

The meaning of description in Alex La Guma's *A Walk in the Night*

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Introduction

The literary production of the South African writer Alex La Guma has a distinctive feature. It is the writer's will to present his society with no beautifying make-up. The consequence of this artistic choice is his recourse to description: description of characters, of the plot and its setting, that is, space and time. This distinctive feature has not gone unnoticed by readers and critics who have pointed it out in several studies and have ranked the writer among the realist writers of his time and country. Description which generally causes the narration to come to a halt to present an object with words traditionally appears in the narration of a dynamic fictional story. How then does the writer structure these aspects of the genre which seem contradictory at first sight? What links can be established between description, reality and realism as a variant of this literary genre? What meaning, at last, does description convey in *A Walk in the Night* which is to a certain point purely descriptive? These questions will be addressed through a methodology that will serve as a tool to analyze social problems as conveyed by the literary style of the author.

I- La Guma's realism

The word "realism" is far from being a simple concept. A work labelled as realist is not one that narrates events that are believed to have occurred in a real life or one that is constructed from facts, details and other descriptive precisions. The writer who, from his imagination and experience, succeeds in producing a narrative (a story), in creating a fictional universe that is as real or even more real than reality itself, this one will be considered as a realist writer. But first of all, let's analyse the relationship between description and realism.

1- 1. *Description and realism*

Realism is one of the particular features of the modern novel. A variant like the epic genre establishes a distance that M. Bakhtine labels as "epic" between the narrator and the events he narrates for the time of these latter are beyond his reach. He is thus unable to assess this time, its heroes and values. He can but bow low in admiration or veneration in front of the finished and unique conception of this world whose values are ideal, immutable and unquestionable. The novel, as for it, is concerned about topicality. It abolishes distances and mocks the topicality that it judges, scoffs at and demystifies. It makes one with the current events, the present world with its limits, weaknesses and discordant voices. The discourse that represents is at the same level with the represented discourse and builds with the latter "dialogic relations" and "hybrid combinations"¹

All these elements show that it is the intention of the novelistic discourse to form one body with the current issues, with reality. For that reason, it seeks to convince readers about its likelihood. One is remembered the aristotelian theory of likelihood particular to the prose

¹ M. Bakhtine, *Esthétique et théorie du roman*, Paris, Gallimard, 1978

genre which states that the impossible which is plausible is preferable to the possible which is not convincing.² The modernist prose distinguishes itself by its concern for precision of temporal and spatial setting of experiences that are playing in the literary work. The time of the novel is neither the 'once upon a time' nor the 'in an unknown or far away country' of traditional tale telling. The story itself is not made up of fantastic events. In a modern prose, we are told when and where the events narrated occur. Even if it is a fiction, a "lie", it is the author's role to succeed in creating this illusion of the real, the factual. "It is up to the artist to find the way to convince his audience of the full truth of his lies"³ argues an accomplished artist like Pablo Picasso. We believe La Guma has achieved this. By the choice of details, of colours, sounds ... characters, places and events become either friendly or repulsive to us though they are a pure product of our imagination and that of the author. The reader ends up identifying with these elements, allowing himself to be convinced by what is told and described as trustworthy. Without this trust and tacit agreement, there is no true art, no impression of realism. In *A Walk in the Night*, there are moments when disgust, stench, suffocating heat ... of some places get to the face, the noses during or even after the description or narration that displays them. It is only by identifying oneself with the characters of the short stories and therefore by perceiving them as real that one can feel, share in their frustrations and unvoiced anger. If description is so present in these stories, it is then not by accident but as a consequence of that choice to be realist, objective, which leads to analyse the relationship between realism and reality.

I- 2. Realism and Reality

Realism is the manifestation of that artistic trend that consists in depicting the daily life, the human or natural reality as they are without any attempt to idealize or distort them. This said, it should never be forgotten that we are in the domain of art and are speaking about representation: it should not be thought, when it is argued that La Guma's style is a realist one, that the latter contents himself with making a written report on a shanty district as a journalist, a sociologist or a historian would do. *A Walk in the Night* is a work of art of a realist style by this ability to raise itself above a particular factual social reality. It is the result of the construction of an imaginary universe inspired by the social realities of a South African city in the era of Apartheid. Thanks to that capacity to transcend the specific everyday life, the work succeeds in touching the heart of any human being who reads it, be he African, European or Asian. Describing District six, the short story writer has succeeded in speaking to man about man. He did not content himself with reproducing the lived daily reality. How could he have done that anyway? A faithful description of a district would hold in no single book and we should not hope to meet Adonis, Willieboy or the police officer Raalt in the streets of any Cape district. As for white policemen and the poor black youths, it is possible to meet plenty of them at any corner of the streets of south african cities. This is to show that realism does not consist in a servile imitation of a "real" world.

It is true that society is the model of the work of art and the german philosopher E. Kant was able to establish the superiority of nature over art which is its representation but this does not turn art into its copy. Art even manages subsequently, in a dialectical relationship, to become a model for the society. We are recalled the example of Pushkin who wanted to adapt his daily life to his poetic artistic ideal and other writers who used their lives to achieve a

² Aristote, *Poétique* in M. Haar, *L'œuvre d'art*, Paris, Hatier, 1994, p.19

³ quoted in R. Wurmbrand, *Karl Marx*, Paris, Mediaspaul, 1988, p.77

literary goal.⁴ Paul Valéry sums up this idea even better when he asserts that “l’oeuvre modifie l’auteur. A chacun des mouvements qui la tirent de lui, il subit une altération. Achevée, elle réagit encore une fois sur lui.”⁵ Art is therefore not the copy of its model. It speaks about life and its model is life. To be inspired by human life or taking it as a model is not to submit oneself to a factual truth. It is by giving free rein to the imagination that the novelist builds up a life that looks so much like the one that is really lived. Realism is therefore not the description of any external reality: it consists in surpassing that one and suggesting new human values. In any case, this seems to be the vision of La Guma who, dealing with a situation specific to a given social or historical environment, manages to speak to the hearts of men, of humanity, of any human being worthy of that name.

I- 3. Realism as social criticism

To describe is to show, to disclose, that is, showing the daily lives of the characters of the narrated story. But doing this, the writer necessarily draws a criticism of this daily reality. Literature succeeds in creating a textual universe which has its own coherence, its own system of elements and relationship that are opposed to the real universe. That is where the critical function of description lies and sets it apart from the vulgar naturalism that would consist in substituting to the described object of the text an alleged real one. This leads us to the paradox that descriptive analyses are more charged with meaning than other forms and are the ones which destroy with the most of efficiency reality and its illusions.

The best way for the writer to take part in the improvement of social life, is to content himself with doing his job: disclosing the reality so as to change it. J-P Sartre spoke of the “action par dévoilement.”⁶ The reality that is described is the one that is to be improved. By disclosing the South African reality to South Africans themselves, by showing it to all eyes without any artistic beautifying, readers and those who live these realities are urged to either persevere in their social practices that are described or work out a change. Even the initiators of Apartheid do not wish to be confronted with their own creation hence the censure that prevailed at that time. La Guma who only chose to describe what everyone can see for himself in South Africa had to publish outside his country.

It is impossible to describe for the sake of describing. If we agree with Brice-Parain that words are loaded pistols, “des pistolets chargés”, then each written or uttered word is a gunfire. One cannot therefore describe with impunity in a system that is trying to hide social facts. The writer makes it his responsibility to lay bare the reality so that men can change or keep it as it is according to J-P Sartre for whom the role of the writer is to “dévoiler le monde et singulièrement l’homme aux autres hommes pour que ceux-ci prennent en face de l’objet ainsi mis à nu leur responsabilité.” He must see to it that, adds the critic, no one fails to know his world as it is in fact, “que nul ne puisse ignorer le monde.”⁷

The writer throws back to the South African society an image, or better, a picture of itself that it must accept as valid or reject. The realistic description inherently contests established values and political regimes. The novelist is a sort of spoilsport in front of so many physical and moral ugly things. His action produces an uneasy conscience on the society. As such, description questions the established order that it aims at destroying. It is in a perpetual

⁴ in A. Jefferson, *Modern Literary Theory*, Batsford, 1997, p.33

⁵ P. Valéry in J. Ricardou, *Pour une théorie du roman*, Gallimard, 1948, p.68

⁶ J-P Sartre, *Situation II*, Paris, Gallimard 1948, p.73

⁷ *Ibid.*, p.74

antagonism with the conservative forces. For that reason, true art is inevitably fought against by autocratic regimes. There is no need to call names, to express subjective political opinions: it is just enough to describe, to show and thus transform.

In the short stories that we have here, space signifies, i.e., it has a meaning. The graphic description of details of District six are a real indictment of the prevailing social order. The slums, the streets strewn with garbage are but the symbol of social injustices. Through the mere description of these spaces, the narrator aims at arousing the reader's indignation. Here the meaning does not seem to have precedence over description as it can be seen in some other variants of the novel where description is but the illustration of the meaning that is established beforehand. In this last case, it has the effect of creating a sense of redundancy and wantonness. The meaning stems from description and stands out through an insightful analysis of the critic or reader. For that reason, description is necessary to narration not as an auxiliary or a substitute but as an essential step toward meaning. Assessment is thus linked to presentation. But beyond this link between meaning and description, there is another one between the latter and a message that is planned to be universal.

II- Description and universalism

One of the merits of Alex Laguma is that, unlike many writers of his country, he has managed to give a particular and original touch to a motif almost hackneyed which is the criticism of the Apartheid system. He has managed, while dealing with a sensitive issue of a specific country, to speak about and to humanity, to express an idiosyncratic standpoint on a universal problem. With him, the criticism of the racist regime of South Africa gains a new resonance. The lives La Guma describes are not only those of the South African coloured but of all the economically marginalised of the world. What meaning is to be drawn from the description of characters like Doughty, Whitey and other white people in the other short stories? Its meaning is that poverty is the yardstick of no race. The description of the room of the old alcoholic Doughty connotes an image of death, "a newly opened tom" which foreshadows his ultimate end. He is compared to a human wreck, "a decrepit bloodhound", "a deserted abandoned ruin", "helpless as wreckage disintegration on a hostile beach." (p. 24-25) The discourse of the writer is directed both to the blacks and the whites. It is even aimed at the initiators of Apartheid. In other words, all races are victims of the system. Doughty, Willieboy, Adonis, Raalt ... are all victims of a system that alienates them. With the example of Doughty, it becomes clear that the system does not show solidarity with all the whites. In fact, like capitalism which gave birth to it apartheid has no brother or friend. Its brother, friend or ally is its interests, stakes and the person who favours it.

Thus, true liberation will not be that of the sole blacks but that of all the victims of the Apartheid system. Through the description of the poor living conditions of white characters, the writer seems to suggest that, far from being enemies, the latter should be regarded as allies, as brothers because of the common fate in front of the alienating system. With them, the principle is set that poverty is the benchmark of no exclusive race. With these examples, La Guma rejects the social and racial determinisms and suggests going beyond racial manicheism as a way to liberation. The friendship that the old white offers Adonis and which the latter misunderstands shows this need for love, friendship and brotherhood. It also shows that any human being, regardless of his race has some humane qualities. Human beings do not allow themselves to be kept behind determining and defining bars. That is the expression of his freedom.

Through the description of the lives of white characters, we also realize that La Guma rejects the solutions based on emotions and racial feelings. With him, the answer to Apartheid will not consist, for the blacks, in attacking the whites for poverty here seems to be a shared

reality. For that reason, the emotional solutions of individual revolt or of a racial revolution which we had become so familiar with with his country fellowwriters is hinted at here as unworkable.

Apartheid will not be defeated by a racial revolution, of war of the Blacks against the Whites but by an awareness of the common fate of all the oppressed and victims of the system. With La Guma, a non racial approach as a solution to the South African problem is stated. That is why the option of liberation will not be a racial one. Hope for this community therefore lies in the social class of the economically disadvantaged.

As it is stated by Marxism, capitalism, and we dare add its product Apartheid, carry in their bosoms, the germs of their own death. The solidarity of all victims, coloured and whites alike around their shared condition of poverty is the hope of this country. Against the usual counter racist rhetoric of the coloured writers, La Guma proposes a universalist discourse about human condition. The spontaneous welcome and solidarity that the two railway workers show towards the white man who emerges from the nearby bush in a "A Matter of Taste" gives a hint of that community of fate and social condition. The white South African as well as the black is to be freed from oppression and poverty. The victims are of different types for even those who think of themselves as its guardians are but its victims as well. If with Doughty, it is seen that the system does not show solidarity to all white men, Raalt, the police officer, is another thoughtless victim of that system which has managed to convince the latter that his real and sole enemy is the black man and not the system that opposes them as enemies.

Some readers and critics will undoubtedly reproach La Guma with his universalist pretensions, his concerns about human condition instead of the condition of the coloured against whom the system is clearly against. Moreover, he will be reproached with his liberal naïve belief that man can escape social and racial determinisms through love, brotherhood and many other good feelings in a country where race determines power relations. It is rather difficult not to agree with this criticism and see through the poor white characters some rare exceptions who but confirm the rule of racial supremacy. But as an intellectual, that is, one who is able to see beyond his own feelings and emotions, the writer must be able to escape the rigid racial determinism. He must seek values that are beyond emotions and this can be achieved only by distancing himself from his own feelings and those of his social environment. That is the condition to be a good critic and a support to one's community. What is expected of him is "... des formules universelles, distinctes des intérêts et des circonstances, valables pour tous et pour toujours"⁸ The new South Africa is there to prove the clearheadedness of La Guma. The rainbow nation had been heralded by a literature inspired by the rainbow spirit several decades before. Emotions and resentments should be discarded when a long term goal is aimed at. Description is not only a stylistic device to convey a universalist ethos. It is also a stylistic device to protect oneself against censure.

III. Description as a way out of censure

A writer always writes in a social-historical context that has an impact on his production. In the case of the South Africa of the Apartheid era, the reality of the censure imposed by the regime that could not put up with protests against the establishment had to be taken into account. The writers had either to keep silent, blink the injustices of Apartheid or commit themselves openly against the regime and find themselves in illegality and therefore be

⁸ T.Todorov, *Critique de la critique*, Seuil, 1984, p.175

condemned to write clandestinely. Various attitudes were adopted. But as the history of literature shows, it is often in the worst living conditions, under the worst abject forms of dictatorship, the worst political and economic deprivations that masterpieces of literature have been produced. These constraints have never prevented true art from expressing itself. The Russian writer Dostoievsky among many others is a living example of what the literary genius can produce in the worst moments of an existence. This has often been possible through the use of stylistic devices that have served to circumvent the harshness of the official censure.

It seems to us that here, Alex La Guma has had recourse to description, to its objective rigour and particularly to the economy of value judgements to guard himself against the norms of the South African police regime. Description goes hand in hand with objectivity, scientificity and therefore the economy of subjective and emotional judgements. That is what P. Hamon's analysis referred to when he wrote that " [le descripteur] est plutôt du côté des savants austères peu diserts, des scientifiques en chambre ..."⁹

In fact, description is not a neutral language as we saw in the preceding part of our study. It functions like a rhetoric device that protects the enunciator against attacks from the censors of the established order. It is true that in his case the South African regime realized the trick and did not allow itself to be tricked. A description is an utterance which implies innuendoes. It always has a literal meaning beyond which we must go to have access to the true or suggested meaning, to the "signifié" of the description. It proceeds by way of an economy of interpretation on the part of the one who describes i.e, the narrator or the writer. It can be realized how interesting Description can therefore be considered in a context of oppression as a weapon. The narrator produces a literal meaning by his descriptions and leaves it to the reader's responsibility to make social interpretations of linguistic signs. Having stated nothing, it is easy for him to defend himself by taking refuge behind the literal sense. In fact, who could charge La Guma for criticizing the South African regime? He only described places, common and daily "facts" that can be witnessed in any poor districts of the Cape. Never has he named the regime in his short story, its dignitaries and its official ideology. As a consequence, in no way is he to assume responsibility for conclusions that each reader can draw from the "facts" he displays.

The other law of economy on which description is built is the common sense of the reader who is constantly brought to ask himself one important question: is it normal for human beings to live in such an environment? Why does the author put so much emphasis on the detailed description of the different settings? Isn't it because this setting has something unexpected, unacceptable or abnormal? These are the questions and the answers that may be inferred when reading *A Walk in the Night*. We can therefore venture to say this text is an "open" one (Umberto Eco) for the meaning is to be built by the reader himself: it never escapes the reader that disclosing the living conditions of these populations is an implicit call to the rescue of this population. In fact, no normal human being will find this environment fit enough for a decent life particularly in a context of insulting opulence displayed by a minority.

It stands to reason that if no description is made of the living condition in white areas, apart from the symbolic setting of the police van, it is possible to figure out a clear picture of their space by drawing a contrast with the coloured poor one described in minute details. Thus, the following chart can be inferred between the two settings from the only one which is presented.

Setting of the victims

Gloomy - flabby - volatile (precarious)

Setting of the oppressor

Geometric – permanent structure

⁹ P. Hamon, *Introduction à l'analyse du descriptif*, Hachette, 1981, p.41

Broken - open
Dirty - malodorous
Dark

One – closed
Clean – fumigated
Well-lit - luminous

All things said, it is clear that no writer describes for the sake of doing it. Emphasis is not laid on details purposelessly. It is not difficult to figure out the ideological option of La Guma even though he never refers to any particular regime. How, in fact, can a space with so much poverty be described with such vividness without referring to the political system that has nurtured it? How can the prisons' universe be described as it is done in "Tattoo Marks and Nails" without it taking us mentally back to the system that uses it, after having built it purposefully to ensure its survival, to prevent any attempt to contest the prevailing order. The best enemy for a community which is reluctant to let itself be seen as it is in fact, which is ashamed of itself and uses artifices so as not to be seen as it is, its most fearsome enemy will be any act that discloses it publicly without any single value judgement. It is that role of laying naked, of disclosing that the writer has undertaken and so well achieved. There is no wonder why he had to go into exile and had to publish *A Walk in the Night* outside his home country.

IV- Time, space and description of characters as a carrier of meaning

1- Time

Space and time can hardly be dissociated for they are generally defined one according to the other. Space is perceived as an expanse having duration and is always necessary to the perception of time.

The main action of our eponymous short story occurs at nightfall. This is the appropriate moment for the "human salad", the human larva of District six to creep out of their holes. We are acquainted at this time of the day with people of all sorts of social conditions: prostitutes, bandits, alcoholics, gamblers ... The temporal setting of darkness contributes to the gloomy and specific atmosphere of that district. The police make their presence felt with night patrols since they know that at this period will emerge out of darkness those who fear daylight. The latters must be prevented from threatening the established unfair order under the cover of the night.

The living space of the inhabitants of District six is a dark space, with a dim lightning, "a pallid glare" (p. 25) where we are presented with electrical bulbs that hardly work. The night or darkness stands for the ghost life to which this coloured population is condemned. It must hide itself, clean itself from sight, make itself as non-existent as possible. Apartheid is also that barmy attempt to almost deny the fact of a coloured South Africa. Coloured were condemned to non-existence, to a life of darkness. The title of the book is telling: the existence of all the victims of the system is a walk into the night of the Apartheid system. That is why an animal imagery linked to darkness is associated to these inhabitants. Rats, mice, cockroaches and many other insects often recall the night and its darkness. It is at this moment that these animals creep out of their hiding holes to find their food in the sewages of the shanty town or come closer to the lights of electric bulbs, symbol of an opulent life, that attract them. But it is the other component of that couple of the setting, that is, the description of space, which provides the most of significant elements for the comprehension of the book.

2- Space

The regime of Apartheid set itself the political aim of separating the different communities living on the South African soil. It is by a control of space that the authorities

wanted to achieve that segregative policy. The aim was to create antagonistic spaces that would exclude one another. The initiators of the system meant to park the blacks in some shanty districts so as to avoid any contact with the whites. All the laws like the Bantu Native Act of 1955 which set the racial groups and the Bantu Native Act of 1952 which established a pass for the movement of coloured inside their own country aimed but at avoiding the slightest communion between the different components of the South African society.

As a consequence, the South African space is a world divided into different sub-spaces. That is the meaning of the spatial description: spatial apartheid, spatial segregation, spatial bipolarity. The white space is the antithesis of the black one. The two spaces never overlap or merge. The coloured are meant to stand aloof from the white space. Any contact between the two spaces is a threat of death for the coloured. Willieboy, although innocent of the murder of the old white Doughty, will meet his end in this white space. But as for the whites, they have the right to regulate the black space. That is the meaning of the patrols and incursions of Raalt and his colleague into district six. Moreover, the name of the dwelling place of these poor reveals the policy of denial of the history and importance of the black majority in their motherland. Streets and districts are named after western conquerors, monarchs and towns. We thus have Hanover Street, Queen Victoria Park but no single place bears any African name. What is the sense of reducing a district to a number as if streets and districts could not also be named after some African heroes like Shaka for instance among many others?

The space of the poor is described as broken up, opened with subspaces: bars, restaurants, the club, the building and the prison ... This space also expresses all the poverty of this world and is the meeting point of all physical and moral uglinesses. It is in these pubs and restaurants that crimes and murders are planned as we can see with the gang of Joe. These are meeting points for hooligans, sailors looking for prostitutes and of many other poor people.

They also serve as refuge spaces and safety valves. People almost run away from their homes for these spaces where they go to drown their fears and frustations in alcohol, drug, prostitution, share their feelings in debates with other persons of their social and racial condition. It is also an ambivalent space where humane qualities, moral and physical uglinesses mix. The same pub which is the embodiment of self-destruction with drug and alcohol, where crimes and robberies of the worst form are planned, is also the same place we witness the expression of solidarity, brotherhood, freedom and hope, "where the disillusioned gain temporary hope, where acts of kindness were considered and murders planned." (p13)

Streets present us with the contradictions of the capitalist system which inundates the market with goods, entice people to mass consumption but deprive the majority of the coloured of the means to have access to these consumption goods. That is why, in such a context, the only remaining way to live for a number of these youths is crimes and robberies. The consumption of alcohol and tobacco are encouraged and billboards do but vaunt products. "A half mile of sound and movement and signs, signs, signs: Coca/Cola, Sale Now On, Jewellers, The Modern Outfitters, If You Don't Eat Here We'll Both Strave, Grand Picnic to Paradise Valley, Luxury Buses, Texas, Coffee ..." (p. 8) The system sells to the oppressed the arms of their own destruction. They waste away their energies in boredom, gambling, alcohol and other despicable vices and therefore disqualify themselves for any further act of revolutionary and conscious impact. This black space is the antithesis of the white space.

2-1. The white space

There is a descriptive economy of the white space which remains to be mentally figured out by drawing a comparison with the black one which is its antithesis. If the black space is presented with such minute details in words that are disgusting and revolting, what sense can be drawn from the absence of description of the one space which ought to be juxtaposed to the

first one? If the black space is thus depicted, it is by opposition to another normal space, to an ideal one. If it is depicted in such a way as to suggest that it is unacceptable and unbearable, it is because the one of the whites next to it is clean, well-lit and offering all the facilities of a decent life. All these factors can contribute to rendering the first one even more unbearable.

The single white space we are presented with is a space-symbol of the state repressive apparatus: the police van. Its description is worthy of our interest. It has a triangular shape and is made of steel and iron. This iron and steel van, a real impregnable stronghold, is made in the image of its occupants. They have hearts of stone and are without the slightest humane quality. This iron space is a dangerous one from which the coloured must stand aloof just like with a gravestone for the worst sufferings and even death await the one who gets caught in its clutches as we see with Willieboy. But at the same time, it stands for the perpetual state of anguish in which the white man is kept. He pays back the terrors and injustices he inflicts on the coloured by living under pressure, with the constant fear of a revolt of the oppressed. The price those who oppress have to pay is never to have peace of mind with themselves and their environment for they fear the reaction of those to the detriment of whom they thrive.

The shape of the space-symbol is not a fortuitous one. Its geometric and triangular shape is opposed to the flabby and circular space of the blacks. The triangle expresses the inequality that characterizes their universe. Its mobility renders it even more fearsome and efficient in its oppression for thus, it can regulate the black space which becomes a prison for the victims. It wouldn't be an overemphasis to say that the Republic and territory of South Africa in those days was a huge prison for all the coloured whose slightest movements were watched closely, checked and regulated. The two spaces are set to exclude one another but the whites have the right to control the black space in which they make frequent incursions with night patrols for which the South African police came to be famous worldwide in the era of triumphant Apartheid.

The description of characters echoes the descriptions of space and time. Like space which conveys meaning, description of characters also conveys some meaning that cannot be discarded.

2- 2. The sense of description of human beings

In the literature of anaemia as was seen with a novelist like the French J-P Sartre or even the "nouveau roman", emphasis was laid on parts of the body, each of these acquiring its autonomy. Here the entire body is described physically and morally. Thanks to this description, characters' educations, social and racial situations are evidenced. Poverty, lack of education, physical work, alcohol, drugs ... account for characters' morphologies. Adonis is described with the terms of a "premature" adult. Willieboy and Joe are presented as young men who, having hardly emerged from their teenage years, are already thrown out into the adults' world. In normal circumstances, they ought to be at school or at home with their families to complete their educations. These youths speak and dream of cinema, of films of war. The little Hazel who lives in the neighborhood and hardly knows how to make up her face leads a life of her own. She has "jutting breasts" evidencing her adolescence and also dreams of soap opera. The best illustration of that precocious old age can be seen in the description of that young lady who surprises Willieboy in the room of the murdered Doughty. Sha has grown old out of close pregnancies and her face is described as "a young old face" (p. 38) It is hard to find one's way with such an ambiguous association of words with so contradictory meanings. It is also hard to tell the ages of Joe whose face has an "ageless quality" (p. 9) but also of Adonis and Willieboy who could be labelled with terms semantically ambivalent like "adult-children" or "child-adults."

Clothing acquires a crucial importance for it reveals social standings. Descriptive details about clothes are made to remind us that most coloured characters hardly have any clothes to wear. The shoe of Adonis have lost their bright tan aspect of its first days and show cracks where there used to exist none. As for Joe, everything he wears is faded and holds together thanks to pins. "*His trousers*, the narrator describes, had gone at the cuffs and knees, the rents held together with pins and pieces of string, and so stained and spotted that the original colour could not have been guessed at." (p. 9)

The language used by the characters also reveals their lack of education. Whenever each of these opens the mouth, it is realized that he has never had the chance to set a foot in a school. There is here once again a linguistic apartheid that stems from a planned illiteracy. In most short stories of this book, when a coloured character is allowed to speak, it is done through a rough and incorrect English. Language tells people's social and racial origins. But as a consequence of this policy, we have a lot of frustrated and weak beings. That is why these youths seem to attack the society so as to make it pay for having inflicted humiliations on them and having left them behind in its progress. Unfortunately, they often attack other innocent and weak victims like them on whom they vent their ill-restrained angers, their suppressed violence that can only be poured on such people who bear no responsibility in their fate. The hero Adonis at the end decides to join the group of hooligans he had always stayed far from as a way to take his revenge on a society that only knows how to humiliate and frustrate. Unfortunately, these frustrated never organize themselves to attack the system, the real persons responsible for their misfortunes and sufferings.

As for the white characters, they are depicted with terms that reveal their inhumanity. The description of the police van echoes that of its occupants who are the representatives of the white man. In fact, the only white men who appear in this short story are the police apart from Doughty. Through these descriptions we are presented with the trial of the South African police but also the regime it defends: it is a police at the service of a single race in a multiracial country, a police that harasses and frightens more than it reassures, which is dehumanized with some hints of psychopathology for some of its agents. Like the van, symbols of the lack of life are associated with these policemen. Steel, iron, coldness, hardness are metaphors that are used to describe them. Thus, speaking of one of the policemen Adonis meets when coming from his job, the narrator says that "[t]he voice was hard and flat as the snap of a steel spring, and the one who spoke had hard, thin, chapped lips ..." (p. 11) The inhabitants of District six refuse to cooperate with them to elucidate the murder of Doughty because for the district dwellers, these policemen have no humanity in them. The narrator proceeds to explain that "... there was no desire in them to cooperate with these men whose faces had the metallic look, and whose hearts and guts were merely valves and wires which operated robots." (p. 58)

The character of Raalt allows us to have access to the psychology of the South African white racist. The aggressive and hysterical frenzy of this character is but the consequence of some deeply hidden complex. Behind his airs of a brute is concealed a weak woman. In fact, Raalt is a sort of emasculated man who, through violence, wishes to redeem a virility that he is denied at home. There, he does the household chores and must go through many other humiliations and frustrations. His wife has lost her former beauty and is no more attractive. Besides, she must be taking him through a lot for him to spend his days brooding over criminal projects to murder her. He keeps on repeating that he wishes to kill her and he probably would have if he could do it with impunity as it is the case with the coloured. But here, it is about a white woman and he feels powerless to react. Raalt is an unaware victim, the watchdog of a system which destroys, dehumanizes and prevents him from having normal relationships with the other components of the South African population. He does not meet difficulties to socialize only with the blacks. His colleague gets him on his nerves. He dreams

of wringing his own wife's neck. As we can see, he is almost unable to express humane feelings and has become a machine trained to kill. He is a frustrated being who misses love and self-respect at home. He is also a powerless victim that seeks weaker victims on whom he can pour out his aggressivity. His rage is incomprehensible outside this angst and all the racist myths which assail the minds of those of his ilk. He has to be tough and wicked with the coloured to redeem his humanity. That is the price to pay for his masculinity to be regained. Raalt is particularly a victim of that fear that impels those who are aware of exercising an illegitimate and unfair power that cannot last for ever. The coloured are a permanent threat in his subconscious. That is the root of the Apartheid system: perceiving the other race as the evil and the most dreadful threat. The blacks frighten by their number. The highest anguish of the whites in this context is to think of a revolt of all the black victims. The latter must therefore be traumatised, if possible, eliminated by mass-killings. Such a barmy enterprise is revealing of the sick minds of racists and other genocide planners.

Conclusion

From this analysis, it is understood that there is no wanton description in this work. On the contrary, it has become the most important stylistic device that has identified this work as a great realist story where every reader is called upon to share the fate of a large portion of the South African population, to suffer and dream with it of an era of brotherhood and shared happiness. These blissful tomorrows are possible only within the context of a rainbow South Africa deprived of its racist prejudices. Alex La Guma calls upon all human beings regardless of their races, countries and ideologies. The efficiency of his message and his audience stretch accordingly beyond the limits of the era of Apartheid. It will always be topical as long as on earth the question of social injustice will prevail, that poverty will be the daily companion of some populations. Alex La Guma has been a true intellectual and an artist to the full sense of the term: he heralded the new South Africa and History will have acknowledged the truth of his vision some decades later.

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