

*Fathers and Sons:  
Structures of Erotic Patriarchy in  
Afrikaans Writing of the Emergency*<sup>1</sup>

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**I**N J. M. COETZEE'S recent novel, *The Master of Petersburg*, a distraught Dostoevsky, intent on discovering the truth regarding the death of his son Pavel, is patronizingly consoled by Maximov, the bland "judicial investigator":

"Not easy to be a father, is it? I am a father myself, but luckily a father of daughters. I would not wish to be the father of sons in our age. . . .

"So I wonder, in the end, whether the Nechaev phenomenon is quite as much of an aberration of the spirit as you seem to say. Perhaps it is just the old matter of fathers and sons after all, such as we have always had, only deadlier in this particular generation, more unforgiving." (45)

Maximov, as functionary of a repressive regime, has his own reasons, not necessarily philosophical, for minimizing and dehistoricizing the "Nechaev phenomenon," that is, the revolutionary spirit as manifested in radical youth groups. But towards the end of the novel, a weary Dostoevsky concludes in effect that Maximov was right:

For the first time it occurs to him that Pavel might be better dead. Now that he has thought the thought, he faces it squarely, not disowning it.

A war: the old against the young, the young against the old.

(247)

In this interpretation, the class struggle is preceded, perhaps superseded, by a war between the generations. Coetzee's novel is set in 1869, in pre-revolutionary Russia, and was written in the aftermath of the revolutionary struggle in South Africa, a struggle often seen as waged most fiercely by the children, the Soweto generation of 1976. In *Age of Iron*, his earlier novel set in the State

of Emergency, Coetzee registered the disturbing precocity of revolutionary children through Florence, the domestic servant of the white narrator:

"I cannot tell these children what to do," said Florence. "It is all changed today. There are no more mothers and fathers." (36)

Florence is saying that the old pattern of authority based on respect for and obedience to the older generation has been superseded by a new generation of self-willed children who have appropriated the struggle from their elders (though Florence later claims that "These are good children, they are like iron, we are proud of them" [46]). Coetzee's account of the alienation of Dostoevsky, himself a revolutionary in his youth, from his son's involvement with the "Nechaev phenomenon" can thus be read as, among other things, a figure of tension between two generations of dissidents.

But in South Africa in the 1970s and 1980s the generational divide was felt also on the other side of the barricades, in the white Afrikaner laager desperately closing ranks against the perceived threat to all that it held sacred. In the struggle to retain the supremacy which it regarded as its God-given right, white South Africa recruited its sons and sent them to the border of the country and beyond to fight for the fatherland. And whereas the state has always had at its disposal the means to coerce its young into readiness or at any rate availability to die for the fatherland, no country, as the USA discovered in Viet Nam, can afford such coercion indefinitely. The sons must believe that they *want* to wage the wars of the fathers; the fathers have to seduce the sons into complicity.

I am using somewhat lurid terminology to introduce as baldly as possible the argument of this essay, which extends Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's claim that "In any male-dominated society, there is a special relationship between male homosocial (*including* homosexual) desire and the structures for maintaining and transmitting patriarchal power" (25).<sup>2</sup> I want to argue that in the male-dominated society that was South Africa in the 1980s, the "special relationship" was mediated through the father-son nexus—not exclusively, of course, but significantly enough for it to have left strong traces in the literature of the period. I have

chosen three Afrikaans writers of roughly the same generation—Mark Behr, Pierre de Vos, and Koos Prinsloo—partly because I believe that Afrikaans writers belong to a more obviously authoritarian community than, say English-speaking white South Africans. But to “belong to” such a community is also for most of these writers to feel an estrangement or “detrribalization” that forms the subject or the main premise of many of their novels. Of course, the sundering process, being generational, manifested itself between not only fathers and sons but mothers and daughters, mothers and sons, fathers and daughters; all these combinations occur in the literature of the Emergency.<sup>3</sup> But in South Africa in the 1970s and 1980s, it was the sons who went to war and the fathers who sent them there, with whatever support from dutiful mothers. In fact the three writers that I have chosen to discuss all depict families in which mothers and sisters contribute interestingly to the experience of the protagonist; however, for the sake of clarity I have filtered out that contribution to highlight the father-son relation.

The power base of the Nationalist regime was traditionally the family, and politicians strove to cultivate an image of paternal benignity. Thus Etienne van Heerden refers to his own generation as “the sad children of Verwoerd” (26)—a generation that felt itself betrayed by their parents’ veneration of the genial, fatherly, but utterly uncompromising Verwoerd. By the 1970s, Verwoerd’s patrimony had reduced itself to a messy and bungled war, and his grim-faced successor, John Vorster, had few claims to warm loving-kindness, preferring to base his appeal on a reputation for toughness. But in the 1980s, with the regime experiencing a crisis of credibility in the face of insistent reports of state brutality, the eminently unlovable P. W. Botha attempted to recover for himself the image of loving fatherhood (a notorious television programme on “P. W. Botha the Man” had Mrs. Botha telling the nation how much her husband loved custard). This ambitious public relations exercise is satirized as “Project Charm,” in Etienne van Heerden’s *Casspirs en Campari’s*: Ernie, advertising genius and general go-getter, explains to his staff:

“I believe that the psyche of this country is crying out for a new myth, a redemptive image, which must be engraved into their minds—that

of a fatherly, strong leader. A man who, with charm but with authority, leads rather than rules." (387)<sup>4</sup>

The point is not, of course, that the leader is about to change his nature: what is proposed is merely that the public perception of him should be manipulated to create "a new myth" behind which the politician can operate with all the more impunity. In practice, "Project Charm" was less amusing than in van Heerden's version of it. In one of its manifestations, an increasingly repressive regime sought to improve its public image, without relaxing its methods, through highly-publicized swoops by the police "Child Protection Unit" on "child sex rings," that is, teenage male prostitutes and their clients; apparently these raids were intended to divert attention from the imprisonment and maltreatment of children as "political offenders." In the words of Heather Regness, a social worker active in the National Institute for Crime Prevention and the Rehabilitation of Offenders:

I have no doubt that the whole scare was an exaggeration, if not a complete fabrication. At the time the South African Police's image had been harmed by revelations of abuse under Emergency regulations. Gay men were easy targets; the police could arrest "child molesters" and appear the heroes of the community instead of the villains. (qtd. in Retief 106)

Thus the "parental" protection offered by the State becomes its sanction both to persecute the scapegoats and to continue the detention and maltreatment of children. And in targeting homosexuals, the State knew that it was choosing a scapegoat that few citizens would rush to defend. The episode presents an absorbing instance of the homophobia described by Sedgwick, which is, as she says "not arbitrary or gratuitous, but tightly knit into the texture of family, gender, age, class, and race relations. Our society could not cease to be homophobic and have its economic and political structures remain unchanged" (3-4). Furthermore, in a homophobic society the state can present its own homophobia as justice.

The parental role of the state when exercised in this way thus consists in the criminalization of certain kinds of sexuality. And yet, such homophobia is perfectly compatible with a strong homoerotic tropism, as I shall demonstrate in the rest of this essay.

Of the three writers discussed here, only one, Prinsloo, writes material that is overtly gay; but it is part of my argument that the structures of homoerotic desire that are so close to the surface of his stories are present also in the more reticent narratives of the other two writers. Prinsloo is distinguished also from the other two in that his short stories draw much more heavily than their novels on thinly-disguised autobiographical material, less obviously structured as narrative—but the stories, in their disjointed and discontinuous way, do form a kind of chronicle of family life, of which the main thread is his relationship with his father, with Prinsloo's death forming a partly foreseen terminus.<sup>5</sup> Treating these stories, then, as a single narrative based on a developing relationship with the father, I shall be using Prinsloo as a kind of control in my discussion.

In her analysis of male homosocial desire, Sedgwick proceeds from the erotic triangle as constructed by René Girard in his *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel* and developed in his later works; in terms of that figure, "Girard traced a calculus of power that was structured by the relation between the two active members of an erotic triangle. What is most interesting for our purposes in his study is its insistence that, in any erotic rivalry, the bond that links the two rivals is as intense and potent as the bond that links either of the rivals to the beloved: that the bonds of 'rivalry' and 'love,' differently as they are experienced, are equally powerful and in many senses equivalent" (21). Now that bond as described here, and derived as it is from the Freudian Oedipal triangle,<sup>6</sup> can in fact be recovered in fairly straightforward form as a father-son relation in Coetzee's *Master of Petersburg*:

Is it always like this between fathers and sons: jokes masking the intensest rivalry? And is that the true reason why he is bereft: because the ground of his life, the contest with his son, is gone, and his days are left empty? Not the People's Vengeance but the Vengeance of the Sons: is that what underlies revolution—fathers envying their sons their women, sons scheming to rob their fathers' cashboxes? He shakes his head wearily. (108)

In the equation of "the ground of his life" with "the contest with his son," Dostoevsky recognizes that the alternative to the contest is death; and yet, later, he can reflect bitterly: "Fathers and sons: foes: foes to the death" (239). The contest is both life-giving and

death-directed—as, after all, revolution often claims to be. To Dostoevsky, the roots of political action are in the resentment of son against father, which precedes the revolutionary urge. Women and cashboxes alike thus become only tokens of potency exhibited to intimidate or impress the other party to this inter-generational rivalry.

In Nadine Gordimer's *My Son's Story*, father-son rivalry is even more explicitly seen as the ground of action. Here the father, a political activist, is having an affair with a co-activist, and Will, the young narrator, as yet inactive both in politics and in love, reflects bitterly on his father's infidelity:

I think what he wants is to show off is his virility. To me. The proof of his virility. That clumsy blonde. . . . He sent me to her to show me it's not my turn yet. (94)

And such acceptance as the son reaches, rests on his recognition of the universality of their situation: "It's an old story—ours. My father and mine. Love, love/hate are the most common and universal of experiences" (275). The "Son's Story" of Gordimer's title is thus also the father's story, shared exactly because of the rivalry that binds them together as inexorably as on the surface it divides them. The erotic rivalry between father and son is posited on the heterosexual nature they have in common: the son has to come into his manhood by challenging the masculine domination of his father, and the woman is both necessary and sufficient cause for the rivalry. Will's father, sensing a slight lowering of tension between himself and his son during the absence of his mistress, reflects "Ah, without women, what is always subliminally taut between men is relaxed" (159). The bond between father and son seems to have no direct erotic charge; whereas the connection with the woman may be secondary to that bond, it is yet a necessary connection, without which the emotional charge cannot be conducted between the two males.

But useful as such a pattern is in clarifying an archetypal family structure (the "old story"), we would not expect it to account for all father-son family relations. The three works that I concentrate on here, though all centring on the father-son relation, do in fact redraw and revise the triangle in ways not adumbrated by the Freud-Girard-Sedgwick model. My aim is of course not to prove

Freud or his successors “wrong”; rather it is to add to their models of patriarchy one which we may call directly homoerotic in that a kind of erotic short circuit fuses rivalry and love, without the necessary intercession of an intermediate figure.<sup>7</sup> Also, I hope that these three examples will suggest how a “universal” model of human behaviour may be subject to the pressures of the particular and immediate, in this instance the State of Emergency in South Africa.

In his short story “Drome is ook wonde” / “Dreams are also Wounds,” Prinsloo recalls his most recent visit to his (female) therapist: “Yesterday in therapy she reflected in a monotone that my mother is absent in my psyche” (45). This is an extreme statement of the phenomenon I am trying to describe, whereby the mother is not so much absent as inoperative in the erotic dynamic between father and son. If we were to talk of a triangle at all in these works (and there is of course no reason why we should do so, other than Girard’s insistence that that is the essential figure of human desire),<sup>8</sup> we might more readily find a third term not in any human being, but in the fatherland, not as the site of rivalry, but as the (false) site of ostensible unity and identification. Both Behr and de Vos create fathers who are fanatically and professionally patriotic: the one is a general in the SADF, the other a senior policeman — both, then, in the business of killing for their beliefs (de Vos emphasizes this aspect by making the policeman-father a member of the Special Services “death squads” stationed at the notorious Vlakplaas). In both novels, accordingly, the relationship with the father has its political corollary in the nature of the son’s patriotism.

Prinsloo, on the other hand, restricts the “father” in his stories to what one imagines his real father to have been, a farmer turned power-station worker. But his father is also a hunter, and Prinsloo develops the symbolic implications of this arms-bearing preoccupation with all the knowingness of a psychoanalytic initiate. In one of his early short stories, “And our fathers that begat us,” he reprints a photograph of his father sitting on an elephant shot by *his* father — followed by a photograph of his father in Defence Force uniform during the Second World War, then one in bathing trunks, showing off the muscles he had acquired with

the help of the “Sunny Boy Super Big Power Course.” This triptych of masculinity illustrates, as it were, the various accounts of male endeavour in the story, one of which is the grandfather’s hunting exploits as recorded in his *Voortrekker days and experiences on safari in Kenya* (12).

The grandfather’s accounts of what he calls his “true manly experiences” (“Die Jonkmanskas” 86) are quoted at various point of Prinsloo’s oeuvre, once at the behest of his grandmother, who tells him “You must see to it that your grandfather’s book is published” (“Die Jonkmanskas” 76). The filial piety that urges him to obey her does not prevent him from contextualizing the memoirs in terms that his grandfather could not have anticipated:

Then I walk to the bookshelf and take out Brian Easlea’s *Science and Sexual Oppression* from among the other paperbacks. First I look up “penile insecurity” in the subject index. . . . Hunting was typically one such exclusively male and prestigious activity which served to bestow virile status on the successful male. (“Die Jonkmanskas” 85)

The grandfather, little suspecting what the wiser generations succeeding him will make of his proud recollections, laments his failing powers: “I’m also no longer so quick with the rifle” (85), but consoles himself with the trophies of his pursuits:

What still calms my hunter’s nature are the heads of game, skins and hides that I have in the house—a collection that I have built up over the years. (85)

These relics of a life well spent are given an ideological base in the preface to the memoirs, which is reproduced in yet another short story:

I would like to put into writing for my grandchildren the hard years and the pleasant years of their grandparents. . . .

Where they came to tame the land for their progeny. . . . Our great Ideal was to keep the Afrikaner pure. We saw that the foreigner could see no difference between black and white, but through the example and Religion of our forebears we stayed pure and my trust is that my descendants will always look back to the parents who gave them the example. (“By die Skryf van Aantekeninge oor ’n Reis” 10-11).

In the old battle of the pen and the sword, the pen-wielding grandson easily reduces the grandfatherly weapon to penile



insecurity. That the patriarch's "true manly experiences" should at last achieve currency and immortality in the uninhibited narratives of his gay grandson is one of those tricks that time does play on the complacent—except that in this instance time is abetted by Prinsloo, much of whose output may be seen as an act of revenge on the certainties of the fathers that begat him. In the ironically titled memoir "Belowe Jy Sal Niemand Sê Nie" ("Promise You'll Tell Nobody"), he publicly disappoints his grandfather's hopes of racially pure progeny by telling the world in the first sentence of the story that "the first time that I touched somebody else's cock" (100)—the somebody else was black.

If Prinsloo, then, sardonically contrasts his own penile exploits with the "true manly experiences" of his forebears in their colonial ventures, the other two writers more indirectly explore the erotic implications of the arms-bearing father, now in the context of the crypto-colonial Angolan war. In *Slegs Blankes/ Whites Only*, Pierre de Vos establishes a complex web of associations linking the father with both the fatherland and with male homoeroticism. The protagonist, Etienne de Villiers, has decided, as part of his break with his past, to leave his wife—in itself an interesting connection between the heterosexual relation and the status quo. Arranging to meet his old friend Fanie to tell him about his decision, he designates for the meeting the Voortrekker monument in Pretoria: "It's a place abandoned by God and by history" (46). But clearly the place has some kind of power over him, and he tries again to formulate its significance:

There is something naive and dangerous about the monument that reminds me of my father. It's also the one place where I can generate enough anger to give me courage to do the things that have to be done. (46)

It may be this rather odd connection between monument and father that makes him lose his ironic cool when he hears a tour guide explaining to two tourists: "This is a sacred place for us Afrikaners, you know. . . . I wish I had the courage to go and tell her: speak for your fucking self, just don't drag me into it" (47). And as if to prove that the place is in any case not too sacred for the basic bodily functions, he goes into the men's toilet:

On the wall above the piss trough someone has written with a black pen in crooked capitals: "I suck cock." There are no other graffiti on

the dull-green walls. An idea occurs to me: "I piss on you, my people," but I don't write it down. (47)

The contemplated rejection of the "volk" is aligned, through the parallel construction of the two graffiti, with the declaration of transgressive sexuality.

The sequence is in turn aligned with another series of events and recollections, taking off from a childhood memory of the whole family on its way to the Voortrekker monument for the centenary celebrations of the Afrikaans language. There has been some tension in the family because the father has forced the mother to take off the hat she wanted to wear to the occasion, but in the car there is what seems to be a tacit reconciliation as he looks at his wife:

He smiles at her and drums his fingers on the steering wheel. His hands are big and hairy. His black hair is cut very short and his neck is heavily tanned. (56)

Here the triangular pattern is redrawn as a boy looking at his father looking at his mother; it is his father that he registers, who seems to be the erotic focus of his gaze. The awareness of the physical aspect of his father leads straight into an associated memory:

At the end of last year, on the way to Glentana for our holidays, in the toilets of the BP garage in Ladysmith, I saw for the first time what a thick stream he peed in the porcelain bowl. The little white pills gurgled in his bowl whereas I had to get up on my toes to get my thin little stream into the bowl. His tool was thick and long and when he shook it off, I could see the little veins bulging. (56)

Etienne's fascination with his father's penis is coextensive with his awe of paternal authority, but also with that desire for paternal tenderness and approval which seems to prompt so many of the boy's actions. Ironically, that approval and tenderness are withheld exactly because Etienne is the kind of boy who seeks approval and tenderness:

"There's something wrong with the child," my father says. "He's too pretty for a boy, I'm telling you." (82)

In the repressively masculine world in which the father moves, affection between men can be shown only in a safely masculine

environment, and to safely masculine men. Hence, perhaps, the father's anxiety that his worryingly celibate best friend should get married, and hence also his rejection of his son for not being masculine enough. Hurt by this rejection, Etienne fantasizes: "Perhaps one day my father will also be sorry. Then he will ruffle my hair and press me against him and ask me to go with him to watch a rugby match" (84).

The young Etienne has clearly internalized his father's values: it is on his father's ground that he wants to meet him. (He is the most knowledgeable boy in his school both in rugby lore and in the history of the Great Trek.) It is indeed at a rugby match that Etienne experiences such closeness to his father as the latter ever allows:

He presses me against him so tightly that my ears start singing. I turn my head away and wipe the tears with the back of my hand so that my father should not see that I'm crying. (37)

It is in keeping with the general eschewal of "unmanly" emotion that the father's embrace should be violent rather than tender. Rugby, of course, is a prime homosocial activity, with its male exclusiveness, its emphasis on physical contact, and its generally tough image; it is also one of the main repositories of white male patriotism in South Africa.<sup>9</sup> It is thus one of the few occasions on which the father would allow himself such an excess of emotion towards his son; the emotion is sanctioned, as it were, by the occasion, though the boy has to hide his corresponding "unmanly" emotion.

In this context, Etienne's marriage figures as one more attempt to please his father, as he tries to explain to his wife after he has left her: "It's all a battle against my father. Our marriage too" (96). This is as close as he ever gets to explaining to her or to anybody else why it should be necessary to leave her in order to rethink his life: clearly he sees marriage as part of the complex of expectations that he must defy in order to achieve some integrity: "I never once said no to him. I was always too scared" (193).

Thus Etienne, who married to please his father, leaves his wife as an act of liberation from the father, without having anything with which to replace that bond—except perhaps in terms of a transgressive sexuality. This is never spelt out, but the one person

who seems to be a potential sharer of Etienne's disquiet is Rudolph, the advice office worker, himself the alienated son of a conservative Afrikaans father. There are subdued suggestions of an unspoken attraction between them:

Rudolph seems uncomfortable with the personal note which the conversation has assumed. I want to reassure him, want to extricate him further from his own discomfort, but I don't know how.

"We must go," I say at length. "My wife is waiting."

"Your wife, yes," he sighs.

In silence we walk out into the warm summer's evening. The bright full moon hangs low over the city, slants the long shadows of our bodies over the dirty pavements which follow us all the way to our motor cars. Our eyes meet only fleetingly before we both make our way back into our own lives. (185)

If it is Rudolph who seems uncomfortable with the personal nature of the conversation, it is nevertheless Etienne who terminates it—and not for the first time—with a reminder of the wife waiting at home. Again, then, the triangular relation decentres the woman as the object of rivalry; it is Etienne who stands at the apex, with his wife and Rudolph "contending" for possession. Paradoxically, the wife represents the interests of patriarchy, and yet the male most matches the erotic appeal that forms the basis of patriarchy. From this point of view, it may be significant that it is Rudolph that Etienne chooses to entrust with his father's top secret files: the burden of the past is shifted to somebody who may help Etienne to cope with it.

In Behr's *The Smell of Apples* the homoerotic appeal of patriarchy is dramatized more directly if more innocently, through the wholly admiring gaze of Marnus, the young narrator, who dotes on his father, the youngest general in the history of the South African Defence Force. As part of the father-son ritual the two shower together:

Father's chest and stomach are full of hair. His mister hangs in a black thicket. . . .

In between the soaping and the hairwashing and the asking about all Frikkie and I have been doing, my father asks: "Now tell your father, does that little man now and again stand up straight yet in the mornings?" (69)

We might interpret this as a father's playful impatience for his son to reach potent manhood, or as the general's professional

interest in the development of future soldiers. But later events cast a darker implication on these interchanges, as on the whole of Marnus's apparently idyllic childhood. In the climactic scene of the novel, Marnus wakes up in the night to find his little friend Frikkie missing; assuming that he is in the guest bedroom directly below his own, with the mysterious "Mr Smith," in truth a Chilean general on a secret mission to South Africa, Marnus peers through a knothole in the floor:

Then the general stretches out his arm to Frikkie and it looks as if Frikkie is trying to move up further against the wall. . . .

It's getting lighter now. I can see his other hand is on Frikkie's little man.

His face is now up against Frikkie's. It looks as if he's pressing Frikkie against the wall and kissing him. . . .

He takes one of Frikkie's hands and puts it between his legs. His mister is sticking up straight through the fly of his pyjama pants.

(182)

The euphemisms here recall the bantering in the shower, although now of course in a far more sinister context.<sup>10</sup> The conflicting messages of the man's "pressing Frikkie against the wall and kissing him" dramatize precisely the perversion of tenderness into an act of violence. The full coercive force of the erect "mister" is asserted when the seduction turns into rape. Marnus discovers that the rapist is not the Chilean general, but his own father. The boy's initial reaction is to reject his father; he declines to shower with him, and refuses to come to him to accept the Chilean general's farewell gift of a pair of epaulettes. His father, sensing his revulsion, takes him into the bathroom and beats him savagely, while the boy screams "I hate you":

[Then he] puts me down on the bathroom floor and turns me so that I'm looking at him. I'm still struggling to catch my breath. And then for the first time I notice that father is crying. His eyes are no longer angry. The tears are running down his cheeks and the corners of his mouth are pulled down. He kneels before me and holds me while I cry and with his hand he strokes my face and hair. He speaks softly to me while I cry, and he says he's sorry that he has hit me and he holds me tightly against his chest. (204-05)

This scene is both affecting—in showing the father's vulnerability—and sinister—in suggesting that paternal tenderness is yet

another, more insidious form of coercion. This reconciliation is in fact a more effective assertion of paternal power than the violence of the hiding or even of the rape: tears and gentleness achieve what brute force could not, and the boy succumbs to the father's wish: "Father sits down on the bed and I go and stand in front of him and he screws the epaulettes into the cloth of my camouflage suit" (205).

In the symbolic framework of the book, the father-general thus exerts his power in the most directly homoerotic way of all, and reinforces this through the bond of parental affection. Marnus's acceptance of the patriarchal bond is confirmed by his rebuff of his more politically aware sister, who tries to warn him about the significance of the epaulettes: "Go away! You don't know *anything!*" (206). And immediately after this he reflects with satisfaction that in terms of their pact of mutual confidence, Frikkie is unlikely to tell anybody about the rape: "Between us the secret is safe" (206). Thus the boyish game of secrets is incorporated into the adult system of secrecy; and Marnus, now an initiate, arrives also at awareness of his own sexuality, which is coloured by its occurrence after his capitulation to the authority of his father and his symbolic assumption of the military uniform he is still wearing. The "little man" is preparing to claim company with the "mister" of the father. The achieved bond with the father is sealed the next morning as they prepare to leave on holiday:

While we're pulling the canvas over the boat, I ask him whether I can't go along to Okavango next year already. Father smiles at me over the boat and asks: "Little bull, first tell your father, is there foam yet on the water when you pee in the morning?" I smile and nod. Father laughs and says yes, I'm big enough to go tiger-fishing and there is nothing for Mother to worry about. (207)

The big bull, having checked on the little bull's credentials, admits him into the world of male activity, in which maternal concern, like the sister's warning the night before, is disregarded. The parental bond that in the Freudian model has as its corollary a rivalry between father and son is here a kind of complicity, based on affection but also on the power of the father to cow the son into submission and recruit him in service of patriarchy.

Marnus's growth to knowledge entails also his recognition that it was his mother, and not his sister, as he had assumed, who came to the Chilean general's room in his father's absence. In the symbolic structure of the novel, then, Marnus's father "provides" his wife for the visiting general's pleasure, just as Marnus "provides" his best friend for his father's pleasure. Though in neither is case the connivance conscious, both constitute a variation on the kind of homosocial transaction "between men" which Sedgwick derives from the work of Gayle Rubin, arguing "that patriarchal heterosexuality can best be discussed in terms of one or another form of traffic in women: it is the use of women as exchangeable, perhaps symbolic, property for the primary purpose of cementing the bonds with men" (25-26). What Behr's use of Frikkie as object of exchange adds to this analysis is the implication that homoeroticism itself can be inducted into the system of "patriarchal heterosexuality," though at a certain price in honesty.

The male bond established by Marnus's complicity with his father in the rape of his best friend achieves its symbolic equivalent when the grown-up Marnus joins the Permanent Force and fights in Angola as commissioned officer. In one of the flash-forwards to the Angolan war that punctuate the novel (we gather that this is in the aftermath of the morale-breaking failure of the SADF to capture Cuito Cuanavale in 1987-88), the grown-up Marnus contemplates his maturing sexuality:

When I look down, I realize that I'm still holding my mister. The head, covered by the soft foreskin, is half flattened between my thumb and forefinger and through the open fly creep the long dark hairs. . . .

I open the rest of the fly buttons, put my hand through the browns and lift the balls out. . . . The hairs here are lighter. At the base of each there is a slight broadening—miniature irrigation furrows around young trees which retain the water. Under the weight in my sweaty palm I feel the coolness of the skin of the seed bags and I slide them back carefully through the fly. (70-71)

This rather cryptic description, which I have quoted in much truncated form, does not simply present the adult penis as icon of assertive masculinity: indeed, the delicacy and vulnerability of the description suggests that the penis and testicles are being

contemplated not only or not even in the first place as an image of male power, but rather as a fragile source of life and fertility. But the context—a soldier urinating in the midst of a campaign—reminds us that this “mister,” the euphemism by now a sad echo of childhood days, is also that all-significant signifier that marks Marnus as part of patriarchy.<sup>11</sup> As the black section leader says to him, “We’re not like the Cubans who take women along to war. It’s the men who have to make war” (125). Marnus, with the proof of his masculinity in his hand, and surrounded by the disasters of war, succeeds to his patrimony. If, as Sedgwick explains, “by distinguishing (however incompletely) the phallus, the locus of power, from the actual anatomical penis, Lacan’s account creates a space in which anatomic sex and cultural gender may be distinguished from one another and in which the different paths of *men’s* relations to male power might be explored (e.g., in terms of class)” (24), then here we have a failure or refusal to draw that distinction: penis *is* phallus, in that the “actual anatomical penis” is also the “locus of power.”

In Prinsloo’s writing the fascination with the paternal penis assumes a more unambiguously sexual charge—so much so that, he records, it disconcerts even his therapist.

In the dream which flabbergasts the therapist, my father asks why I’m crying and I say I don’t know and he tries to touch my leg with his mutilated little finger. . . . That is when we try to fuck, filthily, his prick too thick for my arse. He is lying under me, but we’re struggling, because his penis, the giant head that funnels down to where the shaft tapers down above the balls, buckles all the time. It’s only when he starts stroking me, over my cheeks and tense pectorals, that I open up and come down over him and it’s still later that we lie choking with stiff cocks in each other’s gullets. (“Dreams are also Wounds” 48)

As recounted, this is not a rape so much as a sexual act between two consenting adults; but as in Behr’s novel, the penetration of the son is preceded by, is in fact made possible, by a show of tenderness—and the penetration is intended as consolation for the inexplicably disconsolate son. The paternal penis, then, is site of both domination and love. The deliberate crudity of Prinsloo’s description is really a continuation of and a manifestation of the tension recorded in the dream: the significance lies not so much in having the dream as in telling about it in this



public way. The father may have penetrated the son, but the son's telling of the tale reverses the power relation.

Prinsloo's whole oeuvre may be read as an ongoing engagement with his father, as much as a record of a past relationship. Every story is itself an act, as well as a record. Thus, as a conclusion to "And our fathers that begat us," Prinsloo quotes a letter from his father, apparently a reply to the son's announcement of his homosexuality:

Brother, yes, I'm glad that the hatchet has been buried. It was a bitter pill for me, but I'm so glad that you're not hiding anything from me. . . .

I've not told your mother anything about our revelation and want to ask you to let it remain your and my secret.

Yes, I must conclude now because I want to watch TV.

Your affectionate Father. (26)

In reproducing the father's letter, the act of writing becomes at one and the same time a tribute (to the father's effort to come to terms with his son's homosexuality) and a betrayal, both of his father's exclusion of the mother and of the promise of secrecy which the father tries to exact from the son. Unlike the young boy in Behr's story who opts to share and protect the father's secret, Prinsloo's protagonist declines the bond of secrecy with the father (in this respect like the son of the policeman in de Vos's novel who steals and makes public his father's "top secret" files).

All three writers indulge a fantasy of the father relinquishing his authority and asking for forgiveness. In Behr's novel, as we have seen, that moment of capitulation is also the moment of the father's greatest strength, in that the young boy cannot withstand an appeal made in the name of love. But de Vos allows his protagonist to grow up before being appealed to in this way; the ex-policeman takes to telephoning his grown-up son:

". . . I just want to know, Etienne. It's so long since we've talked. I want to talk to you. People change. I've changed. I'm no longer the same man that you used to know."

"I have my own life now. It's better that we don't see each other."  
(173)

Clearly this is not a son who has in the normal course of things

outgrown his ties with his father: there's something of the repentant lover about the father's manner, and something of the resolutely unyielding lover-who-cannot-trust-himself about Etienne. There is no easy transition from boyhood to independence, only an abrupt shift from subservience to hostility.

Prinsloo again most starkly crystallizes this pattern. The last of his published stories to deal with his father, written in the shadow of his own impending death, was "The Story of My Father." By this stage of the father's story, which is of course also the son's story, the son feels strong enough to mock what he regards as his father's self-dramatizing tendency on the telephone:

From his voice I could hear that as usual he's feeling oh so pitifully oh so terribly, pitifully sorry for himself. ("Somewhere between a thunder cloud and the hurt lover," I explain to my lover.) (68)

There may be a subtle disloyalty to the father in the "explanation" to the lover—even, we might say, a kind of infidelity. But the very mockery is a way of dealing with a bond he has not yet shaken off. And the father, too, it transpires, cannot rid himself of the guilt of fatherhood. He has phoned to tell his son about a dream he had, in which he sends his son to fetch a spanner:

"I tell you to pass the shifting, but you're still small, and you search and search and you get flustered and run over there to the . . . Don't be scared of me," my father's voice breaks unexpectedly through my ear. He gasps for breath: "Please don't be scared of me," he weeps and cries and pleads. "I did it all out of love. . ."

"The other day I said to your other cousin, when you were small and doctor Hansie le Grange . . . thought you had leukemia, I said to God if you die I'll do away with myself. . ."

"Ag, you're so small in my dream," my father tells me, and his emotion overwhelms him again. "And you get more and more bewildered because you can't find the spanner. Later you're over there against the wall next to the shelves and you get hold of two little planks which you offer to me like a little book."

He cried himself awake out of his dream, says my father, "and told Mamma immediately. It was she who said I should phone."

"Thank you for your dream," I say.

"Ah," says my father. "I'm feeling much better."

Well, is there ever a surprise in store for him. (69)

The vulnerable father, weeping and crying and pleading, has to repudiate his own authority ("please don't be scared of me") in

an attempt to reach his son, claiming that this authority was but a manifestation of love; but now that the son is in fact no longer scared of his father, he can indulge a kind of sardonic tenderness, in which affection is blended with a grim relish of his own capacity to hurt his father through his own death—and perhaps also through the “little book” that he is now offering him. The father as “hurt lover” elicits a response that is somewhere between a lover’s spite and a son’s affection; the story ends on one of the few direct references in Prinsloo’s work to his own illness:

What I won’t tell him just yet is that my lover and I fuck much less nowadays, what with the rash in my mouth and the fever blisters in my arse and the neverending running shits and the oh-so-rare little cancers.

That, my dear Papa, I’m keeping for later. (70)

It is impossible to say whether this is revenge or affection, confession or cruelty. Confronting his father with the starkest facts and results of his homosexuality even while he is claiming to refrain from doing so, the son seems to relish his own capacity to hurt. It is a power which he derives from his father’s love; but then again, as the father’s dream seems to confirm, that love has always manifested itself as power. And in a postscript to the story which may be seen as a gesture of comprehension, the son recollects that the old story of father and son applied also to his father:

(P.S. While I replay my father’s message on the answering machine again and again, I remember something about the story of my father that I forgot to tell my lover the night before: It was only at sixteen—yes, he’d been taken out of school by then—that my father stopped running, but walked like a normal person when my grandfather ordered him to go and fetch something.)

The son’s doing of his father’s bidding, whether from eagerness to please or from fear of punishment, is a timeless enough image of parental authority and filial obedience.<sup>12</sup> It is in the near-instinct to run when ordered that “respect” for authority becomes indistinguishable from conditioning through fear, and that power relations in the family reflect and to an extent explain political attitudes. Behr’s novel most clearly dramatizes the practice of child abuse under the cloak of parental concern, but the other two works also depict, though less directly, patriarchy as

comprising both violence and tenderness, not as contradictory elements but as mutually reinforcing components. At a national level, this sanctions the persecution of gay men as child protection, the suppression of political dissent as warding off the “Total Onslaught”; at a family level it requires the regimentation of the family in the interests of the development of the child. And where family intersects with nation, and patriarchy embraces fatherland, the defence of the whole requires the sacrifice of the son—again most overtly dramatized by Behr in what we take to be the death of Marnus in the Angolan war. Where power clothes itself as loving-kindness the loving father may also be the violator of youth.

A disturbing potential of the double face of patriarchy is to attract the son, partly by the promise of phallic power, partly by the appeal of male tenderness, into complicity with a repressive regime—and all the more strongly the more pronounced the homosexual element in the male make-up. Thus gay sexuality becomes collaborative rather than oppositional, sporting the SA uniform rather than the pink triangle.<sup>13</sup> This is the possibility that Behr’s novel represents symbolically through Marnus’s acceptance of complicity in his father’s rape of Frikkie: the son is co-opted through his admiration for the strength and his protection of the weakness of the father.

Coetzee’s Dostoevsky is haunted by the image of a man who had violated his twelve-year-old daughter and then strangled her:

Why does it recur now, this image of a man at the water’s edge with a dead child in his arms? A child loved too much, a child become the object of such intimacy that it dare not be allowed to live. Murderous tenderness, tender murderousness. Love turned inside out like a glove to reveal its ugly stitching. And what is love stitched from? . . . Not rape but rapine—is that it? Fathers devouring children, raising them well in order to eat them like delicacies afterwards. *Delikatessen*.  
(125)

The figure of the murderously tender father is an extreme version of the ambiguity I have been examining in this essay, whereby tenderness and murderousness form two complementary aspects of a single relation. Thus the father in Prinsloo’s “Story of My Father” who pleads with his son not to be scared of him since he did it all out of love presents an image of paternal

self-justification in the face of the sons' stories, denouncing the voracious appetites, the murderous tenderness, of the fathers.

But even as we read these stories, the revenge of the younger generation upon the old recreates the bondage from which it is trying to escape. So, for instance, Etienne, on the day of his self-emancipation, visits the police museum, by now an almost quaint relic of past horrors, like the Voortrekker monument. He makes his way to the "terrorism room":

I have eyes only for the photo in the lower left-hand corner. It shows a policeman—my father—in camouflage dress. He is leading a handcuffed black man in underpants out of the door. . . . My father is clenching an automatic rifle in one hand and smiles broadly, his white teeth slightly discoloured with nicotine stains. . . . I can't look at it without feeling the familiar constriction in my chest. That, at least, hasn't changed. My dear, dearest father has me as tightly in his grip as ever. (De Vos 24)

The father is here captured at the moment of triumphant identification with the regime he serves, the smile and the rifle constituting the essential ambiguity of patriarchy—and the rebellious, politicized son is as much in thrall to his power as when he was a naive believer in his father's values. At a different level of fictionality, one might say that the novel itself, ostensibly a declaration of independence from the power of the father, becomes also a testimony to the power of the father and even a manifestation of that power; hence Etienne is last seen on the steps of the Voortrekker monument with his head in his hands, sure of nothing except that he does not know where to go: "Now how do you live in a world with which you don't agree and in which you don't feel at home?" (*Whites Only* 195). Having asserted to his father "I have my own life now" (195), Etienne is left wondering how to live it.

Behr's answer to that rhetorical question is to arrange for his protagonist an escape from such a life and for his novel a more decisive conclusion: as Marnus lies dying in Angola, he returns to the embrace of his father: "Once again I feel Father's face against my chest and my arms around his head, and I feel safe" (205). Again Behr dramatizes most directly an implication present in all three authors (and also in Coetzee's *Master of Petersburg*) where the son has not succeeded in liberating himself, the true consummation of the father-son relation is the death of the son. The

security Marnus finds in his father's embrace is the security of death.

Given the discrete units of Prinsloo's stories, the tension between father and son apparently lacks such resolution: the deadlock between attraction and rejection seems absolute. But the death anticipated in the last stories exerts its own force of closure, which it is impossible to ignore in reading these stories. And there is that in Prinsloo's relationship with the father that makes that death seem like a last act of defiance, a final emancipation, a kind of tender murderousness or murderous tenderness that also ultimately requires the death of the son. "The old matter of fathers and sons" is not reducible to any single pattern; but what these three writers have in common is a vision of fathers and sons bound together by "such intimacy that it dare not be allowed to live." By a final paradox, that intimacy survives nevertheless, in the shape of these fictions struggling towards emancipation.

#### NOTES

- 1 A partial State of Emergency was declared in South Africa on 20 July 1985, lifted on 7 March 1986, and reimposed in more stringent form in June 1986, to be lifted only in June 1990. I am using the term fairly loosely to refer to writing produced during this whole period or in response to it.
- 2 Sedgwick elucidates her central term as follows:  
 "Homosocial" is a word occasionally used in history and the social sciences, where it describes social bonds between persons of the same sex; it is a neologism, obviously formed by analogy with "homosexual," and just as obviously meant to be distinguished from "homosexual." In fact, it is applied to such activities as "male bonding" which may, in our society, be characterized by intense homophobia, fear and hatred of homosexuality. (1)
- 3 In Gordimer's *A Sport of Nature*, Sasha, the left-wing trade-union organizer, talking about his mother, also an activist, refers to "the wrestling game she and I have, to the last gasp—she or me. . . . I continue to wound her savagely" (242). Coetzee's *Age of Iron* is premised on the distance, geographical as well as partly ideological, between mother and daughter; and in André Brinks's *An Act of Terror* one of the Afrikaans female revolutionaries sees in her father everything she most despises about the status quo.
- 4 Bracketed translations are my own, even where the availability of a commercial translation is noted in the bibliography. I have in general sacrificed style and idiom to literal meaning.
- 5 Prinsloo died of AIDS in 1994, at the age of 36. His two last—and most controversial—volumes of short stories, *Slagplaas* and *Weifeling*, were written while he knew he was ill. I am committing a conscious biographical fallacy in subsuming Prinsloo's varied narrators, focalizers, and protagonists under the label of "Koos Prinsloo"; obviously there is no such direct identification between author and

character. But since I am treating a series of stories as a single narrative, it would be tedious to keep referring to "the protagonist" or "the narrator," as the case may be.

- 6 I am blithely begging some big questions here: Girard would certainly not agree that his theory of mimetic desire is "derived from" Freud. See, for instance, his "Freud and the Oedipus Complex" (*Violence* 169-92), and "Psychoanalytic Mythology" (*Things Hidden* 352-92). For the view that Girard presents a "classic case" of the anxiety of influence, and that "Freud is Girard's haunting rival, daunting double and castrating father," see *Moi* 30. This is not the place, nor am I the person, to arbitrate the matter, but an incidental implication of my essay is that Girard's theory of triangular desire cannot sustain the kind of universal applicability he claims for it.
- 7 Girard's theory of triangular desire must minimize the distinction between homosexual and heterosexual, "since the model and rival, in the sexual domain, is an individual of the *same* sex, for the very reason that the object is heterosexual. All sexual rivalry is thus structurally homosexual" (*Things Hidden* 335). He thus rather confusingly accommodates "true" homosexuality as a variant of a special "form of heterosexuality in which the partners play the roles of model and rival, as well as that of object, for one another" (337). For a critique of this, see *Moi*, especially 29-30.
- 8 In his early essays on the subject, Girard recognizes that the triangle is a specialized variant rather than the universal form of human desire. Thus in the seminal essay "'Triangular' Desire" he states quite simply, "In most works of fiction, the characters have desires which are simpler than Don Quixote's. There is no mediator, there is only the subject and the object" (*Deceit* 2). But with time he seems to come to disregard this insight and impose a triangle on even the most linear relationships, such as those referred to in Note 7.
- 9 In Damon Galgut's *The Beautiful Screaming of Pigs*, the young protagonist, a conscript in the Border War, reflects on his and his friend's inability to play rugby: "There was, you see, a brotherhood of men, to which we could never belong. My father, my brother, the boys at my school: they knew things that I don't know. There was that in their hands that helped them catch balls; that helped them see objects in flight" (71). Significantly, the father is also a hunter, whereas the brother is a soldier in the Permanent Force.
- 10 In Afrikaans, Marmus's childish euphemism for the adult penis, "meneer," contains connotations of authority ("sir" would be a closer equivalent than "mister"), which make the "little man" of the terrified boy seem particularly vulnerable.
- 11 Cf. Grosz 122: "The penis comes to represent tangibly the differences between the sexes as other organs, in our culture, do not, enabling it to function on an imaginary level to signify presence and absence or fullness and privation."
- 12 But see Daniel Rancour-Laferrier:
 

In essence, the hierarchical organization of interactions in a human male collective is a complex icon of males mounting and being mounted by one another. . . . Giving orders is an icon of anal penetration, taking orders is an icon of being anally penetrated. (345)
- 13 See Rancour-Laferriere 346:
 

Gays and bisexuals were in fact an important part of the Nazi movement, and a current joke had it that "Out of the Hitler Youth an SA [Storm Trooper] man will emerge!" But this tolerance lasted only until 1934, when Hitler decided that Ernst Röhm, homosexual head of the SA, was a political liability. Röhm was executed, and the extermination of male homosexuals in Germany—and later in all of Nazi-controlled Europe—got into full swing. (346)

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