



And a Threefold Cord: La Guma's neglected masterpiece?

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Abstract

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*For a variety of reasons (including its publication history), Alex la Guma's second novel **And a Threefold Cord** (1964) has long been neglected by readers and critics. This essay seeks to redress this situation by offering a reading of the novel that demonstrates its artistic integrity. Like **A Walk in the Night**, **And a Threefold Cord** avoids the overt propagandizing that arguably mars La Guma's later work. The political "message" of the text is shown to emerge organically from events that unfold in its presented world. **And a Threefold Cord** is set in a Cape Flats shantytown, and it analyses the predicament of the shanty dwellers in terms of class inequality and economic exploitation, rather than in terms of racial discrimination. This ensures the novel's continuing relevance in a South Africa where far too many people are inadequately housed in ever-growing "informal settlements".*

1. Will protest literature survive?

As the apartheid years recede ever further into the past, a reasonably objective stocktaking of the South African literary achievement of those years becomes increasingly feasible and perhaps necessary. This is especially true with regard to the work most closely tied to its immediate social and political context: the overtly "committed" writing generally known as "protest literature". The obvious question that arises is this: now that the politically oppressive conditions to which that literature so urgently responded no longer exist, will the literature continue to be read? Which texts are likely to survive, and why?

One writer whose work is in my view indubitably substantial enough to lead an independent existence in this post-apartheid era is the late Alex La Guma. As early as 1966, Lewis Nkosi could dismiss contemporary fiction by black South Africans as “cardboard pulp”, “journalistic fact parading outrageously as imaginative literature” (Nkosi, 1983:137, 132), but except La Guma’s first novel from this generalisation on the ground that it was redeemed by “an enthusiasm for life as it is lived” (Nkosi, 1983:137). *A Walk in the Night* (1968) is indeed still read and remembered, as are *In the Fog of the Seasons’ End* (1972) and *Time of the Butcherbird* (1979) and, to a lesser extent, *The Stone Country* (1967). The purpose of this essay is simply to (re-)introduce to an influential section of the South African reading public the one La Guma novel missing from this list: *And a Threefold Cord*.

2. Institutional canonization is the result of many factors

Although the Africanist-nationalistic agenda which informs it has been sharply criticised as anachronistic and inappropriate (Coullie & Gibbon, 1996), the statistical research done by Bernth Lindfors on the modern African literary canon has yielded some intriguing information (Lindfors, 1995). For instance, he has worked out that in terms of inclusion in literary courses at tertiary educational institutions throughout Africa, Alex La Guma is the 11th most highly regarded African author (Lindfors, 1995:50). And according to Lindfors’ “Better Ultimate Rating Plan” for individual texts, *A Walk in the Night* comes in 14th, *In the Fog of the Seasons’ End* 21st, and *Time of the Butcherbird* 36th (Lindfors, 1995:55). The fact that the latter two novels are generally more highly rated by English Departments than *And a Threefold Cord* (which, together with *The Stone Country*, makes no showing on these pop charts) offers a typical illustration of the extent to which institutional canonization is the product of a range of factors of which the notion of “literary merit” is only one. To my mind, *And a Threefold Cord* could well be La Guma’s most successful work of fiction. Its relative neglect can be attributed in large measure to the singular fact that, alone of La Guma’s novels, it has never appeared under the Heinemann imprint in the best-selling African Writers Series. Between the time that the first edition issued by Seven Seas Books of East Berlin in 1964 was sold out and the time that the Kliptown Books reprint appeared in 1988, the book was simply not available. It is surely no coincidence that these were the years in which the teaching of African writing in English was being established at African universities and the canon was in the process of formation. I do not know why Heinemann declined to add the novel to their popular AWS list; though I suspect that even if they had, *And a Threefold Cord* would not have enjoyed the success of the other novels. While it is no

less “political” than the other books, it is less stridently so, less overtly polemical; its canvas is limited to a shack settlement on the Cape Flats in midwinter, and it reproduces to a lesser extent than the other works the “spectacular” (Ndebele, 1986) stock images of South Africa under apartheid.¹

In South Africa, of course, La Guma’s entire oeuvre was during this time doubly banned, individual works in terms of the Publications Act, the author himself and all his utterances in terms of the Suppression of Communism Act, later the Internal Security Act. In recent years *A Walk in the Night* and *In the Fog of the Seasons’ End* have made it into several South African university syllabuses. But again it is revealing that, at a time when censorship was relaxing and the other La Guma titles were appearing in bookshops, the Kliptown reprint of *And a Threefold Cord* was hardly noticed, attracting only two reviews of any substance in this country (a politely complimentary one in the *Weekly Mail* [Tennant, 1989] and a politely dismissive one in *Beeld* [Van Zyl, 1991]). Surprisingly, the *Book Reviews Index* lists not a single journal review of the edition to date.

3. Re-reading *And a Threefold Cord*

In this article I attempt to begin to fill this lacuna by offering a reading of the novel that does not significantly depart from the commentary that appears in my MA thesis of 1979. Although I have kept abreast of the published criticism since then, it does not seem to me that – two essays by William Carpenter excepted – any particularly perceptive commentary on the novels has come out for some years. La Guma has tended to attract the most dreary sort of “solidarity criticism”, content in the main to work within the narrow parameters of a liberationist political orthodoxy (e.g. Abrahams, 1985); or, more recently, a curiously homogenizing kind of postcolonial criticism (e.g. JanMohamed, 1983; Yousaf, 2001). The relatively early pieces by Lewis Nkosi (1966, 1968), David Rabkin (1973) and, especially, J.M. Coetzee (1971, 1974, 1992a), remain the best guides in a generally less-than-distinguished body of criticism.

1 This is significant if it is borne in mind that La Guma’s prominence in the syllabuses of literature departments at African universities in the 1980s undoubtedly reflected a tendency to use his work as a way of introducing students to South African social and political issues.

I think that anyone who knows La Guma’s work must have been irritated by Njabulo Ndebele’s choice of one of his weakest stories (“Coffee for the Road”) to exemplify the “spectacular” mode of literary representation (Ndebele, 1986). La Guma is one of a scant handful of “protest” writers who have unarguably done a great deal more than simply reproduce what Ndebele calls the “surface symbols” of South African life.

Re-reading *And a Threefold Cord* after many years, it seemed to me that certain fundamental points made by these critics have retained their validity. Among these are Coetzee's insistence on the sheer *literariness* of La Guma's descriptive style (Coetzee, 1992a) which, relentlessly accumulating metaphorically-charged details of physical decay and human "disanimation" (Carpenter, 1991a), introduces the reader to an intriguingly mannered and markedly idiosyncratic vision of the human world. The real interest of the novels thus lies not so much in the vaunted realism of their representations as in "their myopic concentration, the dreary patter of their detail, and their rigid psychology" (Coetzee, 1974:112). La Guma's is a vision forever caught between the opposing impulses of a formal political optimism and what Coetzee (1992a:360) has called "one man's horror of a degraded world", an obsessive, even fetishistic response to a pollution and abjection seemingly intrinsic to the human condition.

The concrete immediacy of the descriptive style yields in the later novels to a more stereotypical evocation of character and setting: *In the Fog of the Seasons' End* and *Time of the Butcherbird* are political novels patently structured by what neo-Aristotelean critics would call "didactic" plots. So too are *A Walk in the Night* and *And a Threefold Cord*, but these works are more creaturely, more effectively camouflaged as "mimetic" plots, more charged with that "enthusiasm for life as it is lived" remarked by Nkosi (1983:137). In the later novels, La Guma's political vision, doomed throughout his life to be stalled in the orectic mood, becomes increasingly sentimental. Although the sentimentality is there from the beginning (the death of Willieboy in *A Walk in the Night*), in *And a Threefold Cord* it is decisively restrained by the stark and gritty naturalism of the representational mode.

And a Threefold Cord is a short novel and its plot, although novelistic rather than short-fictional, is comparatively slight. The Pauls family – Dad and Ma Pauls, their sons Charlie, Ronald and Jorny – live in a miserable three-roomed "pondokkie" somewhere on the Cape Flats. As the narrative begins, the onset of rainy weather is posing an additional threat to the already tenuous security of their lives. Charlie Pauls, faced with the "serious proposition" of a leaking roof, goes to cadge a piece of scrap iron from George Mostert, the proprietor of a nearby service station. On the way he has a fight with Roman, a vicious thug who is jealous of Ronald's liaison with a woman named Susie Meyer. When Charlie returns he shares some wine and conversation with Uncle Ben, during which his growing political consciousness is revealed. Then follows a series of calamities: Charlie's ailing father dies, and then the shantytown suffers the brutal invasion of an early-morning police raid. Among those

arrested is Ronald Pauls, who has stabbed Susie Meyer to death in a fit of jealous rage. Finally, the children of Freda, the woman whom Charlie has decided to marry, are incinerated in a horrible accident. Rain is still falling as the shattered remnants of the Pauls family gather in the shanty. But Charlie has learnt from experience that “people can’t stand up to the world alone”, and the novel ends on a note of hope that human solidarity – the “threefold cord” of the epigraph and title – may yet prevail.²

In the account of the novel that follows, I attempt two things: first, to explicate its analysis of South African society in terms of the fundamentalist Marxism-Leninism which La Guma brings to the work; and secondly, to demonstrate that the novel is not simply a vehicle for political propaganda and has the artistic integrity to stand up to conventional (Western) critical scrutiny.

3.1 Social consciousness and human solidarity

The social consciousness of the characters in *And a Threefold Cord* is only marginally less limited than is the case in *A Walk in the Night*, and although the material environment looms as large, if not larger, in the determination of their destiny, there is one individual whose political awareness signals the reader’s arrival in what Engels claimed to be the proper domain of literary realism, the depiction of “the revolutionary response of the members of the working class to the oppression that surrounds them, their convulsive attempts – semiconscious or conscious – to attain their rights as human beings” (Marx & Engels, 1947:42). Although Charlie Pauls’s only “revolutionary” action is to punch a policeman and then run for his life, the dawning class consciousness which he is anxious to share not only helps him to face the succession of tragedies which have befallen the Pauls family with composure but also points towards a more hopeful future. “People can’t stand up to the world alone”, he says, “they got to be together” (111);³ and it is the resilience of human solidarity in the face of impossibly oppressive circumstances, perhaps the most humble victory of all, that the novel is chiefly concerned to celebrate.

2 Ecclesiastes 4:9-12: “Two are better than one; because they have a good reward for their labour. / For if they fall, the one will lift up his fellow: but woe to him that is alone when he falleth; for he hath not another to help him up. / Again, if two lie together, then they have heat, but how can one be warm alone? / And if one prevail against him, two shall withstand him; and a threefold cord is not quickly broken.”

3 Page numbers refer to La Guma, Alex. 1988. *And a Threefold Cord*. London : Kluptown Books.

Although the Pauls family has drifted to Cape Town from the platteland, their situation anticipates the fate of many inhabitants of District Six forcibly removed to the Cape Flats under the provisions of the Group Areas Act in the late sixties and early seventies. These are the days of strict Influx Control measures, and the typical "white" attitude towards "informal settlement" is exemplified by George Mostert's prosperous petrol customer, the bloated "connoisseur of poverty" (107) who declares: "Wonder why the authorities don't clear the bloody lot out. Just brings disease and things ... If I had any say, I'd pull down the whole bally lot and clear 'em all out ... don't know what we poor buggers pay taxes for" (107).

3.2 The influence of the physical environment

Yet the shanty-dwellers in *And a Threefold Cord* have more than public antipathy and a generally inimical social and political environment to contend with. Lacking the means adequately to defend themselves against the onslaught of bad weather, they encounter Nature itself as a hostile force, an enemy as malevolent and seemingly inscrutable as the police convoy that comes in the darkness and rain to devastate their lives. Indeed, rain and wind preside over the police raid like willing henchmen, exacerbating the misery of those who have been turned out of their homes and arrested. And when the police depart, their confederates in oppression remain, growling "like a hungry monster", attacking the squatters "with ferocity", "in an anger of frustration" (110). Rain, anthropomorphized as a "cutting, muttering, gurgling, sucking, bubbling personality, like a homicidal imbecile with a knife" (80), dominates the narrative from beginning to end.

In the opening chapter, men and bad weather square up for a violent collision as the elements of the Cape winter are ominously deployed (1-2). What is to the more fortunate merely a change in the weather signifies to the shanty-dwellers the onset of a grim struggle for survival, simply because their survival depends on the ability of their shacks to withstand the assault of wind and rain. As he did in *A Walk in the Night*, La Guma goes to some lengths to emphasize that people are what their physical environment makes them. The characters in *And a Threefold Cord* are people whose aspirations are limited to the desperate hope that their homes will not collapse on top of them. They are literally "the people of the shanties and the *pondokkie* cabins" (2), because the material conditions of their existence are shown to create rather than simply reflect their identity. La Guma develops this premise into a suggestive and pervasive symbolism in which the shack and the forces that

beleaguer it become material correlatives for its inhabitants (more specifically, the family unit) and the tribulations that beset them.

The Pauls's house is a congeries of junk and litter:

Dad and Charlie had scavenged, begged and, on dark nights, stolen the materials for the house. They had dragged for miles sheets of rusty corrugated iron, planks, pieces of cardboard, and all the astonishing miscellany that had gone into building the house. There were flattened fuel cans advertising a brand of oil on its sides, tins of rusty nails which Charlie had pulled from the gathering flotsam and jetsam and straightened with a hammer on a stone; rags for stuffing cracks and holes, strips of baling wire and waterproof paper, cartons, old pieces of metal and strands of wire, sides of packing-cases, and a pair of railway sleepers (17).

The shanty's sheer existence is a tribute to what Rabkin (1973:57) calls "the power of putting together, of assemblage". Its otherwise useless components find usefulness in combination with each other; together they realize the "wealth [that exists] even in dirt" (99). Just as a broken-down kitchen stove found "abandoned on a rubble heap" (17), once refurbished with other bits of junk, is given new life as the centre of the Pauls's corporate home life, so *La Guma* implies that it is only in community and comradeship that people may triumph over the demeaning attritions of poverty, the circumstances that would reduce them to inconsequent bits of junk, and attain the full stature of their humanity.

The Pauls's shanty, which has "the precarious, delicately balanced appearance of a house of cards" (18), reflects the dire insecurity of the Pauls family at the outset of the novel. Dad Pauls is bed-ridden and moribund, Ronald surly and uncooperative; Charlie, the other breadwinner, is out of work; and Caroline, nine months pregnant, is faced with the prospect of giving birth in an old packing crate. Inevitably, it seems, the house of cards must collapse. Dad Pauls dies, Ronald murders Susie Meyer and appears destined for the gallows, the police raid the shanty town, and Freda's children perish in a grotesque accident. Yet the ramshackle shanty⁴ proves to be more than a match for the violence of the elements:

4 One might note in passing that anthropomorphizing the house here makes perfect thematic sense because the house is already a symbol of communal solidarity. In *A Walk in the Night* the frequent personification or at least animation of elements of the urban physical environment serves ambiguously to underline the disanimation and dehumanization of the ghetto dwellers.

Miraculously, the house held. Dad and Charlie Pauls and others had built it well; well enough to stand up to this kind of storm, anyway. The rain lashed at it, as if in an anger of frustration ... But the house seemed to clench its teeth and cling defiantly to life (110).

It was Charlie Pauls who fixed the leak in the shack's roof and it is Charlie who now holds the family together in their hour of despair. Groping for the words to express the imperfect understanding of their predicament nascent in his new-found class consciousness, he remembers again the man he once worked with "laying pipe" in Calvinia, whose ideas are having an increasing influence on his own thinking. He takes Freda's hand – "It wasn't cold, as he expected it to be, but rough and warm with life" (111) – and for the second time quotes the "slim burg", only this time speaking with real personal conviction:

'Like he say, people can't stand up to the world alone, they got to be together. I reckon maybe he was right. A *slim juba*. Maybe it was like that with Ronny-boy. Ronald didn't ever want nobody to he'p him. Wanted to do things alone. Never was a part of us. I don't know. Maybe, like Uncle Ben, too. Is not natural for people to be alone. Hel-I, I reckon people was just made to be together. I –' Words failed him again, and he shook his head, frowning (111).

Then Charlie the homemaker, the repairer of roofs, feeling the "awkwardness of the time he had decided to marry [Freda]" – overwhelmed by the same transcendent emotion his more general commitment to others engenders – sets about the simple domestic task of making a pot of coffee. The resilience and tenacity of the communal life is assured; and the promise of the lone carnation on the rubbish dump, "gleaming, wonderfully bright, red as blood and life, like hope blooming in an anguished breast" (100), is symbolically renewed, as Charlie glimpses a bird soaring skyward, bearing with it the aspirations of the invincible human spirit:

Charlie Pauls stood there and looked out into the driving rain. The rain bored into the earth. The light outside was grey, and the rain fell steadily, like heartbeats. As he looked out at the rain, he saw to his surprise, a bird dart suddenly from among the patchwork roofs of the shanties and head straight, straight into the sky (112).

And thus the novel ends.

3.3 Points of criticism and the novel's own criteria of relevance

Some critics – Bernth Lindfors, for example – have found the novel's closure, especially Charlie Pauls's concluding appeal for solidarity,

forced and unconvincing. Lindfors takes La Guma to task for the tendentious “deflection” of his “message” in the last chapter, a message which moreover “seems to be thrust on his novel instead of springing from it” (Lindfors, 1966:15).⁵

I do not think it will suffice simply to dismiss this objection as the expression of an inappropriate bourgeois aesthetic. The question Lindfors asks is this: Would La Guma’s novel have been more “successful”, more convincing, had he not opted to conform to a narrowly tendentious programme; had he, perhaps, been content to leave the Pauls family, annihilated by huge social forces, in a condition of hopeless moral and spiritual bankruptcy? Certainly, given some of the premises of his presented world, such an ending might have embodied a greater measure of truth-to-life, of the verisimilitude which is in the last resort the only universal criterion by which realist art-forms may be judged.

But to the socialist realist, the writer whom Stalin characterized as “the engineer of the human soul”, to depict life truthfully in works of art means “to depict it not scholastically, not lifelessly, not simply as ‘objective reality’, but to depict actuality in its revolutionary development” (Zhdanov, 1963:487). Socialist realism involves the portrayal of the *typical*, “that which expresses most fully and precisely the nature of existing social forces” (Malenkov, 1963:488), not necessarily that which is most widespread, usual or likely. In fact, “conscious exaggeration or stressed images do not exclude the typical but reveal or emphasize it more fully” (Malenkov, 1963:488); as Gorky insisted, socialist realism is actually a misnomer for “revolutionary romanticism”, a mode of representation whose primary purpose is not mimesis but “to promote the consolidation of revolutionary achievement in the present and a clearer view of the lofty objectives of the socialist future” (Gorky, 1963:487).

Although *And a Threefold Cord* could with some justification be claimed by the school of socialist realism as one of its own, I think the novel can be shown to bear up to the scrutiny of the bourgeois aesthetic that informs Lindfors’s allegation of didactic artificiality. For

5 It is possible that I misinterpret the thrust of Lindfors’s criticism. I take his objection to be that the narrative cannot sustain the weight of political statement it is made to bear, whereas he may be criticising the lack of subtlety with which the statement is made. Whichever it be, the alleged offence is essentially the same. Lindfors voices similar reservations about *A Walk in the Night*: “... the moral does not grow out of the story naturally. Rather, it hangs like a dead appendage, a label which La Guma tacked onto the story in order to draw attention to the lesson he wants readers to learn”.

... in any imaginative effort, that which we mean by the real remains the basic criterion of viability, the crucial test of relevance, even if its specific features can hardly be determined in advance but must be felt anew in each given instance (Rahv, 1963:581).

And a Threefold Cord projects its own criteria of relevance and viability which safely account for its political statement at the level of *vraisemblance*.

4. Charlie as character convinces within the novel's fictional world

In order to answer Lindfors's charges effectively, it is necessary to show, first, that Charlie Pauls's passionate call for unity is consistent with the expectations the reader has thus far evolved of him, in other words, that the utterance rings true; and secondly, that the character of Charlie itself is consistent with the remainder of the fictional world, and not merely an incongruous mouthpiece for the author's social injunctions. I do not think there can be any doubt that La Guma has in general created a thoroughly convincing fictional milieu.

One of the characters who "wanted to do things alone" (111) is Uncle Ben, an old soak who wears "an expression of resignation to some inexplicable woe" (45). Ben is darkly aware of the presence of some unidentifiable "evil" at the back of his drinking problem.⁶

'I don't know what it is, Charlie, man. A man got to have his *dring*, don't I say? But with me is like as if something force me to drink, drink, drink. Is like an evil, Charlie, forcing a man to go on swallowing till he's fall-fall with liquor. An evil, man.' (48)

He is able to discern a connection between his own fate and that of Dad Pauls: "Is an evil, Charlie, what make a man drink himself to death with wine, an evil what make a poor old man shiver and shake himself to death in a leaking pondok without no warm soup and no medicine" (48). But lacking even the most rudimentary political education, Ben can connect no further, and lapses into lugubrious reverie. La Guma takes the opportunity to insert a graphic objective epitome which provides the perfect counterpoint to Ben's remarks. A fly "trapped by winter" makes a bid for the dim light of a window pane but is brought up short by the glass; instead it commences drinking from a puddle of spilt wine (49).

6 Cf. *A Walk in the Night* (La Guma, 1968:25). Doughty is "destroyed by alcohol and something neither he nor Michael Adonis understood".

Later it overturns and begins to drown in the wine, “its wings trapped”. Finally, “the fly fell onto the floor and lay in the darkness, struggling. In the sick-room Dad Pauls cough-cough-coughed and then wheezed like a broken bellows” (50).

Meanwhile Ben’s maudlin reflections have set Charlie thinking and prompted a recollection:

‘There was a burg working with us on the pipe. When we was laying pipe up by Calvinia. Know what he say? Always reading newspapers and things. He said to us, the poor don’t have to be poor.’ He took the second bottle and equalised the drinks in the two pickle jars. ‘This burg say, if the poor people all got together and took everything in the whole blerry world, there wouldn’t be poor no more. Funny kind of talk, but it sounded awright,’ Charlie said.

He continued, warming up: ‘Further, this rooker say if all the stuff in the world was shared out among everybody, all would have enough to live nice. He reckoned people got to stick together to get this stuff.’

Uncle Ben said, frowning: ‘Sound almost like a sin, that. Bible say you mustn’t covet other people’s things.’

Charlie said. ‘This rooker did know what he was talking, I reckon.’

‘I heard people talking like that,’ Uncle Ben said. ‘That’s communis’ things. Talking against the goverment.’

‘Listen,’ Charlie said, as they had another drink. He was feeling voluble. ‘Listen, Uncle Ben, one time I went up to see Freda up by the people she work for, cleaning and washing. Hell, that people got a house *mos*, big as the effing city hall, almost, and there’s an old bitch with purple hair and fat backsides and her husband eating off a table a mile long, with fancy candles and *dingus* on it. And a *juba* like me can’t even touch the handle of the front door. You got to go round the back. Eating off nice shiny tables, plenty of roast meat and stuff.’ Charlie scowled and swallowed some wine. ‘Bible say love your neighbour, too. Heard that when I was a lighty in Sunday-school.’ (49-50)

It is worth stressing that Charlie’s awareness of inequality and his crude conceptions of class are not second-hand: although influenced by the politically informed labourer, they do not derive solely from him. On the contrary, they arise spontaneously and logically from Charlie’s personal observation of enormous discrepancies in standards of living, an observation that has raised certain political questions to which Charlie demands political answers. Uncle Ben, who stubbornly refuses to face the political implications of his intuitive perception of “evil” (“That’s communis’ things. Talking against the goverment”), adopts an orthodox religious stance. His attitude implies that such matters are in the hands

of God (“We got to trust in the Lord, Charlie”) and he advocates religion as a source of solace (49). Charlie, frankly sceptical about the efficacy of faith – “Ma read the Bible every night. It don’t make the poor old toppy any better” (49) – now contemplates its manifest hypocrisy with scorn: “Bible say love your neighbour, too. Heard that ... in Sunday-school”.

Thus, briefly to recapitulate on the extent of his political education, Charlie understands that his poverty is the result of a system that distributes wealth unequally, and therefore unfairly. By rejecting the idea that the system is divinely ordained (“Who works out how much weight each person got to carry?” – 55), he has accepted the possibility that it might be changed. Furthermore, he has an inkling that this change might only be achieved through the concerted efforts of the poor or working class.

Yet at the end of the novel, invoking the same authority of the man he met “laying pipe”, he seems to be saying that people have to stick together in order to survive. Charlie Pauls is in fact expressing two ideas that he has not yet sorted out in his own mind. On the one hand, he is voicing his as yet half-conscious realization that the solidarity necessary for the poor to stand up for their rights must somehow start with the family; and on the other, he is wrestling with the more profound notion that the individual may find fulfilment only in community.⁷

5. Loyalty to class and community

Lenin believed that one facet of the revolutionary consciousness, the total identification of the interests of the individual with those of the group, would evolve naturally from “the observance of elementary rules of living together – rules known for centuries and repeated for thousands of years in all codes of behaviour” (Bukharin & Probrzhensky, 1969:17). In *And a Threefold Cord*, La Guma dramatizes the hope that the instinctive loyalties among family and friends may in the course of time extend to the larger family of class, and thence to all humanity. He assures us of the existence of such charitable bonds and warns us by example of the consequences of ignoring or perverting them.

7 Charlie Pauls has also an inchoate, precarious understanding of historical necessity. When Freda is consumed with remorse for having accidentally caused her children’s death, Charlie suggests: “Hell, man, maybe we is both to blame. Maybe it was all just put out like that, the way some people say. Maybe is God. Uncle Ben and ou Brother Bombata talk like that” (111). Charlie has already rejected the idea of a supernatural agency and the determinism he gropingly perceives is materialistic; the insight into necessity it affords him is the only freedom within his reach.

Charlie Pauls defends his family's honour in the fight with Roman on an unsolicited impulse of fraternal loyalty: "A man must *mos* fight for his brother, don't I say?" (31), he proudly announces to Freda. And Missus Nzuba, African earth-mother, gives spontaneously and selflessly: "We got to yelp each other" she says (69), explaining with simple logic, "I'm proud to yelp you. We been living here together a long time ... we all got to stand by each other" (70). During the police raid, which profanes the sanctity of the marriage bed with the demand that a man produce his "permit to love" his wife (85), the correspondence between family and class loyalty is suggested at a verbal level. One of the victims sadly enquires of a black policeman, "Why do you do this, brother? Why do you do this to your own people?" (85).

Central to the socialist ethic is the belief that the individual can achieve fulfilment only in and through community, not against it, so that the ideal of fellow feeling is not only a potential political weapon but also a precondition of self-realization and true humanity. The poor, who lack the means to buy themselves the specious impedimenta that serve as a measure of human dignity in capitalist society, have only the wealth of human relationships to fall back upon. Thus Ma Pauls speaks with more wisdom than she perhaps realises when, in reply to Uncle Ben's remark that "A family always give trouble", she says: "Yes. But I reckon is better to have some troubles than nothing at all" (56).

Those who selfishly ignore the call of community pay the price of having "nothing at all". Severed from the humanizing influence of his family, Ronald Pauls is reduced to a subhuman monster,⁸ Uncle Ben is a useless drunk; while Roman, who shamefully abuses the authority vested in him as head of a family, is a bestial automaton. Significantly, it is Roman, Ronald, Susie and that other loner, George Mostert, who are most frequently described in terms of animal imagery.

And so La Guma's "message", as it finds expression in Charlie's impassioned exhortation at the end of the novel, far from being arbitrarily "thrust" upon it, evolves organically and convincingly from the narrative. The only challenge to the reader's suspension of disbelief lies in the vague realm of probability – the likelihood of the development in Charlie

8 Even Ronald is incorporated into the family/shanty symbolism mentioned earlier. As the force that threatens the solidarity of the family, he is metamorphosed into the force that threatens the solidity of the shanty. When Ronald does his butcher's work on Susie Meyer under the driving rain, he becomes that "cutting, muttering, gurgling, sucking, bubbling personality", "the homicidal imbecile with a knife", which is one of La Guma's metaphors for the rain.

Pauls' consciousness, the likelihood of his interpreting and articulating his experience in the way that he does – which is surely an extrinsic calculus independent of and irrelevant to the logic of the plot.

6. Race prejudice

The story of the Pauls family does not exhaust the social analysis contained in *And a Threefold Cord*. George Mostert, the white proprietor of a derelict service station, has lived for too long without the joys of human comradeship. His solitariness indicates another force that threatens the harmony of the social family – the prejudice of race. Although he is loath to countenance the fact, Mostert's declining fortunes have consigned him to practically the same economic bracket as the denizens of the shantytown a stone's throw away. But to Mostert the settlement is "a strange country" inhabited by "a foreign people met only through ragged brown ambassadors who stopped by sometimes to beg for some useful rubbish" (38). Although in his solitude Mostert is grateful for any company, he is

... trapped in his glass office by his own loneliness and a wretched pride in a false racial superiority, the cracked embattlements of his world, and he peered out sadly past the petrol pumps which gazed like petrified sentries across the concrete no-man's-land of the road (38).

Even after he has accepted Charlie Pauls' invitation to join the shantytown folk for a party, so engrained are the patterns of racial privilege that, while he pours himself a stiff drink, "it did not occur to him to offer Charlie a shot, too" (42). And so Mostert fights a losing battle with his "warped sense of loftiness" which tells him "it ain't right people like us should mix with them" (80).

Mostert's attitude towards his coloured neighbours stands in stark contrast to that of the African, Missus Nzuba; and La Guma implies that the disease of racism will alienate the white working class from its appropriate role in the revolution. This suggestion is reinforced by the images of dilapidation and doomed conflict which characterize the descriptions of Mostert and his garage, images which look both backwards and forwards in history:

Like a lone blockhouse on a frontier, [the garage] stood against the dark-green background of trees, with an air of neglect surrounding it, as if deserted by its garrison and left to crumble on the edge of hostile territory (36).

Mostert himself is “like a volunteer who had agreed to, or had been ordered into standing a lone rearguard action” (36). The decaying service station stands “like an ignored flag of surrender” (36), reflecting not only its owner’s miserable predicament, but also the inevitable end of white privilege and private enterprise. That this sort of reading is supported by the text is corroborated by the following passage, in which La Guma seems to be flirting with an allegorical fusion of concrete detail and political prophecy:

The white paint on the outside of the building had long been violated by the elements and careless drivers. There was history written in the fender-scars and the hub cap marks, the dried-up pools of grease like the congealed blood of dead business, in the chipped and battered enamel signs, and the torn and faded bunting like the shield and pennons of slain enterprise hung up for the last time in forlorn defiance (37).

7. Poverty and dehumanization

Although Mostert is peripheral to the main plot, through his encounters with Charlie and Susie Meyer he makes a direct contribution to the unfolding of the action. There are, however, several chapters in the novel that are quite detached from the various strands of narrative. They serve as interludes, heightening or relaxing tension as the momentum of the story is temporarily arrested, while at the same time filling out the fictional world – something for which La Guma’s unwavering concentration on immediate detail provides little scope. Some of these chapters enlarge on the theme of dehumanization: Chapter Seven, for instance, which contains the description of Drunk Ria, that “squalid parody of a female” (27) who is barely recognizable as human. Like a “shopwindow dummy rescued from a sewer” and “crudely stuffed with odds and ends, dressed in a gown of sewn-up dishrags” (27), Ria “cursed and wept and laughed about her in a voice as harsh as a death rattle” (28). Drunk Ria is death-in-life, the logical extremity, the consummate product of poverty’s work of dehumanization. Again, the cameo of the shantytown capitalist who makes his living by selling water to his neighbours (Chapter 17) suggests that the system destroys exploiter and exploited alike:

Water is profit. In order to make this profit, the one who sells the water must also use it to wash his soul clean of compassion. He must rinse his heart of pity, and with the bristles of enterprise, scrub his being sterile of sympathy. He must have the heart of a stop-cock and the brain of a cistern, intestines of lead pipes (72).

These interludes, which stand in oblique relation to the narrative like a choric commentary, help to broaden the perspective of La Guma's social analysis, while at the same time establishing a compelling sense of rhythm.⁹

8. Characters not extrapolations of political theory, but men and women of flesh and blood

However, that *And a Threefold Cord* is La Guma's most effective work of protest is attributable in the first instance not to the breadth or profundity or accuracy of its social analysis, but to the skill of La Guma's characterization, which evokes men and women of flesh and blood, not extrapolations of political theory. In *A Walk in the Night* La Guma offers an intellectual understanding of Michael Adonis's predicament which, because it construes him wholly as a victim (and not a particularly sympathetic one at that), enjoins on the reader a formal kind of pity. But in this novel, La Guma makes it possible for the reader to believe in Charlie Pauls as a man, not just in what he stands for; we share his hopes and disappointments and are genuinely moved by his suffering; we can identify with him because he is presented as a human agent rather than a term in a formula for social analysis. Perhaps one can generalize from this: that *And a Threefold Cord* is a successful protest work because it moves us deeply; that it moves us because we can identify with the character of Charlie Pauls; and that Charlie is a sympathetic character *in spite of* the ideological burden he is made to bear, regardless of our disposition towards that ideology. In my view La Guma never again invests his portrayal of character with the same degree of compassion and understanding. In his next three novels the protagonists are heroes, villains or mere grotesques, and he tends to portray their violent fates either with a wistful sentimentality or a certain "dark lyricism" which, as Coetzee has observed, is by no means free of a perverse and ambivalent fascination (Coetzee, 1992b:365-66).

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9 In terms of style and descriptive strategy, these "interlude" chapters bear a strong resemblance to some of La Guma's journalistic sketches published in *New Age* and *Fighting Talk* in the 1950s. See especially the piece on the administration of the pass laws in Cape Town, "The Machine" (La Guma 1956).

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