

Lionel Abrahams speaks:

I am more than honoured, more than grateful to have this Pringle Award. I am moved at receiving from a body like the English Academy a signal of encouragement and friendliness at a time when the signals from the country as a whole tend to fill one with confusion, disgust and dismay.

We seem to be in the heyday of a spirit of power-lust that makes a god of security, and sacrifices a thousand joys and freedoms and truths to that god – to say nothing of lives.

Censorship, which particularly concerns us here, is an expression of that same spirit – though I am convinced that censorship, as applied against South Africa's literary authors at the very least, has no genuine connection with security, or with moral standards.

It has to do with a natural enmity between the creative writer and that lust for power. The bully has constantly to prove his power by pushing people around, and the writer makes a convenient target. Moreover, the writer's creative truthfulness makes it impossible for him to fall in with the

fiction about security. He sees no point in giving up a joy here, a freedom there, a truth anywhere, in the futile hope that death can be bought off or bought over. He insists on knowing and living the whole of life to the limit of possibility.

Many of my friends have left South Africa. Others are talking of doing so. As for myself, I acknowledge that there is always the possibility of the unimaginable fright or hurt that could turn me inside-out and make me need to leave. But my intention is to stay. I feel that this is my place. My work relates to this place. I tell myself that even if privilege and comfort and prosperity and safety were taken away, I would still find my meaning in this place. To be forced to leave would be a moral disaster for me.

The award which the English Academy has bestowed on me is a sign of your recognition which will help me to hold on to my resolve to stay where my life has meaning. □

THE DARK WOOD

by Peter Wilhelm; Ravan Press 1977.

Reviewed by Jill Arnott

Dominating the plot of Peter Wilhelm's **The Dark Wood**, are the differing choices and destinies of two brothers; David and Jan van Vlaams: sons of a wealthy, conservative Johannesburg businessman who is deeply concerned with the protection and preservation of what he sees as an embattled Afrikaans tradition and heritage. It is in relation to their father's society, its values, policies, and customs, that the brothers must mould their lives; giving their loyalty to, or withholding it from, the system he represents. The nature of this society is such that acceptance or rejection of its primary values must to some extent dictate the shape of their respective futures, for it is a society dedicated to the protection of its own, and the elimination of those who threaten its structure and security.

To this extent, then, the concerns of the book are political, but only on a relatively superficial level. "The Exorcism", the Theodore Roethke poem from which Mr Wilhelm draws his title, is about identity and the nature of selfhood; and it is the individual personalities of Jan and David, their needs and weaknesses, rather than any external circumstances or events, which finally influence their separate decisions. David, the elder, despite the advantages of an overseas education, remains true to the tradition which has the most to offer him personally: the South African way of life as exemplified by the upper echelons of Afrikaans-speaking, Johannesburg-

northern-suburbs society. He does try to rationalise his need for a structured, stable, static environment into political terms: "We're a young country still . . . we can't afford liberalisation at this stage . . .", but these naive over-simplifications cannot deceive even himself. His real nature, his need to be both dominated and protected, is revealed by his grateful submission to his power-hungry stepmother. David is less a patriot than a man with a highly developed sense of self-preservation, and it is this instinct that dominates even his love-life. He chooses his woman, Marika Marais, not only because she is the daughter of a useful business contact, but also because she is traditional White-South-African womanhood incarnate: "a product of decency and sun, of Cape rectitude and racial purity". Mr Wilhelm's satire is here, as elsewhere, a little heavy-handed; but the point he makes, and the inescapable parallel with Hitler's ideal of Aryan maidenhood, is certainly relevant.

With David exposed as spineless, self-seeking, and wilfully blind, it might be expected that his sibling, Jan, representative of the liberal-thinking counter-culture, would emerge as a more attractive personality. But if anything Jan strikes the unbiased reader as even less sympathetic: his progressive ideals marred by personal bitterness and a childish desire to revenge himself on a society in which he has failed to realise himself. His desire for revolution is less a commitment to freedom than a morbid fascination with violence: "In his mind he had stripped the guests,

but not for orgy. He had made streaks of dark blood run down their white skins". The "whiteness" here is not of any social relevance, but serves as a foil for the exciting darkness of blood. Like David, Jan uses political phrases to justify his attitudes, but again these are just a cover for more personal needs and motivations. Seeking integration into the anti-establishment culture he has opted for, Jan gets involved with a black woman — an affair which culminates in a disastrous climax; disastrous rather than tragic, because the affair is based neither on love nor on deeply felt ideals, but upon Jan's desire for integration and acceptance in the black community. The woman, Crystal, is for him "the adjunct to a pose".

Significantly, both men achieve their only moments of true integration, of real insight into the cultures with which they have chosen to identify, when they cease to intellectualise their attitudes and respond instinctively and sensually to the essentials of that culture. David, on the Marais' estate, finds that closeness to the land itself awakens in him an awareness of the vital rhythms of an agricultural, rather than a political tradition, and he finds himself meshing with those rhythms. A similar "meshing" takes place between Jan and a Nigerian drummer at a Swazi pop-festival, and this primitive but valid contact achieves what Jan's forced identification with black attitudes and problems never could.

Apart from these brief moments, **The Dark Wood** paints a depressing picture of the choices open in white South Africa today; and the gloom is deepened by the author's apparent lack of affection for any of his characters.

However, the final effect of the whole book is no more tragic than the fate of Jan; partly because the characters are occasionally in danger of becoming caricatures, and partly because there are moments and phrases in the novel which are trapped uneasily between the dramatic and the absurd. Mr Wilhelm's Customs officials "snarl like dogs", and David, hearing from Marika of a previous affair, is haunted by an image of her "as slimy as truth".

Peculiar as the latter phrase is, it is not inappropriate in Mr Wilhelm's work: he does seem to see any truth in a South African context as inherently "slimy". The moments of reckoning for both brothers are ones of degradation, not achievement: Jan's ignominious and futile death, and David's equally ignominious marriage to a girl he has never really loved.

The ending of the book, cast in the form of Jan's dying dream or hallucination, seems to be an attempt at resolving some of the issues raised. The central figure, whether old man, primitive god, or spirit of Africa, seems to represent the older, stronger, and more mysterious African culture which provides both touchstone and perspective for the futile culture-clash which has destroyed both brothers. This is never made explicit, however, and the whole scene seems too nebulous and surreal to provide a satisfactory solution to any of the very real problems that Mr Wilhelm has thrown up. The old man may contain within himself both the corruption and the wholesome energy of Africa (the "rotten meat" and the "milk and honey") but these are not so easily reconciled in present-day society. □

SOWETO

A People's Response

A survey conducted and published by the Institute for Black Research, Durban.

Introduction by Peter Brown

Two weeks after the first outbreak of violence in Soweto in June, 1976, a group of black students in Durban met to discuss these events. They drew up a questionnaire, submitted it to 500 people of all races in Durban. The results were not written up for more than a year because of the banning of leading members of the Institute for Black Research, the organisation behind the survey. The report has, however now appeared. It has lost nothing of its value through this delay. It reflects attitudes which every South African should be made aware of and for this reason, in spite of the fact that the report has been fairly widely reported on in Natal, we quote extensively from it in this issue of REALITY, so that our readers elsewhere know something of the reactions of people in a City remote from those events of June 16th. It is clear that while Durban was virtually untouched by the violence of those days, their impact on its people was profound. Some of the more interesting and important points to emerge from the report were, I thought, these:

Blacks saw the events of Soweto and after in political terms, Whites as an outbreak of lawlessness;
Fear of the police amongst blacks is pervasive;
All groups saw the enforcement of Afrikaans as the trigger to violence — so much for Dr Treurnicht's

"master-mind" behind it all!

Africans are as afraid of a violent solution to South African problems as are the members of any other group. What is more, 80% of Africans who rejected violence in all circumstances, had little or no formal education, thus exposing another white-propagated myth, that of the "uneducated savage";

In spite of this fear of violence a growing number of Africans now see an armed struggle as the only way to change and see that the consequence of such change will be that white domination is succeeded by African domination or an Africanist government.

Most interesting of all is the number of black people who would still prefer to see some kind of non-racial government succeed apartheid. The report should be compulsory reading for all Cabinet Ministers. They would learn from it that they still have time, though not much, to change, before committing suicide. Here are some quotations from the report.

The group administered its questionnaire to 500 Durbanites in an attempt to gain some insight into (1) how they saw the events, (2) what influenced their conceptions, (3) what effects they thought the events would have on government policy and (4) how they visualized change.