

The "little magazines" soldier on

As South Africa's intellectual barriers rise higher

JOHN POVEY

IN SPITE OF ALL THE DIFFICULTIES which one would expect to render creative writing all but impossible in the country, the South African literary magazines continue to struggle. Recent numbers suggest how lively writing in South Africa still is amongst those who continue to stand for some aesthetic moral principle in that torn country. *The Purple Renoster*, edited by Lionel Abrahams, though long quiescent is apparently not dead, and promises another number. Guy Butler has found the time auspicious enough to found a new poetry magazine, *New Coin*; an activity bold enough in any country. Its broadsheet form — at first an economy, now a badge — is seen on many bookstalls and prospers considerably. The two major South African literary magazines are still *Classic* (16s. 6d. per annum, P.O. Box 10428, Johannesburg) and *Contrast* (£1 14s. per annum, P.O. Box 3841, Cape Town): two recent numbers that have just arrived show contents lively and rewarding as one could find in little magazines anywhere. If they were better known, I am sure they would sell well outside South Africa on their literary merits:

Classic's new number (Vol. 1, No. 4, 1965) comes to us after a break occasioned by the tragic loss of its editor Nat Nakasa. The new edition reaffirms in its editorial the principles for which this magazine stands.

"These are tired days, wounded days, but the initial values which presume, for all men, the freedom to love, live, search and aspire must not be neglected and it is of these, to the best of its ability, that *Classic* will attempt to speak."

The major work of this edition is, of course, the short story of Nadine Gordimer, "One whole year and even more." It describes how, in an English family, an *au pair* girl with a magnificent but unconscious physical attractiveness gradually pervades the life of the husband until, almost unconsciously, certainly unadmittedly, he succumbs to her redolent sexuality. Atmosphere and insight are both superbly handled.

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Besides this, there are the more inevitable South African themes. There is the fragment from a work in progress by Dugmore Boetie with its tender record of the little African boy, part delinquent, part hero; both victor and victim of the social situation he faces. So different, but to the same point, is the clever variant Wolf Miller plays upon the nursery rhyme form, "A tale for our time":

And mouse and cat and dog and man
Living their lives in terror
None of them knew how it all began
So they closed their eyes and grew pale
and wan—

A comment on all who live, dismayed, in the Republic. Other items include some reproductions of South African painting and an adaptation of Lewis Nkosi's interviews with African writers which he organised for the National Educational Television film series. I wonder how intentional it was that the last lines of this edition are David Rubardiri's appeal "Teach our children to read which they have never learned for these last fifty years." They seem to say everything.

Classic is the Johannesburg magazine, and from *Contrast* we usually get a view of writing in Cape Town. This is probably a matter of geographic convenience, the mere proximity of literary friends, as any real belief that there are separate schools of writing in these two major cities of South

Africa. The latest *Contrast* (Vol. 3, No. 4, July 1965), by chance, concerns itself with Johannesburg in a special edition dedicated to "the metropolitan centre of the country, of all South Africa."

Contrast is undoubtedly the more professional of the two magazines, though I suspect that from its pages one might be less likely to be surprised by something really distinguished and unusual. *Classic* may have pieces of doubtful competence, but it seems to stand on the point of a revelation. In a sense it is more alive. In spite of the deliberate selection of Afrikaans items, *Contrast* is less obviously South African in its tone and setting. Ruth Miller's dialogue with her "Fingers" has that type of sophistication that is international. Similarly, Desmond Greig's "Landscape with rhino" has a vividness that derives not from the landscape itself but from the poetic evocation his description achieves. Joy Sachs's sensitive story "The soft fire rain" doesn't really have to be set in Johannesburg. Besides Nadine Gordimer's tenderly anxious tale "Not for publication," the title story of her latest collection, a major section in this number is devoted to a debate on the decision of the South African government to rescind the protection of the copyright laws from those playwrights who deliberately withhold their plays from South African production as a moral and political protest against apartheid policies; the "Play Piracy" Clause of the Copyright Act of 1965. William Gibson, the author of the Broadway success *The Miracle Worker*, had written:

"All, all men are created equal . . . it is a cry from the depths of human life . . . we refuse our plays to the apartheidists because that cry is in our ears and we have promises to keep."

Nadine Gordimer and Mary Renault, amongst others, accept the morality of such a boycott. They ask, in fact, if provocative drama is no longer available, what can ever be done to break through the intellectual wall that South Africa is so defiantly erecting. Perhaps magazines such as these suggest that there are still hearts and consciences that exist in the university of art. In literature there is always hope. ●

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