

**Preface to**  
**“FOOLS” AND OTHER STORIES**  
**A Dissertation Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences**  
**University of Denver**  
**In Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree Doctor of Philosophy**  
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**March 1983**

These five stories are part of a long project in which I am attempting to explore imaginatively various aspects of life in the community I grew up in South Africa. The first part, which these five stories cover, deals with the themes of early childhood and adolescence. In the second part I hope to explore adult life up to old age; lastly, I want to imaginatively study the movement of social change. I have had this project in mind for many years. The more I think about it, the more it seems to grow and to subject itself to so many diverse influences that it seems to be one of those things that will take a lifetime to complete.

Charterston, where all but one of the stories in the first part are set, is a township of Nigel, a small city about thirty miles east of Johannesburg. The city stands at the eastern periphery of the Witwatersrand industrial complex. Although Nigel has a lot more industry now, when I was growing up there, we were surrounded by much farmland. As a result, I have found there an interesting mixture of urban and rural mentalities. This mixture, together with the geographical position of the city in relation to the metropolis, has contributed to the community's sense of its own smallness and isolation. As far as I am aware, these stories represent the first sustained, serious efforts at written fiction to have ever come out of that small community. If the stories ever do get published together as they appear here, whatever their quality, they might represent a major literary event in the history of the Charterston community. My awareness of this possibility means that in writing these stories, I have been constantly alert to the presence of an attendant mixture of exhilaration and anxiety resulting from the sense of my being something of a pioneer.

The decision, and that is what it was, to write about life in a small, rather parochial community, was not an easy one to make. It is as if in all the years the project has been in my mind, I was trying to convince myself of its validity. The reason for this is that much of South African fiction is set in the big metropolitan centres of Johannesburg, Durban, or Cape Town. Where small rural or semi-urban communities provide the setting, the protagonists, very early in the story, are quickly whisked away to the cities. Alan Paton's *Cry the Beloved Country* is the famous example of the latter kind. Many similar examples are to be found in Sizulu, Sixhosa, and Sesotho literatures.

The result of this kind of literary tradition, so lacking in variety, is that it tended to exercise a tremendous tyrannical hold on my imagination, especially since, when I began to write, I had no extensive experience of life in the big cities. It was as if there were an unwritten law which stipulated that nothing outside of the metropolitan cities was valid for artistic treatment. In other words

history, in the word's broadest meaning, seemed to exist only in the large urban centres. So, being "outside" history, I instinctively tried to turn away from and to suppress the local richness of my upbringing, one which had nurtured my imagination, and struggled to adopt a new, often imaginary sense of place. Thus, the economic, political, and cultural dominance of metropolitan over rural or semi-urban life could also be exerted over the creative imagination in terms of the availability of "valid" artistic choices. This is the case particularly with regard to content and theme. One of the aims of my project, therefore, is to deliberately work against such a tendency. But although my stories are not situated in rural communities as such, I have made a move away from the metropolis.

When I had made my decision, I then became aware of having inadvertently entered a field of concern much wider than the decision to write about a small community. I had to ask some serious questions about the state and the role of art in a single-mindedly tyrannical society such as South Africa. In a society where politics is as pervasive as it is in South Africa and in fact a matter of life and death; where having ideas is dangerous; where there is great pressure on one to identify oneself with one cause or another; and where ordinary human acts such as going home after work, eating or having friends, are subject to political control, then most decidedly, the decision to write, quite apart from any inner compulsion to do so, is a political act. Consequently, my thoughts (as well as that of other South African writers) about the validity of art in such a situation are not an attempt to engage in an abstract philosophical search. In this kind of political situation, I found that the writer of fiction has to determine what his art has really become, and what effect it can have on society. In trying to look into these issues, I soon realized that I was faced with a situation in which literature seems decidedly a victim more affected than affecting.

Since social obsession with politics, particularly in its vulgar forms, preoccupies almost every aspect of people's thoughts and feelings, both those of the oppressor, and of the oppressed, the horizons of consciousness, in terms of the availability of creative choices, have been severely limited. The result is that in a society where the influence of North American and European capitalist consumerism has become a dominant feature of life, a competition has developed in the "marketing" of oppression by "The Establishment",<sup>i</sup> on the one hand, and the "marketing" of resistance to oppression by the "Subverting Forces"<sup>ii</sup> on the other hand.

For example, the Establishment (what South Africans call The System) attempts to manipulate thinking by establishing the validity of its rule through constant propaganda. It also tries to create an aura of militarism, and an ideology in which technology, particularly of the military kind, is supposed to hold ultimate solutions.

It will grant false independence to African nationalities in order to decrease the numbers of Africans in what are called "white" areas. Language too is turned into a useful tool in the efforts of The Establishment to make the status quo acceptable: "Apartheid" becomes "separate but equal development," arid "Reserves for Africans become "Homelands"; political opponents become "communists", "terrorists", "agitators", and "trouble-makers". All such efforts at social control are backed by a carefully nurtured culture of consumerism through which people's perceptions of real social problems are blunted by the promise of an abundant material life.

The "Subverting Forces," on the other hand, show an equal reliance on the verbal validation: The System is described as "the racist, barbaric, fascist regime" as repetitively as possible. Other catch phrases are "neo-Nazi barbarism", and its "brute force;" "fascist tyranny and barbarism"; "outpost of

imperialism”; and “stinking ideology”. The language of inspiration is equally canned: “the progressive forces”; “comradeship ... in the trenches of freedom”; “mobilization of workers”; and a variety of other similar expressions which have been made substitutes for creative and analytical thinking. It is not that these expressions do not point to truths about the political situation in South Africa but that they fail to illuminate the complexity of the evil so that it can be organically understood through a participatory intellectual and emotional engagement. The result is that, most tragically, the aridity of the The System appears to have been transferred into the very armoury of resistance. Evidently, what long ago became The System’s convention of oppression, seems to have produced its own antitheses: the convention of resistance, which appears to have ossified into a non-organic concern with political vulgarism. The overall effect of this situation is that those areas of life in which it is lived spontaneously and not according to some verbal formula, begin to hold no interest for people, and may even be actively discouraged. One effect is that such spontaneity is prevented from becoming a form of triumph in its own right. Thus we have for the oppressed, a kind of self-imposed oppression in which resistance to state oppression does not fundamentally liberate them. This lack of a triumphant transcendence over oppression means that the oppressed permit themselves no more than the skill to voice predictable protest. This surely must represent the triumph of The System at the highest level, for the game, after all, is being played on its own familiar terms.

The effect of this situation on South African fiction is that it has led to the predominance of what Es’kia Mphahlele has called “the underdog” character.<sup>iii</sup> Basically, the underdog’s behaviour is that of a victim. Consequently, situations are designed which will demonstrate his suffering, or his human deprivation. Briefly summarized, the formula and its variations could go this way: if the victim lives in the ghetto, he will be violent: if he has no Job, he will steal; if he does not pay his rent, corrupt municipal officials will have him evicted; if he does not carry his identification papers, he will be arrested; and if he is arrested, he will be sentenced to work under slave conditions on some Boer’s farm; if he falls in love with a white woman, that affair is doomed; if he comes in from the rural areas, he will surely become a criminal, and if he starts frequenting the shebeens, he will surely be unfaithful to his wife. There are a variety of other predictable situations. In other words, characters matter only to the extent that within these theorems of fiction, they prove the existence of oppression and all its debilitating effects in fiction of this type. Their total existence is confined within the predictable. Mphahlele notes in The African Image that, “it is this kind of protest which limits the emotional and intellectual range of characterization.”<sup>iv</sup>

Mphahlele goes on to give an example of a well known story, “Mob Passion”, by Can Temba. If the story were to be reduced to a formula, it would be characterized as follows: if the character lives in the ghetto and is a Zulu, then his sworn enemy will be a Mosotho, or a Xhosa, or a member of any other nationality other than his own. We have in this story a Romeo and Juliet situation which a faction fight results in tragedy. Mphahlele comments about the following extract that it “typifies this violence and the sensationalism that has reduced it (‘Mob Passion’) to cliché:

Mapula acted. Quickly she picked up the axe whilst the mob was withdrawing from its prey, several of them bespattered with blood. With the axe in her hand, Mapula pressed through them until she reached the inner, sparser group. She saw Alpheus [one of her faction] spitting upon Linga’s [her sweetheart’s] battered body. He turned with a guttural cackle – He-he-he! He-he-he! – into the descending axe. It sank into his neck and down he went. She stepped on his chest and pulled out the axe. The blood gushed out all over her face and clothing. That

evil-looking countenance she gradually turned to the stunned crowd, half lifting the axe and walking slowly but menacingly towards the largest group. They retreated – a hundred and twenty men and women retreated before this devil-possessed woman with the ghastly appearance. But then she saw the mangled body of the man she loved and her nerve snapped. The axe slipped from her hand and she dropped on Linga's body, crying piteously.<sup>v</sup>

Quite evidently, the centre of attention here is not the characters as such but the amount of violence they are forced into. Having noted the violence, we are supposed to conclude logically that it is the condition of oppression that makes people behave this way. The impact of the story remains at the level of social propaganda. The effect of such a story is to shock the reader without providing him, at the same time, a deeper understanding of the characters' motives.

The ethos of conventionalized resistance seems to have brought fiction to an almost obsessive immersion into the dramatically shocking aspects of oppression, an immersion that seems to become a rather macabre justification for living. It is as if the writers of such stories were saying: "You are truly alive when you are caught in such situations."

Perhaps at the root of this problem for writers in South Africa is what T.T. Moyana discusses in an essay called "The Problem of a Creative Writer in South Africa." He considers the problematic relationship between art and social reality in South Africa:

An additional difficulty to the creative artist in South Africa, especially the black writer, is that life itself is too fantastic to be outstripped by the creative imagination. Nkosi calls the theme of the absurd a theme of daily living in South Africa. Indeed, many writers of the absurd school would find their plots too realistic to startle anybody into serious questioning of their deeper meaning. How would the quarrel over a bench in Edward Albee's Zoo Story startle anybody in a country where thousands of people have been daily quarrelling over who should sit on a particular park bench, and the country's parliament has had to legislate on the matter? That's much more startling than Albee's little quarrel between two men. And Kafka himself would not have bettered the case told by Lewis Nkosi. He was arrested by a policeman who then phoned his superior to ask, "What shall I charge him with?" Or the incident of a white man and a coloured woman who were tried for being caught kissing. The court got bogged down over the question of whether the kiss was 'platonic or passionate.' One white reporter who covered the case for a local newspaper wrote: "Lawyers and laymen are certain that the Minister of Justice will now have to consider an amendment to the law which will define the various degrees of kissing from the platonic to the passionate."<sup>vi</sup>

It is clear from this that state repression, in what Dostoevsky, describing Stavrogin in The Possessed, called "rational malice," makes every kind of horror possible, and that consequently, the failure of much South African writing that has attempted to grapple with these issues has been the assumption on the part of a large number of writers that they can, through mere mimetic representation, out do this horrible reality at its own game. In this situation, comments Lewis Nkosi, "it is difficult to see why we should give up the daily newspaper in favour of creative fiction."<sup>vii</sup>

Where South African racism makes every kind of horror possible, daily life is often so overwhelming in its ugliness that writers, relying almost exclusively on the given facts of external social tension, do not give themselves enough time to reflect and, consequently, to fully appreciate that tension in

fiction is generated within specific human situations. Many fictional characters therefore, lack the kind of inner life that would give them depth. In a negative social reality that seeks only to produce controlled human responses, interiority and spontaneous behaviour have been rendered inconsequential. The restoration of such interiority would enable the individual character to be seen to respond both intellectually and emotionally to his immediate environment. Outward behaviour will then be seen as the externalisation of will and motive in action.

The aim is total engagement. Such interiority restores complexity to human action. In other words, it is not enough for a writer to show in a story that a particular character is not allowed to sit on a certain bench; nor is it enough to show that as the character approaches that bench, she is feeling very tired from having been overworked at low wages. Rather, it needs also be pointed out that as she absentmindedly sits on the forbidden bench, she is also thinking of her daughter's coming wedding, or of the expensive glass that her youngest child broke that morning (the kind of glass used only when visitors are around – so how on earth am I going to welcome people into my house, now?), or that she had some fruit to take to a friend in hospital. There are endless situations that would enable the character before us to become a more complex, more challenging person, one who is not just supposed to be important and interesting only when she responds directly to oppression. Indeed, the more a writer works out such details, the more he will realize that, in fact, the bench becomes relatively unimportant. What is happening here is that the writer makes a radical shift in imaginative emphasis, away from the conventional symbol of negation, towards a more complex, more interesting living being who has, indeed, somehow overcome the symbol with her more compellingly intimate preoccupations. The writer brings the deceptively unsensational items of behaviour more and more into the reach of active consciousness.

Jack Mitchell, in a discussion of some fiction by a Soviet author, makes some pertinent remarks in this regard:

The greatness of a book like The Young Guard lies to no small degree in the way the author does not only show the kind of existence the young Soviet patriots are fighting against plus the fight at the highest most organized level, but, through revealing to us 'moments of syntheses' in the midst of the fascist oppression, when the young people meet together, where the forces of oppression are for the moment pushed to the sidelines, when the lads and girls fleetingly live their own kind of lives on their own terms, we are made aware of the kind of life that they are fighting for. In this way their struggle at the highest level gains tremendously in pathos, in emotional content; their heroism at this level is seen as the logical conclusion of their all-sided humanity.<sup>viii</sup>

The importance of Mitchell's remarks lies in the fact that I am not here calling for the writer's indulgence in some kind of abstract humanism about the inner life and the human condition. Rather, I am calling for a full development of fictional characters so that they are rendered as far as possible in "their rich, manifold, indestructible, creative life illuminated from the inside."<sup>ix</sup> Nor does this kind of illumination mean the abandonment of direct and legitimate political concerns, or the denial of the necessity for the overthrow of tyranny. Rather, it is to rescue the humanity of the oppressed by bringing it more fully into the centre of active social consciousness, so that political enterprise is made more creative and more engaging as a worthwhile experience. Only in this way can the reader be given a convincing sense of how people generate ideas and build visions from concrete fact of

their total existence. The aim is to put the bench referred to above into a richer context of the wholeness of social behaviour.

If I were to look for a comparable situation in the world, I would have to cite the example of Afro-American fiction. It seems to me that Afro-American literature reached its maturity when it sought to address itself to the totality of Afro-American experience, in which political consciousness became one factor among many others in the Afro-American struggle for liberation in the United States. This development is a reflection of the Afro-American's growing confidence in his ability to define the world with the validity of his total experience. Indeed, this is a political achievement at the highest and the most profound level. I am thinking here of the writings of James Alan McPherson, Toni Cade Bambara, Ernest Gaines, Toni Morrison, Gayle Jones, Ishmael Reed, and John A. Williams. In the writings of these writers, the goals for the collective liberation of Afro-Americans have not been abandoned, rather, they have been given fuller and more compelling substance.

The significance of my decision to explore life in a small community such as Charterston, should now have become evident. If the overall South African social reality is itself a sensational "fantasy" that makes imaginative reality somewhat superfluous, and encourages in it an ethos of superficiality, then it seems to me, that such superficiality is constantly challenged and invalidated in small communities. There, interpersonal relationships tend to be mediated less by conventional, technological manipulations of industrial society, than by the more deeply felt and more immediate human conflicts. This is not to deny the existence of the latter kind of mediation in the urban centres, but rather to assert that a small place gives me a ready-made opportunity and concentration to experiment with a new aesthetic. Central to this new aesthetic is the positing of the deceptively ordinary, the spontaneous, and the unpredictable, as revolutionary in its unsensational refusal to be packaged according to the Establishment's ethos of consumerism. Such an aesthetic also forces me to come to terms with such issues as the effectiveness of the short story in such a negative social environment as the South African one; the role of innovation in technique, particularly in the context of the relationship between form and content, and lastly, the problems of characterization.

What I realized early as I was writing these stories was the near impossibility of writing the "real" short story – the short short story. I found that in view of the tasks I had set myself, it was difficult for me to contain my materials within "acceptable" limits. I tended towards expansiveness. Indeed, beginning with "The Test" the stories get longer and longer until I finally cross the barrier entirely with "Uncle," to write the novella, which for Henry James, according to R.P. Blackmur, "was a small reflector capable of illuminating or mirroring a great deal of material."<sup>x</sup> I found, however, that my anxiety over the need to write a "proper" short story meant that I was constantly aware of the form's characteristic concentration and compactness – which gave me the necessary technical discipline – while the longer form allowed me expansiveness of material.

This unity of concentration and expansiveness enabled me to avoid a few serious compositional problems. Firstly, I avoided the temptation to want to display a technical virtuosity in which form, in a rarefied manner, completely overwhelms content. One result of such a tendency is that a reader of a story written in this manner can become more aware of the brilliance of the author than of the compulsiveness of his story, as if it is not the story that matters, but how it has been written. In this regard, the technical "games" of Barth or Barthleme or Coover, for example, do not interest me

beyond my awareness of them as “technical experiments.” Beyond that, it begins to look as if these “technical experiments” are an artistic version, in a consumer society, of the technological ethos of innovation and more innovation, in order to satisfy nothing more than the appetites of the consumer for more and more sensually stimulating commodities. The usefulness of the commodities is not as important as their newness. Perhaps the state of North American civilization provides ample leisure for such artistic preoccupation.

The second problem I tried to deal with is the tendency of the short story’s working towards a concentration on disembodied detail. If one can regard the novel as synthetic, as bringing together many diverse experiences into an organic whole, then the short story tends to be isolating, concentrating on a single incident and working by an economy and high suggestiveness that tends towards poetry. The degree of economy and suggestiveness that an author can permit himself depends not only on the internal, structural demands of the story, but also on the extent of illumination the author seeks to provide for the reader in the context of a wide range of shared social assumptions. The isolating nature of the short story does not fully satisfy my desire for a fuller structural understanding of people in society, and for the need towards the realization of fuller relationships between things. This leads me to speculate that perhaps the short story, in its most concentrated form, will flourish only where there is a broad range of shared social assumptions on a variety of issues. A reader in this situation will resort to a broad, easily recognizable social code to fill out the larger details around an isolated incident, towards which his interest is being directed. There may also be shared assumptions about art, in which case the reader fills in the missing holes with the help of an artistic code. But where such social and artistic assumptions are lacking, particularly in societies torn by strife and massive social upheavals, or in culturally deprived societies such as South Africa, the novel, in its totalizing expansiveness, provides the necessary syntheses. Short stories on the other hand, by concentrating on isolated details, may serve not to illuminate, but to reinforce the sense of social frustration and disharmony stemming from an intuitively felt inability to control the disparate and conflicting elements of life. After all, it does no good to have a sense of control over the isolated incident without, at the same time, having a comforting sense that the broader situation is under control. In this regard, I have always felt a need to understand the whole rather than the detail, except when the detail is narratively essential.

I note with interest that South African stories which have interested me most have been stories that have tended towards the novella. For example, Alex La Guma’s “A Walk in the Night” falls in this category; so do the following among Es’kia Mphahlele’s stories: “Mrs.Plum,” “In Corner B,” and “Grieg on a Stolen Piano.” Perhaps the only way to write short stories in such a situation as I have described, is to write them in a group such that they echo each other. James Joyce, for example, in Dubliners conceived of the project as a whole, so that although each story can be read by itself, it really is part of a larger synthesis. He then went on to write novels.

The last problem I have tried to avoid is the opposite of the first: the dominance of content over form. This trap, as I have tried to show, is easy to fall into in the situation I come from. It is easy for the writer to think that the details of the story will tell the story for him. Technique should very much be part of the compositional exercise. Indeed, experimenting with elements of technique, point of view, for example, and being aware that there could be many ways of telling a story, is itself an exercise of freedom. It is part of the task of opening up the imagination in order to transcend the severe limitations on life imposed by strict political control. Thus the creative act can itself be an act

of liberation. But, of course, experimenting with technique does not become an end in itself, for art and the broader social interest are inseparable in that situation.

Although I have thought about this creative project for many years, a number of influences have helped to give it shape in my mind, particularly this first part which deals with childhood and adolescence. The similarity of design with James Joyce's Dubliners will already have made itself evident. It was, in fact, Dubliners that gave me a real sense of how to approach the project. Joyce gave me a method by which I could organize my materials. Although I have broadly adopted the four-part structure of Joyce's work, I have not taken his philosophical intention. Certainly, Charterston is not meant to be some kind of symbolic quintessence of South African life, nor is it particularly indicative of moral paralysis, although a story such as "Fools" is intended to heavily suggest such a possibility. Rather, as I have already indicated, my intention is to delve as far as possible into the essence behind the conventional masks of oppression; to reveal a complexity there, a multi-sidedness designed to open up the horizons of consciousness; to suggest that even for those struggling for freedom, it is to frustrate that struggle to attempt to subject living to easy formulae, and that if, under the inevitable demand of social praxis, formulae have to be devised, they must be preceded by as inclusive an understanding as possible.

My interest in the theme of childhood goes a long way back. Most of my early poetry I wrote, when I first began writing, was almost exclusively about children. It was while I was busy composing those poems that I came across the work of Bernardo Honwana, a Mozambican writer. The title story of his collection called We Killed Mangy-Dog had such a hold on my imagination that I sensed I would never write another poem about childhood again. Instead, I would try fiction. We killed Mangy-Dog is a fascinating story of childhood innocence, compassion, indifference, anxiety, and cruelty, all of which became a concrete metaphor for those states of mind and feeling in the adult world. They all emerge in the story when it has to be decided whether Mangy Dog, an old sick dog, has to be put to sleep. This is a story whose symbolic qualities resemble those of Golding's in Lord of the Flies, but in much more subtle, much less imposing manner. I was struck by the story's narrative immediacy, its sensitive handling of children as if they were telling the story of their lives in an unself-consciousness dramatic performance.

Several other writers who wrote about children interested me, but in a manner supplementary to Honwana's impact on my imagination. I was much inspired by Ernest Gaines's "The Sky is Gray," a wonderful story of childhood's initiation into the world of adult responsibility. The relationship between the boy and his uncle in my "Uncle," parallels that which exists between the boy and his mother in the Gaines story. I have indulged much in Dylan Thomas's exuberant verbal and descriptive play in Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog; have been much moved by the haunting philosophical power of Lord of the Flies; have been wholesomely charmed by Camara Laye's celebration of childhood in L'Enfant Noir. I have also enjoyed the rich, yet tragic abundance of life in Maxim Gorky's Childhood; the moral lyricism of Sibusiso Nyembezi's Mntanami, Mntanami, one of the high points in Zulu literature thus far; the carefree innocence of Narayan's Swami and Friends. It can be seen that all these stories and novels deal with a wide range of childhood situations from the innocent celebratory lyricism of L'Enfant Noir, to the social and moral heaviness of Gorky's Childhood. All these writings have outlined for me the richness of the imaginative field I too wanted to plough.

Thematically, I have grouped the stories in this collection into three categories. The first category consists of “The Test” and “The Music of the Violin,” both of which were written as attempts to depict that aspect of growing up in which children become more aware of an inner potential in them which leads to a greater self-awareness. In the first story, the boy “finds himself” through participating in an adventurous exercise which, at first, begins as a need to show off to others that he can do it. But as he is running by himself in the cold and in the rain, the task becomes one in which he has to prove himself no longer to others, but to himself. Endurance becomes crucial to success and self-estimation. But of course, he does not depend entirely on himself – he can never depend entirely on himself. He is also made by the world around him. It is also the pressure of what society thinks of his own abilities that helps to carry him through. In this way, I tried to arrive at this synthesis between the self-in-itself, and the self-in-society.

“The Music of the Violin” is the only story in this selection that is not set in Charterston. A friend of mine who lives in Johannesburg, told me the story of how children of middle-class Africans in Soweto, were constantly harassed as they walked through the streets with their musical instruments. So, try as I might to put the story in Charterston, it refused altogether. So I gave in to Soweto. But the story really is an integral part of the others. In “The Music of the Violin,” it is the act of revolt at the end of the story which forces the boy away from passiveness towards an assertive confrontation with the world. The outside world, in this story, in comparison to that in the other stories of early youth, has become increasingly hostile: a condition which prepares us for the world in “Fools.” As far as technique is concerned, “Music of the Violin” was more consciously experimental. There was in its writing a deliberate intention by me to use flashback as a device for suspense; to delay the ultimate moment of revolt to the very end, and in the process, to accumulate the sense of agony in the boy’s mind to the extent that it became unbearable. When the revolt finally comes, it is supposed to prove most liberating for the boy.

The second category of stories concerns the world as it is mirrored almost passively in the mind of childhood. Here I am thinking of “The Prophetess” and “Uncle”. In these stories I was fascinated by the possibility of ironic mirroring in which the immediacy of lucid childhood perceptions gives us the fullest impact of the world with an equanimity that enables us to see the old anew, and to discover a freshness which leaves us somewhat more accepting. In his preface to What Maisie Knew, Jones remarks:

No themes are so human as those that reflect for us, out of the confusion of life, the close connexion of bless and bale, of the things that help with the things that hurt, so dangling before us for ever that bright hard metal of so strange an alloy, one face of which is somebody’s right and ease and the other somebody’s pain and wrong.<sup>xi</sup>

Thus, the almost unmediated perceptions of childhood about its surroundings, enable the adult observer to reflect and reappraise without feeling intimidated. Indeed, if there is anything intimidating, it is the lucid image of adulthood itself both in its triumphs and in its failures as they are reflected in the mind of childhood. The consciousness of childhood therefore represents a non-judgmental intelligence whose reflected images of society are thrown back at society with a silent, yet urgent indictment on the one hand, or with a comforting reassurance on the other. I made the effort in “The Test” and in “The Music of the Violin” to get at a similar immediacy of perception, but I like to think that in these stories, the young protagonists are much too intimately involved in the

events around them, whereas in “The Prophetess” and “Uncle” the informing intelligence tends towards dispassionate observation. In that way, the irony in the protagonists’ observations is sharpened.

“The Prophetess” tries to depict the conflicting worlds of mystery and rationality in a contest that is endlessly intriguing to the child. The mysterious side is probably what is responsible for the folk quality of imagination that a child grows into in its community, and one which makes the age of innocence unforgettable both for its pleasures and its terrors. It is, I believe precisely this folk quality that gives any place the stamp of its uniqueness. And it is a uniqueness that is ultimately inexplicable. That is why I did not try to resolve the central issues in this story in any definite way. I tried to give the sense of a rich and unending problematic. Even more interestingly problematic for me is the syncretism in the Prophetess’s beliefs as well as in the boy’s mother’s mixing of healing methods. In general, though, as Wole Soyinka points out, in African culture “the mystical and the visionary are merely areas of reality like any other.”<sup>xii</sup> This constant movement from one plane of reality to another brings out a form of social imagination that retains for me a never ending fascination. That is why, in this regard, I have found nothing but sheer enchantment in Marquez’s One Hundred Years of Solitude. I have found it also in the pervasive luxuriance of setting in such Caribbean novels as George Lamming’s In the Castle of My Skin, Michael Thewell’s The Harder They Come, and in Joseph Zobel’s Black Shack Alley. In these novels, the richness of vegetation which evokes a pervasive sense of earthy abundance seems to induce a colourful social imagination that has found its visual quintessence in Haitian painting. There, the aura of myth on the one hand, and naturalistic representation on the other, interact so intimately that the difference seems to have disappeared altogether. It is the same quality of imagination that we find in two African classics: Amos Tutuola’s The Palmwine Drinkard, and Thomas Mofolo’s Chaka. Indeed, this quality of social imagination is so abundant in Africa that it may well influence one of the imaginative directions my own work might take in the future.

“Uncle,” as I have already stated, runs parallel to Ernest Gaines’s “The Sky is Gray.” In fact, I owe the episodic arrangement of “Uncle” to the Gaines story. “Uncle” was designed to be a series of felt and observed moments at a particular time in the life of the young protagonist. My emphasis was not so much in telling a story in the conventional, linear sense, but in presenting dramatically, a series of significant moments. It is the passage of days that provides narrative sense, not so much the events themselves. The intended effect is to focus attention on the significance of individual events at the moment they are occurring, to enjoy the fullness of those events while maintaining sufficient interest in what is to follow. In fact, whenever I read the story I find that it ended just when my frustration with the lack of some narrative “significance” began to work against it. Basically the story is meant to be a celebration of family life, I was attempting to explore the idea that responsibility is meaningless if it has no inter-personal intention, and beyond that, a social one.

It might be interesting to note that the first two drafts of “Uncle” were in the omniscient voice. But a few days after I had finished the second draft, I came across Faulkner’s As I Lay Dying, and the impact of Darl’s voice on me told me that “Uncle” had to be a different story. The change in voice was going to give me just the kind of immediacy I have found somewhat elusive in “The Test” and in “The Music of the Violin.”

Standing in a category of its own is “Fools” in which the young man, Zani, is supposed to come to a realization not of his strengths, but of his weaknesses, so that he can become stronger. In its original conception, “Fools” had three adolescent characters. I threw away the other two, however, because I decided that the story might have more social impact if there was some interaction between a young adolescent, and an older person through whose voice we could see the young man. I attempted, in Teacher Zamani, Nick’s voice in The Great Gatsby; but I found that what I had intended to be a somewhat distant peripheral voice, entered much more into the events of the story. On account of the presence of two major characters in “Fools,” I see the story as a transition between part one and part two of my project.

“Fools” is the story of two people. One, a middle aged teacher who tried and failed his opportunity to change his community, and now sees in the other character, a young man who has similar aims, some kind of moral reincarnation. If there is a “political” story in this selection, it is this one. There were a number of goals I set myself in writing this story. Firstly, I deliberately chose a political theme to see to what extent I was going to avoid the usual pitfalls of such a theme, How was I going to walk the tight rope between intense personal involvement and artistic distance? I wanted to create balanced characters with an individuality of their own, so that I could avoid the trap of making people mere items in a moral debate. Secondly, this was also an experiment at philosophical self confrontation. The main character in Bloke Modisane’s “The Dignity of Begging,” looks at himself and says, “I might be a big shot beggar but as a husband and father, I stink...” I wanted to work with a similar ironic voice that enables characters to look hard at themselves. This is a story in the writing of which I felt profoundly grateful that Dostoevsky had gone before me. I wanted to get at purity of dreams against the immaturity of experience on the one hand, and the corruption of experience, on the other hand. It was difficult to confront the ugliness in those who, as victims, easily invite sympathy. It was as if one was stepping into the enemy’s shoes. There is a danger though, that with moral judgment being overwhelmingly on the side of the wronged, the latter might sink into a moral complacency that prohibits both individual and social self examination. Such prohibition leads to the kind of moral self-complacency that breeds the attitude that problems are easier than they actually are and that history will absolve. In this situation, active responsibility, crystallized in the teacher’s wife, Nosipho, is an essential value. In this story, we move into the adult world of rationalizations in which it is hard to make out truth from deception even with the present testimony of one’s own inner feelings and attitudes.

Lastly, I tried in “Fools” to experiment with the handling of many characters while giving to each one of them a distinctive individuality. Going hand-in-hand with this individuality is the sense of proportion, in the presentation of each character, within the overall structure of the story. In a sense, I was really trying to prepare myself for an attempt at a novel.

Here, then, are the stories. My remarks about them are not in any manner definitive. My intentions before the writing, and my interpretations after the writing are not necessarily coincident. My role as interpreter is as good or as bad as the reader’s. I should point out that all the stories in this collection, with the exception of “Fools,” have been presented before various creative writing classes in the Writing Process at the University of Denver. So, many different insights, for which I am profoundly grateful, have gone into the composition of these stories.

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- <sup>i</sup> Herbert Marcuse, An Essay on Liberation (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969).
- <sup>ii</sup> Marcuse, An Essay on Liberation.
- <sup>iii</sup> Ezekiel Mphahlele, The African Image (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1960), p.180.
- <sup>iv</sup> Mphahlele, The African Image, p. 180.
- <sup>v</sup> Quoted in Mphahlele, The African Image, pp. 187-88.
- <sup>vi</sup> T.T. Moyana, "Problems of a Creative Writer in South Africa," in Aspects of South African Literature, ed. C. Heywood (London: Heinemann, 1976), pp. 95-96.
- <sup>vii</sup> L. Nkosi, "Fiction by Black South Africans," in Introduction to African Literature, ed. Ulli Beier (London: Longmans, 1967), p. 222
- <sup>viii</sup> Jack Mitchell, "Aesthetic Problems of the Development of the Proletarian – Revolutionary Novel in Nineteenth-Century Britain," in Marxists on Literature, ed. David Craig (U.K.: Penguin, 1975), p. 259.
- <sup>ix</sup> Mitchell, "Aesthetic Problems," p. 259.
- <sup>x</sup> R.P. Blackmur, Introduction to The Art of the Novel: Critical Prefaces, by Henry James (New York, London: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1948), xxvi.
- <sup>xi</sup> Henry James, The Art of the Novel: Critical Prefaces, Intro. By R.P. Blackmur (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1948), p. 163
- <sup>xii</sup> Wole Soyinka, Myth, Literature and the African World (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1978), p. 65