'Road to Consciousness': *And A Threefold Cord* and *The Stone Country*

Jabulani Mkhize

As in Alex la Guma's *A Walk in the Night* (1967b), the subject and style of his *And A Threefold Cord* (1988) have their roots in his early journalism. A documentary vignette, which appeared in La Guma's 'Up My Alley' (*New Age* 27 June 1957), and in which he focuses on how adverse winter weather conditions affect slum dwellers, is the likely source of La Guma's subjects in this novel. For La Guma's concern with the plight of the poor slum dwellers of the Cape Flats is also at the core of the plot of *And A Threefold Cord* (1988). As the novel begins, the Pauls family, which lives in a dilapidated pondokkie in Windermere, is not only threatened by the incessant rain which highlights the need for attention to a leaking roof, but is also concerned with the deteriorating health of Dad Pauls. Charlie, Dad Pauls's eldest son, who consistently demonstrates his concern for his father's fragile health, attempts to repair the leaking roof. The ultimate death of Dad Pauls, however, seems to spell disaster for his family—translating into a reality the idiom 'it never rains but it pours'. Firstly, Ronald, Charlie's younger brother, is arrested for stabbing his girlfriend, Susie Meyer, whom he is convinced has betrayed him by having a sexual encounter with the lonely garage owner, George Mostert. Secondly, a pondokkie which belongs to Freda, Charlie's girlfriend, is razed to the ground and her children are incinerated as a result of a faulty primus stove which is left burning in the shack to keep the children warm. Nevertheless, the novel ends on a positive note when Charlie accepts responsibility for Freda's welfare and invites her to join the Pauls family.

La Guma's writing of *And A Threefold Cord* (1988) was prompted by a request from Seven Seas Publishers in Berlin, East Germany, who approached him while he was detained in Roeland Street jail in Cape Town, inviting him to write a novel for publication (Abrahams 1985:69). Hitherto, La Guma had written a short story, 'The Wedding' (Abrahams 1991), which, although its plot revolves around the Pauls family, is not overtly political, its central thrust being the arrangements being made for the marriage of the daughter of the Pauls[1]. However, the knowledge that the novel, *And A Threefold Cord* (1988), was to be published in East Germany must have had an impact

[1] The characters in the short story are, with some slight changes, the same as those in the novel.

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not only on La Guma's conception or composition of this work but also on its intended ideological effect on a wider international audience. It is perhaps for this reason that the novel is more overtly political. Chandramohan correctly identifies two 'concessions' made by La Guma in the novel to accommodate the expectations of an 'overseas readership': firstly, Brian Bunting's foreword which not only introduces La Guma, the political activist and creative writer, to a wider audience, but also attempts to provide what is called in Marxist terms 'the conditions of the novel's production' (La Guma 1988). Secondly, the novel provides a glossary of Afrikaans words which is clearly meant for a non-South African readership (Chandramohan 1992:94).

On one level, La Guma provides a somewhat 'innocent' reason as a motivation for his writing of the novel:

> ... it was a matter of recording history or recording situation. The book is about suburban slums which is a character of the South African scene .... This is just another scene in the life of the community, another facet of the picture. I decided again that the picture of the suburban slums did not appear anywhere in South African writing, so I said well why shouldn't I do it, because it is part of our life, our scene, so it should appear in the picture (Abrahams 1985:70).

In these words, La Guma alludes to his novels as providing individual 'pictures' of South African 'totality'—a comment obviously strengthened by the fact that the interview took place when most of his novels had already been published—and reaffirms his role as a social historian.

La Guma's use of subjects drawn from his journalism is but one indication that it might well have been his intention to 'record history'. It would seem, however, that on another level, an arguably more immediate motivation for the writing of this novel is the one spelt out by La Guma in his response to Abrahams's question about the weather as a dominant feature of the novel. He points out:

> Well, part of the fact is that the weather plays a part in creating the atmosphere and it helps to describe the scenes and so on. There is also the fact that overseas people believe the South African regime's tourist propaganda that it is a country with a perfect weather. I had an idea that rather we could use the weather as a feature of South Africa, but also in terms of its symbolic potential, and thus at the same time to make it genuinely South African. In other words I am contesting official propaganda of South Africa's natural beauty and trying to show the world that the tourist poster world of wonderful beaches and beautiful golf links is not the total picture (Abrahams 1985:71f).

Authorial intention, then, reveals La Guma's recognition of the political ideological

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effect that his work might have on a wider international audience as having served as an impetus for his writing of the novel.

In line with La Guma's avowed intention referred to above *And A Threefold Cord* (1988:1) begins with exhaustive descriptions of weather:

> In the north-west the rainheads piled up, first in cottony tufts blown away by the high wind, then in skeins of dull cloud, and finally in high climbing battlements: like a rough wall of mortar built across the horizon, so that the sun had no gleam, but a pale of phosphorescence behind the veil of grey. The sea was grey too, and metallic, moving in sluggish swells, like a blanket blown in a tired wind. The autumn had come early that year, and then the winter, and now the sky was heavy with the promise of rain.

This detailed description of the weather conditions does not just serve the purpose of 'creating atmosphere' as La Guma (1988:2) modestly suggests, but it is significant to the world of the novel in so far as the weather directly affects the lives of the characters:

> The people of the shanties and the *pondokkie* cabins along the national road and beside the railway tracks and in the suburban sand-lots watched the sky and looked towards the north-west where the clouds pregnant with moisture, hung beyond the mountain. When the burst of rain came, knocking on the roofs, working men carried home loads of pilfered corrugation cardboard cartons, salvaged rusted sheets of iron and tin to reinforce the roofs. Heavy stones were heaved onto the lean-tos and patched roofs, to keep them down when the wind rose.

This juxtaposition could create the impression that the novel's focus is the struggle of humanity against natural forces (rain)—a preoccupation that would easily encourage a naturalist interpretation of the novel[2]. Nevertheless, La Guma's (1988:81) interest

[2] La Guma's treatment of weather is at times reminiscent of Gorky's handling of weather in the short story, 'One Autumn', or lengthy descriptions of nature in the same author's story 'Malva'. Here is one example from 'One Autumn': 'The rain drummed relentlessly on the wooden boat, the muffled noise suggesting sad thoughts, and the wind whistled .... The waves of the river slapped against the bank, they sounded monotonous and hopeless, as though they were telling of something inexpressively boring and unpleasant .... The sound of the rain became one with their slapping .... The wind rushed blindly ... on and on, singing cheerless songs ...' (n.d.:181). La Guma employs personification in a similar way in his description of weather in *And A Threefold Cord*: 'The rain leaned against the house, under the pressure of the wind, hissing and rattling on the corrugated iron sides, scouring the roof. The wind flung the rain against the house in a roar, as if in anger, and turned away, leaving only a steady hissing along the poorly painted blistered metal' (1988:3). Such descriptions abound in La Guma's novel.

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lies in a realistic rendering of how adverse weather conditions accentuate the 'abject poverty' of the residents of the shanties, as particularly represented in the Pauls family. The poverty of the Pauls family is clearly demonstrated in the description of the effort that was put into the building of the 'house' itself. As the narrator tells us:

> Dad Pauls and Charlie had scavenged, begged and, on dark nights, stolen material for the house. They had dragged for miles sheets of rusty corrugated iron, planks, pieces of cardboard, and all the astonishing miscellany that had gone into the building of the house (La Guma 1988:17).

Eventually, the narrator goes on, 'the whole place had a precarious, delicately-balanced appearance of a house of cards' (La Guma 1988:18). This makeshift structure is but one of 'the collection of dilapidated shanties that was springing up like sores on the leg of land off the highway' (La Guma 1988:17).

The housing problem, is, however, only emblematic of a broader problem of the lack of a proper infrastructure in this settlement. In the descriptive prose that is the cornerstone of La Guma's 'naturalist' style in his early novels the narrator makes this point quite explicitly:

> It could hardly be called a street, not even a lane; just a hollowed track that stumbled and sprawled between and around and through the patchwork of shacks, cabins, huts and wickiups: a maze of cracks between the jigsaw pieces of settlement, a writhing battlefield of mud and strangling entanglements of wet and rusty barbed wire, sagging sheets of tin, toppling pickets, twigs and peeled branches and collapsing odds and ends with edges and points as dangerous as sharks' teeth, which made up the framework around the quagmire of lots (La Guma 1988:21).

As in District Six in his *A Walk in the Night* (1967), there are signs of decay in the shanties. This is also described in a catalogue form that had by now become typical of La Guma's documentary style:

> Over everything hung the massed smell of pulpy mould, rotten sacking, rain, cookery, chickens and the rickety latrines that leaned crazily in the pools of horrid liquid, like drunken men in their own regurgitation (La Guma 1988:21).

As Chandramohan (1992:97) correctly observes:

> In his descriptions of the locale and the people La Guma shows a concern for naturalistic detail, as he had done earlier in *A Walk in the Night*.

To suggest that such 'descriptive passages are clearly more important than the narra-

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tive' (JanMohamed 1983:239), however, seems to tilt the argument towards a naturalistic interpretation of the novel. The reality is that in spite of such descriptions the significance of the narrative is not undermined because these descriptions are organically linked to the plot. Larisa Saratovskya (1988:162) puts it more succinctly:

> The attention to the dank and at times loathsome details are justified since they are not a goal unto themselves, but a means towards a realistic portrayal of [social] reality of the 'bottom depths' seen a la Gorky[3].

The Myth of the Frontier and Alternative Strategies of Survival

La Guma dismisses any naturalistic reading of the novel by being quite emphatic about the fact that the pondokkie dwellers survive against all odds. He makes this point quite explicitly in his comparison of the solitary life of the garage owner, George Mostert, with that of the pondokkie dwellers. From his garage Mostert observes

> the jumble pattern of shacks and shanties sprawled like an unplanned design worked with dull rags on a dirty piece of crumbled sackcloth

and he thinks, 'a strange country, a foreign people' (La Guma 1988:38). Nevertheless, the narrative continues:

> Life was there, no matter how shabby, a few yards from George Mostert's Service Station and Garage, but he was trapped in his glass office by his own loneliness and a wretched pride in a false racial superiority, the cracked embattlements of his world, and he peered out sadly past the petrol pumps which gazed like petrified sentries across the concrete no-man's-land of the road (La Guma 1988:38).

Mostert's garage stands like 'a lone blockhouse on a frontier' and, although he has money—for which pondokkie dwellers such as Susie Meyer (La Guma 1988:83) and Ronald (La Guma 1988:93) envy him—his

> loneliness [hangs] about him in the form of a spirit of enforced friendliness, a desire for conversation, a willingness to do a small favour (La Guma 1988:36).

La Guma's rendering of this contrast is curious in so far as it seems to draw on and evoke the myth of the frontier in the depiction of the relationship between blacks and

[3] For this quotation I am indebted to Michael Denner, a graduate student at Northwestern's Department of Slavic Languages and Literature, who translated this article for me from Russian into English.

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whites in 17th and 18th century South African historiography. The terminology is telling since it bears the stamp of what Dorian Haarhof (1991:5) in his study *The Wild South-West* calls 'the use of a language construct that constitutes [a] "Frontierese"'—words such as 'frontier' and phrases such as 'lone guard action' immediately come to mind. Although Mostert's loneliness tempts him to 'open' the frontier by socially interacting with the shanty dwellers, as seen, for example, in his 'desire for a conversation, a willingness to do a favour' (La Guma 1988:37), the frontier remains 'closed' because of his 'wretched pride in a sense of false superiority' (La Guma 1988:37)[4]. Later Mostert wonders whether he should 'take the plunge and accept Charlie's invitation' (La Guma 1988:80) to visit the settlement but 'hesitation had attacked him again' (La Guma 1988:81) and he took refuge in his fate which is summed up in one word 'solitude' (La Guma 1988:37).

In contrast to Mostert's 'solitude', the life of the slum dwellers is pervaded by a communal sense of solidarity. For example, when Charlie and his Dad build their shack they get the help of other 'Coloured and African shack dwellers' (La Guma 1988:18). During the period of preparation for Dad Pauls's the prevalence of a sense of 'communal self-consciousness' (Carpenter 1991:87) is clearly manifest in Missus Nzuba's generosity and willingness to help. When Ma Pauls shows her appreciation for Nzuba's offer of water to the family Nzuba responds: 'There is no need to be thankful. We all got to stand by each other' (La Guma 1988:90). There is also a manifestation of solidarity during the funeral proceedings as people converge on the Paulses: 'Relations and neighbours were assembled there, swarthy mulatto faces and very dark African, all looking solemn, for there is unity even in death' (La Guma 1988:73). In the next chapter La Guma again reiterates the vibrancy of life in the pondokkies despite all odds: 'But there is time for laughter and for merriment' (La Guma 1988:78), reads the first sentence of this chapter.

Such juxtaposition of Mostert's life of 'solitude' with the vibrancy of the shack dwellers could easily be misconstrued, leading to the conclusion that La Guma invokes an Afrocentric-informed notion of African communalism that is pitted against white individualism. This impression could be intensified when one considers the 'message' of solidarity that dominates the political logic of the novel as articulated in the epigraph which is taken from the Bible in Ecclesiastes iv: 9-12.

[4] The term 'frontier' here is used not only as a marker of a physical boundary (like the road that serves as a line of demarcation between Mostert's garage and the shanties) but also in a psychological sense in cases where racial prejudice hampers normal social interaction. The frontier is 'open' when there is social interaction, and it is 'closed' when the prejudices are allowed to define the relationship between 'races'.

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> Two are better than one; because they have a good reward for their labour
> For if they fall, the one will lift up his fellow;
> but woe to him that is alone when he falleth;
> for he hath not another to help him up.
> Again, if two lie together, then they have heat, but how can one be warm alone?
> And if one prevail against him, two shall withstand him; and a threefold cord
> is not quickly broken.

However, La Guma eschews this notion of monolithic African communalism in his allusion to the class distinctions that exist amongst Africans themselves. In a dramatic re-enactment of how people of the shanties have to beg for water from those who have access to water, the narrative tells us: 'Those who owned the plumbing and taps sold water to those who lacked such amenities' (La Guma 1988:71). The conceptualisation of differences in racial terms is thus subverted by a paradigm of class analysis. Against this background, then, Mostert's alienation should not only be seen in terms of race but also in terms of his class position—it is important in this regard to note that Ronald is of the opinion that Mostert gains Susie Meyer's sexual favour because 'the burg's *mos* got a car and a business and cash' and not just because he is white.

Critical or Socialist Realism?

Lewis Nkosi (1975:44) has expressed some reservations about what he calls 'the limitation of canvas' in La Guma's work which, he argues, prevents him from 'exploring further and deepening the relationship between the characters'. He then goes on to argue that 'except for Charlie Pauls none of the characters in *And A Threefold Cord* are given enough time and space to develop their individuality' (Nkosi 1975:114). The significance of Nkosi's comments for our purposes is that (without making any direct reference to Lukács) they seem to capture very poignantly the notion of typicality as embodied in the portrayal of Charlie in the novel and thereby confirm the novel's satisfaction of one of the tenets of Lukács's criteria for realism. Typicality, Lukács (1978:154) maintains, is achieved 'not with the loss of individuality in character portrayal but with the intensification of individuality' and this can only be determined when a character is compared to other characters within a particular fictional world. Finally, according to Lukács (1978:154)

> [an] artist achieves significance and typicality in characterization only when he successfully exposes the multifarious interrelationships between the character traits of his heroes and the objective general problems of the age and when he shows his characters directly grappling with the most abstract issues of the time as their own vital and personal problems.

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There is no doubt that La Guma's portrayal of Charlie Pauls meets these criteria—La Guma goes to great lengths in an attempt to demonstrate Charlie's endeavour to grapple with the problems of the people of the pondokkie. He not only tries to identify their problems but he also tries to come to terms with what could be done to alleviate the situation. There is, however, a danger of conflating 'typicality' with 'topicality' here (Lukács 1967:123) especially in readings of the novel that, however indirectly, unproblematically regard Charlie as a mouthpiece of the author's ideology and, by implication, interpret the novel as 'illustrating literature' (Lukács 1969:12). I have in mind here readings such as that of Lindfors (1966:51) who argues that '... La Guma's message seems to be thrust upon his novel instead of springing from it' and Gerald Moore (1980:112) who contends that the introduction of the 'recollections' of Charlie in which he reiterates the utterances of the 'rooker' is 'forced and self-conscious'. I shall return to these arguments later.

Vladimir Klima (1976:147) correctly observes that the optimism of *And A Threefold Cord* (1988) is 'remarkable since the author wrote it under difficult conditions' of repression and police surveillance. Indeed *And A Threefold Cord* (1988) rejects the 'fatalism' that is associated with naturalism not only in its characterization but also in its symbolism. This is embodied in both the birth of Caroline's child indicating a continuation of life (La Guma 1988:98) and in the symbolism of 'one carnation' (La Guma 1988:100) which grows on the dump in which young children such as Charlie's youngest brother Jorny play. As the narrator tells us: 'The flower stands alone, gleaming, wonderfully bright, red as blood and life, like hope blooming in an anguished breast' (La Guma 1988:100). This blooming hope is finally captured in the sudden 'darting [of] a bird from among the patchwork roof of the shanties [heading] straight, straight into the sky' (La Guma 1988:112). In this way birds are 'associated with freedom' in the same way as they are in Gorky's allegorical tales, 'Song of Stormy Petrel' and 'Song of the Falcon' (Scherr 1988:28). This leads to the next issue, the categorisation of La Guma's realism in this novel.

Lindfors's assertions on the tendentiousness of the novel have justifiably been challenged by both Balutansky and Cornwell who provide ample examples to demonstrate how La Guma's 'message' emerges organically from the political logic of the novel[5]. Cornwell's (1995:12,6) argument is much more relevant for our purposes because although he identifies in the novel 'an analysis of South African society in terms of the fundamentalist Marxist ideology which La Guma brings to the work' (La Guma 1988:6) and, with some reservations, also reads the novel as 'socialist realist', he acknowledges that the novel is not 'simply a vehicle for propaganda'. Yet Cornwell's reliance on the prescriptive Stalinist-Zhdanovite version of socialist realism in his analysis threatens to call into question, if not undermine, his contention that the novel

[5] See Balutansky (1990:43-50) and Cornwell (1990:11-18).

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is not simply a vehicle for propaganda. While I endorse the latter argument my categorisation of La Guma's realism in this novel is slightly different from Cornwell's. Since it is inevitable that any categorisation of La Guma's realism in *And A Threefold Cord* (1988) will primarily revolve around the consciousness of the protagonist Charlie Pauls and the impact that the 'rooker' has on him, it is to this that I will now turn.

In Charlie's conversation (over a bottle of wine) with Uncle Ben, which shifts from concerns with the uncle's excessive drinking habits to the fragile health of Dad Pauls and the poverty of the pondokkie dwellers, the narrative provides a clear picture of Charlie's attempt to grapple with the issues that affect his community. Uncle Ben, obviously in reference to Dad Pauls, simply attributes to evil 'what make[s] a poor old man shiver and shake himself to death in a leaking *pondok* without no warm soup and medicine' (La Guma 1988:49), but Charlie questions his moral explanation. He argues: 'Ma read the Bible every night. It don't make the poor old toppy any better' (La Guma 1988:49). Using the sayings of 'a burg' who used to work with him 'laying pipe' in Calvinia, Charlie attempts to provide what seems to him to be a more convincing explanation of the social realities:

> There was a burg working with us on the pipe .... Know what he say? Always reading newspapers and things. He said to us, the poor don't have to be poor .... This burg say, if the poor people all got together and took everything in the world, there wouldn't be poor no more. Funny kind of talk, but it sounded alright .... Further, this rooker say if all the stuff in the world was shared out among everybody, all would have enough to live nice. He reckoned people got to stick together to get this stuff (La Guma 1988:50).

Initially, Uncle Ben's response is couched in religious terms: 'Sound almost like a sin, that ... Bible say you mustn't covet other people's things' (La Guma 1988:50). When Charlie insists that, in his opinion, this 'rooker did know what he was talking [about]' (La Guma 1988:50), this elicits a response that is reminiscent of Mr. Greene's to the taximan's assertion that the 'colour bar is because of the capitalis' system' (La Guma 1967b:17) in *A Walk in the Night*: 'I heard people talking like that .... That's communis' things. Talking against the government' (La Guma 1988:50). This does not deter Charlie from justifying his argument:

> 'Listen', Charlie said ...'. Listen, Uncle Ben one time I went up to see Freda up by that people she work for, cleaning and washing. Hell, that people got a house *mos*, big as the effing city hall, almost, and there is an old bitch with purple hair and fat backsides and her husband eating off a table a mile long, with fancy candles and *dingus* on it. And a *juba* like me can't even touch the handle of the front door. You got to go round the back. Eating off nice shiny tables, plenty of roast meat and stuff ...' (La Guma 1988:50).

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This analogy is further developed as Charlie ponders over Alf and Caroline's failure to secure a house from council:

> Is funny there got to be a lot of people like us, worrying about the roof every time it rain, and there's other people don't have to worry a damn. Living in wake-up houses like the house Freda work by, like I was telling Uncle Ben, or even just up the road here .... Some people got no money, some people got a little money, some people got a helluva lot. Rooker I was working with laying that pipe, he reckon poor people ought to form a union, likely (La Guma 1988:54f).

Charlie's awareness of inequality is crude. What is one to make of Charlie's assertions in the novel?

Charlie's argument has elicited divergent responses from critics. According to Maughan-Brown (1991:21), Charlie's 'political insights are always second-hand, and generally consist of little more than disjointed reflections of the "rooker"'. Gerald Moore (1980:112) also shares this view, adding that '[Charlie's] rather adventitious appeals to the rooker and his opinions' weaken La Guma's attempt 'to show in [him] the dawnings of an ideological consciousness'. For Cornwell (1995:15), however,

> conceptions of class are not second hand; although influenced by the politically informed labourer, they do not solely derive from him. On the contrary, they arise spontaneously and logically from Charlie's personal observation of enormous discrepancies in standards of living, an observation which has raised certain political questions to which Charlie demands political answers.

While I share the view that Charlie's pronouncements are second-hand, showing a heavy reliance on the 'rooker's sayings', I doubt that they are 'always' so (as Maughan-Brown suggests), nor do I share Moore's (1980:112) claim that this weakens La Guma's rendering of 'the dawnings of political consciousness in Charlie'. It could well be that La Guma felt that 'these adventitious appeals to the rooker' (Moore 1980:112) would minimise the danger of the inflation of the hero's consciousness and strengthen the status of his work as an artistic production rather than propaganda. It is thus in keeping with La Guma's aesthetic considerations that the 'political attitudes' should be 'implied' and views expressed 'unobtrusively' (La Guma 1984:72). Charlie's utterances are, to a certain extent, second-hand—not only does Charlie acknowledge the influence of the 'rooker's' views on him and consistently appeal to his authority but he also uses phrases that are clearly meant to privilege the discourse of the rooker. The rooker's authority derives from his 'reading of newspapers' hence 'he did know what he was talking' because he is 'a *slim* burg', a clever fellow with a 'lot of things in his head' (La Guma 1988:49f,111). Despite his heavy reliance on the authority of the rooker Charlie's

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political insights are not solely second-hand—from what the rooker told him, he is able to make appropriate extrapolations, for example, his apposite analogy about Freda's employers (La Guma 1988:50). But, does the fact that Charlie 'speculates briefly about communism', a 'poor people's union' and the 'redistribution of wealth' (JanMohamed 1983:242) warrant the categorisation of the novel as socialist realist? A Gorkian model of realism would commend La Guma for having moved beyond the confines of critical realism which, according to Gorky (1982:343), 'criticizes everything' without affirming anything. For one thing, by advocating a 'socialist humanism', via the sayings of the rooker, La Guma's protagonist establishes a status for himself as a 'positive hero' (especially when compared to Michael Adonis in *A Walk in the Night* 1967b). In a word, through the sayings of the rooker, as articulated by Charlie, La Guma invests his protagonist with an

> active romanticism which strives to strengthen man's will to live and raise him up against the life around him, against the yoke it would impose on him (Gorky 1982:35).

The problem with this interpretation, however, is that Charlie's 'consciousness' is not profound enough to provide the novel with a socialist perspective. It would seem, then, that a Lukácsian model offers a more useful explanation to deal with this problem in the realism of the novel. In so far as *And A Threefold Cord* (1988) 'emphasizes the contradictions of capitalism' rather than 'the forces working towards reconciliation' (Lukács 1963:114), it may be seen as employing the 'indirect method' (Lukács 1963:99) of analysis that Lukács identifies in the realism of Thomas Mann. La Guma's realism differs from that of Mann, however, in that the class struggle in this novel is not seen 'from a bourgeois point of view' (Lukács 1963:99). Nonetheless, the novel's satisfaction of one of the most crucial of Lukács's criteria for critical realism, namely, 'a negative attitude' towards capitalism and 'a readiness to respect the perspective of socialism' (Lukács 1963:93), puts this work firmly within this tradition.

'Spontaneity/Consciousness Dialectic'

A number of critics interested in tracing the progressive development in La Guma's oeuvre have noted a remarkable feature in La Guma's characterization of his heroes. This is best summed up by Coetzee (1992:356) in the passage below:

> The theme of La Guma's oeuvre clarifies itself ... the growth of resistance from the aimless revolt of individuals without allies or ideology (anarchy, crime) [in *A Walk in the Night*] to the fraternal revolt of men who understand and combat oppression, psychological and physical. *And A Threefold Cord* reflected the dawn of man's conception of himself as a political creature; in *The Stone Country* the first cracks in the

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> chaotic, defensive individualism of the oppressed appeared and alliances began to sprout; *In the Fog of the Seasons' End* presents both the political conception of man's fate and the fraternal alliance as accomplished facts.

In a similar vein, Piniel Shava (1989:37), whose discussion of La Guma's work (curiously) omits *And A Threefold Cord* (1988), confirms this development:

> La Guma would like to demonstrate that the acquisition of class consciousness is also a slow and difficult process. From *A Walk in the Night* through *The Stone Country* to *In the Fog of the Seasons' End* ... he shows how the political consciousness of his heroes develops in stages.

Taking the cue from both Coetzee and Shava I want to take this point further and argue that at the heart of the shift in each of La Guma's novels is Lenin's thesis on the

> changeover from 'spontaneity' (*stikhiynost*) in the worker's protest movement to political awareness and from such an awareness (*sozaniye*) to revolutionary demonstration of their dissatisfaction (Freeborn 1982:43).

Katherina Clarke (1981:15) explains how the 'spontaneity/consciousness dialectic' as a 'ritualized account of the Marxist-Leninist idea of historical progress' which constituted the 'master plot of the Soviet novel' became integral in socialist realist texts. Clarke (1981:15f) also provides an illuminating explanation of the theoretical framework of the application of 'spontaneity/consciousness dialectic' in fiction:

> In terms of this dialectical model consciousness is taken to mean actions or political activities that are controlled, disciplined and guided by politically aware bodies. Spontaneity means actions that are not guided by complete political awareness and are either sporadic, uncoordinated, even anarchic (such as wildcat strikes, mass uprisings), or can be attributed to the workings of vast impersonal historical forces rather than to deliberate actions .... In the narrow context of the individual human being, as distinct from society at large, 'consciousness' means political awareness and complete self-control that enables the individual to be guided in all his actions by his awareness, whereas 'spontaneity' refers to purely visceral, wilful, anarchic, or self-centred actions.

This framework is useful in contextualising Charlie's political development in the novel. After a humiliating experience, in which a policeman calls Freda a '[b]lerry black whore' and questions the respectability of Charlie and Freda (La Guma 1988:87f) during the course of the raid in the shacks, Charlie decides to go out in order 'to see

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what is happening to [his] people' (La Guma 1988:89). His concern with the treatment meted out to his people by the police prompts him not only to defy a policeman who is annoyed by the presence of the slum dwellers to watch the spectacle but also to give this policeman a forceful blow on his 'exposed jawbone' and take to his heels (La Guma 1988:91). Although Charlie's action is not self-centred nor anarchic, resulting as it does from his concern with his people, to call it 'revolutionary' as Cornwell (1995:6) does is perhaps to read too much into this undeniably politically positive gesture of defiance. Charlie is certainly 'losing faith in the permanence of the system that oppresses [his class]' and beginning 'to sense the need for collective resistance' (La Guma 1988:91), but his physical response to the policeman in this episode seems to be 'more in the nature of outbursts of desperation and vengeance than that of struggle' (Lenin 1961:114). In a word, his consciousness is again, in Lenin's terms, in its 'embryonic form' (Lenin 1961:113). Nothing provides more evidence of the 'embryonic form' of Charlie's consciousness than his uncertain and somewhat vague articulation of the 'rooker's' utterances in his attempt to console Freda for losing her children.

> He said something one time, about people most of the time takes trouble hardest when they alone. I don't know how it fit in here, hey. I don't understand it real right, you see. But this burg had a lot of good things in his head (La Guma 1988:111).

Unlike Charlie Pauls in *And A Threefold Cord* (1988), George Adams, La Guma's protagonist in *The Stone Country* (1967a), is a fully-fledged political activist who is arrested and sent to prison for distributing leaflets of an illegal organisation. In prison, which is seen as a microcosm of South African society, Adams discovers that social interaction, not only between the prisoners and the guards but also amongst prisoners themselves, works according to the law of the jungle. Adams refuses to be reduced to that level of animal existence—he not only insists on his rights but also attempts to instil a sense of solidarity amongst the prisoners as a way of restoring their human dignity. In the meanwhile other fellow inmates are busy working on a daring bid to escape from prison which is thwarted when two of the prisoners are caught by the warders. The novel ends when a young prisoner, Albert March (alias the Casbah Kid), is being taken downstairs by the guards after being sentenced to death on a murder charge.

The shift from *And A Threefold Cord* (1988) to *The Stone Country* (1967a) is suggestive of what Clarke has identified as the 'road to consciousness'. Like Charlie Pauls, George Adams rejects a naturalist, fatalistic and idealistic explanation of human fate, as the following interaction between him and the Casbah Kid clearly demonstrates:

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> 'We all got to die. Hear me, mister, I put a knife in a *juba*. He went dead. Is put out, like. Everybody got his life and death put out, reckon and think ...'. 'Put out?' George Adams asked. 'You reckon so? Man, if our life was laid out for us beforehand, what use would it be for us to work to change things, hey?' 'Right, mister. You can't change things, *mos*'. He chewed the cuticle of a thumb. 'But hear me, chommy. People's trying to change the things all the time' (La Guma 1967a:14).

Unlike Charlie, whose political insights are essentially second-hand, Adams's materialist explanation and his unwavering belief in the possibility of change stem from his practice—as an activist he is part of the movement that seeks to effect change. La Guma provides a brief account of the growth of Adams's political commitment:

> He had gone to meetings and had listened to speeches, had read a little, and had come to the conclusion that what had been said was right .... There's limit to being kicked in the backside ....

Adams's view of his arrest also reflects his conviction regarding the justness of the cause. As the narrator puts it:

> George Adams had no regrets about his arrest. You did what you decided was the right thing, and then accepted the consequences (La Guma 1967a:74).

Whereas Charlie's actions against the police were indicative of 'outbursts of desperation and vengeance' (Lenin 1961:114), as pointed out earlier, Adams's actions are always suggestive of being acts of 'struggle' (Lenin 1961:114). Adams stands out amongst his inmates in prison not only because he is aware of his rights but also because he is prepared to insist on them even if this includes defiance of the guards. While the other prisoners have been conditioned to cower in submission and accept the authority of the guards without question, Adams challenges them. Yusef, the Turk, one of Adams's fellow inmates, sums up the attitude of the prisoners in his response to Adams's reference to his rights:

> Rights, you reckon you got rights, man? Listen mate, only the ... warders got rights. *They* tell you what is rights? (1967a:51).

Although Adams acknowledges that Yusuf is correct in his suggestion: 'You can do as you blerry well please, only don't get in their way' (La Guma 1967a:52), this does not deter him from fighting for his rights and earning the wrath of the guards (La Guma 1967a:61f). As Saratovskya (1988:165) correctly observes:

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> The political consciousness, internal organization, and the sense of comradeship help Adams to preserve his human dignity, not only in his relations with the prisoners, but also with the warders.

Adams's attitude and his treatment of his fellow inmates are indeed suggestive of his political consciousness. The prison, we are informed in a distinctly La Gumaesque style, is populated by 'a human salad' (La Guma 1967a:80) of

> Ragged street-corner hoodlums, shivering drunks, thugs in cheap flamboyant clothes and knowledgeable looks, murderers, robbers, housebreakers, petty criminals, rapists, loiterers and simple permit-offenders ... (La Guma 1967a:19).

We look at this world through the eyes of Adams whose point of view serves an important structural function of 'linking the various parts of a rather disjointed story' (Rabkin 1973:59):

> In the half-world, hemmed in by stone and iron, there was an atmosphere of every-man-for-himself which George Adams did not like. He had grown up in the slums and he knew that here were the treacherous and the wily, the cringers and the bootlickers, the violent and the domineering, the smooth-talkers and the savage, the bewildered and the helpless; the strong preyed on the weak, and the strong and brutal acknowledged a sort of nebulous alliance among themselves for the terrorization of the underlings (La Guma 1967a:37)

But Adams tries to understand and identify with their plight and thereby affirm the words of the novel's epigraph quoted from Eugene Debs: 'While there is a lower class, I am in it/While there is a criminal element, I am of it/While there is a soul in jail, I am not free'. This is best exemplified in his guiding philosophy: 'We all in this .... together' (La Guma 1967a:38) which recurs in the novel. Accordingly, Adams's political mission is to demonstrate his rejection of this atmosphere of every-man-for-himself by preaching the need for collective resistance: 'Prisoners ought to object .... Strike for better diet, *mos*' (La Guma 1967a:74). He even goes further in his demonstration of what Asein (1987:102) calls his

> communalistic outlook ... [which is suggestive of] the Marxist affirmation on which La Guma bases the thesis in this novel

by sharing what he has with his inmates. In this way he may be seen as having embraced the ideal of a 'socialist humanism' which Charlie Pauls nascently espouses in *And A Threefold Cord* (1988).

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Maughan-Brown (1991:21) has correctly identified Adams's political activism as 'notably low-key'. He goes on in a tone of implicit criticism:

> he wins respect by the dignity of example, sharing food and cigarettes and insisting on his rights, rather than by political argument, and the rationale for becoming politically involved presented by the novel is fairly rudimentary: There's limit to being kicked in the backside ... (Maughan-Brown 1991:21).

Although La Guma does not explicitly elaborate on the rationale for Adams's political involvement he does indicate that Adams decides to be politically involved after listening to the speeches in political meetings and feeling convinced that 'what had been said was right' (La Guma 1967a:74), but Maughan-Brown does not make reference to this statement which precedes the one he cites because it would undermine his argument referred to above. Yet, as Mzamane and Tadi (1986:7) point out:

> ... George Adams stands out as the revolutionary flame that kindles the hearts of the oppressed, as a morale booster and a conscientizer.

Perhaps more than in the case of Charlie Pauls in the previous novel one is tempted to argue that Adams is a 'positive hero' in the same way as in the Soviet socialist realist novel, for there is no doubt that he not only 'exemplif[ies] moral and political virtue' (Clarke 1981:46) but he also serves a 'didactic function' (Clarke 1981:47) through his 'extraordinary dedication and self-deprivation' (Clarke 1981:49) as seen in his willingness to share everything he has with his inmates. This may not have been a conscious intention on the author's part but Adams's relationship with both Yusef the Turk and the Casbah Kid would seem to reinforce this interpretation. In this regard Adams could be seen as a political 'mentor' who, albeit to a limited extent, conscientises these characters who eventually turn out to be his 'disciples'. 'People like you, we got to look after, *mos*' (La Guma 1967a:70), says Yusef in an attempt to provide a rationale for his protection of George Adams from Butcherboy. In addition, Adams's political principles gradually earn him the respect of the Casbah Kid whose initial reluctance to interact with him is likened to 'prying open the jammed door of a vault' (La Guma 1967a:12). In spite of these hints though it would be exaggerated to claim that La Guma was making a serious gesture towards socialist realism.

The subjects of *The Stone Country* (1967a), like those of the works discussed earlier, are also drawn from La Guma's journalism[6]. There is in this work still evi-

[6] See for example 'Ten Days in Roeland Street Jail' (1993) and 'Law of the Jungle' (1993). Later, La Guma wrote the short story, 'Tattoo Marks and Nails' (1967), which is set in prison and whose protagonist, Ahmed the Turk, seems to be an earlier version of the creation of Yusef

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dence of La Guma's descriptive prose, but he has now become more economical in his selection of details that count—devoting most of his descriptions to the creation of portraits of prison character types which depict their reduction to animal existence. In effect, La Guma's naturalist style is here modified by symbolism which is in line with the allegorical nature that he accords this prison. Or is it that as La Guma firmly establishes himself as a fiction writer traces of the documentary style which is drawn from his journalism begin to disappear? Whatever the reason, this transition does not diminish La Guma's aesthetic achievements in this novel.

Carpenter (1991:88) argues that in this novel La Guma 'reaches for a nineteenth-century in which biological and cultural evolution are indistinguishable'. Indeed La Guma's extensive focus on 'the brute in man' (Horton 1992:267), especially in his portrayal of Butcherboy, would link him with the naturalism of Jack London. But La Guma's resort to animal imagery in this case is understandable since it is consistent with his intention of showing the prevalence of the 'law of the jungle' in this prison. Moreover, George Adams's 'control over his destiny' (JanMahomed 1983:249) and his optimism, which provide the essential ingredients for the novel's critical realist perspective (as embodied in La Guma's allegorical reference to South Africa as a prison), subvert this naturalism and foreground the shift in La Guma's next work, *In the Fog of the Seasons' End* (1972), as a pointer to revolutionary political action.

Department of English
University of Durban-Westville

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the Turk in the novel. For another journalistic account of the prison conditions in South African jails see Sonia Bunting's 'The Prisons of Apartheid' (1960) which provides factual accounts of what went on in these prisons. *The Stone Country* (1967) also draws on La Guma's experiences and that of his inmates in prisons where he served numerous short spells, as La Guma himself points out in his interview with Cecil Abrahams.

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