

AVATARS OF WALDO

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Where South African writing has been more than the mere inertia of metropolitan discourse reproducing itself in an exotic place, its narratives have always in effect been allegories of community, strenuous efforts of memory or anticipation that contest by their own example theory's privileging of the present. This writing has since the extraordinarily prefigurative example of Olive Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm* been for a century at least the critical repository of the lost or imagined times of communities that have been formed by the galloping dynamic of bourgeois modernity to fetishize land and its ownership, space and its occupation. The early documents of South Africa's troubled encounter with capitalist modernization (Sol Plaatje's *Mhudi* is another) speak to us not as expressions of liberal ideology more or less ignorant of their own conditions -- but as fissures in the continuous text of our history, priceless resources (Pechey, 1994:166). Schreiner movingly characterises this encounter:

He may grow up without the sight of a city, and beyond the reach of the touch of luxury; but he has in his hand the key to all nineteenth-century civilization. If, at seventeen or eighteen, he tires of the life of the backwood and desires to see the life beyond, he has only to shoulder his bundle, and at the end of a hundred or a thousand miles he finds himself in a city. All about him may be strange at first; he is awkward in act, slow in speech, but there is not a word or a sound in the world around that is not modifying him; the talk of the men in the lodging-house, the arguments of the men in the public-bar, the chatter at the street corners, the newspapers he takes up, the cheap books he buys for a few pence, open the modern world to him (Schreiner, 1976:101).

In 1973, in answer to the question 'What are modern Africans writing about?', Nadine Gordimer identified 'five main African themes' (Gordimer, 1971:8). She called the first of these the Countryman-Comes-to-Town theme. In Lagos, Johannesburg, Cotonou, Accra, all over the continent, the theme is the same, the novels and stories all deal with the impact of contact with the white man's town and white civilization.

Whereas many white writers were turning in disillusion away from modernity, the African hero, a 'Whittington-like figure' was embracing it, while rejecting his own inferior status in

it and holding on to his own traditional values. Ten years later, in 1983, Ursula Barnett wrote of the South African predecessors of Gordimer's 'modern Africans['] less successful encounter with modernity. After R.R.R. Dhlomo's *An African Tragedy* of 1931,

[t]he plot of a black man coming to the city and succumbing to its evil ways has been repeated ad nauseam...but rarely by black South Africans writing in English because it was no longer a situation that interested them. Later writers were brought up in the city (Barnett, 1983:113).

By 1985 Stephen Gray could offer a chronological list (from Blackburn's *Leaven* of 1908 to Mzamane's *Mzola* of 1980) of South African English fictional treatments of what he called the 'Jim comes to Jo'burg' theme. Peter Abrahams' *Mine Boy* of 1946 is the first true 'Whittington-like figure' in the series, the countryman who settles successfully in the city. Gray's essay seems to have formed the basis of the 'Jim Comes to Jo'burg' entry in the *Companion to South African English Literature* of 1986. In 1989, Jane Watts identified 'Peter Abrahams' first two novels' as precursors of 'a series of Jim Comes to Jo'burg novels dealing with the gulf between moral life and existence in the urban ghettos' (Watts, 1989:2), and in the same year Piniel Shava described 'Plaatje's successors', (R.R.R. Dhlomo, Abrahams and Dikobe) as dealing 'with such issues as blacks' economic needs, the conflict between urban and rural values...' (Shava, 1989:15).

While the provenance of the theme, then, is vague (Plaatje and Abrahams seeming to mark generations in its lineage), there is consensus that the story of the country person coming to the city is a central motif of 'the matter of tradition and modernity... the great theme of modern African literature' (Chapman, 1993:8), which in South African fiction has involved black and white, women and men, many languages and many cities. To refer to 'Jim Comes to Jo'burg' as anything more than a late regional variant of that theme is reductive and impoverishing: it prolongs the currency of an opprobrious epithet, it privileges Johannesburg, the Chamber of Mines, and male experience, and it ignores the already mentioned 'extraordinarily prefigurative example of Olive Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm* (Pechey, 1994:166).

Schreiner's extraordinary prefiguration of the condition of modern South Africa springs metonymically from a narrow chronological and geographical base. '...I will not go down country' says Lyndall to her stranger, 'I will not go to Europe. You must take me to the Transvaal. That is out of the world. People we meet there we need not see again in our future

lives' (Schreiner, 1981:223-224). Schreiner was writing in the late 1870's and the discovery of gold in the Transvaal in the 1880's was to change the dimensions of the world as Lyndall saw it, but for the moment of 1883, when *The Story* was published, Lyndall's description of the Transvaal as 'out of the world' is just to the scope of the novel. The historical, geographical and social focus of *The Story of an African Farm* is provincial, and regional.

Part 1 is localised strictly to the farm itself. Every new arrival is a stranger, and the narrative is given structure by the sequence of arrivals, as the regime of Old Otto is undermined and succeeded by that of Bonaparte Blenkins. At the same time, Schreiner's double heroine/hero, Lyndall/Waldo is taking the resources of the farm as far as they will go. In this very structure Schreiner was laying down a motif of South African (colonial) fiction in English.

Part 2 is given its structure by a sequence of departures from (and in some cases, returns to) the farm. The most significant of these quests are, naturally, those of Lyndall and Waldo, between whom the division of narrative and thematic labour is gender-based: Lyndall goes out to bear a child and to die; Waldo goes out to find work, to return and to die. The farm that Waldo returns to however, has changed irrevocably; the drought-stricken, remote, backward economic unit of Book I has become a kind of pastoral *locus amoenus* in Waldo's dying vision:

Sitting there with his arms folded on his knees, and his hat slouched down over his face, Waldo looked out into the yellow sunshine that tinted even the very air with the colour of ripe corn, and was happy.

He was an uncouth creature with small learning, and no prospect in the future but that of making endless tables and stone walls, yet it seemed to him as he sat there that life was a rare and very rich thing. He rubbed his hands in the sunshine. Ah, to live on so, year after year, how well! Always in the present; letting each day glide, bringing its own labour, and its own beauty; the gradual lighting up of the hills, night and the stars, firelight and the coals! To live on so, calmly, far from the paths of men... (279-280).

The vision is partly natural: 'Rains had covered the Karroo with a heavy coat of green that hid the red earth everywhere' (273). Schreiner seems to have been precise about climatic history, as in her reference to 'the year of the great drought, the year of 1862' (37). While the transformation of the farm is thus both social and historical, it is also a matter of perspective, a vision that can only be internalised, for although Waldo himself will not live to see it he imagines the redemptive moment within history:

...well to live long, and see the darkness breaking, and the day coming! The day when souls shall not thrust back the soul that would come to it; when men shall not be driven to seek solitude, because of the crying-out of their hearts for love and sympathy. Well to live long and see the new time breaking (280).

For on his journey away from and back to the farm Waldo has learned the significance of the new division between town and country, between work and toil, between *urbs* and *locus amoenus*, that follows on initial industrialisation and incipient urbanisation. In terms of South African history, this is the subject matter of Schreiner's novel, whose action is set precisely in the 1860's and 1870's, when South Africa was undergoing the acceleration, brought on by the discovery of diamonds, of the processes of capitalist colonisation, proletarianisation and dispossession.

Yet in Waldo's dying vision there is also an impulse which, while distinctly modern, links Schreiner to the European pastoral tradition. On the one hand, Waldo's death is the fulfilment of 'a compulsion inherent in organic life to restore an earlier state of things which the living entity has been obliged to abandon under the pressure of external disturbing forces' (Freud, 1920:47). Waldo, like Freud's organism 'wishes to die only in [his] own fashion' (51). But in the generic terms of the classical tradition, *The Story of an African Farm* makes a pastoral out of an ironic georgic, and this 'low mimetic' (Frye, 1961:34) narrative derives its vision from Hebraic rather than Hellenic sources. In Genesis the story begins with the breaking of a law. Without transgression there is no story, and in Genesis the story is the human story.

In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground... (3.19).
Therefore the Lord God sent him forth from the Garden of Eden, to till the ground from whence he was taken (3.23).

The expulsion from the Garden divides past from present, Eden from the workplace, 'the Sunday from the week'. The centrifugal aspect of the division, the movement away, is associated with what in later terms of material culture is thought of as progress. Cain, in Milton's words, is the 'sweaty reaper' of 'arable and tilth', while Abel is the 'shepherd...more meek' of 'sheep-walks and folds' (*Paradise Lost*, XI:429-438; Milton:434). And Cain becomes the first builder of a city:

And Cain went out from the presence of the Lord, and dwelt in the land of Nod, on the east of Eden.

And Cain knew his wife: and she conceived, and bare Enoch: and he builded a city, and called the name of the city, after the name of his son, Enoch (Genesis 4, 16-17).

Babel, 'a city and a tower, whose top may reach unto heaven' (11,4), represents the corporate and co-operative physical expression of human imagination: its fulfilment would mean that 'nothing would be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do' (11,6). Its frustration is only possible because the people are scattered and their language confused. From the pastoral point of view, exploitation and lack of restraint continue to sustain the historical city, which becomes also a carnivalesque vortex of opportunity.

The mythopoeic principle of division continues between Egypt and Canaan, and beyond. In the fourth vision of *Paradise Lost*, Book XI, Adam sees a 'wide territory spread Before him', divided among 'towns... rural works... cities' [(345); (Milton:438)]. The manifestation of this division is of course important in South African writing, literary historiography using the division both analytically and chronologically. In the grand narrative to which I am referring, the human story begins in a garden and ends in a city, the new Jerusalem, which represents for Blake, say, the re-integration of the human imagination. There is no Blake in South African writing unless it is the H.I.E. Dhlomo of *The Valley of a Thousand Hills*, but on the level of low mimetic prose narrative rather than that of heroic epic, the new city is represented as the rehabilitation of the work place, and it is towards that possibility that one sequence of South African fictions moves. The rehabilitation represents a kind of reconciliation of two contradictory stories of work: the Edenic, that work is evidence of humanity's loss of its own potential; the Marxian, that work is what distinguishes humanity as such:

the animal merely uses its environment, and brings about changes in it simply by its presence; this is the first essential distinction between man and other animals, and once again it is labour that brings about this distinction (Engels, 1973:260).

The Jerusalem of Blake's poem is built expressively rather than functionally, unlike the cities of South Africa whose image in the fiction of the past century, like South African history itself, would bear out Marx's account:

The division of labour inside a nation leads at first to the separation of industrial and commercial from agricultural labour, and hence to the separation of town and country, and a clash of interests between them (Marx, 1966:121).

Urbanization in South Africa, in the account offered by the texts which I discuss, is largely a function of industrialization. Until 1870 towns were largely 'seats of decision-making and action (military villages) from which the Whites imposed their power over most of South

Africa' (Fair:2). This is the *urbs* as *locus munitus*, that is 'walled place', as against *locus amoenus* or 'place without walls'.

But after 1870, after diamonds, gold and 'the growth of industry and commerce, cities and towns become the focus of economic wealth and the generators of great inequality between rich and poor people and between rich and poor regions' (Fair:2). These are the *urbes* 'built as places of work', as Raymond Williams describes the Northern English cities of the nineteenth century (Williams, 1973:220):

Between 1948 and [1985]... towns and cities [became] vehicles for the containment of the Black population by denying them access to power in these urban areas on the one hand and restraining their flow to them, on the other (Fair:2).

1948 stands for the maturity of secondary industry following World War II, the coming to power of the reformed National Party, the publication of *Cry, the Beloved Country* (and *Time Longer than Rope*), and the production of the Johannesburg Chamber of Mines' recruiting film *Jim Comes to Jo'burg*.

Waldo's is the first South African version of the story of the country person who comes to the city. Schreiner's version, only one element of her novel, although an important one given deep resonance by its context, is told in Waldo's 'unfinished letter' of Chapter 11 of Part 2. As Michael Wade observed, this story is always a picaresque (Wade, 1993:6), but it is crucial that its picaro/picara has not been forever a transient, that he/she make a real beginning from a place to which commitment is authentic. In the opening of Book 1, Chapter 9, Waldo returns from the mill; he has perfected his shearing machine and 'the brown plain' which is 'the home farm' seems like the centre of 'the whole world' (89) to him. Ironically his father has died the previous night, Blenkins will soon crush the shearing machine, and Waldo will seem to have exhausted the possibilities of the farm. In so far, then, as *The Story* is a *bildungsroman*, Waldo's journey begins early in the action. Like Lyndall's movement out into the world (and beyond?), Waldo's departure is triggered by an encounter with a 'stranger'. This occurs in Chapter 2 of Part 2 ('Waldo's Stranger'), a chapter which, with its immediate predecessor ('Times and Seasons') was often dismissed by earlier critics as discursive excrescence on the central narrative of the novel. But as Chapter 1 of Part 2 is a recapitulation of Part 1, Chapter 2 is an anticipation of Part 2. The 'new man' (144), Gregory Rose, has rented half the farm; Waldo is carving a totem for his father's grave. The stranger seems to acknowledge some aesthetic worth in Waldo's work, which the boy attempts to

explicate in a paratactic series of images: 'grotesque little manikin... fantastic figures and mountains, to the crowning bird from whose wing dropped a feather' (148).

The stranger proceeds 'blandly' to translate Waldo's carving into the general terms of the allegory of the white feather of truth, and only then elicits Waldo's 'life story' from him. Laurens van der Post wrote that the 'white feather of truth' story derived from a Khoi folk-tale (van der Post, 1961:180-181); the stranger's allegorization has taken all local colour from the story, processed it for a global, English readership.

Chapter 1 of Part 2 had been a coherent, sequential account of Waldo's growing up, but when he attempts to tell this story to the stranger, it becomes 'A confused, disordered story -- the little made large and the large small, and nothing showing its inward meaning' (160).

This moment of translation from particularity to generality is a moment of encounter between colonial/provincial and metropolitan culture, a moment of transition from tradition to modernity. Yet Waldo loves the stranger for his lack of belief, hope and feeling, and the stranger accepts the gift of Waldo's carving. The two will meet again.

Culturally, Waldo is a 'colonial' whose centre is elsewhere, but a 'provincial' in the sense of offering, *in potentia*, an alternative cultural order to the metropolitan. The contrast is a parallel to the country/city contrast of the pastoral.

Soon after (Chapter 6) Waldo announces his intention to Lyndall: 'I will take the grey mare -- I will travel first -- I will see the world -- then I will find work'. (This comes in immediate response to Lyndall's imaginative seeing of the world in the compression of 'a multitude of disconnected unlike phases of human life' (201)). He leaves 'that old life... that old colourless existence... a dream' in Chapter 7 (to search for his stranger), but his story is only told (can only be told?) after his return to the farm, in the letter he had promised Lyndall, which is picked up at the moment when Waldo moves to 'the next town' (235).

Waldo's first encounter is with commercial work, as a 'salesman'. He sees clerical work as 'the lowest'. Waldo's peasant sensibility is enraged by a fellow clerk's 'murder' of his horse. (The horse is a potent signifier in this story). Experience at this stage aligns commerce with the church as exploitative orders. Waldo's next encounter is with industry, in the form of transport-riding serving the Diamond Fields; here he learns the demands of alienated physical labour, on which the pretentious elegance of shops depends:

... we drove on again all night; so it went, so it went... I thought of nothing; I was like an animal. My body was strong and well to work but my brain was dead. If you have not felt it, Lyndall, you cannot understand it. You may work, and work, and work, till you are only a body, not a soul. Now when I see one of those evil-looking men that come from Europe -- navvies, with the beast-like sunken faces, different from any Kaffir's -- I know what brought that look into their eyes; and if I have only one inch of tobacco I give them half. It is work, grinding, mechanical work, that they or their ancestors have done, that has made them into beasts. You may work a man's body so that his soul dies. Work is good. I have worked at the old farm from the sun's rising till its setting, but I have had time to think, and time to feel. You may work a man so that all but the animal in him is gone; and that grows stronger with physical labour. You may work a man till he is a devil. I know it because I have felt it (238-239).

Here Waldo takes to brandy ('Cape smoke') at the instigation of his master and as a means of coping with dehumanising labour. The Bushman who drags the drunken Waldo from the road seems to say 'You and I are comrades'. This is a turning-point for Waldo: 'I turned my head from him', a gesture which may signify Waldo's refusal of solidarity with the industrial proletariat, strikingly different from his earlier identification with the Bushman as solitary artist (42-43).¹ A vision of his future life comes to Waldo in the contrast between 'the earth, so pure after the rain, so green, so fresh, so blue' (239) and an imagined lurid newspaper report of his death in a drunken accident. At this point Waldo's return journey to 'the old home farm' begins. When the master beats one of the draught-oxen to death, Waldo the peasant revolts, almost kills his employer, and sets out, walking 'back to the town', where a brief interlude combines modest civilization with

work at a wholesale store... I had only to work from six in the morning till six in the evening; so I had plenty of time. I hired a little room, and subscribed to a library, so I had everything I needed; and in the week of Christmas holidays I went to see the sea (241).

But the idyll cannot last. Here, in Grahamstown, in the Botanic Gardens, Waldo meets and is rejected by his stranger and feels his own vulgarity again. For Waldo the locale of industrialization (transport-riding on the road to the Diamond Fields) is separate from that of urbanization.² Waldo's first sight of the sea is as fabulous as any; and two more strong symbolic encounters -- garden, child -- and 'a kind of fever' immediately precede Waldo's continuing on the 'delightful journey... home' (242).

Waldo's return signifies a choice for tradition over modernity but his story has presented a foundational grammar, a typology, of what a South African critic has called 'the central

South African story -- a harsh urbanising story -- in which a retention of ethical justice has functioned in the literature as the principle of the style' (Chapman, 1993:12). An old order passes in the death of a father and the incursion of a 'stranger' or a 'new man'; the hero leaves 'the farm' and encounters intensifying varieties of labour, temptation ('Cape Smoke') and betrayal; but there are also new loyalties and a new (sense of) identity, new dimensions to the world (the sea), even a new name: 'The other clerks gave me the name of Old Salvation...' (234). After a crisis of rejection, an epiphanic vision and physical breakdown ('fever'), in Schreiner's *ur* version, the hero returns to the farm to die, looking as he sits out in the sun with his hat over his eyes, for all the modern world, like 'the lazy native'. Although this narrative resolution is repeated, one of the significant revisions of the story, which only appears 63 years after Waldo's, is that which leaves the hero a permanent resident of the city. That is the real 'Dick Whittington' story.

The power of Schreiner's novel is borne out by comparison with some other fictional versions in English of the South African story from the 1880's. In 1883, Mrs. M. Carey-Hobson published *The Farm in the Karoo*, a romance that functions as a handbook on ostrich-farming for prospective settlers, supplying what 'a kind critic' had wished for from Schreiner's -- 'a history of wild adventure' -- and addressed to those seeking 'a life of adventure' (Schreiner: 'Preface') or 'in the genial climate of the Cape a renewal of life and vigour' (Carey-Hobson, 1883:x). Mrs. Carey-Hobson could not see that historic change would require new stories:

...should my young friends feel a sufficient interest in Fred and his friends, I may at some future time conduct them to the Diamond Fields and other less known parts of the country, and describe what they saw there (xi).

Between 1884 and 1897 Rider Haggard published six romances. In 1886 R.D. Ensor, a retired Cape civil servant, published *Sitongo*, a mildly satirical romance, which appears to have been popular, perhaps to a Cape coterie; it was twice printed in that year. *Sitongo* is a white African, descendant of a white woman shipwrecked on the Kaffrarian coast in the late 18th century and settled among the Xhosa. (Ensor, a Transkei magistrate, based his character on a witness who appeared before the Cape Commission of Enquiry into Native Affairs in 1881). *Sitongo* is rescued from his kraal by missionaries and after a series of picaresque adventures which take him through colonial South Africa to Cape Town and on to Germany (where he

becomes a music-teacher, since, he tells us, everyone is a music-teacher there) Sitongo returns to his Xhosaland family.

Subsequent examples of the South African story of the country person who comes to the city are well known. Blackburn's *Bulalie* is the first black hero (*Leaven*, 1908). Sol T. Plaatje's *Native Life in South Africa* (1916) epitomises the cruelty of modernity's expulsion of country people from their homes and *Mhudi* (1931), in the flight of the heroine and Ra-Thaga from their 'burnt city' and the Matabele, anticipates the flight of *July's People* (1981) from Johannesburg and *Michael K* (1983) from Cape Town. R.R.R. Dhlomo's *An African Tragedy* (1931) is the nadir of the fictional trajectory of the tradition-modernity encounter, although *Mhudi* and Ra-Thaga's confident, if apprehensive, embrace of modernity had already anticipated an upswing.

Peter Abrahams' *Mine Boy* appeared in 1946. This important text is apparently conventional in a number of respects: in its title; in its epigraph from Kipling; in its degree of idealisation of its hero, Xuma, who goes underground as a boss-boy on only his second day of work on the mine. But in the climax the white miner Paddy accepts the leadership of Xuma. And Abrahams' novel makes a powerful and analytical re-statement of the de-humanising effects of alienated labour: 'And for all their sweating and hard breathing and for the redness of their eyes and the emptiness of their stare there would be nothing to show'. The subornment of the pastoral vision is registered in 'the induna... like a shepherd with a spear' (Abrahams, 1946:65), but Abrahams locates a sense of continuity and community around certain female characters, especially Leah. The distinctive achievement of his novel can be read in a comparison of its closing paragraphs with the end of the novel which for many years largely determined the world's imagination of South Africa. In the last chapter of *Mine Boy* Xuma decides that he must join Paddy in jail. Maisy undertakes to walk with him to the police station:

They went out and walked down the empty street...

*

One by one the lights of Malay Camp were turned out. One by one the lights of Vrededorp and the other dark places of Johannesburg, of South Africa, were turned out.

The streets were empty. The leaning, tired houses were quiet. Only shadows moved everywhere. Only the quiet hum of the night hung over the city. Over Vrededorp. Over Malay Camp (201).

At the end of *Cry, the Beloved Country* Kumalo is home at Ndotsheni, deep in prayer:

...And while he stood there the sun rose in the east.

*

Yes, it is the dawn that has come. The titihoya wakes from sleep, and goes about its work of forlorn crying. The sun tips with light the mountains of Ingeli and East Griqualand. The great valley of the Umzimkulu is still in darkness, but the light will come there also. For it is the dawn that has come, as it has come for a thousand centuries, never failing. But when that dawn will come, of our emancipation, from the fear of bondage and the bondage of fear, why, that is a secret (Paton, 1948:253).

There is in Abrahams no hint of return to the farm as *locus amoenus*; the protagonists can see beyond the *locus munitus* and, if my argument is just, the work-place has been, at least potentially, rehabilitated. This is an accepting, unironic, unsentimental picture of Johannesburg. In 1946, the year in which *Mine Boy* was first published, the Fagan Commission reported that South Africa's urban black population could no longer be thought of as migrant, and in 1950 the Tomlinson Commission, which presented the demographic and economic blueprint of apartheid, put a price on the policy which the South African white electorate was never prepared to pay. The 1950's became 'The Drum Decade', in which was heard the voice of black urban 'carnival', opportunism and individualism.

If Olive Schreiner's Waldo is a congener of Blackburn's black hero and heroine, Jochem van Bruggen's Ampie, Dhlomo's Robert Zulu, and Abrahams' Xuma, then literature may be able to give us, at a time when we need it, access to experience beyond our limitations of gender, race and class.

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Notes

1. Graham Pechey describes Waldo as 'proletarianized' (1983:74). Michael Wade's discussion of Waldo deals only in racial terms (Wade, 1994:5-7).
2. For 'Grahamstown' in subsequent editions, Schreiner had 'the town' in the first edition; the more precise localisation is characteristic. Early Afrikaans versions locate the encounter with modernity in both 'die delwerke' and 'die stad' (Kannemeyer 1:336).

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