'THE ARTIST WOKE'
Perceval Gibbon: From Reporter to Novelist

by Graham Douglas James Stewart

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Perceval Gibbon in 1902

Painting enraptured on the studied stroke,

Like a cast cloak

Fear and affliction from his shoulders fell.

There died the savage, here the artist woke,

Answering the spell.

from 'Bushman Paintings' by Perceval Gibbon. African Items, 1903.

ABSTRACT

My contention is that the development in Gibbon's narrative technique shows evidence of a liberalising ideological change, which enabled the author to transcend the racist attitudes apparent in his early works and attain a more tolerant point of view in Margaret Harding, his last novel. I draw a distinction between Gibbon's authorial 'point of view' and 'narrative viewpoint' to differentiate between his own occasionally-expressed racism, and his ironic portrayal of racist characters. Gibbon ultimately overcomes his ambivalence by refining his style; a process that not only mirrors the resolution of his personal response to the question of race but also marks his progress from news reporter to accomplished artist.

In my Introduction I argue that Gibbon, whose preoccupation was with social issues rather than the individual moral development of his characters, has tended to be ignored by critics who favoured the psychological (or realist) novel.

In Chapter 1, the short stories of The Vrouw Grobelaar's Leading Cases are shown to reveal two key elements of Gibbon's writing: a readiness for person-

ifying typically South African attitudes, and a concern with relationships between people of different races. Gibbon's narrator does not, however, distance himself sufficiently from Vrouw Grobelaar's bigoted views.

Souls in Bondage addresses a theme that Gibbon recognises as the matrix out of which South Africa's future society must develop: the relationship between white colonials and the local black population. The central character, Thwaites, reflects in his shifting sympathies Gibbon's own growing apprehension of racism, and is evidence of Gibbon's firmer control over the narrative and moral centre of his material.

While Salvator ignores the racial predicament in South African society, it reveals some development of Gibbon's command of narrative viewpoint. The theatrical 'placement' of juxtaposed characters anticipates the structure of Margaret Harding.

In Margaret Harding Gibbon's criticism of racist society shows a maturity in which the uncertain identifications of Vrouw Grobelaar and Souls in Bondage have been resolved. The richer, more poetic depth of his writing style may also be attributable to a collaboration with Joseph Conrad.

Gibbon's work deserves more than a marginal place in South African literature. His Vrouw Grobelaar short stories and his novels offer a unique insight into society at the turn of the century, and reflect the author's own experience of shedding the Social Darwinist ideology of race: from 'savage' to 'artist'.

DECLARATION

This study represents original work by the author and has not been submitted in any form to another University. Where use is made of the work of others it has been duly acknowledged in the text.

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(Frontispiece: Perceval Gibbon in 1902 from Jessie Conrad's Joseph Conrad and his Circle. (1935) Port Washington: Kennikat Press, 1983.)

INTRODUCTION

Gibbon's preferred medium was the short story. As a close friend of Joseph Conrad, Gibbon is often referred to by Conrad's biographers as 'Perceval Gibbon, the short story writer', and until the re-publication of his novel Margaret Harding in 1983 it was only in anthologies of short stories that his prose remained in print (Marquard [ed] A Century of South African Short Stories and Adey [ed] Under the Southern Cross). Poems from his collection African Items (1903) appeared in F.C. Slater's anthology The Centenary Book of South African Verse (1925); Butler's A Book of South African Verse (1959) and Chapman's A Century of South African Poetry (1981). In addition to African Items, his literary output between 1903 and 1926 consisted of five collections of short stories and three novels - Souls in Bondage (1904), Salvator (1908), and Margaret Harding (1911). His profession as journalist and war correspondent probably accounts for his attraction to the short story form: it provided a suitable vehicle for his distinctive combination of acute social observation and disciplined compositional style. I would argue that the journalistic influence is also a key to his overall achievement as a writer, as he

draws his characters from a wide range of society, apparently privileging incident and 'human interest' over ideology.

My contention is that Perceval Gibbon's fiction has been denied its due by South African literary critics because his novels, in particular, have not met conventional liberal-humanist expectations. Central to Gibbon's literary aims is a fascination with and an exploration of inter-racial encounters and their social implications, a theme which is most evident in his two South African novels, and to a lesser extent in his short stories. While race is his major preoccupation in the South African writing, the relationship between representatives of apparently irreconcilable social groups continues to be a central feature of his later short stories set in Russia. His journalistic background leads to an artistic purpose centred in a character's relationship to society, rather than a preoccupation with an individual's interior development. His novels do not reveal the meticulous interiority of character to be found in the 'great tradition' of nineteenth and twentieth century realist novelists, a sine qua non for some critics. It may be Gibbon's tendency to favour social reality above the individual, and to emphasise the debate between various attitudes manifested in his characters, that has led until now to the comparative neglect of his work. Contemporary reviewers such as Francis Carey Slater found Gibbon ' ... a finished literary craftsman' and Margaret Harding was described by B.K.L. in The State of March, 1912 as being worthy of 'a very high place among works of fiction which have this country for their setting'. However, the prevalence of the critical approach which, until the 1970s, elevated the psychological realist novel above all others has tended to ignore writers such as

Gibbon who have focused on social reality. J.P.L. Snyman, for example, typifies this attitude in an article on Gibbon's achievement as a writer:

> Perceval Gibbon showed certain gifts in his grasp of the South African people and their problems, but as a novelist he did not concentrate sufficiently on the study of character, with the result that his people are mostly types who are placed in the book to state a certain point of view. His merit must, therefore, be sought in his themes and theories, rather than in his ability as a writer of novels. (93)

Even P.D. Williams, in his Introduction to the 1983 edition of Margaret Harding, objects to Gibbon's characterisation of Kamis as a 'theoretical construct, not a fictional personage' (xiv) and Williams too subscribes to the conventional critical opinion which rejects the validity of a character in whom the emphasis is on wider social issues rather than individual moral growth. Kamis, although an unusual character, has a very powerful fictional presence and his predicament makes him what Lukacs describes as an historical social type, a living embodiment of significant social events. It is the confrontation between the awakening liberalism of Margaret and the (ironically) rigid racial segregationist attitude of Kamis that Gibbon places at centre-stage. The creation of interior lives for his characters is subordinated to this intention, which I would argue does not diminish Gibbon's success.

In Gibbon's novels and short stories, it is the social and racial dynamic of South Africa that comes under the microscope, not only individual moral growth. In this regard, L.D.M. Stopforth's comparison between the short story techniques of Gibbon and Pauline Smith reveals Gibbon's different, but equally valid, intentions

as a writer. Smith's stories are examinations in extreme close-up of individual characters. In spite of the vividly-realised immediate countryside and community, these are first and foremost stories of personality, in which individual souls reach out to be stung or chastened into spiritual awakening. Conversely, Gibbon's Vrouw Grobelaar, the narrator-purveyor of the stories in The Vrouw Grobelaar's Leading Cases, deals in action, sensation and moral-pointing. The prejudices, superstitions and morality of Gibbon's characters are less deeply considered in an individual sense than Smith's, but his stories cover a far wider spectrum of society. While Smith filters out black and 'coloured' people from her South African microcosm, Gibbon's wry depiction of Vrouw Grobelaar clearly reveals her racism:

> 'Kafirs,' she said, 'are not men, whatever the German missionaries say.' (41)

Gibbon juxtaposes black and white, Boer and Briton, rural and cosmopolitan in the short stories. His novels achieve, in a more sustained and successful way, a fictional account of a developing society heading not only for the 1910 Act of Union that would unite white colonial South Africa, but the 1913 Native Land Act that would effectively deny black people any possibility of sharing in the benefits of the economic and political life of the country. Gibbon's interest in the conspicuous racial divisions, and his ability to explore the implications of these rifts through the interaction of his characters is an achievement that ranks at least with Pauline Smith's, and, in terms of the later development of the South African novel, has, I would argue, proved to be more influential. The narrow social canvas of white writers like Pauline Smith, who have emphasised the interior development of their characters while screening out the wider social context of their time, has led to their

being marginalised in a society which increasingly expects that literature should provide historical perspectives.

It is also my view that Gibbon's writing represents a significant advance in South African fiction not only because it confronts in a serious way the fundamental issue of race relations in a colonial society, but also because it represents a highly appropriate utilisation of fiction as a medium for expressing social ideas. Margaret Harding operates just as powerfully as a social commentary as does Schreiner's Trooper Peter Halket of Mashonaland and Blackburn's Leaven but without being as overtly polemical as these works.

Firstly, Gibbon's work presents a debate on the future of South Africa which focuses on the interaction between different race groups; in this he is one of the first writers in South Africa to challenge the ideology of Social Darwinism. His rejection of Social Darwinist beliefs appears both in the opinions expressed by the characters in Margaret Harding and in the substance of the plot. Gibbon places the narrow Social-Darwinist view in the mouth of the reactionary Mr Samson:

> 'The colour line will never go,' replied Mr. Samson solemnly. 'You might as well talk of breakin' down the line between men and beasts.' (Margaret Harding, 187)

J.M. Coetzee in an article on the theme of racial 'flaw' in Sarah Gertrude Millin's novels explains that Social Darwinism

> ... in essence teaches that groups fail to flourish because there is something 'in' them that is teleologically unsound. [...] With hindsight

> it is easy to see to what ideological needs Social Darwinism answered in the advanced countries of the West. At home it explained how the rich got rich; abroad it explained why certain peoples were destined to be colonized. (144)

Initially, Gibbon's writing reveals a partial acceptance of racial determinism but develops towards a more radical answer to the problem of social inequality, symbolised most strikingly by miscegenation. Novels previously neatly pigeon-holed by survey-critics as dealing with 'the colour question' and subsequently ignored are now, in the light of new, sociologically-influenced critical examination, being seen as a significant part of the literary history of South Africa. Alan Paton, in his article 'The South African Novel in English', comments that 'where life and race are inextricably entwined ... if one is writing about life, one is also writing about race,' and also that

> Most of those [South African] novels in English that are still remembered, were written by people who had a strong social purpose and who had a strong view that the novel has a social function. (145)

From the perspective of the 1980s, Gibbon's writing reveals that his developing social consciousness begins with a barely-questioned acceptance of colonial race prejudice, but ends with a fictional debate in which he struggles to shed the racism and bigotry of his earlier writing. Certainly Gibbon is one of the first to use sex across the colour line to epitomise South African race relations (either as an ideal vision or as a catastrophe), and in <u>Margaret Harding</u>, his last South African novel, he seems to advocate miscegenation as an ideal.

Gibbon's South African literary output stops with the publication of Margaret Harding. After his return to Britain and shortly thereafter as a correspondent on the European battlefronts during World War 1, his silence on South African issues seems more the result of a keen literary intelligence being deflected by events than a retreat from the consequences of an unpopular ideological position. The important influence that South Africa had on Gibbon's creativity, however, is substantiated by the relatively lacklustre writing that characterises his later output. It is true that Gibbon was a journeyman writer - for instance, he was commissioned to write an official documentary of the Royal Navy which he completed in 1919 - but the depth of his perception and the profound concern with South African problems, evident in Margaret Harding in particular, reveal the worth of an author with whom Joseph Conrad seriously considered collaborating in the writing of a play about his African experiences. From the stories of The Vrouw Grobelaar's Leading Cases in 1905 through to Margaret Harding in 1911 one can trace clearly the development of anti-racist ideology coupled with an increasingly confident mediation by the author of the debate amongst characters representing contending social attitudes.

The process of shedding the racist ethos of Social Darwinism that I hope to illustrate in my examination of The Vrouw Grobelaar's Leading Cases, Souls in Bondage and Margaret Harding (Salvator ignores racial issues) is mirrored in the character of Margaret Harding herself. In her attitude towards Kamis, Margaret moves from a repugnance for Kamis's physical features to an acceptance, in which the humanity of the man overcomes any previous aversions:

'Afterwards I didn't mind [his face],' she replied. 'I'd got used to it.' (251)

Yet in his early writing, for instance in those stories from The Vrouw Grobelaar's Leading Cases which deal with black/white relationships, Gibbon condones, although he does not explicitly share, the vicious racism of his protagonist. Comparisons between black people and animals abound, and the revulsion against African facial characteristics re-appears in Souls in Bondage. Nevertheless, by locating the predicament of a woman of mixed race at the centre of his first novel, Gibbon reveals a significant shift in his ideological development, epitomised by Thwaite's offer to marry the young 'coloured' woman Cecilia. In Margaret Harding, Gibbon presents the debate in its most accomplished form with an educated black man as his protagonist.

In addition to pointing out his developing social vision I would argue that Gibbon made ingenious use of the novel form to express conflicting attitudes within colonial society. South African critics have argued forcibly since the 1970s that the received Eurocentric tradition of literary criticism (with its insistence on the primacy of the realist novel) is often neither adequate nor appropriate for the evaluation and discussion of local literary output, especially of writing intended to reflect social reality.

The value of using sociological criteria to identify relevant and valid subjects for literary criticism can be seen in a re-assessment of a 'classic' novel such as The Story of an African Farm that reveals Schreiner's use, in addition to the 'realism' of the Lyndall/Waldo story, of various alternative literary modes to explore her themes. Episodes such as Waldo's Stranger's story and the 'Times and Seasons'

section, were judged by many early critics to be unfortunate lapses from the serious business of recounting the story of Lyndall's character development. Francis Brett Young, for example calls the novel 'ill-adjusted' (513), and J.P.L Snyman in his 1952 survey of South African English novels classifies it as 'essentially a novel of character' (3). Yet the unconventional techniques in the novel give evidence of the author's having found additional alternative modes of expression, more appropriate to a uniquely South African social context. Other novelists have also found the centrality of individual experience in the realist novel to be at odds with the powerful social and even the geographical contingencies of South Africa. Plomer's Turbott Wolfe reflects the clash between the individual and the indifferent and inexorable 'destiny' of Africa. (See Margaret Harding's similar reaction, Margaret Harding, p. 36.) The protagonist ultimately shrinks from commitment to social and political change, and the structure of the novel reflects the fragmentation of apparently unshakable western models that Europeans sought to impose upon the country.

Apart from limiting critical response to novels which can be defined in terms of liberal-humanist literary conventions, critical insistence on 'psychological' realism as an indispensable requirement effectively denied adventure romances, documentary-based narratives, polemical writing, satire and social realism the possibility of serious critical consideration. Particularly restrictive was the insistence (grounded in I.A. Richards' method of practical criticism) on the isolation of the text from social and political frames of reference. Approval of this type of contextual detachment had the effect of elevating a novel like Smith's The Beadle - with its focus on individual experience - while relegating to the realms of 'lesser' fiction

Blackburn's Burgher Quixote, a novel providing a profound criticism of colonial institutions and attitudes through the satirical depiction of 'typical' characters in their social milieu. Until recently, Gibbon has suffered a critical neglect similar to that of Blackburn. These authors require a critical position that allows the depiction of social reality a significance equal to that of the inner development of individual characters.

Critics such as Georg Lukacs and Raymond Williams have insisted on the characters' significance within the wider social context of the novel. Lukacs measures an author's achievement according to his 'capacity to give living human embodiment to historical-social types'(34) rather than in terms of his ability to trace individual psychological growth. Instead of dismissing Bonaparte Blenkins, for example, as one of E.M. Forster's 'flat' as opposed to 'rounded' characters, (75 - 85) we could (from Lukacs' perspective) judge his significance in the novel by considering him in a wider context: as a representative of the corrupt but sophisticated urban world suddenly thrust into the South African social framework by the influx of Europeans drawn to the Kimberley diamond fields. Similarly, the intrusion of Boy Bailey in Gibbon's Margaret Harding disrupts the status quo of that microcosm of society. In 'Realism and the Contemporary Novel', Raymond Williams places emphasis on social context in his own definition of the 'social realist' novel:

> ... it offers a valuing of a whole way of life, a society that is larger than any of the individuals composing it, and at the same time valuing creations of human beings who ... are also ... absolute ends in themselves. (584)

Central to Gibbon's work is an emphasis on the clash between characters who represent different attitudes in South African society, and a comparison of their various reactions to events precipitated by race differences. Gibbon's authorial standpoint is in some ways the familiar, many-eyed persona of the mass media, mediating the diversity of society under only a very loose editorial control, and leaving moral conclusions to the reader. The study of his fiction reveals the development of an instinctive journalistic talent into an ability to sustain a considered narrative technique. By allowing the contending social arguments implicit in Gibbon's writing to function as a focus for criticism, the various attitudes, moral, social and political can be analysed and recognised as contributing towards the meaning and the general cohesion of the novels and stories.

CHAPTER 1

THE VROUW GROBELAAR'S LEADING CASES

Although the collected edition of Vrouw Grobelaar's Leading Cases appeared in 1905, many of the stories had been published in serial form by Blackwood from as early as 1903. Gibbon's narrator, Vrouw Grobelaar, is not a 'protagonist' in the sense of being a fully developed fictional character, yet there is nevertheless sufficient realisation of her personality and attitudes to compel the reader's attention. Through her, Gibbon is able both to present the narrative of each short story, and to express popular Boer prejudice. But there is a profound contradiction in his depiction of her character, which alternates between charm and bigotry. The Vrouw Grobelaar stories are striking evidence of Gibbon's struggle as a writer to withhold moral judgment while striving to portray his characters within their particular social contexts. Gibbon's technique of allowing his characters to speak for themselves with minimal intervention by their reporter/creator, is drawn from his journalistic experience, but it embodies an inherent ambiguity which flaws all his work until he writes Margaret Harding in 1911: he is unable finally to detach his own sympathies sufficiently from the racism he describes. The stories fail because Gibbon's irresolution is transmitted to the reader, whose sympathies shift uneasily

from Vrouw Grobelaar to the victims of Boer oppression and back again in spite of the writer's attempts to provide an element of ironic commentary on her intolerance.

It is this very contradiction that can be seen later in Gibbon's ambiguous treatment of characters in Souls in Bondage while subsequently, in Salvator, he seems to abandon a coherent narrative viewpoint altogether. It is only in Margaret Harding that he succeeds in resolving the inconsistency of viewpoints, by taking an identifiable moral stand and juxtaposing his characters in a less erratic narrative matrix. Central to my argument is Gibbon's preoccupation with inter-racial contact as a theme, and a developing liberal insight as well as an increasing control of authorial distance from his subject. This collection, however, shows Gibbon vacillating in his control of narrative viewpoint, while his racial attitudes range from non-committal to deeply prejudiced.

He succeeds, however, in creating three clearly discernible and contending 'voices'. These can be identified in the character of Vrouw Grobelaar herself, the narrator (the schoolteacher, and Katje's future husband) who cannot always be clearly distinguished from Gibbon's own authorial voice, and Katje, Vrouw Grobelaar's niece. Although Vrouw Grobelaar's voice predominates, Gibbon establishes a distinct identity for his first person narrator even though he is never named. Vrouw Grobelaar's words 'If you were a landed Boer, instead of a kind of schoolmaster' (88) inform the reader of the narrator's profession, and her repeated condemnation of the English establishes a tension between them as characters:

> 'All the strange foulness that the English bring with them.' (189)

The narrator is established as an 'outlander', an itinerant observer, and Gibbon reminds us that he has only recently come to the area: 'The business was something before my time' (108) and his acquaintance with a family living near the Mozambican border shows that he has travelled more widely. The developing relationship between the narrator and Katje culminates in the announcement (in the last chapter) that they are to marry and move into town (267). Vrouw Grobelaar is shown to accept Katje's departure with benign tolerance, despite her previously expressed prejudices:

> 'Do you think I would let a man - any man, or perhaps an Englishman - carry you off like a strayed ewe?' (13)

Gibbon makes a sustained and structured attempt to distance his narrator from Vrouw Grobelaar's point of view, but the sheer vigour of her racism often eclipses Gibbon's irony: ' ...He had a way with him - something heavy and ugly, like a beast or a Kafir...' (71). In spite of the blind racism that she espouses, Gibbon demonstrates that she is also clearly aware of the exploitative and political imperatives that underpin colonial race ideology:

> 'How could the Burghers work the farms if they had not the Kafirs? ... you will see that we must hold the Kafirs with a hand of iron or they will destroy us.' (42)

Above all else, however, it is the inconsistency of Gibbon's own attitude towards racial issues that is revealed by such comments. At times he seems to endorse bigotry while at others his irony clearly invites the reader's condemnation. Gibbon strives to present the Vrouw Grobelaar to the reader without any moralistic

intervention, but he frustrates his own purposes by offering too little direction, and produces instead a measure of narrative incoherence.

Even though the character of Vrouw Grobelaar, shown paradoxically both as an engagingly wise 'earth mother' and a bigoted racist, may not have offended his popular British contemporary readership with its firmly-held sense of racial superiority, it is nevertheless unacceptable to the modern reader. Gibbon has, however, produced an authentic portrait of a typical representative of rural Boer society which invariably sought biblical justifications for racial exploitation:

> 'Did not the dear God make everything for a purpose, and what is the use of a Kafir if he is not made to work?' (41)

Gibbon's talent for characterisation has been noted by Stopforth in an unpublished 1954 MA thesis. Stopforth praises Gibbon for

> ...his manner of presenting character in action and by means of revealing dialogue. (123)

More acclaim for the character of Vrouw Grobelaar is to be found in a contemporary review in The African Monthly. The reviewer presumably reflects the complacent Imperialist superiority of Gibbon's popular readership in finding no incompatibility between convincing character portrayal and the dubious morality inherent in the stories:

> The shrewd common-sense, sharp tongue and clever philosophy of Vrouw Grobelaar cannot fail to attract the admiration of all readers. (517)

It is likely that as a working journalist, Gibbon would have tended to play to the gallery, and while one of his aims may have been to recount his African experi-

ences without the constraints of day-to-day newspaper reporting, his writing technique had not developed to the point where he was able (or willing) to differentiate between his own prejudices and those of his characters. For example, the narrator's voice offers no clearly defined attitude towards blacks, although the way in which he introduces Vrouw Grobelaar's views reveals an ironic distance:

> The Vrouw Grobelaar had no opinion of Kafirs, and was for ever ready to justify herself in that particular. (41)

Here Gibbon underscores her racism by emphasising the self-conscious posturing of having 'no opinion', and suggests that her strong psychological need for self-justification may conceal a sense of guilt. There is some evidence then, that Gibbon can at least objectify, if not actually condemn, her racism. Further evidence of Gibbon's standpoint can be found in 'The Hands of the Pitiful Woman', where Vrouw Grobelaar berates the German missionaries for making the claim that black people are human beings, and for teaching Katje 'nothing but rubbish at that school' (41). The narrator, however, is himself a schoolteacher (86) and likely to share the views of human equality and African economic autonomy that Katje has repeated. Although the narrator's voice is never openly hostile to Vrouw Grobelaar's racism, his ironic commentary, however tentative, establishes a distance between Gibbon and these views. When Vrouw Grobelaar refers to a family living near the Mozambican border as 'not of good Boer stock, but a wild and savage folk, with dark blood in them' (143), the narrator reveals a xenophobic dimension to her attitude by pointing out wryly that these people are half Portuguese and could even be related to royalty.

In contrast to his oblique condemnations of racism, Gibbon's reference to the consequences of a search for a missing Boer girl clearly shows his repugnance for the gratuitous violence used:

> ' ...every Kafir stad and kraal [was] turned inside out, and half of them burned.' (160).

From the worldly air that Gibbon gives his narrator-persona we can be reasonably sure that his attitudes are fairly close to Gibbon's own, and that he shares the narrator's fascination with Vrouw Grobelaar's dynamism and energy, as well as his indulgence of her racism. Gibbon's ambivalent attitude is most clearly manifested in the themes of certain of the short stories themselves. I will go on to consider these tales, and trace Gibbon's approach to racial issues, which while sometimes contradictory, nevertheless reveals a maturing liberal view.

Gibbon is at his least admirable in the choice of subject for the story 'The Hands of the Pitiful Woman', in which a Boer farmer's wife and child, besieged in their farmhouse by marauding black farm workers, can be seen as a manifestation of the insularity and harshly self-protective racism of the Boer psyche itself, and as a projection of the Boer's fears for his own survival in South Africa. By prefacing the story with an exposition of Vrouw Grobelaar's own extreme racism, Gibbon goes on to use the story to exploit the idea of 'black peril'. The story itself concerns the fate of a Vrouw Coetzee who is left alone on the farm with her baby while her husband Piet travels to Pretoria on 'political business'. One day during his absence, the black workers down implements, and later begin banging on the window shutters demanding brandy. After withdrawing, the workers later return,

drunk, and make several attempts to enter the house while Vrouw Coetzee wards them off with a shotgun. After she has killed two men, the workers begin pounding on the door and threaten her and the child with death and torture:

> 'Yes, we will kill the child first, and slowly - slowly! It shall cry a long time before it shall die at last!' (49)

With tragically bad timing, Vrouw Coetzee herself strangles the child just as a party of burghers arrives to assist her. She subsequently goes mad with remorse, and dies a year later. The terror felt by the victim, and the detailed description of the tortures with which she is menaced, are deliberately exploited by Gibbon, presumably to provide some insight into the Boer hatred of blacks. But the story aims primarily at capitalising on the sensational, and one senses here that Gibbon is least in control of the racist attitudes that he appears to qualify in some other stories in the collection.

In contrast, Gibbon reveals a stereotyped but significantly more enlightened attitude towards black people in the story 'Like Unto Like' which is presented in the form of a cautionary tale to Frikkie Viljoen, a nephew of the Vrouw Grobelaar, who has indicated an interest in marrying a woman his aunt regards as lower class and of inferior caste. She goes on to tell the story of Stoffel Mostert's wife who eventually 'returned to her own people' (the blacks) unable to resist the call of the primitive feelings within her. The woman in question was the daughter of a '<u>takhaar bijwohner</u>', whose appearance is described by Vrouw Grobelaar as showing that her 'people have been meddling with the Kafirs'. Although the tale ends predictably with a horrified Stoffel shooting his wife after he discovers her one night at a nearby kraal dancing naked to the sound of African drums, Gibbon's emphasis

on the sensual beauty of the dance represents more than a conventionally romantic European reaction to Africa. Although Gibbon is to some extent guilty of pandering to popular taste with his exotic description, his evident affinity for black culture suggests two themes that he develops in his later work: miscegenation and a rejection of racism:

> And suddenly the figures round the fire gave way, save the one with the painted face and bones; for from the shadow of the a hut at the back of the fire came another, who rushed into the light and swayed wildly to the barbarous music. The newcomer was naked as a babe new born; wild as a beast of the field; lithe as a serpent; and crazy to savageness with the fire and the drums. (68)

As in 'The Hands of the Pitiful Woman', Gibbon seems to be betrayed by a newspaperman's tendency to sensationalise, while revealing at the same time an inability to transcend the late nineteenth-century sense of European superiority in the way, for example, a post-Achebe writer is required to do.

By showing Frikkie's outrage at Vrouw Grobelaar's implied insult to his future wife, Gibbon leaves the reader not only with the impression of a ruffled conventionality, but also with a hauntingly 'exotic' set of possibilities linked to the concept of mixed race. In this sense, the story presents a marked alteration in perspective in Gibbon's attitude towards blacks compared to that shown in 'The Hands of the Pitiful Woman'. Whereas the emphasis in the story discussed earlier lies in an identification with the 'laager' mentality of the Boers, in this story the imaginative identification is with Katrina Ruiter, and the lure of the primitive African rhythms. The next step for Gibbon is Cecilia, the 'victim' of racial mixing in Souls in Bondage

and the final stage, Gibbon's approval of the white woman who marries a black parson referred to in Margaret Harding.

More problematical than either of the two stories already discussed is 'Tagalash' [Tokoloshe], in which Gibbon presents an ambiguous inter-racial encounter in a featureless underworld. This is the only story in the collection, and possibly the only piece of work in Gibbon's entire output, in which the action is placed in a fantasy setting. Gibbon's unwillingness to locate the story in a realistic social context is an indication of his as yet uncertain attitude towards the subject of miscegenation. As we shall see, the encounter between Polly Joubert and the Tagalash is in some ways a precursor of that between Margaret Harding and Kamis in the later novel. Although the differences between the two situations are as marked as the similarities, it is the crucial racial interaction that links the two within the context of Gibbon's overall literary development, and from this point of view, 'Tagalash' represents the most significant treatment of the theme of race in the Vrouw Grobelaar collection.

'Tagalash' recounts the singular experiences of Polly Joubert, a Boer woman who, after a quarrel with her husband, walks to a nearby river, and fantasises about a lover. An incarnation of her fantasy, in the form of the tagalash, abducts her to a twilight world where he makes repeated attempts to win her affection. She resists, begging to be returned to her own world. Eventually she is granted her request and the tagalash offers her a 'charm' to compel love, or win her husband's forgiveness. The nature of this charm is left vague, and Polly will not admit to remembering what it was, but as it solves her marriage problems, it is presumably

an erotic skill. Her husband's smug comment is: 'It is a true charm that, my kleintje'. On one level 'Tagalash' displays an ambivalence similar to that evident in 'Like unto Like', where the formal cautionary tale is undercut by an imaginative approval of the sensual black dance. The conventional part of the 'Tagalash' story tells of an incompatible Boer couple who achieve marital bliss with the assistance of a little black magic. However, most of the action of the story revolves around the Tagalash's attempted seduction of Polly:

> '"But," she said, "I am white!" For no one had ever heard of any but Kafir brides for Tagalash.
>
> 'He shrank a little, but smiled yet beseechingly, as he would have her cease that part of the tale.
>
> '"You are so beautiful," he urged. "Come with me to my house, will you not?"' (181)

Gibbon's preoccupation with the courtship of the Boer wife and the tagalash suggests not only the later treatments of the inter-racial theme in Souls in Bondage and Margaret Harding, but also provides an insight into Vrouw Grobelaar's attitude towards the developing relationship between the narrator and Katje: it is their return from an afternoon together in the 'cool and lonely places in the long grass beside the spruit' (170) that prompts her to tell the cautionary tale. To Vrouw Grobelaar, the English narrator seems as alien a suitor for Katje as the tagalash.

Gibbon's portrayal of Vrouw Grobelaar is problematic because her racism prevents the modern reader from sympathising with her as he intended. The problem that Gibbon ultimately presents is that of a seductive narrator who often condones immoral and unacceptable views. Where Gibbon does allow Vrouw

Grobelaar to express human feelings with regard to blacks, Gibbon's qualifications, although undeniably true to her character, jar the sensibilities of the reader:

> 'What I didn't like about him was his way with the Kafirs. A Kafir is more useful than a dog after all, and one shouldn't be always beating and kicking even a dog.' (32)

Any positive implications of her aversion to the violently racist Fanie are immediately eclipsed by the dog comparison, which debases the rest of Gibbon's characterisation, where he attempts to stress her more endearing qualities.

Without the hindsight provided by our knowledge of Gibbon's later output, The Vrouw Grobelaar's Leading Cases would be indistinguishable from the rest of the 'pulp' fiction of the day, while its Imperialistic assumptions about the superiority of white civilisation and its bigotry would leave it doubly damned. Yet a closer examination of the stories reveals a vitality of style and a preoccupation with inter-racial communication in which the origins of a small classic like Margaret Harding can already be discerned.

CHAPTER 2

SOULS IN BONDAGE

Gibbon devotes the first few pages of Souls in Bondage (1904) to describing Dopfontein as a microcosm of South African society. The town can be seen almost as a representation of the Social Darwinist schema, with its geography reflecting the social context in which the action will take place. In choosing Dopfontein, the local country town of The Vrouw Grobelaar's Leading Cases and Margaret Harding, Gibbon reflects contemporary demographic changes by directing the reader away from the Boer-dominated rural periphery of the Vrouw Grobelaar stories, to an urban setting. Gibbon's mise-en-scéne is a typically racially divided South African town made up of white Dopfontein on the higher ground above the Spruit (literally 'on top', and figuratively at the top of the Social Darwinist hierarchical structure), the Kaffir location half a mile away on the other side, and the 'off-colour' (mixed-race) town on the 'bare earth' in between. Thus Gibbon establishes at the outset the social order as perceived by the white colonial, and as manifested in the racial segregation of his towns: a pattern which has been etched into the South African landscape. Gibbon presents the white town as orderly and quiet, the African location similarly arranged in regular rows - but totally alien to white society - while

the coloured town 'crawled with the fevered activity of hell, and all the fuss and business was to no end.' (5).

The narrative centres on Martin Thwaites, an unsuccessful, white, middle-aged lawyer whose Dopfontein practice consists mainly of minor legal services to members of the black and 'coloured' community. Amongst his acquaintances is Cecilia du Plessis, a pretty, light-complexioned coloured girl who has been well educated and who is now suffering as a result of her squalid surroundings and her drunken mother. Thwaites tries to dissuade her from accepting a marriage proposal from Bantam, a handsome but violently-disposed stable hand, and even proposes to her himself in an attempt to prevent the wedding, in spite of the social disgrace that this would bring him. Bantam eventually manages to undermine Thwaites's opposition to the marriage by insinuating that Cecilia is pregnant. In a parallel plot, George Joyce, a transport rider, encounters an attractive young woman on a farm he is passing, and is introduced to her father: a man with a strong belief in racial equality, and a drunkard. Mr Graham's labourers exploit his weakness, threatening him and his daughter. Joyce is later promoted to manager of the transport company and soon thereafter rescues Peggy from the farm where her father has been murdered by the African labourers. Joyce marries Peggy a fortnight later.

Meanwhile, Cecilia and Bantam have also married and moved to nearby Ferreirastad. Bantam drinks too much, openly sleeps with other women and abuses Cecilia alternately with brutal beatings and with cruel indifference. Acting on a presentiment, Thwaites journeys to Ferreirastad where he finds Cecilia dying

in a pool of blood after a vicious assault by Bantam. Thwaites, 'the foundation of his life fallen', ails and dies soon after.

Gibbon's negative attitude towards miscegenation in this novel leads us into a nightmare world of corruption and despair, where the descendants of cross-racial unions are doomed to suffer as a result of the dissipation and misguided lust of their colonial forebears. A contemporaneous review in the British African Monthly applauds Gibbon's ability to bring life to this world in his fiction, but also raises for the modern reader the question of Gibbon's imperialist assumptions about race and society:

> [Gibbon's work shows a] keen insight into the half-caste world which exists near the centres of civilisation in South Africa. (517).

The African Monthly reviewer clearly accepts as axiomatic that Gibbon and his readership share the view that white settlements represent the 'civilisation' from which other races ('half-caste world') are excluded.

Unlike the stories in the Vrouw Grobelaar collection, Souls in Bondage suggests that Gibbon can see beyond narrow imperialist assumptions, particularly in his depiction of Thwaites's inner turmoil, but it shows that he is still caught in the trap of Social Darwinist determinism in his view of South African society. His portrayal of Mr Graham, for instance, is an apparent rejection of the philosophy of racial equality: he is presented as the prototype of the 'degenerate' colonial who loses his grip on European standards and descends to the level of the blacks. Popular myth would have it that the logical extreme of such a descent is miscegenation. It is typical of Gibbon's ambivalence toward the subject that at this point in his

development, he chooses to subvert Graham's egalitarian beliefs by portraying racial tolerance as a weakness that brings personal ruin.

However, I would argue that Gibbon's reactionary point of view should not be taken at face value, given the accent on inter-racial encounters already noted in the Vrouw Grobelaar stories. On the contrary, Gibbon's work as a whole shows a development away from the widely-accepted colonial myth - in which the white man was expected to remain socially aloof from the exotic native population over which he held sway, and where the wages of disobedience were ruin and corruption - towards an acceptance of a future society which would depend on a resolution of racial conflict. Cecilia, shown to be a tragic victim of miscegenation in Souls in Bondage is yet another step in Gibbon's progress towards that memorable image in Margaret Harding: the statue to be built in the future to commemorate the first miscegenator, with the inscription: 'She felt the future in her bones.'

The Social Darwinist backdrop to Souls in Bondage seems to be a necessary station in Gibbon's advance towards the acceptance of individual equality evident in Margaret Harding. By the time he writes the latter novel, he has reached a point where he is able to present a woman who has married a black parson, and Margaret Harding herself, as heroic figures or pioneers, rather than victims. I would suggest that Gibbon's vision elevates his writing above Cullen Gouldsbury's Tree of Bitter Fruit (1910) which takes for granted the disastrous results of integrating a black person educated in Europe back into his native society, and Sarah Gertrude Millin's God's Stepchildren (1924) which traces the inevitability of degeneration and ruin in the descendants of mixed unions.

Gareth Cornwell in a study of Fitzpatrick's 'The Outspan' offers an explanation of the apparent ambivalence towards the issue of race in some colonial fiction:

> Such paradoxes are symptomatic of the dissonance between the racist ideology of Empire and the liberal-humanist tradition of the discursive mode in which that ideology achieved literary expression... (23)

The difficulty Gibbon experienced in reconciling his contradictory attitudes towards race, particularly conspicuous in the character of Thwaites, can be understood more fully in this context:

> ... the moral-psychological logic which propels the narrative is at odds with the plot of racial determinism which purports to provide coherence and significance ... writers of this period may attempt to place 'the source of understanding, of action and history' outside the individual (though universal) subject, [but] the nature of the discursive mode in which they are working simply does not permit it. (27)

In Souls in Bondage there is no narrative focus equivalent to that of Vrouw Grobelaar. Although Martin Thwaites's point of view is often used, his lack of liveliness and his studiously neutral attitude make him both less sympathetic and less successful than Vrouw Grobelaar. Gibbon deliberately places this slow, pedantic and painstakingly impartial lawyer at the centre of his novel as a pivot between the two main stories (the Peggy/Joyce romance and the Cecilia/Bantam anti-romance) and as a centre of Gibbon's own debate over racial attitudes. Gibbon's depiction of the characters of Thwaites and his egregious clerk, Charlie Bateman, owes a great deal to Dickens. Thwaites is given idiosyncratic catch phrases (like Dickens's

Barkis or Uriah Heep) in his characteristic comments on his profession: 'The practice promises well' (9) which is the very phrase that is on his lips as he dies. Bateman operates as a thoroughly villainous foil to Thwaites's polite professionalism, and also as a purveyor of local gossip in, for instance, bringing Thwaites the news of Cecilia and Bantam's impending marriage. Bateman also embodies the final cynicism of the novel by taking immediate advantage of Thwaites's death when he drains Thwaites's brandy glass. There is also a Dickensian quality in the vitality of the dialogue and sharp delineation of eccentric characters in Gibbon's description of the circuit court dinner (173-9), which anticipates the highly-charged gatherings in the Sanatorium drawing room in Margaret Harding.

In this novel, violence and brutality triumph over the kindness and mildness of Thwaites and Cecilia, and a form of institutionalised violence is entrenched as a result of the success of George Joyce, who employs his brutality in establishing his business. Thwaites, as attorney to all race groups in Dopfontein, is conveniently placed to link Gibbon's parallel plots, located in the white and the coloured sections of the town respectively. But more important to our examination of Gibbon's development as writer is his presentation of the racial debate centred in the person of Martin Thwaites. In order to save Cecilia from a disastrous marriage with the vicious Bantam, Thwaites offers to marry her himself, so accepting what Gibbon offers as the white South African's view of ultimate degradation: a union across the colour line.

Thwaites's gesture anticipates the positive image of miscegenation presented by Gibbon in Margaret Harding, and gives added significance to the elderly

lawyer's inner debate as he considers the possible consequences of such a marriage:

> A part of that tragic [coloured] community that he was, an alien among them and an exile from his own people, so much of aggressive racialism survived in him as to make him unconsciously applaud anything in a yellow man or woman that strove to desert its breed and approximate to white standards. After all, tolerance is mainly a measure of self-defence, and poor old Thwaites, walking circumspectly between the contempt of his own race and the familiarity of that which had granted him hospitality, was not the personality to evolve a tolerance that should demand no reciprocity. The broadest-minded people are those whom the fires of the stake have singed. (164)

Thwaites's 'aggressive racialism' is acknowledged, but Gibbon makes the point that 'tolerance' (i.e. acceptance of a mixed marriage) is a virtue, which, as in Thwaites's case, is diminished by the individual's perceived need to protect himself ('self-defence') against a 'lowering' or change of living standards brought about by the partial adoption of the norms of another culture. People who have suffered greatly (unlike Thwaites, who has lived a closeted, protected life) are most likely to display the (implied) nobility of tolerance. The distinction drawn here between Thwaites's 'racialism' (a sense of white superiority) and the morally laudable acceptance of equality by those 'whom the fires of the stake have singed' is a clearer indication of Gibbon's ideological position than can be detected at any point in The Vrouw Grobelaar's Leading Cases. The choice for Thwaites is presented as a tragic dilemma: on the one hand, marriage to Cecilia would destroy his status and the 'tepid ambition' that he has nurtured all his life; on the other, abandoning her

to Bantam's murderous violence removes the 'foundation of [his] life' (315) and eventually kills him. In making his choice, Thwaites is shown to balance his own humanity and moral rectitude against the typical racial attitudes of the day:

> Yes; but a half-caste, off-coloured, a yellow girl, with a touch of the tar-brush, - a creature to whom the foul Kafir was kin and ancestor, co-parent with the crime of a white conqueror! (165)

These comments are presented as part of Thwaites's internal debate, and clearly represent the clichèd prejudices of contemporary white colonial opinion; the type of opinion from which Gibbon distances himself in a comment such as the following:

> ... but there was the descent, the shame of the white man's fall to the companionship of the Kafirs - the ultimate disgrace a South African can sink to. (205)

Here the ironic emphasis is on the words 'South African'. In spite of Gibbon's continued adherence to the Social Darwinist view of society, occasional satirical insights like this reveal a growing consciousness of the artificiality of the colonial social fabric. Gibbon seems at these times to regard entrenched white South African race prejudice with an increasingly critical eye, and manages more frequently to avoid identifying with it.

Nonetheless, there is still ample evidence of confusion in Gibbon's grasp of his debate on race, especially when we consider his treatment of Mr Graham, the dissolute colonist. Mr Graham is shown to have a liberal attitude towards blacks,

and in response to Joyce's suggestion that he sjambok his labourers into accepting his authority, he remarks:

> 'I don't believe in treating human beings like beasts. A Kafir isn't a brute, you know, Mr Joyce.' (156).

The context in which Graham's words are presented subverts the view that he expresses: his degeneration into drunkenness and finally death is a direct result of fraternising with his black labourers. Indeed, the major failure of the novel is Gibbon's inability to endorse the positive features of Graham's (or Thwaites's) liberalism and explicitly to condemn Joyce's immorality.

Gibbon's ambivalence is most evident in his presentation of Joyce, who enjoys authorial approval yet, paradoxically, is shown to be unacceptably brutal in his treatment of black people. There is a major inconsistency in implying that Joyce's violence is immoral, while at the same time precluding the reader from an identification with Graham's tolerant views. This inner contradiction, central to Gibbon's failure in Souls in Bondage, is resolved successfully in Margaret Harding. A more accurate measure of Gibbon's progress in Souls in Bondage is the ideology discernible in Thwaites's inner debate and in Gibbon's apparently contradictory observation that Mr Graham has 'a distinction that might have been greatness.' (273). However, Gibbon's depiction of Mr Graham as a dissipated drunkard whose 'essential fluidity of character' (273) is given to bouts of drinking in his labourers' kraals requires us to regard him as an example of 'white man's incontinence' (71): the attribute that leads to sex across the colour line, and has created the 'damned' coloured community.

The ambivalence in Gibbon's attitude provides the grounds for Jenny de Reuck's accusation that he

> ...[involves] the reader in the tacit acceptance of the narrator's racist categories when evaluating character and interaction between characters (14).

My argument is that Gibbon's racial views, while confused, are anything but complacent and unquestioning, and reveal a developing maturity that will eventually permit Gibbon to present a meaningful debate on racial attitudes. The most convincing testimony to Gibbon's increasing sensitivity to racial issues is the extent to which he is able to show that Thwaites's tragedy is a function of the society in which he lives, and that his affection for Cecilia is not a weakness but a strength, tragically denied its fulfilment by the combination of societal forces and the shrewdness of Bantam's malicious insinuations about Cecilia's pre-marital pregnancy.

De Reuck goes on to accuse Gibbon of a failure in the rendering of character, especially in the case of George Joyce in whom there is an 'uneasy alliance of chivalry and violence' (10). She finds a radical (and damning) inconsistency in Gibbon's harnessing together Joyce's 'wholesome hero' image with his brutality towards the black labourers on Graham's farm. However, there is some evidence that Gibbon intends the reader to see a direct parallel between the violence of Joyce and of Bantam. If we accept Thwaites as a central pivot, then Joyce and Bantam are clearly intended as contrasting figures, linked ironically by their predilection for violence. On the one hand Bantam is shown to be 'cruel, false, and dissipated' (119), cynically trapping Cecilia into a marriage which he exploits for

sadistic pleasure, while on the other, Joyce creates an impression that is 'altogether good and pleasant' (254), yet both display extreme ferocity. The linking of the two characters may be part of an attempt to provide the novel with a pessimistic conclusion with wider social implications: that neither race group is able to resolve conflict without recourse to violence.

The novel operates adequately at the level of melodrama and in this sense Bantam the villain and Joyce the conquering hero are consistently and clearly delineated. Gibbon catalogues Bantam's evil qualities and simplistically lists Joyce's good ones: 'an excellent fellow and a charming guest' (255). At this level, his denunciation of Bantam is too facile, while his ironic treatment of Joyce is too hesitant to be immediately and effectively discernible.

Cecilia's personality is presented via the different perspectives of several characters. Thwaites sees her as a fragile innocent, a view that is shared by Joyce who, we are told, has knocked a man down for insulting her by calling her 'pretty nigger'. The public view of Cecilia is stated by the magistrate who regards her as a 'good' one amongst a bad bunch, while the coloured community regards her as aloof and irritatingly self-righteous, producing either active hostility (as in Bantam and Mrs du Plessis) or clumsy attempts at friendship, which Cecilia immediately rebuffs (as in Sannie's overtures to her in Ferreirastad). We are told that

> ... her mission-school education in the Transkei had sundered her hopelessly from her own colour and kind, while giving nothing in their place. (290)

In this respect, J.P.L. Snyman in a short magazine article, 'South African Authors - 45. Perceval Gibbon', on Gibbon and his writing, has drawn a parallel between Cecilia, and Kamis in Margaret Harding, both of whom are estranged from their people by their education.

The irony in Gibbon's depiction of George Joyce is apparent in the contrast between the images of romantic hero and brutal animal. On the one hand we are shown the Joyce who rescues Peggy Graham from the black labourers doing 'what they please with her' (211), the 'good chum' so admired by the van der Merwe family, while on the other we see the gratuitously vicious colonist who returns from the kraal after avenging Graham's death:

> 'There is blood on your hand,' she said next. 'It is all wet.'
> He put his hand in his pocket, but could not speak.
> 'There is blood on your boots too,' she went on. 'You are all blood.' (271)

Gibbon shows that the racial aggression in Joyce is intimately linked to his success in business: he emerges as a prototype of the pioneer colonist/capitalist. His easy assumption of a leadership role in the van der Merwe transport firm is related to his authority over blacks (he quells one of Graham's rebellious black servants with a mere glance) and to his eventual prosperity:

> ... their teams made record journeys and their waggons carried bigger loads, to the quick profit of the firm. (251)

Gibbon's condemnation of Joyce is barely discernible when compared with his explicit criticism of Bantam, but at times there is a distinct element of parody in his

presentation of the white hero, whose only outward gesture as he contemplates marriage to Peggy is to punch his fist into his hand, unconsciously expressing his own violent nature, and by implication the violent character of colonial exploitation in general:

> Joyce stood in the middle of the room, his right fist poised above the open palm of his left hand. 'Little - chum!' he said to himself slowly. 'Yes, by Jove!' and he dropped his fist with a smack of emphasis. (209)

Although Souls in Bondage shows Gibbon struggling unsuccessfully to control the 'ontological gap' between author and fictional character, Thwaites represents a significant step towards the narrative distancing required to achieve that goal. The extreme shifts in narrative technique that characterise Salvator, his next novel, may be Gibbon's reaction to what he had perceived as his central problem in writing Souls in Bondage. However, the latter novel marks an advance on the bigotry displayed in some of the stories in The Vrouw Grobelaar's Leading Cases and a development towards a more dispassionate appreciation of prevailing racial assumptions. When he abandons the racial theme in Salvator, his writing seems to lose its essential impetus, and he is able to write his best novel only when he presents his most thoroughgoing examination of the subject in Margaret Harding.

CHAPTER 3

SALVATOR

Gibbon's second novel, Salvator, is no longer available from South African libraries, and the text used in the present study is a handwritten transcript by Pieter Williams of a British library copy, so a fairly comprehensive account of the story is provided here to assist the reader.

Although the novel shows the author experimenting with narrative point of view, it ignores entirely the subject of race in the South African context and centres on the conflict between revolutionary idealism and conservative caution and reserve. A third point of view, not fully developed by Gibbon, represents the ruthless forces of colonial expansion. So the novel's significance resides in its narrative structure and not in any development in Gibbon's treatment of race in South African society.

Salvator portrays what is essentially a palace revolution rather than a popular liberation struggle. And although Salvator works towards a coup d'ètat in Mozambique, the overthrow of the government would have resulted only in the

replacement of the established Portuguese colonial administration by another group of equally imperialistic Europeans. Nowhere does Gibbon suggest that the local African populace have any claim to political representation, nor indeed are they acknowledged to have any existence at all outside the role of menial servants (194) or powerless observers (287).

There were two very different types of revolutionary activity in late nineteenth-century Mozambique. The first consisted of widespread action by the indigenous population, motivated by a desire to protect their society from the expropriation of land and labour by Portuguese colonial forces. Gibbon chose to ignore this popular uprising, which kept Lisbon's army engaged in campaigns almost every year from the 1870s until the end of the century, in favour of a more Eurocentric struggle: an attempt by the local ruling classes to overthrow Portuguese domination and so preserve a lucrative slave trade.

In Mozambique: From Colonialism to Revolution, Allen and Barbara Isaacman describe Portugal's hold over the Mozambican territories in the mid-1800s as so tenuous that their influence hardly extended more than a few kilometres outside the key coastal towns. Lisbon's authority was further eroded by the European powers' rejection of its historic claim to Mozambique at the Congress of Berlin. As a result, Portugal came under considerable international pressure to 'pacify' the local population and abolish the slave trade in order to retain the colony.

In pursuing its policy, Portugal tried both persuasion and military force in an attempt to stop the slave trade, which until then had been covertly sanctioned by

the Portuguese in exchange for recognition of their sovereignty by the local aristocracy. It is within this unsettled context that Gibbon places Salvator - as champion of the avaricious Mozambican merchant classes.

Nevertheless, Gibbon's novel presents an absorbing exploration of the revolutionary mind, and an examination of the effect on close inter-personal relationships of a single-minded dedication to a cause. Salvator's idealism and political ambition are shown to have the intensity of a personal crusade, overriding any private commitment such as his engagement to Lady Betty. The same passionate devotion to the Mozambican revolution also blinds him to Pumphrey's repeated warnings about his personal safety, and perpetuates his fatal trust in his nemesis, Jock Adams.

The plot structure pivots on the opposing viewpoints of Salvator and of Jem Charters, landed English gentleman and rival for the affections of Lady Betty, while the character of Pumphrey provides a further, peculiarly colonial, perspective. In Salvator, Gibbon juxtaposes the ideals and characters of the three men, the first an Austrian nobleman with a passionate mission to overthrow a corrupt Mozambican regime, the second a complacent reactionary who, initially at least, regards Africa as no more than a convenient location for his hunting pursuits, and the third a sharp-witted mercenary.

The novel opens in the island town of Mozambique (now Lumbo), which until 1897 was the capital of Portuguese East Africa. The political instability of the time was prompted by the stricter enforcement of anti-slavery laws and the more

intrusive presence of the Portuguese authorities, bent on asserting their sovereignty in the face of the powerful European countries' 'scramble' for Africa. An atmosphere of political intrigue in dark alleys and whispered conversations prevails throughout the opening chapter, which brings together the three main protagonists in an anonymous encounter involving Charters's rescue of Salvator from a Mozambican prison. This event provides the bond of shared experience that underpins the interaction of the two men during the later scenes set in England. Charters is persuaded by Pumphrey, Salvator's lieutenant, to assist in his chief's flight by giving up his mailboat ticket, but when Charters eventually arrives at his home on the Sussex downs, he discovers that the man he saved has - coincidentally - not only moved into the neighbourhood but won the admiration and affections of the woman he loves.

Salvator has all the glamour of an adventurer returned from remote and exotic climes and Lady Betty is described as 'A Desdemona to any man's Othello' (34). Charters is provoked into accusing him of being incapable of paying sufficient attention to Lady Betty while at the same time pursuing his mission in Mozambique. Salvator responds by castigating Charters for exploiting his obligation to him (for saving his life) and contrasts the nobility of his cause with the placid complacency of Charters's English country existence.

Lady Betty and Salvator's engagement is beset by differences over the latter's commitment to Mozambican revolution. Salvator loses his temper whenever she attempts to persuade him to abandon his revolutionary goals and he resists all suggestions that his talents might be more usefully employed in European politics

(Lady Betty's implication being that any truly worthwhile idealism would be wasted in an African context). Gibbon makes it clear that Salvator would be incapable of a sustained relationship with anyone who did not embrace his political aspirations with equal fervour. Manoel de Sa, a Portuguese diplomat and guest of Charters, warns Salvator that his designs in Mozambique are doomed to failure and that he has been betrayed by his own allies. Lady Betty's subsequent pleading with Salvator to give up his mission leads to another row, a broken engagement and Salvator's immediate departure for Africa. As he leaves, he concedes that Charters is Lady Betty's natural mate and makes a speech condemning their complacency and praising his own adventurous zeal:

> 'You'll live here, torpid like snakes in winter, feeding yourselves and starving your souls ... And I'll be down there in the sun, balancing my life on my finger, dodging between disease and murder...' (146)

Chapters recounting Lady Betty's gradual recovery from the shock of Salvator's departure alternate with an account of the unfolding of the revolution in Mozambique. While Gibbon presents the English chapters from Charters's point of view, he forgoes the opportunity of presenting the African sequences from Pumphrey's viewpoint, and by so doing, emphasising the casual violence of colonial adventurism. Instead, he presents this part of the story from a 'neutral' point of view, and seems to ignore the imaginative possibilities of using Pumphrey as a narrator. A number of exotic characters who constitute Salvator's inner circle are introduced, and these chapters chronicle his adventures as he narrowly escapes capture by the Portuguese by disguising himself as a leper and sabotaging the engines of a Portuguese warship. The story is regularly punctuated by Pumphrey's cautions

about the treachery of Jock Adams, but Salvator obstinately refuses to order Adams' execution.

Back in England, another warning from the Portuguese diplomat prompts Lady Betty to book a passage to Mozambique in a final attempt to dissuade Salvator from initiating the revolution. Charters insists on accompanying her, and even though she agrees at last to marry him, she remains intent on making her appeal to Salvator. On arrival in Mozambique they are greeted by the ominous sight of a British cruiser lying at anchor in the harbour (Thomas Henriksen in Mozambique: A History, tells of British warships being despatched to Mozambique island in 1891, but as part of a tactic to force the Portuguese out of Mashonaland). However, neither the threat of British intervention, Lady Betty's pleas, nor Pumphrey's warnings of betrayal can sway Salvator. Charters and Lady Betty are given a close-up view of the start of the abortive revolution from the edge of the Praça in the centre of the city where they watch the growing excitement of the crowd awaiting Salvator's arrival, and hear the band strike up the first few bars of the Portuguese national anthem: the cue for his first address to the people. Before Salvator has the opportunity to utter a word, however, Adams assassinates him, shooting him point blank, while loyalist Portuguese troops burst out of a nearby church and begin firing on the rebel crowd.

Charters and Lady Betty manage to elude the pursuing troops after a rooftop chase (which Gibbon echoes in his 1913 short story 'The Second-class Passenger'). The final chapter contains a letter from Pumphrey (now involved in a revolutionary struggle in Venezuela) congratulating them on their marriage.

Salvator reveals an advance on the narrative ambiguity of Souls in Bondage in that the ideological differences between the two major protagonists are more clearly delineated and defined. Gibbon's emphasis on the rational exposition of the characters' philosophical convictions shows his more confident control over their conflicting attitudes, as well as a refinement of his previously non-committal treatment of character which resulted in the uneasy irony of his depiction of Joyce, for example. Passages in which Salvator and Charters argue show the success of Gibbon's journalistic instinct for juxtaposing representative characters and anticipate the polished presentation of contending 'voices' in Margaret Harding.

And yet there are still major flaws in Salvator that are attributable to an as yet undeveloped ability to sustain an unequivocally ironic narrative command over the presentation of character, and to locate the narrator's voice firmly in moral counterpoint to theirs. By largely withdrawing his authorial narrative voice, Gibbon avoids the ambivalence that characterises Souls in Bondage, but in so doing, damages the continuity of the novel. For instance, a major shift in narrative viewpoint occurs in the fifth chapter, where there is a switch from Charters's to Salvator's point of view without adequate signalling by the author/narrator. Although the change is consistent with the debate between the two protagonists, it takes place with too much of a jolt and is evidence of a major narrative shortcoming rather than a deliberately courageous strategy.

In the opening chapter, the narrator identifies closely with Charters's viewpoint: 'the trouble of his intent face, touched Charters' pulses' (7) and the action is

framed by Charters's conventional English country gentleman's perspective. The atmosphere of intrigue and the exotic 'glamour' of the East African town is intimately associated with Charters's outsider status and viewpoint. The reader is invited through the narrative to share Charters's European prejudices, and the authorial approval of his attitude is confirmed in the following chapter by the warm welcome he receives on his return to Sussex and the appeal to the reader's sympathy at his irritation on discovering Lady Betty's interest in Salvator. We are viewing the world over Charters's shoulder, and indeed the consistency of the narrative depends on this manoeuvre.

The narrative focus remains on Charters until the end of Chapter 4: 'The futility of the whole affair struck him suddenly, and he laughed shortly' (67). Gibbon does nothing to prepare the reader for the jarring switch of sympathies that occurs in the following chapter, which describes the encounter between Lady Betty and Salvator who are caught in a storm on the downs. We are invited to look through Salvator's eyes at Lady Betty:

> And somehow it was with no sense of surprise that he looked at the girl presently, when a lone dancing blaze flickered over them, and saw that her face, bright with wet, was smiling. (76-7)

In addition to the replacement of Charters by Salvator as focaliser, the violence of the scene also represents a complete dislocation from the muted, staid perspective that Charters embodied. Lady Betty, so far characterised as a strong-willed exemplar of upper-class gentility, dedicated to the care of her ailing father, is transformed: 'a spirit tuned to the pitch of Salvator's' (76). Presumably the reader is expected to re-tune just as suddenly, but the change is experienced as a puzzling

wrench rather than an illuminating transformation. With Salvator now filling the central narrative position, Charters is for the first time shown in a harshly critical light as in this comment from no less a person than Lady Betty, his erstwhile lover: 'I think he measures the world in terms of purchase and payment' (89), and a page later we are drawn into Salvator's introspection as he gazes at a map of Mozambique. The reader's sympathies are now wholly invested in Salvator and remain with him until Chapter 9 where Charters is re-installed as the central narrative focus until the very last chapter. Even though Salvator produces a convincing speech on his own behalf in Chapter 10, the viewpoint remains Charters's for the rest of the novel, apart from the 'neutral' adventure-style narrative of the Mozambique sequences and the last chapter, which consists of Pumphrey's letter from Caracas.

Paradoxically, Gibbon's failed attempt to provide a convincing structure for the debate between idealism and conventionality looks forward to the successful management of contending viewpoints in Margaret Harding, where he is able to present the opposing arguments with more assurance and with a clearly defined narrative centre. In Margaret Harding Gibbon develops the debate as a natural outcome of the relationships that exist between the characters in and around the Sanatorium, whereas in Salvator he thrusts Salvator mid-stage in an unnatural and stylistically inept shift in narrative focus.

Gibbon also fails to exploit Pumphrey fully as a narrator. Pumphrey is shown to have emerged from a bourgeois English family background in search of adventure and social and financial advancement. Although loyal to Salvator, he

has no qualms about using murder or theft to achieve his goals. His parents recoil from this knowledge: 'Till now none of us has had a hand in bloodshed.' (118), while Salvator recognises a familiar trait in Pumphrey's brother Walter: 'You respond to a hint of greed like a lock to a key.' (122) The epistolary final chapter in which Pumphrey reflects on his Mozambican experiences, reveals the thinly-disguised rapacity of the coloniser/mercenary:

> ... and two days ago we entered this town from one end while the scoundrels who had been in possession were crowding out at the other. (318)

Newly installed in a position of authority, we learn that with his usual cocky self-assurance Pumphrey has gained a higher salary, the position of Lieutenant-General and 'a few other things which I picked up for myself'.

Salvator, after having visited Pumphrey's middle-class family in England, has this insight into his associate's independence of character:

> As a personality he stood alone, and one did not see him as having a family at the back of him, a Christian name to be spoken affectionately; he sufficed by himself. (119)

As a spokesman for the new, classless, European colonial entrepreneur, Pumphrey could have provided a significant 'third' perspective in the novel, in contrast to Salvator's mid-European idealism, and Charters's aristocratic self-righteousness. Although the 'colonial adventurer' perspective is dimly realised in the Mozambican chapters of the novel, Gibbon misses the opportunity of using Pumphrey fully as a significant alternative voice.

Ultimately then, Salvator does not represent an advance on Gibbon's achievement in Souls in Bondage, either in its treatment of the theme of racial interaction (which it completely ignores) or in its control of the point of view of the narrator. It is the only work considered in this thesis that has no central narrative focus: it is like Souls in Bondage without Thwaites. By the time he writes Margaret Harding Gibbon has come closer to achieving the depiction of juxtaposed views and voices through the medium of a sympathetic central character, and Margaret herself is the closest Gibbon comes to realising this in his writing.

CHAPTER 4

MARGARET HARDING

Margaret Harding was published in 1911, seven years after Gibbon left South Africa and a year after Union. Time and separation seem to have sharpened Gibbon's perception of South African society, refining his narrative technique to combine the voice of the insider with that of the dispassionate observer:

> Margaret had started a subject [miscegenation] which no South African can exhaust. They discuss it with heat, with philosophic impartiality, with ethnological and eugenic inexactitudes, and sometimes with bloodshed, but they never wear it out. (186)

Gibbon feels qualified to provide insights into the different players in South African society, while carefully avoiding the ambiguous narrative identifications of The Vrouw Grobelaar's Leading Cases and Souls in Bondage. In Margaret Harding, Gibbon displays a 'liberal' acceptance of racial equality similar to that of his character Paul du Preez, who regards 'all things with an equal wonder and an equal kinship' (58). In narrative asides, Gibbon assumes the role of informed commentator on South African society: the Boer is 'the world's disinherited son' (58) whose combination of pragmatism and idealism place him 'with his feet in the

mud and his head among the stars' (60). On the average white South African's apprehension of his relationship with his black neighbours, he reports:

> There is an instinct in the South African which makes him conscious, in his dim, short-sighted way, that over against him there looms the passive, irreconcilable power of the black races. He is like a man carrying a lantern, with the shifting circle of light about him, and at its frontier the darkness pregnant with presences. (68)

Written at the time of the entrenchment of white colonial interests in South Africa, Margaret Harding reflects in individual terms the deep-seated racial prejudice and fear which motivated broad political manoeuvres to obstruct demands for black rights. Gibbon left South Africa at the height of the political debate that culminated in the Lagden Commission recommendations, which included racial segregation and white political representation for blacks. And as a journalist after his return to Britain, he would have followed the Manchester Guardian's campaign on behalf of the African People's Organisation delegation who visited the country in 1909 to protest against the colour bar recommended by the South African National Convention; and he would also have been aware of M.K. Ghandi's visit to plead on behalf of the Indian population.

His six years as a reporter in South Africa would have exposed Gibbon on a daily basis to the generally hostile public attitude towards white 'liberals' who advocated political rights for blacks, not least from within the columns of the newspapers for which he worked. Edgar Wallace, editor of The Rand Daily Mail, for instance, described the campaign for the black franchise in these terms:

> ... [the] monstrous movement amongst educated natives to have the Kaffir placed on terms of social and political equality with the European, with the alternative of a native combination to drive the last white man into the sea...' (October 20, 1902)

The extent of Gibbon's ideological shift is apparent in the Social Darwinist debate in Margaret Harding. The remaining vestiges of racism apparent in The Vrouw Grobelaar's Leading Cases and Souls in Bondage are directly confronted in Margaret Harding. For instance, Gibbon condemns the contemptuous attitude of the Cape Mounted Police trooper towards 'a person who held lax views in regard to Kafirs and white women' (290). Even more significant is the derisive tone of the authorial intervention (shared by Margaret) that classifies Mr Samson's opinion that 'black and white don't mix' (187-8) as merely a 'fly-blown aphorism'. The change in Gibbon evidenced by these remarks is both philosophical and literary, and signals a clear progression from the attitude expressed in Souls in Bondage that 'everyone knows what Kaffirs are', to an acceptance of racial equality. In Souls in Bondage Thwaites voices this opinion:

> ... where sorrow and joy are concerned, human feelings, and all the great things in life, the question of colour is - er - not an issue. Doesn't matter, you know, and needn't be considered.'. (23)

Thwaites's characteristic hesitancy had registered Gibbon's own indecisiveness at this point, but also, prophetically, the direction of the author's future development, so that in Margaret Harding, Kamis's persecution is placed at the centre of the novel: 'I need friendship, and company, and equality with people about me ...' (157).

As narrator, Gibbon takes the opportunity of establishing an ironic distance between himself and the wider South African debate, while placing his characters fully within that arena. Margaret Harding combines a condemnation of racism and a dismissal of the assumptions of Social Darwinism with an affirmation of the worth of the individual. Gibbon's insight into the nature of white interest is equally perceptive:

> 'It's the one thing that binds [white] people together out here, Dutch and English, colonials and Transvaalers and all the rest - the colour line.' (250).

He had observed that whites were willing to transcend their language differences and present a united front against the 'kafir', a endeavour which was hardly enlightened, but consonant with the white protectionist spirit of Union in 1910. The defensiveness of Francis Carey Slater's comments in a contemporary review confirms that Gibbon's assessment had struck a sensitive chord:

> Mr Gibbon paints the Colonial as a dull and brainless yokel, whose stock topic of conversation is the Kafir, who is also the chief object of his cruelty, hatred and contempt. We venture to think that this picture is not only uncharitable but unjust. (35)

Gibbon's protagonist Margaret mimics his own action by leaving the country, and the debate, behind her. Gibbon's departure inevitably colours our interpretation of the novel itself because in spite of the compelling arguments presented in the dialogue he avoids offering solutions to the problems he raises. Margaret's return, and Kamis's move to the Transkei to treat victims of the smallpox epidemic, evade the main issue of the novel - how can black and white find common ground? How can an entrenched colour bar prevent conflict?

Although Gibbon makes only oblique references to black opposition or rebellion, he does mention the political consequences of the return to Africa of other blacks educated in Europe. Kamis, in discussing his British guardian with Margaret, repeats the warning he received from the old man about 'lapsed' West Africans, who had rebelled against the colonial status quo. Kamis's intentions, however, prove to be more philanthropic, directed towards giving medical assistance to 'the poor beggars who live here, and giv[ing] them a lead towards a more comfortable existence.' (158). Gibbon portrays the authorities unsympathetically, in the person of the implacable Sub-Inspector van Zyl of the Cape Mounted Police, who warns of a black uprising:

> 'The whole lot of 'em are uneasy down in the south there and we're strengthening our posts.' (94).

Van Zyl's harsh interrogation of Margaret bears out the seriousness with which Kamis's presence is regarded, as does the thoroughness of the organised search which culminates in Kamis's arrest at the Sanatorium. Earlier, the reader has been invited to share Margaret's horror at the spectacle of the blighted, hopeless string of captives that van Zyl leads past the Sanatorium:

> ... perhaps twenty Kafirs, men and women both, dusty, lean creatures, with the eyes, at once timorous and untamable, of wild animals. They shuffled along dejectedly, their feet lifting the dust in spurts and wreaths, their backs bent to the labour of the journey. Three or four of the men were handcuffed together, and these made the van of the unhappy body; but, save for these fetters, there was nothing to distinguish one from another. Their separate individualities seemed merged in a single slavish-

> ness, and as they turned their heads to look at the white people elevated on the stoep, they showed only a row of white, hopeless eyes. (91)

There is an echo in the description of van Zyl's prisoners of the passage in Conrad's Heart of Darkness where Marlowe catches sight of the hopeless chain-gang of black prisoners being led through the company's station in Africa:

> Six black men advanced in a file, toiling up the path ... each had an iron collar on his neck, and all were connected together with a chain whose bights swung between them, rhythmically clinking. ... All their meagre breasts panted together, the violently dilated nostrils quivered, the eyes stared stonily up-hill. They passed me within six inches, without a glance, with that complete deathlike indifference of unhappy savages. (22-3)

F.R. Karl in Joseph Conrad: Three Lives - A Biography refers to Gibbon 'with whom Conrad would later contemplate doing a play about his African sketches'. In May 1913, Conrad contacted his publisher about the possibility of writing a play with Gibbon. The time period suggests that it was Gibbon's Margaret Harding material that would have formed the basis of this proposed play, and the unitary setting of the novel (the main action takes place in the Sanatorium itself, with only brief forays beyond) and the high proportion of dialogue give the novel strong dramatic qualities. Although there is no firm evidence, it is likely that Conrad planned to collaborate on a work with Gibbon, along the lines of previous joint ventures with Ford Madox Hueffer (Ford) such as The Inheritors (1901), and which may have been prevented by Gibbon's involvement as correspondent for the Daily Chronicle in the First World War. Just how far their collaborative effort developed is difficult

to ascertain, but the close working relationship between the two writers may account for Gibbon's firmer artistic control in Margaret Harding, as compared to the earlier works.

Gibbon was a close family friend and dedicated Margaret Harding to Jessie and Joseph Conrad. Zdzistaw Najder in Joseph Conrad: A Chronicle writes:

> Perceval Gibbon [was]...a gifted writer, energetic reporter, and motorcycle fan. Gibbon soon became almost a member of the Conrad household. Jessie even described him as 'perhaps the closest and for both Joseph Conrad and me, the most intimate [friend]' Uncle Reggie (Gibbon's unused first name was Reginald) was also adored by both Conrad boys. Gibbon was youthful, bursting with energy, and known for his sharp wit; his attitude towards Conrad was one of respect and filial protection. (352)

It is likely that Conrad contributed towards the characteristic style of the novel, and possibly also towards its theme. Apart from the description of the prisoners, the style of other passages, especially descriptions of the Karoo landscape, is strongly reminiscent of Conrad's writing. For example, as Margaret takes her first long look at the Karoo from the stoep of the Sanatorium, Gibbon imbues its physical features with a philosophical and thematic significance which is not a noticeable element in his earlier fiction:

> She stood between the square pillars with their dead and ruined vines, and looked forth at a land upon which the light stood stagnant. It was as though the Karoo challenged her conception of it ... The shadows had

> promised a mystery, the light discovered a void. ... Margaret, quickly sensitive to the quality of her environment, gazed at it almost with a sense of awe, baffled by the fact that no words at her command were pliant enough to fit it. It was not 'wild' nor 'desolate' nor even 'beautiful'; none of the words allotted to landscapes, with which folk are used to label the land they live upon, could be stretched to the compass of this great staring vacancy. It was outside of language; it struck a note not included in the gamut of speech. 'Inhuman' came nearest to it, for the salient quality of it was something that bore no relation to the lives - and deaths - of men. (36)

Margaret's inability to find a place in the bigoted social fabric of colonial South Africa is foreshadowed in this passage as she stands like a sacrificial victim unable to put words to the scene before her. Here Gibbon expresses a typically alienated European reaction to the African landscape similar to that already registered by Olive Schreiner in The Story of An African Farm and echoed by later writers like William Plomer and Douglas Livingstone. The symbolic richness of some of Gibbon's descriptions in Margaret Harding is conspicuously absent from his earlier (and later) work, and this aspect of Margaret Harding also seems to reflect Conrad's influence.

A comparison between two passages, one from Souls in Bondage and the other from Margaret Harding, both describing African locations, emphasises the emergence of a new metaphorical signification in the latter work. In Souls in Bondage, the black location is described thus:

> ... a town of brown huts, orderly set, and that toy-like neatness and suavity of outline which hallmarks all Kafir work. (4)

In Margaret Harding, however, a reference to the black section of the 'small, stagnant veld dorp' suggests the complex economic and social bonds that link black and white in South Africa:

> ... and the big, brown native location like a tuberous root at the lower end. (134)

There is also the startling image of the aloes sent by Kamis to Margaret and which seem to her, 'cold, flaunting flowers which had come to her out of the wilderness, as though to remind her that at the heart of it there was a voice crying', (89) while to Fat Mary, in direct contrast, they are 'stink-flowers'.

Conrad's influence on Gibbon seems to have gone beyond technique alone and affected his views on colonialism. Although a long way from Conrad's complex response to Social Darwinism in Heart of Darkness, for example, the explicit rejection of racism and criticism of the colonial reaction to Kamis distinguishes Margaret Harding sharply from all Gibbon's earlier work. Gibbon's denunciation of colonial racism in Margaret Harding represents a radical departure from the ideology implicit in his endorsement of the white supremacist Mozambican revolution which is the central action of Salvator.

Conrad went on to dedicate Victory (1915) to Perceval and Maisie Gibbon, and Michael Chapman in an unpublished letter makes an interesting comparison between the two authors:

> One can see [Gibbon's racial] qualifications, even ambivalences as a weakness, or as the significant part of a real struggle by the author to break free of the Victorian racial ethos into a saner, more tolerant vision. It is interesting that Gibbon dedicates the book to Joseph Conrad with whom he was friendly - for Heart of Darkness had represented Conrad's own struggle to free himself from the idea that black races were naturally inferior (because lower on the evolutionary scale) and to see worth judged according to behaviour and deeds.

Conrad may have served as both model and mentor for Gibbon who could have used his first-hand experience of Conrad's nervous breakdown, which occurred at about this time, in developing the character of Dr Jakes. Towards the end of the composition of Under Western Eyes in May 1910, Conrad underwent what Karl describes as a 'complete breakdown' (680) and Jessie Conrad in her Joseph Conrad and His Circle describes Gibbon's role in this way:

> If it had not been for Perceval Gibbon who came often and always, it seemed, in the nick of time, I feel sure I would not have held out.' (144)

Jessie's role as wife, protector and maintainer of the family 'business' (she was afraid that Conrad would destroy the only extant manuscript and kept a proprietary eye on it during the illness) mirrors in some ways the relationship between the Jakeses. Certainly the sympathy with which Gibbon describes this aspect of Mrs Jakes's otherwise unappealing character, seems to be attributable in part to his admiration for Jessie Conrad. There is, however, another possible model for the Mrs Jakes character that pre-dates Gibbon's acquaintance with the Conrads. In an occasional piece written for The Rand Daily Mail while he was working as a

reporter for the newspaper in Johannesburg in 1902, Gibbon describes a long-suffering hotel owner's wife whose dignity in despair suggests that of Mrs Jakes, as well as something of the predicament of the South African colonial wife in general. In a paragraph entitled 'A Tragedy', part of the short article of traveller's reminiscences called 'Along the Road: A Journey by Post Cart', he writes:

> A gaunt smiling man received us, and behind him stood a thin, worn little woman with untidy grey hair, and pale, weary eyes ... I noticed that he was positively trembling with suppressed excitement, and that he moved about ceaselessly. The little woman was divided between the table arrangements and keeping a watchful eye on him. Her gaze followed him throughout.

Later, the husband in an audible aside tells one of the travellers that if his wife should claim that he is mad, they should not believe her. The last words of the piece give the reader an insight into the woman's personal hell. Gibbon asks her,

> 'How long have you lived in this place?'...
>
> 'Sixteen years,' she answered briefly.

Gibbon's choice of a sanatorium as the location for the novel, has both historical and metaphorical significance. A.E. Voss, in a paper on Olive Schreiner, has pointed out that at the end of the nineteenth century, South Africa was popularly regarded by Europeans as a healthy resort for convalescents, and quotes John Alexander Wilmot's 1884 publication The Most Delightful Voyage in the World:

> For pulmonary complaints medical men agree that there is no finer climate in the world than the plateau of Cradock and Queenstown and the plains of the Free State. (5)

It was also at this time that James Logan founded the town of Matjiesfontein for the treatment of wealthy consumptives. But in addition to the physical disabilities of the characters, Gibbon gives symbolic significance to Dr Jakes's sanatorium as the setting for an illness within South African society itself. The sanatorium inmates' rejection of the professionally competent Kamis in favour of the dissipated Dr Jakes reveals a society debilitated by its unwillingness to overcome racial prejudice even for its own ultimate good. In addition, the 'disease' metaphor suggested by the setting can be seen to extend to Margaret's moral or spiritual (rather than physical) 'cure', in overcoming her initial racist aversion to Kamis.

This moral development of Margaret Harding herself, consistent with the expectations of the 'conventional' individual-realist novel, may also be attributable to the influence of Conrad, and complements Gibbon's focus on the social debate inherent in her relationship across the colour line. Margaret is shown to grow from a position of repugnance to Kamis's negroid features to one of acceptance. Her initial reaction to Kamis is an irrational repulsion:

> The Kafir waited, standing up, a slender, upright young man in worn, discoloured clothes. To Margaret then, as to Paul in his first encounter with him at the station, there was a shock in the pitiful, gross negro face that went with the pleasant, cultivated voice. (72)

Even in an attempt to express an attitude of qualified racial tolerance, Ford reveals a similar distaste:

> 'Well, the ordinary person knows all right that a matter of the tar-brush in the complexion doesn't make such a mighty difference in two human beings ... But all that doesn't prevent him from barring niggers utterly in

his own concerns. It doesn't stop his flesh from creeping when he reads of the woman in Cape Town, and imagines her sitting on the Kafir's knee.' (195).

It is precisely at the dramatically significant moment of Margaret and Kamis's 'discovery' by Boy Bailey that Margaret is shown to have consciously come to terms with her unjustified aversion to Kamis:

> Margaret raised herself and sat up, deliberately thrusting down out of her consciousness that instinctive element which bade her do injustice and withhold from the man before her his due of acknowledgement. (160)

Later she counters Ford's racist remarks by telling him that in her meetings with Kamis she 'didn't shrink ... My flesh didn't crawl once. When I shake his hand, it feels just the same as yours.' (251). In her encounter with Kamis immediately before his capture by the trooper, she is able for the first time fully to transcend her physical aversion to the black man:

> She remembered the expression on Ford's face when he had questioned her as to whether she did not experience a repulsion at a Kafir's proximity to her, and tried now to find any such aversion in herself. They stood in an intimate nearness, so that she could not have moved from her place without touching him; but there was none... (279)

Viewed in the context of the novel as a whole, Margaret's personal 'growth' serves to highlight Gibbon's own struggle to come to terms with an ambiguous attitude towards race. The fact that Margaret and Kamis's relationship does not develop into intimacy, may suggest that he still experiences difficulty with this issue

in spite of his narrative endorsement of her development. While it is impossible to determine the reasons for Gibbon's apparent aversion to African features, one explanation may be that he used it merely as a deliberate ploy to produce a frisson in his popular European readership, receptive to the 'forbidden fruit' appeal of sex across the colour bar. Whatever his intention, Margaret's achievement is clearly also Gibbon's, and serves to redeem some of the racist excesses of The Vrouw Grobelaar's Leading Cases (e.g. 'The Hands of the Pitiful Woman') and suggests some distancing from racism that he has managed to establish consistently for the first time.

In spite of his interest in Margaret's personal 'development', Gibbon's main preoccupation, and his real achievement in Margaret Harding, is in his reflection of the social milieu in which her relationship with Kamis takes place. Margaret's departure from the Sanatorium is one of the most compelling scenes in the novel and one that most clearly indicates a development in sophistication and style from the Gibbon of the earlier works. In the concluding chapter of the novel, Margaret has been given 'official' sanction by her Sanatorium companions to bid farewell to Kamis, whose friendship has outraged South African sensibilities (both black and white) and has led to her premature departure from the country. Arranged along the stoep above the couple are 'the deputies of the colonial Mrs Grundy' (315) and closer by are the puzzled eyes of the black servants carrying Margaret's luggage. The scene neatly assembles the representatives of the different social voices that Gibbon has shown operating throughout the novel: Mrs Jakes typifying white colonial enmity towards the mixed-race pair on the one hand and Fat Mary, her black servant, equally hostile, on the other. In between there are representatives

of further subtle shades of local opinion: Vivie du Preez's presence points to the possibility of changing attitudes towards cross-cultural relations, and Paul's to a full acceptance of racial equality, which throughout the novel has suggested the possibility of individual relationships entirely free of race prejudice. Mr Samson represents the unshakable colonial Victorian confidence in the superiority of the European races, while Ford reflects a more tolerant attitude, recognising an equality of class, but not of race.

Occurring under such close scrutiny, the actual farewell between the two protagonists, Margaret and Kamis, is inevitably a self-conscious affirmation of the polite, asexual friendship it has always been, in spite of the innuendo fuelled by local gossip that has led to Margaret's ostracism. It is on the social dynamic of the assembled cast of characters that Gibbon literally places the spotlight - in the form of the watery sun that

> shone on them feebly between clouds, and they looked like the culminating scene in some lugubrious drama. (316).

In spite of the self-parody - on one level Margaret Harding is a melodrama - Gibbon has skilfully provided a dramatic vignette of the various contending social voices heard in the novel. Mr Samson's influence with the Governor has rescued Kamis from the charge of sedition, thereby conveniently removing the baleful influence of Sub-Inspector van Zyl as if by the convention of a deus ex machina. The whole theatrical ensemble is held together, and lent humorous ironic distance by Gibbon's imposition of several admonitory coughs that remind us not only of the presence of the 'audience' during the farewell, but more importantly the pervasive-

ness of the social proprieties that have been decisive in determining the outcome of the relationship: taboos which have been temporarily suspended for the occasion.

> '...I wanted to thank you for what you did for me that night,' said Margaret earnestly. 'It was a horrible thing, wasn't it? But I hear - I have heard that it has come all right.'
>
> Mr Samson coughed again. Mrs. Jakes, with an elbow in each hand, coughed also.
>
> 'All right for me, certainly,' the Kafir answered. 'They have given me something to do. There's an epidemic of small-pox among the natives in the Transkei, and I'm to go there at once...' (315)

The entire passage both encapsulates and confirms Gibbon's intention, obvious throughout the novel, of juxtaposing social viewpoints that typify the various shades of South African opinion, allowing Gibbon to abdicate a judgemental role and leaving the reader to draw moral inferences. It is precisely the same technique to be seen in the earlier works, but executed here with an accomplished artistic self-awareness. In The Vrouw Grobelaar's Leading Cases the interplay between Vrouw Grobelaar herself, Katje and the narrator is secondary to the stories themselves, while in Souls in Bondage Gibbon's ambivalence only confuses the reader's response to the parallel plots. In Salvator, Gibbon withdraws his authorial point of view altogether. The absence of a clearly signalled moral standpoint in the earlier works tends to leave the reader vacillating between condemnation and approval. But Gibbon has overcome this indecisiveness in Margaret Harding and the politely coughing Mrs Grundys of the conclusion of the novel are clear evidence of this new

confidence and control. Michael Rice in a review of the 1983 reprint of Margaret Harding says of the novel:

> The artist's vision transcends both prejudice and social pretension. (14)

It is possible to detect in Gibbon's narrative voice a reflection of his feelings about his own experience of South Africa. In a reference to Mrs Jakes, he writes: 'Many a man leaves less when his time comes in South Africa.' (51). Yet in spite of the apparent victory of white colonial opinion on the stoep of the Sanatorium, Gibbon does offer a symbolic solution to South African racial divisions, in the form of the woman from Cape Town, mentioned several times in the novel, who has married a black parson.

The subject is introduced, ironically, by arch-racist Mrs Jakes with the intention of embarrassing Margaret who she knows is acquainted with Kamis. Mrs Jakes's comment on the matter is typical of the average white colonial: 'To go and marry a Kafir - the vile creature.'(186). A later comment by Margaret gives the woman's action symbolic significance. While projecting a vision of the society of the future, she says:

> 'There'll be a statue in one of those glazed brick cities to the woman in Cape Town ... It'll be inscribed in letters of gold: "To -," whatever her name was. "She felt the future in her bones"'. (187)

Although this image reflects Margaret's whimsicality (registered by Gibbon through Mr Samson's rejoinder, which is a noisy blowing sound) the monument image appears again in a later conversation between Margaret and Kamis:

> 'But while she lives they'll make her suffer; they'll never forgive her. I wish I could have seen her before I go.' (280).

The strength of Margaret's romantic identification with the woman, suggests that the statue image expresses an ideal shared by Gibbon himself. The statue to the first miscegenator has a pre-echo in an earlier reference to a meeting between Kamis and a white prostitute in Cape Town. The encounter provides an early hint of the social ostracism that will follow the later central black/white relationship in the novel:

> ' ...two homeless people, cast out by our own folk and rejected by the other colour.' (79).

Significantly, Gibbon locates the incident near the van Riebeeck statue:

> ' ...and van Riebeck [sic] looking over our heads to Table Mountain.'.

However, Kamis's own attitude towards the woman from Cape Town is in surprising contrast to Margaret's:

> Kamis uttered an embarrassed laugh. 'Well,' he said, 'I'm afraid I'm not very sympathetic. I suppose I've lived too long among white people; my proper instincts have been perverted. But the fact is, I think that woman was - wrong.' (281)

Kamis's objections remind us of Gibbon's earlier aversion to miscegenation expressed in Souls in Bondage, but here Gibbon gives the words to an African, and in a context in which the author appears to have come to terms with his own previous reservations. It is equally possible that Kamis's disapproval (so very similar to that expressed by Ford) may also reflect what Gibbon sees as the irony, even the tragedy, of a 'civilised' African 'trapped' in a black skin. Gibbon's

developing artistic maturity, by the time he wrote Margaret Harding, had led him to confront in his own work something of the ambiguity that Gareth Cornwell, in 'Deconstructing The Fiction of Race', identifies as typical of colonial fiction:

> Such paradoxes are symptomatic of the dissonance between the racist ideology of Empire and the liberal-humanist tradition of the discursive mode in which that ideology achieved literary expression, a tradition which locates meaning not in some invisible cosmic principle but in the mind of the individual subject. (23)

Moreover, Kamis's views accurately reflect divisions that existed amongst contemporary black political organisations over the merits of racial segregation: the South African Native National Congress, for example, rejected the concept of segregation only in 1913, two years after the publication of Margaret Harding.

Yet in spite of the inconclusiveness of the ending of the novel (in terms of social forecasting as well as the future development of the characters Margaret and Kamis), Gibbon leaves the reader with the haunting image of the statue depicting a Margaret-like miscegenator presiding over a harmonious non-racial society of the future. The clash between what is almost a utopian ideal on the one hand, and Gibbon's pragmatic recognition of the self-protective 'union' of whites on the other, tends to confirm his insight as a social commentator.

Gibbon's particular achievement was to focus on a key feature of the social evolution of South Africa: the relationship between black and white. His own progress as novelist was intimately linked to his developing understanding of the issue of race, and the refinement of his writing technique is closely matched by his

success in overcoming his own racial prejudices. Gibbon's achievement in bringing enlightenment to the sombre area of racial division equals that of Schreiner and Blackburn. He leaves no final vision or grand resolution to the social problems he so accurately renders in his work, but the comment of a reviewer in The State soon after the publication of Margaret Harding in 1911 still provides an accurate commentary on his entire South African output:

> We remember no scene in fiction to equal the grim irony of that in which Kamis, under arrest for sedition - with Dr. Jakes sodden drunk in the armchair - gives directions to Ford for the medical treatment of Margaret, who has been stricken with a sudden haemorrhage at the shock of his arrest. So that this is a gloomy book, dark with the shadow of disease, and with the deeper shadow of the colour problem, under the hard brilliance of the South African sun. (276)

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