‘She felt the future in her bones’— Gibbon’s
_Souls in Bondage_

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Gibbon’s preferred medium was the short story. As a close friend of Joseph Conrad, Gibbon is often referred to by Conrad’s biographers as ‘Perceval Gibbon, the short story writer’, and until the re-publication of his 1911 novel _Margaret Harding_ in 1983 it was only in anthologies of short stories that his prose remained in print.

His profession as journalist and war correspondent probably accounts for his attraction to the short story form: it provided a suitable vehicle for his distinctive combination of acute social observation and disciplined compositional style. In the stories, Gibbon juxtaposes black and white, Boer and Briton, rural and cosmopolitan. But his novels achieve, in a more sustained and successful way, a fictional account of a developing society heading not only for the 1910 Act of Union that would unite white colonial South Africa, but the 1913 Native Land Act that would effectively deny black people any possibility of sharing in the benefits of the economic and political life of the country. Gibbon’s interest in conspicuous racial divisions, and his ability to explore the implications of these rifts through the interaction of his characters is an achievement that ranks at least with Pauline Smith’s, and, in terms of the later development of the South African novel, has, I would argue, proved to be more influential.

Gibbon presents us with a debate on the future of South Africa which focuses on the interaction between different race groups; and by so doing becomes one of the first writers in South Africa to transcend the ideology of Social Darwinism implicit in most colonialist fiction. His rejection of Social Darwinist beliefs appears both in the opinions expressed by the characters in _Margaret Harding_ and in the substance of the plot itself. Gibbon (1911:187) places the narrow Social-Darwinist view in the mouth of the reactionary Mr. Samson:

‘The colour line will never go’, replied Mr. Samson solemnly. ‘You might as well talk of breakin’ down the line between men and beasts’.

J.M. Coetzee (1988:144) describes the appeal Social Darwinism had for colonial expansionists:
Gibbon’s Souls in Bondage

With hindsight it is easy to see to what ideological needs Social Darwinism answered in the advanced countries of the West. At home it explained how the rich got rich; abroad it explained why certain peoples were destined to be colonized.

*Souls in Bondage* (1904) can be seen as Gibbon’s first flawed attempt to explore the complexities of South African society—a theme he was able to develop much more successfully in the later *Margaret Harding*.

Gibbon devotes the first few pages of *Souls in Bondage* to describing Dopfontein as a microcosm of South African society. The town can be seen almost as a representation of the Social Darwinist schema, its geography reflecting the social context in which the action is to take place. In choosing Dopfontein, the fictitious local country town of his earlier collection of short stories, *The Vrouw Grobelaar’s Leading Cases* (1905) and of his later, most successful novel, *Margaret Harding*, Gibbon reflects contemporary demographic changes by directing the reader away from the Boer-dominated rural periphery of the *The Vrouw Grobelaar* stories, to an urban setting. Gibbon’s *mise-en-scène* is a typically racially divided South African town made up of white Dopfontein on the higher ground above the Spruit (literally ‘on top’, and figuratively at the top of the Social Darwinist hierarchical structure), the black ‘Kaffir’ location half a mile away on the other side, and the ‘off-colour’ (mixed-race) town on the ‘bare earth’ in between. Thus Gibbon establishes at the outset the social order as perceived by the white colonial, and as manifested in the racial segregation of his towns: a pattern since etched into the South African landscape. Gibbon (1904:5) presents the white town as orderly and quiet, the African location similarly arranged in regular rows—but totally alien to white society—while the coloured town ‘crawled with the fevered activity of hell, and all the fuss and business was to no end’.

The narrative centres on Martin Thwaites, an unsuccessful, white, middle-aged lawyer whose Dopfontein practice consists mainly of minor legal services to members of the black and ‘coloured’ community. Amongst his acquaintances is Cecilia du Plessis, a well-educated coloured girl who is suffering as a result of her squalid surroundings and the abuse of her drunken mother. Thwaites tries to dissuade her from accepting a marriage proposal from Bantam, a handsome but violently-disposed stable hand, and even proposes to her himself in an attempt to prevent the wedding, in spite of the social disgrace that this would bring him. Bantam eventually manages to undermine Thwaites’s opposition to the marriage by insinuating that Cecilia is pregnant. In a parallel plot, George Joyce, a transport rider, encounters an attractive young woman on a farm he is passing, and is introduced to her father: a man with liberal beliefs in racial equality, and a drunkard. Mr. Graham’s labourers exploit his weakness, threatening him and his daughter. Joyce is later promoted to manager of the transport company and soon thereafter rescues Peggy from the farm where her father has been mur-
dered by the African labourers. Joyce marries Peggy a fortnight later.

Meanwhile, Cecilia and Bantam have also married and moved to nearby Ferreirastad. Bantam drinks to excess, openly sleeps with other women and abuses Cecilia alternately with brutal beatings and with cruel indifference. Acting on a presentiment, Thwaites journeys to Ferreirastad where he finds Cecilia dying in a pool of blood after a vicious assault by Bantam. Thwaites, 'the foundation of his life fallen' ails and dies soon after.

In contrast to the positive vision of future racial integration presented in Margaret Harding, Gibbon's negative attitude towards miscegenation here leads us into a nightmare world of corruption and despair, where the descendants of cross racial unions are shown to be doomed to suffer as a result of the dissipation and misguided lust of their colonial forebears. A contemporaneous review in the British African Monthly applauds Gibbon's ability to bring life to this world in his fiction, but also raises for the modern reader the question of Gibbon's imperialist assumptions about race and society:

[Gibbon's work shows a] keen insight into the half-caste world which exists near the centres of civilisation in South Africa (Anon. 1907:517).

The African Monthly reviewer clearly accepts as axiomatic that Gibbon and his readership share the view that white settlements represent the 'civilisation' from which other races ('half-caste world') are excluded.

Unlike the stories in the The Vrouw Grobelaar's Leading Cases collection, Souls in Bondage suggests that Gibbon can see beyond narrow imperialist assumptions, particularly in his depiction of Thwaites's inner turmoil, yet it also shows that he is still caught in the trap of a Social Darwinist determinism in his view of South African society. His unsympathetic portrayal of Mr. Graham, for instance, is an apparent rejection of the philosophy of racial equality: he is presented as the prototype of the 'degenerate' colonial who loses his grip on European standards and 'descends to the level' of the indigenous population. Popular myth would have it that the logical extreme of such a descent is miscegenation. It is typical of Gibbon's ambivalence toward the subject that at this point in his development, he chooses to subvert Graham's egalitarian beliefs by portraying racial tolerance as a weakness that brings personal ruin.

However, I would argue that Gibbon's reactionary point of view should not be taken at face value, given the accent on inter-racial encounters to be seen in the The Vrouw Grobelaar's Leading Cases stories, and the evidence provided by his reviewers that he may have been 'playing to the gallery'. Taken as a whole, Gibbon's work shows a development away from the widely-accepted colonial myth—in which the white man was expected to remain socially aloof from the exotic native population over which he held sway, and where the wages of disobedience were ruin and corrup-
tion—towards an acceptance of a future society which would depend on a resolution of racial conflict. Cecilia, shown to be a tragic victim of miscegenation in *Souls in Bondage* is yet another step in Gibbon’s progress towards that memorable image in *Margaret Harding*: the statue to be built in the future to commemorate the first miscegenator, with the inscription: ‘She felt the future in her bones’ (Gibbon 1911: 187).

The Social Darwinist backdrop to *Souls in Bondage* seems to be a necessary station in Gibbon’s progress towards the acceptance of individual equality evident in *Margaret Harding*. By the time he writes the latter novel, he has reached a point where he is able to present a woman who has married a black parson, and Margaret Harding herself, as heroic figures or pioneers, rather than victims. I would suggest that Gibbon’s vision elevates his writing above Cullen Gouldsbury’s *Tree of Bitter Fruit* (1910) which takes for granted the disastrous results of integrating a black person educated in Europe back into his native society, and Sarah Gertrude Millin’s *God’s Stepchildren* (1924) which traces the inevitability of degeneration and ruin in the descendants of mixed unions.

Gareth Cornwell (1983: 27) in a study of Fitzpatrick’s ‘The Outspan’ offers an explanation of the apparent ambivalence towards the issue of race in some colonial fiction:

Such paradoxes are symptomatic of the dissonance between the racist ideology of Empire and the liberal-humanist tradition of the discursive mode in which that ideology achieved literary expression.

The difficulty Gibbon experienced in reconciling his contradictory attitudes towards race, particularly conspicuous in the character of Thwaites, can be understood more fully in this context:

... the moral-psychological logic which propels the narrative is at odds with the plot of racial determinism which purports to provide coherence and significance ... writers of this period may attempt to place ‘the source of understanding, of action and history’ outside the individual (though universal) subject, [but] the nature of the discursive mode in which they are working simply does not permit it (Cornwell 1983: 27)

In *Souls in Bondage* Martin Thwaites replaces Vrouw Grobelaar as narrative focus. However, his lack of liveliness and his studiously neutral attitude make him both less sympathetic and less successful than Vrouw Grobelaar. Gibbon deliberately places this slow, pedantic and painstakingly impartial lawyer at the centre of his novel as a pivot between the two main stories (the Peggy/Joyce romance and the Cecilia/Bantam anti-romance) and as a centre of Gibbon’s own debate over racial attitudes. Gibbon’s depiction of the characters of Thwaites and his egregious clerk, Charlie Bateman,
owes a great deal to Dickens. Thwaites is given idiosyncratic catch phrases (like Dickens’s Barkis or Uriah Heep) in his characteristic comments on his profession: ‘The practice promises well’ (Gibbon 1904:9) which is the very phrase that is on his lips as he dies. Bateman operates as a thoroughly villainous foil to Thwaites’s polite professionalism, and also as a purveyor of local gossip in, for instance, bringing Thwaites the news of Cecilia and Bantam’s impending marriage. Bateman also embodies the final cynicism of the novel by taking immediate advantage of Thwaites’s death when he drains Thwaites’s brandy glass. There is also a Dickensian quality in the vitality of the dialogue and sharp delineation of eccentric characters in Gibbon’s description of the circuit court dinner (Gibbon 1904:173-179), which anticipates the highly-charged gatherings in the Sanatorium drawing room in Margaret Harding.

In this novel, violence and brutality triumph over the kindness and mildness of Thwaites and Cecilia, and a form of institutionalised violence is entrenched as a result of the success of George Joyce, who employs his brutality in establishing his business. Thwaites, as attorney to all of Dopfontein’ communities, is conveniently placed to link Gibbon’s parallel plots, located in the white and the coloured sections of the town respectively. But more important to our examination of Gibbon’s development as writer is his presentation of the racial debate centred in the person of Martin Thwaites. In order to save Cecilia from a disastrous marriage with the vicious Bantam, Thwaites offers to marry her himself, so accepting what Gibbon offers as the white South African’s view of ultimate degradation: a union across the colour line.

Thwaites’s gesture anticipates the positive image of miscegenation presented by Gibbon in Margaret Harding, and gives added significance to the elderly lawyer’s inner debate as he considers the possible consequences of such a marriage:

A part of that tragic [coloured] community that he was, an alien among them and an exile from his own people, so much of aggressive racialism survived in him as to make him unconsciously applaud anything in a yellow man or woman that strove to desert its breed and approximate to white standards. After all, tolerance is mainly a measure of self defence, and poor old Thwaites, walking circumspectly between the contempt of his own race and the familiarity of that which had granted him hospitality, was not the personality to evolve a tolerance that should demand no reciprocity. The broadest-minded people are those whom the fires of the stake have singed (Gibbon 1904:164).

Thwaites’s ‘aggressive racialism’ is acknowledged, but Gibbon makes the point that ‘tolerance’ (i.e. acceptance of a mixed marriage) is a virtue, which as in Thwaites’s case, is diminished by the individual’s perceived need to protect himself (‘self-defence’) against a ‘lowering’ or change of living standards brought about by the partial adoption of the norms of another culture. People who have suffered greatly (unlike
Thwaites, who has lived a closeted, protected life) are most likely to display the (implied) nobility of tolerance. The distinction drawn here between Thwaites’s ‘racialism’ (a sense of white superiority) and the morally laudable acceptance of equality by those ‘whom the fires of the stake have singed’ is a clearer indication of Gibbon’s ideological position than can be detected at any point in The Vrouw Grobelaar’s Leading Cases. The choice for Thwaites is presented as a tragic dilemma: on the one hand, marriage to Cecilia would destroy his status and the ‘tepid ambition’ that he has nurtured all his life; on the other, abandoning her to Bantam’s murderous violence removes the ‘foundation of [his] life’ (Gibbon 1904:315) and eventually kills him. In making his choice, Thwaites is shown to balance his own humanity and moral rectitude against the typical racial attitudes of the day:

Yes; but a half-caste, off-coloured, a yellow girl, with a touch of the tar-brush—a creature to whom the foul Kafir was kin and ancestor, co-parent with the crime of a white conqueror! (Gibbon 1904:165)

These comments are presented as part of Thwaites’s internal debate, and clearly represent the clichéd prejudices of contemporary white colonial opinion; the type of opinion from which Gibbon distances himself in a comment such as the following:

... but there was the descent, the shame of the white man’s fall to the companionship of the Kafirs—the ultimate disgrace a South African can sink to (Gibbon 1904:205).

Here the ironic emphasis is on the words ‘South African’. In spite of Gibbon’s continued adherence to the Social Darwinist view of society, occasional satirical insights like this reveal a growing consciousness of the artificiality of the colonial social fabric. Gibbon seems at these times to regard entrenched white South African race prejudice with an increasingly critical eye, and manages more frequently to avoid identifying with it.

Nonetheless, there is still ample evidence of confusion in Gibbon’s grasp of his debate on race, especially when we consider his treatment of Mr. Graham, the dissolute colonist. Mr. Graham is shown to have a liberal attitude towards blacks, and in response to Joyce’s suggestion that he sjambok his labourers into accepting his authority, he remarks:

I don’t believe in treating human beings like beasts. A Kafir isn’t a brute, you know, Mr. Joyce (Gibbon 1904:156).

The context in which Graham’s words are presented subvert the view that he expresses:
his degeneration into drunkenness and finally death as a direct result of fraternising with his black labourers. Indeed, the major failure of the novel is Gibbon’s inability to endorse the positive features of Graham’s (or Thwaites’s) liberalism and explicitly to condemn Joyce’s immorality.

Gibbon’s ambivalence is most evident in his presentation of Joyce, who enjoys authorial approval yet, paradoxically, is shown to be unacceptably brutal in his treatment of black people. There is a major inconsistency in implying that Joyce’s violence is immoral, while at the same time precluding the reader from an identification with Graham’s tolerant views. This inner contradiction, central to Gibbon’s failure in Souls in Bondage, is resolved successfully in the later Margaret Harding. A more accurate measure of Gibbon’s progress in Souls in Bondage is the ideology discernible in Thwaites’s inner debate and in Gibbon’s apparently contradictory observation that Mr. Graham has ‘a distinction that might have been greatness’ (Gibbon 1904:273). However, Gibbon’s (1904:273) depiction of Mr. Graham as a dissipated drunkard whose ‘essential fluidity of character’ is given to bouts of drinking in his labourers’ kraals requires us to regard him as an example of ‘white man’s incontinence’ (Gibbon 1904:71); the attribute that leads to sex across the colour line, and has created the ‘damned’ coloured community.

The ambivalence in Gibbon’s attitude provides the grounds for Jenny de Reuck’s (1988:14) accusation that he ...

[involves] the reader in the tacit acceptance of the narrator’s racist categories when evaluating character and interaction between characters.

My argument is that Gibbon’s racial views, while confused, are anything but complacent and unquestioning, and reveal a developing maturity that will eventually permit Gibbon to present a meaningful debate on racial attitudes. The most convincing testimony to Gibbon’s increasing sensitivity to racial issues is the extent to which he is able to show that Thwaites’s tragedy is a function of the society in which he lives, and that his affection for Cecilia is not a weakness but a strength, tragically denied its fulfilment by the combination of societal forces and the shrewdness of Bantam’s malicious insinuations about Cecilia’s pre-marital pregnancy.

De Reuck goes on to accuse Gibbon of a failure in the rendering of character, especially in the case of George Joyce in whom there is an ‘uneasy alliance of chivalry and violence’ (Gibbon 1904:10). She finds a radical (and damning) inconsistency in Gibbon’s harnessing together Joyce’s ‘wholesome hero’ image with his brutality towards the black labourers on Graham’s farm. However, there is some evidence that Gibbon intends the reader to see a direct parallel between the violence of Joyce and of Bantam. If we accept Thwaites as a central pivot, then Joyce and Bantam are clearly
intended as contrasting figures, linked ironically by their predilection for violence. On the one hand Bantam is shown to be 'cruel, false, and dissipated' (Gibbon 1904:119), cynically trapping Cecilia into a marriage which he uses for sadistic abuse, while on the other, Joyce creates an impression that is 'altogether good and pleasant' (Gibbon 1904:254), yet both display extreme ferocity. The linking of the two characters may be part of an attempt to provide the novel with a pessimistic conclusion with wider social implications: that neither race group is able to resolve conflict without recourse to violence.

The novel operates adequately at the level of melodrama and in this sense Bantam the villain and Joyce the conquering hero are consistently and clearly delineated. Gibbon (1904:255)catalogues Bantam's evil qualities and simplistically lists Joyce's good ones: 'an excellent fellow and a charming guest'. At this level, his denunciation of Bantam is too facile, while his ironic treatment of Joyce is too hesitant to be immediately and effectively discernible.

Cecilia's personality is presented via the different perspectives of several characters. Thwaites sees her as a fragile innocent, a view that is shared by Joyce who, we are told, has knocked a man down for insulting her by calling her 'pretty nigger'. The public view of Cecilia is stated by the magistrate who regards her as a 'good' one amongst a bad bunch, while the coloured community regards her as aloof and irrationally self-righteous, producing either active hostility (as in Bantam and Mrs. du Plessis) or clumsy attempts at friendship, which Cecilia immediately rebuffs (as in Sannie's overtures to her in Ferreirastad). We are told that

...her mission-school education in the Transkei had sundered her hopelessly from her own colour and kind, while giving nothing in their place (Gibbon 1904:290).

In this respect, J.P.L. Snyman in a short magazine article, 'South African Authors—45. Perceval Gibbon', on Gibbon and his writing, has drawn a parallel between Cecilia, and Kamis in Margaret Harding, both of whom are estranged from their people by their education.

The irony in Gibbon's depiction of George Joyce is apparent in the contrast between his depiction as a romantic hero and as a brutal animal. On the one hand we are shown the Joyce who rescues Peggy Graham from the black labourers doing 'what they please with her' (Gibbon 1904:211), the 'good chum' so admired by the Van der Merwe family, while on the other we see the gratuitously vicious colonist who returns from the kraal after avenging Graham's death:

'There is blood on your hand', she said next. 'It is all wet'.
He put his hand in his pocket, but could not speak.
'There is blood on your boots too', she went on. 'You are all blood' (Gibbon 1904:271).
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Gibbon shows that the racial aggression in Joyce is intimately linked to his success in business: he emerges as a prototype of the pioneer colonist/capitalist. His easy assumption of a leadership role in the Van der Merwe transport firm is related to his authority over blacks (he quells one of Graham’s rebellious black servants with a mere glance) and to his eventual prosperity:

... their teams made record journeys and their waggons carried bigger loads, to the quick profit of the firm (Gibbon 1904:251).

Gibbon’s condemnation of Joyce is barely discernable when compared with his explicit criticism of Bantam, but at times there is a distinct element of parody in his presentation of the white hero, whose only outward gesture as he contemplates marriage to Peggy is to punch his fist into his hand, unconsciously expressing his own violent nature, and by implication the violent character of colonial exploitation in general:

Joyce stood in the middle of the room, his right fist poised above the open palm of his left hand. ‘Little – chum!’ he said to himself slowly. ‘Yes, by Jove!’ and he dropped his fist with a smack of emphasis (Gibbon 1904:209).

Although Souls in Bondage shows Gibbon struggling unsuccessfully to bridge the ‘ontological gap’ between author and fictional character, Thwaites represents a significant step towards the narrative distancing required to achieve that goal. The extreme shifts in narrative technique that characterise Salvator (1908), his next novel, may be Gibbon’s reaction to what he had perceived as his central problem in writing Souls in Bondage. However, the latter novel marks an advance on the bigotry displayed in some of the stories in The Vrouw Grobelaar’s Leading Cases and a development towards a more dispassionate appreciation of prevailing racial assumptions. When he abandons the racial theme in Salvator, his writing seems to lose its essential impetus, and he is able to write his best novel only when he presents his most thoroughgoing examination of the subject in Margaret Harding.

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References