# 'Sparks of Carnival Fire': Alan Paton's 'The Quarry' (1967) and the Bakhtinian Carnivalesque

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## Carnival

In William Plomer's (1980:12) novel of 1926, *Turbott Wolfe*, Wolfe, soon after arriving in South Africa from England, visits Dunnsport, where he comes across 'Schonstein's Better Shows' fair, managed by Mr Judy Franke whose wife, we learn, was 'barefaced by day and barebacked by night'. Her husband—notice his name, in a gender-reversal, is 'Judy'—is similarly defined in terms of his flagrant sexuality: 'he wore no underclothing but his socks and a silk shirt' (12). In scenes described as 'ribald' and resounding with 'bawdy laughter' we are introduced to the fair itself with its 'extraordinary mixture of races':

> Round us as we talked circulated a crowd of black, white and coloured people: English, Dutch, Portuguese, nondescript were the whites; Bantu, Lembu, Christianized and aboriginal, Mohammedan negroes were the blacks; and the coloured were all colours and races fused. It came upon me suddenly in that harsh polyglot gaiety that I was living in Africa; that there is a question of colour (12-13).

In a swing-boat he notices a white man and black woman kissing.

What Turbott Wolfe comes across is a carnival of racial and cultural hybridity, against which is measured the hideous racism and cultural isolation of the colonials he would subsequently encounter, like the Rev. Fotheringhay who is satirised as being '"stranded on the rock of his own consciousness in that bewildering sea that life is in modern Africa' (22-23). In the spirit of that glimpsed carnival, Wolfe will himself engage in cross-cultural activity—he, for example, spends time with the local people 'working out Lembu folk-tunes' (17)—and help set up the 'Young Africa' movement whose central policy is the promotion of miscegenation as

'the only possible way for Africa to be secured to the Africans', through the creation of a new hybrid 'Eurafrican' people.

It is this liberatory usage of carnival imagery—here appearing for the first time in South African literature—as theorised in the writings of Mikhail Bakhtin who was a radical populist democrat, that will be examined through a reading of Paton's allegorical 'The Quarry', which is almost certainly his most anthologised—and well-known—short story. Subsequent to—and in the light of—the literary analysis, a re-reading of the South African liberal tradition and its usefulness for a post-Marxist politics will be discussed.

For Bakhtin, carnivals can be traced back to European antiquity. They blossomed as public spectacles during the Medieval period and the Renaissance, until they were undermined by the emergence of Modernity, whereupon the 'carnival sense of the world' migrated into literature, particularly the novel. Carnival for Bakhtin was seen as a utopian 'loophole' in reality, a temporary semiotic subversion of ruling class power and the naturalising ideologies that sustain it. Vigorously populist, carnivals were an 'escape from the official way of life' (Bakhtin 1984b:8), revealing, in their strategies of satire and mockery, the 'joyful relativity' (Bakhtin 1984a:160) of all social structures, and hence gesturing towards the 'world's revival and renewal' (Bakhtin 1984b:7) in a spectacle of libertarianism: 'They were the second life of the people, who for a time entered the utopian realm of community, freedom, equality, and abundance' (Bakhtin 1984b:9).

'The Quarry' is based upon a real event that happened in the 1950s. This is Paton giving an account of it:

> A small black boy finds himself marooned on a quarry-face, and is brought to safety by a brave white man, who is greeted on descending by a great crowd, mostly Indians and Africans, who cry out to him, 'Thank you Sir. God bless you, Sir. White man, God bless you' (Paton 1975:139).

Paton was clearly moved by the untypical behaviour of the participants: a white man helping a black child, a black crowd finding something to thank a white man for. But we also notice the flagrant paternalism of the event, which is most probably the reason why Paton significantly altered it in the story by reversing the racial identities of the two main figures: a black man now rescues a helpless white boy. This role reversal will, as shall be seen, be central to the story.

The story opens with the following:

> Everywhere the city was driving back nature, to the South and the West and the North. Only the East was safe, for there lay the ocean. Skyscrapers stood

> on the places where elephants had crashed through the forest. Hippopotamus
> Pool was a city square full of the smell of buses, Lion's River ran down a
> straight concrete channel into the Bay. (1970:13)

It is a (romantic) opposition between the City and Nature: the 'city' is seen in
alienating terms, as an ineluctable force beyond human intervention, imposing a
bleak regimentation upon the variety, freedom and nobility of nature. It has expelled
'life', which marginally survives, we next learn, in Mitchell's 'Quarry', which alone
had 'resisted the march of the city' (13). This opposition—in Bakhtinian terms,
between 'centripetal' (centralizing) and 'centrifugal' (dispersing) forces—is, of
course, a little allegory of post-Sharpeville 1960s South Africa, the 'city' as the
apartheid regime, in that period basking in the triumph of its defeat of the popular
democratic forces, able now to impose its (in textual terms) 'un-natural' political will
on the South African people ('nature') without serious opposition. 'The large green
pigeons have long since gone', writes Paton, perhaps referring to the imprisonment or
exile of the mass democratic political leadership; only the 'very small fish' remain
behind to resist the 'march of the city'. It is the resistance of these 'small fish' in a
marginal space outside the hegemonic order that the story will celebrate.

A white boy called Johnny Day has ambitions to do the apparently
'impossible' and climb the dangerous quarry face, at the bottom of which is a
'serious' and 'official' notice that reads: 'No Climbing, By Order', to which the text
adds: 'Only whose order it was, no one knew' (13). Here we find the inscrutable
mystery of power, naturalised by its elevation beyond human authorship.

Johnny begins climbing, and soon attracts an anxious 'Indian man' who
begins imploring him to return, warning him of the severe dangers, but of course
Johnny ignores him, and soon there begins to assemble a very anxious 'growing
crowd (of over a hundred) of Indian men and women and boys and girls, and African
men from the factory' (15) ... 'a crowd of every colour and class and tongue, bound
all of them together for these moments by unbreakable bonds, to a small white boy'
(17). Against the rigidities and divisions of apartheid dogmatism, people come
together in a shared concern for another human life:

> There they stood, shoulder to shoulder, ruler and ruled, richer and poorer,
> white and black and yellow and brown, with their eyes fixed on a small
> piece of whiteness half-way up the quarry-face, and those of them that knew
> a thing or two knew that the boy was in a position of danger. (17)

It is perhaps something of a little joke of Paton's that the boy gets stuck and
becomes helpless and frightened when the trail, which had until then been 'half-right'
in direction, shifts to 'half-left'. The isolated white defier of authority cannot move to

the left on his own to persist in his defiant courage. The crowd, passive spectators to this defiance, emit a 'growl ... of defeat and frustration' (18).

It is when an African man, Thomas Ndlovu, goes to the rescue of Johnny that the mood of the story suddenly alters from acute anxiousness to that of raucous celebration, from the 'vertical' movement of the climb to the 'horizontal' axis of a popular and populist gathering:

> What had been a tense and terrifying affair had become a kind of festival.
> Jests and laughter had replaced groans and sighs ... (18).

This 'festival' has remarkable affinities with the characteristics and significance of the medieval European carnivals as analysed by Bakhtin.

For Bakhtin, the carnival was marked by the breakdown of the division between spectators and participants: 'Carnival is a pageant without footlights and without a division into performers and spectators. In carnival everyone is an active participant, everyone communes in the carnival act' (Bakhtin 1984a:122). Similarly, in the story, the gathering crowd transforms from being anxious spectators of the boy's climbing to active participants in a festival of their own making. Moreover, for Bakhtin—and for the story—such events are inherently populist, the people's defiant celebration outside of 'official' culture. For Bakhtin, such carnivals take place in 'islands' outside of 'official' space and time, and of course the quarry, still untouched by the advance of the 'city', is just such a space.

Thomas Ndlovu, who rescues Johnny, is the catalyst to transform the occasion into a carnival. For Bakhtin, the 'primary carnivalistic act is the mock crowning and subsequent decrowning of the carnival king ... and he who is crowned is the antipode of a real king, a slave or a jester' (Bakhtin 1984a:124). Thomas is this carnival clown, the 'herald of another ... nonofficial truth' (Bakhtin 1984a:93):

> Then he started his climb, amid a new noise of laughs, cheers, approval, and advice. Thomas soon showed himself to be vigorous and unskilled, and his friends below, who had been so anxious about the first climber, made jokes about the second. As for Thomas himself, whenever he had bought off what he thought a piece of good climbing, he would turn to the crowd and raise his clenched fist, to be greeted by cheers and laughter .... Thomas, with intention somewhat foolish, climbed flamboyantly and wildly, shouting encouragement in English to the small boy and exchanging banter in Zulu with his friends on the ground (19).

We notice that, while he is the hero—or king—of the hour, this clown with his exaggerated movements and banter with the crowd, also manages to caricature his

own heroic identity. He parodies the 'monolithically serious' (1984a:124f) face of authority.

According to Bakhtin, the carnival was a subversive temporary 'suspension' of normal 'repressive and 'ideological' apparatuses and the class relations they function to perpetuate, to produce through 'carnivalistic mesalliances' a 'new mode of interrelationships between individuals' (Bakhtin 1984a:123), where, as Simon Dentith (1995:68) puts it, 'the high, the elevated, the official, even the sacred, is degraded and debased, but as a condition of popular renewal and regeneration'.

> The laws, prohibitions, and restrictions that determine the structure and order of ordinary ... life are suspended during carnival: what is suspended is hierarchical structure and all the forms of terror, reverence, piety, and etiquette connected with it—that is, everything resulting from socio-hierarchical inequality or any other form of inequality among people (including age). All distance between people are suspended, and a special carnival category goes into effect: free and familiar contact among people .... People who in life are separated by impenetrable hierarchical barriers enter into free familiar contact on the carnival square (Bakhtin 1984a:122f).

In Paton's story, as has been seen, 'a crowd of every colour and class and tongue' (17) dissolves those apartheid-enforced divisions and inequalities to celebrate 'free and familiar contact'. To this extent, Paton's festival is, as Bakhtin put it, a 'parody of the extracarnival life' of apartheid South Africa, which is also seen in the range of role-reversals enacted. In this 'inside out' world, whites are vulnerable and helpless; a black man is the hero and goes to the rescue of his erstwhile white oppressor; Indians and Africans similarly show concern for a white person; Thomas Ndlovu tells his erstwhile white 'master' to get the police; while the police are momentarily seen to be helping people instead of oppressing them.

Graham Pechey (1989:43) captures the full import of these events when he argues:

> Any sociopolitical project of centralisation or hegemony has always and everywhere to posit itself against the ubiquitously decentralising (centrifugal) forces within ideology. 'Carnival' is the name Bakhtin gives to these forces in so far as they find expression in consciously parodic representations across a range of signifying practices.

Thus, by means of this 'contrapuntal juxtaposition' (Danow 1991:48) of centripetal and centrifugal forces, Paton's festival becomes a fully-fledged semiotic defamiliarisation of (or a 'gay loophole' within) apartheid ideology, and a central

aspect of this is the disruption of one of ideology's main mechanisms: the naturalisation of the social order it serves. If, as Bakhtin argues, the 'serious aspects of class culture are official and authoritarian: they are combined with violence, prohibitions, limitations and always contain an element of fear and intimidation' (Bakhtin 1984b:90), then this carnival celebrates the 'laughter of all the people' (Bakhtin 1984b:11):

> Liberating one from fear ... with its joy at change and its joyful relativity, is opposed to that one-sided and gloomy seriousness which is dogmatic and hostile to evolution and change, which seeks to absolutize a given condition of existence or a given social order (Bakhtin 1984a:160).

This is what Paton writes of the arrival of the police (notice the 'ambivalent' laughter):

> The arrival of the police was greeted with good humour, for here was an occasion on which their arrival was welcome. Words in Zulu were shouted at them, compliments tinged with satire, for the crowd was feeling happy and free (20).

A ribald, positive, laughing, ironic defiance, feeding off this renewed sense of the relativity of all power and social reality, which is developed in the final paragraph:

> Thomas ... led the small white boy to the notice board which said, NO CLIMBING, BY ORDER. What he said, no one heard, for it was lost in an outburst of catcalls, laughter, jeering and cheering (21).

Here is the positive defiance of authority, with the people no longer afraid of its mysterious omnipotence, but instead they have sufficient confidence to jeer at it. Incidentally, Bakhtin traced the genealogy of carnivals to 'ancient pagan festivities, agrarian in nature' which were connected to 'moments of crisis, of breaking points in the cycle of nature or in the life of society' (Bakhtin 1984b:9), such as the middle of winter. The festivities would therefore celebrate 'moments of death and revival'. In this regard, Paton's story takes place on the day after Christmas, which can itself be traced back to pagan seasonal festivities, and which, of course, precisely celebrates the death of the old and the birth of the new, and is itself written within the 'crisis' of a monolithically dominant apartheid regime.

Bakhtin argued that, in carnival's independent articulation of a radical anti-hegemonic populism that reveals, as Eagleton (1981:148) puts it, 'the "fictive" foundations' of social formations and the contingent open-endedness of social reality,

carnival is a 'temporary transfer to the utopian world' (Bakhtin 1984b:276), a 'true and full, though temporary, return of Saturn's golden age upon the earth' (Bakhtin 1984b:7f). Paton's story is precisely this—a 'utopian' affirmation of a democratic world without inequalities or racism that self-consciously knows itself to be 'unreal', a moment outside of the real time and space of its present. In that 'granite' period of the post-Sharpeville 1960s, of extreme oppositional powerlessness and quietism, Paton emphasises those vital humanist principles in the small victory of his narrative. The utopian gesture is precisely determined by its political context: liberal utopianism is a salvaging of an affirmation of political principles where more practical political practices are impossible.

In this regard it is apposite to refer briefly to a talk Paton gave at Wits University in 1968 called, 'Why we must go on dreaming'. In the following passage, Paton is referring specifically to what were once called the 'Liberal universities', but his argument has every relevance to 'The Quarry':

> Now I shall examine another view ... that to pit the force of an ideal or a principle against raw and sometimes ruthless political power, is quite fatuous; that the only thing to pit against political power is another political power; that you must quit your ivory tower and get down there into the arena and play the game of power.
>
> But there are times when you cannot get down and play the game of power, because you have no steed, no armour, no lance. The only thing you have is your belief, and the only thing you can do with your belief is to affirm (Paton 1975:201).

What is very interesting about 'The Quarry' is that, in the face of an intransigently totalitarian state apparatus, liberalism, traditionally associated in South Africa with a timid constitutional reformism, takes a radical populist turn, much like Johnny Day, who, to continue his defiant ambitions, must turn 'slight left', but cannot do it on his own. What saves Johnny are the masses.

Something of this tension within Liberalism emerges in the 'Introduction' to *A Century of South African Short Stories* (1978) by Jean Marquard, which includes Paton's 'The Quarry'. After warning us to avoid 'political' readings of fictional writing, Marquard offers her own political analysis of 'The Quarry'. The 'benevolent behaviour of the crowd', she writes—and she means by implication any crowd of people—is a hopelessly unrealistic portrait, nothing short of 'miraculous' in its dreamy 'optimism' (34). For the liberal Marquard, crowds are by definition malevolent, threatening, barbaric, a 'mob'—the implicit conclusion being that only the solitary individual can be trusted to act responsibly in a civilised manner. This

fear of the masses and mass political mob/ilisation are interestingly absent in Paton's story.

In the dark years of Stalinism, Bakhtin drew upon a long history of resistant 'folk-humour', and of a literature 'carnivalised' during Modernity by the migration of carnival motifs into it. But Bakhtin also has the 'historical memory' of the 'carnival' of 1917 to feed upon, and, in a similar way, Paton had the 'carnival' of the politically heteroglot and struggling 1950s to draw upon, an 'existential heteroglossia' (Clark & Holquist 1984:301) so manifestly opposite to the politically 'silent' 1960s, that migrated into his short story, 'The Quarry'.

## Liberalism and Post-Marxism

In their book, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (1985), Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe develop an anti-teleological 'post-Marxist' discourse where Marxism is freed from such essentialist concepts as 'classism': 'the idea that the working class represents the privileged agent in which the fundamental impulse of social change resides' (177), and where the notion of democracy—so lamentably absent from 'actually existing socialism' in the 20th century—is of central liberatory importance. For Laclau and Mouffe, the 'democratic discourse' of the French Revolution—speaking of equal rights and popular sovereignty—ushered onto the world stage a new 'social imaginary' of equality that potentially challenged all forms of inequality, including economic inequality (154-156). Nineteenth century Europe saw the 'articulation' between democracy and liberalism, with its 'discourses of rights' and liberty, to produce a liberal-democratic discourse. For Laclau and Mouffe it is this language of liberty and equality that offers the potential for the radical transformation of modern societies, a 'deepening of the democratic revolution' to sectors of the social from which traditional liberalism has remained aloof: 'The task of the Left therefore cannot be to renounce liberal-democratic ideology, but on the contrary, to deepen and expand it in the direction of a radical and plural democracy' (176) that would ultimately lead to the self-regulation of civil society.

From this perspective, left-wing perceptions of both socialism and liberalism are transformed. The centrality accorded to the 'democratic revolution' leads to the conclusion that 'socialism is one of the components of a project for radical democracy, not vice versa' (178), and that

> It is not liberalism as such which should be called into question, for as an ethical principle which defends the liberty of the individual to fulfil his or her human capacities, it is more valid today than ever (184).

Indeed, further support for this view is found in Terry Eagleton's *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (1990), where he argues that 'Marx does indeed possess an "absolute" moral criterion: the unquestionable virtue of a rich, all-round expansion of capacities for each individual' (223). A 'communist ethics', however, emphasises that 'we should foster only those particular powers which allow an individual to realize herself through and in terms of the similar free-realization of others' (224). The indebtedness of these ideas to liberalism is clear.

Such a reading by Laclau and Mouffe enables both liberalism and the socialist project to be re-conceptualised: if the latter must now answer to the imperatives of an endlessly unravelling social democratization, then the former is no longer merely the antagonist of liberation but a valuable resource—as in South Africa with its trenchant defence of civil and human rights—upon which more radical libertarian claims can be developed.

Allied to this project is a revisionist understanding of ideologies, in that they are no longer seen as essentially bound up with (the interests of ) a particular social class. Instead, ideologies have no necessary 'class belonging' (Mouffe 1979:195), but can instead be re-articulated—as with the discourses of 'democracy' or 'nationalism'—by different social groups and thus re-accented in line with different social and political interests. The contemporary task is to appropriate the discourse of democracy to give it a radical inflection.

Liberalism in South Africa has had a long history, beginning with 'Cape liberalism' instituted by the British following their Second Occupation of the Cape in 1805, and characterised by the abolition of slavery and Pass Laws, the ending of discriminatory legislation, a qualified non-racial franchise for men, the freedom of the Press, and eventual representative government. The greatest victory for liberalism was witnessed in 1994, with the establishment of a non-racial and non-sexist constitutional democracy in South Africa. However, through the course of the 20th century, which saw the increasing oppression of the black majority, Liberalism was seen by the Left—Marxists, and later, Black Consciousness intellectuals—as a superannuated, largely white middle-class and reformist response to segregationism and apartheid that was hopelessly compromised by the colonial and capitalist parameters of its ideology. Liberalism, it was argued, sought to de-radicalize black political aspirations by preaching moderation; patience and gradualism in a context that demanded radical political opposition.

Much of this critique is of course accurate, although it does not take into account the extent to which black political organisations such as the African National Congress appropriated a great many liberal themes such as democracy and civil and human rights (as can be seen in the Freedom Charter)—and indeed it is difficult to describe the present ANC government as anything other than a liberal democratic entity. What this demonstrates is Laclau and Mouffe's argument that ideologies have

no inherent 'class belonging', that they, like liberalism, can be appropriated by other social forces and in the process be 're-articulated' to be given a more radical political inflection.

This is in part a discussion about means and ends: the ANC was struggling for a non-racial democratic society, but, unlike traditional liberals (the argument goes), was willing to countenance radical means to that end: mass mobilisations, working with trades unions, and the armed struggle (hence its alliance with the South African Communist Party), that ensured its mass black political base.

However, there is also a danger here of caricaturing 'white liberalism'. The Liberal Party itself (1953-1968) was not simply a 'white' organisation: indeed Douglas Irvine (1987:119) points out that by 1961 the 'majority of delegates to the party's national congress were African', and it is often forgotten that in the 1950s the Liberal party was the only party in South Africa with a non-racial membership—the ANC was open only to Africans, while the non-racial SACP had been outlawed. The Liberal Party was also not wholly a parliamentary, constitutionalist movement operating lamely within the system: liberalism was transformed by the political momentum of the 1950s, turning to what Irvine (1987:120) describes as 'nonparliamentary political activity' and playing important roles in the Boycott Movement (both in South Africa and abroad), participating in illegal marches, etc. This important radicalization is well captured in Alan Paton's novel, *Ah, But Your Land Is Beautiful* (1981), which can be read as a political history of the 1950s, and in particular of the Liberal Party, of which Paton was a key figure (he was elected the party chairman in 1956, and two years later became its president). A further index of this move to a more radical and populist liberalism is the party's abandonment of a qualified franchise in favour of a universal franchise in this period—the articulation of a proper democratic liberalism. Indeed, in 1961 some Liberal party members established the African Resistance Movement which was committed to acts of violent sabotage.

My argument then, following those of Laclau and Mouffe, is that one cannot dismiss the writings of liberalism *in toto* because the discourses of equality, liberty, and civil and human rights are too important for any liberatory project to be airily (or shrilly) rejected as part of the fabric of a discredited 'white liberalism'. Rather, these discourses need to be appropriated and 're-articulated' to suit more radical democratic claims, and in this light there is much to learn from the history of South African liberalism, including the great many fictional writings produced by it. The radical populist democratic discourse of 'The Quarry'—a discourse favoured by Bakhtin and Laclau and Mouffe—opens up such a space of contemporary appropriation.

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