The Marginal

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Some of the assumptions which have appeared in the corridors of time are that society's institutions learn from history, or that, in taking the excesses of history into consideration, institutional protagonists have society at large as their concern. There may even be a general feeling that the historical confession facilitates individual and/or social refinement - that, in the mirror of history's abyss, we may even become reconciled despite the past determinations which run like unbridgeable ravines through the collective South African psyche. Alternatively, some would wish to 'forget the past', to start over anew - given the promises of the constitutionalised new dawn over the Southern African landscape.

Such optimisms may, however, register a serious lack - e.g. by not recognising that any mythology progressively musters its own rejuvenated or even new exclusions, subjugations and repressions. Once the institution has thrown away its historical crutches and feeble attempts at rejoining a seriously dislocated society, it starts to move according to its own laws—again.

The paucity of recognising and understanding the fact that every dawn has its noon, twilight and even midnight corroborates Rilke's view in *Duino Elegies* (cf. Tanner 1994:17) when he said:

> For Beauty is nothing but the beginning of terror, which we are still just able to endure, and we are so awed by it because it serenely disdains to annihilate us (Stephen Mitchell trans.).

This tragic wisdom was also captured by Silenus, Dionysus' friend (cf. Nietzsche 1983:601):

> Miserable transient race, children of chance and hardship, why do you force me to say what it would be much more charitable for you not to hear? The best of all things is something you will never be able to comprehend/grasp: not to be born, not to be, to be nothing. But the second best for you - is to die soon (a.t.).

If South Africa has indeed started on its way to becoming a nation, some of the primary questions which should be asked - as the young Nietzsche realised in a different context - are: How can existence become bearable once we recognise that all is

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construct and that every construct, every positivity with its rules and regularities simultaneously alienates, divides, sets itself up against, banishes, incarcerates? - not least, concerning the organs, language and labour. Secondly, within the value - pleasure binary, why does the human being pursue and assert value and truth rather than pleasure and untruth? - are there ways in which one can deal with modernity's excesses?

Alternatively said: Why do we enjoy and are not only pleasured but also transfixed by tragedy, estrangement? Why do we, in reality, delight in suffering, but in the public sphere as in speech, give pain an automatically negative role in life?

These, I think, are two of the questions - paradoxical as they are - which provide the decor for this issue of *Alter*nation - and precisely because of the 'new dawn'.

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First and foremost is not the simplistic view that defending of paradox brings enlightenment - neither that South Africa is currently riddled with silent reversals of privilege - nor that literature is branded unserviceable. The main reason, rather, is that posed by the rational optimists, the killers of tragedy, those propounding the Socratic maxims: virtue is knowledge; all vice is from ignorance; the virtuous man is the happy man. It is before the economy of and the belief in the omnipotence of reason that tragedy and with it, pleasure itself, are banished. Even though he narrowly escapes oversimplification, Nietzsche's (1983:632f) explication still rings true - that in Socrates'

> quite abnormal character, instinctive wisdom appears only to *hinder* conscious knowledge in some instances. While in all productive people instinct is the creative and affirmative power, and consciousness assumes a critical and cautionary role, in Socrates instinct becomes the critic, consciousness the creator - a monstrosity per defectum (e.i.o.).

Reflecting on how man has been tricked by his belief in technology and its alliance with either an ancient or futurist mysticism, Wilhelm Reich (1975:366) echoed similar sentiments from a different angle when he said:

> [Man] dreams about how these machines make his life easier and will give him a great capacity for enjoyment .... And in *reality? The machine became, is, and will continue to be his most dangerous destroyer, if he does not differentiate himself from it* .... The advance of civilization which was determined by the development of the machine went hand in hand with *catastrophic misinterpretation of the human biologic organization*. In the construction of the machine, man followed the laws of

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> mechanics and lifeless energy. This technology was already highly developed long before man began to ask how he himself was constructed and organized. When, finally, he dared very gradually, cautiously and very often under the mortal threat of his fellow man to discover his own organs, he interpreted their functions in the way he had learned to construct machines .... *The mechanistic view of life is a copy of mechanistic civilization.* But living functioning is fundamentally different; it is not mechanistic. The specific biologic energy, orgone, obeys laws which are neither mechanical nor electrical (e.i.o.).

To this argument, one can invoke Foucault (1982:296-300) who - albeit in different context and nearly forty years later - added the analysis of modernity's discourses of economy and language to that of the organs. He points to man's recognition of language as object of study, language as discourse itself and language's critical value. Such recognition, however, merely functioned as recompense within the economy of the institution. What to some degree escaped modernity's orders, however, is literature (read: tragedy) - a literature which was being produced as colonialism flooded its new worlds[1].

Concerning the economic, again, Hegel (cf. Avineri 1974:147ff,152) already pointed to the excesses of industrialisation - not least the overproduction of consumer goods which stands in direct inverse relationship to the increase of abject poverty and a civil society paid with taxes drawn from industry without the means to purchase into modernity's promise of opulence and comfort. Even though this is one of the few (if not only) questions he raised to which he never found an answer, and despite his own proposals for state intervention and Keynes' answer concerning the focus on public works which does not produce immediate consumer goods, the main question also facing South Africa is that of poverty.

So, who or what speaks for humanity's sexual energy, her literature and her poverty?

Only tragedy.

Maybe, tragedy belongs on the highways and byways, on the streets, on the pavements, on the city's garbage dump, in jail and in the rural field - spaces where time knows no progress nor fortune. These are the realms of the poor, the excluded, the incarcerated, culture's forgotten, the overlooked and often manhandled - tragedy's aristocracy, tragedy's sages and civilisation's discontent.

[1] On the further division: canon - minor literature, cf. esp. Deleuze & Guattari (1992) on: 1) a minor literature written within a minor language or a language which is not officially recognised; 2) a minor literature within a major language; and 3) a critical oppositional literature written in a major language; also North's (1994) excellent work on the dialects/dialectics of [Afro-]American language/literature.

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Maybe, literature belongs with its characters and to tramp with wisdom, the author's vocation - fittingly captured in Cecil Abrahams' (1990) title for his collection of essays on Bessy Head: *The Tragic Life*.

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In terms of the value - pleasure binary, Derrida - as did Hume - attempted to bring this fact into the centre, most eloquently summarised by Eagleton (1992:28):

> The aesthetic begins as a supplement to reason; but we have learnt from Derrida that it is in the manner of such lowly supplements to supplant what they are meant to subserve[2]. What if it were the case that not only morality but cognition itself were somehow 'aesthetic'? That sensation and intuition, far from figuring as reason's antithesis, were in truth its very basis? The name for this subversive claim in Britain is David Hume, who, not content with reducing morality to a species of sentiment, threatens to collapse knowledge to fictional hypothesis, belief to intensified feeling, the continuity of the subject to a fiction, causality to an imaginative construct and history to a kind of infinite intertextuality. For good measure, he also argues that private property - the very basis of the bourgeois order - rests simply on our imaginative habits, and that political order - the state - arises from the *weakness* of our imagination (e.i.o.).

Everything is constructed and it is due to the weakness of our imagination that we believe otherwise. What more can one say?

Freud (1985:339) himself initiated the social uses of his theory of the unconscious - which he similarly held, only became manifest with the rise of modernity - when he contended that 'civilization [or culture] and its discontents' indicate the possibility of a 'pathology of cultural communities' or in current parlance, a socio-cultural account of the marginal - the sub-cultural. Premised on the fact of humanity's hostility towards culture, Freud (1985:263) argued that this may be because of the conflict man experiences between the pleasure principle and his invention and continuous development of culture. Seen as 'developed in order to "*control* our instinctual life"' (Freud 1985:266), all culture(s) - not least as it is institutionalised - have their discontents - individually, but also socially. The social unconscious arises due to modernity's 'cultural or sociological pressures' (Clark 1982:423). This understanding has been developed in primarily three ways, in the *social unconscious - political*

[2] Cf. esp. Derrida (1982:1-28; 69-108; 1987; & 1993:251-277) and for the vocation of literature and literary scholarship in deconstructive perspective, cf. Gasché (1986:255-270).

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economy nexus; the *psycho-analysis - time and space nexus*; and the *social unconscious - pleonexie nexus* (cf. Van den Berg 1970).

In the *social unconscious - political economy nexus*, the unconscious as 'repressed physiological (libido) and biological (death and life instinct) needs' (Freud) and the 'social and economic historical forces' which 'pass through an evolution in the process of man's socio-economic development' (Marx) share 'common ground' (Fromm 1986:101,106). This indicates at least three perspectives (cf. Fromm 1986:99,107n1). Firstly, the unconscious does not only come before the conscious but more importantly that '[t]he logic of the historic process comes before the subjective logic of the human beings who participate in the historic process' (Luxemburg 1961:93). Secondly, as 'collective unconscious' the social unconscious symptomatically effects activities which reveal certain aspects of social reality not held in social consciousness (Mannheim 1936:33ff). Thirdly, since social and economic historical forces also have an individual element, the 'repression of the ordinary natural desires' (cf. Marx & Engels 1939:423), such repression causes one 'passion' to be separated off from the 'whole living individual' only to satisfy that one. As such, it 'assumes an abstract, separate character' and is then determined not by consciousness (Hegel's Spirit) but by '*being*' or 'living' -

> the empirical development and self-expression of the individual, which in turn, depends on the conditions of the world (*Weltverhältnisse*) in which he (sic.) lives (Marx & Engels 1939:242).

The individual becomes 'the slave of the one alienated passion [—ritual index of his institutions] and has lost the experience of himself as a total and alive person' (Fromm 1986:100).

In the *psycho-analysis - time and space nexus*, it is especially the rise of western hegemony with its emphasis on social transformation and the accompanying negation of others' (strong) cultural differences and boundaries under the aegis of western civilization, that the social unconscious was born. Social structure/society which is seminal to individual life (Benedict 1934) was not acknowledged but suppressed - if not destroyed - resulting in the separation of particular people (at particular time-space nexuses) for purposes of control, leading to collective neuroses (cf. Horney 1937; 1939). Under the hegemony of one (western) culture, people had to continuously repress the cultural values and norms into which they have been socialised.

Within western rationalism, positivism, science and technology, people repress desire. Here, it is the contradictions in western society which bring about neuroses, i.e. the contradictions between competition and humility, the creation of needs and their mere partial fulfilling and ultimately, the hypostetising of personal liberty in the face

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of the reification of strict rules (cf. Van den Berg 1970:234,236f). In African context, Mphahlele (1974:41) says - in a text which should be compulsory reading for any aspiring academic/student - of this split:

> Ambivalence, ambivalence. Always having to maintain equilibrium. You walk with this double personality as colonised man. You have to cope with the presence of foreign rule and its white minions. Now you have to cope with what they left on your mind. So you will always be a colonised man. Only, political independence ought [!] to help you turn that state of mind into something dynamic. The dialogue between the two selves never ends. The pendulum swings between revulsion and attraction, between the dreams and the reality of a living past and the aspirations, the imperatives of modern living. Ambivalence.

In the *social unconscious - pleonexie nexus* the danger is that there may arise a conflict between the different social selves - not only two - into which an individual is socialised. That an individual is socialised into a variety of 'social selves', 'different social consciousnessess' which society provides as possibilities, has to learn to live as 'a plural self', or has to exist as a multiple personality, has been variously articulated[3]. In situations of transformation, or in disintegrating societies, the individual must execute one or more of the selves. Concerning that social self, the individual then has a loss of memory, an *amnesia*. The executed social self is then relegated to the social unconscious. It then follows that the social unconscious is the result of the disintegration of society or the generalised other into separated and disassociated antagonistic groups while the individual does not have social access to the executed generalised other anymore. In the context of *acculturation* dynamics - an individual's learning of appropriating and rejecting certain elements in the group to which it belongs - s/he may experience *euphoria* or *disphoria*—euphoria when the individual appropriates and experiences what society (a significant other) condones; disphoria, when this relationship is distorted (cf. Sullivan in Mullahy 1954)[4].

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[3] For a uniform society, cf. James (1891-1908); for multiform societies, cf. Durkheim (1933); for antagonistic groups in a society, cf. Simmel (1908); Sorokin ([1923]1967; 1947); for a social self related to a significant other with which relations are broken, cf. Ferenczi & Rank (1924); Gerth & Mills (1954); for disintegrating societies, cf. Mead (1934).

[4] For a further elaboration on issues broached in this article, see especially the excellent little book of Herbert Marcuse (1979).

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Since its inception, *Alter*nation - as did the CSSALL (cf. Smit & Van Wyk [1998]) - has attempted to clear spaces different from those we know and in which we are socialised and institutionalised. Different from past homogeneities, it has also attempted to create a forum from which scholars could dialogically play in on existing (past) discursive hegemonies. In addition, this project has as aim - in the *interregnum* or the twilight/dawn - to inscribe existing discourses into the general text of the South African literary and language margins - to uncover 'some diverse set of meaningful concerns' (cf. Dreyfus 1993:312f) which could provide an insight into 'our' disparate cultural landscape. This, ultimately, will hopefully not only contribute to an institutional recognition and appreciation of 'our' diversity but also feed into Njabulo Ndebele's (1994:9) statement concerning the future of literature in South Africa when he said:

> The role of literature in this situation [] is not an easy matter. It throws up a problematic of its own within the broad cultural crisis I have been attempting to understand. Writers, rather than critics, are likely to provide the ultimate direction. Hopefully *critics* will pose the kind of questions that will assist *writers* in their work (e.a.).

As possible resource for the 'direction'[s] Ndebele intimates, this issue of *Alter*nation was conceived under the joint editorship of Johan van Wyk, Lindelwa Mahonga and Jannie Smit. It is neither intended as the pursuit of some victimised marginal within a context of political intolerance, nor as an attempt to re-state the antinomy between romantic privilege, independence, capriciousness and cut-throat competitiveness, exploitation and avarice. Rather, it aims to put in the limelight the pleasure/ tragedy of the enigmatic, the sub-cultural - an attempt to experience the marginal as caught up in the inevitability of a normative politics. As such, it wishes to be a supplement, a parergon - the divisioning site where the person's but also society's 'splits' - our common tragedy - become more obvious but also more perceptible for the conscious hazard of creative patterning in the folds of an emerging South Africa.

Through various twists and turns and focusing attention on some of the criss-crossing boundaries and limits which make South Africa such a boundaried and margined landscape, authors in this issue of *Alter*nation provide an angle on the South African literary panorama from different perspectives. Precisely because each perspective is situated and conditioned by particular circumstances - raising the curtain on tragedy in a particular way - they provide some idea of what a South African literature may yet be.

But maybe, this issue's function is nothing else - or more - than something like the Old Comedy's *parabasis* - to ventilate a matter of public if not mass interest; or to hold up a number of imaginary mirrors, in the face of the new Socratic: If tragedy's

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unhappy consciousness emerges in the in-between-world of self-consciousness's deceptive certainty of itself and its satisfaction of desire through the sublation of the other (Hegel), then it is in the effects and experiences of tragedy's inessential marginality that both artist and critic may find their imaginative ground and South African 'society' its mirror.

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