“Iron on iron”: Modernism engaging apartheid in some South African Railway Poems

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Abstract

Modernism tends to be criticised, internationally, as politically conservative. The objection is often valid, although the charge says little about the quality of artistic achievement involved. This article argues that the alliance between Modernism and political conservatism is by no means a necessary one, and that there are instances where modernist vision has been used to convey substantive political insight, effective social critique and solid resistance. To illustrate the contrast, the article juxtaposes the abstract modernism associated with Ben Nicholson and Barbara Hepworth, working in the remote Cornish fishing village of St Ives during WW2, with a neglected strain of South African railway poetry which uses modernist technique to effect a powerful critique of South Africa’s apartheid dispensation. The article sustains a distinction between universalising modernist art that requires ethical work from its audiences to achieve artistic completion, and art in which modernist vision performs the requisite ethical work within its own formal constraints. Four very different South African railway poems, by Dennis Brutus, John Hendrickse, Alan Paton, and Leonard Koza, are examined and contextualised to demonstrate ways in which a modernist vision has been used to portray the social disruptions caused by apartheid. Modernist techniques are used to turn railway experience into a metonym for massive social disruption, without betraying the social reality of the transport technology involved.

Railway poetry, South Africa, modernism, apartheid, Dennis Brutus, John Hendrickse, Alan Paton, Leonard Koza, Barbara Hepworth, Khoi, St Ives, Cornwall, Christopher Hope, John Cage, Marcel Duchamp, Charles Bernstein, Clement Greenberg.

Modernism is usually portrayed as a conservative political force, insofar as it is taken as having political import at all. One has only to think of Joyce, Pound and the early Eliot (disregarding work subsequent to “The Hollow Men”) to recognise that what is accepted as a typically modernist aesthetic, involving radical experimentation with literary perspectivism, with cutting, juxtaposition and bricolage, with temporal displacement, with formal complexity and condensation, with reduced contexts and narrative etiolation, often adds up to little more politically than an attitude of unfocused discontent, psychological tension, and pervasive cultural mourning. Consider the case of the late writer ‘John Coetzee’ presented in Summertime (2009), the third volume in J.M. Coetzee’s trilogy Scenes from a Provincial Life. The interviewer presses ‘Coetzee’’s former colleague and lover, the French lecturer Sophie Denoël, for an opinion on his politics:

So, all in all, you see Coetzee as a conservative, an anti-radical.

A cultural conservative, yes, as many of the modernists were cultural conservatives – I mean the modernist writers from Europe who were his models.

(240)

Is there a necessary connection between the artistic techniques of Modernism, cultural conservatism, and political ineffectuality? To be sure, modernist-inspired discontent may prove fertile in encouraging desires for a fairer, more equitable, more liveable political dispensation, but it
is equally prone to glorify and reify the obstacles standing in the way of any such social amelioration or, alternatively, to soar beyond them into utopian fantasy. Even disregarding the element of whimsical satire – thereby discounting some essential meaning – ‘John Coetzee’’s purported politics are an alarming throwback to the aftermath of May ’68:

What would have been Utopian enough for him?


(230)

Serious? Irresponsible? Playful? Who knows. But the passage serves to underline the question of the social and ethical impact of Modernism. Does the modernist aesthetic, its array of techniques and the epistemic outlook they imply, always or necessarily evoke conservative forces of caution, social trepidation, and inaction, masked by utopian idealism?

An answer to this question may lie in the manner and the extent to which modernist works engage with the social processes of modernity. Some of them rely extensively on the audience, reader or viewer, to draw social implications. A useful illustration is to be found in the artistic history of St Ives, the fishing village on the north coast of Cornwall in the United Kingdom. (I choose this particular example because the geographic and spiritual remoteness of Cornwall from the metropolitan centres of European intellectual life in a way mimics the South African relation to mainstream European Modernism.) Attracted by a particular quality of light, by remoteness, rugged scenery and a traditional way of life, from the 1880s onwards the region around Newlyn and St Ives was popular with artists, particularly painters. The so-called Newlyn School of painters became known for realistically observed marine and landscape subjects. Art in St Ives took a different turn. Although famous for the ‘naïve’ or ‘primitive’ work of the painter-fisherman Alfred Wallis (1855-1942), and the potter Bernard Leach (1887-1979), St Ives developed into a ‘de-centred centre’ for progressive contemporary European art thanks largely to the presence of Ben Nicholson and Barbara Hepworth, who settled there at the onset of war in 1939. Through the 1930s the direction of their work had been similar. In painting and sculpture, respectively, they were developing a vocabulary of pure, simplified forms, as of course were Henry Moore and leading European practitioners of abstract art such as Naum Gabo (who also worked in St Ives for a time), Mondrian, Brancusi and Jean Arp. The preference for the physical and cultural isolation of St Ives on the part of Nicholson and Hepworth might seem to suggest a longing for life-conditions matching their experimental artistic advance into the abstraction of pure form. Yet far from indulging a desire to escape modernity (the unforgiving War, a jaundiced expression of modernity at its most savage, made this in any case an impossibility), the work of Nicholson and Hepworth ultimately conveys a universalising, civilising, democratic vision. Their concern with abstraction and pure form has a utopian social dimension in that it tries to speak for humanity and transcend national differences. But not at the expense of attention to the local. Quite crucially, and in accord with the modernist preference for ‘truth to materials’,² their efforts to evoke a universal modernity drew deliberately on the local physicality of Cornwall, its light, its stone, and its natural forms; and the results stand in unmistakeable contrast to the debasing propagandistic art associated with European fascism, racism, and nationalism.
Nevertheless, there remains a lingering doubt about St Ives Modernism, and it is the question of its social purchase. Those beautiful forms, drawn from the physicality of a place, indeed speak to a benign vision of human universality, but do they engage the social struggles of humanity? Can human beings locate their pressing challenges – not just the horrific War, but the concrete, everyday strivings of people – in this beautiful but rarefied efflorescence of abstract form? Hepworth’s work, for instance, graces galleries and public spaces in many parts of the world, from the Johannesburg Art Gallery (*Idol*, polished bronze, 1971), to Rotterdam’s De Doelen Concert Hall (*Curved Form*, *Bryher 11*, bronze, 1961), to the flagship branch of John Lewis’s department store in London’s Oxford Street (*Winged Figure*, aluminium with steel rods, 1961–62). This is beyond doubt a kind of art that many find inspiring, even uplifting. But such work hardly speaks to concrete human predicaments without a supervening act of personal appropriation, perhaps an effort of interpretation verging on translation: What does this form, this energy, mean to my inner life? How does it make me feel about the world around me? How does it change me? This is not a criticism: such is the humane rationale and power of utopian art. A lingering Platonism of the kind we find in Kant’s ethical philosophy inheres in this universalising vision, and calls out strongly for ethical work to be done, for linkages to be made to specific, historicised circumstances, before such inspiring vision attains its social fulfilment, its artistic completion.⁸

However, something very different occurs when modernist works directly engage conditions of social modernity to express and criticise them from a political perspective, as happens, for example, in a strain of South African railway poetry which I propose to examine in this essay. This poetry uses railway experience to explore particular inflections of modernity visited on South Africa during the apartheid period. Unlike St Ives Modernism, which adumbrates telling synergies between the local and the universal but without explicit reference to supervening processes and conditions of social upheaval, the examples of South African railway poetry we shall look at use the social reality of railways, transfigured by the artistic vision and techniques of literary Modernism, to capture not merely the local and universal, but also the concrete, mediating socio-political dimensions which impact powerfully on human lives. This in no way implies that the railway poems are better art. But it does suggest that Modernism can sometimes have a distinctive edge of political activism which undercuts the widespread tendency to dismiss the entire international modernist movement as politically inert or even reactionary.

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South Africa has a rich but scarcely examined legacy of railway poetry. For South Africa at large, railways have arguably been the most socially prominent, incisive, and powerful agency articulating the country’s troubled and uneven accession to modernity (cf. Dubow, 181; Merrington, 115). Poetry which emerges from this development takes many forms, embracing imperial celebration and triumph, indigenous African response, eulogies of steam power, evocations of railway life and the experience of railway travel, railways as metaphor, and several other *données*.⁹ Comparable themes are expressed in railway poetry world-wide.⁵ However, in this country three additional thematic strands appear uniquely South African: the impact of railways on the South African War, a war in which railways made their historic debut in mass human conflict;⁶ the sustained treatment of the train as a metaphor for political revolution (cf. Wright, 2010); and the evocation of railway experience as a metonym for the apartheid system as a whole. The latter strain is the concern of this essay. Through the strategic focus and careful selection of detail characteristic of Modernism, these
poems take ordinary presentations of historical railway experience and subvert the conventions of surface realism to create disturbing visions of a whole society under horrific political and social stress. Immediate local railway *realia* are filtered through finely-rendered human and social detail so that the implicit appeal to a universal ethical sensibility registers as a political protest, a contribution to a social movement of rejection and resistance, rather than an abstract human aspiration. This is Modernism deployed for very definite ethical and political ends.

The issues can usefully be explored in particular poems. For instance ‘Train Journey’, by Dennis Brutus, employs a typically modernist aesthetic vocabulary. The focalising poetic image, dear to the more verbally prolix nineteenth century Romantic poets, has here been pared to a minimum, and the complexity of the historical context, its economic background, and the socio-political forces informing the social predicament are compacted into a pathetic line-side cameo, one which is by implication replicated country-wide as the authentic icon of apartheid South Africa. (The implied potential for widespread ‘mechanical’ replication is of course deeply characteristic of Modernism.) The complex forces of industrial modernisation have been compressed and reduced to the visual image of empty railway tracks. There is not an iota of sentimentality, and yet the art-image that comes to mind might be a figure from Picasso’s ‘blue period’:

**Train Journey**

Along the miles of steel  
that span my land  
threadbare children stand  
knees ostrich-bulbous on their reedy legs,  
their empty hungry hands  
lifted as in prayer.

The intensity and concision of this simple image – hungry children waiting at the line-side to beg from passing passenger trains – captures much of what Brutus wants to say about the material conditions of South African life under apartheid. The palpable absence of any train in the poem is significant. Miles of steel track exist to ‘transport’ goods and labour, to carry them across the land, uniting resources, goods and markets; but incidentally passing by, or by-passing, the rural poor, those ignored and excluded from the capitalist economy. The central image of the poem inscribes in the starkest fashion the destructive impact of modernisation on rural South Africa – in historical terms, South Africa as it evolved after the crucial Land Act of 1913 which dispossessed the rural populace, impairing irreparably the peasant way of life and culminating in the apartheid dispensation. There is a horrifying rupture, a permanent visual disjuncture, between the hungry, pleading hands, the ostrich-thin legs with their bulbous knee-joints (which is all we see of the children), and the unfeeling steel rails they haunt so persistently in the hope that better-off travellers may respond to their need when a train finally comes – ‘trickle-down’ economics at its symbolic nadir. The modern power of capitalist accumulation represented by the metonymic railway line is patently ill-adapted to meet genuine and obvious human need. The strength and fixity of the track (often called, in railway parlance, the ‘permanent way’) contrasts with the organic vulnerability of the children. The iconography of Christian prayer – intercession, pleading, begging – replicates hauntingly, horrifically, the importunate plea of the physically hungry (one thinks of the ambivalent signifiers in Stevie Smith’s poem ‘Not Waving, but Drowning’ (167), or Wittgenstein’s ‘duck-rabbit’ puzzle (194-96)). The poem presents a telling illustration of the problem of catastrophically uneven
modernisation: the ‘miles of steel/ that span my land’ connect and accumulate wealth for the wealthy, and at the same time sunder, neglect and ignore the poor, dividing the human community.

A second striking piece, John Hendrickse’s poem ‘Divided Train’, from his 1990 volume entitled simply Khoi, takes the issue of division and alienation further, using modernist techniques to suggest a vast sweep of South African history and pre-history that underlies the apartheid moment:

Divided Train

Standing on a platform
inviting new invaders
to death with me

waiting to get on
and glide forward into
a new reality

waiting for a train
under surveillance
of new events

Standing on the station
Square slabs of concrete
Division between line
And platform
Signs of civilization
Signs slam against the eyes
WHITES ONLY – SLEGS VIR BLANKES

Signs of division

Forced to stand where goods
are loaded onto the train
at the end of the station
near the flesh of the cadavers
Springboks necks twisted awkwardly
eyes wide with surprise

A sacred symbol of our people
taken by the rugger bugger
murdered by the hunt

Soft gentle eyes stare into nothingness
Shot in the leap of life

God has the gun aimed at me
to kill the devil inside of you

Signs of civilization

Coal dust – Asbestos dust – Gold dust
Their profits
All part of our death

ALL SIGNS OF CIVILISATION

Superficially a poem protesting at what used to be called ‘petty apartheid’ on the railways – the reservation of carriages towards the rear of the train for whites, the division of platforms into different areas by race, the barbarous signage proclaiming ‘WHITES ONLY – SLEGS VIR BLANKES’, and so forth – Hendrickse’s writing here pursues the issue of socially-motivated division much deeper until it broaches not only the historical marginalisation and decimation of his people, the Khoi, but a more fundamental alienation of humanity from the natural order, and therefore from its aboriginal self, through the impact of modernity, of everything that Hendrickse groups scathingly under the category ‘CIVILISATION’. Significantly, there is no ‘I’ in the poem. The speaker, the ‘me’, is a presence, not an actor – testimony to the still persisting cultural and political marginalisation of the Khoi in modern South Africa. Like Milton in the sonnet on his blindness – and the comparison is strange but oddly appropriate – he just ‘stands’ and ‘waits’. In one sense, there is pathos in the notion of the speaker ‘inviting new invaders/ to death with me’, because that is precisely what the Khoi are not doing and never have done. They have never had occasion freely to invite anyone into the territory now called South Africa. Modernity and destruction have been visited on them by successive waves of invaders, African, Portuguese, Dutch, British, German; European hunters, missionaries, traders, farmers and tourists, none of whom were invited. Guests might conceivably be invited, but not ‘invaders’. Yet, as a descendant who is genetically part of South Africa’s original human population, comprising the Khoi and San people, Hendrickse envisions the destructive apartheid fiasco unfolding as if under the aegis of his people, disempowered hosts at a party where intruding guests have taken over and are behaving abominably, destructively.

Apartheid regulations force the speaker to occupy the far end of the platform where goods are loaded on ‘mixed’ trains, those carrying both passengers and goods. A mistaken and insulting scale of human values is implied. The speaker is positioned next to the cadavers of dead springbok, hunting trophies about to be transported, probably in the guard’s van at the end of the train. These beautiful creatures have been killed not for the table, but for the pleasure of the hunter. Worse still, the springbok, sacred symbol of the Khoi, has been appropriated as a national emblem for rugby, a sport then strongly associated with young white Afrikaners and by implication with Afrikaner Nationalism. With cruel irony the dead springbok hint at the careless decimation of the Khoi people by the forbears of these self-same young ‘rugger buggers’. The sheer gratuitousness of the ‘game’ of slaughtering wildlife for ‘sport’ – and let us not forget that the Khoi and San were not infrequently killed as animals by early white hunters, simply for ‘sport’ – matches the place of the Khoi in South Africa’s national life. Even today, they are too often treated as anthropological tokens rather than living remnants of a once vibrant community, and still less as a political force – except when their votes are being sought! The glassy eyes of the dead springbok on the platform look on nothing; there is no foreseeable future for the Khoi which does not involve boarding the modernising train with everyone else. Facing extinction as a people, their future is blank unless they resolutely join the armed struggle to defeat apartheid. This is the second sense in which the poet is inviting ‘new invaders/to death with me’, and why the train is so fatally divided. Some of those boarding the train must kill their fellow passengers, because they have no choice:

God has the gun aimed at me
to kill the devil inside of you

This resistance is more fundamental than simply the elimination of apartheid. Their own imminent extinction impels the Khoi effort to resist/transform/’kill’ the destructive (modernising) impulses
driving South African development: the apartheid malaise, yes, but also, and more radically, the entire superstructure of culture, invention, and innovation which has taken humans beyond the values and life-world of pre-historic pastoralism. Hendrickse writes in defence of that traditional life-world. For the Khoi, the act of boarding the train means submission to an unforeseeable collective future, the final death of an old reality, separation from an immemorial way of life. The equating of apartheid insanities with modernity and civilisation (‘ALL SIGNS OF CIVILISATION’) underlines the unpalatable fact – unpalatable at least to those who value Western social achievement at its best – that apartheid ideology and its regulatory framework was itself an elaborate instance of Western rationalism at work in the service of perverted values. In comparison with what the Khoi have lost, these values are so much dust; ‘Coal dust – Asbestos dust – Gold dust’. Or so the poem asserts.

‘Divided Train’ evidences a strongly modernist emphasis on the railway as metonym. A realistic railway scene, incorporating actual apartheid signage, is recast as a semiotic system: ‘ALL SIGNS OF CIVILISATION’ – my emphasis. A synchronous poetic performance, rooted in a particular historical moment on a particular railway platform, registers the modernising thrust of apartheid, with its uncivilised and destabilising biases in place, to support a diachronic modernist vision which stretches back to the territory’s prehistory. Its utopian implications – the utter rejection of civilisation, a rejection even more radical (and ineffectual) than that mooted by Coetzee’s character in Summertime – are mitigated by the poem’s strong call to armed struggle to liberate those thrown ineluctably together in today’s South African body politic.

In a very different poem, Alan Paton’s ‘Anxiety Song of an Englishman’, the modernist leap from surface realism to generalised socio-political ethos is at its most succinct and totalising. The speaker’s momentary feeling of being dominated and overawed by giant steam locomotives on a railway platform is transformed very precisely into the poem’s political critique of apartheid:

Anxiety Song of an Englishman

Down here where we talked of the Empire
From morning till night, and heard not a word
Of Afrikaans spoken, now come the great engines
And the Afrikaners stand on the footplates
And look confidently down through the hissing steam
As though they themselves had manufactured them
Yes they look down confidently at me
From a great height it seems, and turn a lever
And move off majestically and contemptuously
To the next station, to dwarf some other person.

This slightly bitter, self-mocking little poem uses the impressive presence, power, and scale of the steam locomotive, as well as its physical, other-than-human, character, to evoke sectional emotions associated with the political eclipse of English-speaking South Africa following the Afrikaner Nationalist victory in 1948. Adopting a semi-satirical perspective, in which the former province of Natal is viewed sardonically as ‘the last outpost’ of the British Empire, the poem captures the unfamiliar political powerlessness and sense of disconnection, the reduction to spectator-status, felt by politically concerned English-speaking South Africans after the 1948 election. The initial shock of D.F. Malan’s surprise victory over Smuts’s governing United Party (Malan’s HNP coalition won a majority of seats but only a minority of the vote) has apparently worn off, but there remains a rueful
awareness that Natalians had been caught napping, trapped in the aftermath of a mythical British hegemony where they still talked of the British Empire ‘From morning till night’.

Routine poetic Modernism is being used both to evoke and anathematise a new phase of South African modernisation. The realistic social ‘vehicle’ (the impression created by the locomotive) and the modernist political ‘tenor’ carried by this impression are so congruent as to be inseparable. The Afrikaner Nationalists were indeed using the railway system, whose development had earlier played so significant a part in supporting the case for the creation of the Union of South Africa in 1910 (cf. Thompson, 94) in order to industrialise the country largely for the benefit of its white population, and in particular to provide work and a substantial boost to the economic status of so-called ‘poor whites’, many of whom voted for the Nationalist Party. The jobs and the skills training provided by the railways were a major source of social betterment for the white Afrikaans underclasses, just as today they proffer opportunities to supporters of the ANC. The refrain from Christopher Hope’s very accomplished (and un-modernist) railway ballad, ‘Kobus Le Grange Marais’, about a disillusioned Afrikaner railwayman who has lost his leg in a shunting accident and now props up the station bar, captures this social moment with brutal specificity:

He sways on his stool in the Station Bar and calls for a short white wine
And knocks it back and sheds a tear and damns the party line,
And talks to himself and blocks his ears when the tired old locos shunt:
“Way back in’48, we said, die koelie uit die land
And kaffer op sy plek, we said, the poor white wants his share:
They put me in my place, all right,” said Kobus Le Grange Marais.

Paton’s poem also says something definite about the character of the modernisation fostered by the Nationalist dispensation. The ‘Afrikaners stand on the footplates/And look confidently down through
the hissing steam/As though they themselves had manufactured them’. This rather snide observation hints first of all at the rural and agricultural roots of Afrikanerdom. The modern urban world of mining, heavy industry and finance had been the traditional preserve of white English-speakers. Afrikaners were moving into an urban-industrial milieu hitherto closed to them and becoming wealthy and successful. But it was not a world that they had created. English-speaking industry and business regarded them as interlopers. More concretely, Paton makes the point that the frail pretensions of Afrikaner Nationalist hegemony were afloat in a globalising world, and to pretend otherwise was deluded and foolish. South Africa assembled and maintained steam locomotives; it never manufactured them. Afrikaans engine drivers were taking charge of foreign locomotives, or at least machinery of non-South Africa manufacture, perhaps hinting that Europe and North America (that broader global ‘Empire’) continue to rule through superior technologies. 7

It is tempting to reduce this poem to a petty squabble within a then-dominant white racist class fraction, and obviously it carries undertones of an Afrikaans-English antipathy that sounds and resounds through the mists of South Africa’s early colonial history. But if the overall stance is a rejection of Afrikaner Nationalism’s urge to dominate others, to treat the shaping of a complex polity as though it were a piece of grand totalitarian social engineering over which they had complete charge – railway construction writ large – then the more enduring message must concern the dangerous futility of all such political approaches. The locomotives and their drivers move on to dominate someone else, true, but locomotives cannot dominate all the people all the time, a lesson radical social constructionists neglect at their (and our) peril.
A last example before summing up: With its sturdy reliance on descriptive realism, Leonard Koza’s ‘Nyanga Train’ seems at first glance more a straightforward commentary on the impact of the migratory labour system in the Western Cape than an exercise in literary Modernism. Yet the pedestrian nature of the poem illustrates rather aptly the genesis of, in this case, a rather staid modernist poetic through faithfully modelling selected conditions of social modernity under apartheid. The poem creates a painterly ‘image’ in its first verse paragraph, in some ways a South African equivalent of Pound’s ‘In a Station of the Metro’, but with an added auditory dimension:

Nyanga Train

Iron on iron. Third class brown coaches arrive,
screaming between dusty concrete platforms.
A massive cloud
of impatient workers
with tongues endlessly clicking various
dialects of Xhosas, Tswanas and Basutos
bulldozed together in compact coaches.

The grey-haired guard shakes his head
In despair as the wooden doors bang one after the other
Long after the whistle blew.

Second class citizens who can hardly
afford third class fare under the
fourth class conditions they find themselves.

Like pilchards they’re pressed breathlessly together
during the steaming summer,
travelling daily like cattle
to a slaughter-house to shed their dear lives
in sweat so that there could be mielies
on the table of the drought-stricken Bantustans.

The grey-haired guard, remembering more orderly times, shakes his head ‘in despair’ at the dilatoriness of the commuters, who continue to board ‘Long after the whistle blew’: the rhythms of rural life unconsciously resist the imperatives of the timetable. The babble of Xhosa, Tswana and Sotho dialects is forced into artificial contiguity (‘bulldozed together’), while bodies are similarly crammed into the confined space of the carriages, just as apartheid had ‘bulldozed’ both bodies and voices into the ad hoc communities of the Cape Flats, Nyanga township for one, so very different from the spacious geography of their territories of origin, mainly Lesotho and the ‘Bantustans’ of the Transkei, Ciskei, and Bophuthatswana.

The play on the word ‘class’ in the third verse paragraph – black South Africans are second class citizens politically because they are denied the vote, third class passengers because the first and second classes on trains are reserved for whites, and they live under fourth class economic conditions equivalent to the hard benches provided in fourth class carriages, because that is all apartheid deems necessary – elevates the poem’s import beyond its surface realism to castigate the entire apartheid political system, yet it gestures to this larger meaning without abandoning the literal reference. A modernist aesthetic registers through estranging, dehumanising comparisons
with fish (canned pilchards) and animals (cattle trains bound for the abattoir), fleeting images which transmute the typically cramped conditions on overcrowded apartheid commuter trains into the more abstract realm of socio-political metaphor. The poem ends with a telling thrust at the misconceived economics of grand apartheid.

The poem’s provenance can be established fairly accurately. It takes place before the old chocolate brown SAR livery on passenger stock was replaced by Gulf Red and Quaker Grey. The slamming of the doors indicates that the poem pre-dates the introduction of automatic sliding doors on electric suburban trains. It is set therefore in the late 1950s or early 60s, most probably during the period when apartheid regulations in the Western Cape began to bite more rigorously. The railway authorities in and around Cape Town were noticeably tardy in enforcing ‘petty apartheid’ on commuter routes, perhaps because there was less appetite for such regulation than elsewhere, more scepticism, a dispensation fostered by a history of people of different races rubbing along together on the trains without much surface discord. But eventually bureaucratic enforcement became ineluctable, impelled by an unshakeable white Afrikaner Nationalist majority in Parliament.9 The establishment of Nyanga (‘moon’) township dates to the late ‘40s and early ‘50s, when overcrowding in Langa (‘sun’) township became impossible.10 Forced removals dumped whole populations on the desolate wastes of the Cape Flats, notoriously the inhabitants of District Six, but also many other so-called ‘non-white’ communities from around the Cape Peninsula. These displaced and traumatised people were increasingly thrown together with migrant labourers flooding in from the Bantustans – the impoverished faux states established to give some semblance of validity to the notion of apartheid, or ‘separate development’, as it was euphemistically termed by its supporters. The artificial economic growth attempted in the Bantustans under the Border Industries policy yielded little employment, and workers were forced to sell their labour in the centres of white urban-industrial power, such as Cape Town. This is the origin of the ‘massive cloud’ of workers which boards the Nyanga train.

Beyond insistent but highly selective surface realism, we see the experience of train travel once more serving as a metonym for the experience of South African modernity under the impress of apartheid. The daily commute from Nyanga to employment of some sort in the ‘white’ economy of Cape Town, becomes a metaphor for that loss of personal autonomy, sacrifice of dominion, and degrading submission to an economic necessity controlled by others, which shaped the experience of so many under apartheid. Destruction and fragmentation of tradition is at the heart of modernist lamentation, and poetic responsiveness to the modernist turn, supporting these higher levels of interpretive abstraction, yields access to a symbolic order whereby an overtly realistic account of commuter journeys offers a reading of the distorted patterns of the apartheid economy.

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A striking feature of the poems we have examined is their reluctance to betray or depart from the material reality in which they are based. Railways remain fully railways: ‘iron on iron’ as Kozza expresses it. The critique of apartheid is present in the material, never outside, never imposed. In the course of this essay I have felt impelled to enlist spatial analogy to elucidate that internal enhancement of meaning which edges these poems towards generalised social critique, thereby opening them to ethical response (I see I have invoked notions of ‘elevation’, of ‘transcendence’, of a separate ‘vehicle’ and ‘tenor’, of a ‘leap’, and so on, all the while striving to convey the falseness and
inadequacy of these descriptive gestures); but not even the interior metaphoricity of language can account for the poetic procedures displayed here without invoking the informing aesthetic of modernist perspectivism, selection and concentration.

An abiding question concerns the role of aesthetic form in articulating the modernist vision. So often during the apartheid scourge an unthinking impulse was to decry any pretence of ‘art’, or to urge in its place a radical iconoclasm, suggesting that attention to literary form and craftsmanship were somehow redundant, that only forceful expression in the bluntest terms could be adequate as a response to the socio-political chaos which was apartheid in action.11 The four poems we have looked at – and several others might have served as well – suggest that modernist technique could in fact be crucial in bringing mundane reality (‘railway experience’) into political focus and thence into an arena of ethical judgment. In each of the examples this was achieved through a selection of detail and perspective that could illuminate effectively the mediating social implications, the human effects, of apartheid modernity. Modernism cannot neglect these implications without yielding an aesthetic construct which is politically inert. Hence my initial forensic example concerning the social impact of St Ives Modernism: any social implications attributable to such art must inhere in ethical ‘work’ accomplished by an audience in responding to its formal abstraction; perhaps, too, in the once trenchant contemporary contrast with the ethical implications of those dire forms of social realism employed by National Socialism and Fascism in the 1940s.

Modernism’s implicit claim is that valid social critique subsists within the work of art itself, simply because it faithfully conforms or submits to the fractured, disjointed features of abstract modernist reality. Such critique may benefit from critical explication in supplementary discourse (this is what I have attempted in the case of these four poems), but this commentary is merely a form of educative scaffolding. The artistic substance is there in the material. I am thinking here of Clement Greenberg’s aperçu regarding the founding impulse of Modernism in painting:

The essential norms or conventions of painting are at the same time limiting conditions with which a picture must comply in order to be experienced as a picture. Modernism has found that these limits can be pushed back indefinitely before a picture stops being a picture and turns into an arbitrary object; but it has also found that the further back these limits are pushed the more explicitly they have to be observed and indicated.

(1993: 89-90)

The notion of artistic norms and conventions being forced back indefinitely towards the mundane, the everyday, the ‘found’, encounters some of its limits in, for example, the infamous ‘Ready Mades’ of Marcel Duchamp – his ‘Fountain’ urinal is a celebrated example12 – or the aesthetic of John Cage, who urged “we must bring about a music which is like furniture, a music which will be part of the noises of the environment” (1961:76). Explicating his own practice in “Optimism and Critical Excess (Process)” (1990), the New York poet Charles Bernstein confirms a point made earlier in more scholarly terms by Hugh Kenner (See The Pound Era, 1971), namely that Modernism is typically a product of twentieth century urban-industrial existence. Bernstein writes:

Fast cutting, fragmentation, polyphony, neologism may all be features of late-twentieth century life - - - as much as “aesthetic inventions”. My linguistic environment might include, within the space of an hour, bites of Donahue on incest, street fights in several languages, a Beethoven quartet with commentary, calls to the telephone company followed by intimate discussions of personal affairs followed by a computer-voiced marketing survey – with a
Weill song interpreted by John Zorn in the background, segueing into close readings of Spinoza followed by a recitation of the brothers Grimm.  

(852)

Such articulations remain benchmarks of modernist conceptualisation. But the tail end of Greenberg’s comment is the telling part: the more closely art approaches quotidian ‘reality’, the more it has to signal its artfulness through its form as art; sometimes relying to an extent on clarifying discourse – commentary, phenomenological bracketing, and other forms of contextualisation to orientate the audience. In the limit situation dear to Duchamp, all of the artfulness lies, not in the object, but in the tutored gaze, the attuned ear, the awakened sensibility and the means and mechanisms which engender them.13 Faced with the hermeneutic challenge of how to relate to such works, audiences or ‘consumers’ may not recognise or respect the presence of the ‘essential norms or conventions’ of art invoked by Greenberg, because they have been pushed so far back into reality that they evaporate and lose efficacy. As Freud supposedly urged in a comparable situation of potential hermeneutic collapse, ‘Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar’.14 Some readers of poetry may instinctively feel that a train is just a train, not really a fit subject for poetry. South African railway poets – and there are few major South African poets who have not attempted the subject – urge otherwise. Rather as Manet’s and Monet’s experimental studies of steam in painting (think of Manet’s “Le Chemin de Fer” (1874), or Monet’s series of eleven paintings of the Gare Saint Lazare, initiated in 1877) presaged major developments in Impressionist and Post-Impressionist painting, so a few South African poets developed their own forms of literary Modernism as a vital way to engage with apartheid modernity. The four poems examined in this essay ask us momentarily to view railways through the lens of Modernism, so that some human meanings of modernity manifest themselves trenchantly in a particular poetic experience.

NOTES

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1 I shall not, in this essay, be supplying a normative definition of Modernism, believing that no such definition can ultimately be more than misleading. I tend to concur with Charles Bernstein’s characterisation of the problem: ‘‘‘the acceptance (reification) of formalist and New Critical ‘master’ maps of modernism – by modernism’s supporters and detractors alike – has, in some ways tragically, streamlined (in other words, institutionalized) an otherwise messy, polydictory arena of activity and precipitated an often farcical series of spin-off maps under the rubric of postmodernism’ (486).


3 There was plenty of ethical energy available in the complex artistic forces issuing from the combined legacy of English aestheticism and the Arts and Crafts Movement to make this social impact seem valid, if not inevitable (see Tillyard, 1988, 52-56).

4 See the Introduction to Wright (2008), pp. xiii-xxix.

5 See, for example, anthologies by Ashley (2007), Carr (1978), and Hopkins (1966).


7 Paton may have been under the erroneous impression that SAR steam motive power was wholly dominated by Britain. This was not so. It is true that there had been a long association with Glasgow’s North British Loco.
Co. in the first half of the century, including contracts with their pre-merger Glaswegian affiliates, Dübs and Co., and Neilson, Reid, while production of articulated Garratt locomotives was for years dominated by the Manchester firm of Beyer-Peacock. But overall the purchasing pattern was reasonably eclectic and included orders from the American Loco. Co. in Schenectady, from the Montreal Loco. Works in Canada, from Berliner Maschinenbau, and from Krupp in Essen, Germany, and several others.

8

IN A STATION OF THE METRO

The apparition of these faces in the crowd;
Petals on a wet, black bough.

Ezra Pound

9 Gordon Pirie writes concerning the implementation of ‘petty apartheid’ regulations on the railways, post-1948: ‘After several decades of statutory racial segregation, there was not very much left for the authorities to do except perhaps to police racial prohibition more effectively, and to introduce segregation to suburban trains in the Cape Town metropolitan area, where passengers of any skin colour could still sit wherever they liked. Being on its doorstep, this anomaly was an acute embarrassment to the new government’ (671).

10 Although the name means ‘sun’ in Xhosa, the township was in fact named after Chief Langalibalele, the Hlubi leader who rebelled against the Natal government and was imprisoned on Robben Island in 1873. The fact that the adjacent township was called Nyanga (‘moon’), suggests the significance later became blurred.

11 A characteristic poem in this vein, and which relies on the railway trope as an organising principle, is Abduraghiem Johnstone’s ‘Pula Pulani’ (‘pay attention’), a typically blunt and powerful statement of violent revolutionary intent (see Wright, 2010: 13). In literary theory, a locus classicus for revolutionary posturing was the anthologist Mothobi Matshoba’s zestful 1980 pronouncement supporting an iconoclastic conflation of prose, poetry and drama in a generic fusion he dubbed proemdra: ‘We will have to donder conventional literature: old fashioned critic and reader alike. We are going to pee, spit and shit on literary convention before we are through; we are going to kick and pull and push and drag literature into the form we prefer’ (5). The call was for revolutionary artistic freedom from conventional (Western) genres and critical attitudes, underwriting a need to remake the entire institution of writing from Africanist perspectives, using generic fusion and original invention as required (cf. Zander). Mothobi’s plea lacked critical traction and accrued little practical support in the long term, probably because the artistic freedom he claimed is theoretically always available, even in a police state; actual political, economic, and cultural freedoms are not.


13 This, incidentally, may be why Stanley Cavell, for one, asserts that a potential for fraudulence is an inherent aspect of the modernist project (See Must We Mean What We Say?, p. 189).

14 Freudian folk-lore: the bon mot is attributed to Freud, but to the best of my knowledge there is no evidence he either uttered or wrote it.

WORKS CITED


