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The Farm: A concept in the writing of Olive Schreiner, Pauline Smith, Doris Lessing, Nadine Gordomer and Bessie Head

Africa belongs to the Africans; the sooner they take it back the better. But a country also belongs to those who feel at home in it¹

Knowing where he belongs and where he feels at home has been a central problem for the protagonist of white South African fiction from Schreiner onwards. The white settler in Africa is intensely conscious not only of his historical situation, his relation to time, but also of his relation to space, the land itself, seen as something to be structured, conquered or possessed. It is from his sense of the land as something structured by him that he derives his own sense of belonging to it, of being in the right place historically. Conversely, estrangement, alienation, displacement, which are dominant themes in white South African fiction, reflect the protagonist's insecurity with regard to the land and to his right to own it. The South African protagonist is not a passive creature of history as he often is in British or even American fiction. He has, in a sense, chosen his life and constantly affirms or questions that choice.

The five novelists under discussion are all women and the critic might therefore be expected to focus attention on female points of view as expressed in their work. Lyndall's feminism (*The Story of an African Farm* 1883), Andrina's position as a 'fallen woman' (*The Beadle* 1926), Mary Turner's loss of individuality (*The Grass is Singing* 1950) and Elizabeth's struggle for emancipation from male domination (*A Question of Power* 1973) are major preoccupations in these novels. In *The Conservationist* (1974) we encounter a male protagonist whose rejection of women's humanity is a major source of his own deficiencies. Yet in each of these novels the woman question is a secondary theme, a lateral growth shaped by the more profound question of what it means to be a South African. In each case self-definition transcends gender but is solidly grounded in location. Each writer explores ways in which the South African landscape is taken into the psyche of the protagonist.

The nature of society and land itself in Southern Africa differs, of course, from European analogues. Raymond Williams (1973) proposed this evocation, containing typical English elements, of the 'feel' of the country:

Thus, at once, for me, before the argument starts, country life has had many

meanings. It is the elms, the may, the white horse in the field beyond the window where I am writing. It is the men in the November evening, walking back from pruning, with their hands in the pockets of their khaki coats; and the women in their headscarves, outside their cottages, waiting for the blue bus that will take them, inside school hours, to work in the harvest. It is the tractor on the road, leaving its tracks of serrated pressed mud; the light in the small hours, in the pig farm across the road, in the crisis of a litter; the slow brown van met at the difficult corner, with the crowded sheep jammed to its slatted sides; the heavy smell, on still evenings, of the silage ricks fed with molasses. It is also the sour land, on the thick boulder clay, not far up the road, that is selling for housing, for a speculative development, at twelve thousand pounds an acre.²

Notable features of the English landscape as Williams portrays it are the small scale, the cosiness of the land; 'the white horse in the fields beyond the window' is near enough to respond to. Secondly, the land is peopled. Those who live in it are tranquil, rooted, pursuing traditional ways of life, bound together into a community. Rural life, in the third place, is eminently viable; transport, communication, economic growth are all implicit in the tractor, the litter, the brown van, the silage ricks fed with molasses, culminating in a reference to the increased monetary value of the sour land. As striking contrast to William's gentle depiction of country ants and harvest offices we quote a description in *The Grass is Singing* of the protagonist's response to the farm she lives on in Southern Rhodesia:

When she was gone, she thought, this house would be destroyed. It would be killed by the bush, which had always hated it, had always stood around it silently, waiting for the moment when it could advance and cover it forever, so that nothing remained. She could see the house, empty, its furnishings rotting. First would come the rats. Already they ran over the rafters at night, their long wiry tails trailing. They would swarm up over the furniture and the walls, gnawing and gutting till nothing was left but brick and iron, and the floors were thick with droppings. And then the beetles: great, black, armoured beetles would crawl in from the veld and lodge in the crevices of the brick. Some were there now, twiddling with their feelers, watching with small painted eyes.³

Mary's fear of the African bush is controlled by the narrator who sustains a detached perspective on her character. The subjective, apocalyptic view of nature is symptomatic of Mary's condition. Her phobia takes the form of a loss of distinction between her self and the world outside, she imagines menacing presences in the bush lying in wait for her. But at another level, Lessing's prose can be interpreted as repeating a motif which is an archetype of Western fiction about Africa; that Africa, the alien continent, maps in its external geography certain unexamined forces in the European psyche. The classic example of this colonial archetype occurs in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* where the jungle stretching inland from the safe margin of the river bank is threatening and mysterious.⁴ It occurs too in the Romance fiction of

writers like John Buchan (*Prester John*) and Rider Haggard where the adventuring hero discovers, exposes and conquers the dark forces in the African interior.

Lessing's prose is weighted by its emphasis on the negative relation between nature and the character who experiences it (unlike the harmonies evoked by Williams). Nature is depicted as *unnatural*, unproductive, unyielding, incommunicable. The beetles belong to another, alien form of life hostile to Mary. Because there is timelessness in the bush, time dominates. By contrast, time is controlled within a human order on the carefully delineated farm of Williams's description. The farm is itself altered by social and economic changes: the cobbles replaced by tarmac, footpaths by modern highways. Lessing's narrative gives us a sense of land as quintessentially unchanging because it is not primarily in touch with agriculture and its processes. In South African literature, although the landscape of the Karoo, Southern Rhodesia, Southern Transvaal and Botswana are differentiated, the narrative usually provides in each case a further dimension of monotony. Veld, desert, empty space, poor soil, unpeopled distances are factors which acquire a spiritual, non-local rather than a provincial, 'placed' significance. One would never think, when reading some modern South African fictions, that it is physically beautiful country. Political and social anxiety is projected by the writer not only onto her protagonists but onto the physical environment itself. Lack of communication, oppression and cultural poverty are human and social conditions germane to the South African setting and in the five novels I have mentioned, we see the land itself becoming a symbolic extension of these harsh social facts. Williams distinguished between an 'unmediated nature—a physical awareness of trees, birds, the moving shapes of land'—and a 'working agriculture, in which much of the nature is in fact being produced.'⁵

Nature and agriculture in fact are not fully complementary in South African farm literature; there is always a sense of separate, unintegrated aspects of the land which resist human control. In the first South African novel (1883) an estranging quality in the landscape, the association of soil and vegetation with subjective states of mind, is already present:

He turned up the brim of his great hat and looked at the moon, but most at the leaves of the prickly-pear that grew just before him. They glinted and glinted, just like his own heart—cold, so hard and very wicked. His physical heart had pain also; it seemed full of little bits of glass, that hurt. He had sat there for half an hour, and he dared not go back to the close house . . . With his swollen eyes he sat there on a flat stone at the very top of the 'kopje'; and the tree, with every one of its wicked leaves, blinked and blinked and blinked at him. Presently he began to cry again and then stopped his crying to look at it. He was quiet for a long while, then he knelt up slowly and bent forward. There was a secret he had carried in his heart for a year, . . . 'I hate God' he said. The wind took the words and ran away with them, among the stones, and through the prickly-pear.⁶

Here is the hostile prickly-pear almost seventy years in advance of Lessing's avenging bush. In both cases the vegetation seems to mock the colonist's attempt to establish individual identity and self-confidence. In both cases it seems to confirm them in negative feelings of guilt, fear, self-denial. In the prickly-pear Waldo projects his own feelings of unworthiness. He is personally responsible for what he perceives as the cruelty of his environment. Waldo and Mary look into a void, their fears are primeval and nature, instead of consoling them as it might in contemporary European literature, becomes the spatial dimension of fear itself. Nature is personified—the prickly-pear 'blinked'; in Lessing's text the trees and branches 'nudge', 'push' and 'shoulder'. The hostility in nature takes the form of a supreme indifference to human endeavour. This point is strengthened in both authors by repeated reference to the great age of the land itself, in contrast to the relative youth of the human species. In Lessing, insect life is the metaphor for this immutability; in Schreiner it becomes synonymous with the stunted bushes growing in the desert.

In *The Story of an African Farm* oppression is presented practically as a law of nature. A pattern of arbitrary cruelty runs through the text and set against this, Waldo's belief that God will perform an individual miracle for him is presented as a mere audacity. A hierarchy of suffering in *African Farm* reaches down to the humblest forms of insect life:

The beetle was hard at work trying to roll home a great ball of dung it had been collecting all the morning; but Doss broke the ball, and ate the beetle's hind legs, and then bit off its head. And it was all play, and no one could tell what it had lived and worked for. A striving, and a striving, and an ending in nothing.⁷

The 'African' view of the land as hostile to the colonist is balanced in Schreiner's novel by a softer 'European' view of nature as educative and benevolent. Waldo sometimes experiences his physical environment in this way:

It has been a delightful journey, this journey home. I have walked on foot. The evening before last, when it was just sunset, I was a little footsore and thirsty, and went out of the road to look for water. I went down into a deep little 'kloof'. Some trees ran along the bottom, and I thought I should find water there The floor on which I stood was of fine white sand, and the banks rose on every side like the walls of a room There was one among the trees on the bank that stood out against the white sky. All the other trees were silent; but this one shook and trembled against the sky. Everything else was still; but those leaves were quivering, quivering. I stood on the sand; I could not go away.⁷

Thus for Schreiner, as for Coleridge, country or nature is experienced as mood:

'We cannot hope from outward forms to win
The magic and the life, whose fountains are within'⁸

She is the first of the South African novelists to see self-definition as intimately connected with environment.

Writing of an early era in the Cape Colony Pauline Smith's view of the Dutch farmer *sui generis* is gentle and partial. The brief social sketch she provides in the opening pages of *The Beadle* (1926) reproduces fairly run-of-the-mill local historical perspectives: the Boer needs to be 'understood'—his patriarchal principles and his racial intolerance are evaluated from inside his historical situation:

And in the Aangenaam valley, as in every other South African community, the Dutch retained their own direct Biblical interpretation of life. They were the descendants of a race formed by the mingling of the early Dutch settlers . . . with French Huguenots But though the Dutch Governors robbed the French Huguenots of their language, it was from the latter that, in the mingling of the two races, there came, through the memory of past sufferings and sacrifices, that intensity of religious feeling which still makes the Boers a race apart.⁹

Smith's explanations, when read today, have acquired a familiar, almost defensive tone. But she is sensitive to the Boer's need to structure the land. In her short stories, the protagonists, poor landless people, wander across a blighted wilderness, constantly seeking security and shelter which take the metaphoric form of mirages constantly eluding them.

Smith's treatment of farm life transcends the realism inherent in its details. She provides place names and topographical details but her perceptions are of the intense evangelical kind which seek a world in a grain of sand. In her short stories this is always the case.¹⁰ In her novel the heightened poetic strain is less in evidence and she explores farm and country for specifically social ends. The homestead at *Harmonie* is, as the name indicates, a nucleus of virtuous rural life. Taking us out of the bush and the desert she creates in the farm house a vision of the health and sanity of country life as it has been understood in the pastoral literature of Europe. Emphasis on the kitchen centres human values in the order of domesticity and its patterns:

The kitchen was a big, sunny room with a fire-place resembling a platform At one end of this platform was the door of the great brick oven, built out into the yard. At the other was a small modern stove. The stove was seldom used and most of the cooking was done in three-legged pots The shovel, the chairs against the whitewashed walls . . . the bucket-rack with its row of brass-bound wooden buckets, were all, like the ceiling of the room and its doors and window-frames, made of yellow wood grown rich in colour with age and beautiful with the constant use of years The scoured cleanliness of the tables and racks, the dazzling polish . . . deep, rich colouring . . . high, wide, many-paned windows, made the kitchen at *Harmonie* one of the most beautiful rooms in the old gabled house.¹¹

Here the values are explicit; they are those of the humanist moral structure and its architectural presentation reminiscent of 18th century European

classicism (where architectural features reflect humane values). Order, tranquility, sweetness and light are implicit in the physical items composing this picture. The kitchen is spacious—a physical dimension reflecting the hospitality and generosity of the van der Merwes who own the farm. Warmth (friendship and sympathy are the co-ordinates) comes not only from the sunny situation, but in winter when the fireplace is in use. Thus the environment is controlled by human skills. Custom takes precedence over innovation (the modern stove was seldom used). Furniture 'grown rich in colour with age' reflects enduring ties in the van der Merwe marriage. The van der Merwes themselves grow rich and beautiful with age. Thus the Cape Dutch gabled farm house (built by slave labour in the 17th and 18th centuries) represents, for Pauline Smith, an ideal structure in life and art; an oasis of beauty and an emblem of enlightened European civilisation in a harsh surrounding landscape. Her art explores a tension between Calvinist bigotry and a more tolerant form of Christianity. This tension is mirrored in the contrasting landscapes she presents: the arid soil and empty spaces in the short stories are balanced by the settled prosperity in the Harmonie complex: homestead, church, fertile lands and soft purple hills in the distance. The locality is specific, representing only one small section of rural South Africa. Yet incorporated into the regional quality of her writing is a broad overview which repeats the *motif* of eighteenth and nineteenth century European fiction where the country estate encompasses a complete way of life. In 'The Novel and the Nation in South Africa' (1973) Nadine Gordimer commented on the lack of cultural identity which plagues local writers:

We have no common language and we have, of course, no ethnic kinship, but, on the contrary, a constant re-definition of quite ancient ethnic differences. Our common historical experience is not one of fighting together, but against one another—white man against black, Afrikaner against Englishman. We have no common frame of political thought, but a clash of bitterly opposed ideologies. As for fear of a common foe—the foe we fear is each other.¹²

This enforced sectionalism does not affect the writing of Pauline Smith. She turns the limitation of partial knowledge into strength and she does this by painting small pictures in which the parts are harmoniously related. Gordimer's problem concerns the writer whose aims are primarily social and encyclopaedic. Smith's miniatures are complete in themselves, 'knowable communities' in art: incomplete only in an extra-literary dimension if they had to be related to the full spectrum of social history.¹³

The Grass is Singing was described by Walter Allen as one of the best first novels of our time and its popularity was established by seven re-prints in five months, reminding one of the equally immediate appeal of *The Story of an African Farm* and *Cry the Beloved Country* (1948). Lessing's novel is 'Rhodesian' but conditions in the sub-continent are so similar (Lessing herself fre-

quently refers to her setting as 'South African') that there can be no valid reason for treating it as part of a separate literature. *The Grass is Singing* examines the relations of exploitation and prophesies the break-down of a social system on the model of *The Waste Land* from which the title is taken. Parallels are numerous and explicit. Lessing sees the farm and by symbolic extension the Southern African system itself as a tottering structure propped up by a slave economy. Relationships in such a system are dependent, unequal and therefore unhealthy. Agrarian relations based on ideological premisses (a race theory) fuse with the new capitalism of the post-depression era to form the values of the settler community in Southern Rhodesia:

He was still a proper cockney, even after twenty years in Africa. He came with one idea: to make money. He made it. He made plenty . . . He farmed as if he were turning the handle of a machine which would produce pound notes at the other end . . . above all he was hard with his farm labourers. They, the geese that laid the golden eggs, were still in that state where they did not know there were other ways of living besides producing gold for other people.¹⁴

This portrait of the tough Rhodesian frontier farmer is a far cry from the humane, coffee-drinking van der Merwes of Smith's Karoo farm. Dick Slat-ter's farming ethics are founded in the merchant capitalism initiated by the large commercial companies with interests in the colonies. Their aim was to extract commodities and they were not concerned with the circulation of goods. The classic example in literature about Africa is again *Heart of Darkness* where the ruthless plunder of ivory reflects the plunder of Africa by the European powers at the beginning of the century.

Lessing's novel opens with a newspaper account of the murder of Mary Turner. The response of the district briefly sketches orthodox social attitudes in the white settler community:

Long before the murder marked them out, people spoke of the Turners in the hard, careless voices reserved for misfits, outlaws and the self-exiled. The Turners were disliked, though few of their neighbours had ever met them, or even seen them in the distance. Yet what was there to dislike? They simply 'kept themselves to themselves'; that was all. They were never seen at district dances, or fetes, or gymkhanas. They must have had something to be ashamed of; that was the feeling. It was not right to seclude themselves like that; it was a slap in the face of everyone else; what had they got to be so stuck-up about? What indeed! Living the way they did! That little box of a house—it was forgivable as a temporary dwelling, but not to live in permanently. Why, some natives (though not many, thank heavens) had houses as good; and it would give them a bad impression to see white people living in such a way.¹⁵

Here Lessing registers the defensive, rationalising tone of 'laager' mentality in white South African society. The rigid provincialism expressed in suspicious responses to unconventional behaviour patterns in others, the

underlying sense of inferiority which is constantly on the alert for insult or criticism 'it was a slap in the face for everyone else' and the taboo on white poverty illustrate the attitudes of the Slatter community. The intellectual and spiritual barrenness of the local wasteland is implicit in the nature of its diversions (district dances, fetes, gymkhanas). The Turners are disliked on the irrational grounds of their habitual absence from group activities. Thus the community imperative is not grounded in a natural gregariousness but rather in the defensive spirit of alliance against the unknown and, more specifically, against the fear of the loss of racial identity. To maintain economic and cultural superiority over the natives is the first duty of a white citizen and the Turner's poverty is resented more than their lack of sociability.

Against this background of social ostracism, Lessing describes the early life of Mary Turner. The dominant symbol of her youth is the store:

If one was looking for a symbol to express South Africa, the South Africa that was created by financiers and mine magnates, the South Africa which the old missionaries and explorers who charted the Dark Continent would be horrified to see, one would find it in the store. The store is everywhere.¹⁶

The store is the unit of white economic dominance. The store embodies some of the central contradictions which buttress white South African society. It functions both as a community centre (meeting place for families isolated by huge distances) and as a reminder of the community's collective isolation from the original homeland, England. The store is also an embodiment of the cultural deprivation, stunted emotions and mental boredom of the white farming community. It depends on trade and the early colonial custom of selling beads, copper or other trash to the natives is perpetuated in the commercial transactions at the store. The moral squalor associated with a conquering race living on the proceeds of conquest is projected into descriptions of the store itself. It is the source of Mary's unhappy childhood.

In the transition from her economically depressed childhood in a barren, isolated South African dorp, to a vacuous town life of office work, parties, films and tennis, controlled by a mindless gregariousness, she exemplifies two of the traditional modes of life in South Africa. The move from country to town represents an escape from squalor to comfort; but it is an escape which offers no liberation since she cannot face the memory of her own past but seeks constantly to bury it. The unreality of her life in town, unconnected to any of the central issues of South African society, is conveyed by her complete ignorance of the country's political structure, its larger population and its administrative processes. Here, in the arrested adolescence of the boarding house she seeks shelter from the problems of identity by negating her own. She abrogates responsibility to the institution—the 'club'. This is another version of the 'lager' mentality.

On her husband's farm and in her kitchen, Mary comes into conflict with a

series of black labourers and servants. Lessing devotes the extraordinary creative energy of the novel's final sequences to Mary's mental breakdown. As she loses her sanity she realises her own lack of individuality. The collective code of behaviour is a lifeline to which whites must cling. Once this is gone, Mary, believing herself to be a failure as a woman, is in the power of the servant, Moses. The land itself becomes a threatening place which will 'avenge' itself. The country is a foreign and nightmarish presence in her consciousness. Lessing has spoken of 'all-white African literature' as the literature of exile 'not from Europe but from Africa'.¹⁷ In Mary Turner the point is exemplified.

In *The Conservationist* Nadine Gordimer treats the farm and the 'plateland' both historically and as metaphor, a way of perceiving history. In this she follows patterns created by Schreiner and followed by Lessing. The farm is presented, not as an alternative to other social orders but as a microcosm of the social order as a single unit. Gordimer's protagonist, a sophisticated urban being, attempting to create a retreat in the country from the complications of city life, reverses the traditional literary theme of the simple countryman going to town. Mehring's responses to the country as a fresh Eden are those of a city man, whose primary energies are devoted to making money from industry. The land is purchased as a tax dodge, as a weekend refuge from the city (just as the city during the week is a relief from the farm) and finally, as a potential venue for an adulterous affair—'a place to bring a woman'.¹⁸ Thus, in numerous ways, Mehring views the farm as a viable escape from business and family responsibilities. The theme of white guilt, prominent in literature of the fifties and sixties¹⁹ is a dominant feature here. Mehring is continually on the run. The alternative orders of city and country (marriage and mistress, board room and crops) offer only a temporary and false respite since the feelings he tries to repress are internally located. His recurring impulse to tidy the house is an expression of a deeper dissatisfaction with his failures in personal relationships. The farm house, merely a place to camp, or to sleep with his lover, negates the qualities traditionally associated with the house as home. Mehring interprets freedom as non-involvement with the lives of others. He detaches himself from the responsibilities of moral choice and judgement. He remains 'outside' the country and its policies, the life of the people on his farm compound, the feelings and aspirations of his son and his mistress. He tries to eliminate the past and the corpse on his farm represents all that he attempts to run from.

The image of the nameless corpse discovered on his farm reflects Mehring's condition. The diagnostic implications of the symbol are diverse. Mehring tries to evade responsibility for the corpse:

Why should he go to look at a dead man near the river? He could just as well telephone the police at once and leave it to the proper channels that exist to deal with such matters . . . It is a sight that has no claim on him. But the dead man is on his property.²⁰

The dead man embodies that which cannot be dealt with so easily by 'the proper channels' and the corpse remains on the farm. Mehring's refusal to take responsibility for his life makes him the victim of circumstances and this proves ultimately fatal. Denial of the dead man's importance 'a sight that has no claim on him' characterises his denial of other basic truths. It is not only death that is denied but also things of value in his life; that is, personal relations. The denial of feelings which could only be negatively experienced as guilt and remorse result in cynicism—'my possessions are enough for me'²¹—and the inability to make vital connexions with others. But Mehring cannot bury his human needs deep enough; like the corpse on his property (the result of somebody else's crime), they rise to the surface and begin to stink. Repressed guilt and fear in Mehring's individual case reflect the case history of the society of which he is a member; as far as he participates in its collective codes, the white South African interprets survival as a need to deny unpleasant truths. These must be dealt with by the 'proper channels'. Individual responsibility is shifted to corporate institutions or to abstractions: the 'regime', the 'state', the 'police'. But the corpse is on Mehring's property, an unwelcome reminder of the mortality he must share with all men:

For a moment he does not know where he is—or rather who he is; but this situation in which he finds himself, staring into the eye of the earth with earth at his mouth, is strongly familiar to him. It seems to be something already inhabited in imagination.²²

Mehring's inhumanity is presented in depersonalised modes, those of metaphor and symbol. In the opening vignette of children, Gordimer displays her method of presenting intersecting symbols:

Pale freckled eggs.

Swaying over the ruts to the gates of the third pasture, Sunday morning, the owner of the farm suddenly sees: a clutch of pale freckled eggs set out before a half-circle of children. Some are squatting; the one directly behind the eggs is cross-legged, like a vendor in a market. There is pride of ownership in that grin lifted shyly to the farmer's gaze. The eggs are arranged like marbles, the other children crowd round but you can tell they are not allowed to touch unless the cross-legged one gives permission.²³

Here the eggs and marbles are associated (and this is repeated in a different context later) to suggest a thematic combination of game and life. The eggs will never hatch now and their symbolic function is transferred from traditional associations with fertility to an expression of status. The chestnut trees that Mehring plants on his farm are selected to enhance his prestige in the eyes of weekend guests. Life is treated as a game: the children play a status game and the child who possesses the eggs is in charge. But a larger question lurks behind the passage. Who owns the eggs? The child who expresses 'pride of ownership'? Mehring, on whose farm they are found or the guinea

fowl who laid them? With respect to a purely circumscribed legal system Mehring owns a certain acreage of the land. But he is an absentee landlord. The management of the farm is left to Jacobus, a wily middleman who collaborates with his white 'master' while striving at the same time to maintain credibility with the squatter community in the farm compound. The landowner's right to the land is guaranteed by a precarious political disposition:

'All to yourself. You've bought what's not for sale: the final big deal. The rains that will come in their own time, etcetera. The passing seasons . . . I'll bet you'll end up wanting to be buried there, won't you? . . . —O Mehring—her laugh—you are a hundred years too late for that end! That four hundred acres ins't going to be handed down to your kids, and your children's children . . . That bit of paper you bought yourself from the deeds office isn't going to be valid for as long as another generation. It'll be worth as much as those our grandfathers gave the blacks when they took the land from them. The blacks will tear up your bit of paper. No one'll remember where you're buried.'²⁴

Throughout the novel, which consists largely of discursive sections and narrative digressions, Mehring's defensive cynicism is off-set by his mistress's shallow liberalism. In each case point of view is fragmented and disembodied. Antonia's verbal rejection of Mehring's values is contradicted by their sexual alliance. In fact, mental conflict generates physical excitement and thus the potency of moral principle is consistently undermined. Antonia's disapproval of Mehring is defused by words which are never followed by action. Repeatedly Gordimer demonstrates that the individual living in the South African system is alienated from his own acts of speech which are collective, pre-structured. The rigid formalisation of speech codes constrains options and leads to partial vocabulary and deficient communication. Mehring and Antonia type-cast one another. He is 'capitalist' and 'racist', she is 'liberal' and 'leftist'. Communication between Mehring and Jacobus is even more restricted:

Jacobus admires the trees because, although they are nothing to see, this small, he is told they are special trees. He asks a great many questions about them; he thinks this is the way to please, he knows how to handle the farmer . . .

— I think I can taste that nuts next year —

That wily character knows he is exaggerating, he may not speak the language but he understands the conventions of polite conversation all right.²⁵

In a parallel analysis, Gordimer exposes the stock aesthetic responses of the city-bred person to the country as landscape:

Many well-off city men buy themselves farms at a certain stage in their careers—the losses are deductible from income tax and this fact co-incides with something less tangible it's understood they can now afford to indulge: a hankering to make contact with the land. It seems to be bred of making money

in industry. And it is tacitly regarded as commendable, a sign of having remained fully human and capable of enjoying the simple things of life that poorer men can no longer afford.²⁶

The view of nature expressed here is as superficial as the communication between Mehring and his manager, responses in both cases being reduced to stereotypes.

Private ownership of the land is associated, by implication, with the role of South Africa as trustee of Namibia. By introducing this particular issue, Gordimer raises the question of human and *de facto* political rights to territory:

Why do you call it 'Namibia?'

Driving along that is the subject on which he wants to ask the question, will get the urge to ask all day, meaning something different every time . . . Why call it Namibia? i.e. why that and not another invention expressive of a certain attitude towards the place The Namib doesn't conjure up jealousy in anybody. So it doesn't suggest the country belongs any more to Ovambos than Damaras, Hereros than Basters. It's demographically neutral. A desert. It's nobody's in particular.²⁷

The concluding episode of *The Conservationist* is the burial of the corpse by the local community, including Witbooi, an 'illegal' immigrant from Rhodesia who has lived in South Africa for seventeen years. As far as the authorities are concerned, he does not exist, yet, like the corpse, he is indubitably there:

There was no child of his present but their children were there to live after him. They had put him away to rest, at last; he had come back. He took possession of this earth, theirs; one of them.²⁸

The narrative statement that ultimately blacks will inherit the land negates Mehring's claim to individual possession. Much of the verbal action of the novel explores his responses to landscape and we are made to feel that whatever is left of Mehring's truncated sensibility is invested in this response. Yet his affection for the farm as empty space is sham since it excludes the people who populate it. Gordimer makes the point that however spacious the African landscape may be, communication with soil is no substitute for communication with people. The human drama that activates life in and around the compound; the Indian store keeper and his family, Witbooi, a man without papers, Phineas's wife who deals in witchcraft, portray a struggle for survival at subsistence levels unknown to Mehring and his weekend set. Beneath the serene skies and temperate sun, the farm as 'setting', life is crude, violent and Gordimer registers the details of the labourers' existence more accurately than any previous South African novelist has done.

A further dimension obtrudes. The idea of nature itself, as ultimate arbiter of human fate; 'nature' as the land itself, as universal energy, seasonal

cycles, the growth and decay of vegetation; timeless and unchanging aspects of contour and climate, geological time—indifferent to social permutations—these are concepts belonging to literary convention. A discrepancy shows between Gordimer's social and aesthetic treatment of her theme. Superimposed on the social theme, which exposes the dehumanising aspects of the South African system, is the artistic urge to structure a universal ideal, an innocent, illusory world beckoning to the fallen protagonist. Mehring believes in the ethics of production and is lulled to a false sense of security by the recurring patterns of work on the farm. But this orderly routine thinly papers the cracks. Beneath is human turmoil, produced by unrealistic attitudes to the people who work the land. The notion of the superiority of space itself over the people who bend it to their needs is offered as an alternative to the social pessimism generated by the novel's action, rather than as a coexisting truth. In spite of this, Gordimer has perhaps succeeded in 'laying the ghost of the pastoral in South African literature'.²⁹ She has recognised the pervading presence of social discord and individual alienation in the South African system. There is no such thing as an innocent countryside, a pastoral or traditional 'homeland' to which the victim of industrial capitalism can escape. Mehring's illusion of freedom on the farm is in fact an extension of a repressive condition that is all-penetrating and absolute in the lives of white and black alike.

In the work of Bessie Head, a political refugee from South Africa, we meet an alternative treatment of the exiled consciousness. The salvation denied to Waldo, Mary Turner, and Mehring, who must act within the boundaries of a closed system, becomes possible for Head's protagonists, who flee across the border to Botswana. The conviction that freedom is self-definition in terms of a universal condition can be expressed in a free society:

It seemed almost incidental that he was African. So vast had his inner perceptions grown over the years that he preferred an identification with mankind to an identification with a particular environment.³⁰

This view, endorsed by the narrator, would constitute evasion and passivity in the circumscribed worlds depicted by Lessing and Gordimer. Head's characters, having established their Africanness by moving out of the arena where it is denied, can at last concentrate on achieving human rather than national identity. Working within a context in which basic human decencies can be assumed, Bessie Head writes descriptive fiction with the aim of revealing to her reader how people live and think in a country without a recorded literature. As an outsider in terms of traditions and language, she is especially suited to the task. The understanding of traditional African society is an extension rather than a primary function of her experience. Her protagonists are outsiders, new arrivals who try to forge a life for themselves in a poor,

under-populated, third-world country, where traditional and modern attitudes to soil and society are in conflict. These are familiar themes in African writing, but Bessie Head may be distinguished from other African writers in at least two respects. She does not idealise the African past and she avoids a discussion of white imperialist domination and its consequences in Africa. Botswana is always presented with the alternative South African order implicitly in mind and the international group of people who come together to run communal farms in her ideal villages represents a way of thinking which incorporates national and racial identity into a composite, extra-national humanity. In Bessie Head's novels the farm is equated with sanity and wholesomeness. The nervous, unstable protagonist of *A Question of Power* regains personal equilibrium through application to gardening on the co-operative:

So tobacco, tomatoes, broccoli, peanuts, all grew happily side by side in her garden. Tobacco was for snuff, peanuts for cooking oil and peanut butter, tomatoes were 'specialities', and broccoli might just like to grow in Motabeng.³¹

A sceptical reader might question the hypothesis that broccoli could be made to grow in Botswana, but the freedom of choice conferred on this vegetable—'might just like to grow in Motabeng'—is a transference of the writer's freedom to structure her world view in new ways, unconnected with the pressing social dilemmas in South African society that make of art in that country a prescriptive task. The optimistic agricultural activities described in *A Question of Power* are balanced against the exploration of darker themes:

In writing *A Question of Power* I tried to communicate something about evil—the horror that exists behind the everyday affairs of man—and in this way I was able to lever myself out of it.³²

The horror is set against the farm, not integral to it, and it is in this respect that Bessie Head's treatment of farm as locale differs from that of the white writers we have discussed. Mehring's production ethic—'the farm, to justify its existence and that of those who work on it, must be a going concern'³³—is applied by the workers in Bessie Head's village communities: but the concept of capital growth as an end in itself is replaced by a view of the land as the source of food for the people on it. A simple form of socialism is operative in Golema Mmidi (*When Rain Clouds Gather*) and Motabeng. Golema Mmidi is an idealised concept of the village as a self-sufficient unit in which people work together towards common goals. It is superior to others in Botswana because it has acquired a system of permanent settlement:

Normally, in other parts of the country, whole families would migrate in November to their lands on the outskirts of the villages to help with the plowing and planting Not so with the people of Golema Mmidi Unlike the migratory villagers who set up crude, ramshackle buildings on the edge of their lands, they built the large, wide, neatly thatched huts of permanent residence.³³

Thus in Golema Mmidi the ideal of permanent settlement, forever eluding the 'displaced' protagonist of white farm literature, is finally realised: we return to a vision of the pastoral.

NOTES

1. Doris Lessing, *Going Home* London, 1957. p. 12.
2. Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* London, 1973. p. 16.
3. Doris Lessing, *The Grass is Singing* London, 1950. p. 242.
4. Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* London, 1902.
Watching a coast as it slips by you is like thinking about an enigma. There it is before you—smiling, frowning, inviting, grand, mean, insipid, or savage, and always mute with an air of whispering, Come and find out. This one was almost featureless, as if still in the making, with an aspect of monotonous grimness. The edge of a colossal jungle, so dark green as to be almost black, fringed with white surf, ran straight like a ruled line, far, far away, along a blue sea whose glitter was blurred by a creeping mist. p. 13.
5. *The Country and the City* p. 3.
6. Olive Schreiner, *The Story of an African Farm* London 1883, pp. 35-36.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 99.
8. Coleridge, "Dejection: An Ode".
9. Pauline Smith, *The Beadle*, Cape Town, 1926. p. 27.
10. Pauline Smith, *The Little Karoo*, Cape Town, 1925.
11. *The Beadle* pp. 14-15.
12. Nadine Gordimer, In *African Writers on African Writing* ed. G.D. Killam 1973. p. 67.
13. *The Country and the City*.
Most novels are in some sense knowable communities. It is part of a traditional method—an underlying stance and approach—that the novelist offers to show people and their relationships in essentially knowable and communicable ways. p. 214.
14. *The Grass is Singing*, p. 15.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 11.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 36.
17. Doris Lessing, 'Desert Child', Book review in *New Statesman* 56. Nov 1958.
18. Nadine Gordimer, *The Conservationist* London 1974. p. 43.
19. Rowland Smith, 'The Johannesburg Genre' in *Exile and Tradition* ed. R. Smith Dalhousie, 1976. pp. 116-7.
20. *The Conservationist* p. 12.
21. *Ibid.* p. 64.
22. *Ibid.* p. 39.
23. *Ibid.* p. 4.
24. *Ibid.*, pp. 167-8.
25. *Ibid.*, pp. 210-1.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 20.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 132.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 252.
29. A.E. Voss, 'A Generic Approach to the South African Novel in English' in *U.C.T. Studies in English*, Cape Town, 1976.
30. Bessie Head, *A Question of Power*, London, 1973. p. 12.
31. *Ibid.*, p. 163.
32. Bessie Head, Interview 'In Exile and Community in Southern Africa: The novels of Bessie Head', Jean Marquard *London Magazine* Vol. 18. Dec 1978.
33. Bessie Head, *When Rain Clouds Gather* London, 1969. p. 37.