

*Surviving in Xanadu: Athol Fugard's  
"Lesson from Aloes"*

ERROL DURBACH

... I would build that dome in air,  
That sunny dome! those caves of ice!  
And all who heard should see them there,  
And all should cry, Beware! Beware!  
Coleridge, "*Kubla Khan*"

"XANADU": the nameboard hangs conspicuously from the garden gate of a small cottage in the Algoa Park district of Port Elizabeth, a depressed White working-class area that serves as a buffer between the city and the even more depressed Coloured townships on its outskirts. It is, at first sight, the pleasure dome of a "mad Afrikaner, who recites English poetry" (47) and adopts the cultural symbols of a Romantic tradition quite alien to the drought-stricken South African landscape. Here, under a blazing African sky, he cultivates his beloved collection of aloes — the miraculous plant that springs from rocks in the "rainless glare" (15) — carefully tending his specimens in their jam-tins and categorizing their bewildering variety in a dogged attempt to order his world. There are no gardens "bright with sinuous rills" in this Xanadu, no incense-bearing trees or sunny spots of greenery — no vestiges of a gentle English Romanticism — and the attempt to create an African analogue of a Coleridgean idea is fraught with irony and incongruity. The two traditions do not merge, as he discovers in his tense relationship with his English wife, whose skin burns and blisters in this Xanadu and who laments her inability to cultivate roses in its barren soil. And the noblest of his Xanadu-ideals — to create a world of sustaining order out of the chaos around him, to reconcile all racial and political hostility in a

garden domain and discover the aloe's secret of survival in the desert of the heart — all these liberal hopes are cruelly countermanded by the negative corollaries inherent in the Coleridgean idea itself.

For the walls and towers that girdle Xanadu not only define the pleasure dome but isolate and confine it; and if it resonates with Romantic hope and yearning, it may also quite legitimately remind some readers of the artificially created Group Areas, the White haven which is also the White South African's prison (Munro 478). There is the constant danger of Piet Bezuidenhout's Xanadu serving as a buffer zone between his world and reality, an opium dream in which to feed on Liberal idealism is to delude oneself with the milk of Paradise. Despite Fugard's close sympathetic affinity with his "mad Afrikaner," these ironies are everywhere apparent in the play — an awareness, to pursue Coleridge's metaphor, of caves of ice beneath the sunny pleasure dome, and the resonating voices prophesying war. None of Fugard's other pieces captures so precisely the feeling of the 1960s: the sickening taste of Liberal aspirations defeated, the despair of Liberal hopes deferred, and the tragic consequences for all groups — Afrikaner, English, and Coloured — of resisting the Nationalist Government's systematic suppression of these hopes and aspirations. *A Lesson from Aloes* is his dramatic paradigm of apartheid triumphant: the ice-cave of alienation, isolation, mistrust, unresolved suspicion, recrimination and fear that gapes beneath this pathetic little Xanadu in Algoa Park.

Xanadu — the sunny Liberal domain — is more difficult to define than the system which undermines it. When the play was first staged in 1978, "liberalism" as a political ideology had virtually passed into oblivion as a noble failure. In 1988 it is dismissed, contemptuously, as a pinko-grey experiment in misguided humanism (as it is by Biko in the film *Cry Freedom*.) But, in the simplest way of grasping its vision, it derives from a Romantic belief in the Universal Brotherhood of Man and a political ideal of inter-racial solidarity — a meaning most eloquently defined by Alan Paton in a memorable passage from *Cry, the Beloved Country*: "I see only one hope for our country, and that is when white men and black men, desiring neither power nor money, but desiring only the good

of their country, come together to work for it.” (42) This is the subtext of all Piet Bezuitehouth’s motives; and, as Athol Fugard admitted in an interview with Dennis Walder in 1982, if “the old Liberal Party of South Africa still existed, I’d feel obliged to identify with it” (16). The “old” Liberal Party, like the African National Congress in the early years of its existence, represented an alliance of all racial groups dedicated to the peaceful implementation of the Freedom Charter with its guarantee of equal rights. But by the time these parties were banned as “unlawful organisations” (the African National Congress in 1960, and the Liberal Party in 1968), their ideals had already corroded from within. Dennis Walder’s analysis of Liberal failure — “a naive faith in the reforming potential of personal moral pressure” (16) coupled with an increasingly more futile “commitment to constitutional and parliamentary means” (17) — is echoed in the bitter speeches of Steve Daniels, Fugard’s spokesman for the Coloured’s disillusionment with Liberal political strategies:

Tell me one thing we’ve achieved that makes it worthwhile staying here and messing up my children’s lives the way I have mine. Because that’s what will happen. We’ve only seen it get worse. And it’s going to go on getting worse. But I know why now. We were like a bunch of boy scouts playing at politics. Those boer-boys play the game rough. It’s going to need men who don’t care about the rules to sort them out. That was never us. (68)

And he raises his glass to toast the “lost cause” of Liberal decency, pacifism, and constitutional compliance. But his condemnation goes beyond Walder’s diagnosis to challenge the very notion of a political alliance of White and Black. For in the ice-cave of apartheid, the White man’s “Liberalism” is made to seem a shamefully discredited evasatory ploy — a conscience-salving device for buying off the Coloured within a system that makes the purchase all too easy. “I got no problems with old Solly in his nice house at Humewood,” says Steve Daniels who must leave his country on an Exit Permit. “He gives me boat tickets, I give him an easy conscience. And anyway, he’s got a factory full of my people making him richer. I’m not saying his heart isn’t in the right place. Hell man, he’s proved it! Same for the others. They all got their hearts in the right place . . . (*A note of bitterness comes into his voice*)

. . . so I got no problems in saying good-by to them next week" (69). What remains extremely uncertain, and is never fully resolved, is whether Steve has any "problems" saying good-by to Piet Bezuitenhout — his motive, indeed, for coming to see him in the dead of night may be to test the quality of their "brotherhood" and the viability of the dream of Xanadu. But the bitterness of involuntary exile from his native land spills over into an utterance of such insensitivity that virtually nothing is left to salvage from the abortive meeting of White and Coloured Liberals: "If I had a white skin," he sneers, "I'd also find lots of reasons for not leaving this country" (67).

In the ice-cave, each inhabitant suffers in isolation, indifferent or apathetic to the plight of others and incapable of acknowledging that the South African tragedy embraces all racial groups in equal measure but in different ways. Scarred by apartheid, each inhabits a small corner of hell and imagines it to be an exclusive and personal domain. The Coloured, in an all-absorbing bitterness of soul, denies the grim experience of the White victims of the regime; and the White Englishwoman insists on the centrality of *her* experience, which has driven her beyond the bounds of sanity:

I accept, Steven, that I am just a white face on the outskirts of your terrible life, but I'm in the middle of mine and yours is just a brown face on the outskirts of that. Do you understand what I'm saying? I've got my own story. I don't need yours. I've discovered hell for myself. It might be hard for you to accept, Steven, but you are not the only one who has been hurt. Politics and black skins don't make the only victims in this country. (74)

The claim that Whites can suffer as much as Blacks and Coloureds, complains Russell Vandenbroucke (175), smacks of piety — but this is precisely the point. Self-righteousness and piety are shared in equal measure by the Englishwoman and the Coloured man; and it is a tribute to Fugard's dramatic subtlety that he is able to honour the nature of individual grief while holding at arm's-length its crudely solipsistic manifestations. Another of Vandenbroucke's charges is that the suffering in the play lacks a "universal" dimension, that the images of victimization are compromised by a "narrowly South African" focus (175) — but *A Lesson from Aloes* is a specifically South African tragedy, a witness to the political con-

ditions of the 1960s and their impact on human relationships. It is with the narrowly South African that Fugard begins, and without the reality of these three interlocking and specific tragedies of politics and race there can be no "universal" tragedy of alienation and displacement. I want to deal with each "story" in turn, beginning with that of Steve Daniels.

When *A Lesson from Aloes* premiered in Johannesburg, Fugard himself played the role of Steve Daniels. When it opened in New Haven, James Earl Jones was cast as Steve. The role, clearly, is ambiguously "Coloured"; but it would be a mistake to regard Steve Daniels as a representative of the Black South African community (which has its own story, its own peculiar hell, and a very different history). The significant fact about the three million Coloureds in the Cape Province is that they are the racially mixed children of predominantly Afrikaner parentage —

Damned from birth by the great disgrace,  
A touch of the tar-brush in his face (Butler 102)

— and denied by their Afrikaner father as shameful evidence of his "immorality". They speak the same language as the Afrikaner (which the Black people do not), belong in large numbers to the Dutch Reformed Church (which the Black people do not), and share in the Afrikaners' gene-pool (which the Black people do not). The very names of Afrikaner and Coloured — "Willem Gerhardus Daniels" (62), "Petrus Jacobus Bezuitenhout" (5) — resonate with a Dutch sonority which bears witness to their common heritage. The Coloureds, in other words, have no racial origins apart from those shared with the Afrikaners, no country beyond South Africa, no "homeland" to which they may be summarily banished (like the Black people). They are the reef on which all rational arguments for apartheid smashes and sinks, living evidence that its basis is racist and not cultural, that its politics are those of blood-purity and not the much vaunted integrity of the Afrikaner language and faith. The history of the Coloured people of South Africa has been one of systematic deprivation, a tragedy of dispossession, disinheritance and disenfranchisement unmatched in the fate of any other racial group: humiliated by the Immorality Amendment Act (1950) which

extended the prohibition against interracial sexual contact to White/Coloured relationships, racially classified (or reclassified) under the Population Registration Act (1950), segregated from their White neighbours under the Group Areas Act (1950) and forcibly removed where necessary, and struck — after five years of constitutional wrangling — from the voters' roll in the Cape by the Separate Representation of Voters Act (1956). The Coloured experience of the 1950s is captured in Steve's fragmented recollection of his father, the fisherman expelled under the Group Areas legislation from his "home" in racially reclassified "White" area, and excluded by distance from the sea. Two memories dominate: the old man's Bible-curse on the little bit of ground after the legal battle to save his land, and his Job-like despair in the face of his nation's destiny under apartheid: "Ons geslag is verkeerd" (64) ["Our generation . . . our race is a mistake"] — an image of the Coloured as an error on the White genetic map. It is this very despair that impels his son to decisive action in the 1960s, that drives him to countermand his fate as a racial "mistake" in the history of humankind.

The "Cause" begins in a non-violent, optimistic alliance of White and Coloured interests and there is a vivid lived-through quality to Piet's recollection of a Xanadu of hope and solidarity: the boycott of the Port Elizabeth buses which, for the first time, impels the Coloured community into political action; the sensation, "like rain after a long drought" (34), of being welcomed by the non-White brotherhood; and the lessons in Liberal philosophy, learned from Steve Daniels, that an evil system is not a natural disaster and that men have it in their power to correct social injustice and reform the world. But the rhetoric, restated in 1963, rings trite and hollow — like the first inspiring utterances of faith and purpose in Gladys's diary, and their gradual fading into blankness and silence. It was the Sharpeville massacre in 1960 and the banning of the African National Congress, as Margaret Munro suggests (473-74), that decisively terminated all inter-racial alliances in South Africa. But Liberalism had begun to die even before Sharpeville. The growing militancy of ANC splinter-groups, like POQO with its "Africa for the Africans" slogan, redefined the "Cause" in terms of a Black nationalism which had lost all patience

with White Liberal purpose and its evolutionary dream of political change. White participation in the Black struggle is no longer welcome, and Liberalism of any hue becomes a counter-revolutionary betrayal of the "Cause".

The response of the Nationalist Government to Black Nationalism, civil disobedience and political dissidence was to declare a State of Emergency and enact the Unlawful Organisations Act (1960) to ban political groups. Individual banning had been made possible under the Suppression of Communism Act (1950, 1954) — which defined one of the aims of Communism as "a belief in racial equality" (Brookes 204) — and it is possible under a banning order to restrict mobility, effectively silence a dissident, forbid communication, and preclude him from belonging to any political organisation. The only alternative to the banning order is "voluntary expatriation" under an Exit Permit which prohibits any return without the Government's permission. And to make assurance doubly sure, the General Law Amendment Act (1963) licensed the South African police to arrest without warrant or charge, and detain for up to ninety days, anyone suspected of committing or knowing about certain specified types of political offences. There is no appeal to the Courts, and many detainees (as Edgar Brookes discreetly puts it) "were subjected to solitary confinement, with, in some cases, marked psychological results" (207).

This is the massive reactionary backlash in which Steve Daniels is ensnared and to which he has fallen victim "with marked psychological results." His experiences are loosely based on those of the exiled Coloured poet, Dennis Brutus, whose career is coupled in Fugard's *Notebooks* with that of Piet V.<sup>1</sup> — the prototype of the Liberal Afrikaner. There is a passage in the September 1963 entry (99-100) about the wounding of Brutus who had taken a stand against apartheid in sport, had been banned, arrested for breaking his banning order, then captured by the Security Police and shot in the stomach. No lead smashes into Steve Daniel's stomach, but the violence inflicted by the police is no less devastating. He, too, is arrested for breaking his banning order, and under police interrogation is driven to the brink of suicide. Finally, his nerve broken and his defences smashed in prison, he is pressured to provide whatever information — real or fictitious — the police demand.

But his breakdown is merely an occasion for mockery and derision. They know it all already. Some unknown traitor to the "Cause" has already leaked its secrets, most probably the same informer who had betrayed Steve's violation of his banning order to the authorities. His world, devastated of trust, becomes merely uninhabitable. Half-fearing that his visit to Xanadu may be a trap, his courage boosted by liquor, Steve Daniels is shamefully prepared to believe the worst of his staunchest ally.

Joseph Lelyveld, in *Move Your Shadow*, provides a useful gloss on the "exorbitant price of trust" in South Africa. Visiting Port Elizabeth for the POQO trial, he meets two Black friends at Athol Fugard's cottage and asks them why Black policemen and state witnesses in political trials are never assaulted in the townships.

"To do something like that," one of the men said, "you would want at least two men, wouldn't you?" Pausing to indicate that my question was hypothetical and not intended as incitement, I gestured towards the only other person in the room, the man's best friend. "How do I know," came the mumbled reply, "that he is not an *impimpi* [informer]?" No one who was not in jail or house arrest under what was called a banning order could ever be immune from that suspicion. So pervasive was it then that the authorities could compromise stalwart black nationalists by seeming to ignore them. (9-10)

This is more insidious than a bullet in the guts. It strikes not at the individual, but at his relationship with a world of men; it undermines the Universal Brotherhood more effectively than an Act of Parliament; and it infects even the most apparently unassailable relationship with a corrosive suspicion. "Your beautiful friendship?" cries Gladys. "Can't you see it's rotten with doubt?" (70) For if Steve can suspect Piet as an *impimpi* then nothing remains of Xanadu, the Liberal domain whose inhabitants must now engage in a charade of friendship with others who may (or may not) be fee'd servants of the Special Branch. The clandestine meeting of two old comrades in the back yard of Xanadu merely underscores the interlocking tragedies of cunningly programmed alienation and disillusionment in a country where *not* to be imprisoned is as heinous a penalty as banishment. One exile leaves his "home," shamed by his betrayal of fellowship and trust. The



other remains "at home," exiled forever in an ice cave of suspicion and fear.

Gladys's story and her history have little in common with Steve's. She is a visitor to Xanadu, rather than a founding member, one temporarily inspired by the rhetoric of a "Cause" which now leaves her fundamentally indifferent, and involved in the violent aftermath of its collapse only as an apathetic bystander. She is the rose in a garden of uprooted and rootbound aloes searching, in their jam-tins, for the space nature intended for them and seeking to survive the South African drought. But the price of survival, "thorns and bitterness" (15), is too much to pay in a country which she resolutely refuses to acknowledge as her "home." "I know I was born here," she says, "but I will never call it that" (37). Her allegiance remains with a land she has never seen, a climate she has never known, a culture absorbed at second-hand. But she clings to her "Englishness" as a drowning woman to a spar, Anglicizes her world in a futile endeavour to deny its Africanness (Piet is called "Peter" in her domestic vocabulary), and dissociates herself from God's unspecified curse on the Afrikaner nation (16). South Africa, with its sun and its politics and its violence, has scarred her; and her Anglo-African attitude of sentimental nostalgia for a world of English rose-gardens and sunny spots of greenery barely conceals the fear that she is as "homeless" and "rootless" as Steve Daniels. It might have been possible, before the 1960s, for the English-speaking South African to cherish an illusion of England as some primary "home," and domicile in Africa as a temporary visit of the uncommitted; but in 1961 South Africa withdrew from the Commonwealth, severed its cultural ties with Great Britain and declared itself a Republic. The psychological effect upon the Anglo-Africans was to spoil the illusion of the alternative "home" and the myth of a temporary sojourn; and the symptoms of this shock of cultural redefinition are clearly manifest in Gladys's depression, her dissociation from the catalogue of South African disasters, and her sense of almost apocalyptic isolation in an alien universe:

Do you know they've got a date worked out for the end of the world? It's not far off, either. I almost told him there are times when I think it has already happened . . . it's hard sometimes to

believe there is a world out there full of other people. Just you and me. That's all that's left. The streets are empty and I imagine you wandering around looking for another survivor. (19-20)

The great irony in the life of this existentially displaced person is that "England" is, indeed, her final "home" — not the country to which Steve is exiled, but the Fort England Clinic in Grahams-town where she has been treated before, and to which she will retreat again. Persecuted for a political "Cause" she has never really believed in, violated by the confiscation of her diaries by the Special Branch (she experiences it as rape), Gladys's descent into madness reduces her to another item in the catalogue of South African disasters. For merely to *live* in South Africa is to be incriminated, either by indifference or complicity or chance, in the violence of apartheid and the misery of others; and the notion of a refuge in some other "home" is as illusionary as the myth of Xanadu. "England" — the only England she knows — is a Romantic cliché on the wall of a Mental Hospital, a composite of greenery and soft mist and thatched roofed cottages glowing in the twilight of Somerset. She is sane enough to dismiss it as a futile distraction from the reality of her situation. For her, there is finally no hope, no faith, and no trust left in the world — nothing but the absolute goodness of her Afrikaner husband, which is a terrible provocation to her desire to violate it. Her lesson in survival has been the bitterness and the turgid violence which she associates with the aloe-garden of Xanadu. And to save herself from what she most hates and fears, she packs her bags for voluntary exile, "home" to the protective custody of the Fort England Clinic.

"The aloe," writes Perseus Adams in his poem "The Woman and the Aloe," "talks truly only to those who have endured her wait" — the seasons of drought, the silence, the loneliness:

Nothing else can so quickly, and with such pure art  
 Raise up my thorn-riddled love for this place  
 Hard as banishment — yet lit with wild sweetness too.  
 A neighbour to stones am I, a sister to a priceless gift.  
 (169)

"The aloe," writes Vandenbroucke in his stringent criticism of the image, "is too simple a symbol to bear the weight expected of it

since it has no meaning outside of its ability to survive a harsh environment. Instead of being evocative it is demonstrative" (174). Maybe so, for the reader who has not had to endure her wait. But few images evoke more breath-catchingly the South Africanness of the icon, that pervasive poetic tradition in which, as J. M. Coetzee puts it in *White Writing*, "the stony truth of Africa emerges in the form of a flower" (168). In a tradition stretching from the early Afrikaner verse of van den Heever to the poetry of Roy Campbell — whose lines on the "glory" bred from "thirsty rocks" (14-15) clearly establish the context of Piet's miraculous vision — the aloe reasserts her hold on the poetic imagination and affirms once more the poet's faith in the "living heart" beneath the rocky and unpromising surface of Africa (Coetzee 168). To Gladys, who rejects the wild sweetness of the aloe, the "lesson" it teaches is the appalling cost of survival — thorns, bitterness, a turgid violence. She knows nothing of the scarlet spikes of *aloe aborescens* with its nectar-filled cups for the *suikerbekkie* birds, or the defiant flowering of *aloe ferox* in the desolate veld (14-15), or *aloe ciliaris* pushing through the undergrowth to find the sun (65). Over and against the demonstrative lesson in survival is a wonderfully evocative image of uncommon beauty and defiance and a miracle of natural variation and difference which resists man's habitual attempts to codify, and classify, and separate (65). If one of the play's political "lessons" advocates a counter-revolutionary philosophy of stoical endurance, another surely celebrates Nature's resistance to the fetters and shackles of man-made systems. But beyond all the didactic "messages" spoken in the play, there is a peculiarly South African Romanticism in Piet's sympathetic affinity with the aloe, the kinship (in Perseus Adams's words) that "carries the undertow of twelve deep / Seasons together":

What a bane it must be to the cold heart of Death  
That beauty could rise and be stronger than this heat. (170)

Survival is not merely a matter of weathering the "dry white season" of the Nationalist regime, naively trusting in a change of heart and political climate. It inheres in the one quality Piet shares with Gladys's mother: "a terrible determination not to die" (23),

not to succumb to the congealment of spirit in the ice-cave of apartheid. The cold heart of Death has already claimed Steve Daniels and Gladys. What they cannot understand in Piet is his determination to endure the futility of his commitment to a politically uninhabitable country. What can "home" possibly mean to a socially displaced and ideologically suspect Afrikaner? (65). His condition at the end of the play, as Fugard describes it, is one he shares with Beckett's lonely protagonists: "face-to-face with himself . . . the absurdity of himself, *alone*" (xiii). It is, again, a peculiarly South African variation on a European existential theme.

Piet's identity would seem, initially, unassailable. He knows who he is and, like an aloe, finds himself "at home" in the South African landscape:

For better or for worse, I will remain positively identified as Petrus Jacobus Bezuitenhout; Species, Afrikaner; Habitat, Algoa Park, Port Elizabeth, in this year of our Lord, 1963 . . . and accept the consequences. (5)

This sounds unappealingly like the sort of South African bloody-mindedness that one associates with Afrikaner Nationalism — the defiant political arrogance, contemptuous of consequence, that typified the Nationalist Party triumphs of 1963: the smashing of resistance movements under the Sabotage Act, the abrogation of *habeas corpus* under the Detention laws, the imposition of stringent censorship controls under the Publications and Entertainment Act, and the arrest and imprisonment of Mandela and other White, Black and Indian dissidents. But the early 1960s were also witness to the emergence of a radically alternative form of Afrikanerdom: the "Sestigers" who resisted censorship of their writing and were denounced as traitors, ostracized from the community, their books publicly burned and their publishers threatened (Brink and Coetzee 10); a courageous group of Dutch Reformed Churchmen and intellectuals — among them Professor Geysler and Beyers Naude — incapable of reconciling Scripture and Apartheid, and consequently denounced as apostates and heretics (Lelyveld 277-314); and an indeterminate number of "ordinary, good-natured, harmless, unremarkable" Afrikaners (Brink 9), like Fugard's Piet

or André Brink's Ben Du Toit, whose humanity is outraged by the system, and whose defection from the Tribe brands them as *kafferboeties* ["nigger-lovers"] and *hensoppers* ["Boer War traitors"] (48). It soon becomes manifestly clear that Piet Bezuidenhout is just such a dissident Afrikaner, and that "accepting the consequences" of his betrayal of the *volk* is the defining aspect of his absurd endurance — clinging to an idea of "home" in a country "harsh as banishment," expending his "thorn-riddled love" in a land where his roots no longer find the space creation intended for them, confident of his own integrity on a political stage where others cast him in the role of an *impimpi*. In a world devoid of trust, all human action suddenly becomes absurd — a cautious playing of parts in relationships riddled with uncertainty and doubt. In the final analysis, it is Piet who is betrayed by the appalling failure of others to recognize his essential goodness.

Piet's story is that of the grass-roots Afrikaner, politically naive and unsophisticated, whose consciousness is raised by his own humanitarian response to the harsh circumstances of South African life and the misery of the Black and Coloured people. The death of a child on his drought-stricken farm, the defiant dignity of the Coloureds who refuse to ride the Cadles buses, the discovery that "politics" begins in human sympathy and solidarity: the discontinuous narrative sections of the play trace the unexceptional history of an Afrikaner "common man," a simple farmer, whose tragedy is inseparable from the tragedies of the other racial groups in the 1960s. In a sense, it is the African farm that fosters both the humanity and the naïveté. Race relations, as Piet V. puts it in Fugard's *Notebooks* (23), have no place on a farm where Black and White children play together in friendship, and where the old Afrikaner tradition of household prayers takes place in a gathering which recognizes no racial differences. Piet's Xanadu is, in some ways, an anachronistic urban replication of this aspect of the South African farm, sharing with it the same isolation from rough "boer-boy" politics (68), the same unworldliness of Liberal idealism which Piet has pieced together from a Palgrave's Golden Treasury of Political Thought. Like his impassioned recitation of Longfellow's "The Slave's Dream," his aspirations and ideas are simultaneously comic, pathetic, and deeply moving (50).

They are also contradictory, confused, and "banal" (Vandenbroucke 175) to those who demand that political drama advocate political solutions to the South African predicament. If an evil system is not a natural disaster and men can make this a better world to live in (35), how can Piet's stoical determination to endure change the situation? "What sort of significant action is that," asks Nadine Gordimer, "in terms of the contest of our country?" (Seidenspinner 339). The point, however, is that Piet's attitudes are challenged consistently throughout the play in an attempt to define the absurdity of his final resolution. "I am . . . surprised," says Gladys, voicing the single most insistent objection to the play's politics, "at how easily you accept the situation." To which he replies, "I don't accept it easily, but there is nothing else to do. I can't change human nature" (21). For the Marxist "significant action" — through revolutionary violence, if necessary — will alter the situation and make a better world in which human nature can flourish. But for Fugard, if bad laws and social injustice are to be unmade by men, it may be necessary to change human nature as precondition for significant action. We can make a better world, he would seem to imply, by being better people; but insofar as "human nature" has been conditioned by the psychopathology of apartheid to deny love and trust and faith as the only strategies for resistance against the "cold heart of Death," what *political* solution can there be? Even Gladys, in her irresistible urge to violate the "goodness" of her husband, succumbs to deadly thoughts. Did he collude in the police raid on her private property? Is he one of the Special Branch? (76). It is not only Steve Daniels whom she deliberately infects with such suspicion, but the audience as well. The deadliest moment in the play is Gladys's response, at the end of Act One, to the shame and humiliation that overwhelm Piet at the thought of being branded an *impimpi*. "It's not true, is it?" she asks (42). His answer is a shocked silence. If wife and friend can believe such outrage, what point is there in denial? And what possible action can be taken when the greatest contest of the country is the havoc wreaked on human nature by the operation of the Nationalist Party regime on human connections?

Can a writer so passionately identified with his country, clinging so vainly to an outmoded Liberal ethic, and bound by his own

Afrikaner heritage into such sympathy with his protagonist ever provide a viable alternative to the South African predicament? Many of his critics point to a career of failure and despair, withdrawal from action, and guilt. "He has dreamt of a 'superman'," writes Margarete Seidenspinner, "but has finally identified with Piet Bezuidenhout, the 'victim' of the system whose only wish is to survive, a notion whose pessimism has created a very strong antipathy in many South African spectators" (339). It is a curious "victim," however, who refuses to compromise his humanity, who *chooses* his mode of survival — neither compelled by the State into exile, nor driven ineluctably into insanity — and whose pessimism is held in a delicate balance with an absurd form of hope. At the end of the play, Piet Bezuidenhout is left contemplating the same unidentifiable aloe that eluded categorization at the beginning. Aloe Anonymous? Some improbable new species, like nothing else in South African botanical records? The final sympathetic affinity that binds the Man and the Aloe is their anomalous and mutant identity — unnamable first specimens in an evolutionary, grass-roots change that begins with one ordinary and unremarkable individual finding his "home" in a world not programmed for his survival. Is there, finally, a *name* that fits a subversive Afrikaner who refuses to relinquish his drought-stricken tradition, whose defection from Afrikanerdom has left him without tribal connections, rejected and ostracized by a Brotherhood of which he is the conscience of the tribe? To the Afrikaner majority he is "kafferboetie" and "hensopper." To the Liberal minority he is "impimpi." To the political Left he is a compromising counter-revolutionary evasionary. To Fugard he is an absurdly courageous pessimist, an answer to the death of spirit in the South African ice-cave, and an indomitable survivor like Perseus Adams's Aloe-woman: . . . "Though the silence and loneliness have beaten / The walls of my identity and failed" (169). The hope, in 1963, was that the species would take root and spread and that a new generation of "Verligte" [Enlightened] Liberal Afrikaners would engage in the dialectics of South African history. It would be naive to claim any validity for this prophetic expectation when the "Verligte" movement in Afrikanerdom has been so brutally offset by an extreme Right wing backlash — the "Verkrampies," whose electoral vic-

tory has made them the official parliamentary opposition. But the Piet Bezuitenhouts are an undeniable term in the South African political argument, as indigenous a species, now, as the Aloe Aborescens. Their survival may be tenuous and endangered (Ben Du Toit in Brink's novel is murdered by the Special Branch); but Fugard's play, "in celebration" of his Afrikaner mother, Elizabeth Magdalena Potgieter, also celebrates the "absurd" goodness and decency which remain the Liberal's weapons against all attempts to destroy him.

## NOTE

- <sup>1</sup> The play is based upon the career of a "real" Piet, whose association with Dennis Brutus replicates the rift between White Liberals and Coloureds so poignantly dramatized in *A Lesson from Aloes*. In the "Introduction" to the play, Fugard quotes a (slightly rephrased) entry from his *Notebooks* of February 1961:

"Piet . . . stood as a Coloured representative in the constituency that was at that time claimed to be the largest in the world. . . . Incident that hurt him most was when he addressed a meeting in Korsten . . . a Coloured area . . . 'Brothers and Sisters,' and they laughed at him. 'Hell man, that hurt.'

Dennis B. his friend, Coloured schoolteacher, followed him around during the election campaign, organizing opposition to Piet. Dennis's feeling was that if a Coloured could not represent Coloureds, they would rather have no rep. at all.

A Govt. stooge they both despised eventually got in. Dennis thought that Piet, in coming so close to the truth and then compromising it, was more dangerous than the Govt. stooge who was obviously a fraud." (x-xi)

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