Alex la Guma's Politics and Aesthetics

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Alex la Guma persistently reiterated his belief that the situation in South Africa was bound to change and that he would, hopefully be part of a 'post-apartheid South Africa'. His socialist and nationalist 'post-apartheid' vision is summed up in the following words taken from his last published article written under the pseudonym 'Gala'[1]:

> Can we not look into the future and see the barriers fallen away under the hammer-blows of progress as our people, having emerged victorious over racist tyranny, national oppression, ethnic or community divisions, commence to build a new life? Can we not dare to bring within the boundaries of our community Marx's and Engels's even longer-term view of the world of the future? .... Flourishing under the warm sun of the equality of all peoples, our culture, art and literature will intermingle as our liberated peoples will do, blossoming into a South African culture; we shall then read a South African literature, not what is described today as merely literature 'from' South Africa or 'South African Writing' ('Gala' 1985:42).

Regrettably La Guma was not able to witness the realisation of his dream for a non-racial and democratic South Africa, albeit achieved not through a revolution but by way of a negotiated settlement. He died of a heart attack in Havana, Cuba, in 1985 at the age of 60[2]. A sense of the contribution he made to international and South African culture and politics can be gauged from the honours he received before his death:

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[1] I am indebted to Brian Bunting who informed me about La Guma's pseudonym, 'Gala', which, he explained, was derived from the author's name and surname. Using this information, I was able to deduce La Guma's other pseudonym 'Arnold Adams'.

[2] Before his death he was contemplating writing an autobiography and a travelogue on Cuba, where he had been a representative of the ANC since 1978 (Chandramoham 1992:194). According to Blanche la Guma, La Guma was also busy working on a novel to be called *The Crowns of Battle* or *Zone of Fire*. There are conflicting accounts on this unpublished novel. According to Blanche la Guma, La Guma indicated to her shortly before his death that he had 'all his ideas' on *Crowns of Battle* or *Zone of Fire* 'in his head'. 'He died before he started [writing] the book', Mrs la Guma wrote in a letter to the author. On the other hand, Cecil Abrahams states in a letter to the author (dated 6 June 1994) that, in the end, La Guma abandoned the idea of *Zone*

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> The Soviet Presidium awarded La Guma the Order of Friendship; the Republic of Congo gave him the President Nguesso Literary Prize; the French Ministry of Culture awarded him the much coveted title of Chevalier des Arts et Lettres; and the Soviet Writers Union set a special evening to pay tribute to him and to celebrate the publication of a half a million copies of his selected works (Abrahams 1991:vi).

This catalogue of achievements marks the recognition of La Guma's political and cultural development and underlines the need for an in depth study of his legacy.

There is a general agreement amongst critics on the existence of a close relationship between Alex la Guma's politics and his fictional writing. Yet there are different opinions amongst them on whether this relationship strengthens or weakens his work. Thus, on the one hand, there are commentators who have embraced La Guma as a revolutionary writer whose works justifiably furthered the ideological ends of the Movement while, on the other hand, there are those critics who have been somewhat sceptical of the aesthetic merits of such politically informed literature[3]. The most vociferous of the latter critics, Njabulo Ndebele (1991:85), who has in a number of essays taken issue with South African literature that has 'located itself in the field of politics', has, for example, aligned La Guma with what he calls 'the tradition of spectacle'—the exponents of which he has accused of being guilty of 'the dramatic politicisation of creative writing' (Ndebele 1991:40). It could, however, be argued that in using La Guma as an exemplar of the spectacular tradition, Ndebele seems to have overlooked the fact that La Guma was informed by an equally significant but radically different aesthetic tradition from the largely (liberal) Arnoldian—one that seems to inform his own aesthetics of the ordinary. It is precisely this alternative tradition which La Guma represents that this essay attempts to recuperate.

rediscovering a tradition

In a paper read at the First Pan-Cultural Festival in 1973, a paper which the exponents of the African Renaissance in present day South Africa might find useful, Alex la Guma

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of Fire. Kenneth Parker (1986:9) corroborates Abraham's argument that at the time of his death La Guma was working on *Crowns of Battle* and even goes further to indicate that the title comes from the lines: 'Let the heroes display proudly their crowns of battle' from the Zulu epic *Emperor Shaka the Great* by Mazisi Kunene. Abrahams (1992:225) explains elsewhere that this novel had been 'planned extensively and two rough chapters had been written'. In the same letter Abraham's indicated to me that he was working on the unfinished manuscript of this work with the aim of bringing it out for publication (letter to the author). Mrs. La Guma does not, however, appear to be aware of the manuscript.

[3] A good example of the commentators that embrace La Guma as a writer of the Movement is Comrade Mzala's (Jabulani Nxumalo's) (1986:89) 'Death of Alex la Guma: Writer and Freedom Fighter'.

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emphasised the need for cultural workers to reclaim the African cultural heritage and urged the liberated African countries to ensure that everyone had access to education because, in his words, '[k]nowledge is the weapon in the struggle for final emancipation' (La Guma 1973:99). Although La Guma uses 'Africanist' terms, the central thrust of his argument is, nevertheless, not at odds with his Marxist beliefs. The notion of education that La Guma seems to have had in mind here is what Norman Geras (1986:137) has called 'the *education* of the proletariat' (e.i.o.) in terms of which 'the proletariat transforms and educates itself in the process of its revolutionary struggle to overthrow the capitalist society'. This process of self-education of the proletariat, Geras (1986:138) is quick to point out, 'in no way contradicts the Marxist theory of the party'[4]. La Guma is speaking from his position as a member of the Communist Party, as an 'organic intellectual' (in the Gramscian sense) who is supposed to provide guidance to the working class. For La Guma there was no contradiction regarding the reciprocal relationship between the working class and the party on behalf of which he wrote and organised:

> The main distinguishing feature of a true democratic cultural revolution is its mass, nation-wide character. The strength and vitality of the revolution is derived from the awakened creative energy of the masses and their aspirations for new life, enlightenment and culture. Real progress cannot be decreed from above; living creative progress is the product of the masses themselves. We must raise the lowest sections of the population to the state of making history (La Guma 1973:99).

In these words, La Guma not only made clear his belief in the pivotal role of culture in the struggle for liberation, but also summed up what may be regarded as the guiding principle of his revolutionary philosophy throughout his life. For not only did La Guma, as a cultural worker, attempt to ensure that 'the lowest sections of the population [are] raise[d] to the state of making history' by way of his writings, but, in his role as a political activist, he also identified with the interests of (and fought on behalf of) this constituency in his unwavering dedication to the liberation struggle in South Africa. For La Guma 'the lowest section of the population' is undoubtedly the proletarian masses, a fact which not only becomes obvious in the working class bias of most of his novels but also has a great deal to do with the influence of his father[5]. Although La

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[4] 'For Marx and Lenin, the party is nothing other than the instrument of the working class, its own organization for struggle; it is not, for them, yet another external agent of liberation above or superior to the masses' (Geras 1986:138).

[5] La Guma appears to share the Lukácsian conception that 'the fate of the revolution depended upon the ideological maturity of the working class' (Frisby 1983:86).

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Guma informs us that both his parents were politically conscious people, it was largely his father's political activities which influenced his social and political outlook. Against this background, then, one cannot look at La Guma's cultural and political development without examining his father's role in the South African liberation struggle.

James la Guma was a member of the ANC since the 1920s, the South African Coloured People's Organisation (SACPO) in the 1950s, a member of the ICU in 1919 and by 1926 its permanent secretary. His commitment to working class interests was, however, not confined to his involvement in the activities of the ICU. La Guma was a member of the Communist Party South Africa (CPSA), a party which was formed in 1921, which he joined in 1925 and was in the executive of the party by 1926 as well as the secretary of the Non-European federation of Trade Unions in 1928, in addition to his position as secretary of the ANC branch in Cape Town. Jack and Ray Simons (1983:267) describe him as 'one of the first coloured radicals to abandon the concepts of liberalism for Marxist theory and class struggle'.

La Guma was elected to attend the International Congress of the League Against Imperialism and for National Independence as a representative of the Party in Brussels, Belgium, in 1927 together with Josiah Gumede of the ANC and D. Colraine, a representative of the South African Trade Union Congress. It was at this congress that the South African delegation drafted a resolution which demanded 'the right for self-determination through the complete overthrow of the capitalistic and imperialist domination' in South Africa (La Guma n.d.:22)—a resolution which the Brussels Congress adopted. The resolution may have served as an impetus for La Guma's subsequent attention to the national question in South Africa. After addressing meetings in Germany following the conference, La Guma and Gumede left for Moscow, where La Guma discussed the South African National question with members of the Executive Committee of the Communist International (ECCI), especially with Nikolai Bukharin, then a prominent party member.

La Guma's first visit to Moscow after the Brussels conference is of particular significance both in terms of his contribution to the South African liberation struggle as well as the impact it might have had on his son's political and literary development later in his career. La Guma's encounter with Bukharin is significant in this regard. Bukharin was not only an important party thinker according full support to Stalin's New Economic Policy of the time but, as editor of an official Party newspaper, *Pravda*, he also played a significant role in promoting proletarian literature through his support of the Proletkult. This brief encounter with Bukharin must have had an impact on La Guma—who is described by his son as having been an avid reader of working class literature—and later on his son's reading tastes as well.

Of particular significance with regard to this visit to Moscow, however, was La Guma's submission of a statement on the South African situation to the Communist International (Comintern), in which he argued for the establishment of a 'Native

Republic' as a precondition for the realization of socialism[6]. La Guma's analysis of the South African situation received the blessing of the executive of the Comintern, which then submitted the adoption of the slogan, '[a]n independent native republic as a stage towards a workers' and peasants' government with full guarantees of the rights of minorities' for discussion by the CPSA (La Guma n.d.:48). This proposal was, however, vehemently rejected and criticised by some members of the party, with S.P. Bunting being the most vociferous. After a lengthy debate amongst members of the party in Cape Town, the 'Black Republic' thesis, as it was later called, was endorsed by the CPSA in 1929. Commenting on La Guma's pivotal role in the formulation and subsequent adoption of the Black Republic policy the Simonses (1983:398) argue:

> Only a person who combined a firm adherence to Marxist theory with a passionate belief in national liberation could conceive the prospect of African rule as a necessary first stage to the achievement of a classless society. Such a person was James La Guma.

The Black Republic thesis, which was based on Lenin's 1920 thesis on the national and colonial question, in terms of which the national liberation struggle against imperialism is seen as the first stage towards socialism, was to have a profound impact on the relationship between the African National Congress and the South African Communist Party (as the CPSA was later known) at a later stage in the history of the struggle. For in the words of Francis Meli (1989:79), it underlined the crucial

> relationship between African nationalism and socialism, by stating that the concept of class struggle must of necessity incorporate the principle of national self-determination for Africans and other nationally oppressed blacks.

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[6] Jack and Ray Simons (1983:398f) sum up La Guma's argument in the following works: 'First establish majority rule, he argued, and unity, leading to socialism, would follow'. The party should therefore concentrate on strengthening the movement for national liberation, and at the same time retain its separate identity and role as a socialist party. Communists should 'build up a mass party based upon the non-European masses', unite landless whites and natives behind an energetic agrarian policy, give expression to the demands of African workers and dispel their illusions that the British acted as the demands of African workers and dispel their illusions that the British acted as intermediaries between them and their Afrikaner oppressors. The 'native republic slogan would act as a political catalyst, dissolving traditional subservience to whites among Africans and racial arrogance towards Africans among whites'. The phrase 'dissolving traditional subservience to whites among Africans and racial arrogance towards Africans among whites' immediately calls to mind Steve Biko's assertions in *I Write What I Like*. It is perhaps such statements in James la Guma's argument that prompted Joe Slovo's conclusion that the Black Republic thesis foreshadows Black Consciousness in SouthAfrica [Amakomanisi:The South African Communist Party 1921 - 1986 (video cassette)]. The ideological thrust of the 'Black Republic' thesis is, however, different from the terms of Black Consciousness.

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Most significantly, the 'Black Republic' thesis, which underscored the collaboration between British imperialism and 'the white bourgeoisie of South Africa' (Bunting 1981:91), was a precursor to the 'colonialism of a special type' (CST) theory, which formed the central thrust of 'The Road to South African Freedom', the programme of the South African Communist Party (SACP) adopted in South Africa in 1962. In terms of the CST theory, 'the oppressing white nation [occupies] the same territory as the oppressed people themselves and [lives] side by side with them' (Bunting 1981:299).

In the words that clearly signal the official justification of the alliance between the SACP and the ANC, the programme also states that the South African Communist Party set out as 'its immediate and foremost task' the attempt to work for a united front of national liberation and 'to strive to unite all sections and classes of oppressed and democratic people for a national democratic revolution to destroy white domination' (Bunting 1981:286). James La Guma's position is clearly indicated in the following words which conclude the introduction of the programme:

> The destruction of colonialism and the winning of national freedom is the essential condition and the key for future advance to the supreme aim of the Communist Party: the establishment of a socialist South Africa, laying the foundation of a classless, communist society (Bunting 1981:286).

The Simonses (1983:450) refer to La Guma as 'the chief architect of the black republic policy': this intellectual role which clearly underscores his highest achievement as an 'organic intellectual', was bound to have a significant influence on his son, especially with regard to his perspective on national liberation and class struggle in South Africa.

early activism

As can be seen, then, Alex la Guma was born in a home where working class politics and the national liberation struggle were a major preoccupation, and was encouraged from the beginning to think in class terms and to see the situation of Coloured people in the national context. At one level, it was the existence of 'an atmosphere of working class activity and ideas at home' (La Guma 1991:16) which aroused La Guma's curiosity as a child and helped develop his political consciousness:

> I do not remember my parents ever sermonising me as [a] child, but one was always being advised to devote oneself to 'something useful', or 'to lead a useful life'. A picture of Lenin hung in our living room. Very often people came to visit and I would hover on the outskirts of the conversations, listening to chats about politics, trade-union work, or the 'Party' ('Gala' 1982:50).

La Guma recalls enquiring from his mother about the picture of Lenin on their living room wall and being informed that his father was 'a follower of Lenin' and that 'Lenin had been the leader of the great change in Russia which had done away with poverty so that people no longer need to be poor'. When he probed further, La Guma goes on to tell us, his mother told him that '[his] father and others like him used the teachings of Lenin

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to show workers in the country that they could achieve happiness for themselves and their children' (La Guma 1993:168). La Guma recalls how as a young 'schoolboy artist, [he] was asked to help paint posters, decorate the banners or illustrate the leaflets which his father's work demanded' ('Gala' 1982:50). He was already part of the marches and demonstrations even before he entered high school in 1938. As a high school student at Trafalgar in Cape Town, La Guma relates with obvious cynicism how he discovered that they were taught by 'politically conscious' teachers. La Guma informs us:

> After classes we were invited to attend lectures of a 'political nature'. There I heard long and dull discourses about the 'permanent revolution' as well as dire criticisms of and outright attacks on the Soviet Union. This was offensive to me, for in our family we had always been taught to cherish and admire the Socialist Sixth of the World. I soon gave up attendance of these 'activities' which also went under the guise of 'cultural programmes' ('Gala' 1982:51)[7].

Like his father, La Guma became an avid reader from an early age. Writing under a different pseudonym, 'Arnold Adams', La Guma outlines some of the sources of his cultural and political development:

> I read *The Iron Heel* and saw in Jack London's 'people of the abyss' my own community ground down under the weight of poverty, oppression, ignorance. Could it be that the oppressed people all over were the same? In *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* I saw our own working men. These books moved me more than the set books we were given to read (at) school. I wasn't interested in *The Adventures of Maurice Buckler* or *Mica Clarke* ('Arnold Adams' 1971:59)

La Guma read very widely, covering the classical Russian writings of Tolstoy,

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[7] The position being rejected here was the Trotskyian version of the 'permanent revolution' as espoused in South Africa in the 1940s by the leaders of such organisations as the All-Africa Convention (ACC), the Non-European Unity Movement (NEUM) and, significantly, the Cape African Teachers' Association. This version of the theory of the 'permanent revolution' rejects the national democratic phase of the revolution and espouses instead, the idea that the revolution has to be 'socialist in character' and immediately establish a dictatorship of the proletariat. The following characterisation of this vision is one with which La Guma would have agreed: 'Trotskyism in South Africa (as elsewhere) had the following characteristics: It opposes the democratic revolution as a distinct phase in the struggle for socialism; it is unable to get to grips with the national question; its theoretical dogmatism prevents it from coherently distinguishing between the "form" and "content" of class struggle, and its abstract view of politics encourages élitist and anarchist styles of organisation' (Dialego 1988:69). For an inside perspective of this version and a different view on the policies of the CPSA see Hosea Jaffe's *European Colonial Despotism*, especially chapter seven and eight. In chapter seven he provides a critique of the Black Republic thesis and in chapter eight he credits the 'Trotskyite' organisations as having provided 'the most sustained, intense and widespread political education of the oppressed people ever conducted in South Africa' (Jaffe 1994:166).

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Dostoyevsky, Gorky, Sholokov and American writers such as Farrel and Steinbeck[8]. The working class bias of most of Alex la Guma's novels later in his literary career can, therefore, be attributed partly to his early exposure to this literary tradition.

La Guma was at that stage a fifteen year old matric student but, as he tells us, he was more interested 'in seeing the defeat of Nazism than [he] was in his examinations' (La Guma 1991:17). The result was that La Guma dropped out of school (in order to join the army) before he could complete his matriculation and, having enrolled at the Cape Technical College, he passed matric in 1945 when he had already started working:

> You wanted to get through school in order to enter a more dynamic world. After high school I turned away from further education because it appeared that life held more serious things than more certificates based on knowledge that had little to do with reality ('Arnold Adams' 1971:59).

La Guma's opportunity to enter 'a more dynamic world' came when he was employed as a factory worker by the Metal Box Company in Cape Town. Although La Guma was initially romantic about the prospects, it was while he was working for this company that he learnt about the hardships of being a worker—an experience that facilitated the emergence of his interest in working class issues. La Guma recalls what he felt about the situation of the workers then:

> I could see how the workers were exploited, and how they suffered. I came to know the day-to-day problems they had, the hopeless condition of their families and other slum dwellers. Those outcasts of South African society were poor, they were backward, they were unconcerned. Many of them died inside themselves like trees eaten by worms beneath the bark. I was amazed at their tolerance, their resignation. I couldn't understand why they didn't want to do something about it, why they didn't change these conditions but drifted along without a murmur, year after year (La Guma 1984:71).

This is an interesting observation in so far as it underlines what the Hungarian Marxist Georg Lukács has called the reified consciousness of the workers in terms of which the 'capitalist social order' is internalised by the worker without interrogation becoming, as it were, his 'second nature'[9]. The remedy to this reified conception of capitalist order,

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[8] See for example La Guma (1991:18). As James Matthews, his fellow writer who worked closely with La Guma in Cape Town before the latter fled the country, told me in an interview: 'Alex was influenced by every writer who had a profound feeling of the social deprivation of others'. La Guma's wide reading habits were also confirmed by his wife, Blanche, in an interview with Chandramohan (1992:199) as well as in a letter to the author dated 10th March 1994. In her words: 'Alex was an avid reader, amongst authors whose works he read was Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, Gorky and others too numerous to mention'.

[9] In the words of Lukács: 'In every aspect of daily life in which the individual worker imagines himself be the subject of his own life he finds this to be an illusion that is destroyed

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as La Guma himself later realises, lies in the development of a 'proletarian class consciousness' amongst workers themselves. The Marxist-Leninist underpinnings of La Guma's politics is clear from the following account of his relationship with fellow workers:

> At lunch time I found myself talking to the workers. I seemed to have become a great talker. I talked about lots of things, I remember. International news, South African politics, the colour-bar. Some of the workers viewed me with curiosity. They asked me whether I was a communist. Certainly I was a member of the trade union. Was I a communist? I must have been telling them things, explaining situations, in the manner of a communist ('Arnold Adams' 1971:60).

La Guma here was (perhaps subconsciously) not only identifying the 'proletariat as a redeemer' of its own situation within the capitalist system but also instilling in the workers a self-consciousness that Lukács identifies as the first step towards overcoming reification (see Zitta 1964:175f).

As a member of the trade union committee at the Metal Box Company, La Guma was in the forefront in the organisation of a strike for better wages and better working conditions. He recalls 'a somewhat juvenile talk [he] gave on the meaning of class struggle' during the course of the strike ('Gala' 1982:51). As a result of his involvement in this strike action, La Guma lost his job. Although La Guma later 'realised' that the situation was 'much more complicated' than he saw it (La Guma 1984:71), this experience was, nonetheless, significant in his development. After his dismissal from the Metal Box Company, La Guma found work in the art department of Caltex Oil Company in Cape Town. Blanche La Guma, his wife, tells us that it was while La Guma was working for Caltex that 'he took a correspondence course in journalism which was to serve him well in the future' (La Guma 1991:7). It was also while he was working at Caltex that La Guma started recruiting members for the Communist Party and, interestingly, this (apparently spontaneous) recruitment drive preceded La Guma's official membership of the party. The young La Guma finally joined the Young Communist League in 1947 and became a member of District 20 of the Communist Party by 1948:

> One day I realised that while I had been encouraging my mates to take more interest in those things which were keeping them in that position of

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the immediacy of his existence' (Lukács 1971:165; see also Johnson 1984). Lukács (1971:172) goes on to point out: 'the process by which the worker is reified and becomes a commodity dehumanises him and cripples and atrophies his "soul"—as long as he does not consciously rebel against it'. It is important to note here that Lukács later renounced this 'messianic' role accorded to the proletariat as a way of coming to terms with Leninist theory (see Lukács's 1967 preface to *History and Class Consciousness*; Novack 1978:120f; Jones 1977:50f).

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> indignity as second class people in their own Motherland, I could do more myself ('Arnold Adams' 1971:61).

One may, of course, argue that, given his home background, it was inevitable that La Guma should join the Communist Party. La Guma himself indicates that his family background had a great deal to do with this move: 'perhaps I was influenced within the circle of our family—certainly that had something to do with it' ('Gala' 1982:51). 'On the other hand', La Guma continues to point out, 'there were [other] independent experiences which made me as an individual more and more aware of the necessity to change the face of our country' ('Arnold Adams' 1971:57). Some of the motivations for joining the Communist Party which La Guma cites include the appalling conditions of life under which the predominantly working class community of District Six lived; his own reading of working class literature which sensitized him to the plight of the workers in other parts of the world as well as the potential revolutionary role that could result in workers changing their situation; his experiences as a worker which provided him with a first hand practical encounter with the conditions of the working class in his own country; lastly, the working class internationalism demonstrated by the Party during the war when it interpreted fascism as a threat to the working class all over the world and gave its full backing to the Soviet Union[10]. Having joined the Young Communist League, La Guma began getting some lectures from his father 'on the honour and importance of being known as a Communist' (La Guma 1993:168). Joining the Young Communist League (YCL) also provided La Guma with the opportunity to delve deep into the theories of Marxist-Leninism. La Guma tells how as members of the YCL they 'read Lenin's works and debated youthfully and fervently'. Two years after La Guma had joined the CPSA, however, the organisation had to disband, pre-empting the banning of the Party by the government. The Nationalist government, nonetheless, declared it an illegal organisation in 1950 and La

[10] It is perhaps important to note that even before the Soviet Union became involved in the war, at a time when the CPSA still held the belief that the war was only the concern of the imperialists, Jimmy la Guma, his father, did not endorse this initial party position. According to Alex la Guma, his father maintained that the second World War was an antifascist war being waged against Hitler and Mussolini who were not only 'implementing imperialist ambitions, but were also attacking the working class of Europe and its vanguard'. 'Internationalism demanded that the workers of Europe be defended' concluded James la Guma (La Guma 'A biography' n.d.:67). This interpretation of events by his father had a bearing on La Guma's interest (at the age of fifteen) in joining the army as well as on his consciousness about the need for international solidarity with the working class: 'Nazism was overrunning Europe. I knew about the stupid system that turned my own people into strangers in their country. We were continually reminded that we were "Non-Europeans Only"; in Europe they were butchering Jews and gypsies, and Hitler called us "subhumans". We were all one, because we were all being persecuted, and they were fighting in Europe. I wanted to fight the Nazis, but when I left home to join the armed forces the recruiting officer found me underweight and too skinny' ('Arnold Adams' 1971:59).

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Guma was 'listed under the Suppression of Communism Act as a known communist' (Abrahams 1985:7).

La Guma continued being involved in politics, however, even after the banning of the Party, participating more in local and nationalist campaigns rather than working class activities. When a Coloured People's Convention was called in 1953 and the South African Coloured People's Organisation was formed, La Guma was one of the founder members. The South African Coloured People's Organisation (SACPO), a national coloured organisation, was formed to mobilise and unite all Coloureds to resist the Separate Representation of Voters Bill of 1951, which was aimed at removing the Coloureds from the common voters roll, and to align itself with the ANC's campaign against apartheid and for equal rights for all South Africans (see Lewis 1987:269). La Guma became a member of the executive of SACPO in 1954 while he was still working at Caltex, but, after some time, he resigned from this company to become a full-time organiser for SACPO. In November the same year, La Guma married Blanche Herman, who was to share his political and cultural activities. In 1955 La Guma became chairman of SACPO and was instrumental in organising SACPO for the historical Congress of the People held in Kliptown in June 1955. While La Guma and several other SACPO delegates were on their way to Kliptown, they were arrested in Beaufort West and released without being charged only after the conference had ended. SACPO members, nevertheless, vowed to carry the Freedom Charter to every corner of the land in their capacity as members of the Congress Alliance, which adopted the Charter in 1955. After its 1959 December conference the South African Coloured People's Organisation changed its name to the South African Coloured People's Congress (or CPC) to fall in line with the Congress Movement under the auspices of the African National Congress.

journalism, detention and exile

The period from 1955 to 1962 was a significant phase in both La Guma's political career and his writing career. Firstly, in 1955 La Guma was asked to join the staff of *New Age*, a newspaper that served as the mouthpiece for the ANC and the SACP, at its headquarters in Cape Town[11]. It was after joining the staff of this progressive newspaper that La Guma 'really started to write seriously' (La Guma 1991:19). Secondly, as chairman of the South African Coloured People's Organisation, La Guma played a leading role in challenging the government's 1955 Race Classification Bill and the South African Act Amendment Bill which effectively removed Coloureds from the common voters roll. He was also in the forefront in the struggle against the decision of

[11] In joining this progressive newspaper as a reporter, La Guma was once again following the path of his father who, in the 1930s, was an editor of *Liberator*, a monthly journal of the National Liberation League in which Alex la Guma himself assisted as a juvenile artist.

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the Cape Town City Council in April and May 1956 when the municipality decided to segregate buses (see Abrahams 1985:8). In December 1956 La Guma and other leaders countrywide were arrested and charged with treason. Since the history of the 1956 Treason Trial is well documented, it suffices to point out here that the central argument of the State against the accused revolved around suspicions of the existence of a conspiracy to overthrow the existing government by force as well as the allegation that the Freedom Charter was a communist inspired document, and that the trial dragged on until 1961 when, as a result of insufficient evidence, the accused were acquitted.

As one of the accused in the Treason Trial, La Guma wrote extensive reports for *New Age*. On May 2, 1957 La Guma was assigned a regular column entitled 'Up my Alley' by *New Age* (see Abrahams 1985:12). It was La Guma's work with *New Age*, specifically his new column, through which he established himself as a chronicler of liberation, that paved the way for his literary career. As Andre Odendaal and Roger Field indicate in a recently published collection of La Guma's articles and reports, 'many of the themes in his short stories and novels are first encountered and developed in the early newspaper articles' (La Guma 1993:xviii). It was largely as a result of his political work and perhaps partly because of his biting journalism that people who called themselves 'the Patriots' made an attempt on his life on May 15, 1958. According to Blanche La Guma's account of the incident:

> When the matter was reported, the police showed no interest. Only when he received an unsigned note reading 'Sorry we missed you, will call again—'The Patriots'—did they come to the house to inspect the hole made by the bullet into the wall. That was two days after the event (La Guma 1991:10).

Immediately after the Sharpeville incident of March 1960 the South African government declared a State of Emergency and arrested many political activists all over the country. La Guma was one of those detained and he spent five months firstly in Roeland Street prison and then at a special prison in Worcester in the Cape before he was released:

> In the multi-racial, multi-national community of political detainees lay the guarantee of a future, free South Africa ... we have come out of the jails stronger, more determined than before (La Guma 1993:147f).

In 1961 when Nelson Mandela, the then leader of the African National Congress, called a national general strike in protest against South Africa becoming a white republic, La Guma went underground and helped organise the Coloured people in Cape Town to rally around Mandela's call. He was detained for ten days for his involvement in the campaign. Following his release in June 1961, in August the government imposed a five year banning order on La Guma under the Suppression of Communism Act. In 1962 La Guma was, according to his wife, 'the first person to be placed under twenty-four hour house arrest' (La Guma 1991:13). This restriction order prohibited him from attending public gatherings and effectively forced him to resign from *New Age*. In

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October 1963 both La Guma and his wife were detained under the 'Ninety-day solitary confinement clause'. After Blanche's release from jail, she was also served with a banning order. Her husband continued to be under house arrest after his release. La Guma was again arrested under the '180 days solitary confinement clause' in 1966 and upon his release he was instructed by the African National Congress to leave South Africa with his family and settle in exile in London. La Guma told Cecil Abrahams:

> It was felt that after having spent four years under house arrest and going for the fifth year with the prospect of another five years ... one could be more constructive outside. So we came to Europe to carry on what we were doing on another front (La Guma 1991:25).

The period from 1962 to 1965 was significant with regard to La Guma's writing as he used the restriction orders to get down to the business of writing fiction. Apart from a number of short stories, La Guma wrote a novella, *A Walk in the Night*, which was published by Mbari in Ibadan Nigeria in 1962. Between 1962 and 1963 La Guma wrote *And a Threefold Cord*, which was subsequently published by Seven Seas Publishers in East Berlin in 1964 while La Guma was in prison in Roeland Street. On his release from prison, La Guma wrote *The Stone Country*. As can be seen, then, the period from 1960 to 1965, the larger part of which La Guma spent under twenty-four hour house arrest, was indeed a period during which La Guma 'did most of his writing' (La Guma 1991:12; Abrahams 1985).

During the period of exile in London, La Guma continued with his political work—addressing anti-apartheid gatherings as a representative of the ANC in the United Kingdom in 1966 and 1967. He also retained his membership of and worked for the SACP (which had been established as an underground movement in South Africa in 1953). Because of the secrecy that Party members maintained during the period of repression this has not been recorded in earlier biographical accounts[12]. For the purpose of survival, Blanche La Guma worked at London hospitals, while La Guma worked for a private radio agency owned by Dennis Duerden. While working for Duerden, La Guma wrote a number of detective stories 'based on a fictitious African detective named Captain Zondie' (Abrahams 1985:17). When the private radio agency closed down La Guma found work as an insurance clerk at Abbey Insurance Company in London, a firm for which he worked from 1968 to 1970. La Guma's period in exile was also marked by a number of important developments with regard to his cultural productivity. As early as 1969—three years after his arrival in London—La Guma was awarded the first Lotus Prize for literature by the Afro-Asian Writers Association, a prestigious award which he accepted from Prime Minister Indira Ghandhi at New Delhi

[12] I am indebted to Barry Feinberg, La Guma's comrade in an SACP unit in exile, who brought this to my attention in a conversation I had with him at Mayibuye Centre on 24 March 1994.

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in India in 1970. This award must have served as an impetus for La Guma's production of his next work, *In the Fog of the Seasons' End*, a novel on the underground activities of ordinary people who have decided to wage an armed struggle against racial capitalism. This novel was, according to La Guma, conceived and drafted in South Africa although it was fully written in London (see Abrahams 1985:18). Perhaps more significantly, La Guma's period of exile afforded him an opportunity to attend and address numerous conferences in different parts of the world, and, thereby, share ideas with other literary figures the world over. For La Guma, on the one hand, this exposure did not only broaden his cultural horizon but also provided him international recognition as an author of undoubted repute. For readers and researchers interested in La Guma's work, on the other hand, La Guma's conference papers and essays published in exile are most valuable since they provide useful information on La Guma's conception of the function of literature as well as his argument on the relationship between culture and politics.

Soon after his arrival in London, La Guma was invited to participate in the Scandinavian-African writers conference in Stockholm in 1967. At this conference La Guma shared ideas with other African writers such as Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Wole Soyinka, both of whom were generous in their accolades for his literary talent. It was at this conference that La Guma for the first time made statements on his ideas on literature and commitment in an open debate. In the same year, and immediately after the conference in Stockholm, La Guma was invited as a guest at the Fourth Congress of the Union of Soviet Writers in Moscow. As Abrahams (1985:17) points out: '[t]his visit to the Soviet Union was the first of many to come'. These regular visits to the Soviet Union afforded La Guma an opportunity to have constant contact with the Soviet Writers Union and must have had an impact on his aesthetic commitment to socialist realism (at least in theory). In 1975, after a six-week tour of the Soviet Union at the invitation of the Writers Union, La Guma wrote a book entitled *A Soviet Journey*, a travelogue in which he records his impressions of the Soviet Union, which was published by Progress Publishers in Moscow in 1978. Although La Guma had regular contacts with the Soviet Writers Union, he seems to have spent a great deal of his time on his cultural activities with the Afro-Asian Writers Association. La Guma's links with this association began during the first year of his arrival in London when he was invited as a guest speaker at the Third Congress of the association in Beirut. Perhaps in recognition of his talent as a cultural worker, the members of the Afro-Asian Writers Association elected La Guma as deputy secretary-general at its Fifth Congress at Tashkent in the Soviet Union in 1975. He was initially appointed acting secretary-general in 1977 (when the Egyptian secretary-general of the association died in Cyprus) and was eventually appointed secretary-general of the same association in 1979 (Abrahams 1985:19). In 1979 La Guma, who had been instructed by the ANC to represent its interests in the Caribbean, Central and Latin America and was operating from Cuba, produced his last published novel, *Time of the Butcherbird*. This novel, according to Jan Carew (1986), was later used as a text for Soviet students studying

English literature and philosophy[13].

It has been argued that the exposure La Guma received during this period, which inevitably drew his attention to the need to address an international audience as well, may have inadvertently led to apparent contradictions between his politics and the aesthetic construction of his work, as exemplified in *Time of the Butcherbird*[14]. According to this view, this contradiction may be attributed not only to La Guma's condition of enforced exile, which deprived him of the benefit of writing on an 'intimately known community', but also to his changing 'aesthetic ideology' (Maughan-Brown 1991:32f)[15]. Drawing on the statement made by La Guma in an interview with Robert Serumaga in 1966, in which La Guma indicates his attempt to achieve a 'universality of opinion' by moving beyond a set of apartheid-created 'compartments', Maughan-Brown (1991:35,34) detects in La Guma 'an element of aesthetic back-tracking', the evidence of which is provided, *inter alia*, by what he perceives as La Guma's residual belief in the 'universals of traditionalist criticism'.

One cannot dispute the traces of a liberal humanist aesthetic in some of La Guma's extra-fictional statements. However, La Guma's use of 'universality' in this context seems to have a lot to do with the writer's will to transcend the barriers of race in his writing—hence La Guma's reference to the failure of writers to 'project (themselves) across the colour line' earlier in that interview—and as such it may be seen as La Guma's reflection on the charterist position (or the pluralism of the ANC as some people have called it). It could also be argued that La Guma conflates universality with revolutionary internationalism as can be inferred from his assertion that the writer 'tries to spread out, extend his views, extend his opinions and get opinions from other sources so that he doesn't become confined to his ivory tower'; or the argument that 'universal ideas could still be expressed' even if one is writing 'within a particular environment'[16]. Viewed from this perspective, then, Maughan-Brown's (1991:34) assertion that once 'the concept of universals is accepted, the whole question of the

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[13] In an interview both Apollon Davidson and Vladimir Shubin confirmed that La Guma's writings were popular in Russia.

[14] Feinberg stated to the author that La Guma's later novels were aimed at eliciting international solidarity because it was felt that an international awareness campaign would bring more supporters to the cause, La Guma indicated in a letter to Jane Grant that his target had not really been an international audience. 'I never actually have a foreign readership in mind, but wrote, and continue to write, the way I believe the story or novel should be written according to the gospel of Alex la Guma' (La Guma in Grant 1978:49).

[15] Some 'anomalies' that Maughan-Brown notes in his critical essay on *Time of the Butcherbird* were identified earlier by Mbulelo Mzamane (1985:39f).

[16] In a letter to Grant (1978:50) La Guma makes this explicit: 'the revolution is international, and if my characters act out their parts on the South African stage, I hope they are also saying something to non-South Africans'.

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legitimacy of literature's serving historically specific political ends is thrown back into the melting pot' is somewhat problematic. Moreover, to make reference to 'La Guma's assertions about the relationship between culture and politics after his exile' or 'aesthetic back-tracking on the part of La Guma once he was established in exile' seems to imply that La Guma may have made assertions on this relationship before his exile. Evidence suggests that it was not until La Guma was in exile that he started throwing some light on his aesthetics—a factor that seems to have been overlooked in Maughan-Brown's essay. Against this background, then, I would argue that if there are any traces of some tenets of liberal humanist aesthetics in some of La Guma's statements, these are overshadowed by La Guma's consistent and heavy reliance on Marxist aesthetics of realism, which is informed by what Lukács—in a reference to Maxim Gorky's writings—calls 'proletarian humanism'. This brings us to the place of La Guma's fiction in the South African realist debate.

the South African realist debate

La Guma's work has always been at the centre of the realist debate in South Africa—a clear indication that he is known as one of the writers in South Africa who is seen as consciously working within a particular realist tradition. This debate was initiated by Lewis Nkosi (1979:221) who argued, in his 1967 essay, that there was a lack of tradition—'indigenous' or 'alien'—in South African literature written by Blacks. Instead what one gets from black South African writing, Nkosi (1979:222) went on to argue, is 'the journalistic fact parading outrageously as imaginative literature' without any effort being made to 'transmute these given social facts into artistically persuasive works of fiction'. Nkosi does provide an indication of a tradition he would prefer South African writers to follow and that is the experimental line of modernism which, he feels, would rescue black fiction from the 'straightforward' documentary realist narrative. Amongst those artists who, according to Nkosi, have failed to 'transmute given social facts into artistically persuasive works of fiction', is Richard Rive in whose novel, *Emergency*, Nkosi (1979:222) finds a failure 'in characterisation and imaginative power to do justice to the desperate human situation with which he is dealing'. However, Nkosi is generous in his accolades for Alex la Guma who, despite the fact that he 'tills the same apartheid plot which other writers have so exhaustively worked up' distinguishes himself 'as a true novelist' by his optimism ('his enthusiasm for life as it is lived') (Nkosi 1979:226). Nkosi (1979:227) finds in La Guma's work, *A Walk in the Night*, 'distinct Dostoevskian undertones'. In short, unlike Rive's failure 'in characterisation and imaginative power to do justice to the desperate human situation' in *Emergency*, Nkosi admires La Guma's *A Walk in the Night* despite its employment of a realist narrative which the central thrust of Nkosi's essay seems to be aimed at undercutting.

In his intervention in this realist debate, J.M. Coetzee picks up this point more cogently. Coetzee argues in his 1971 essay, 'Alex la Guma and the Responsibilities of the South African Writer' that 'the Western line of experimentation' (which Nkosi clearly favours) would seem to 'perpetuate a rift between the writer and society at large'

(Coetzee 1971:6). The writer, Coetzee correctly suggests, 'should not choose his tradition at random, but rather choose it with some sense of social implications for his choice' (Coetzee 1971:6). This is precisely what La Guma is doing, Coetzee points out in his brief but illuminating examination of *A Walk in the Night* in which he convincingly shows that this novel 'exemplifies a conception of literature radically different from Nkosi's' (Coetzee 1971:7). According to Coetzee, La Guma's novel is informed by a critical realist tradition which is exemplified in La Guma's truthful depiction of the Coloured situation and the gesture towards 'potentialities for heroic action' (Coetzee 1971:11,10) as captured in the symbolism of the 'dawn' of a new situation. Coetzee continues this line of argument in another essay, 'Man's Fate in the Novels of Alex la Guma'. David Attwell (1993:12) captures Coetzee's (1992) argument thus:

> In 'Man's Fate in the Novels of Alex la Guma' Coetzee goes on to argue, via George Lukács's studies of realism, that La Guma is a critical realist who politicizes his art by gesturing toward a revolutionary transformation of history encoded in characterization and symbolism: thus, La Guma arrives at narrative solutions that have an implicitly progressive social hermeneutic.

In a word, then, La Guma is a social realist who is conscious of the ideological implications of working within this tradition.

Seventeen years after the publication of Nkosi's essay, this debate was taken up by Njabulo Ndebele. Following Nkosi, Ndebele argued in 'Turkish Tales and Some Thoughts on South African Fiction', an essay that has since become seminal in South African critical debates, that 'what we have (in South African black fiction) is creative writing's almost obsessive emulation of journalism' (Ndebele 1991:45). This apparently heavy reliance on an obsessive documentation of oppression has, according to Ndebele, inevitably led to the production of an aesthetic of 'anticipated surfaces rather than one of processes', an art which lacks the potential for a transformative impact on the reader's consciousness because it is grounded on political exposition. Such kind of fiction thrives on an aesthetic effect based on 'identification' and 'recognition' (Ndebele 1991:45), Ndebele argues. Ndebele takes the debate much further in his later essay, 'The Rediscovery of the Ordinary', suggesting that writers should 'rediscover the ordinary' by exploring a wide range of human experience, thereby avoiding 'the representation of the spectacle' (Ndebele 1991:37) as embodied in narratives which are preoccupied with a documentation of oppression. Rediscovering the ordinary, it turns out, also includes an effective use of subtlety so that the reader's imaginative faculty is challenged and, in this way, the transformation of his/her consciousness is assured.

Curiously, Ndebele provides La Guma's story 'Coffee for the Road' as an example of the 'spectacular' and cites amongst other things, 'the complete exteriority of everything', 'the dramatic contrasts all over the story' and the 'intensifying device of hyphenated adjectives' as pointers to the 'spectacle' in this story (Ndebele 1991:43). There are no grounds to doubt the persuasiveness of Ndebele's argument in this regard;

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however, one may argue that Ndebele's argument seems to have overlooked the fact that La Guma's documentation of minute details in this and other stories is indicative of his indebtedness to a naturalist tradition within realism. Moreover, one wonders at the randomness of Ndebele's choice of this particular story by La Guma! The same technique (the documentation of minute details) is used much more effectively in *A Walk in the Night*, which Ndebele does not make reference to because, one suspects, it would put into question the validity of his argument with regard to La Guma.

This debate invokes the 1930s debates between Lukács and Brecht amongst others which were triggered off by Lukács's attack on Bloch's expressionism[17]. In the local version of the debate it would seem that Nkosi subscribes to Brecht's argument in terms of which the use of the experimental line of modernism is seen as compatible with the realistic aesthetic. For example, Nkosi (1979:223) has a lot of praise for Bloke Modisane's *Blame Me On History* because it 'shows a dedication to a superior form of realism which succeeds partly because the author is alive to the fact that reality itself is elusive to the process of Time as an orderly sequence of events'. Coetzee, it has been shown, employs Lukács in his defence of La Guma's oeuvre. Unlike Nkosi, who displays some bias towards modernism, Ndebele does not seem to be suggesting that the writers should dispense with the realist tradition per se; instead, he postulates a return to a realist aesthetic in terms of which individual characters in a text grapple with the problem of 'internal' contradictions of their identity. Michael Vaughan (1990:194), for example, has shown how Ndebele's own fictional work, *Fools and other stories*, is not only written in the realist tradition but is also targeted at the development of an 'intellectual leadership'. La Guma's project, on the contrary, was directed elsewhere. Here is La Guma on this point:

> Having read South African literature, I discovered that nothing satisfactory or worthwhile from my point of view had been written about the area from which I sprang. So I think there was a conscious effort on my part to place on record the life in the poor areas, working class areas, and perhaps for that reason most of my work is centred around that community and life (La Guma 1991:9).

La Guma here clearly identifies himself with, and regards his point of view as consistent with, that of the working class: in a word, his ambition was to create a South African working class (proletarian) literature—at least in terms of content (the question of whether he also had the working class as his virtual readership is another matter). It is thus no surprise that in line with his attempt to 'put on record' the lives of the poor working classes, La Guma perceives his role as a writer and his 'function as that of an historian of the people' (La Guma 1991:21). It should be clear, then, that the ideological

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[17] For this debate see *Aesthetics and Politics* (1971). A summary of these debates is also provided in Johnson's *Marxist Aesthetics* (1984), Lunn's *Marxism and Modernism* (1982), Bisztray's *Marxist Models of Literary* (1978) and Ramanujam's *Quest for Reconciliation* (1993).

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function which La Guma assigns to literature is radically different from the ideological function that Ndebele's realist project envisages[18]. La Guma's aesthetic is best approached through the work of Lukács.

Lukács argues that realism embodies an objective approach to the social world and that realist fiction provides a convincing picture of historical and social change. In the words of Lukács, the basic premise of the realist school is the recognition that Man is *zoon politikon*, a social animal. According to this view, derived from both Aristotle and Marx,

> the individual existence [of characters] ... their 'ontological being' ... cannot be distinguished from their social and historical environment. Their human significance, their specific individuality cannot be separated from the context in which they were created (Lukács 1963:19).

In Lukács's terms, then, the cornerstone of realism is the acknowledgement of the individual's fate as being inextricably bound to his/her social and historical environment. It is this recognition of the merging of the private and public domains, the individual and the historical, that constitutes the notion of 'typicality', a crucial concept in Lukács's aesthetics of realism, in terms of which individuals are seen as 'social units' who are actively involved in the socio-historical forces that shape their future. In Lukács's own words:

> What characterizes the type is the convergence and intersection of all the dominant aspects of that dynamic unity through which genuine literature reflects life in a vital and contradictory unity all the most social, moral and spiritual contradictions of a time (Lukács 1978:78).

In short, a socio-historical perspective and a broad readership willing to be conscientised are the necessary conditions for the realisation of realism.

There is no doubt that a socio-historical perspective plays a vital role in La Guma's fiction. One pointer to this trend can perhaps be seen in the development from one novel to another that marks La Guma's craftsmanship and establishes his authority as a social realist. This progressive development provides a fictionalised analysis of the historical development of the political struggle in South Africa in terms of the gradual development of political consciousness in La Guma's characters. As La Guma (1991:38) himself points out, in these novels he 'hoped' to portray 'truthfully' what went on in the lives of the poor and the working class and 'at the same time to indicate

[18] In relation to Udenta's (1993:9) aligning of La Guma with revolutionary aesthetics it is perhaps important to note here that in a reading of Albie Sachs's seminal paper 'Preparing ourselves for freedom' and Ndebele's essays, Maughan-Brown (1993:161) argues that Ndebele's 'radical politics' is somewhat at odds with 'the more conservative aesthetics underpinning his cultural programme'.

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the developing sense of revolt which was fermenting all the time within the communities'. La Guma's broader project then, the one that can perhaps be identified as a crucial feature of his social realism, was to present the working class as both 'objects and subjects of history' (Lunn 1982:79). Related to the trend of development in La Guma's novels is the sense in which central protagonists in each novel can be described as 'typical', not as 'abstract personifications of historical trends' nor as 'symbolised abstract functions of class struggle' as in naturalism, but in the Lukácsian sense in which characters become an embodiment of the general social conditions and yet individuals in their own right. The point in question, argues Lukács (1963:8), is the organic, indissoluble connection between a person as an individual and as a social being, as a member of a community.

The crucial question, however, is this: where does La Guma's social realism fit in to the terms of Lukács's paradigms of different categories of realism? Is La Guma a critical realist or can La Guma be classified as a socialist realist who is influenced by the Soviet aesthetic of heroic figures who serve as leaders of the revolution? In short, where does La Guma's South African realism fit into metropolitan realist forms?

the Soviet connection

La Guma had already written a number of short stories as well as three novels when he started writing essays on literature. For this reason these essays may perhaps be regarded as a reaffirmation of the theory that informs La Guma's writing of his own works. The issue of whether in reality La Guma's theory is compatible with his practice, is, however, a different matter. Suffice it to say here that, although these essays were not written primarily as a series of studies in aesthetics—but are drawn from various sources such as conference papers, interviews, extended reviews of other artists' work and essays in response to particular theoretical positions adopted by other artists—they, nevertheless, help to provide some indication of the central thrust of La Guma's aesthetics. My intention in this section is to explore the ambiguities and complexities of La Guma's aesthetic position by showing how they are a result not only of his Marxist beliefs but also of his indebtness to Russian realist aesthetics (particularly Gorky's) rather than to Lukács.

If there is one aspect which emerges clearly in La Guma's aesthetics, it is his expressed conviction that the social world is not only knowable but can also be represented 'as it is'. In an interview with Cecil Abrahams, La Guma (1991:29) made the following comment with regard to his writing: 'when I portray the life of South Africa I try to show it as it actually is'. 'Life', La Guma (1976:50) argues elsewhere, is 'the stimulation of artistic endeavour'. Indeed in all his extra-fictional statements La Guma has articulated this belief in the potentiality of fiction to capture the quality of human life in its profundity. This view is epitomised in the often quoted statement made by La Guma at the Afro-Asian Writers' Conference in Moscow in 1968: 'One cannot separate literature from life, from human experience and human aspirations' (La Guma 1970:238). It is this belief in the inseparability of literature and life which is central to

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La Guma's aesthetics.

La Guma's belief in the inseparability of literature and life, one may argue, should not come as a surprise. As a member of the Communist Party La Guma was expected, among other things, to subscribe to a materialist conception of the world in terms of which the source of all events and actions is to be found in material causes—in real life. (It should however be added that not all empiricists are Marxists.) It could therefore hardly be expected that he would provide an idealist explanation of the source of fiction. It is therefore no coincidence that La Guma's works draw on the author's observation of life around him. In an essay written for the *Literary Gazette* in Moscow in 1980, in which La Guma makes comments on his own writing and political work, he makes this clear: 'I had seen many things around me which had never been dealt with in South African creative writing, and I was convinced that this was real material for a writer' (La Guma 1991:37). It was on the basis of his observations, then, that La Guma hoped to 'portray truthfully the lives' of people who are the subject of his fiction.

La Guma's conception of the relationship between literature and life, and the explanation that he provides of the nature of this relationship, are clearly suggestive of his indebtedness to the fundamentals of Marxist theory. This can clearly be seen in the following statement made by La Guma at the Afro-Asian Writers' Congress in Tashkent in the Soviet Union in 1975:

> When we talk of the relationship between art and life, we mean that unity between what is reflected and the manner in which it is reflected, and this is the quintessence of art (La Guma 1976:50).

What immediately comes to mind as one reads this statement is Lenin's reflectionist theory of literature which is also endorsed by the middle-period Georg Lukács. One is in fact tempted to suggest that there are obvious shades of Lukács in this statement, as can most obviously be seen in the underlying belief that art 'reflects' social reality, a crucial aspect in the Marxist theory of realism. It will, however, be shown that La Guma's view of the relationship between literature and life is defined in non-problematic terms, which distinguishes it from the Leninist model of reflection in terms of which literature is not simply a crude reflection of reality but its mirror in which contradictions and ambiguities are embodied. As Kulikova points out:

> Lenin noted specifically that reflection is not a simple, direct, 'dead-mirror' action, but a complicated, dichotomous, ziz-zag-like one, which contains the possibility of departing from real life (Kulikova 1976:187).

The dialectical nature of the process of reflection is summed up in Lenin's own words:

> The *reflection* of nature in man's thought must be understood not 'lifelessly', not 'abstractly', not devoid of movement, not without contradictions, but in the eternal process of movement, the arising of contradictions and their solution (in Kulikova 1976:187).

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Although it is believed that La Guma may have had access to the writings of Lukács on the theory of realism at some stage in his literary career—a belief largely based on the knowledge that La Guma read widely, especially when it came to Marxist theory—there is no substantial evidence in any of his essays to suggest that Lukács's works may have had a direct impact on his aesthetics[19]. What is clear, however, is that La Guma read the writings of Lenin, Georg Plekhanov, 'the founder of Russian Marxism' (Lichtheim 1970:57) and, perhaps most significantly, Maxim Gorky, the Russian pre-revolutionary author who since the 1934 congress of the Union of Writers became known as the father of socialist realism, and that this writer's theories on literature had a profound impact on La Guma's aesthetics[20]. As La Guma himself acknowledged in his 1968 address to the delegates of the Afro-Asian Writers' Congress: 'When we talk of literature in its true sense, we cannot exclude the contributions of Gorky. Maxim Gorky wrote a vast amount about literature' (La Guma 1970:237). It is therefore no coincidence that La Guma makes frequent reference to Gorky in redefining and defending his aesthetics in some of his essays.

In his 1968 address to the Afro-Asian Writers' Congress La Guma draws extensively on Gorky's essay written on the occasion of the establishment of World Literature Publishers in 1919[21]. He begins his address by quoting at length Gorky's definition of literature which reads in part:

> Literature is the heart of the world; all the joys and sorrows, dreams and hopes, despairs and wreaths of it, all the emotions of man as he faces beauties of nature, all his terrors as he faces nature's secrets, lend it wings .... One might call literature also the all seeing eye of the world, an eye whose glances pierce the deepest secrets of the human spirit .... [All] literary creation in prose or in verse shares the unity of the emotions, thoughts and ideas common to all men, the unity of the sacred striving of man towards happiness and freedom of the spirit, the unanimous hope for better forms of

[19] Brian Bunting, in an interview with the author, speculated that La Guma might have read the writing of Lukács because he read a lot of Marxist literary theory including the writings of Christopher Caudwell.

[20] La Guma's acknowledgement of the influence of Gorky on his writing and his aesthetics can be found in 'What I Learned from Maxim Gorky', 'Answers to Our Questionaire' (Anon 1987) and in Kondratovich's (1977) 'Writers in the Struggle for Peace'. In 'Answers to Our Questionaire' La Guma specifically states that Gorky 'introduced [him] to working class literature and the spirit of socialist humanism that goes with it'. It also needs to be stressed that Lenin, Plekhanov, and Gorky at times disagreed. So La Guma had to choose from them what he thought was best for his own discourse. See Lenin (1967), particularly his critical letters to Gorky as well as Gorky's literary portrait of Lenin where he records his own impressions of both Lenin and Plekhanov (Gorky 1982:279-325). In chapter 7 Robin (1992) outlines and compares Plekhanov and Lenin's contribution to the theory of realism.

[21] See 'Vsemirnaya Literature' (World Literature) in Gorky's *On Literature* (1982:153).

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life (La Guma 1970:237).

La Guma quotes Gorky at length here not only to reaffirm his belief in the inseparability of literature and life, but also to endorse what Lukács (1972:218) has called Gorky's 'humanist conception of the mission of literature'—that is, the notion that literature has to facilitate the progress of humanity. Accordingly, La Guma argues:

> Literature, art, culture, civilisation, these are not abstract conceptions as some would imagine. They define the direction and basis of our actions at a particular time. They must therefore be understood and interpreted in their revolutionary paths as the ethos which drives man forward or retards his progress according to the dynamism of that civilisation (La Guma 1970:239).

The key phrases here are 'define the direction and basis of our action at a particular time' and 'the ethos which drives man forward or retards his progress according to the dynamism of that civilisation'. For they cogently capture Lukács's theory of realism in terms of which a socio-historical perspective is crucial to realist fiction's depiction of society as a progressive force. It is by being rooted in socio-historical reality that literature performs its function, which is, according to La Guma, to raise the consciousness of the readers to the vitality of life. Following Gorky, therefore, La Guma argues:

> One of the greatest values of literature is that by deepening our consciousness, widening our feeling for life, it reminds us that all ideas and all actions derive from realism and experience within social realities (La Guma 1970:238).

The idea of the indissoluble link between literature and life recurs in La Guma's essays and in different ways demonstrates some affinity between La Guma's ideas and Gorky's. Nowhere, however, is Gorky's influence on La Guma's aesthetics more pronounced than in the latter's provocative essay, 'Alexander Solzhenitsyn: "Life through a crooked eye"'—arguably the most significant essay in terms of one's understanding not only of La Guma's aesthetics but also of his politics. For one thing, La Guma not only defends the Soviet Union and its socialist practices (during the 1960s and 1970s) but most significantly he also employs Gorky to reaffirm his commitment to the aesthetics of realism in general and declare his unequivocal support for socialist realism in particular. But, for the moment, the question is: what prompts La Guma, an avowed South African Marxist, to write an essay on Alexander Solzhenitsyn, a dissident Soviet writer and a vociferous critic of Stalin and the Soviet leadership of the 1940s who was arrested, kept in prison camps, exiled, a writer who not only denounced socialist realism but ultimately repudiated Soviet society, Marxism and socialism and became a convert to Christianity?

La Guma's essay was primarily prompted by the publication of Solzhenitsyn's Nobel Prize Lecture of 1972 by the *South African Outlook*, a local journal associated with the missionary establishment, which through its control of Lovedale Press made

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publications by black writers accessible to readers. La Guma (1974:69) sees the publication of this lecture by *South African Outlook* as a demonstration of this journal's complicity in the 'anti-communist and anti-Soviet campaign' waged by the Nobel Committee. He questions the criterion used by the Nobel Committee in awarding the Nobel Prize for Literature to Solzhenitsyn in 1972 and, having provided several examples of writers who deserved the prize but never gained it, accuses the Nobel Committee of using the Nobel Prize 'as an act in the "cold war"' (La Guma 1974:78)[21]. La Guma goes on to argue

> The award of the prize to Alexander Solzhenitsyn in 1970 came only as a logical conclusion of the Nobel Committee's policy not so much on the merits of the literature, as on its attitude to the Soviet Union, to the ideas of socialism (La Guma 1974:78).

By making a comparison of the reception of Solzhenitsyn's fiction in the Western mass media, on the one hand, and that of the Soviet Union on the other hand—the former bestowing accolades on Solzhenitsyn for his 'talent' and the latter complaining about his 'obsession with prison-camps' and his distortion of Soviet life (La Guma 1974:76)—La Guma seeks to demonstrate that Solzhentsyn's works 'show that he is far from concerned with the realities of Soviet life' (La Guma 1974:77). Against this background, then, La Guma concludes: 'Seeing Soviet life through a crooked eye got him the Nobel Prize for 1970' (La Guma 1974:77).

It is not our concern here to comment on the demerits or merits of Solzhenitsyn's fiction. What is important for us is rather to point out that La Guma's scathing attack on the ideological content of Solzhenitsyn's fiction and the Nobel Committee's award of the Nobel Prize to this Soviet dissident writer provide ample evidence of La Guma's unwavering support for the Soviet Union and his uncompromising adherence to socialist ideology. This is best exemplified in the following statement La Guma made with regard to Solzhenitsyn's fiction:

> to give the impression that prison-camps form the general experience of Soviet people is, to say the least, a gross distortion of the realities of Soviet life. No honest person who has visited the Soviet Union can claim that he experienced the atmosphere of oppression, concentration camps and secret police as Solzhenitsyn would have it. The common problems of the Soviet Union people today are those concerned with the transition from socialism to communism, and that is what most writers in the USSR are concerned with (La Guma 1974:74).

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[22] In an earlier article Brian Bunting said: 'Dr. Zhivago—a good book with a bad philosophy' (*New Age* November 16, 1958:6). He also points out that Boris Pasternak's novel was valorized in the west because this was 'an issue in the cold war' rather than anything else, and sees the award of the Nobel Prize for literature to this author as smacking of ideological bias. Interestingly, Bunting also employs Gorky in his critique of Pasternak's work.

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It was perhaps this attitude towards the Soviet Union that prompted Lewis Nkosi, who was with La Guma during the latter's first visit there in 1968, to allege:

> Alex la Guma is a man fiercely and humourlessly committed to his ideology—communism. I was surprised to discover how conservative and uncritical he was in his commitment. Indeed there are many independent Marxist thinkers who would be irritated by his brand of pious regard for everything Soviet policy-makers are doing as almost beyond any questioning (Nkosi 1975:110).

To back up his argument Nkosi cites La Guma's 'implicit endorsement' of the trial of two Soviet writers, Yuli Daniel and Andrei Sinyavsky, who had been prosecuted for smuggling their manuscripts out of the country. For Nkosi, on the contrary, it was 'strange' that, in his words, 'any artist interested in creative freedom, least of all (La Guma) ... who had himself been prosecuted and his works proscribed' (Nkosi 1975:110), would adopt such an attitude towards the fate of the other writers[23]. La Guma's critique of Solzhenitsyn six years later can therefore be seen in the context of La Guma's general attitude to the critics of the Soviet Union in general and dissident writers in particular.

The most crucial part of La Guma's essay on Solzhenitsyn for our purposes here is his critique of Solzhenitsyn's Nobel Lecture itself entitled, 'The Role of Writers in Society'. For it is precisely Solzhenitsyn's aesthetics, and his conception of the role of a writer, which eventually become the main target of La Guma's critique. Briefly summarised, for Solzhenitsyn art is of divine origin: 'there are no doubts about its foundations ... we received it from Hands we were unable to see', he argues (Solzhenitsyn 1972:142). Although Solzhenitsyn explains the source of art in spiritual (idealist) terms he insists on the responsibility of a writer to his society. He is, however, quite emphatic on the freedom of the artist: 'Let us concede that the artist *owes* nothing to anyone' (Solzhenitsyn 1972:145). Implicit in his emphasis on the freedom of the artist is his rejection of writers having to play a politically partisan role by espousing a particular ideology. This is a clear demonstration of Solzhenitsyn's condemnation of the officially sanctioned practice of socialist realism with its emphasis on the exaltation of the heroic figures of the revolution. According to Solzhenitsyn, the writer has a moral rather than a political responsibility to his community and this is in line with the mystical terms in which the origin of art is explained in Solzhenitsyn's aesthetics. In Solzhenitsyn's own words: 'The writer is not an outside judge of his compatriots and

[23] Solzhenitsyn has since returned to Russia and, in a dramatic turn of events, in an article which appeared in *Moscow News* (22 February 1987) it was reported that the trial of Sinyavsky and Daniel was 'now officially viewed as a mistake' (See Anon. 'Staggering Admission' in *Index on Censorship* 5 1987:1-5). 'Andrei Sinyavsky' is the pen-name of Abram Tertz who, like Solzhenitsyn, was critical of socialist realism and Stalinist repression. See his novel *The Trial Begins* and his accompanying critique entitled 'On Socialist Realism'.

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contemporaries, but an accomplice in all the evil perpetrated in his country or by his people' (Solzhenitsyn 1972:147).

La Guma interrogates Solzhenitsyn's mystical or idealist conception of the origins of art. He points out that for Solzhenitsyn art is something that is 'above, separate from, people' and then argues, if it is true that 'we received [art] from Hands we were unable to see' (as Solzhenitsyn suggests), therefore 'we must conclude that even if there was no humanity, no mankind, no people on earth, Art could still be there' (La Guma 1974:70). Instead, La Guma offers a materialist explanation of the origins of art, arguing that all art 'came from human endeavour'. 'If talent was not exercised, then we would not have art', La Guma argues (La Guma 1974:70). Having said this, La Guma reiterates his belief in the indivisible link between literature and life and employs Gorky to back up his argument: 'What the imagination creates is prompted by the facts of real life, and it is not governed by baseless fantasy, divorced from life, but very real causes' (La Guma 1974:71). On this basis, therefore, we may conclude that La Guma turns to Gorky primarily because he shares with Gorky a materialist conception of the world from which the idea of the inseparability of literature and life stems.

The assertion from Gorky (cited above) leads La Guma to the following definition of art: 'art is a representation of life' (La Guma 1974:71). If art is a 'representation of life' as La Guma suggests, then, what is the role of the artist? For La Guma, the task of the 'real artist [is to search] for truth and to depict [that] truth' (La Guma 1974:75). This conception of the task of the writer has some affinity to Lukács's theory in so far as it is suggestive of La Guma's heavy reliance on the honesty of the writer in his pursuit of 'truth'—and, as such, would seem to downplay the role of ideology in this pursuit. For Lukács (1978:84), following Marx and Engels, the honesty of the writer, we know, means portraying 'reality as it actually is' even if, in the process, one has to transcend one's 'most cherished preconceptions and most intimate personal aspirations'. This is where La Guma parts company with Lukács: for La Guma, the search for truth is consistent with and perhaps too closely linked with the principle of partisanship of literature as espoused by Lenin in 'Party Organisation and Party Literature'. For this reason, La Guma (1974:71) expands his definition of art:

> But, further, art is a representation of life also modified by the personality of the artist; for the artist has a character, an outlook on life, the world around him, and through his art he hopes to modify the personality of others.

Once again, La Guma's indebtedness to Marxist aesthetics of realism can be seen not only in his definition of art as a reflection of social reality but also in his acknowledgement of the role of ideology in this representation of reality. However, La Guma's use of the term, 'personality' instead of ideology could be seen as rendering visible the (at times) *ad hoc* nature of his theory.

La Guma's conceptualisation of the role of ideology in literature, one suspects, is attributable to his interpretation of Lenin's principle of partisanship as well as his somewhat mechanistic version of the theory of reflection. Earlier, in this essay, La Guma employs Gorky in reaffirming his belief in the Aristotelian dictum that man is a political animal. Later, in the same essay, La Guma reiterates his conception of the

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relationship between literature and life as well as the consciousness-raising function of literature: 'Literature and art not only reflect the life of the people, but they also help mould the human mind' (La Guma 1974:74). He then goes on to argue:

> The idea of the individual link of literature and art with the interests and struggle of social classes and, in socialist society, with the life of the entire people, was theoretically substantiated by Lenin who propounded the principle of partisanship of literature. Artistic creation cannot remain outside the struggle of classes, outside politics; for each writer, whether he likes to or not, expresses in his work the interest of some one class (La Guma 1974:74).

While one endorses the notion that 'artistic creation' is socio-historically determined and can therefore not remain completely 'outside politics', one would be sceptical of the argument that a work of art is always an expression of an author's class interest or ideology, as implied in this assertion[24]. Nevertheless, the significance of this assertion, however platitudinous, is that it clearly spells out La Guma's belief (despite humanist traces in his vocabulary) in the ideological function of literature, a belief to which La Guma makes consistent reference in his extra-fictional statements.

There is a clear agenda in La Guma's adoption of Lenin's principle of the partisanship of literature and it is to embrace socialist realism. Accordingly, La Guma begins by castigating 'bourgeois propagandists' who 'attack this principle, trying to prove that to serve the interests of a definite class is incompatible with artistic creation'. To back up his argument he refers to what he calls 'the clatter of innocuous and trivial reading matter produced in the West which helps to divert the masses from more serious aspects of life' and wonders whose interests 'the writers of such material serve' (La Guma 1974:74). In contrast, La Guma argues, the socialist system is the first system which 'freed culture from the influence of the money-bags' by 'affording the artist a chance not to pander to the tastes of a small coterie of the "cultured" but for the masses' (La Guma 1974:75). The argument ends on a high note, with La Guma (1974:75) defending and embracing socialist realism:

> Each real artist searches for the truth, seeks to depict the truth. But this is what socialist society is also interested in. The main demand of socialist realism is to portray life truthfully in its progressive development.

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[24] La Guma may be paraphrasing Gorky's argument here: 'A writer is the eyes, ears and voice of his class. He perceives, formulates and portrays the sentiments, desires, worries, hopes, passions, interests, vices and virtues of his class, his group' (Gorky 1982a:272). In his 'Ideology and Literary Form—A Comment' Francis Mulhern (1975:85) has challenged this conception by pointing out that the ideological status of the text is not determined by its origin but by its objective function and for that reason textual ideology might even be inconsistent with authorial ideology.

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The first statement ('Each real artist searches for the truth') is interesting in the sense that it is as if La Guma responds to a statement Solzhenitsyn is quoted as having made with regard to socialist realism elsewhere:

> All have agreed, whatever their subject and material may be, to leave unspoken the main truth, the truth that stares you in the eye even without literature. It is this vow to abstain from the truth that is called Socialist Realism (Ronald Hingley quoting Solzhenitsyn in Hingley 1979:203).

La Guma makes use of Lenin's principle of partisanship in order to endorse socialist realism and, thereby, challenge Solzhenitsyn's discourse[25].

It was in the name of Lenin's principle of partisanship that the (official) Zhdanovite version of socialist realism was proclaimed in the Soviet Union after the debates of the 1930s. Zhdanov is quoted as having said of Soviet literature:

> Our Soviet literature is not afraid of the charge of being 'tendentious'. Yes, Soviet literature is tendentious, for in an epoch of class struggle there is not and cannot be a literature which is not class literature, and tendentious, allegedly nonpolitical. And I think that every one of our Soviet writers can say to any dull-witted bourgeois, to any philistine, to any bourgeois who may talk of being tendentious: 'Yes, our Soviet literature is tendentious and we are proud of this fact, because the aim of our tendency is to liberate the toilers, to free all mankind from the yoke of capitalist slavery' (Quoted in Robin 1992:56).

Clearly, there are striking parallels between the Zhdanovite version of 'tendentiousness' and La Guma's interpretation of Lenin's principle of partisanship, as articulated in his article on Solzhenitsyn.

It is necessary at this point to explore another dimension of La Guma's aesthetics of realism which seems to me to provide a clue to La Guma's recourse to the principle of partisanship. Apart form Gorky, it would seem that La Guma's aesthetics of realism also has a great deal to do with George Plekhanov, whose early philosophical contribution to the realist debate in Russia received critical attention in the 1930s. This

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[25] It should be pointed out here that even before La Guma went into exile he was aware of the debates on Soviet aesthetics (and more particularly on socialist realism) since some of these were discussed in *New Age* in the 1950s. See for example Ilya Ehrenburg's report 'Soviet Writers Call for Radical Changes' (*New Age* May 23 1957:7); Wilfred Burchett's 'Soviet Culture is the Heritage of All' (*New Age* July 16 1959:4) and 'Pasternak Tells Why he Wrote *Dr. Zhivago*' (*New Age* October 30 1958:4) as well as Brian Bunting's '*Dr. Zhivago*—A Good Book with a Bad Philosophy'. Perhaps more significant is the fact that Soviet academics and researchers have also been as interested in South African culture and politics as South Africans were in theirs. For more information on this see Davidson and Filatova (1997), as well as Saratovskaya's 'South African Literature in Russia' (1992), and Cheremin, Saratovskaya and Zemskov (1988) amongst others.

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is significant when one considers that 'Soviet Marxism on its philosophical side, was rooted in Plekhanov and Lenin' (Lichtheim 1970:57). There is ample evidence that La Guma read Plekhanov's *Unaddressed Letters*, *Art and Social Life* ([1899-1900]1957) and appropriated some of Plekhanov's ideas by incorporating them into his own discourse.

In his essay, 'Has Art Failed South Africa?', which appeared in The *African Communist* in 1977, La Guma employs Plekhanov in his endorsement of ideologically oriented artistic production. He points out in his critique of the art for art's sake school of thought in South Africa:

> The black artist in South Africa is not averse to mixing his work with 'politics'; he cannot but accept that as one of the victims of the oppressive society, his work almost automatically becomes involved ... for us or the conscious artist, man is not made for the Sabbath, but the Sabbath for man—society is not made for the artist, but the artist for society. The function of art is to assist the development of man's consciousness, to help improve society (La Guma 1977:82).

He then goes on to attack those artists who reject a utilitarian view of art citing Plekhanov's argument '[a]rt for art's sake arises essentially where the artist is out of harmony with his social environment' (La Guma 1977:83). He accuses these artists of being in 'ivory towers' taking 'refuge from the slings and arrows of an outrageous society' (La Guma 1977:82). La Guma's essay was written as a rejoinder to Cecil Skotnes (1976), a South African artist, who had expressed his concern about what he saw as 'a singular lack of guts' in South African art despite the existence of what he described as 'a classic revolutionary situation' that could stimulate a proliferation of artistic production. In his argument Skotnes had particularly singled out what he perceived as a 'lack of a strong artistic tradition' on 'the Black Front' and expressed his reservations about the merit of art that is 'bound to ... political institutions in general'. As can be inferred it is precisely with these particular aspects of Skotnes's argument that La Guma takes issue and recruits Plekhanov to make a case for black artists.

Plekhanov distinguishes between those artists who perceive art in terms of their responsibility to society, those who argue that the function of art is to assist the development of man's consciousness, to improve the social system, on the one hand, and those who see art as an end in itself on the other (Plekhanov 1957:149). He then uses various examples from different historical contexts to test the viability of these two opposing views. Plekhanov's investigation leads him to the following conclusion on the art for art's sake school of thought: 'The belief in art for art's sake arises when artists and people keenly interested in art are hopelessly out of harmony with their social environment' (Plekhanov 1957:163). On the contrary, the utilitarian view of art

> that is, the tendency to impart to its production the significance of judgements on the phenomenon of life, and the joyful eagerness, which always accompanies it, to take part in social strife, arises and spreads whenever there is mutual sympathy between a considerable section of society and people who have more or less active interest in creative art (Plekhanov 1957:163).

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As can be inferred from these statements, the validity of Plekhanov's thesis lies in its attempt to demystify the terms of these opposing perspectives on art by locating them in historical contexts or social conditions within which they thrive[26]. It could be argued that it is because of Plekhanov's rejection of 'prescription in art' that La Guma appeals to Lenin's principle of partisanship, thereby finding a resolution to the impasse that Plekhanov's aesthetic theory seems to create for him in this regard[27].

In all his extra-fictional statements La Guma persistently denounces the art for art's sake argument and espouses a utilitarian view of art. This is best exemplified in the following statement made by La Guma (1971:113):

> It is perhaps possible, within the environment of developed societies, to create with a certain amount of confidence the impression that the art, culture, the level of civilisation of a people have nothing, or little to do with socio-economic and political forces within these societies; that culture has nothing to do with politics. In South Africa this is not possible. The proposition of art for the sake of art finds no foothold in the atmosphere of racism, violence and crude exploitation which is the day-to-day experience of the South African people.

What is particularly striking here is not so much La Guma's rejection of art for art's sake proposition and the way in which he embraces a utilitarian view of art by underscoring the inseparability of culture and politics, but it is the fact that there is an element of tentativeness with regard to his use of these two positions in this statement. In short, there is an unarticulated assumption that in a post-apartheid society, under a different historical or social setting, there will be a shift from the contemporary discursive position. Indeed, this seems to be confirmed towards the end of the essay:

> As long as racism and oppression last in Southern Africa, culture will take this form. When the oppressed have freed themselves from the shackles of

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[26] Regine Robin (1992:150), who traces the origins of socialist realism and underscores its contradictions, argues that 'for Plekhanov, art is a socio-historical phenomenon, a thought, an idea, a content, something to express, something that is expressed through images. It is a reflection of reality, anchored in its time, which attains perfection when the relation between form and content is maximally adequate'.

[27] Demetz (1967:197) sees this rejection of prescription in art as Plekhanov's 'half-hearted defence of the principle of *l'art pour l'art*'. Robin (1992:150) comments: 'Art for art's sake is always the sign of retreat from the social: one needs to analyse why this retreat from the social, historically speaking, imposes itself on certain artists. That is why Plekhanov abandons the "social utility" of art as an immanent principle. In so doing he creates a considerable shift in what we have called the discursive base of realist aesthetics: he opens up an ambiguity, a shadowy zone that, in conjunction with his rejection of prescription in art, would suffice to explain why he was blacklisted as a Menshevik and as the creator of a passive aesthetic in the Soviet society of the 1930s'.

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> economic, social and political limitations, flowers will bloom anew in an environment of happiness in a life lived in dignity, a life of freedom and comradeship among our peoples (La Guma 1971:120).

It would seem, then, that La Guma has fully grasped Plekhanov's argument that the 'social utility of art' is not 'an immanent principle' and that he agrees with Plekhanov's thesis in general.

However, as Henri Arvon (1973:14) points out, Plekhanov 'refuses to put art and literature in the service of party politics'. This is where La Guma parts company with Plekhanov and, instead, embraces Lenin's principle of partisanship in literature. It is perhaps not surprising that La Guma should subscribe to Lenin's principle of partisanship in literature when one considers that La Guma served his apprenticeship (as a writer) as a reporter under the auspices of *New Age*, a politically partisan newspaper that was not only 'run by [Communist Party] members [and] consistently reflected party policy [but whose] position on international matters was [also] virtually indistinguishable from the foreign policy of the Soviet Union' (Forman & Odendaal 1992:xxii). Significantly, it was apparently with regard to Party publications that Lenin wrote his famous paper on partisanship, 'Organisation and Party Literature' in 1905. However, one may argue that La Guma, like his counterparts in the Soviet Union in the 1930's, extends Lenin's principle of partisanship to include creative works of literature. This can be seen most obviously in La Guma's argument that one 'cannot of course separate one's social and political allegiances from one's creative work' (Grant 1978:49). It would seem, therefore, that La Guma subscribes to Plekhanov's aesthetic in so far as it is compatible with his liberation discourse and that, where the question of tendentiousness is concerned, La Guma does not seem to distinguish between his works and his political allegiances. This does not, however, mean that in La Guma's works the political message which conforms to his political allegiances is always explicitly stated—and, in this sense, his practice would seem to be at odds with his theory.

The concept of tendentiousness in La Guma's aesthetics is linked to his belief in the ideological function of literature, a belief to which La Guma (1991:20) makes consistent reference:

> A writer, if he is conscious of what is going on around him, automatically reflects [the real picture] ... and through portraying the life around him also produces his own ideas about it. Of course, what should be borne in mind is that a writer is supposed to be conscious of the direction in which his works are going to point .... I think that it is the role of the conscious writer to guide the morals, the perspectives and objectives of the community.

In La Guma's view, then, a writer is not only a chronicler of the experiences of his community but he is also an ideologue providing guidance to the perspectives of the community. It is against this background, then, that La Guma (1970:237) expresses the intended ideological effect of his writing of *And A Threefold Cord* in these words:

> When I write in a book that somewhere in South Africa poor people have no

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> water but must buy it by the bucketful from some local exploiter then I also entertain the secret hope that when somebody reads it he will be moved to do something about those robbers who have turned my country into a material and cultural wasteland for the majority of the inhabitants.

As can be inferred from this statement, in La Guma's terms, it is not enough for literature to depict the social situation truthfully, but, in addition, the ideological effect of literature should be to transform the consciousness of the readers even to the extent of spurring them on to engage in some form of action! It would seem, then, that it is for this purpose that La Guma turns to social realism as an effective means of conscientizing his readership.

contra Gordimer and Fugard

The significance which La Guma attaches to the ideological function of literature and the concept of tendentiousness can also be seen in his literary criticism. This is best exemplified in La Guma's critical essay on Nadine Gordimer's *The Black Interpreters—Notes on African Writing*. In the first section of this work entitled 'Modern African Fiction in English', Gordimer makes a critical assessment of African literature written in English which she sees as beginning with the Negritude movement. She then distinguishes between African writers who are 'testifiers to social change'—those who merely provide a 'sort of context of expression, of bald background fact' (Gordimer 1973:8f)—and those who write 'literature' in which the quality of the writing matters. Having made a critical appraisal of some literary texts by such writers as Achebe, Ngugi, Ayi Kweyi Armah and others, Gordimer (1973:32) concludes that African English literature's best writers are critical realists in the Lukácsian sense—establishing a link between the past and pointing towards the future—and that this is the direction in which African literature is developing.

In response, La Guma takes issue with Gordimer's exclusive treatment of English literature written by Africans and her measuring of them against European standards. He describes this special treatment of 'African literature as "literary apartheid"', a practice which, in his view, results in the construction of 'a cultural Bantustan' ('Gala' 1974a:103,102). According to La Guma, Gordimer's reservations on the 'testifiers to social change' are due to these authors' giving too much attention to social issues'. But, La Guma argues, 'softening the social impact has never guaranteed success for any work of art' ('Gala' 1974a:105). What is crucial in La Guma's terms is rather the ideological commitment of the writer and the extent to which his writings contribute to human progress. In his words:

> The writer's participation in the development of life is measured by the ideological artistic level of his work, the depth of his depiction of events and problems. The writer must find the epicentre of events and determine his place in them, his point of view. Then he will find application for his talent and personal experience and will worthily serve the cause of aesthetic and social progress. There are writers who work in a kind of vacuum, who stand

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> apart from events, who do not maintain close ties with the truth of their ethos, their source of inspiration. An atmosphere of vacuum cannot stimulate works that contribute towards the common progressive character of life and literature .... We are witnessing how the cultural heritage of Africa is transformed into modern, social and political orientated literatures and the arts. This is one of the most important tasks of the mentioned cultural revolution and a stirring event in modern and progressive world culture ('Gala' 1974a:103*f*).

According to this view, then, the writer's credibility as a craftsman, and, one may add, the literary value of his work, depend largely on the ideological effect of the cultural product—hence La Guma's belief that socially and politically oriented African literature contributes towards a cultural revolution. Implicit in La Guma's criticism of writers whose works are not based on a concrete ideological basis, those 'who work in a kind of vacuum, who stand apart from events, who do not maintain close ties with the truth of their ethos, their source of inspiration', is his endorsement of the principle of partisanship in literature.

The fact that the principle of partisanship in La Guma's aesthetics is closely linked to socialist realism (as stated earlier) can most obviously be seen in La Guma's negative response to Nadine Gordimer's labelling of the best African writers as critical realists. In an argument that reveals La Guma's lack of familiarity with Lukács, La Guma ('Gala' 1974a:106) accuses Gordimer of failing to address the question of the main trends of development of African English literature 'in terms of African reality'. La Guma ('Gala' 1974a:106) continues to argue:

> Instead [Gordimer] borrows from Georg Lukács a formula which asserts 'critical realism as not only the link with the great literature of the past, but also the literature that points to the future'. And so she concludes with amazing aplomb 'there seems to me little doubt that African English literature's best writers are critical realists, and that this is the direction in which literature is developing .... But African development and African literature have not come to a full stop'.

La Guma's objection to Gordimer is somewhat puzzling: implicit in his argument is the suggestion that African literature should be assessed 'in terms of African reality' rather than through a heavy reliance on critical theories of (foreigners such as) Lukács. Leaving aside the question of assessing African literature 'in terms of African reality', La Guma's argument would seem to me to render visible two factors with regard to his aesthetics. Firstly, it indicates La Guma's lack of awareness of Lukács's seminal contribution to Marxist aesthetics of realism to which La Guma himself obviously subscribes. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, La Guma's argument here is suggestive of his somewhat ambiguous attitude towards being categorised as a critical realist—La Guma is amongst those African writers who are seen by Gordimer as creating an African literature, the critical realists. Unlike the 'testifiers' who 'take stock-in-trade abstractions of human behaviour and look about for a dummy to dress them in', Gordimer argues that La Guma's protagonists in District Six (as seen in *A*

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Walk in the Night) 'do not talk about inequality' instead they 'bear its weals' (Gordimer 1973:19,29). Nevertheless, in La Guma's assertion that African development and African literature have not come to a full stop there is an implied indication that African literature should not be defined within the confines of critical realism.

Why does La Guma object to being labelled a critical realist? La Guma's 1974 essay (also written under the pseudonym 'Gala'), in which he examines Athol Fugard's oeuvre, may provide some clues. In this essay La Guma argues that in Fugard's plays there is 'an ever-present concentration on experimentation and technical innovation' and he sees in this regard evidence of Samuel Beckett's influence on Fugard ('Gala' 1974:102). Not surprisingly La Guma is quick to point out that it is nevertheless 'the content of Fugard's work which must certainly "reveal the real man"' ('Gala' 1974:102). For La Guma is not so much interested in Fugard's dramatic devices as he is in the ideological orientation of the content of his works which, he hopes, will 'reveal the real man'—a reading that would seem to reveal La Guma's conflation of textual ideology with authorial ideology. La Guma's only comment on Fugard's early plays, *No-good Friday* and *Nongogo*, is that they are 'naturalistic tragedies set in Johannesburg black townships—and staged with African casts' ('Gala' 1974:102f). *The Blood Knot*, which seems to gain La Guma's tacit approval, is seen as being informed by a liberal humanist ideology whose tenets include 'the freedom of the individual, abhorrence of colour discrimination and the nightmare of Blacks under apartheid' ('Gala' 1974:103). La Guma finds in some of Fugard's later plays, however, not only 'deteriorating symbolism' but also a lack of clear ideological commitment. For La Guma, the government's withdrawal of Fugard's passport in 1967 (which was reissued four years later and accompanied by the South African government's subsidy of his play, *Boesman and Lena*) and Fugard's subsequent withdrawal of his support for the cultural boycott resulted in 'the absence of a more concrete response to the realities of the South African scene' ('Gala' 1974:105). Instead, La Guma argues:

> Athol Fugard is now the playwright first. It is now enough for him to portray various aspects of life through his skill and talent. He has suffered the fate of South African liberals with their absence of any scientific or consistent attitude towards the society in which they live and work ('Gala' 1974:104).

'Scientific' is a telling term here in the sense that it is clearly indicative of La Guma's immersion in Marxist-Leninism. La Guma's attitude to liberal ideology is (deliberately) ambiguous. Although he accuses liberals of their lack of 'scientific or consistent attitude' towards their society, he does not expect Fugard to move beyond the confines of his ideology. Athol Fugard, La Guma argues, 'need not only be an observer of his country's condition', or as he puts it merely 'bear witness', and be a 'classic example of the guilt-ridden impotent white liberal of South Africa'. Within the confines of a liberal humanist ideology itself there are prospects for a progressive outlook, La Guma seems to suggest. In La Guma's own words: 'An admission of guilt is in itself a step towards personal re-evaluation, and a more profound understanding of his function as an artist' ('Gala' 1974:105).

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It may, however, be argued that beneath La Guma's critique of the ideological content of Fugard's plays, lurks his dissatisfaction with a critical realist perspective, which La Guma clearly associates with the liberal humanist ideology that informs Fugard's writing. Liberal humanist literature is seen by La Guma as protest art *par excellence*, it merely negates without making any positive affirmation. In his words: 'It is not enough for South African art merely to idealise the negation of the racist way of life. Art must also be warmed by the fires of the struggle for liberty' ('Gala' 1974:104). La Guma's assertion here is clearly reminiscent of Gorky's 1934 critique of critical realism:

> The realism of the bourgeois's 'prodigal sons' was a critical realism. But while exposing the cankers of society ... critical realism could not show people the way out of this thraldom. It was easy to critisise everything, but there was nothing to assert except the obvious senselessness of such social existence and 'life in general' (Gorky 1988:303)[20].

The parallels are striking. It would seem then, that, beneath La Guma's ambiguous attitude towards critical realism lies his aspiration towards socialist realism of which his literary mentor, Gorky, is known to be a leading exponent.

conclusion

My argument is that if there is any convergence between La Guma's aesthetics of realism and that of Lukács this has a lot to do with La Guma's absorption of Gorky's fiction and aesthetics of realism rather than the possibility of La Guma having read Lukács's writings on the theory of realism. Both La Guma's admiration of Gorky's fiction and aesthetics, and his apprenticeship in the Communist Party-linked newspaper, *New Age*, which helped establish La Guma's position as both a social historian and an ideologue, produced La Guma's realist aesthetics.

At one level, then, La Guma's aesthetics draws extensively on what Robin (1992:109) has identified as the shifts and displacements in 'the discursive base of the Russian realist aesthetics'. This can be seen not only in his use of the Marxist theory of reflection but also in his employment of Plekhanov's conception of the utilitarian view of art, which La Guma links to Lenin's principle of partisanship as a way of incorporating it in his own discourse. However it is also important to note that this was no ready-made activist theory of literature that could simply be imported into the South African context. The concept of ideological didacticism that underpins the socialist realist aesthetic was grafted onto the realist aesthetic. This raises the question of

[20] Robin (1992:149) argues that Gorky leans on the Russian 'realist discursive base and plugs into it' the concept of tendentiousness, 'the primacy of the political over the aesthetic, not only of content over form'.

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whether La Guma's obvious endorsement of socialist realism translated smoothly into practice in his fiction; a question that falls beyond the scope of this essay.

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