Hoping for hope

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ALAN PATON
Journey Continued: An autobiography
308pp. Oxford University Press. £14.95.
0 19 219237 X
NADINE GORDIMER
The Essential Gesture: Writing, politics and places
Edited and introduced by Stephen Clingman
356pp. Cape. £15.
0 224 02534 1

In 1974 Alan Paton and Nadine Gordimer had an undignified falling-out in the Johannesburg Sunday papers. A report that Gordimer had accused white South African liberals of making "promises they have no power to keep" moved Paton to compare the sacrifices made by his colleagues in the South African Liberal Party with those made by Gordimer herself. It turned out that the report of Gordimer's accusation had not been entirely accurate, but that she did reject the term "liberal". An exchange of open letters followed, and Paton was only partly mollified by Gordimer's explanation that, while admiring Paton and his colleagues, she preferred to consider herself a "radical", as she felt that liberals had nothing to offer South African blacks.

The episode is not referred to explicitly in either Paton's *Journey Continued* or Gordimer's *The Essential Gesture*, but together they yield an illuminating account of how white liberalism came to be overtaken by events in South Africa. *Journey Continued*, which Paton finished shortly before his death earlier this year at the age of eighty-five, completes the autobiography he began in *Towards the Mountain* (*TLS*, March 6, 1981). It takes up his story in 1948, the year in which his first novel, *Cry, The Beloved Country*, was published and the Afrikaner National Party first came to power. The novel was an instant success. It quickly spawned a Broadway adaptation – *Lost in the Stars*, with music by Kurt Weill – and a Korda film, starring Sidney Poitier. Paton describes this period of international celebrity with the unaffected relish of someone who had remained an obscure and decent citizen until well into his forties. However, he does not dwell long on his memories of famous names. Most of the book, and what makes it most worth reading, deals with the story of his opposition to the Nationalist government.

Paton's political life coincided with the life of the South African Liberal Party. He was a founding vice-president when the Liberal Party was formed in 1953, and he typified the membership, as an English-speaking white who felt it his Christian duty to oppose apartheid. From their inception the Liberals were attacked from the left as well as the right. They defined themselves as much by their antipathy to communism as by their rejection of racialism, and as a result always kept their distance from the broadly based Congress movement.

The Liberals were at their most effective during the years of non-violent protest in the 1950s. But after Sharpeville in 1960, when many leading Liberals were imprisoned, and Paton himself had his passport taken away, their quixotic plan of gaining power by winning the white elections ceased even to make rhetorical sense. A significant number of young Liberals joined the largely white African Resistance Movement, and managed to blow up some electricity pylons before they were caught. Paton describes the trauma of their subsequent trial and imprisonment in pained detail. The Liberal Party never recovered, and finally disbanded in 1968, when multi-racial political organizations were made illegal.

The narrative of *Journey Continued*, which is dedicated to the members of the Liberal Party of South Africa, stops with the close of Paton's political life in 1968. An epilogue reviews the 1970s and 80s and offers a prognosis. Paton remained committed to non-violence throughout his life, and neither wanted nor expected a successful armed revolution. So in the end the only prospect that this brave and upright man could foresee was that change will come as fast as the Nationalists allow it.

The Essential Gesture is a selection of Nadine Gordimer's occasional non-fiction writings. In one of the addresses included she says "I remain a writer, not a public speaker: nothing I say here will be as true as my fiction", and it is undeniable that, taken as a whole, this volume lacks the characteristic clarity of her fictional vision. But this is only to be expected in a collection that repeatedly approaches the same topics from different angles, and it is illuminating to have a record of the evolution of Gordimer's concerns.

A central theme of Gordimer's fiction has been the roles available to whites who are in sympathy with black ambitions. As early as 1959, in the article "Where Do Whites Fit In?", Gordimer accepts that for the foreseeable future whites will only be tolerated if they keep quiet and stop trying to lead blacks. A decade later, with the rise of the black consciousness movement, her uneasiness about white roles leads her to an explicit rejection of liberalism: since liberals are powerless to effect change, they are condemned, in the words of Nosipho Majeke, to the role of "the conciliator between oppressor and oppressed".

The position of whites who dismiss liberalism yet continue living in South Africa is not straightforward, but need not be any less honourable for that. Gordimer speaks of the white "outriders" on whom "the secret police keep watch, as we prance back and forth ever closer to the fine line between being concerned citizens and social revolutionaries", and of violence as "a terrible threshold none of us is willing to cross, though aware that all this may mean is that it will be left to blacks to do so".

As well as political reportage, the collection includes profiles of individuals, essays on Gordimer's travels in Africa, and reflections on being a writer under apartheid. Much of this has the extra interest of providing background to Gordimer's fiction. The portraits of Nat Nasaka and of Abram Fischer, both of whom were in different ways destroyed by apartheid, cast a poignant light on the Johannesburg where most of Gordimer's novels are set, while the travel essays give her perceptions of the broader African world into which she ventures in *A Guest of Honour* and *A Sport of Nature*. Overall, the volume shows us a fierce intelligence seeking out hope within complex and unhappy circumstances.

Uprooting the malignant fictions

Cherry Clayton

J. M. COETZEE
White Writing: On the culture of letters in South Africa
193pp. Yale University Press. £14.95.
0 300 03974 3
CHINUA ACHEBE
Hopes and Impediments: Selected essays 1965–87
130pp. Heinemann. £10.95.
0 435 91000 0

The critical work represented in the selected essays of the South African novelist J. M. Coetzee and the Nigerian author Chinua Achebe is of a new and superior order, mobilizing the best creative and critical energies of two writers as committed to their craft as they are to exposing what Achebe calls the "monster of racist habit". In both cases the critique of a "white" culture (whether European, American, or South African) – its assumptions, blind spots, abuses of language, logic or humanity – is based on a scrupulous examination of evidence, as it emerges within early travel writing, anecdotes, or the work of individual authors who appear to be transmitting the "truth" of a continent and its indigenous peoples, but are often perpetuating Western conceptual grids. The result, as they see it, is the entrenching of dehumanizing myths. The pervasiveness and harm of such myths are driven home with a new force by two highly intelligent writers with insight, humour and moral passion.

Coetzee's essays derive their strength partly from his training as a linguist; he is also at home in both Afrikaans and English South African literature. This background, as well as a deep and working knowledge of travel writing and early historiography, enable him to range freely across a spectrum of cross-cultural "white writing", and occasionally to make linguistic analysis (as in the case of the novelist Pauline Smith) the vehicle of a deeper critique. The thread connecting his essays is a concern with the ways in which the South African landscape has been "read" by its writers, in order to reach "the significations that lie behind or within reality, so that reality will . . . yield a structure of meaning". At the same time he interrogates those readings, tenaciously asking why certain questions were *not* asked, given the European currents of sensibility available at the time, and the realities that were staring early colonials in the face. Why was the notion of the sublime not applied to the South African hinterland? Why did the Edenic myth not take hold more strongly? Why does Pauline Smith create a feudal world on a South African farm? At which points is the "farm" posited by C. M. van den Heever congruent with "nature"? These are new and striking questions to ask; that they are the right ones is confirmed by the ideological contours they uncover.

In Coetzee's analysis – broadly ranging from seventeenth-century "contact" literature to the poetry written round about the Second World War – white South African writers are shown to be buttressing myths which justify their possessfrom the broadly based Congress movement. indigenous peoples. The empty landscapes they portray evidence a "failure of the historical imagination", an inablility to see those landscapes as historically peopled. These conclusions are compelling, though he modifies them by an insistence on the limitations inherent in the available genres. Furthermore, his discussion rests on a model of the writer as a highly self-conscious, politically aware and socially responsible being – a writer, in short, like himself, though arguments rage about the extent to which Coetzee's own highly meditated fictions are, or can be, both post-modernist fables and answerable to South African political realities.

I believe that they are both, but it also seems fair to point out that earlier novelists, such as Olive Schreiner, Pauline Smith and Alan Paton, were imperfectly embedded in their own times, and that the obligations we currently lay on the creative writer from a post-colonial vantage-point are rather heavy. Smith, for instance, "never thought her way fully through the dynamics of peasant activity". Well, how many writers do think their way fully through these issues before putting pen to paper? The jagged ways in which critical stances, emotional needs, and self-justifying myths become part of a fictional construct are distorted by a critique which keeps unmasking necessarily selective visions as selective. On the other hand, Coetzee is right to keep pointing out the ways in which such visions *are* selective. More self-consciousness about silences, especially silences which disallow other voices, or which conceal more sinister forms of utterance, is what we all need, especially in South Africa. Perhaps the thrust of this collection would be partially answered by a discussion of the ways in which black voices have in fact emerged in recent decades. But the deeper, and more disturbing, answer is posited by Coetzee himself: " the failure of the listening imagination to intuit the true language of Africa . . . stands for another failure, by no means inevitable: . . . an inability to conceive a society in South Africa in which there is a place for the self." That he sees this as an avoidable fate casts light on his own continuing consciousness-raising activity as a novelist and critic in South Africa.

Like Coetzee, Achebe is both rooted in his own culture and critical of it, though he has a richer and more dynamic culture to draw on, which may partly account for his less cerebral, but vigorous, humane and humorous voice. The "essays" in *Hopes and Impediments* are often the texts of occasional talks, and thus they gain the fuller dimension of personality, and the cutting edge of a spoken denunciation, counter-argument, and reiteration of principle and belief which the genre offers. The collection begins with a convincing demonstration of Joseph Conrad's racism, and the ways in which *Heart of Darkness* has been appropriated by teachers and critics. Anyone who has not yet quietly removed *Heart of Darkness* from their undergraduate syllabus and substituted *Things Fall Apart* will do so after reading this essay. But perhaps the best idea would be to go on teaching *Heart of Darkness* with Achebe's essay as accompaniment.

Though Achebe's revelation of certain offensive tones and assumptions is unanswerable, his real concern, shown throughout these essays, is to address racism as such, as a habit of mind which cannot conceive of the African as an equal, and uses Africa as a giant projection screen for its own Western fantasies and flaws. Like Coetzee, he sees the imaginative annexation of a territory, without an eye for the "recognizable humanity" within it, as deeply culpable and artistically distorting. In reply to this skewed perspective, he enlists many of the values he defines in Igbo art: an "outward, social and kinetic quality", together with a space for the private and contemplative. His own inclusive and life-enhancing definitions of art clearly draw on traditions within Nigerian cultural life: "Even if harmony is not achievable in the heterogeneity of human experience, the dangers of an open rupture are greatly lessened by giving to everyone his due in the same forum of social and cultural surveillance."

Achebe's emphasis on human beings as creatures who find their fulfilment not in individualism, consumerism, or an ideal of free, uncluttered space, but in "a presence – a powerful, demanding presence limiting the space in which the self can roam uninhibited . . . an aspiration by the self to achieve spiritual congruence with the other", is healthy and corrective. This belief is the core of his critique of some Western writers and of his appraisal of undervalued or misunderstood African writers, such as Amos Tutuola, of whose novel *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* he offers a vigorous and illuminating reading.

The collection begins with his analysis of Conrad and ends with a tribute to James Baldwin. Along the way there are speeches on broad topics, such as "The Truth of Fiction" and "Thoughts on the African Novel", a personal tribute to Christopher Okigbo , and passing reflections on the present needs of his own society. Despite the more glaring practical deficiencies operating within his own modernizing society, he still values a literary culture and sees its role as crucial:

> Literature . . . gives us a second handle on reality; enabling us to encounter in the safe, manageable dimensions of make-believe the very same threats to integrity that may assail the psyche in real life; and at the same time providing through the self-discovery which it imparts a veritable weapon for coping with these threats whether they are found within problematic and incoherent selves or in the world around us.

It is in this valuing of "benevolent" fictions, which know themselves as fictions, and the discrediting of the "malignant fiction" of racism, which is fiction masquerading as truth, that Achebe and Coetzee are united directing their considerable eloquence. That Coetzee has more malignant fictions to uncover is simply an indication of the close relationship literature has with its social matrix.

Chinua Achebe's novel *Anthills of the Savannah*, which was shortlisted for the 1987 Booker Prize, is to be re-issued as a paperback on October 7 (233pp. Picador, in association with Heinemann. £3.95. 0 330 30095 4). It was reviewed in the *TLS* of October 9–15, 1987. At the same time Picador will publish Achebe's impressive *The African Trilogy*, comprising his three earlier novels *Things Fall Apart*, *No Longer at Ease* and *Arrow of Gold* – originally published in 1958, 1960 and 1964 respectively (555pp. £6.95. 0 330 30331 7). In his preface to the trilogy the author relates that "*Things Fall Apart* and its sequel, *No Longer at Ease*, came originally as one piece of work" to his "unpractised hand". He saw it as a family saga encompassing three Igbo generations "which would correspond roughly to the times" of his own grandfather, his father and himself. Achebe describes *Arrow of Gold* as "an enrichment of the old story of Africa in its initial struggle for its land and mind against the ruthless invaders from the West".

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