

## Poetry

### *Pure and Applied:* DANIEL ABASIEKONG

## *Rabearivelo and Brutus*

CONSIDERED TOGETHER, the poems of Dennis Brutus<sup>1</sup> and Jean-Joseph Rabearivelo<sup>2</sup> show conclusively that there are more valid approaches to meaning than just one, and that success and effectiveness depend more on the poet's own inspiration and his artistic capabilities, than on the intrinsic nature of his raw material. This certainly trite remark is called for, because each of these poets has succeeded in spite of a strong body of critical opinion which would wish his work out of existence simply on account of the subjects he treats.

It is a curious fact that so many people, including poets as well as readers, turn up their nose at any attempt by the art of verse to grapple with public themes, to break out into the public streets. It is a curious fact for two major reasons.

First, life in the twentieth century belongs mainly to the public streets, and you cannot comprehend the former while shutting out the latter. As Archibald MacLeish puts it, "There is always an outdoor war to go to in our time or a huge public death in the sky or a revolution down at the corner of a couple of continents or a march-past of Great Decisions dressed up like elephants in scarlet words or a band concert of mortal trumpets and drums from over every horizon on earth. All this is out of doors and it is out of doors we do our talking and arguing and walking up and down with our souls and wondering whether we'll live until morning and whether we want to . . . We spend weeks and months arguing honesty, not private honesty—not our own several private honesties—but the public honesty of what we call, with admirable detachment, our 'society' . . . We forefeel disaster—public disaster: the collapse of our country, of our tradition, of our assumptions, our hopes . . . We cry for direction, but it is public direction we mean; for leadership, but political leadership . . . Our dreams are public. Even our terrors are public. And nevertheless we won't have our poetry out of doors."<sup>3</sup>

Yet—and this is the second count on which the present state of affairs seems curious—great writers through the ages have always been "public-minded" men. This is, in so far as a difference (which many take for granted today) could be discerned between public world and private words as regards the meanings of poetry. Sappho's inward-looking lyrics were not typical of Greek poetry, which in the main treated

great public themes. Great public themes form a substantial part of the work of Dante, Shakespeare, Shelley and Tennyson.

The idea that the meanings discoverable by poetry are irrelevant to public concerns is often traced back to the reaction of the artists of the "nineties" against the abhorrent political world in which they found themselves. Even before them, however, William Morris's socialism and Tennyson's idea of the poet as the supreme commentator on material progress had ceased to be typical of their age. The theory rapidly gained currency that, on the one hand, public affairs were artistically deleterious and, on the other—as Arthur Symonds is said to have declared—"the poet has no more part in society than a monk in domestic life."

It is, of course, possible to argue that today the world outside has become so repulsive and complicated as to make some poets turn their backs upon it. But this argument serves as a cogent excuse for poetry that is a "journey inward", without discrediting poetry that is not—that is, without establishing that poetry has nothing to do with politics and public themes, and *should* have nothing to do with them.

As already remarked, Dennis Brutus shows a triumphant disdain for this type of narrow-minded literary legislation. His work has re-affirmed that it is possible and valid to create good, perhaps great, poetry out of politics and history — to write living and intensely personal poetry whose meanings take hold on public affairs.

It is natural that a South African poet with an "open" sensibility should react to the horny police regime that operates in his country. Brutus—himself a "coloured" whose anti-apartheid activities have earned him the demonstrated wrath of Dr. Verwoerd's government—reacts with vigour, integrity and defiant hopefulness.

By vigour I mean the arresting energy and refreshing robustness of the voice that speaks in these poems. "Integrity", a rather suspicious word, sums up those qualities of the poet's temper, intellect and imagination that save his protest from sounding merely strident, from degenerating to blubbery emotionalism or mawkish self-pity or naive malice.

Vigour, integrity, defiant hopefulness—these whole-

some qualities are impressed upon us by the compelling force of the poet's trained intellectual capacity, by the brilliant intensity of his imagery, by the way he presses language urgently and aptly into service, by the confident modulation of rhythm and gross structure.

Brutus's intellect is distinguished by its skill and intensity, certainly not—on the evidence of these poems—by depth. But perhaps this is because, as C. Day Lewis said, "On topical issues, however tremendous, profound poems can only be written by the rare genius who is able to see them prophetically . . ."

If Brutus is not a rare genius, he surely boasts a skilful, forceful, trained intelligence. The way he exercises his sure intellectual grip on his subjects calls to mind the method of John Donne and the Metaphysicals. A typical Dennis Brutus poem opens with a line or a couple of lines which holds in embryo the central motif of the piece.

The sounds begin again . . .

Somehow we survive  
and tenderness, frustrated, does not wither . . .

This sun on this rubble after rain . . .  
Time—ordinary time—

exerts its own insistent  
unobtrusive discipline . . .

A common hate enriched our love and us . . .

Brutus then builds up his poem by developing this stated motif, arguing, describing, expounding, analysing, illustrating with vivid and living imagery, occasionally bolstering the argument with conceits, all the while echoing the opening lines either directly or through new images and descriptive details which embody the *idea* of the opening lines, and finally concluding in a dialectical and emotional point of rest, in which often the opening lines resound again.<sup>4</sup> Even those poems—like "Between the time of falling for the flowers . . . *Waiting (South African Style): Off the Campus, Erosion: Transkei*—which do not answer strictly to this formula, are conducted with the same show of skilful and compulsive logic, the same analytical intelligence and sense of fact.

A good example of Brutus's method is the poem whose opening lines are

A troubadour, I traverse all my land exploring all  
her wide-flung parts with zest . . .

—one of the very best things that he has written.

The poet here depicts himself as one whose wish to devotion and service to fatherland has been thwarted. His country has failed to reward or return his love and zealous devotion—

no mistress—favour has adorned my breast  
only the shadow of an arrow—brand,

Troubadour—amorous—loved-one—mistress-favour!  
The unity of this poem—its thematic development and gross structure—is secured by this image, which is the backbone of each of the three stanzas. Thus Brutus achieves the "tightness" which he says is essential to a good poem.<sup>5</sup>

This procedure depends for its success as poetry largely on the poet's use of imagery. Otherwise, it would be mere intelligent, skilful *argument*. The sense of Brutus's poetry—be it complaint or romance—is a sense tried upon the pulses rather than merely spelled out by cold reasoning. The poet impresses his *thoughts* upon us by way of *feelings* induced by apt images. In the letter of

19 February, 1963 already referred to, addressed to his wife Bernice concerning an unpublished poem he wrote for her, Brutus refers to "the interweaving image and idea that I like and sometimes get in my best things . . ."; and adds that after reading a good poem "we are conscious of a rich variegated experience which sums up the whole in a complex *intellectually satisfying emotion*."<sup>6</sup>

The poem beginning "This sun on this rubble after rain" is another excellent example of this. (In this poem—as in the short one opening "Out of the granite day"—natural phenomena are treated as reflections or images of human situations.) The argument runs something like this: When we are no longer soaked by our oppressors in tears and sweat, we shall sing in exultation, or take steps to revenge the wrongs done us. Meanwhile, however—while we are still suffering and crying—all we can do is plead for the slightest relief, which we need badly, and be grateful for it.

That is the *idea*. Look, however, at the *poem*:

This sun on this rubble after rain.

Bruised though we must be  
some easement we require  
unarguably, though we argue against desire.  
Under jackboots our bones and spirits crunch.  
forced into sweat-tear-sodden slush  
—now glow-lipped by this sudden touch:

—sun-stripped perhaps, our bones may later sing  
or spell out some malignant nemesis  
Sharpevilled to spearpoints for revenging  
but now our pride-dumped mouths are wide  
in wordless supplication  
—are grateful for the least relief from pain  
—like this sun on this debris after rain.

What a rich, unparaphrasable "interweaving of image and idea"! The poet does not tell us *about* oppression. Rather, he presents an image of Oppression, so that we hear its sound as the bones "crunch" beneath the jackboots, and see it in action as it forces them "into sweat-tear-sodden slush". Since we are thus looking at Oppression—seeing its acts and hearing its sounds—we feel on our pulses the ideas about it that the poet is trying to communicate to our intellect. That is how Brutus carries us along, achieves vigour through apt and arresting imagery employed in skilful and forceful argument.

1. Dennis Brutus: *Sirens Knuckles Boots* (Mbari, Ibadan 1963) Ed. Denis Williams.
2. Rabearivelo: *24 Poems* (Mbari, Ibadan, 1962) Translated from the French by Ulli Beier and Gerald Moore.
3. Archibald MacLeish: *Poetry and Experience* (The Bodley Head) pp. 116-117.
4. This shared characteristic of the 17th century Metaphysical Poets is discussed by A. Alvarez in *The School of Donne* (Chatto & Windus) pp. 61 seq. I have not tried here to point out the differences in detail between Brutus's method and that of Donne and his followers, who in any event also differ among themselves in their handling of this formula.
5. In a letter to his wife dated 19th February 1963.
6. This letter is among the relevant documents which Denis Williams kindly and willingly placed at my disposal.
7. Chinua Achebe: *Things Fall Apart* (Heinemann) p. 30.
8. Editor of *Breakthru International Poetry Magazine*, Densbarn, Lindfield, Sussex, England.
9. Edited by Gerald Moore and Ulli Beier, and published by Penguin in the African Library series.
10. *Revolution* (August-September, 1963) p. 207.

The range of this imagery, in thirty odd short poems, is remarkable. The seasons, music, chivalric and militaristic allusions, legal references, the world of Nature—visual, aural, tactual imagery—all are drawn upon to give concrete body to Brutus's ideas and thus affect us with "a complex intellectually satisfying emotion".

Brutus's language depends for its vitality not entirely on the fire supplied by the imagination but often on the way he uses words (many of them original double-barrel coinages) to shock us:

her gusty breath,  
passion-keen  
is sweet in the morning air . . .

(Autumn comes here . . .)

Our souls, since Hersey, seek the Helix of unknowing  
Save mine, *you-saved*, now leafing like a bough . . .  
("Sublunary no more . . .")

Often a single coinage is made to bear the weight of a whole complex of ideas and emotions which would take a long phrase or sentence to express:

She calculates the change on knuckly fingertips  
and *wordless toothless-old-man mumbling lips* . . .

[*Waiting (South African Style)*].

Under jackboots our bones and spirits crunch  
forced into *sweat-tear-sodden slush*  
—now glow-lipped by this sudden touch:

—sun-stripped perhaps, our bones may later sing  
or spell out some malignant nemesis  
*Sharpevilled* to spearpoints for revenging . . .

("This sun on this rubble. . .")

In the last line, "Sharpeville" is, of course, used as a verb—as substantives so often are in *Sirens Knuckles Boots* (quixoting, tree-bowered, cindered)—but there is also a pun on the first syllable of "Sharpeville" which links it immediately with "spear-points" and thus serves to convey with great economy the idea of the notorious Sharpeville outrage driving South Africa's non-whites to whet their weapons in readiness for retaliatory action.

The jerks and jolts in Brutus's diction are not mere exhibitionism. They share the two touchstones of true poetic language—immutability and inevitability. One cannot imagine the experiences they express being put another way, and one cannot imagine that those experiences could have been left unexpressed in Brutus's words. As an instance of this poet's characteristic use of "the right words in the right order", it might do to quote here in full a poem which the reader may find himself taking in whole at the second reading:

Time—ordinary time—  
exerts its own insistent  
unobtrusive discipline;  
today's undone work is axed  
into oblivion by the chores  
that thud on it tomorrow  
and spit it in the basket of neglect:

and these—these sores—  
unhealed and unattended  
that bleed afresh each day  
under the horny ministrants of law  
must, under impulse of augmented streams  
explode in gouts and swish

these paired clerks and all  
into a messy bloodied waste.

The sensuous richness of imagery makes for obliqueness, and stands between the poet and direct bitterness or sentimentalism. The poem beginning "Somehow we survive . . ." which, incidentally, states Brutus's theme of enduring hope, may—if not read properly aloud—seem to have fallen over the brink. Actually it is rescued by the lightness of tone, achieved by the rather airy rhythm. Tone is again the saviour of *Waiting (South African Style)* which would seem to be an instance of what we have described as naïve malice. In fact, the poem is an odd mixture of despair and wit—the sort of thing one finds in Philip Larkin—which makes one feel that even at the lowest depth of frustration or desperation Brutus seems to be defiantly *laughing* at apartheid, rather than gravely and piteously complaining about it.

The foregoing serves to show how Dennis Brutus invests his verse with a feeling of poetic inevitability which lifts his protest surely into the realm of art. What Stephen Spender once described as "poetry conscripted by the conscience on behalf of victims" is often evidence of good intentions rather than real artistic merit. Dennis Brutus's pieces are of the latter class.

It is a good thing, however, that Mbari did not publish only the political poems. In a letter to Dennis Williams, the poet makes a parenthetical suggestion to the effect that the Mbari volume might comprise *only* his political pieces (or, alternatively, only the personal love poems).

Denis Williams' decision to mix the best of both was, I think, very wise. The result is that we are able to see these political poems as representing not so much a political attitude as one of several poetical ways in which Brutus's sensibility functions. A book of poetry which was entirely protest literature would have been decidedly unsatisfactory, for two reasons.

First, there is the monotony that would obviously result from harping continuously on a single (and, at that, political) string. A more serious objection is that it is now too late for the eloquence of the artist to influence the destiny of humanity in South Africa. It is *before* a war or a revolution or a catastrophe such as exists now in South Africa, that the artist who works on public themes comes into his own. He is impotent *during* such crises. A Dennis Brutus writing in Southern Rhodesia today would speak in a voice trembling with what all readers would painfully recognize as a prophetic blast. In Southern Rhodesia there is still the possibility of changing history, and this possibility, with all the anxiety it carries with it, adds a unique dimension to the poet's utterance. In South Africa, however, where the future has already been fixed by the present, it requires something other than rhetoric and verbal pleading to influence the future—it requires taking up arms against the present.

Fortunately, the Mbari volume contains other things. Love, kindness, sex, space technology—these and other motives are present alongside of apartheid and man's inhumanity to man in South Africa. And some readers may find the erotic pieces, the subject of which is Brutus's devoted wife Bernice, the most satisfying.

Jean-Joseph Rabearivelo of Malagasy makes interesting reading for entirely different reasons. French-African creative writing is so heavily committed to direct nationalist protest against imperialist subjugation and the depreciation of black African culture, that a French-

African poet whose concern is *not* art as socio-political propaganda seems very different.

Rabearivelo combines a fertile mythopoeic sensibility with exceptional powers of observation to create an invitingly unfamiliar world of Nature.

What invisible rat  
come from the walls of night  
gnaws at the milky cake of the moon?  
Tomorrow morning  
those who have drunk all night  
and those who have abandoned their cards,  
looking at the moon  
will stammer . . .  
And all will snigger  
and staggering, will fall,  
The moon will no longer be there:  
The rat will have carried it into his hole.

Here is Nature contemplated with a peculiar visionary intensity which transforms animals and plants and heavenly bodies into a fascinating world operating in accordance with laws tauntingly beyond our ken.

It is a world whose language is neat and clear:

Your crown,  
in your hair dishevelled by the wind,  
conceals a nest of transcendent birds,  
and when you will come to sleep in my bed,  
and I will recognize you, my errant brother,  
your touch, your breath, and the odour of your skin  
will provoke the rustling of mysterious winds  
even to the frontiers of sleep.

This passage is typical of the way in which Rabearivelo achieves a finely controlled dramatic intensity through the use of words that have strong sensuous and physical properties. Yet his world remains for us a strange and unreal world—the world of the invisible rat that carries the moon into his hole; of rootless trees, and dumb but knowledgable birds; of “a tree without trunk, all leaves”; of “cocks that sing in dreams and feed on stars”; a world existing on “the frontiers of sleep”. These poems remind one of “that land of Ikemefuna’s favourite story where the ant holds his court in splendour and the sands dance for ever.”<sup>7</sup> No human figures exist here: the nearest approximation to them are certain semi-divine personages.

Such “pure art” would have seemed like trash to Vissarion Belinsky and his disciples and literary descendants, whose rigorous standards of complete realism and direct social relevance led them to look always in literature for artistic responsibilities corresponding to empirical reality, to the moment in history, and to social and national needs. These are still the things that Ken Geering<sup>8</sup> is on the look out for. Rabearivelo is not one of the poets he mentions by name in his review of *Modern Poetry from Africa*<sup>9</sup> in *Revolution* of August-September, 1963. But it is clear that he is not excepted from this critic’s unflattering remarks on the poets represented in the anthology. Mr. Geering argues, with an air of incontrovertible authority: “If one only need consider poetry as poetry in the appraisal of this African collection; if Africa were totally free and there were time to meditate, to muse; then much in the book would be a delightful and leisurely exercise in the use of words and ideas and poetry—music—as much an intellectual necessity as chess or classical music or philosophical discussion, but as things stand in 1963 there is a sadness

in the all-too-familiar esotericism, the cult of cut-offness from the real meat of Africa’s revolution . . . We could have hoped, unreasonably perhaps, for a little more positive hatred of oppression—if it is legitimate to write poetry of roses or the sadness of deaths from cancer then it must be equally legitimate to write of the necessary and life-giving savagery of a surgical attack on the cancer or the sharp blows and cuts of the pruner’s machete when the dead wood is lopped, that the rosebush may live more abundantly . . .”<sup>10</sup>

Remarks such as his, however, do not help us to see what *is* in a poem, to discover the poet’s intention, which might well be to give us new insight into experience.

What is Rabearivelo’s intention? He cannot properly be accused of escapism. This is because of the completely anonymous nature of his poetry. The poet himself is not present in the poems, and therefore is unlike the escapist who creates a fool’s paradise for himself. Rather, Rabearivelo watches the cosmic drama on “the frontiers of sleep” from a distance, from outside, and he manipulates his images in such a way as to suggest an underlying ironic intelligence which makes these poems perhaps ultimately a comment upon something. Could that something be our own world? The insistent strain of deep frustration and baffled silence (witness such images as birds “that have no nests anywhere” or “birds that have become strangers and cannot recognize their nests”, “grains of insipid salt”, “a forest of silent flutes”, the black glassmaker’s “daily suffering” and his “endless task”); the apparent pointlessness of much of the drama, and the antics of those who perform in it; the curious metamorphoses of practically everything that exists in the world of these poems; the recurrent themes of decay, disaster, death and resurrection; the “fragments of speech” and the “confused” prayers—all these combine to make Rabearivelo’s strange world appear as a symbolic projection of our own. Thus his poems give the same sort of satisfaction that a religious poem gives which is less like a prayer or meditation than an oratorio.

It may be objected that the force of the particular, which is one of the strengths of good poetry, is often smothered by Rabearivelo’s tendency to generalise. Generalized images like “innumerable horns of young bulls”; “innumerable rusty hands”; “a forest of silent flutes”, and the bamboos which

will be nothing but instruments  
in the hands of lovers—

tend to weaken the impact of the scene described. And, as a description of sunrise, the lines.

And he returns

he who went to sleep in the ocean . . .

comes dangerously close to a description of a spade as “. . . the implement rectangular that turneth up the soil”.

Nevertheless, Rabearivelo’s language is on the whole pleasantly fresh and direct. The “feeling” of the words—their folklorist suggestiveness—allied inseparably with the pervasive atmosphere and tone and movement of the whole, prevents the poet’s easy conversational tone from becoming merely chatty, and saves the simplicity of the words themselves from banality.

It was a great loss to African poetry when in 1937 Rabearivelo took his own life in mysterious circumstances at the still tender age of thirty-six. □

# REVIEWS

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## SEEING INDIA WITH SEGAL

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Carole Methven

THE CRISIS OF INDIA by Ronald Segal, Penguin, 1965.

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MR. SEGAL spent three months in India at the suggestion of Penguin books, on the rather dubious assumption that, because he had experience of other poor societies, he was likely to make observations about India which would be of special interest. The task of writing meaningfully about so vast and complex a country on the basis of a three-month visit would seem to many an insuperable one. Not to Mr. Segal. With a naiveté that would be laughable if it were not so dangerous, he plunges into a survey of Indian society in practically all its aspects—from politics and economics to personal hygiene and the status of women.

The author, I am sure, likes to think of himself as a realist. The impression pervades his book that he considers himself one of the few men to have understood the Indian situation, or at least to have been bold enough to speak out about it. He bravely asserts his conviction that "it is not more important to be holy than to be fed", not, one would think, a very remarkable view. As for the realism of his outlook, to many people who know India well, his appraisal of the situation must seem so unequivocally damning, so uniformly gloomy as to be almost pathological.

Whatever his previous experience of poor societies, in Africa or elsewhere, it is precisely the "endless astonishing and affronting poverty" for which the author seems to have been least prepared. One cannot blame him for this; the extent and depth of Indian poverty is unique, and the visitor cannot but be stunned by it. But Segal takes it as an almost *personal* affront, that he should have had to witness such poverty. He writes as if he were the first to notice it, and to appreciate what the "cold statistics" mean in individual human terms. One can only guess at the image he had of India before he went there. Certainly he is able to accept neither the ways in which she is different from other countries, nor the ways in which she is similar. For some reason, he seems to have expected less greed, prejudice and corruption in India than anywhere else, and, to be charitable, it is perhaps disillusionment that makes him see practically everything he looks at through a miasma of disgust, so that it all appears evil and ugly.

If the author had written an account of his personal impressions of India, as Naipaul did in *An Area of Darkness*, the result might have been of some interest. As it is, by being over-ambitious he has fallen between two stools. For *The Crisis of India* is neither a personal account, nor is it an objective study, since Segal has not only allowed his prejudices to get in the way, but has also relied heavily on a miscellany of sources which he was not in a position to evaluate.

Almost one third of the book is devoted to a potted history of India, misleading in places, and, I think, unnecessary, since a chronological account of this kind does not materially enhance one's understanding of the contemporary situation. There are too many books available on Indian history, long and short, for it to be necessary for a new book on India, and especially one claiming to deal with a "crisis", to include an historical section. The author seems to have found history more of a hindrance than a help, for, having equipped himself with a skeleton knowledge of religion and caste, he has then looked in too simple-minded a way for the working out of the rules in practice. In India, as in any complex society, it is usually possible to find what one is looking for in order to illustrate a point, and no doubt Segal found Hindus whose lives were "largely governed by the avoidance of ritual pollution". But in general, such a statement about Hindus is as true as it would be to say that the lives of people in Christian countries are largely governed by the Ten Commandments. The author must be well aware that in countries with which he is more familiar, the link between people's intellectual beliefs and their practical concerns and actions is a tenuous one. Yet in India his commonsense seems to have deserted him. Illustration is not proof, and quoting a few examples tells one very little about the validity of the point that is being made.

A visitor to India of the slightest percipience cannot fail to be struck by the enormous diversity, on every level of life, and to be aware, in consequence, of the danger of making generalisations about "typically Indian" attitudes, traits and behaviour patterns. The author has few inhibitions in this regard. One of his more bizarre conclusions is that the Indian habit of blowing the nose with the fingers rather than with a handkerchief is symptomatic of a deep unconcern for the welfare of one's fellow men. Even if such a theory could be taken seriously, would not the rubbish littering American cities, for example, or the high numbers of road deaths in industrialised countries be similarly symptomatic? Would there be any country, in fact, for which one could not find such a "symptom"?

The latter part of the book is a long and unrelieved tale of woe. The Indian masses are apathetic, starving and superstitious; the rich are rapacious; the administration is corrupt; the Congress party is tottering and divided; the economy is collapsing and shows no hope of recovery; etc., etc. Much of this is, of course, true and worth saying—even if one finds the final *coup*, a comparison between Nehru and Chiang Kai-shek as fellow-tyrants, a little strained! But there is another side to the picture, just as true, which Segal ignores. For, despite all the obstacles, visible progress has been made during the past ten years. People in villages all over India are doing something to improve their con-

dition, rather than vegetating in apathy. The numbers of radios, bicycles and other luxury items being owned and used by ordinary people has greatly increased. Caste barriers are breaking down, slowly it is true, but breaking down none the less. And the way in which the famine of 1964 was handled showed that the administration is not as paralysed by corruption and inefficiency as Segal imagines. In short, the author's belief that everything in India is going from bad to worse represents a gross distortion of reality.

But no one would deny that an enormous amount remains to be done, and the reader looks forward to the concluding chapter in the hope that the author will offer some remedy for the appalling mountain of problems that he depicts. But there is nothing. Only the muddled thinking characteristic of so many Western liberals. Segal frequently compares India's economic progress with that of China, to India's inevitable detriment. Yet he draws back from taking the logical next step. He clearly does not want to see an authoritarian regime in India, but he is unwilling to face the fact that without such a regime, rapid and widespread economic improvement in India is impossible. This conclusion stares out from much of what Segal says, but he lacks the courage or the insight to make it explicit, or at least to think out clearly what it is he wants. By presenting the choice as one between *holiness* and prosperity, he is evading the issue. But then it is no doubt more acceptable to the average *Penguin* reader to "knock" religion than to "knock" the cosy values of parliamentary democracy.

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## COMMONWEALTH LITERATURE?

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John Povey

COMMONWEALTH LITERATURE Edited by John Press  
Heinemann, 1965. 25/-.

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THE SCHOOL OF ENGLISH OF LEEDS UNIVERSITY has, for some years now, pioneered the academically revolutionary view that British writing is not the total extent of English literature. It was appropriate, then, that the first conference of Commonwealth literature in September 1964, should have been convened there. For four days the committee brought together academics, national and expatriate, from many areas of the Commonwealth, joining them with several writers. The proceedings of the meeting, competently edited by John Press, have just been published.

The conference marked the acceptance in the opening words of Vice Chancellor Sir Roger Stevens, that "English is no longer the language of an empire." English abroad is no longer an imperial weapon. What is its position in the Commonwealth?

The sub-title of these deliberations was aimed to disarm the immediate objection of disparity: "Unity and Diversity in a Common Culture." But from the first it was clear that of that contradictory pair clearly "diversity" was going to be demonstrated more regularly. After all what does this group have in common except that, among several other countries, they have chosen to use English as their international language. The

Commonwealth for all that cosy metaphor of a family under mother Queen—that very British image—is an amorphous and constantly changing political concept. John Spencer reminded us in his paper that the majority of members of the present Commonwealth live in nations that are multilingual and multicultural. There is the link that these countries are developing their literatures in English—at least in the exported and therefore better known parts. But even English may become less of a unifying factor. For if English becomes, as it demonstrably is, increasingly national, local, developing characteristics that set it apart from other English forms, even language ceases to be an effectively unifying aspect. Then the concept of Commonwealth literature becomes as amorphous as the organization itself, a gathering of nations with no constitution, that defies political analysis and can only be discussed in such woolly and cheering rhetoric as marked the recent Prime Ministers conference in London.

So we have an inner group of English users. South Africa as a punishment for its policies is not only out of the Commonwealth but out of Commonwealth literature. (Though not at the recent London Commonwealth Festival.) A Pakistan writer is admissible, a Burmese not. An Indian writer is acceptable when he writes in English. The Philippines which has developed a wide range of literature in English is excluded because it falls under the American orbit. It is a partial and exclusive club which puts literature at the mercy of the political affiliations of the member government. Does writing change when a nation opts out of its Commonwealth association?

The danger in convening such a conference is that, no matter how one expresses the disclaimer, its title appears to prejudice the issue. It implies that Commonwealth literature does exist, or ought to exist, or even can be made to exist if one searches hard enough for the unifying element. But the papers delivered made clear that it does not and cannot exist. There is no Commonwealth literature except the literature of those separate nations that happen to have been in the Commonwealth at some specific time. There is only diversity, the more so as the nations get a better sense of their unity. Nationalism can be created—or at least defined—by a literature. How else do Canadians prove they are not Americans? Mr. Rajan's preceptive paper "Identity and Nationality" touched on this aspect. The more that, say, an Australian literature can be proved to exist—and the Australian speakers did a very convincing job of identifying and separating—the less future there is for a belief in Commonwealth writing. After all, in *Transition*, we have not got very far with the definition of an African literature and there is a good deal more homogeneity there. Even if one could work out some rough approximation between the development of literature in the old dominions, as pioneer British settlers tamed the Australian or Canadian bush, what has this to do with the world of the Nigerian writer?

If one can see the desire of newer nations to develop a literature, what has this to do with an outsider? Why should we find each other's prose of interest? As one speaker observed, "Perhaps the literature of colonial adaptation has no interest for those who are not products of that adaptation." How do scholars justify their literary

researches when there is the simple truth spoken by Mr. Argyle: "If literary merit is to be the criterion, there is little in 19th century Australian fiction to detain the interest." Harsh words at such a gathering.

Douglas Grant's concluding speech expressed the paradox. "The pattern that has emerged with respect to writing in English in the Commonwealth is that there is no pattern." The honesty of the Leeds meeting has established that their title is at best nothing but a convenient limitation of the field (keeping out the Americans?) But this is not to say that the conference was not worth while, for the freedom of expression permitted did not enforce any Commonwealth orthodoxy. Any arena that can bring such people together has value. What Narayan does in India is relevant to what Achebe does in Nigeria. If Commonwealth Literature is a questionable blanket to cover such extremes, it initiates those significant cross references between national literatures which are essential if there is to be comparative judgement. Only comparative criticism will prevent all the false emphasis that falls on only the exotic and the picturesque, the local rather than the universal. One returns to Professor Jeffares' introductory remarks that remind us that one reads this literature because it brings new ideas, new interpretations of experience which will enrich our own lives. What could be more desirable than such a vision? It is true that such a truth can equally apply to all writing and not just those that show a reaction to the British experience, but what sort of conference could you hold with a more inclusive title like "Literature written in English in Countries other than England, America and Ireland." Commonwealth has at least brevity to recommend it.

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## SHIELDED SHORT STORIES

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Jim Chaplin

SHORT STORIES FROM SOUTHERN AFRICA *A. G. Hooper*, Editor, Oxford University Press, Cape Town, 1963, pp 148, no price.

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THE PUBLISHERS' BLURB to this book calls it, "an intelligent introduction to the short stories of southern Africa." Setting aside the meaningless use of the word "intelligent" in this context, this is not so. The title is misleading; except for Doris Lessing's contributions, the contents are from the Republic of South Africa, it is intended for readers of that unhappy State, and conforms entirely to its judgements, (as one might expect when its compiler was once at the University of Stellenbosch). The Foreword sets out the restrictions of his choice, made even more appalling by the obvious inability of the editor to see how entirely narrowed he is by his surrounding.

"The stories I have chosen have in general been chosen on their merits. But as this collection has been made with senior school pupils mainly in mind, for one reason or another it has not always been possible to choose stories which seem most characteristic of their authors."

The senior school pupils in mind, are the white electors of tomorrow, and this alone is, one supposes, sufficient reason for shielding them from the realities

of the Nkosi's, Themba's, Abrahams' and Mphahle's, who, believe it or not, also write short stories about Southern Africa. The same reason also excludes any stories by the chosen authors, that might disturb the readers too profoundly, the more open confrontations of the races are avoided, (Sarah Gertrude Millin's two stories might be inclusions in a long letter to a sister married to an English rural vicar). It is not that there are no good stories here, there are indeed, but they can as easily be read in their authors' collected works, for these are, for the main part, authors of established reputation, needing no patronage, no setting forth.

The collection is dominated by Nadine Gordimer, as any anthology on these terms must be. She stands firm as a rock within the area that is her protagonist's life, and the slow purposeful beam of her intellect moves round, occulting only with the equally steady piercing of her compassion. This regularity gives rise to no feeling of revulsion at its implacability, it is recognisable as a thing good in itself, a tool finely used and worthy of admiration. She has an acute understanding of the masculine mind; one knows from her other writing that she has had to understand it in order to come to terms with it, and having won that knowledge, now uses it to good purpose. In *The Bridegroom*, all the hesitations of the forthcoming marriage are transmuted in the relationship between the young road foreman and his gang, itself reflected most clearly in the music at firelight. Phrases illumine the entire story, like a log thrown onto that fire. "When first he had taken the job of overseer to the road gang, he had had strange restless hours at night and on Sundays. It seemed that he was hungry." So much of the black/white relationship is distilled there, it would be pointless to dilute it out.

Miss Gordimer's other two stories are equally shrewd. *Another part of the sky* is a story of torment; of a self-failure only seen as such by a man who is conquering, and who may be too tired with the struggle ever to recognise the victory when it is won. Mrs. Hansen of whom the third tale *Enemies* is told is confronted with a problem. She has long before decided that "alone was not the same as lonely", but when a woman with whom she has had to share a table on the train, dies in the night through greed, she is brought to amend her idea, realising that while it may be true for her, it may not always be so for others.

As written, Dan Jacobson's stories could not be shortened without destruction, but perhaps in time we shall see in him another writer of the spareness of Saki. Such an idea comes to mind while reading all three of those presented here, but more particularly those in which children are involved, The relationship of the rabbit that ate her solitary offspring, to the boy whose *Little Pet* she is intended to be, is splendidly observed against the background of urgent fussiness of parents who have so long pretended in their relationship one with another, that they cannot be natural in any. *Stop Thief!* could be a lesson for the hypothetical senior school pupils; they are more likely to wonder why the child was stopped from kicking the fallen native thief. *The Zulu and the Zeide*, allows the collection to include the Jewish factor that makes the Johannesburg scene so entirely unlike any other in the race pattern of the Republic, and is one of the most moving in the book.

With the giants displayed, we can move more swiftly in our comments. Doris Lessing displays her exterior role particularly well in *A mild attack of Locusts*. She hangs, observant, above the landscape and the humans are little more, but no less, relevant to the total scene, than the locusts they combat. She is similarly remote, aloof, in her account of the ageing man who lets his pigeons roam, because they return, but resents it in his granddaughters, who equally seek *Flight*. Miss Lessing's style is the reverse of Miss Gordimer's; she is outside, looking in, not within looking around, and so loses the centripetal force of the latter author.

Alan Paton's *The Divided House* reads more easily within the volume from which it is taken; we need to be led into the Reformatory background to receive its full impact, though even in isolation it reads true.

Of the remaining half dozen stories, only one stands out, *The Pain* by Pauline Smith. I am frankly at a loss to explain its attraction; the elderly, childless Boer couple, separated for the first time in half a century when the wife goes to hospital, and her smuggling home; these are the ingredients of a high sentimentality, a false *volk* glamour, as irritating as the apartheid-ridden handouts of the Republic's Information service. But, and it is a 'but' that suppresses condemnation, such people do exist, and having met them in the hardly credible isolation of time and space in which they live, one must grant the author due recognition for her acute perception of this rare innocence.

Within this anthology we find virtually nothing that we did not know already, stories that can be appreciated more fully in the several works of the individual authors. Its stated purpose is false, it reflects but a part of the writing that is coming from southern Africa. One is all along aware of the unmentioned and its absence nags, but this is not the fault of the authors, only of the compiler, or ultimately, one supposes, the publishers who have given their imprint to this lop-sided and unrepresentative collection.

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## PLANNED DISAGREEMENT

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Yash Tandon

DISCUSSION AT BELLAGIO : THE POLITICAL ALTERNATIVES OF DEVELOPMENT, Compiled and edited by K. H. Silvert (American Universities Field Staff, Inc., 1964), pp. 185.

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FROM THE OLYMPIAN HEIGHTS of Bellagio, Italy, and withdrawn into an immaculate villa of the Rockefeller Foundation—Villa Serbellone—sixteen social scientists (eight Americans, a Canadian, an Italian, a Chilean, a Persian, an Arab, an East African—Mr. Ali Mazrui—a Japanese, and an Indonesian) looked at the human pageantry below, to deliberate on the politics of development and the growth of nationalism in the new states.

The Conference—the first international conference of its kind under the auspices of the American Universities Field Staff—yielded a mosaic of sometimes very perceptive and sophisticated ideas and suggestions on a subject largely on the frontier of social science knowledge. *Discussion at Bellagio* is a compilation of the discussion itself, which the editor has wisely presented in its original form without, however, making it into a dry verbatim

report. What emerges is an agreement-to-disagree kind of consensus among the participants, but no definitive conclusions.

The discussion revolved round four major themes: the theory (or rather theories) of the nation; comparative politics of development; the roles of the different sectors of the society—the elite, the army, the bureaucracy—in the developmental process; and the recurrent theme of acculturation or transmission of cultural values. The substance of the discussion is presented, however, in three sections.

The first part, not surprisingly, is a feeling-out for some common ground for discussion by a conceptual analysis of such terms as: nation, nationalism, democracy, and authoritarianism. The conceptions of the various schools of thought on the subject—the liberal, the Hegelian, the Marxist, the Catholic—are thrown in for good measure of respectability. Thus Hegel conceived of the state as "the supreme organiser of cultural life, the guarantor of human security under the rule of a hereditary charismatic chief and sovereign", and Marx thought of it as "the organ of class repression".

It is instructive to know from two of the participants at the conference that nationalism involves a "willingness to permit a political institution to settle certain kinds of dispute, and to accept the settlements as though they were ultimate" (Silvert, p.18); or that it involves "a redistribution of power and power relationship, finally in the form of an industrial class system" (Reissman, p.41); or that the nation is "a goal of massive social re-organisation which seeks legitimation in traditional values where possible and seeks legitimation in newer values where necessary", (Reissman, p.42). But what relevance have these conceptualisations for the developmental problems of the new nations?

It is in the second and third parts, that an attempt is made to relate the political concepts to the phenomena of development. An exciting theme that developed out of discussions was the controversy between traditionalism and modernism. If traditionalism involved slower economic development, must we, for the sake of faster economic development, sacrifice the traditional elements of society? *Farmanfarmaian* from Persia insisted "on the absolute necessity of economic development, no matter the costs in shattered images and usages of past social organisation", (p.51). *Ibishi* from the Lebanon, thought this was dangerous thinking, because "the ways of traditional society must be well understood before adequately reasonable and rational developmental procedures can be followed. If the past is destroyed with promises of the future, then the sleeping giant will be awakened whose unreasoning thrashing about will destroy the very advances being pursued". (p.51) He gave a challenging analysis of the Middle Eastern society in support of his argument.

Leaders in Africa might like to ponder over this question of how fundamental a break with the past is demanded by the process of industrialisation—is it that once we have chosen the path of industrialisation, there is no escape from its inevitable effects on the organisation, habits, and attitudes of the society?

Japan's experience here might be instructive, for she was able to have economic development without shattering traditional institutions and structures. How



did she manage this? The answer given by Professor *Itagaki* from Japan that "we retained the ascription variable and only that one. For the rest the movement was towards pattern-variables" (pp.77), is exciting reading, but not much of a guidance. Nor is the editor's elucidation that "the Japanese managed to retain consistency in the social order by maintaining a system of rewards according to the social position of the individual. In all else much pragmatism and relativism in the making of choice was introduced into the system, permitting the flexibility required for economic development" (p.77). There is, therefore, room still for research into the value of the Japanese experience for Africa.

In the meantime, the discussion at Bellagio proceeded to examine the modernising or "traditionalising" influence of such social enclaves as the military, the elite, the bureaucracy and so on. Bureaucracy may ideally be "merely a neutral instrument of changing political masters, a faithful servant of each passing regime", or, as in European societies, it may tend to be a "stabilising or conservative element in the polity", but it could equally well be a "modernising bureaucracy", particularly in the new states. There are instances in history when even the military had modernising or revolutionary impact on societies, like the Napoleonic armies.

But what does modernisation actually mean? Does it imply Westernisation, or would industrialisation suffice in the modernisation process, whether it takes place within the traditional structure or within the Westernised structure? *Mazrui* asked this question towards the closing sessions of the Conference, and rather sneeringly, though aptly, concluded that whatever the Africans did they could not escape the charge of being in the process of being Westernised. "If they have a multiparty system, that is Western. If they have a no-party system, that is still Western . . . If they are God-fearing, they are products of the West. If they are atheists, they are still Westernized. If they become collectivist, they are Western. If they are ruggedly individualistic, they are still Western. There is just no escaping this charge. It is, in fact, the latest form of Western imperialism". (p.165). What, one may ask, is the OAU doing about this one?

The above may give a flavour of the book, but it is impossible to condense the glimpses of insight that lie scattered throughout the book. One may just add that for students of International Relations there is a valuable paper, given by *Eayrs* from Canada, on the effects of the contemporary international situation on nation-building and political development, and the reverse, namely, the effects upon the international environment of policies of national integration.

One may also add one important omission, for though hunting for errors of omission is not a very charitable thing for a book reviewer to do, this one is a glaring one: in all the discussion about freedom, development, national integration and the new states, there is no mention about planning! Even the Index does not include this in its quite exhaustive list. Was this a Freudian slip on the part of the sixteen social scientists?

## ANOTHER ANTHOLOGY

Gerald Moore

MODERN AFRICAN STORIES, edited by *Ellis Ayitey Komey* and *Ezekiel Mphahlele*, Faber.

THE READER MUST BE FORGIVEN for approaching yet another anthology of African short stories with a certain

wary circumspection. After the punishing inequalities of Richard Rive's *Modern African Prose* and the gross inflation of collections like *Quartet* and *Origin East Africa*, there is an expectation of finding the same old batch of stories (some of them dating right back to Langston Hughes' *Treasury*), possibly arranged in a different order and with a few alternate reserves called into the ranks for the sake of variety. Approached in this spirit, the Faber anthology will certainly bring pleasure and relief. Here are some new stories, and even some new writers. True, nothing that follows quite comes up to the expectations aroused by the first story, Christiana Aidoo's *Cut Me a Drink*. For vitality of surface and a continuously imaginative use of English as an equivalent for village speech, this story is one of the best that has yet come out of West Africa. A villager comes to Accra for the first time in his life to look for a lost sister and is himself instantly more lost than anyone. Miss Aidoo's language beautifully combines the stumbling dignified uncertainty of the man and confident, heedless movement of the city:

But my elders, I do not want to waste your time.

I looked round and could not find my bag. I first fixed my eyes on the ground and walked on . . .

Do not ask me why. Each time I tried to raise my eyes, I was dizzy from the number of cars which were passing. And I could not stand still . . .

I stopped walking just before I stepped into the Circle itself. I stood there for a long time. Then a lorry came along and I beckoned to the driver to stop. Not that it really stopped.

"Where are you going?" he asked me.

"I am going to Mamprobi," I replied. "Jump in," he said, and he started to drive away. Hm . . .

I nearly fell down climbing in.

This is the rhythm of a man talking, recreating the moment with its pain and humour, involving us, leaving us in the air, wandering off again into his living.

Another Ghanaian story, Kwabena Annan's *Ding Dong Bell*, displays a humane irony in its account of a cheerfully unprogressive little town, which is more interested in brewing *waragi* than in digging wells. Adelaide Casely—Hayford's *Mista Courifer* is right-minded but a little lame and predictable. Otherwise there is not much of note until we come to two stories from Sierra Leone which are among the best in the book. Sarif Easmon's *Koya* is interesting and competently told, though it suffers a little from the pretentiousness which afflicts this writer's work. He does capture perfectly the petite charm and wholly acceptable flirtatiousness of the young West African girl who is almost a woman in her dress, deportment and gestures by the time she is ten. Abioseh Nicol's *The Judge's Son* explores the mind of a proud, lonely boy about to commit suicide with genuine insight, and the final act, unlike so many in this book, does not look forced or melodramatic; it arises from a loss and despair which the reader has been made to feel.

It is a poise of this kind which also helps to give Can Themba's *Dube Train* its cool effectiveness. At the climax of the story a *tsotsi* who is assaulting a girl on the crowded morning train from the locations is picked up and flung straight through the window by an infuriated passenger. But this is no more than an incident of temporary interest to the thousands who hurtle dumbly onwards into the inhuman city. Thus the event, dramatic enough in itself, also serves to gather for us all the

desperate energy of a life in which every man or woman rushes forward, crushing whatever falls in their path, in their haste to reach a goal which savagely rejects them.

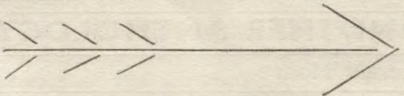
The South African scene presents peculiar dangers to the writer, but the coloured novelist Alex la Guma, evading the carefully structured racial situations which mar the work of Richard Rive and James Matthews, shows his usual capacity to casually domesticate horror and present it to us in the drawing room or the roadside cafe. His little story, revolving simply around a cup of coffee, sickens us more than many of the grander protests.

The indifferent quality of the Nigerian entries serves to remind us that a country which has already so much enriched poetry, fiction and drama in Africa has not yet shone particularly in the short story. The inclusion of passages from full-length works by Achebe and Tutuola is a mistake; this is presented as a collection of stories, not of prose. The best of the Nigerian entries is a competent retelling by David Owoyole of what must surely be a medieval *fabliau*, the tale of a robber who, having been bitten by a cobra hidden in a pot, dupes his comrade into getting bitten likewise. This reminds me of the Acholi song which briskly begins:

The mother of my friend is dead;  
Now we are the same!

Of the two East African stories, James Ngugi's suffers from an inability to achieve a convincing ending which has marred several of his short stories in the past and has presented him with difficulties as a novelist. In his story here, *A Meeting in the Dark*, a young lover murders his pregnant sweetheart rather than face the consequences of marrying her. There are only two ways of preventing this ending from seeming too violently arbitrary and melodramatic. One is to prepare it more carefully, so that the reader is unwillingly involved in it, as he is in Raskolnikov's murder; the other is to achieve a cold, bleak view of the event, an almost ironic detachment, thereby securing our sympathy for the narrator alone. Ngugi has not achieved either of these ends and his murder lies too raw upon the page. Grace Ogot's *The Rain Came* makes us feel the whole texture and weight of tribal belief which can cause a girl to accept her sacrifice to the local monster so that rain may come for her dying people. But the denouement, in which a young Perseus of the tribe rescues this resigned Andromeda, does not seem fully to accept the weight of tragic meaning that such a communal belief entails. The young couple not only escape the consequences of their impiety, but the long-awaited rain falls, as though the powers were unaware they have been cheated of their victim.

From the point of view of the development of English prose there is little in this collection which offers the kind of stimulation so often found in West Indian writing. The African short story is still, in the hands of many of these executants, a somewhat crude and simple affair. The editors' insistence that English is "a language of the elite only" totally ignores the abounding energy and inventiveness of the Onitsha novelists, not to mention the pidgin speaker with his battery of images: "Make you bring chop *one time!*"; "Take this way down, down, down and you go *burst out* into the tarmac!" Ezekiel Mphahlele, Alex la Guma and Abioseh Nicol all present their material with a welcome sophistication, but it is Christiana Aidoo who seems to promise us the growth of an art in which structure, sound and tempo will be handled anew.

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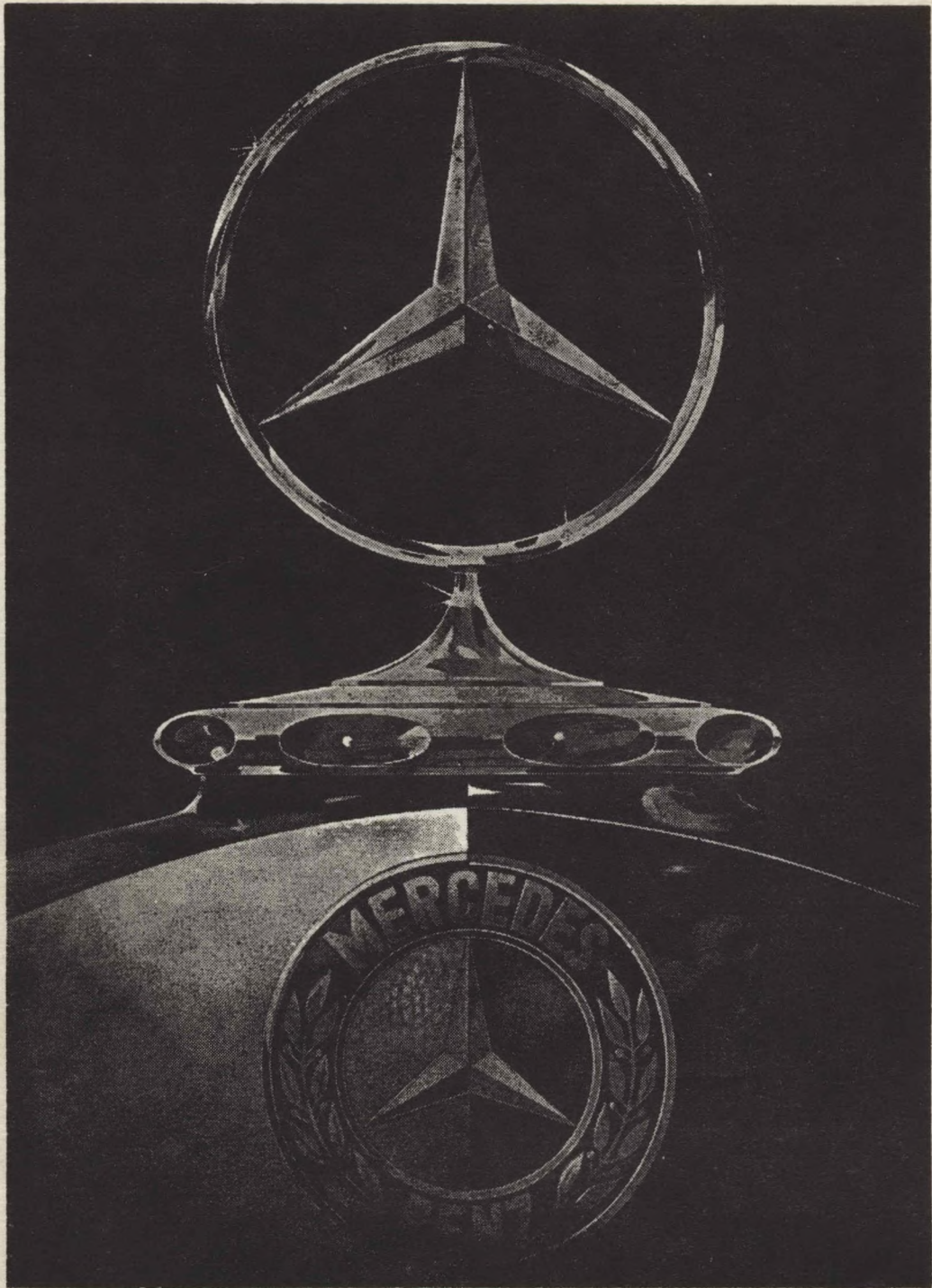
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