the cause has fallen morally even lower than the appetite.

Albert Camus's analysis of the corruptive power of political idealism in *The Rebel* needs to be kept in mind, and especially his discussion contrasting crimes of passion with acts sanctioned by high principle. The enormities of history spring not from passion but too often from high principle and Grand Ideas.

Perhaps this is one reason why, since the 18th century's enlightenment, the philosophical pendulum has swung steadily back. Blake, Keats, Nietzsche, Freud, Jung, Rudolph Steiner, Lawrence and a host of other seers have sounded the insufficiency of intellect and the dangers of neglecting or suppressing the other dimensions of our being. Few would doubt that this warning represents wisdom, liberation, a way of maintaining our human balance. And it has found expression in aspects of contemporary movements like the revival of religion, conservationism and feminism. It seems also to be influential in the South African process of democratisation. Many systems and institutions are seen as relics of 'the System', the Grand Idea, and their logic needs to be challenged.

But the defiance of over-control by the 'left brain' can go too far. So we have toyi-toyi frenzies, rogue strikes, debt and rent boycotts, legal decisions spurned, highways blockaded, streets, campuses and hospitals trashed, flooded and wrecked, patients deserted, hostages taken, and so forth. Again and again the principle of human rights becomes the pretext for actions that disregard the rights of others. Perhaps the inconsistency suits the anti-rational mood. I suppose adherence to principle is a 'left brain' function. So perhaps are consideration, restraint and discipline.

The ugliest of these acts of 'breaking free' must belong to a short phase of transition. But the pervasive climate of low level unintelligibility, though less obviously nightmarish, is unlikely to change so soon. It is maintained by the abuse of language and reason in official communications and

pronouncements by critics, economists, psychologists, linguists and other experts; by the middle-slick and pap-gabble that dominate the mass media and advertising.

It holds sway partly because, in the spirit of the day, linguistic authority has deposed itself in favour of one dictatorial criterion, that of current 'usage'. But language has always been subject to the shaping and invigorating influences of usage. Constant reference back to a received standard, reliance on dictionaries and grammars and models of style, never prevented the modifications that usage brought about; it merely healthily retarded the process of change, reminding us of the language we had to keep command of if we wanted to go on being able to read books and speak to strangers. Why suddenly is the use of a standard no longer regarded as necessary? Correctness has become incorrect.

Then of course there is the fashion for incoherence in the arts and popular entertainments. And beyond that the question of artistic standards is complicated by the challenges of cultural diversity. These are clearly and conveniently articulated by Kelwyn Sole in his essay, 'Democratising Culture and Literature in a "New South Africa"', published this year in the journal *Current Writing*.

He argues that cultural creativity is not a spontaneous process but an organised one — in fact, a form of political activity. This must be the thinking behind all these new structures designed to help the arts. I'm wary of them. Anyway, Sole declares: 'Democratisation will ... require an enlarging of the categories of respected art to include all cultural productions, even ... political posters, T-shirt designs ... beadwork and hut painting', in other words 'forms used by the mass of people'. And he passes the following judgment: 'There are any number of artistically viable forms, bred and nurtured among ordinary people, at times under appallingly adverse conditions, of which the cultural elite in this country is either totally unaware or scornful.'

The reference to 'appallingly adverse conditions', gives me the opportunity for a brutal but necessary remark: that in the arts, as I see it, the deserving case — the poor widow, the paralysed beggar, the child of the oppressed, the hero of the struggle, the survivor of genocide — has no special claim. Genius, talent, meaningful accomplishment, the aesthetic transmutation of experience, are the only justifications. These essentially are the only means by which each work can make its own way, reader by reader, listener by listener, viewer by viewer, audience by audience. If you too consistently neglect this principle you subvert the meaning and value of art and you impoverish and corrupt your society's culture. But

these, precisely, are some of the values that are being devalued.

Sole rebukes 'the cultural elite' for being 'unaware or scornful' of the art forms of the 'ordinary people'. We all know that those he calls 'ordinary people' are generally 'unaware or scornful' of many of the art forms of their fellow 'ordinary people', as well as the art forms of those he calls 'the cultural elite'. Nevertheless, no one would dream of rebuking those 'ordinary people' for exercising some freedom of choice. The rebuke to the cultural elite, as I see it, is an attempt to limit their freedom of choice and press them into a political programme.

When artists make truly creative use of expressive forms that are not elements of their own inherited culture, they are not simply relying on cross-pollination as a formula or a social virtue. A significant artistic hybrid is an exceptional achievement. It demands an imaginative leap, a selective falling in love with the other form or forms.

The alternative is the submersion of the self in a universe of indigenous cultural phenomena, leaving no time for the unending process of mastering one's own inherited or selected field. The ethos of the new South Africa-in-the-making does indeed seem to demand a self-submersion of this order. It expects us to accord respectful patience to those who are culturally or socially different from us, no matter how alien or incomprehensible their conduct is. This ethic of heightened tolerance seems wise, civilised and loving. But it comes, I feel, at too high a price. It seems to require us to subdue the most assertive yet humanly binding impulse of our individuality — the demand to *understand*, and then to judge and to prefer and to choose. Openness to the life around us means very little of human value if all it requires of us is a humble merging, a chameleon-like blending with our surroundings.

There happens to be a striking correspondence between Kelwyn Sole and Alfred Hoernlé in their concern with openness. Hoernlé is described (by Michael Grimley in the *Anthroposophical Quarterly*) as aiming at 'a high degree of openness and tolerance, the ability to participate within the full range of life experience forming a rich comprehensive overview of life and world'.

An important difference between the two approaches is the personal emphasis in Hoernlé's thinking. He wrote: '*I... have found in myself a desire to identify myself with the life around me, to enter into it and share it from the inside...*' (My emphasis). Thus Hoernlé's vision presents a way of absorbing otherness into oneself as a step toward wisdom. It's an ideal which I do not pretend to be capable of meeting except at rare moments. But it is more appealing to me than proactive multiculturalism — that call for us to dissolve the self in otherness.

## The Future

What I have been saying about the effects of politics on literary studies, criticism, aesthetic standards, the pursuit of truth, language, ideas of culture, and the independence of the individual, I think will have indicated that literature is under siege: literature, that is, as understood by Bosman and Butler and Zeke Mphahlele and Modikwe Dikobe and J M Coetzee and Njabulo Ndebele and Mbulelo Mzamane and Nadine Gordimer (despite the theoretical concessions she has made to the political struggle), and by you and by me. Literary standards are under attack from several sides. Apart from the old antipathies — bibliophobia, philistinism, the commercialisation of taste, etc — two kinds of assault have become prominent.

The first comes under the banner of literary theory or 'intellectual responsibility'. It is the promotion of criticism in the academies into a pseudo-science and a quasi-politics that precludes personal response and aesthetic discrimination. The second comes under the banner of 'political correctness'. It is the supposed democratisation and Africanisation of culture in reaction against what is stigmatised as 'elitism', and what is misdiagnosed as 'Eurocentricity'. I shall try to show why and how — perhaps very quietly, even secretly — these assaults must and will be resisted, at least by a few individuals.

One who is resisting is J M Coetzee, our great novelist and essayist. Unlike some of us who are bewildered and intimidated by the esoteric aims and language of contemporary literary theory, Coetzee does not take refuge in ignorance and avoidance, but has mastered the new instruments of analysis as thoroughly as anyone. For this reason, it is especially significant when he dissociates himself from the spirit of fashionable 'high' criticism. Of the several texts in which he has done this, I think the most telling may be an essay entitled 'What is a Classic?' published two years ago in *Current Writing*.

Classical canons are a familiar target of radical criticism. The fashionable construction is that the inherited canons of putatively great art are artificial categories based on culture-specific pseudo-values, artificially perpetuated by various interest groups. Coetzee's essay is innocent of any overt quarrel with this cynical view of canons. Indeed he counters it only implicitly, by absorbing the radical assault on the classics into the stream of normal criticism, and seeing it as a necessary, healthy challenge. Let me quote some brief passages:

'The classic is what survives.' 'As long as the classic needs to be

protected from attack, it can never prove itself classic.' 'Criticism is that which is duty bound to interrogate the classic.' 'Criticism of the most sceptical kind may be what the classic uses to define itself and ensure its survival.'

Thus, refreshingly and affirmatively, Coetzee transcends the intellectual fashion. But what also makes this essay thrilling and profoundly important is its investigation of the *intimate* source of the classic's potency. The pivot of the essay is an autobiographical moment. I quote again:

'One Sunday afternoon in the summer of 1955, when I was fifteen years old, I was mooning around our back yard in the suburbs of Cape Town, wondering what to do, boredom being the main problem of existence for me in those days, when from the house next door I heard music. As long as the music lasted, I was frozen, I dared not breathe. I was being spoken to by the music as music had never spoken to me before.'

'What I was listening to was a recording of Bach's *Well Tempered Clavier*, played on the harpsichord. I learnt this name only some time later, when I had become more familiar with what, at the age of fifteen, I knew only — in a somewhat suspicious and even hostile teenage manner — as "classical music".'

Coetzee goes on to argue that the classics of music are defined by their having survived continuous *testing* in performance by generations of professionals. However, his vivid story of that very unprofessional Sunday afternoon encounter quietly insinuates a different idea — namely, that the essential testing of the music occurs in the realm of the receptive hearer's subjective response. The phrase is mine, but let me repeat it: the receptive hearer's subjective response.

Of course, the musical example is meant to hold for other arts, and certainly for literature. Coetzee is offering a validation of the classics by *substance*, by *naturalness*. 'And today,' he declares, 'every time a beginner stumbles through the first prelude of the "forty-eight", Bach is being tested again.' What, I ask, could be more humanistic, more democratic? And in case my emphasis on inwardness and personal response should suggest a slide toward the asocial, toward solipsism, let me quote one more of Coetzee's reverberating assertions: 'The classic is what survives the worst of barbarism, surviving because generations of people cannot afford to let go of it and therefore hold on to it at all costs.'

Standing on Coetzee's shoulders, and broadening my reference beyond the canons of great works to include whatever is valid and valuable, I want

now to offer some further thoughts of my own about the making and enjoying of literature.

The literary endeavour places one where individuality and society intersect. The writer without a sense of self has no new story to tell. The writer without a sense of community has no one to tell his story to, no means of telling his story, no language. For language is inescapably social, inescapably shared. The nature and business of language is connection.

The way the writer makes his connections with his fellow beings is that, along with whatever else he finds within himself, he also finds something of what is common to others. He hears other voices. In that centre he feels other lives. Having made his discoveries, he spends his time rendering them more fully conscious and articulating them in the language that is his medium; then he holds them out in the mysterious incarnation of aesthetic form — holding them out for recognition, for acknowledgement and claim by the other. And that claiming is one of the measures of civilisation.

I seem so far to be laying the emphasis on literature as an ethical agent in society. This is not the whole story, or the whole poem. There is always more to a creative insight than the basic act of human identification. For example, there can be the liberation of that which is devilish in the writer's impulses; and there can be the calling forth of that which is godlike in humankind. But I won't explore the other dimensions now. I want rather to say something more about identification.

Identification with humankind does not imply a negation of selfhood. It begins with *identity*, the self-aware self. The more developed — that is to say the more individualised the identity, the more significant the identification. A greater psychic space has been traversed. Conversely, significance is less when the identification takes the form of solidarity with one's own nominal brothers and sisters, one's own side, in a political, economic, religious or social conflict. Indeed, solidarity on the one hand and the imaginative act of human identification on the other require entirely different things of the self. Submergence the one, transcendence the other — as different as the toyi-toyi and an ensemble performance. This difference accounts for the human and aesthetic poverty of so much political writing: it addresses itself not outwards to the unpredictable heart of the stranger who is your other self, but into the writer's own group, or own mass, in quest of the ready-made agreement that resides there.

Thus I place the greatest emphasis on individuality, selfhood, personal identity. Nevertheless, the recognition of the other inside the self is crucial, one of the very sparks that make literature possible and, equally, make it necessary to human evolution. The act of literary creation simultaneously

manifests that the writer is an individual and is a member of a community. Without such acts, the conscious recognition of identity between us would go unexpressed, and, increasingly, unpractised. Conscious connection would fail, art would fail, language would fail, and the forces that make us capable of killing each other would reign without check.

In 1943 J H Hofmeyr, with regard to race relations, spoke of trusteeship. A measure of how far we have advanced is that that idea is no longer tenable. It is not given to any group exclusively to fill the role of donor or protector over others. Nevertheless, I want to reinvoke the notion of trusteeship, though in a rather different sense from Mr Hofmeyr's. I visualise not a political trusteeship over people, but a personal trusteeship over values and ideas. Trusteeship over my own heritage for my own sake implies no insult or threat. It is a private matter. But is it useful?

As I have remarked, we are living amid an avalanche of change. Many of the changes cause me pain. The order of my world is threatened. Security, convenience and pleasantness are less to be counted on. I have to witness insulting, wasteful, self-destructive savagery, and remind myself that trash in the streets is less terrible than blood in the streets, that water gushing from a smashed main is not as horrific as flames spurting from bombs. I have to wait while the exasperated, the disappointed, the misled try their hand at fulfilling the symbolism of President Mandela's inauguration by overhauling everything — even the hospitals that succour their own people, even the museums, libraries and universities that give the nation some means of mastery over time and brute circumstance — remaking all in the image of Africa. Sorrowfully, critically, but without paralysing anger, fear or disgust, I have to endure and survive all this — in the words of Isaiah, to hide myself 'as it were for a little moment, until the indignation be overpast' — if I am to embrace our African destiny.

But there is the other side. The opening of our society lends a new urgency to the maintenance of our standards as individuals and as bearers of our inherited culture. Our standards are the wealth we bring out of our personal experience, our education and our communal past; and they are the resource out of which pours whatever we are capable of contributing. We have to guard our own, not *against* others but, in the first place, *for ourselves*, and in the second place, *for* others, our compatriots, against the time when, if ever, they *may* choose to share it, for the future of the land.

So, while I will not try to proselytise anybody or establish a cultural colony, neither will I desert my own values. I will not dissolve my culture in the melting-pot of diversity. I will not withhold criticism when cultural affirmative action results in the publishing and broadcasting of puerile



rubbish. I will not pretend that my black students' writing defects are features of African style. Instead, I will rejoice when one of them struggles for years to express in unflawed English poetry his tribute to his deeply African grandmother: in the end his struggle permits me to share his sense of how she was wonderful. I will hold on to the things I love.

All this, too, is needful if I am to embrace our African destiny.

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In this lecture, Dr Lionel Abrahams, the distinguished poet and author, emphasizes the importance of literary 'high art' and the pursuit of excellence and originality in a society that hopes to be humane and civilised.

He says literature is under siege from two kinds of assault. The first is the promotion of criticism to a 'pseudo-science and a quasi politics' that precludes personal response and aesthetic discrimination'. The second is political correctness: the 'supposed democratisation and Africanisation of culture in reaction against what is misdiagnosed as "Eurocentricity".'

'Perhaps very quietly, even secretly, these assaults must and will be resisted,' Dr Abrahams says.

He adds, 'I will not dissolve my culture in the melting pot of diversity. I will continue to do what I must and what I can by the standards that have formed my tastes and consciousness. I will hold on to the things I love. All this is needful if I am, happily, usefully, to embrace our African destiny.'

Among Dr Abrahams's writings are four volumes of poetry, and a novel, *The Celibacy of Felix Greenspan* (recently re-issued and widely acclaimed in the United States). He has honorary doctorates from the universities of the Witwatersrand and Natal, and is a recipient of the gold medal of the English Academy, the Olive Schreiner Award, and the Pringle Prize (twice).

As editor, publisher, critic and teacher, he has given much of his life to the nurturing of South African literary talent.

# The Hoernlé Memorial Lectures

The IRR is republishing the text of the Hoernlé Memorial Lectures, a series of talks which started in 1945. The original introductory note to the lecture series reads as follows:

*A lecture, entitled the Hoernlé Memorial Lecture (in memory of the late Professor R. F. Alfred Hoernle), President of the Institute from 1934—1943), will be delivered once a year under the auspices of the South African Institute of Race Relations. An invitation to deliver the lecture will be extended each year to some person having special knowledge and experience of racial problems in Africa or elsewhere.*

*It is hoped that the Hoernlé Memorial Lecture will provide a platform for constructive and helpful contributions to thought and action. While the lecturers will be entirely free to express their own views, which may not be those of the Institute as expressed in its formal decisions, it is hoped that lecturers will be guided by the Institute's declaration of policy that "scientific study and research must be allied with the fullest recognition of the human reactions to changing racial situations; that respectful regard must be paid to the traditions and usages of the various national, racial and tribal groups which comprise the population; and that due account must be taken of opposing views earnestly held."*

## About the IRR

Since 1929, the Institute of Race Relations has advocated for a free, fair, and prospering South Africa. At the heart of this vision lie the fundamental principles of liberty of the individual and equality before the law guaranteeing the freedom of all citizens. The IRR stands for the right of all people to make decisions about their lives without undue political or bureaucratic interference.