
Some Bathos & An Apotheosis of Immaturity

Christopher Hope: *A Separate Development*; Charles Scribner's Sons; New York.

Doris Lessing: *The Making of the Representative For Planet 8*; Alfred A. Knopf; New York.

by Maura A. Daly

Doris Lessing's most recent novel and Christopher Hope's first novel are divergent reflections on one particularly modern literary topos: the difficulty of the individual's defining himself in relation to society. This involves another traditional literary subject, the displacement and consequent transformation of the individual. These motifs are, in turn, related to the sempiternal philosophical conundrum regarding the perennial confusion between appearance and reality. In neither book, however, are these topoi fully or even partially developed. The authors fail to come to grips with these questions on anything but the most superficial level. This superficiality results from the evasion of responsibility which permeates both books. In these novels, the societies and individuals are incorrigibly irresponsible when they face philosophical issues—a defect that they seem to have contracted from the authors themselves. What is the nature of this irresponsibility? The nature of the fault is that Mr. Hope wants, at all costs, to satirize, and Miss Lessing to transcend everything. These alone are hardly hanging faults and are certainly the authors' prerogatives, but what is more serious is the fact that these tendencies toward pseudotranscendence and the glorification of the pseudoheroic are really recipes for proving whatever vague, philosophical, unfounded argument one wishes, for sup-

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porting whatever chic pose suits one's fancy. Finally, these stances are simply excuses: for bathos in Miss Lessing's case and for the attempted apotheosis of immaturity in Mr. Hope's.

Both stories are recounted in the narcissistic manner that passes among the literati these days for "talented" and "scintillating." This is particularly true of *A Separate Development*, the slick



tone of which is simultaneously reminiscent of John Irving's *The World According to Garp* and New York cocktail-party *Gespräch*. The problems that come to light in Lessing's and Hope's novels are not, however, just literary—they are political, as well. In both books there is an evasion of individual and societal responsibility. Miss Lessing's protagonist, Doeg the Memory-maker, is delivered from the necessity of defining himself in relation to his society via a synthetic mysticism which allows each individual to become another and to join after death in the "dance and flow" of the universe. This transformation is portrayed in snatches of broken, dreamlike conversations which never really resolve anything. In addition, the delineation between appearances and reality is blurred in the transcendent cosmic unity which is proposed by Miss Lessing as a conclusion. Eventually, neither novel is the evolution suggested by the title. The inconclusive

depiction of the hero's transformation, and finally the absence of verisimilitude are especially disturbing lacunae since they are the very subjects which supposedly provide Miss Lessing's philosophical groundwork.

Mr. Hope's novel, like Miss Lessing's, waffles. He slickly solves the problem of his protagonist's identity by stating that the latter is unclassifiable. Although his novel is supposedly a serious political attack on apartheid in South Africa, the transformation of the so-called hero, Harry Moto, is confined to a series of highly improbable adolescent adventures. The psychic or intellectual effects of Moto's experiences are, at best, only referred to elliptically. Mr. Hope means Harry Moto to be the likable victim in a satire against the horrors—both petty and gigantic—of the South African social and political system, but Moto emerges as merely a youthful manifestation of adolescent bigotry, ignorance, superficiality, and prurience. It seems poor judgment to attempt to criticize the failings of the adult world through a character who epitomizes all the puny vices of youth.

Despite these basic flaws, *The Making of the Representative for Planet 8* and *A Separate Development* do have some redeeming qualities. Miss Lessing does ask some provocative philosophical questions, and her prose occasionally shares the clarity of the ice and snow which abound in her work. Mr. Hope displays an eye for the preposterous and exploits it deftly. In its good moments, *A Separate Development* can be compared with such classics as Ralph Ellison's *The Invisible Man*. The weaknesses and strengths of Hope's and Lessing's novels become more evident when one analyzes their plots more closely.

Miss Lessing's novel is a science-fiction account of the demise of Planet 8—a once beautiful, fertile world inhabited by a civilized peace-loving people

who live in harmony under benevolent rulers. But an ice age is threatening the inhabitants and their planet with extinction. At first, the people believe that the immense black wall which Canopus, their rulers, had instructed them to build, will protect them from the encroaching glaciers. Later, this hope abandoned, they await their promised removal to the clement planet, Rohanda, only to discover that it, too, is being destroyed by ice.

The Making of the Representative for Planet 8 narrates the inward journey, literally and figuratively, of the courageous, nature-loving inhabitants of Planet 8 who must learn to live in cramped, fetid ice caves, to swaddle themselves in animal pelts for protection against the cold, and to eat dried meat and tasteless algae to stave off starvation. These trials of fortitude, wit, and sinew, coupled with the knowledge of their ineluctable fate, provide Miss Lessing's novel with a certain grandeur in keeping with the kinds of questions that the last representatives of the planet consider: What is the substance of thought? Where do thoughts come from? How are they formed? What is memory? Where is it located? Why can one never describe the atmosphere of a dream?

It is a tribute to Miss Lessing that she should pose such questions in a work of fiction, but it is a shame that she is not able to use them effectively. Her plot is composed almost exclusively of inquiry and introspection, but on such a cosmic scale and in such vague, tenuous language that it loses any personal impact. As the planet is devastated by brutal winds, massing ice, and body-killing, mind-numbing cold, the sterility which follows somehow infiltrates the pages of her text, robbing her characters of the very spark of life and tenacity of mind that she is trying to portray.

The daunting metaphysical questions raised by Miss Lessing find no place in *A Separate Development*. In fact, quite the contrary is true: Hope's interest focuses almost exclusively on a study of

appearances and exteriors. Obviously, in a book about the coming of age of a young man in South Africa, exteriors have an inordinate importance, but the barbarity of South African racial prejudice can be properly shown only by concentrating on interior developments—of mind, emotions, and spirit. It is impossible to shake the feeling that this author wrote with one eye on the critics and the other on the typewriter: the first line concerns the protagonist's exposing himself. With a flourish of Hope's pen, a flat-footed, kinky-haired, slightly breasted, questionably complexed

youth, the "hero," has been elevated via language's post-Structuralist belief in itself as an absolute to the status of the literary symbol.

Mr. Hope ostensibly deplores the treatment of black and colored humanity in South Africa, but he treats women either as hysterical females or, more frequently, as sexual service stations. Just as the protagonist runs away after being discovered in a compromising situation with his date for the graduation dance, the author runs away from the crucial questions concerning the effects of hatred, violence, and fear. □

Explorations of the National Psyche

Anthony P. Dunbar: *Against the Grain: Southern Radicals and Prophets 1929-1959*; University Press of Virginia; Charlottesville.

Richard Reeves: *American Journey: Traveling With Tocqueville in Search of Democracy in America*; Simon & Schuster; New York.

by Charles A. Moser

Each of these books treats an important facet of the American experience which has helped to define our national character: *Against the Grain* deals with Southern Agrarian radicalism, with emphasis upon the ideological decade of the 1930's; *American Journey* deals, in a broader and more haphazard fashion, with the general nature of the American polity today, 150 years after Tocqueville's visit to this country. The two books are organized quite differently. Mr. Dunbar, Southern Field Secretary for Amnesty International, has written a detailed historical account of a social movement centered on a limited

number of individuals and organizations, on the basis of records kept by some of them—especially Howard Kester, Secretary of the Fellowship of Reconciliation from 1926 to 1934, and the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union, which reached its zenith in the mid-1930's. Mr. Reeves is a professional writer from New York who decided to retrace Tocqueville's steps as a means of "updating" the latter's observations on American democracy. In the abstract Reeves's idea is a good one, but in practice—given the vast social changes that have occurred in the interim—the scheme has limited usefulness. Reeves emerges with a collage of quotations from Tocqueville as well as his travel notes; with the opinions of present-day community leaders (mostly liberal in persuasion) who just happen to live in some of the places Tocqueville visited; with miscellaneous scraps which he considers characteristic for some reason; and with his own conclusions on various matters. There is, however, a similarity between the Dunbar and Reeves books: both suffer from a tendency to get lost in detail.

Against the Grain is the story of a group of idealistic young men and women who, for the most part, began as Christians but adopted a political pro-

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