Kunapipi 13 (1 & 2) 1991 Full Version

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Abstract

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KUNAPIPI

So give me
Pen and paper
I will write verses
In the midst
Of torture

Special Double Issue

New Art and Literature from
South Africa
Kunapiipi is a tri-annual arts magazine with special but not exclusive emphasis on the new literatures written in English. It aims to fulfil the requirements T.S. Eliot believed a journal should have: to introduce the work of new or little known writers of talent, to provide critical evaluation of the work of living authors, both famous and unknown, and to be truly international. It publishes creative material and criticism. Articles and reviews on related historical and sociological topics plus film will also be included as well as graphics and photographs.

The editor invites creative and scholarly contributions. Manuscripts should be double-spaced with footnotes gathered at the end, should conform to the MHRA (Modern Humanities Research Association) Style Sheet, and should be accompanied by a return envelope.

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KIRSTEN HOLST PETERSEN
& ANNA RUTHERFORD
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Introduction: An Altered Aesthetics?

It is culture to create a new person in a new society with democratic values.¹

It is not a revolutionary observation that South Africa is at a crossroads. On the one hand things look good: Mandela is free, the ANC is unbanned, the pass laws have been officially dropped, and a constitutional conference about the final abolishment of the apartheid state and the institution of a new state based on democratic power-sharing is at an advanced stage of planning. On the other side things are not substantially different. The apartheid state is still there, blacks still do not have the vote, and most important of all, the inequality and the resultant appalling living conditions for both blacks and coloureds are still the same. But the mood is different. It is an explosive mix of political euphoria and unchanged poverty and social inequality. In this situation one thing has changed radically: the political discourse.

Whilst politicians are still battling with the all too real power structure of white South Africa, the opposition between Afrikaaner state and dispossessed masses seems passé in all other fields of discussion. The parameters of educational, national and cultural debates have moved far into the future, leaving the Boers behind like a bad taste. Instead, they concentrate on forming the policies and power relations in the new order. Discourse, in Foucault's use of the word, is 'the name for that language by which dominant groups within society constitute the field of “truth” through the imposition of specific knowledges, disciplines, and values'.² Using the word in this precise meaning, this book is about the struggle to appropriate the discourse within the particular field of cultural production. The positions and strategies of this battle for hegemony are not unique to the South African situation; they fall into a post-colonial pattern whereby certain aesthetic values which have been accepted as universal are suddenly questioned by an emergent group. In South Africa the following statement by Steven Watson has been singled out as a particularly virulent statement of the dominant, metropolitan aesthetics.

Overwhelmingly, the black poetry of the last two decades consists of a number of half-assimilated European conventions which are frequently patched together in so confused and piecemeal a fashion.... The more one absorbs this poetry, the more one is reminded of the old truism that declares bad art always to be totally determined by its socio-historical context, good art never.³

Over and above the opinions expressed in the above quotation it is the unflinching appropriation of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ which carries the cultural baggage of Western hegemony. The opposition expresses itself in much more cautious terms.

The ANC does not ask you to become political pamphleteers.... While we require propaganda art we do not demand that every graphic artist and sculptor become a prop artist. We would urge our artists to pursue excellence in their respective disciplines – to be excellent artists and to serve the struggle for liberation with excellent art.⁴
Despite the above declaration's attempt to uphold perceived standards it is likely to lead to the category of 'bad' art, as the demand to serve the struggle will very likely lead to art which 'is totally determined by its social-historical situation'. The various interpretations of the terms 'good', 'bad' and 'excellent' are capable of carrying vast philosophical and ideological assumptions, and the same is true for the nexus which is set up between aesthetic values and certain themes. The struggle to appropriate the cultural discourse is both specific in its actual arguments and larger than life in its scope and intentions.

Michael Chapman's contribution throws the reader into the middle of an ongoing and, at times, quite vicious debate: the question of 'literary excellence' versus 'relevance'. Chapman is obviously beleaguered, both by critics and by his own struggle with a difficult standpoint. He takes his starting point in a speech by Albie Sachs, 'Preparing Ourselves for Freedom', in which Sachs says amongst other things 'let the criterion of good art not be prescriptive, but broadly anti-apartheid.' This obviously pleased the white upholders of standards - and here the poet Stephen Watson is the bête noire - and inspired them into more 'jargon of Eurocentricism' (Chapman's words). Evidently, Chapman finds that Sachs has gone too far in trying to soften up ANC demands for commitment and relevance and that international subjects like the killing of whales cannot yet be considered of equal importance with 'the killing fields of Natal'. Chapman explains his standpoint by outlining the crisis of belief in the efficacy of art which was the result of the political and social devastations of the 1980s, and the logical result of this, which is a demand for 'accountability to progressive forces'. In this light the short story writer Mtutuzeli Matshoba is preferred to Coetzee and Achebe to Conrad, and perhaps the most important 'resistance tools' are those of 'toye-toye dance, singing, murals, stickers, banners, badges and wooden AK 47s'.

Some of the controversy of the 'pursuit of excellence' discussion also hinges on the different meanings given to the term 'excellence', i.e. is whether it is defined as purely aesthetic or as related to the context (social situation). Chapman thinks the latter, and he urges critics to make humility rather than sophistications of irony their touchstone. He sees a change of emphasis in preferred genres as one of the practical effects of this changed perspective: not poem, play or novel, but short story, autobiography or the political testimony. Arguing for the side of relevance Chapman thus touches upon not only burning South African issues, but also the wider issues of post-colonial criticism and its attempts to rid itself of inherited assumptions of the universal good and to install localised and relativised versions of 'good for us, at this point in history'.

Stephen Gray is concerned with the same issues and even uses the same pattern of outlining the general parameters of the discussion and then fitting his own literary production into it. Although at first he seems to be agreeing with Chapman about the general direction of literary and critical endeavours, a significant diversion occurs, cutting across Chapman's battle lines of Eurocentric, elitist supporters of excellence versus relativist, socially conscious cultural worker. So Gray carefully situates himself between the two major spokespersons for the black and the white writers in South Africa, Nadine Gordimer and Njabulo Ndebele, even though he does not believe in in this particular set of 'poles of a Hegelian dialectic'. From their different perspectives they arrive at an agreement about certain important aspects. They both see the writer as a spokesperson for certain political goals, and they both see literature as a valuable means in the battle for social transformation. Gray then explains how his own literary production fits into these objectives, both in terms of ideological orientation and concomitant stylistic innovation. He chooses the 'non-canonical forms' of the thriller, the historical romance and the epistolary novel. This general level of agreement with Chapman's position, however, covers some major disagreements. Gray goes on to quote Coetzee's plea for a divorce between the discourse of history and that of the novel and
for a novel 'prepared to work itself out outside the terms of class conflict, race conflict, gender conflict'. Gray furthermore applauds Coetzee for being 'suspicious of cashable relevance' and 'rightly dismissive of reductive sloganeering'. He obviously sees himself as working for the same goals as Chapman, but using different means: European (British) notions of literary standards and the autonomy of literature.

Sally Ann Murray approaches the same question from a slightly different angle. Starting from the basic assumption that South Africa has undergone a radical transformation — is in an ‘altered state’ — she then discusses what kind of stories will be most appropriate for this new situation. In line with Michael Chapman she finds that they are likely to be ‘factual rather than imaginative’, and on this premise she argues for a re-evaluation of an earlier, and somewhat neglected novel, Phyllis Altman’s *The Law of the Vultures* (1952). The novel has been criticised precisely for ‘lack of art’ by the kind of criticism which separates a historical consciousness from an artistic one. Murray sees the strength of *The Law of the Vultures* as lying precisely in its ‘refusal to separate its material commitments from the art of fiction’. True to this programme, she sets about establishing the author’s political credentials. Altman was a liberal who very early on grew impatient with slow gradualism and eventually became Assistant General Secretary of SACITU. She was banned in 1963 and forced to leave South Africa, but despite living in exile she made a deliberate effort to write primarily for a home readership, to conscientize a white South African audience.

The defence of the novel hinges on the connection between an ideological theme (the opposition between trade unionism and black nationalism) and its fictional guise, and Murray finds that the characters are convincing enough to carry their ideological burdens without becoming flat. Like Gray, she argues for a different form to carry the altered message, but unlike him, she suggests some radical departures from realist expectations; amongst these expectations she includes the privileging of individual experience, the evocation of setting and a resolution of action and moral theme. Instead she invokes Bakhtin’s notion of heteroglossia, and so defends the inconclusive ending as truer to the social reality. *The Law of the Vultures* has suffered by being compared with Paton’s *Cry, the Beloved Country*, and Murray feels that in the present — and possibly future — situation there is more call for social commitment than for Christian idealism.

David Maughan Brown continues the discussion of critical standards by analysing a group of poems which appeared between January 1987 and June/July 1989 in a ‘poetry corner’ in the weekly supplement, *Echo*, of the Pietermaritzburg daily paper, the *Natal Witness*. During that period some 1400 people were killed in clashes between UDF and Inkatha. The political background is outlined, and Maughan Brown states his own political opinion by blaming Inkatha for the increase in violence.

The poems, which are submitted by township readers, are first analysed in terms of their intended function and political content. This part of the paper falls into the category of literary sociology, in which literature is only one text among many from which information about the opinions or ideology of a certain group can be gleaned, and the conclusion to this part is overtly political. The poems are seen to be didactic, to call for unity, to lament the situation or to try and boost morale, but Maughan Brown finds in them an almost total absence of any analysis of political process. Instead of political solutions the poets turn to God and see the situation as punishment for sin. Whilst Maughan Brown acknowledges that the religious vocabulary can be a disguise for a political message, he mainly laments this ‘displacement of the political onto the religious terrain’, and he blames the situation and ultimately the colonizers for this.

The other aspect of the paper is concerned with the problem of evaluation, which these poems raise. Maughan Brown answers this question in two ways. First he analyses some of the poems in a detailed, New Critical manner, paying close attention to
imagery and finding ambiguities and puns, two highly prized commodities in ‘high’ literary criticism. After this practical demonstration, he then states his opinion that a refusal to engage with poems of this nature on the ground that they do not constitute ‘good’ literature must be contradictory to a liberal or radical sympathy for the struggle. ‘Literary criticism needs to find ways to engage seriously with the ‘voice of the voiceless’. This is as far from the Coetzee/Gray attitude as you can get.

Andries Oliphant discusses the contribution of literary journals to the cultural debate, and this discussion turns into a severe indictment of the British orientated, liberal humanist stance. The journals are grouped into interest groups, defined as ‘a white liberal English tradition, a non-racial democratic tradition, a black Africanist tradition, a white Afrikaans conservative and racist tradition and a liberal, white and black Afrikaans tendency’. Oliphant puts the existing journals into these categories and reserves most space for an angry polemic against the first of these groups. He rages against its stated ‘universal aesthetic principles’, its preference for certain themes (these exclude racism), and its aesthetics, ‘fiercely hostile to socially oriented literary practices’. His denouncement of Eurocentricism and universalism, parading some ‘mystical’ European set of literary rules as the standard of good literature, is closely aligned with the general trend in post-colonial criticism, and in this perspective the British liberal tradition becomes a kind of sly oppressor who oppresses, not with the gun, but with intellectual and aesthetic rules which can be more insidious than the physical oppression. The black Africanist group endeavours to liberate itself from this pressure and combines a strong opposition to European cultural traditions with a search for an African aesthetic and artistic roots. Oliphant, who is editor of Staffrider, endorses the radical, non-racialist standpoint.

Mzwakhe represents, together with the Echo poets, the subject of the controversy. He is a political poet, working for the cultural workers’ groups within the UDF. He composes his own poems and recites them from memory at large political gatherings, and he also performs with a band, where he is the lead singer. His poems, when written down and read in isolation (as in this volume), do not stand up very well to traditional methods of literary criticism, and so the critic is faced with the choice of either branding them as sub-standard (the British, liberal approach) or devising a different set of critical tools and standards, which can take into account the event, the audience, the purpose, the aesthetics of a mass rally rather than of poetic diction, the cliché’s capability of carrying meaning in certain situations etc.

The reality behind these disagreements about the nature and function of literature is, of course, the Apartheid State. The vast inequality in living standards and education between the white and black groups must of necessity be reflected in the kind of literary output which the two groups produce. It is common knowledge that black and coloured literature favours the shorter forms of poetry and the short story and the factual form of the autobiography, whereas the white writers, whilst they also include these forms, have gained their international reputations mainly through their novels. There is one significant South African genre, however, which is shared by all groups of radical writers: the Prison Memoir. The criteria for inclusion in this group is not colour or social status, but political orientation and degree of radicalism. Despite the fact that South African prisons operate an apartheid system, under which black prisoners have a far worse deal than white ones, the general treatment of political prisoners is severe enough for all the writers of prison memoirs to be included in this league of survivors of the unimaginable. J.U. Jacobs’ article discusses a number of writers’ attempts at rendering the unimaginable manageable for themselves and imaginable for the reader. ‘The experience of detention and imprisonment is a major determinant of literary production in South Africa to day’ he states. Jacobs sets out to produce a grammar of the prison diary, drawing not only on a wide body of writing from
South Africa but also making comparisons with outside writers, such as Ngugi and Soyinka. This litany of horrors has the effect of highlighting the political reality and the necessity of altering it; in other words, it focusses the attention on political rather than literary problems. Jacobs, however, concentrates on the individual, psychological level, which is the one which is presented in the literature. He uses concepts from psychology, such as the DDD (Debility, Dependency and Dread) symptom and ‘post-traumatic stress disorder’, and these concepts help explain the behaviour patterns which occur in the prison narratives. There are no stylistic or literary considerations, and the article falls into the category of sociological criticism, in which the literature is read for the information it can disclose. For a genre which is as raw and bleeding as the recently lived prison memoir this seems appropriate, and perhaps by default this article sheds some light on the controversy. Perhaps certain experiences or lifestyles do not lend themselves to literary contemplation or stylistic innovations. The mass funeral, the protest rally or torture in prison might just be such experiences, and with their disappearance (one hopes) the controversy will perhaps lose some of its fire.

There are of course exceptions to all the generalisations stated above; I am only outlining trends, not setting down laws. I will, however, maintain that the prison narrative forces a grounding in reality which can make theorising seem oddly out of place or even misguided, as Cherry Clayton maintains. She continues the discussion of prison narratives, but narrows it down to women’s prison narratives in order to explore two specific aspects: the perceived irrelevance of the struggles organized around nationality, race and gender which is implied by the prefix ‘post’ (post-apartheid, post-feminism and post-colonial) and, more specifically, the relationship between family and state in the prison narratives by women. On the first point she argues against the post-colonial view that ‘comparative methodology and ... hybridized and syncretic views’ is the gateway to a new dispensation which has already emerged with the advent of writers and critics of that order. She punctures this rhetoric by pointing to how identity is shaped by the power structures in the real world. The prison narratives are her examples of this, and on this point she reaches the conclusion that only ‘the defence of specific rights, and specific freedoms’ can liberate the world as she knows it, and this can only be done through the battles centred around nationality, race and gender, both in reality and in literature.

This view again flies in the face of Coetzee’s call for a novel which is not based on ‘class, race and gender’, and along with several of the other contributors Clayton views literature as a tool in the struggle. With regard to the second point, Clayton discusses two black and two white women’s prison narratives and comes to the conclusion that the two black writers view the family as a warm, sustaining unit, despite their own double colonization, whilst the white writers either play down family life or develop a family attachment which makes it possible to join the political struggle. In other words, the feminist equation between the patriarchal family and the equally patriarchal state does not hold for the women writers she has chosen to discuss; the political liberation comes before feminist or gender liberation.

This problem is also discussed by the next contributor, Lauretta Ngcobo, who describes impressions and thoughts from a recent visit to South Africa after having been in exile since the 60s. She finds that there have been no material changes in black peoples’ lives; the majority of them live in utter poverty despite the political optimism, and she thinks that this unequal power relationship casts doubts on attempts to forge a South African sisterhood across the colour bar. She also believes that the new situation has created new lines of division among black women. Although united by race and gender, they are divided by class. This aspect is discussed in terms of the difficulties of coping with the situation black madam, black maid, and she questions the right of black middle class women to speak for working class or traditional women, just as she has
always been opposed to white women acting as spokespersons for black women. The important lines of division in post-apartheid South Africa are obviously going to be class and gender, not race. Ngcobo outlines important obstacles to gender equality which need to be removed: the legal status of black women, the limited access to bank loans and the unequal representation on the governing bodies of the political parties. Here, Clayton and Ngcobo are in agreement that ‘defence of specific rights, and specific freedoms’ is the path to liberation, both in apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa.

The only contributor who is not from South Africa is Kirsten Holst Petersen, and it is not a coincidence that her contribution is concerned with a novel by an established writer, Nadine Gordimer. It is this aspect of South African literature which it is possible to follow and study from a European geographical position. Her discussion of A Sport of Nature hinges on two issues which are raised by Gordimer in the novel, and which the two previous contributors have also discussed: the connection between feminism and nationalism and the role of – in this case white women – in a liberated South Africa. Gordimer agrees with Ngcobo that white women should not act as spokespersons for black women, and she outlines a scenario in which her main character tries to avoid this. However, in the course of this Gordimer falls foul of feminists, because her heroine is forced back into a subservient female role of the type which feminists have spent much energy on working their way out of. The article explores this clash and tries to account for it.

Choosing the poetry and short stories for this volume could be a test of where the editors stand in the battle which goes on in the greater part of the volume, but we have opted out of the controversy and included both people’s poems and more literary ones to illustrate both sides of the debate. The poems cover the ground from radical protest to post-protest. The pivotal point is the moment of change, not necessarily the actual political change, but the ontological change which precedes the political take-over. Sipho Sepamla describes this in terms of personal feelings. Andries Oliphant outlines aspects of the battle which led to this point, in a hallucinatory mixture of grievances and goals, and he mourns the dead who will not participate in the moment of change. Stephen Gray prays for the moment to come soon, desperation creeping into his voice, and in his concern he moves beyond it to a discussion of the returnees, an obvious subject for much soul-searching and writing in the future. Kelwyn Sole joins him in the future orientation of his poetry and provides what Maughan Brown missed in the Echo poems: political analysis to support a didactic purpose. Peter Clarke, informed by the mood of the impending change, sees hope in seemingly hopeless situations. These are all established poets, and they all deal with themes which are directly related to the political situation. But to endorse Njabulo Ndebele’s view that ‘if it is the entire society that has to be recreated, then no aspect of society can be deemed irrelevant to the progress of liberation’ (p. 214), we have included two relatively unknown poets, writing about subjects which are not directly related to the political culture. Deela Khan describes the world of mental breakdowns in private, psychedelic imagery, reminiscent of hippy poetry, and N.M. Nyezwa records private moments, evoking a different (spiritual) dimension from the political awareness of the rest of the poetry.

The stories show the same variety. Two of them engage with the struggle in its past and present aspect, and one describes an aspect of apartheid laws, using humour and self-irony. ‘Long after the Night Watch’ is a Jim-comes-to-Joburg story, an old and tried genre. In this case it is Vukile comes to Cape Town, but the significant departure from the pattern of the story lies in the fact that it is not city corruption and crime which assail the innocent and naive Vukile, but the controversy between migrant hostel workers and township dwellers, or in political terms, between the UDF and Inkatha. Vukile becomes involved, but does not understand what is going on, and the story is constructed in such a way as to mirror his confusion.
‘The Boy with an Extraordinary Mind’ is also a traditional story with a twist. The traditional pattern is that of a black person being humiliated by a white, but in this case the author does not rely on the power of the moral position to carry the message; on the contrary, he explicitly rejects the humility of the destroyed generation, here represented by the grandfather, and makes his main character act positively to liberate himself from that particular form of bondage. Both stories are low keyed, and thus avoid rhetoric and political slogans and concentrate instead on showing how the political situation affects intelligent but naive or defenceless people. In this way they form a direct contrast to Mzwakhe’s political rhetoric, reflecting as they do insecurity, confusion and small personal victories, but their aim is the same: to strengthen the popular will to resist both apartheid and and township violence.

It is interesting that the same genre (Jim-comes-to-Joburg) can be, and already is being, used to deal with situations which lie beyond the apartheid state. By this I am not denying that the apartheid state has created the township violence, but I am saying that the solution to it lies beyond the parameters of the apartheid state. The last story, ‘The Finishing Touch’, is set in 1959, and although this is a period of severe repression and also the period of protest literature, with the seriousness and powerlessness which characterised it, this story is very funny. It concerns an Indian trader, Muthusamy Coopoosamy, who wants to change his name to Michael Cooper in order to fool the authorities into thinking that he is a white man and giving him a trading license. The focus of the story is the Indian community, which through the story laughs at its own shortcomings and celebrates its own resilience. Art can be subversive in many ways, and humour is an important one.

It goes without saying that the editors find the poetry and stories which we have included interesting and valid, and this may look like sitting on the fence in a controversy which is heated and at times bitter. There is, however, another possible interpretation. The examples of writing from both ‘camps’ represented in this volume belong very clearly to their different ‘camps’, and it does not seem difficult to devise different aesthetic norms for them and to keep them separate without arranging them in a hierarchy. Perhaps the disputed area is the middle ground? Here, there is a danger. Just as at a mass meeting it is possible that there is a personality, voice, text and delivery which is not successful, so it is obviously also possible that there is a poem, story or novel, which is also not successful. It is this potentially bad poem, story or novel, which causes the controversy. There is a danger that accepting the different genres makes it impossible to judge any piece of writing to be bad. Bad writing disappears, so to speak, by definition. This happens, I suggest, when the criteria of the genres become mixed in the critic’s mind. A carelessly written story does not become good, because it contains the correct message. This is what the liberal critics have been saying in various unkind ways. Neither is it automatically bad because it is committed. But a poem or play which has moved, entertained and provoked large audiences cannot be judged to be bad, just because it does not fit liberal criteria of literary criticism. I am aware that a genre division has crept in, dividing literature into the genres which can be performed and those which can only – or mainly – be read, and perhaps this is relevant. Perhaps the controversy is caused by applying the criteria for one kind of cultural production to another whose aims and aesthetics are quite different.

The art work is intended to be an integral part of the volume, and apart from being enjoyable it partakes in all the controversies which have been outlined in the other fields of cultural production: ‘high’ versus ‘low’ art, community based group art versus the visions of individual artists, politically committed versus ‘aesthetic’ art. Official white South African art is seen to escape commitment through modernism (enlightened Afrikaanerdom, vividly charicatured by Gordimer in Burger’s Daughter in the character of Brandt Vermeulen and his art collection which includes a ‘life-size plastic female
torso, divided down the middle into a blue and red side, with its vaginal labia placed horizontally across the outside of its pubis, like the lips of a mouth. The tip of a clitoris poked a tongue. The nipples were perspex... and it is also seen to be relying on state funding, which ensures its apolitical nature. A much quoted example of this is the group of three lifesized bronze giraffes in a street in Pretoria. The alternatives to this art are, broadly speaking, committed to an engagement with the political landscape of South Africa, but here the uniformity ends. Community based art, like the people’s parks or peace parks with their ‘found object sculptures’, is even less suited to representation in book form than performance poetry, so the art work represented here is by individual artists, several of whom, however, are members of community arts projects. The choice of media is obviously, like the choice of literary genres, determined by a desire to have an immediate impact on the struggle, and here photography, lithographs, collage and various forms of poster art dominate; but funding, or lack of same, also plays a part in this choice. The photo montage is the traditional vehicle of social protest, and Santu Mofokeng’s series Like Shifting Sands, from which this book takes its title, is a fine example of this. However, this connection between photography and social protest is not inevitable, as the Scenes from Some South African Weddings by Gillian Cargill show. These pictures capture unofficial moments during weddings, ‘the side-line action outside the the formality’, and they celebrate people’s ability to continue living amidst great difficulties. Because they are somewhat whimsical, they also make a statement about the individual artist’s right to choose an angle of vision which does not mesh directly with the demands of the struggle. As a compliment to this Garth Erasmus’ collages, The Emergency Series offer stark and direct images from the struggle, and in between these two extremes Tyrone Appollis’ linocuts The Train Series show both the congestion and terrible conditions of commuter trains and platforms and the energy and spontaneity generated by the people using them.

It is wonderful to find artists who break categories and rules and upsets patterns, but this does not deny the existence of the patterns and rules, it merely points to possibilities beyond them. This book operates in a space beyond apartheid politics, where new lines of opposition are formed and debated. Although the debate is angry, it has moved into a world where ideas and controversies are concerned with ways of seeing, not ways of suppressing. The solutions lie, I suspect, in compromise, or in restating the problem in a different way or working towards altering the social circumstances.

KIRSTEN HOLST PETERSEN

NOTES

MICHAEL CHAPMAN

The Critic in a State of Emergency: Towards a Theory of Reconstruction (after February 2)\(^1\)

South Africa has entered upon times of high emotion... By design or accident F.W. de Klerk hit the fast-forward button on February 2: there will be no return to the old South African ways.\(^2\)

Given that this was written not by a hack journalist but by one of our leading social analysts, we begin to gauge the impact on South Africans of the unbannings, the mass rallies and, most strikingly, the release of Nelson Mandela. (Conversely, the impact can also be measured by the militancy of the white right wing and the hard-line Africanism of the PAC.) In our more sober moments, however, we remind ourselves that February 2 was not a bolt from the blue. Rather, sustained opposition to apartheid during the 1980s – inspired and co-ordinated at home and abroad by UDF/ANC alliances – ensured that De Klerk's actions, admittedly bold in their pragmatism, are explicable as both agency and product of the historical process. We are reminded too of Mandela's words at the huge rally in Durban where, despite his confidence in the liberating commitment of the majority, he warned that 'apartheid is not yet dead. Equality and democracy continue to elude us. We do not have access to political power'.\(^3\)

The words provide a necessary check on euphoria: there is no easy walk to freedom. In ways, the transformation of South Africa to a non-racial society has been working inexorably for many years through the numbers of history: through black urbanisation, black unionisation, black consumer spending. But hope is now manifest in substantive human action. To people abroad, including South African exiles of many years, it might seem naive of me to be emphasising the humanisation of all South Africans. Was there ever any doubt that South African society was larger and richer in possibility than white rule has decreed it to be? One of our first important writers, Sol T. Plaatje, offered black speech and a revised history in reaction to the dehumanisation of the 1913 Natives Land Act.\(^4\) In the 1950s the *Drum* writers before they were 'silenced' pitted their humanity against Verwoerd's retrivalising policies,\(^5\) and the Soweto poets of the
1970s projected human agency into the grim repressions after Sharpeville. Nevertheless, to many of us living in the gradations of our daily lives — and suffering perhaps, in one way or another, from the myopia imposed on us by apartheid — the sight on television of Mandela, the human being and statesman, was a profound experience. In an astute critique of Fatima Meer’s biography of Mandela, *Higher than Hope*, Stanley Uys is right to see no contradiction between his remark that the biography is no great literary achievement while the subject ensures its immense importance. Where does the art of biography end and the purpose of life begin when the subject reaches far beyond the covers of the book to enter, as exemplum, into the national and international consciousness?

It is against such a climate — sketched here, imperfectly — that I had to think seriously about rewriting this paper from scratch: the substance of my argument had been formulated before February 2. Has my title, 'The Critic in a State of Emergency', not been overtaken by events? Is my subtitle, 'Towards a Theory of Reconstruction', not too tentative for our society of new fast-forward buttons? In considering this, I was disturbed nonetheless by the almost unseemly speed with which the ‘Albie Sachs’ debate, as reported in several South African newspapers, was threatening to negate any lessons we might have learned from our recent past. Briefly Sachs, a member of the legal and constitutional department of the ANC and the author of *The Jail Diary of Albie Sachs* (1966), read an in-house paper, ‘Preparing Ourselves for Freedom’, in which he made the point that the arts should not become so fixated by the idea of the ‘struggle’ as to ignore wider, more various understandings of human life. In offering a number of ‘controversial observations ... for the sake of livening debate’, he proposed that members be banned for five years from saying that ‘culture is a weapon of the struggle’. Let the criterion of good art — Sachs concluded — not be prescriptive, but broadly anti-apartheid. As a ‘corrective’ paper read to a political movement, Sachs’ argument serves a usefully rhetorical purpose. Unfortunately, extracts have been paraded in our press in a blandly universalising fashion; and those (usually white) literary critics who see the days of the emergency as inimical to so-called good, contemplative art have rushed into print with all the old jargon of academic Eurocentricism. We have the critic and poet Stephen Watson picking himself up after being pilloried in public for his defence of good literature (his own view of events) and praising poetry that is ‘alive with those ambiguities and contradictions which so much work officially committed to the struggle (and a party-line within the struggle) is forced to foreswear’. I could list several comments in a similar vein by both English- and Afrikaans-speaking academics and writers. Let it suffice, however, to refer to the remarks of Ivor Powell, who reported Sachs’ speech in the *Weekly Mail*. Skipping into a new South Africa by consigning the posters of our very recent past (is it our past?) to the relics of history, Powell observes that the posters of the 1980s had a propagandist
function, they were made to persuade and mobilise a mass audience and, while they may have distilled their purpose with dramatic power, they cannot be classified as art, because art – Powell says – is defined by its doubts, its ambiguities and its complexities of meaning. 13

All this could, of course, sound liberating. But did Sachs really mean to give our literary cognoscenti the excuse to reinstate such woolly and elitist evaluations of literature. One of the consequences over the years has been the disdain, shown by many in our schools and universities, for local writing. Have we really shifted so rapidly through the process of transformation that, all at once, we are world citizens? Are we so willing to grant broadly anti-apartheid writing, however ‘good’ – a poem about killing whales? – the same claim to our interest and attention as writing about the killing fields of Natal? Undoubtedly, Albie Sachs himself in the nitty-gritty of everyday life would reject such easy walks to the freedom of internationalism.

In the light of this debate, I was actually encouraged to retain my originally proposed paper. Perhaps the critic in South Africa is – or, at least, should be – still in a state of emergency. Instead of relying on fast-forward buttons, we need to struggle through the peculiar difficulties and possibilities of our own socio-literary life towards a theory of reconstruction. What I should like to do, then, is to offer you the story of my own evolution as a critic during the 1980s. I do not intend the account to be merely personal and idiosyncratic; rather, I hope it has a kind of representativeness. It begins amid the prolonged crisis of the 1980s at a point when many of us – I think – began to doubt our own commitments to the efficacy of literature and art. Living amid corruption and duplicity in the government, amid daily reports of detentions without trial and vigilante violence, I began to wonder whether, at our historical juncture, issues of people’s education and worker solidarity in the struggle for a living wage had not become so morally pressing as to trivialise, by comparison, literature or art in any autonomous, or even semi-autonomous, sphere.

One of my responses was to write an article, ‘The Liberated Zone: The Possibilities of Imaginative Expression in a State of Emergency’. 14 (A shortened version titled ‘Writing in a State of Emergency’ appeared in the Southern African Review of Books.) 15 In viewing as significant phenomena of the 1980s the political funeral as epic, the performance poetry of Mzwakhe and Qabula, worker testimonies, factory-floor plays, information stories in the alternative media, and the posters which Ivor Powell now describes as relics of history, I concluded that the writers who counted had tied themselves to the pragmatics of political change and should be judged according to their degree of accountability to progressive forces in the oppressed community. By contrast, the skilfully ‘artistic’ responses of acknowledged authors such as Gordimer, Fugard and Coetzee seemed remote from what was most urgently required in a state of emergency: namely, forms of participatory witness.
I had hoped to provoke fruitful debate. Instead, I stand accused of literally betraying the creative faculties. One vituperative response objected strongly to my comment that, in the mid 1980s, the authority of the experience rather than its transformation into the art-object had become the real locus of power.\(^{16}\) I was challenged to resign my professorship and take up a role – presumably as an MK freedom fighter – where I could participate in actual living conditions and inherit the authority of experience. My reply was to query any simple distinction between ‘contemplation’ and ‘action’, and to suggest that if a white professor at a largely white university – I was designated by the letter writer in those terms – feels impelled to engage in ‘real’ activities, the attendant questioning could have important consequences in relation to matters of admission policies, standards, syllabus reconstruction, perception and value.\(^{17}\)

If these arguments seem abrasive, hyperbolic, or just plain daft, then we should perhaps have characterised our phase of literary life in the 1980s as farce or melodrama. We would then be using Marx’s description of the time when the ruling classes begin to lose their way. There is either a retreat from change into older securities – a kind of last feast in which old modes, old atavisms, are revived as if they were new – or there is squabbling, rancour, frenzy and morbidity, those manifestations – as Gramsci identified them – of the interregnum, when the old order is dying and the new struggles to be born. There is, of course, another perspective from which to regard such a time of transition: that of epic. According to this view, the oppressed begin to shape their own future, and the heroic path forward opens up a horizon on which the highly wrought artefact could quite feasibly occupy a relatively minor space. Here the autonomy of art exists only by, in, and through its social conditioning, as the heroic phase locates its own struggles for power in a wide cultural field, where artists become cultural workers. Art is seen, accordingly, as a higher form of labour, a manifestation of the practical activity of people by virtue of which they express and confirm their potential for transformation in the material world. When the esoteric work arrives, it is swiftly minimised. Instead of J.M. Coetzee’s *Foe* (1986) filling the horizon, for example, we use the insights of Jacques Derrida to read the text deconstructively: against the grain of authorial intention, we interrogate its ideological ‘silences’ and gaps. In his critical essays,\(^{18}\) Coetzee understands that so much white South African writing has characterised Africa as either empty landscape or monster. We could add: Africa as noble savage. We now turn these images of colonial psychosis against Coetzee himself, and note that in *Foe* his black figure – Friday – has no tongue. As the writer of ‘difficult’ fictions Coetzee, seen from the perspective of epic, may have lost his own tongue as a novelist of consequence. Using his postmodernist allegories to unpick imperial power relations, he has difficulties in knowing what identities need rebuilding. After fragmenting his subject – the white
European authority – Coetzee is unable, or unwilling, to turn the African ‘other’ into a new subject. There are no new solidarities. The epic voice, by contrast, has few such difficulties, and it might need to free itself from the literary work to fill alternative spaces in many forms. As the novelist Menan du Plessis said in her opening speech at the cultural festival ‘Breaking the Silence’: ‘Resistance art doesn’t follow the path of bourgeois art with its access to the entire range of technical apparatus. Released from the production line, that special economy of publishing and marketing, resistance art finds itself in the daily lives of the oppressed class.’ Du Plessis went on to include, as examples of resistance tools, the rousing toyi-toyi dance, singing, murals, stickers, banners, badges, posters and wooden AK 47s.

In interrogating Coetzee’s high art for its human potentiality while imbuing popular forms with their epic content, I might choose to retain the value of Du Plessis’ insights and present a simple exercise to those critics who wish to scuttle back to the securities of the inviolable text. Let us, for a moment, conjure up in the mind’s eye a poster design of Mandela’s or Sisulu’s head framed by patterns of black, green and gold, and then contextualise the image within the dynamics of the struggle. As we release our memories across forty years of history, we begin to see the poster, afresh, through the eyes of the majority of people in South Africa. In doing so, we should appreciate that there are no neat distinctions between propaganda and art, and that apparently simple images can resonate beyond themselves. As the epic actions of the 1980s have sharply reminded us, no orders or conventions need be regarded as fixed. Rather, we are all ideological beings who contribute our interpretations, and I believe that in any intelligent record of our literature the posters against apartheid will continue to generate interest and expand in significance by virtue of their having captured the most urgent pressures of their time. Because of its thoroughly social character, literature is partisan; it takes sides. Whether we admit it or not, so do we as critics.

The partisan reading may lead me to locate the weight of experience not so much in, say, Coetzee or Gordimer as in the stories of Mtutuzeli Matshoba. In ‘A Pilgrimage to the Isle of Makana’ Matshoba journeys from Soweto to Robben Island to visit his brother who has been imprisoned on political charges. With the warrior-prophet of the amaXhosa, Makana, providing the inspirational myth and the ’76 schoolbuildings still smouldering, Matshoba charts the country as a map of rejuvenated black history even as he struggles to attach his own Black Consciousness predispositions to the ideal of a broader non-racialism. Like an oral storyteller, he ‘pads’ his narrative with digressions and exemplary incidents, he depicts the easily recognisable types – brutal policemen, boorish officials, singing Mother Afrikas – of uncompromising racial confrontation, and finally he underplays his close links to his own brother so as to shift the human story away from the personal to the historical perception:
'Hi son,' I said into the mouthpiece.
'Hey't,' the device crackled back inaudibly.

... Where could Nelson Mandela be staying on the Island?

... A luta continua, I thought.

The language is direct, easily accessible, even restricted in its vocabulary and literary range. Yet the style of the journey signals, appropriately, Matshoba's new occupation of the social and cultural ground. Instead of empty landscapes or monsters or noble savages, we have the dignity of re-assembled identities. The black 'other' has become the subject, and the story suggests that value is determined not merely by the created properties of art, but by relations embodied in social communication. We need not identify a lack of palimpsest complexity or even subtle irony as a fault; rather the 'form' we have conveys the experiential and ethical demands of this particular tale. What according to the criteria of the ideal Western-written story could be regarded as lapses of linguistic register and plotting actually lend substance to the writer's moral purpose. Ultimately, the 'thin' text has the advantage of putting us in touch with the author behind the story, and if we recognise Matshoba as a product of a deficient Bantu Education system, we can also appreciate his authority in a particular time and place. But am I now mingling literary criticism and cultural analysis? If so, is it an invalid activity? In taking Matshoba seriously, I am trying to locate myself as a critic in South Africa. In a spirit of democratic enquiry, I might need to restrict my own superfluity of European literary learning in the 1990s and become, critically and imaginatively, the European 'other'. All of us who have been trained to perceive and revere the brilliant artefact could benefit from such a lesson in humility.

Even in its reliance on 'poor' materials, however, critical humility need not necessarily be antagonistic to a sense of the aesthetic. Well before February 2, several spokespersons, writers and artists had already begun to feel that the narrative of history was set upon a future course where the farce-epic dialectic would be superseded by the 'romance' of the post-apartheid society. At the Culture in Another South Africa (CASA) conference in Amsterdam in 1987, Pallo Jordan in his keynote address saw the praxis of people already creating the new conditions necessary to advance the humanisation of things, beyond utilitarian necessity, to the level of the aesthetic sensibility:

The ANC does not ask you to become political pamphleteers. There are a number of those, though we need more. The ANC does not require poets to become sloganeers; the walls of South Africa's cities testify to our wealth in those and the mastery they have of their craft. While we require propaganda art, we do not demand that every graphic artist and sculptor becomes a prop. artist. We would urge artists to pursue excellence...
Excellence, however, is to be put to the service of the liberation struggle: ‘The task of the democratic artists’ – Jordan continued – ‘is to define, through their art, the political and social vision of the democratic majority.’ The call is for the humanist, internationalist, but distinctly South African character of people’s culture. This envisages, of course, a democratising activity growing out of local circumstances. Jordan’s view is ultimately more egalitarian and, as a result, more challenging than the simple ‘pro-/anti-apartheid’ criterion as accredited to Sachs. While all humanising responses are valuable, some at particular times will be more valuable than others. Whether the work can be designated high art or popular expression, the intention will be to seize back our own creative initiatives in history and grasp the true function and role of literature in our society. As a start, we will need to insist on the primacy of our own writing while giving greater credence to both illuminating and warning lessons from the rest of Africa. We will have to be rigorous in separating, even within the single work, what is attached obsessively to static orders and what, in accordance with a non-racial vision, has transforming potential. As far as ‘internationalism’ is concerned, we are more likely to re-enter the larger world, paradoxically, by being true to our own most immediate and urgent concerns.

I hope my argument so far has avoided any fast-forward buttons. The question remains: how in a society where contexts overwhelm texts do we proceed as critics and educators? My own response has been to attempt, in the course of the present paper, to move beyond the title ‘The Critic in a State of Emergency’ and to give body to the subtitle, ‘Towards a Theory of Reconstruction’. Initially, I have wanted to hold on to the procedures of deconstructive analysis, which can alert us to the ideological underpinnings of all writing from Coetzee to Wilbur Smith. In this respect, a self-questioning of Afrikaans literature might be a priority. Instead of relying on sectarian justifications which have linked the Afrikaans language to state power, progressive Afrikaans critics need to ask some hard questions. Are the writers of grens (border) literature, to take an obvious example, mentally and morally able to move beyond a preoccupation with the disintegrating Afrikaner psyche and explore real social interaction in Namibia? Or, what is the meaning of Breytenbach’s poetry? Does his continual return to surreal modes suggest the liberation of the Afrikaans language or an avoidance of the practical consequences of South African demands? It becomes clear that as the Afrikaans language sets out to free itself from racial exclusivity, its survival and renewal will depend on the values it bequeaths a new society.

At the same time, it is salutary to remember that as early as the mid-1950s Es’kia Mphahlele had seen the function of the black critic in South Africa as essentially restorative. As the fiction editor of Drum magazine, he sought to substitute ordinary life for spectacle, and to fill the landscape
so thoroughly colonised by white politicians, educators, writers and artists — with credible black human beings. Instead of seeing monsters or noble savages, Mphahlele like Chinua Achebe saw dignity in African realism; dignity in African humanism with its value of sharing in community. More recently, Njabulo S. Ndebele has also sought to rediscover the ordinary, and, as writers and critics, we shall need to experience a restructured future in which black and white people define, understand and perhaps decide to alter their differentiated class and gender alliances while making undifferentiated claims on our human sympathy. Undoubtedly, most of us here would agree with such a humanist, even an internationalist, direction. As I have already suggested, however, we should not ignore the distinctive South African character of a people’s culture. Accordingly, it is not anomalous that the ideal of reconstruction, initially at least, might involve a severe shrinkage of white-European significance in both social and literary life. The consolation might be original contributions to the making of a community of purpose. As Frantz Fanon has put it:

... if an intellectual in a colonial situation wishes to create an authentic work of art he must first understand the realities of his nation, and if he wishes to use the past he should do so with the intention of opening the future, as an invitation to action and a basis of hope. But to ensure that hope and give it form, he must take part in action and throw himself body and soul into the national struggle. Furthermore, the writer must remember that the colonial situation drives indigenous cultures underground.

This is a demanding statement of intent. The crucial test is, how do we account not only for rupture, but for restructuration? For the post-apartheid ideal is future-based. As contemplative beings, how do we intervene creatively in pressing material concerns? If we believe that literature and art are liberatory, what precisely do we mean? When J.M. Coetzee looks at the future, he has seen so far only a crisis of linearity. Yet any attempt to reconstruct requires that we accept — pragmatically — the idea of linearities not as inevitable crises, but as necessary master-narratives towards new social and aesthetic relations and ideals. When we include on our syllabuses Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1902), for instance, we might want to set its hallucinatory picture of Africa and its theme of the dissolving European mind in debate with Achebe’s critical realism in *Things Fall Apart* (1958). If Achebe’s realism seems ‘uninnovative’ in comparison with Conrad’s montage, then our aesthetic views might begin to alter as we learn to sympathise, morally, with Achebe’s achievement within his own constraints at the time of colonial transition in Nigeria. As he said, in 1965, in his article ‘The Novelist as Teacher’: ‘I would be quite satisfied if my novels, especially the ones I set in the past, did no more than teach my readers that their past — with all its imperfections — was not one long night of savagery from which the first Europeans acting on God’s behalf delivered them.’
I am shifting here from the political posters of the epic to new canonisations in the phase of reconstruction. In spite of my refusal to consign the insignia of the eighties to the scrap heap, some might perceive a return on my part to a sanctioned field of art. Others will notice, though, that the yardsticks are derived increasingly from African challenges and demands, and that, consequently, the idea of 'revolution' is being broadened, deepened, and even made to accommodate the idea of an ongoing evolutionary drive towards a complex, modernising future. In attending not only to European theorists but equally to their African counterparts, we might want to turn to the Nigerian Abiola Irele, who is a humanist, an internationalist, and is even designated 'bourgeois' by younger Marxist critics in his country. Irele allows texts their volition in contexts; he believes that important books matter in the intellectual life of any country struggling out of the disjunctures of colonialism. His priorities are, however, African books in an African society, and his Department of Classics would centre itself around African oral traditions. In believing that African writers have a responsible voice, that they need to address large issues, the teacher and critic might want to give priority in education not to our European favourites but to a book like Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Devil on the Cross* (1982).

In his writing Ngugi affirms a set of values by which to re-organise one's life. What becomes important is not individualism, but relations between people. It is a utopian thrust of regeneration but, in Ngugi's case, it is not naive. For Ngugi is alert to the need for constant vigilance against one power bloc replacing another without material benefit to most of the people. The messianic urge of the epic is replaced by the analytical mode, as Ngugi sees that behind any anti-colonial front lie other tensions concerning the different aspirations of capital and labour. As we examine a writer like Ngugi, our critical vocabulary needs to embrace modified terms of value: from individualism to the socialised individual, from private life to community, from capitalist surplus to socialist redistribution. Perhaps predictive writing in a new South Africa will be able to move beyond the apocalyptic landscape or the political romance and show us, rationally and imaginatively, how to achieve both constitutional freedoms and equality in the use of our resources. Whether such writers are novelists or, like the assassinated Rick Turner, political philosophers, is not the crucial issue.

As new maps are drawn, the challenges to writers and critics, who are usually from the middle classes or at least the petty bourgeoisie, will be to reach out to the experiences of most people in South Africa. This is not a simple procedure, and along with analytical coherence, humility — as I have suggested — emerges as a moral and critical priority in any society in transition. As a critical requirement, it assists us to enter, in a spirit of genuine enquiry, into apparent dislocations, apparent awkwardnesses of syntax, phrase and contour, which often mark literary forms produced across a society like ours characterised by an unevenness of literacy and
learning. As a moral requirement, our humility reminds us to seek value not only in the achieved product, but in processes of exploration and articulation. A theory of reconstruction will thus be anything but reductive. It could help to revitalise the humanities in South Africa. Without sacrificing international insights we can begin, in confidence, to chart our own field of activity. Initially, sharp erasures may justifiably occur. Some Zimbabwean scholars, for instance, have needed to ignore, for a time, almost the entire corpus of literature produced by whites prior to independence in 1980; the only two white authors to enter the phase of reconstruction on their own terms are Arthur Shearly Cripps and Doris Lessing, both of whom were harshly critical of colonial policies and practices. If such severe tests of progressive content were applied to South African literature, only two white figures prior to the twentieth century are likely to emerge relatively unscathed: namely, Thomas Pringle and Olive Schreiner. Seen as a diagnostic exercise rather than a proscription, such redrawings can have value, and it is to be hoped that earlier lessons in how our education system helped to sanction literary tradition as a monolithic first-world construct will prevent the scholars of reconstruction from being insensitive, in their turn, to differences as a store of strength and knowledge.

The commonalities that may unite us, however, are even more important. Programmes of affirmative action, especially in matters of literacy, education, health and economic opportunity, will initially be necessary, and 'relevance' as a progressive measure of content has an undeniable claim. Similarly, translation studies could contribute to the building of bridges. With English serving most practically as a lingua franca, we shall need to hear, in English, almost forgotten voices such as those of the great Xhosa poet Mqhayi and the Zulu writer Vilakazi. Perhaps new Afrikaans-speaking South Africans will want to hear, in Afrikaans translation, the poetry of Mongane Wally Serote. In fact, Serote – I know – speaks Afrikaans as well as he does English, and might be persuaded to undertake the translation of his own work into a language cleansed of its present associations with the oppressor.

As the 'other' becomes the subject on our syllabuses, the prized Western forms of the poem, the play and the novel will need to make room for forms which have proved to be persistent in our own circumstances, such as the short story, the autobiography and the political testimony. Possibly, Gordimer's own comment in the preface to Ellen Kuzwayo's autobiography Call Me Woman28 could serve to encourage debate about the respective characters of the 'artist' and the 'witness'. Gordimer says that Kuzwayo 'is history in the person of one woman. Fortunately, although she is not a writer, she had the memory and gift of unselfconscious expression that enable her to tell her story as no one else could'.29 This is back-handed praise indeed; and, in general, our assessments of literary achievement will require modification to take into account that many South African
writers have seen themselves committed not primarily to generic conventions, but to human freedoms. How do we teach a future generation the real contribution to thought, human decency and literature of someone like Mary Benson? House arrested, banned, exiled, Benson – a descendant of the 1820 Settlers – was influenced profoundly by *Cry, the Beloved Country* and became a tireless campaigner for justice. She is also a biographer of Luthuli, Khama and Mandela, a historian of the ANC, a documentary-playwright, the editor of Fugard’s notebooks, a novelist and, perhaps most movingly, the narrator of her own story, *A Far Cry: The Making of a South African* (1989). How do we pursue and develop Mandela’s judgment on Benson’s writing as ‘literature that should be widely read, not only because of its own merit, but also because each reader would regard it as an account of the striving to realise a fond dream’?

I keep returning to the suggestion that a theory of reconstruction will blur distinctions between literary studies and cultural studies, and that criticism as a contribution to social analysis and change is the path to value and relevance. Critics will need to devise strategies for occupying a public sphere. Instead of delineating contemplation and action as mutually exclusive, we should learn to relate the opportunities of the universities to the demands of wider communities in our attempts to make literature count in any transfiguration of human and social consciousness. In this regard, we might learn from sociology, political science and history, all of which have seen the advantages of disseminating progressive insights in the pages of the alternative media and even in the middle pages of the mainstream press. Admittedly, the equivalence between literature and practical reality is not unproblematic; but we could ensure that our reviews, even if they are read largely by our peers, contain less pretentious irony and more moral coherence. In reaching outwards, we learn to communicate our insights in accessible ways. We begin, too, to create a real and symbolic readership for our views.

As a teacher of literature, my contemplations thus begin to be translated measurably into contexts of actual behaviour. When a student comes to me and says, I want to write on so-and-so, I might be impelled to ask why. For whom are you writing? For what purpose? What has your writing got to do with restructuring identities in this country? Is your writing progressive in intent, liberating in purpose? What do these questions about literature have to do, finally, with ideas of justice and compassion in a post-apartheid South Africa?
NOTES

19. Address, Cultural Art Group Festival, University of Cape Town (August 1986).


27. See *The Eye of the Needle* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1972).


31. Quoted on the dust cover of *The Making of a South African*.

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Johannesburg dingy overcoat wearing
four million faces, chewing its gum of acid rain
gritting the taste of steel with stone jowls
winking sly glass eyes each frosty dawn
a world fingered by electricity inhabited
by men who say 'If 30 people
want to live in one room
they have the right to do so'
children settling like birds
among the dark, slow minds of father-mothers
they come to love who serve ancestral masters
brains sucked dry as dusty lemons each summer
diseased tongues flaring from the books
scholars burn to please anti-intellectuals
our promised land
poverty giving the rich work to do
as they gather round and discuss the poor
where only banks laugh all the way to the bank
a few neurotic chickens and a leg-lifting dog
the empty plate of the sun drifting
behind the clouds' deceptive tablecloths
children who remember their own funerals
while still buried in their mothers' bodies
and dance at others'
we have changed our blood for petrol
the easier to catch fire
in the half-life of insecure shadows
our ritual tongues must burn
our promised land
pompous figures mouthing phrases continue
to erect themselves on podiums and wave
fingers of moral righteousness
and brave men seek their own murders
to free themselves from any guilt
and the necklaced murderer caught by a mob
jigs as her enflamed body engulfs my words
to give them meaning
the poet ingenué claims the personal is political
it’s all the same so what the hell
don’t toyi-toyi with my heart
it’s your promised land

those hung dangling for the freedom they sought
‘the wages of sin is death’ but sin here always
the courage to say no except for the jobless
who have no option on the wages we others endure
the flaccid smell of breath on trains
squashed full swaying to work each morning
punished by gangs and signified by staffriders
blood of wet bulls roaring in the earth
where descriptions of the real world
startle our eyes away from
the vague words that live in newspapers
prophets who give us a new-found freedom
already as a slogan, an advert for our repeating days

while babies bloat into balloons for Christmas
and marzipan housewives pick ‘n pay
and never give a damn
Pholoso and Thandi each night toboggan
down the screens of white-owned showbiz the same
time surreptitious cops prowl outside
inflated conquerors of children and tin shanties
ouma Engelbrechts priming their sons like bombs
of chagrin

for violence
all and sundry speaking in tongues and pamphlets
the baboons laugh at each others’ foreheads
and only the eventual bodies are real
in their corruption

as the earth under our feet festers
with its recent history

our promised land our promised land
2

I live in a country where the hunters
are wounded by their own smell
I live in a country where the dead
give birth to their own mothers
I live in a country whose heroes
deliquesce into mirages

will this be our promised land?

and search for my soul
in a night that covers all with fog,
with surrender, with bullets, with bodies
strewn into question marks.

Will this be my promised land?

As I age, tyranny does not.
As I grow shrill, killers whisper
placating words of syrup
in this new age of media hope
as I hope, hope burns

3

Now that the spirit of glasnost
reaches out through the tv screens
and we see the crowds in Berlin and in
Moscow marching, millions strong,
and freedom has ceased to be a swearword
and our own red flags appear
but our hope of people's power's lost to us
now is the time
to think.

Now we are told by social Projection Expert & Son
resplendent in their three-piece lives
that communism can never work,
that the deal that we make with each other
despite our 'different cultures'
must hold fast the sanctity of private property
and the four nations drown the working-class
and the road of the town house and the Mazda
leads to the palace of national reconciliation:
now is the time
to think.

Now that some activists more concerned
with overseas tours and solidarity funding
are seen at fashionable discotheques
now that boycotts of beer instituted by strikers
fail as the country scabs in its collective thirst
now that summer saunters out of hiding
out of skies long resistant to rain and thunder:
now is the time
to think

in this fog this anger of heroes
asking us for a vision so they can die

now that it is possible
to support the workers’ struggle from
the command tent of a miss cassidy suit
as we change molotov to idasa cocktails

now

that we are a breeding ground for thieves
soothed by the perfumed rhetoric of priests
from the going down of our oppression
until the rising thereof
now that we do not know or remember
what has happened to us

fascinated, appalled how ugly we are
and always have been, distracted by commerce
as we edge closer to our edge to celebrate
our new nation in its emperor’s
new clothes

now is the time to think

truth, an immense star,
scratching like cottonwool, that
which we die to avoid:

now is the time
now is the time
for the onset of class war
to reject the colonial and African
masks of nationalism
to reject the false pity of liberal
pockets or nations with their money
and their own down-trodden classes

now is the time
to build democracy
with our own hands,
all that we have

all they will ever give to us.

GO HOME AND DO NOT SLEEP

1

All these many years
I have waited, hands my only

weapon and the tools
with which I stroke the world
its objects amidst
a cloying swamp of sunlight

this prison where I’ve waited

earned my jailer’s praise
for patience
  hands
never clenched to fists
until he could not see

respites given me between
hewing stone recalcitrant

into shapes which might to him
mean something
2

I stand behind blade wire always
peering at the plain
stretching a yawn of yellow gums
to where in the distance

a donga slobbers with its tongue

a path there where my legs
will one day take me swaggering
to loll in hopeful grass
captured by a lone tree’s shade
and fall asleep
to prophesy myself upright

and watch
the dusk at length catch fire
the horizons run towards me
on tremulous grey feet

3

I can’t be seen
until I move
gripping the wall
to you outside
I wave my face
like a handkerchief

4

Tear down the fences:
where they come from:
speak, dance, what you will
who now

like I live
in our ruler’s dead fantasies
till we wake that final morning
to find prisoners forgotten
clawing up from out the soil
the graves they suffocate beneath,
parting the wire strand by strand,
through walls becoming dust
becoming water
shedding their homelands the skin
of their fathers’ orthodoxies,
awoken to move forward
without speech
to no future that I know

5

Until then
I’ll stay here.

I have those eyes
no one tries to remember.

A mouth ready
open

for portents
only the dead can still recall.
WOMAN, TRESPASSING IN A GARDEN

During the week it's empty mostly except for the hulking shadow of the gardener, paid (poorly) hourly, once every Tuesday, steering his definitions between hedge and flower bed with bucket and secateurs.

As soon as he's gone without fail a thin form lurches up the road stinking of oil and rubber in her knitted purple earcap past the sonority of machismo brakes with a faded crimpline dress flapping much too large

picks her way carefully through the tangled wire fence as the wind plays with her hem the way a dog would worry a tattered toy, to show her red and bloated legs to the nobody who might be interested:

her ritual is the same collapsing on the grass luxuriously drunk to sleep it off, she dreams she is in a garden with flowers shouting a cerise-white around her

then wakes to find her dream is real.

Her face remains composed. She sits with eyes uplifted to the warmth and the mountain ridged and runnelled as a crust
of crumbling bread in front of her, its indentations smeared with sun a drooling liquid honey

and for the hour she can safely rest

while her stale fingers pluck mealie meal from the meths-stained jam tin in her lap jagged there

lilies watsonias inebriate the jaded taste of bees birds quarrel with each other and, fruit-demented, with the sky spiders dance to trace their webs and even the vaunting weeds dirge to their shame of persecution

as once a week

through her aberrant presence the garden is transformed to more than a rich man’s property
An Author’s Agenda: Re-visioning Past and Present for a Future South Africa

This paper takes as premise Stanley Frielick’s generally accepted point that much publishing in South Africa today is ‘part of the process of historical rediscovery and re-visioning that informs contemporary South African studies’, so that ‘through exploring the dynamic connections between past and present, we can gain a clearer picture of the forces that are shaping our future’. I would add to this one of the satirist Pieter-Dirk Uys’s throwaway lines: The future is known in South Africa; only the past is unpredictable. The position of that elusive specimen - the South African writer - is perhaps best summarised in part by Nadine Gordimer in 1982 in her paper, ‘Living in the Interregnum’, first delivered to the New York Institute of the Humanities. Her often-quoted points include the Gramscian observation that: ‘The old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum there arises a great diversity of morbid symptoms’ – used as an epigraph for July’s People (1981). That ‘There is a segment pre-occupied, in the interregnum, neither by plans to run away from nor merely by ways to survive physically and economically in the black state that is coming’ (p. 264). That the ‘interregnum is not only between two social orders, but also between two identities, one known and discarded, the other unknown and undetermined’ (p. 270). Gordimer defines the writer’s role as follows:

If I were not a writer, I should not have been invited here at all, so I must presume that although the problems of a white writer are of no importance compared with the liberation of 23.5 million black people, the peculiar relation of the writer in South Africa as interpreter, both to South Africans and to the world, of a society in struggle, makes the narrow corridor I can lead you down one in which doors fly open on the tremendous happening experienced by blacks. (p. 272)

Further, the writer’s unique preserve is ‘the territory of the subconscious, where a people’s own particular way of making sense and dignity of life – the base of its culture remains unget-at-able. Writers, and not politicians, are its spokespeople’ (p. 229). She quotes Marquez: ‘“The writer’s duty – his revolutionary duty, if you like – is to write well”’ (p. 276), while very
accurately pinpointing the options open to the declared radical: to ‘remain negatively within the white order – or to declare himself positively as answerable to the order struggling to be born’ (p. 278).

During those 80s which I lived through in South Africa with Gordimer I tried actively to test the facets of her position, most of which to the audience she was addressing would appear self-evident truths. Her analysis derives from her own marginalised position, conscious of the entire weight of South Africa’s history, where ‘the flags of European civilization dropped, and there it was unashamedly, the ugliest creation of man, and they baptized the thing... called it apartheid, coining the ultimate term for every manifestation, over the ages, in many countries, of race prejudice’ (p. 262).

A second position developed later in the 80s, outlined by Njabulo Ndebele, particularly in his Redefining Relevance paper, first delivered to the Second Stockholm Conference for African Writers in 1986. Ndebele’s not so self-evident truths include the observation that, in protest literature during times of severe repression (as between 1948 and 1961 in South Africa):

There was much organised resistance, but it was often brutally crushed. This increased repression created a charged atmosphere in which the resulting articulation of grievance, at both organizational and personal levels, became most ironically the very index of powerlessness. (p. 42) ... At that point the mode of perception, by failing to transcend its own limitations, can become part of the oppression it sought to understand and undermine. (p. 43)

As a corrective Ndebele advocates no ‘mechanical choice between politics and art’; rather, the writer should be enabled ‘to participate in the dialectic between the two. To understand this is to understand the creative possibilities of both’ (p. 47). Ndebele continues:

Most paradoxically, for the writer, the immediate problem, just at the point at which he sits down to write his novel, is not the seizure of power. Far from it. His immediate aim is a radically contemplative state of mind in which the objects of contemplation are that range of social conditions which are the major ingredients of social consciousness. Exclusion of any on the grounds that they do not easily lend themselves to dramatic political statement will limit the possibilities of any literary revolution, by severely limiting the social range on which to exercise its imagination. (p. 48)

In advancing the grounds upon which a ‘change of discourse from the rhetoric of oppression to that of process and exploration’ (p. 50) may occur, he insists on ‘a radical rearrangement of the dialectical poles. Where the thesis was the oppressor, it is now the oppressed confidently introducing new definitions of the future to which the oppressor will have of necessity to respond.... He is no longer in possession of the initiative’
An Author's Agenda: Re-visioning Past and Present for a Future South Africa

This ‘post-protest literature... should probe beyond the observable facts, to reveal new worlds where it was previously thought they did not exist, and to reveal process and movement where they have been hidden’ (p. 50).

Ndebele’s analysis of the role of the writer in the 80s in South Africa, in the light of which I have also lived, agrees pretty significantly with Gordimer’s. If in these slender summaries I do not misrepresent them, both believe in the following: the construct of ‘the writer’ as one immersed in, but detached from, contingent realities; this writer as a spokesperson for a set of future-directed values, which coincide with political goals, but which are arrived at from different premises. Both assume the ‘value’ of the literary procedure in the transformative, revolutionary dynamic; in short, both commit their ferocious and formidable energies to accelerating the arrival of that non-racialist, democratic, unitary South Africa that now is on the threshold of being accomplished; in the writer’s imagination, has already occurred.

Their differences are ones of style: Gordimer is individually apologetic, deferential, insistent on the validity of the private conscience, despite its limitations, in a public arena; Ndebele is explicatory, assertive, even boldly prescriptive. These differences are explained by the natures of the occasions of delivery and their audiences, rather than by any inherent disagreements of personality. Gordimer is also a speaker giving testimony for herself, Ndebele a lecturer speaking for many, so their conventions of delivery also explain differences. But, in all essentials, the one takes over from the other within a mind-set that remains intact. This is a framework of concord within which I have chosen to be included; no South African writer could really have taken upon himself to be excluded from it without missing out on all the key issues of his time.

My own attempt to grapple with this problematic – what is the writer’s task, what are the politics of putting pen to paper, how best do I contribute forward (rather than backward)? – is immeasurably indebted to Gordimer and Ndebele, if only for their having raised the issues in the first place. I am quoting from them because they are so quotable, but I do not mean to imply their voices are the only, lone definitive ones. So actively conscientised and participatory is the world of writers in South Africa today that these issues have become climatic; where writers may be killed for their beliefs and practices, indeed they are matters of life and death as well. Ideological bystanders can no longer comfortably continue, as lack of commitment has become commitment in a retrogressive direction. And so that sweep forward proceeds, not without casualties, but confidently. The new can no longer be aborted. It is being born. Its advent is unstoppable. The morbidity may persist, but a way out of it is foreseen; please, may it come after a lifetime, before we all die of longing for it.
During the 80s my own attempt to engage with this climate included the production of a trio of novels: *John Ross* (1987), *Time of Our Darkness* (1988) and *Born of Man* (1989). Although they were not written in that order, or that close together, they came out on one another's heels as three aspects of, loosely, a single endeavour. Because the reception of them has sometimes to my mind been muddled – at least, unable often to confront what each essentially demanded – I would like to explain the simple schema on which they were based, because I believe each was an attempt to try something basically new in South African fiction. Since fiction works at the micro level of the case history, which is all absorbing, the text is nothing but example; the principles from which the example is made I don’t find have been seen clearly.

In *Time of Our Darkness*, which came first – the references to La Guma and Brink in the title are obvious – I was concerned with three interlocking propositions. They are: that old South African sub-species of fiction, the 'Immorality' novel, which stretches from Douglas Blackburn in 1915 through Schreiner, Plomer, Millin, Peter Abrahams, Paton, Gordimer and even Fugard, was always little more than a pitifully bourgeois shocker that needed drastic renovation if it was to reflect the post-Immorality Act intrusions of the law into private loves. Second, that the entire impetus of the 1986 Children's Revolt, during which children assumed the role of adults and adults became, to say the least, vindictively childish, should be acted out literally. Third, that it was time to backtrack on the history of black liberation, especially in its relation to women's liberation and then gay liberation in the post-World War II world, and to lock the three together as part of one overall, undifferentiated process; hence, a novel whose three protagonists represent those three movements interconnectedly, as they are not often, if ever, connected in South African life. With these three principles in mind, I wrote the work not with any Olympian detachment, but as the action was occurring in the streets around me – a report from the field. I held back on nothing I knew about. The firm thought that it would not be published in any world I knew set my imagination free. It was published and became a bestseller in South Africa. What a surprise!

In *John Ross*, which was written back to back with *Time of Our Darkness*, I reversed the main event. Instead of the extreme case of a black child alone entering a white world, I took a white child and sent him alone into a black world. So they were two sides of the same coin, the coin's name obviously being war-like contemporaneous South Africa. But the contrast between the two works accidentally I found instructive: the black child in the white world is killed off; the white child in the black world is not, and what is more lives on enriched. This was not a preplanned proposition; rather, I now see, it was the inevitable conclusion of such an experiment. The proposition of *John Ross*, as I remember it, was to invert in a systematic way the traditional values ascribed to the terms 'black' and 'white'; in
fact, to do away with them altogether as poles of a Hegelian dialectic in the Western tradition I have been brought up to observe, but which I no longer find acceptable, nor even interesting. In John Ross I proposed to decontaminate that lethal dualism; to let the reader find it leak away from under him/her... to come out of a bad dream fundamentally changed. If I had told the readers of these two texts that those were the kinds of things I was doing, then of course they could not have worked for them.

The third text, Born of Man, took on some unfinished business from its predecessors: the matter of new birth itself – not the process of renewal that new birth is thought to be, but a kind of birth that is quite different, producing what we all know the end-product to be and calling on quite unexpected means from the past. Not renewal and renovation, which implies evolution and adaptation; but drastic re-visioning, which implies, as they say, a whole new ball-game. Thus, taken as a sequence, the three works show the method not to follow, the method to follow, and the likely results. This was not a route I pre-planned – if I had known where I was going at the time of writing, I wouldn’t have embarked on the project in the first place. But it occurs to me now that I needed to convince myself that this was the only procedure, and that is the happy outcome.

Now, in order to deliver these messages one cannot adopt forms of delivery which contest them. If the message is not friendly towards the ruling albocentric, patriarchal, capitalist, fascist, heterosexual, etc., order, so the form cannot be taken from there uncritically. We are not only post-protest in South Africa, but post everything else: poststructuralist, post-Christian and post-colonial (or trying to be), and I would hope post-deconstructionist, too. (New historicism has yet to arrive.) As literature does not offer the possibility of the invention of really new forms, one can only resort to reviewing older forms, finding out the reasons for their neglect, and then possibly renovating them; in short, choosing non-canonical forms to challenge the hegemony of received ideas. Such an activity may be described as in line with the continuing postmodernist project in general: intervention in the order of the status quo.

The fixed relations in existing forms between class, race and gender as determinants of modern attitudes to the human predicament need also to be reworked (for a comprehensive discussion of this, see Levy, for example).9 The relativity of class, race and gender is strongly, crucially related to South African issues. Raymond Williams’ model of cultural change being three-phased – residual, dominant and emergent – has the South African writer placed always working towards the third. The emergent in my view is not created seamlessly by transformation; it is created by combatting the dominant with selected aspects of the residual. To put this another way, we call on re-visioning the past to forge a future in spite of the present. The term interventionist for this sounds tepid and games-playing; I mean strike tactics, which with one simple, well-aimed blow render the dominant in some way no longer workable for the reader.
In *John Ross*, for example, I deconstructed received history in a rather polemical way, specifically the so-called history of Natal in the 1820s, showing a pioneer myth of white settlement and black savagery to have been no more than an inglorious labour raid. In *Time of Our Darkness* the action hinged on children’s rights, an issue so basic it pulls the carpet out from all others. In *Born of Man* I used gay rights, an issue so undiscussed in South Africa that it casts doubts on the depth and conviction of discussion about all other rights (for a comprehensive survey of the cavalier treatment accorded this issue in African literature, see Dunton). 10

Immediately, however, I must dampen any creative fire such rules-of-thumb imply. Among the most resistant to change of all aspects of South African life are its publishing industry and its literary critics. To get *John Ross* into print I had to do no less than five drafts, each more conventional than the last. But at its core I would like to think there is still some irreducible grit that cannot be washed away – grit that may make pearls some time hence. A fourth novel of this group, which reviews the unpleasant British connection in the formation of apartheid – a very unfashionable subject – I simply cannot get published at all. Then again, maybe it is so badly written it is unprintable.

So, if you will allow for formal theory having been diluted to meet the daily contingencies, let me explain some of my tactics. For *Time of Our Darkness* I used the thriller as form, for *John Ross* the historical romance, and for *Born of Man* the epistolary novel, sub-section that irreducible mode, farce. The thriller is currently where political contestation occurs outside the social realism of middle-class fiction. Historical romance, with its noble origins in liberatory romantic rhetoric, recurs, as Lukacs says, at times of upheaval and is still a lively forum, especially for younger readers – at any rate, it predates social realism. So does the third form, the epistolary, and it is a fine one for moral instruction of the reader, but in my case is particularly appealing as it is the nearest Western form to African story-telling. In each case I eased the supposed novelty of these forms by making the narrators first-person, part of whose function was to explain the material and make accessible the terms of the discourse. Thus each contains much internal discussion of what happens and how the narrator himself is (supposedly) being educated. In short, they are three highly self-reflexive texts, as metafictional as representational. Roland Barthes would be pleased at this subversion of the empire of signs and I may now, as he predicted, comfortably die away.

But before I do that…. As for many South African writers in English at present, if there is one constant in my career it is that I write primarily – though not exclusively – for a home readership. This is not something others will say on my behalf, so I must state it here. My concern is to have words between me and my countrymen first, not to take the alternative of writing about my country for export or, as many who are in exile are compelled to do, write for foreigners. Joyce called for silence, exile and
cunning on the part of the colonised writer of his day; today in South Africa the silence is becoming, in fact, an alternative voice, the exile is now seen to be internal (as well as the literal case), and the cunning is mandatory, nothing new. Cunning to slip through the censorship machinery and the thought-control it operates – although recently this has forced a split between literature, the opportunities for which have opened up, and the media, which have practically been closed down. Cunning also not to be processed and consumerised, as so many potentially tendentious works are, by the great, bland, unconscientised public awareness that these days can absorb just about anything without reducing it to its bedrock issues. As many South African readers are still not familiar with what human rights are, they can indefinitely postpone coming to an understanding of them. For many years I have been privileged enough to be able to weigh up the choice (many writers do not have the luxury of making the decision) – to stay and be compromised; to go and be free, but risk losing the home readership I have.... Something instinctive and persistent keeps me plodding back to my fate. Besides, cunning is the challenge that keeps one writing at all.

Or at least the writer should die in the terms we have been using so far – as ‘the writer’ who is immersed in, but detached from, contingent realities, future-directed, committed to the struggle, and so on. More recently than Gordimer and Ndebele, J.M. Coetzee has also defined the role of the writer in South Africa today, at the 1987 Book Week held in Cape Town. As reported in the Weekly Mail, Coetzee’s writer is (or should be) more of an ineradicable cockroach than a socially-determinable being.

Coetzee also took the opportunity to make a plea for a divorce between the discourse of history and that of the novel, to break the current dependence of the latter on the former with its ‘appropriating appetite’. His call was for a novel:

that operates in terms of its own procedures and issues in its own conclusions, not in terms of the procedures of history, eventuating in conclusions that are checkable by history as a child’s schoolwork’s checked by a schoolmistress.

In particular I mean a novel that evolves its own paradigms and myths, in the process (and here is the point where true rivalry, even enmity, might enter the picture), perhaps going so far as to show up the mythic status of the paradigms of history, to demythologise history... a novel prepared to work itself out outside the terms of class conflict, race conflict, gender conflict.11

Coetzee’s reminder of the autonomy of literary from other discourses is a timely and brave one. He goes flat in the face of the tendency of current radical politics to inspan all literature to serve social ends. While planning for social change and stressing the functionality of literature, Gordimer and Ndebele also held this position, if only tenuously and ambiguously... but Coetzee, suspicious of cashable relevance – and rightly dismissive of reductive sloganeering – has taken a clearer line: literature
as an independent activity, to be co-opted only on its own terms. I am sure that he does not mean this in the elitist, ivory-tower way it may sound – the cockroach metaphor is a lot closer to the ground than Gordimer’s leader down the ‘narrow corridor’ and Ndebele’s seated figure ‘in a radically contemplative state’.

Coetzee’s hands-off-the-writer position first occurs in South African literature back in the Lewis Nkosi of the 1960s, where Nkosi defines his function as ‘to reveal our inner geography to the world as well as to ourselves; and this is all we can ask of our writers’¹² – so there is a long line of thinking in the South African writer interested in maintaining independence. At that level – the level of individual tough-mindedness, cussedness – there can be no compromise at all.

In conclusion, this piece is meant to be a personal statement, neither a sober analysis nor a rallying call. I remain sceptical. I quote my fellow writers on their role, but are writers to be trusted? Are they representative of their times, at least in the ways they claim they are? Is their activity worth anything at all? Am I? Isn’t this all a self-advocated mystique, rather than a genuine mystery? Show-biz rather than real action? Paper flowers in the face of bullets? Why pretend to be combatant, when what I do best is mourn the dead? When I am really down under the burden of useless suffering and sorrow, I cannot write at all, not even for the basic encouragement of some extra income. So I have to climb out of that despair by writing again. It is not in myself, but in the work, that any beliefs tend to show.

NOTES

4. Njabulo Ndebele, ‘Redefining Relevance’, Pretexts, Cape Town 1.1 (Winter 1989), pp. 40-51. All further references to this article are included in the text.


Tyrone Appollis: 'Langa Train'. Linocut.
Stephen Gray

SEASON OF VIOLENCE

has not ended; was due to close;
termination was fully announced –
prayer-day now throughout the nations –

the air is cluttered with silent words –
can’t breathe for ascending petitions;
not over yet; only begun

a derailment at Mariannhill;
Sunday is another killer in South Africa;
take a philosophical view:

‘O Lord afford me detachment
from those who want to buy don’t know how;
bullets through flesh fly easily’

As Archbishop Tutu said Martin Luther
King said: ‘those who live an eye
for an eye end up blind people’

will not end; for ever and ever;
help out now; Amen.
RETURNEEES

on their knees touch soil
a generation lost and found

frame time again and
focus on the true subject

bring expertise and vocabulary
from another world apart

apply themselves to pulling closed
the chasm between their and our lives

the great rift will soon entomb
their and our past, level all

renegotiating exile they face
privately the force of their desertation.
SALLY-ANN MURRAY

The Law of the Vultures:
A Story for an Altered State?*

South Africa stands at a critical moment of her history. Despite the optim­isms of recent times, it is not of course a moment that has arisen, as one of our leading sociologists has it, by an ‘almost miraculous intervention’1. Rather, it remains explicable as a point in a long, difficult process of opposition to the structural inequalities of South African society. From any vantage point of that story, we could identify continuities and discontinu­ties that predate even the institutionalization of apartheid in 1948. Yet in looking back through history, we are also aware that a new future in South Africa is struggling to express itself, and as literary people we might consider what kinds of stories are at present most likely to claim our attention. Simultaneously, what stories could increase in value as we seek decisive shifts away from the lumber of a racially and economically oppressive society.

Perhaps the stories will be factual rather than imaginative, especially as we recall that so many South African writers, from Pringle to Serote, have avoided any easy distinction between fictional and historical responses to the experiences of South African life. One such writer is Phyllis Altman, who has been all but effaced from literary consideration and debate. First published in 1952 The Law of the Vultures, Altman’s only novel to date, was rescued from utter obscurity and republished in Johannesburg in 1987. Perhaps the publisher had already sensed that socio-literary developments in South Africa, in the eighties, were beginning to strike consonance with Altman’s insights and forms of response. Perhaps even more so now, as debates about senses of identity, socialist redistribution and liberal com­mitments to human freedom urge us to take cognizance of scenarios for another South Africa, Altman’s book deserves fresh critical recognition. As a critic remarked on the occasion of its republication, ‘The Law of the Vultures is a classic South African tale of humiliation and injustice, ... both deeply moving and highly provocative.’3

Thinking in terms of literary education, New Critical injunctions concern­ing the autonomous text have limited validity with regard to The Law of the Vultures. Instead, we need to see the novel as the product of forces in the late 1940s and early fifties, and our approach might find interest in the fact that Altman herself is caught up in the swirl of events even as she
attempts to impose her self-signature on the textual narrative. The pressures of the time included, of course, the coming to power of the Nationalist Party government, the radicalization of the ANC, the stumbling adjustments of white liberals, and new organization among the black labour force. Altman, who had grown up in Johannesburg white society, had by the 1950s so dissociated herself from prevailing white middle-class norms as to have abandoned her teaching career because of the ‘naked and unashamed racism’ that her colleagues passed on to their white pupils.4 During the late forties, she had been a Welfare Officer with the progressively inclined Springbok Legion, where she had assisted hundreds of black, ‘coloured’ and Indian ex-servicemen who were grappling with both bureaucracy and the demobilization scheme and the broader inequities of a racist society. What we should note here is that although her actions in the Legion were informed by fair-minded ‘liberal’ tenets of equality and justice, Altman would shun liberal politics in South Africa. At the time of writing her novel she had been inspired by possible courses of action in black oppositional politics, and would show little interest in the formation of the Liberal Party in 1953. As the novel suggests, she found compelling the Africanist philosophy of the ANC Youth League and, paradoxically, the tenets of a nascent non-racial trade unionism, as embodied most visibly in young Communist labour leaders such as Dan Tloome and Ray Alexander. (Both had seen as their ultimate ideal the unity of black and white workers, and were removed from office in 1950 by the provisions of the Suppression of Communism Act.) In her working life, Altman herself came to embrace the socialist organizational approaches of SACTU (the South African Congress of Trade Unions). She was assistant General Secretary from 1956 until she was banned in 1963. Having been refused a passport, she left South Africa on an exit permit in 1964 and settled in London where she continued to work on behalf of the ANC for the International Defence and Aid Fund, and has edited both factual and imaginative writing on South Africa as published by Kliptown Books.

Altman’s lived allegiances and sympathies in the late forties and early fifties, therefore, were complicated though socially understandable. She emerges as a white liberal who had become impatient with liberalism’s own preference for gradualism. While the alternative Africanism appealed to part of her, so she seems to have recognized dangers in its apocalyptic visions of chauvinist black nationalism. Against this, she perhaps somewhat idealistically views a broad non-racial future. If the terms of her response and debate were smashed after Sharpeville, they have nevertheless been re-constituted as a characteristic of the 1980s, and I shall suggest that _The Law of the Vultures_ is true to the complexities of its moment even as it strains to push beyond its own historical understanding to urge the reader towards a radically re-evaluated future in South Africa. What some critics have seen as a confusion in its central ideas, I intend to see as the mark of its authentic witness. In reading Altman’s conceptual shifts as
historically explicable, we also begin to appreciate her means of fictional representation. As I shall argue, *The Law of the Vultures* in creative ways challenges several realist expectations about the novel, such as the privileging of individualized experience in richly interiorized characters, the evocation of setting and, finally, the resolution, within the fictional narrative, of action and moral theme. Invoking the traditional antinomies of 'poetry' and 'history', some have remarked on a 'lack of art' in *The Law of the Vultures*. But I am suggesting that the novel yields its validity to us in its refusal to separate its material commitments from the art of fiction. My attempt to recover *The Law of the Vultures* as a literary text should be seen, therefore, as part of a wider social programme concerning, as I said above, the kinds of stories that could accrue in significance as we envisage a more just South Africa.

Set almost entirely within the circumscribed opportunities of black South African life, *The Law of the Vultures* tells several interrelated stories. Altman begins with the life of Thabo Thaele, a Basuto who, having once aspired to be a doctor, takes up clerical work in a progressive Johannesburg firm. After seventeen years he is jailed for a theft committed by a white colleague and, espousing a garbled Africanism, he forms the Africanist 'People of Africa Society'. We then meet David Nkosi, a veteran of the Second World War, who has been decorated for saving the life of his white lieutenant. Lt Walkers vows to assist Nkosi after the war, but back in Johannesburg fobs him off with cash rather than intervene in helping the unfortunate Nkosi to secure his soldier's benefits. As we weave in and out of other stories about black city experiences in a 'white' society, we are introduced to Dhlamini, a trade-union official at the factory where Nkosi has obtained employment. The crux of Altman's argument lies in the ideological battle that ensues between Thaele, the aggrieved and virulent Africanist, and Dhlamini, the Marxist-inspired theorist, for the allegiance of the bewildered 'Jim comes to Jo'burg' figure, David Nkosi. The novel ends problematically with Thaele, the aggrieved and virulent Africanist, and Dhlamini, the Marxist-inspired theorist, for the allegiance of the bewildered 'Jim comes to Jo'burg' figure, David Nkosi. The novel ends problematically with Thaele killed, Nkosi jailed for allegedly inciting insurrection and Dhlamini, we are to suppose, back in the workplace, organizing for the future. In his delirium after being sjambokked, Nkosi concludes the fictional narrative, if not the larger social story:

Nkosi closed his eyes, for it seemed to him that Thaele lay in the corner of the cell. Thaele dying – his head pulp; ... unbidden, Dhlamini appeared ...

'Do not speak, Dhlamini, he said quickly ...

For you do not understand everything ... Thaele is right and you are right. Thaele is right when he says that we must hate all whites. Yes. Do not shake your head. They make it easy for us to hate them ... But you are right also ... You are right when you said we must all stand together. All of us together ... But only our people. ONLY THE AFRICANS! ... He sank into a coma and lay unmoving for many hours. When he woke it was very dark in his cell, but he knew they were both still there. Thaele in death lay in the corner and Dhlamini in life stood opposite. (pp. 205-206)
The Law of the Vultures, Altman has said, indicts the ‘the corruptness of white South African society’, its title taken ‘from a Zulu proverb – ‘He who does not obey the law of man will obey the law of the vultures’.’5 This ‘law’ Altman sees unremittingly at the heart of the South African body politic, and when her novel first appeared Altman’s politics were labelled subversive by a professor of law at Wits. The result was that many booksellers in South Africa restricted their orders of the novel. The term ‘subversive’, however, requires qualification. Altman certainly shows the brutal effects of a racist society on black people. In retrospect, however, what might have been more deeply subversive was that, in direct contradiction to the de-humanizing and retribalizing apartheid laws of the 1950s, Altman fills her primarily urban landscape with convincing black human beings, who both feel and think. In fact, ‘utopian’ visions of transformation, as we encounter in Gordimer’s novel A Sport of Nature (1987), could seem quite facile in comparison with Altman’s tenacious attachment to the actual registers of living in history.

Such attachments were both acknowledged and dismissed by reviewers of the time. One remarked that her ‘passionate commitment to the African course’ has rendered her writing ‘more than a little crude in technique’.6 Another declared, however, that The Law of the Vultures had a significant impact because Altman sympathetically and successfully captured the human stories behind the news: the stories ‘behind the daily crime lists, the terror in the townships around us, the beatings-up, the raids and the lorry-loads of farm labour.’7 Since Altman uses the motif of rural-urban migration, it was inevitable that similarities should have been found between The Law of the Vultures and Paton’s Cry, the Beloved Country (1948). Significantly, however, Altman’s story spans the years 1930-1946: she thus projects her knowledge of the apartheid state back on to a period prior to the 1948 election. Whereas Paton’s novel, which was written at the time of Smuts’s United Party government, has recourse to hope amid desolation, Altman eschews the ameliorative possibilities. This reflects the fact, perhaps, that while Smuts’s ‘trusteeship’, to quote Karis and Carter, had ‘left open the door of expectation that the direction of South African policy might change, the unexpected victory of ...[the] Reunited National Party closed that door’.8 According to social reality, therefore, it should be expected that Altman’s vision and verdict will be harsher than Paton’s. According to the two writers’ temperaments, the material base of Altman’s response also seems apt to her purpose.

Yet her temperament, as I have suggested, was not singular and private in its compulsions, but touched historical consciousness perhaps in a more comprehensive way than Paton’s Christian idealism. Altman’s commitment to materiality does not therefore negate her desire to tap the inspirational energies still reverberating from the Youth League’s 1949 Programme of Action. In her memory, too, could have been the 1946 miners’ strike which, though severely crushed, had at least indicated that black
workers could be mobilized on a large scale. Even as she rejects the course of liberalism, *The Law of the Vultures* retains something of the liberal desire to teach white Soouth Africa the folly of its ways. It is tempting to regard Altman’s utter dismissal of whites in the novel as a reaction to what must have struck many politically progressive South Africans as the wholesale moral bankruptcy of white South African society in taking the path to Nazi-type social ‘solutions’. As a consequence, partly, Altman left South Africa in the late forties, and *The Law of the Vultures* was written in London. With oppositional political organizations beginning to challenge the National Party government Altman returned to South Africa in 1951. As Altman saw it, the various actions of her plot were intended to conscientize and educate a white audience. Yet perhaps to us the most relevant debate in the novel centres around the efficacy of populist or workerist possibilities for the future, for in tying race to class, Altman appears to us to be peculiarly contemporary. The battle of ideas is given human definition in the figure of Thaele the black nationalist, and Dhlamini, the socialist trade union official, so the ‘diagram’ of debate shifts into the ‘picture’ of character interaction. Altman conveys a vivid human story of people living in history:

At first we might see the dignified Dhlamini as the simple alternative to the vengeful Thaele. But Altman needed to incriminate white society as a provocation to an unregenerate Africanism, and Thabo Thaele is seen as both product and agent of the social terrain. It is stressed that he comes to hate white people only after Mr Dent, his aptly named, ineffectually liberal employer, had allowed him to be unjustly jailed. Altman never underplays the way in which Thaele has been shaped by his experiences at the hands of white society. At the same time, Altman’s own democratizing tendencies could not allow her to subscribe in an uncritical way to the sectarian character of Thaele’s Africanist perspective, and we see Thaele himself come to live according to ‘the law of the vultures’, as he uses the suffering of fellow black people at the hands of whites to satisfy his own hunger for revenge.

In contrast, the union-organizer Dhlamini is seen by Altman to be patient and politically articulate: an advocate of ‘unity, understanding and co-operation’ (p. 162). Yet Dhlamini’s labour theory, which idealistically
promotes economic imperatives over human sentiment, rational explanation over empathy, and class over race, tends to erase the severe racial divisions of specifically South African reality. Again, it is as if the ‘liberal’, humane Altman is determined to qualify Dhlamini’s ideological correctness when there is the danger of economic law minimizing the substance of human beings. Another interesting aspect to the presentation of Dhlamini is that despite his comments on class alliances having a certain authority in the story, his voice often echoes into something of a void where the practical manifestations of class are concerned. While Dhlamini frequently repeats longs views of history – one day black and white workers will unite – the shorter views of history had seen white workers in South Africa subscribe to myths of racial superiority. One wonders whether Altman, faced with real human situations, could really ignore the fact that moves forward would rely on a conglomerate of black struggles. Whatever the difficulties, we are deliberately allowed to attend to Dhlamini’s speeches while sympathizing with the fact that the humble soldier David Nkosi, having been absent from his rural family for four years during the war, is unwilling to remain in Johannesburg in order to attend a trade-union night school. The narrative of history includes backtracking, false starts, and provisional consolidations. Ideals about a better future are no less valuable for being tested in the difficulties of everyday experience.

We should be wary, then, of following several critics of Altman’s day who accused Altman of failing to interweave the threads of her narrative. According to one review, *The Law of the Vultures* ‘creaks with improbabilities’.10 Yet, we may recognize that Altman was justifiably circumscribed by history so that her impulses to humanism and didactism could not arrive at any simple resolution. As the Russian Formalist Mikhail Bakhtin might have said, Altman attempts to engage with the voices of her moment not by imposing closure, but by grappling with the various, often equally compelling claims for social and cultural dominance.11 In what Bakhtin has called the heteroglossia of human and social life, textual discontinuities, shifts of perspective and even apparently irreconcilable assertions of moral preference may be seen as a sign of realism. As I am arguing, we need not experience ideological confusion in *The Law of the Vultures*, but an overriding conviction that something needed to be done about human suffering. ‘Contradictions’ begin to signal novelistic truth.

Such a mimetic authenticity will affect the ‘shape’ of *The Law of the Vultures*. As I have intimated, Altman’s response - as she explored issues against the events of the time - could not adequately be conveyed in terms of formal realist conventions of interiority of character presentation and linearity of plot. Yet critics have sought mostly to define Altman’s characters according to notions of individualized experience. (Even at the time of the novel’s recent republication Thabo Thaele, whose story begins the book, was insistently described as the tragic protagonist.12) When
confronted with the abrupt curtailment or, as it subsequently emerges, the suspension of Thaele’s story one-third into the novel, critics have rebuked Altman for failing to sustain what they had expected to be Thaele’s heroic development. The priorities of Altman’s political commitment, however, might quite aptly have queried modes of personal characterization. As Altman has said, her book was ‘compounded of imaginary but typical incidents’ and if she ‘did not consciously choose [her] characters as spokesmen of oppositional ideologies’, she seems nevertheless to have sensed the need to avoid any ruptures between the individual personality and a representative social experience.\(^{13}\)

Thaele has the interest of a credible human being, for instance, but his psychological development is not allowed to govern the trajectory of the novel. With his working experience in the firm of Dent & Co. determined largely by political exigencies, his increasing anger and frustration as an African cannot be located as a ‘fatal flaw’. Rather, he is a victim. Certainly his story has pathos; but if there is a tragic dimension, the ‘flaw’ lies not so much in Thaele the individual as, according to Brechtian understandings, in the dominating ideologies of the epoch. In other ways, too, the term tragedy might be inadequate. For the novel does not end with the death of Thaele. It is less concerned with noble dying than with the potential for productive living. Although imprisoned, Nkosi may be released, and he will have to decide about available courses of action in the future. Dhlamini, for his part, as I have said, remains there, organizing. In The \textit{Law of the Vultures}, circumstances are finally not regarded as immutable; they can be changed by human action.

The fact of materiality is important. In her imagery, Altman often hints at a religious frame of reference – the struggle between Thaele and Dhlamini for the ‘soul’, or loyalty, of Nkosi, for example, which might suggest the temptation of allegory, where ideal possibilities are free from history. Yet in an interview with me in 1987, Altman explained that she does ‘not believe in the fixed destiny of the morality plays’ and feels that people who belong to organizations like ‘Cosatu and the UDF are hoping to create a genuinely democratic society and are actively trying to shape their lives to achieve this end’.\(^{14}\) In thinking of \textit{Cry, the Beloved Country}, we may attach to both Thaele and Nkosi the symbolism of the prodigal son. But such archetypal patternings in \textit{The Law of the Vultures} are continually being returned to the demands of precise social experience. If there is a longing in the novel for sudden transfigurations this may be part of Altman’s desire and need even as she establishes a sociologically convincing locale in terms of people, fact and data. This was something not understood by the critic who felt that Altman’s writing suffers from ‘a starkness that loses many opportunities of atmosphere and descriptive death’.\(^{15}\) To invoke a valley of desolation in contrast to Johannesburg, as Paton does, would be to invalidate the point Altman is trying to make about the truth of the socialized imagination.
If Altman’s style has been rebuked for its lack of ‘descriptive residue’, her plot has been regarded by some as jumbled. But while the action does skew from the single focus of Thabo Thaele to several other points of reference, the various stories in *The Law of the Vultures* are all linked to the central idea of massive dislocation that is so crucial to modern African experience. In presenting a number of ‘Jims’, and also a ‘Jane’, who came to Jo’burg, Altman recognized, perhaps more than other novelists at the time, that the black person was a permanent presence in the cities of South Africa. What might have been seen as awkwardness in her handling of action and setting can, from another perspective, be seen to have a sociological accuracy not found in other ‘Jim comes to Jo’burg’ novels. Whereas Peter Abrahams in *Mine Boy* (1946) and Alan Paton in *Cry, the Beloved Country* (1948) focus, in strong single actions, on single protagonists, Altman’s interlinked stories, her sudden shifts of character attention, her episodic narration and recurrent recourse to debate and discussion all have the effect of immersing her individual characters into a larger, populated landscape. These features also complicate the linear drive of the narrative. If we are impelled to envision a different future, the accumulated detail of people struggling in the here and now provides a crucial check on idealising solutions. In this regard, we are not merely noting a technique, but a democratizing of forms in literature and life. Whether Altman realizes it or not, her determination to speak out on behalf of a suppressed black majority has resulted in the muting of her own individuality of style in favour of a collective kind of voice. As we ‘listen’ to an exchange in Motsubi’s Tea Room, for instance, our attention is healthily deflected from Thaele’s preoccupations with self to the sustaining presence of the black community:

‘I am pleased you are out of gaol,’ [Motsubi] said quietly.
A tremendous rage gripped Thaele ... ‘Do not speak to me! You are a stranger to me. Must everyone know of my affairs?’ ...
Motsubi shrugged ... ‘It is not easy for us to keep out of gaol. I myself have also been arrested,’ ... Thaele drew a deep breath.
‘Why ... why were you in gaol, my father?’ ...
‘Why?’ Motsubi laughed without mirth. ‘why? Because I could not pay my tax.
The year that my child died.’
A woman who had come in and had stood listening to their conversation, now came up to the table.
‘For us,’ she said, ‘it is work and gaol. For our people there is no other way to live. I also have been in gaol.’
‘You, too, my mother. Why? ... ‘Because they found beer in my yard. I did not even make it ... but we lived in the one house and when the police found it they took me.’ (pp. 109-110)

At the end of the fictional narrative Nkosi, too, has been jailed. Yet he continues in his cell to question the political options available to black people, and one is tempted to quote a generation of political prisoners in
saying that in the long march of resistance Nkosi's sentence - five years' hard labour for 'inciting insurrection' - is nothing.

In South Africa today, pass laws have been repealed, prominent political prisoners have been released, democratic organizations have been unbanned, and there seem to be real possibilities for people to tackle, creatively, the issues that Altman, when she wrote her novel, saw as being crucial to any consideration of a more equitable society. At the same time, we still have the Group Areas Act, the Population Registration Act and various restrictive 'native' land acts. Mandela may say 'throw your knives and pangas into the sea', but Brigadier Theuns Swanepoel of the Conservative Party continues to insists that 'The only negotiation with the enemy is down the barrel of a gun'.

In all this, The Law of the Vultures has the power and resonance to convey a crucial principle: we can only understand our present - and thereby construct our future - through an understanding of our past. And through a reading that has tried to connect her literary text to a larger social context, my case for the recovery of Altman should, I feel, extend beyond Altman herself to a wider conception of a new South Africa. Phyllis Altman would not have wanted to separate herself, as an individual, from a generation of 'silenced' South Africans including, among writers, Ruth First, Mary Benson and Alex la Guma. I deliberately mention both women and men. In a recent review of The Law of the Vultures, Christine Barsby claims that by stressing Altman's link with a national struggle we might be in danger of neglecting questions more specifically about the role of women in South African society. Perhaps the challenge is to resist any separation of the national and the 'feminist'. Instead we should recognize that the work of writers like Altman could actually encourage feminist criticism in South Africa to make a sharp conceptual break from currently available white middle-class American and European models, and to articulate a socially progressive presence for South African women in another South Africa.


NOTES


5. Interview, p. 100.


9. Interview, p. 102.


ECHO POEMS

The Pietermaritzburg daily newspaper, the Natal Witness, published a ‘poetry corner’ in its weekly supplement, Echo, which is addressed largely to a black readership. The poems that follow are four of the many that appeared. In the article which follows these poems David Maughan Brown discusses the importance and significance of the Echo poems. We would like to thank the poets and the editor of Echo, Khaba Mkhize for permission to reprint these poems and the extracts from others that are quoted in the article.

Mlungisi Mkhize

JUST BEFORE EMBRACING DAWN

The door was banged
House filled with authoritative voices
Bright torches cutting closed eyeballs
Slashing the flesh of night
Came fire-wielding men.

And when the tool of flames
Pointed at me, threats unfounded
My writings keenly scrutinized,
New strength pervaded my entire being.

So, give me a pen and paper
I will write
Verses in the midst of torture.
What is happening in my land?
My land is a desert of truth,
The emergency swallows every drop of reality.
Inequality is reality; reality is abnormality;
Like howling dogs
Ignorance haunts the voice of the people,
Pregnant with the voice of my people
Are the garbage bins of parliament,
Exploding with squeezed-in voices of my people –
Viva pen of culture, viva!

What is happening in Azania?
I see normality becoming abnormality,
Abnormality becoming normality,
Truth is a taboo in my land,
Like ravenous lions, jails devouring my people,
Graves voraciously devouring the people, and yet
Accumulated emotions
Burst the breast of the survivalists –
Viva pen of culture, viva!
Viva pen of resistance, viva!
Draining the flooding emotions of my people;
Oozing the aspirations of my people;
Voicing the voices of the voiceless;
Voicing the opinions of the voiceless –
Viva pen of culture, viva pen of resistance!

Pen of resistance:
Your extreme silent voice
Will remove the stubborn lids
Of the garbage bins of parliament;
The hands of your voice
Will remove the shroud of lies –
Viva pen of culture, viva
For you have nothing to lose!
Ellington Ngunezi

DEATH ON MY DOORSTEPS

After seeing their targets
On the road
They alighted from a bus
And gave them chase;
Then they saw you standing in your home yard
As their targets ran past the gate
They thought you were one of them,
Gave you chase,
Then caught you, then killed you
O Lins, Lins,
A few minutes later
You laid on the street
Serene in rivulets of blood.
I know you’ve met Mdayisi,
Tana, S’fiso, Mlu, Magugu, Hleke, Nhlanhla,
And the rest;
I am sure you have revised
Your respective brutal deaths.
And there is no complaining
About anything anymore.
And there are no temptations any more.
And there is not eating, no smoking,
No drinking, no cinemas,
And there is no womanising
O Lins, Lins
Your movement to Heaven
Was a reminder that we are
Not for this world,
We all have to be covered with
Our last blankets some day;
Soil,
O Lins, Lins,
You have reached a stage
Of total tranquility and eternity.
'Afropoet' (nom-de-plume)

IT'S A WEEKEND AGAIN

It's a weekend again
Execution time
Daggers ready to obey orders
Our townships like a hive
Ever swelling with anger
Death staring at us like a hungry wolf
Women wail through the night
African women.
Bullets fly in the air
Unleashing death
Children lying in tatters
Blood flowing profusely
Fresh yet new blood
Wolves parading our streets
Their teeth dripping with blood
It's yet another procession
Sinhathing!
You have seen nothing
The worst is yet to come
Mountain Rise!
You rose and the mountains echoed
Haughtily you swallowed them.
It's you and I
Locked up there
Peeping through key holes
Watching revolution live.
Is this freedom?
DAVID MAUGHAN BROWN

‘An Unfinished Mourning’: *Echo* Poems from Pietermaritzburg

So, give me pen and paper
I will write
Verses in the midst of torture.

Mlungisi Mkhize *Echo* 9/6/88

INTRODUCTION

Between January 1987 and June 1989 some 1400 people were killed in incidents of politically-motivated violence in an area of 374 square kilometres around Pietermaritzburg in the Natal Midlands in South Africa. In the same area an estimated 1000 houses were destroyed, some 10,000 people moved house permanently, and another 10 to 15 thousand had to flee their homes for some part of the period in question. The South African State, represented by Cabinet Ministers and South African Police (SAP) spokesmen in particular, made consistent efforts to downplay the conflict until it suddenly became an excuse for not lifting the State of Emergency. Despite the denials, it was all too clear that a major political conflict of mounting intensity, amounting in effect to a civil war, was raging in the Natal Midlands, despite the draconian measures for the suppression of political dissent embodied in the Internal Security Act and the Emergency Regulations. The consequences for the several hundred thousand black inhabitants of the area were devastating.

Throughout this period the Pietermaritzburg daily newspaper, the *Natal Witness*, published a ‘poetry corner’ in its weekly supplement, *Echo*, which is addressed largely to a black readership. A number of the poems, in both English and Zulu, dealt directly with, or touched indirectly on, the political conflict in the area, despite the potentially deadly danger of incurring the displeasure of one side or the other in the conflict, and despite the Emergency Regulations’ prohibition of criticism of the ironically termed ‘security’ forces. But the number of poems touching on the conflict — amounting to no more than 10% of the poems written in English — is very small, given the way the conflict dominated the lives of the people.
Publication of the *Echo* poetry corner was suspended at the end of 1989, though there are plans to resurrect it. The violence in Natal reached new and catastrophic levels in the first few months of 1990 and has claimed the lives of some of the poets published in *Echo*. This paper can focus only on the period from January 1987 to June/July 1989, and has no pretensions to being more than a tentative introduction. More work waits to be done on the poems written in English since July 1989 and, perhaps even more urgently, on the poems in Zulu written over the whole period.

In affording a weekly platform to aspirant and often very inexperienced poets from Natal's 'townships' *Echo* performed a function comparable, if on a smaller scale, to that performed by *Staffrider* magazine in the early years of its existence. Consequently it posed many of the same problems for literary criticism with regard to evaluative criteria. My interest in this paper will not be in an evaluation of these poems against some normative 'standard' of 'good poetry' but in looking at the poetry as a significant component of the cultural production arising out of a particular set of social and political conditions, on which it is able to shed light that cannot be obtained from any other source. The *Echo* poems serve to make the human cost of the conflict real in ways that political analysis and statistical data, however instructive, cannot.

**THE POLITICAL CONTEXT**

The history of the political violence in the Pietermaritzburg area is strongly contested by the two major parties to the conflict: Inkatha, the governing political party in the KwaZulu Legislative Assembly (KLA), originally founded as a Zulu 'cultural' organization by Chief Gatsha Buthelezi in 1975 and laying claim to being the largest black political organization in South Africa; and the UDF a loosely structured grouping of affiliated organisations, ranging from darts clubs to trade unions, united in their opposition to the apartheid system and in their desire to see South Africa transformed into a unitary, non-racial and democratic society. As the governing party of the KwaZulu bantustan, deriving much of its political strength from the authority of conservative 'chiefs' in rural areas, Inkatha would obviously find more favour with the South African state (in spite of Buthelezi's refusal to accept full 'independence' for KwaZulu) than the UDF, which was perceived as a 'radical' internal front for the African National Congress (ANC). As the major sponsor of the KwaZulu-Natal Indaba, a forum promoting a regional federation for Natal and KwaZulu, with belief in a free-market economy as the main cement for the prospective union, Inkatha has generally been looked on much more favourably by the business sector in Natal, and by the English-language media, than the UDF, which was perceived as supporting the 'socialist' tendencies of the Freedom Charter.
The monthly death-toll of political violence in the Pietermaritzburg area rose from one death in January 1987 to 161 in January 1988. Whatever particular event triggered this escalation, the ground for future conflict between Inkatha and community-based political activists more radically opposed to the South African government can be seen to have been laid ten years earlier. The essence of the argument has been succinctly put by Gerhard Maré:  

Only a year after its launch, the 1976 student rebellion in Soweto put the writing on the wall for Inkatha. It signified the start of mass politics with a national scope that had nothing at all to do with Inkatha or Natal regional politics.... The Soweto rebellion...shifted politics into 'the community', with issues of education, rent, local government, services, transport, etc. These were the very areas that Inkatha controlled as a bantustan government and therefore posed a direct challenge to it. Inkatha and the KLA became involved in action against school boycotters, transport boycotts, rent boycotts. Increasingly it had to act as part of the system it was now based in. (p. 72)

Inkatha’s claim to a place in national politics, on which Buthelezi’s own ambitions as a national politician rested, depended on its claims to being the political organization with the greatest mass support in the country. Its dominant position in the KwaZulu-Natal Indaba similarly depended on its claims to being able to mobilize the overwhelming majority of blacks in Natal in support of multi-racialism, federalism and capitalism. Both these claims were severely dented by the success of consumer boycotts and stayaways against which Inkatha had campaigned very actively. With its power-base apparently eroding and the credibility of its claim to represent the black people of Natal in jeopardy, Inkatha mounted aggressive recruiting drives in areas around Pietermaritzburg from mid-1987.

Forced recruitment into Inkatha was resisted by the formation of ‘defence committees’ organized along the lines of street committees (see South African Labour Bulletin [SABL], February 1988: pp. 16-43) which did not necessarily, at least at the outset, have any particular political affiliation - as one participant put it: ‘Once the people united, Inkatha supporters called them UDF. So people said “What the hell, let’s be UDF!”’ (SABL:p. 34). The defence committees often succeeded in keeping Inkatha vigilantes out of what thereby became ‘UDF’ areas. Inkatha’s campaign of forced recruitment would appear to have resulted in the disaffection of substantial numbers of previously apolitical township residents. Moreover, the flood of young activists seeking asylum in outlying areas resulted in the politicization of rural areas which had previously languished under the largely unquestioned authority of traditional (Inkatha) chiefs. By the end of 1987 community support for Inkatha appeared to be very much on the decline. The Inkatha response was, by UDF and COSATU accounts, to launch an intensified campaign, the violence of whose coercion was met with violent resistance and resulted in the 161 deaths in January 1988.
Evidence of state support for Inkatha comes in many forms, from the political affiliations of those detained under Emergency regulations in Natal to the turning of blind eyes to Inkatha rallies held in flagrant contravention of those same regulations. Inkatha 'warlords' who were known to have been involved in the killings, and against whom sworn affidavits had been filed and judicial interdicts granted, were allowed to operate openly in the townships. The police attitude was clearly articulated by the Minister of Law and Order in February 1988: ‘...the police intend to face the future with moderates and fight against radical groups.... Radicals, who are trying to destroy South Africa, will not be tolerated. We will fight them. We have put our foot in that direction, and we will eventually win the Pietermaritzburg area' (Natal Witness 27/2/88). From late 1987 there were numerous attempts to bring the opposing sides in the conflict together for peace talks. Inkatha showed some interest in talks but it would appear that its main, if not only, interest in participating in peace talks lay in obtaining recognition for itself from the UDF as a national political organization – Inkatha has constantly, up to the present, called for the talks to be held at national leadership level.

The dramatic escalation of the violence in the first months of 1990 and its transfer to the Transvaal townships in mid-1990 would seem likely, at least in part, to have been the result of desperate last-ditch attempts by Inkatha to establish Buthelezi's position as a serious contender for political power, or at least as a crucial participant in any negotiating process, in the face of the massive groundswell of popular support for Mandela and the ANC in the immediate aftermath of their respective release and unbanning.

THE ECHO POEMS

(i) Intended Functions

Analysis of the poems suggests that they are intended by their writers to perform a variety of functions, some simple, others much more complex. At one end of the spectrum are a number of poems which are clearly intended as vehicles of a straight-forward didacticism. The Echo Poetry Corner has a relatively wide readership and offers scope for instructing the youth. The pages of Echo become a conduit whereby the wisdom traditionally associated with age can be conveyed to youth dislocated by urbanization and dispersed by the conflict. Thus, for example, we find a poem by S'khumbuzo Mvelase (27/10/88) titled 'Violence' conveying a direct warning to young readers:

We are wiped out
By a disease which we call violence
It takes friends which we loved
Mothers, fathers, sisters and brothers....
It looks as if there is a black cloud
Hanging over this earth
Which has come to take our youth....
Now we want to warn our sons and daughters
Don't let your heart rule your head
Because it can never be satisfied.

The need for unity is the essence of the message most frequently conveyed by the poems – as seen in Oupa Jackson's 'My Last Words, Said Moloko':

and how many of your people
must you kill until you know
that you have killed enough.
I swear there will be no
freedom for you if you are
not united.

A second function performed by the poems is the direct expression of grief and lamentation, to which I will return later. A third distinct function can be seen to be very similar to that claimed by Ngugi for his early novel about the Emergency in Kenya, Weep Not, Child: 'Actually in the novel I have tried to show the effect of the Mau Mau war on the ordinary man and woman who were left in the villages. I think the terrible thing about the Mau Mau war was the destruction of family life, the destruction of personal relationships.'

Short poems obviously do not provide the novel's scope for rendering the effects of violent political conflict on those caught up in it, in terms of fear, loss and physical suffering, but the destruction of family life and personal relationships are vividly realized in many of these poems. The dominant images are of blood and fire. Thus Pietermaritzburg is addressed as '...city of blood, tears and repression' (Abraham Ntombela, 'Today and Tomorrow', 9/2/89) and the reader is told

...I can't see this place
Properly, my eyes are prohibited
By curtains of blood

(Shoba Mthalane, 'Curtains of Blood', 26/5/88)

The images of fire often incorporate references to 'necklacing'. The fullest development of this imagery is found in Ndlovu's 'What's Happening in Maritzburg?' (18/2/88):

Tell them about Maritzburg
Say the capital city is on fire
Flames are burning like that
Of a tractor tyre size necklace
Above the city's head plays the cloud
The cloud of crisis which is the outcome
Of this burning capital city of Natal
Day and night - no difference
There's always darkness
People do not recognise each other...

Here the image is of the whole city being necklaced. The poem sees Pietermaritzburg as a totality, a single body whose anguish can be conveyed via the image of the encircling flaming tractor tyre burning the city alive. This image is symptomatic of the kind of partitioned perception fostered by apartheid and made inevitable by the Group Areas Act. The image of a single burning body does not recognize the extent to which the white suburbs of Pietermaritzburg, ostensibly part of that single body, remain unaffected by, and almost wholly indifferent to, the conflict raging around them. The necklacing image conveys a vision of an endlessly self-regenerated pattern of blind violence: the oily black smoke from the burning tyre shuts out the light; the darkness prevents people from recognizing each other's, and their own, humanity; so in the darkness they add each other to the conflagration. The only winners are the 'ravenous' graveyards.

The only poem to dwell at any length on the role of the poet in the conflict, is Bonginkosi Ndlovu Bafanyana's 'Viva Pen of Culture!' (11/5/89):

What is happening in my land?
My land is a desert of truth,
The emergency swallows every drop of reality.
Inequality is reality; reality is abnormality;
Like howling dogs
Ignorance haunts the voice of the people
Pregnant with the voice of my people.
Are the garbage bins of parliament,
Exploding with squeezed-in voices of my people –
Viva pen of culture, viva!
What is happening in Azania?
I see normality becoming abnormality,
Abnormality becoming normality,
Truth is a taboo in my land,
Like ravenous lions, jails devouring my people,
Graves voraciously devouring the people, and yet
Accumulated emotions
Burst the breast of the survivalists –
Viva pen of culture, viva!
Viva pen of resistance, viva!
Draining the flooding emotions of my people;
Oozing the aspirations of my people;
Voicing the voices of the voiceless;
Voicing the opinions of the voiceless –
Viva pen of culture, viva pen of resistance!
Pen of resistance:
Your extreme silent voice
Will remove the stubborn lids
Of the garbage bins of parliament;
The hands of your voice
Will remove the shroud of lies –
Viva pen of culture, viva
For you have nothing to lose!

Here the primary function of the poet’s pen is to present the truth in a country where truth is as desperately needed as water in a desert. The state of Emergency ‘swallows every drop of reality’ to the extent that it is a strategy for the forcible entrenchment of apartheid’s version of ‘truth’, which involves a reordering of reality whereby the abnormal becomes ‘normal’. The grotesque inequalities of South African society are presented as normal – they are ‘naturalized’ in the hope of winning the ideological assent of their victims. Poetry has a practical usefulness to the struggle – as signified by the ‘hands on’ implication of ‘The hands of your voice’ – whose function is to remove the ‘shroud of lies’ covering the dead desert land.

The image, ‘Like howling dogs / Ignorance haunts the voices of the people’, is highly condensed. The withholding of truth results in the willed ignorance of the people. Ignorance, whether deliberate or otherwise, debases the people, who cry out for truth as dogs howl for sustenance – and as a consequence of their hunger and debasement they embody the same potential for brutal violence as the ‘howling dogs’. The poet’s function is to dispel the ignorance.

‘The garbage bins of parliament’ encapsulates the essence of the relationship between constitutionalist white and black politics and simultaneously offers an explanation of the eventual resort to armed conflict on the part of blacks. White politics trashes the aspirations of the black majority, whose petitions, pleas and protests end up in the ‘garbage bins of parliament’. There comes a point, however, when the garbage bins cannot hold any more, however hard it is crushed in, at which point they explode. When the voices of the people are squeezed into bins until they burst, what the explosions produce in the first instance is language in the form of pamphlet bombs. The associations are, however, with bombs of more than one kind: many of the bombs that have exploded with deadly effect in South Africa in recent years were hidden in garbage bins. The implication is that there is a poetic justice in this ‘striking back’ of the garbage bins to which the requests and reasoning of blacks have been consigned. The image is carried through to the end of the poem where the hope is expressed that what is produced by the ‘extreme silent voice’ of the pen of resistance, less easily suppressed perhaps than other manifestations of the voice of the people, may after all succeed in prising the lids off the garbage bins of parliament and allowing what is in them a hearing.
The reiterated 'Vivas' convey something of the fervour of a black South African political meeting and serve as a device which signals the relationship between cultural production and politics.

(ii) Political Content and Effect of the Poems

The major political thrust of the *Echo* poems lies in such calls for unity as that found in the lines from ‘...Nkeli, but why?’:

...Why fighting  
While they can think?  
Why celebrating  
While fulfilling the oppressor’s wish?....  
May God join the oppressed together  
And guide them.  
In a final assault on apartheid.

The recognition of the need for unity develops out of the desire for peace which is the most frequently repeated refrain running through the poems:

Let peace be among the oppressed  
Let the killing and hatred cease  
Let the oppressor bear the consequences  
For the time has come  
For ma-Afrika to unite.

The other obvious political function performed by those poems that do have explicit political messages lies in the boosting of morale – shown by some of the poems to be at a very low ebb. So we find the sense of futility embodied in lines such as those that conclude Ndlovu’s ‘What’s Happening In Maritzburg?’ – ‘But others fear that the outcome is nonsense, / It is millions of millions of kilograms of ashes’ – being countered by assertions of the necessity for the struggle, such, for example, as that contained in Mlungisi Mlambo’s ‘The Refugees’ (13/7/89): ‘Only through their struggle for equal rights/ Can they live a better life.’

The other ‘political’ aspect of these poems that needs to be looked at briefly is the extent to which many of them are political by default. The majority of the poems eschew political solutions and look to God for a resolution of the conflict. So one finds S’Tiso Mauze (‘I Cry For Peace’, 1/12/89) and Dumisani Mngadi (‘Who Can Give Us Peace’, 15/12/89) both interpreting the political violence in Pietermaritzburg as God’s punishment for sin: Mauze asks, ‘Where are you Lord? Do you like this? / Is this the punishment we deserve?’ and Mngadi declares:
Only the Lord must save us
I cry for peace... It's over, our punishment
God don't make me disbelieve you.

At times the poems are simply prayers, as in Shoba Mthalane’s ‘Curtains Of Blood’:

...“Oh Lord God, I implore
You to let down your
Benedicted spirit over Clermont”
Amen.

There is obviously no need here to go into the role played by imported western religion in colonized societies. It is necessary only to note that the tendency in much of this poetry to turn to God for a solution to the conflict in Pietermaritzburg appears to involve an evasion of any consideration of the need for political organisation on the ground and renders any socio-political analysis of the situation superfluous. It should be recognized, however, that religious sentiment is in some instances clearly being used as a device whereby political commentary can assume the guise of piety and prayer. This is most obvious in the recurrent comparison between the miserable lives lived by those still alive on earth and the paradisal after-lives of those who have been killed in the conflict, which is used often enough to have become almost conventional. One sees this, for example, in:

Blessed are the dead
    For they will:
Never be suspected,
Never be chased,
Never be unmanageable
Never be transformed into firewood
Never be killed
    For they are now:
Protected from adversaries
Saved from opponents
Secured from the persecution of this world
Blessed are those who are dead
    For they have the benediction
Of living eternal and everlasting life.

These lines capture with great economy the atmosphere of fear and suspicion, the nightmare of being chased and torched.

The opposition between the heaven achieved by death in the struggle and the hell on earth endured by those who survive is most fully developed as a framing device for comment on the political conflict by Ellington Ngenezi in his ‘Death On My Doorsteps’ (15/9/88). This poem
deserves to be quoted in full, not only because it reveals very clearly the contradictions that can result from the adoption of the formal device of the Heaven/Hell comparison, but also because it is one of the most moving laments to be found among the Echo poems and provides a very vivid eyewitness narrative of one of the 1400 killings which occurred prior to July 1989.

After seeing their targets
On the road
They alighted from a bus
And gave them chase;
Then they saw you standing in your home yard
As their targets ran past the gate
They thought you were one of them,
Gave you chase,
Then caught you, then killed you
O Lins, Lins,
A few minutes later
You laid on the street
Serene in rivulets of blood.
I know you've met Mdayisi,
Tana, S'fiso, Mlu, Magugu, Hleke, Nhlanhla,
And the rest;
I am sure you have revised
Your respective brutal deaths.
And there is no complaining
About anything anymore.
And there are no temptations any more.
And there is not eating, no smoking,
No drinking, no cinemas,
And there is no womanising
O Lins, Lins
Your movement to Heaven
Was a reminder that we are
Not for this world,
We all have to be covered with
Our last blankets some day;
Soil,
O Lins, Lins,
You have reached a stage
Of total tranquility and eternity.

The lament is so poignant partly because the poet is wholly unconvinced in his attempt to depict a state of being so entirely lacking in temptation as 'Heaven'. The first nine lines of the poem present a matter-of-fact narrative of events which serves to highlight the accidental relationship between life and death in this conflict and the casual way people become no more than dehumanised 'targets'. The lament 'O Lins, Lins' carries a
weight of sorrow which by the end of the poem, although repeated only twice, manages to take on the character of a choric keening. 'You laid on the street' conveys both 'laid' out and 'laid' low, and emphasises the suddenness with which Lins, too, has become a mere object lying in the road. The paradox of 'Serene in rivulets of blood' evokes the observer's surprise at the contrast between the serenity of the corpse and his own shock and trauma. The remainder of the poem consists of the writer's strategies for finding meaning in, and consolation for, Lins's death.

The first strategy involves the inclusion of Lins in the roll of honour of others who have met brutal deaths – the recitation of whose names serves to underline the extent of the death-toll. The use of 'revised' hints at some kind of common analysis, the drawing of conclusions – which must presumably be political – from the common experience of brutal death. But any embryonic political analysis is abandoned in favour of what proves a radically unconvincing set of conclusions drawn from the alternative frame of reference provided by religion. The writer attempts to present himself as envious of Lins's state of non-being which is characterised by the absence of temptations: no eating, smoking, drinking, cinemas or womanising. The selection of the various temptations is obviously based on their desirability, which brings the writer's rationalisation into visible tension with his emotions and inclinations. The grief encapsulated in the second 'O Lins, Lins' does not reflect the writer's posture of satisfaction on Lins's behalf that there are to be no more temptations, it comes across rather as a lament that he and Lins will never eat, drink, smoke, womanise or go to the cinema together again. The 'hell' of the Heaven/Hell opposition is here quite simply not a hell. The personal loss, the nostalgia for the good times with Lins, overrides for the moment the socio-economic and political context.

The construction of Lins's death as a memento mori, the neat and timely purveyor of a religious moral, in the last lines of the poem comes across as a travesty of the personal grief experienced by the poet and overwhelmingly conveyed by the poem – a travesty which is betrayed as such by the again repeated 'O Lins, Lins' three lines from the end. Beside the real attractions of being alive, and beside the concrete local reference in the image of soil as 'our last blankets', Lins's ostensibly envied 'stage of total tranquillity and eternity', seems emptily abstract. This poem reveals very starkly the contradictions consequent upon the displacement of the political onto the religious terrain. The constraints, under which the poems were produced, the constraints of what amounts in many respects to a colonial civil war fought under the auspices of the colonizers, are to be held responsible for that displacement.
(iii) 'Just Before Embracing Dawn' and 'It's A Weekend Again'.

The Echo poems constitute a substantial body of poetry to whose individual components scant justice can be done by a purely thematic analysis. I would therefore like to conclude this paper by looking in a little more detail at two of the poems. The first is the short poem by Mlungisi Mkhize (published 9/6/88) from which my epigraph was taken:

JUST BEFORE EMBRACING DAWN
(16/01/1987)

The door was banged
House filled with authoritative voices
Bright torches cutting closed eyeballs
Slashing the flesh of night
Came fire-wielding men.

And when the tool of flames
Pointed at me, threats unfounded
My writings keenly scrutinized,
New strength pervaded my entire being.

So, give me a pen and paper
I will write
Verses in the midst of torture.

This poem is notable, firstly, as a resistance poem – a poem which finds inspiration in the struggle against the overwhelming might of the South African state. The poem declares itself as having sprung from attempts by the security apparatus to intimidate the poet into silence. It is notable, secondly, for the sustained ambiguity of its language, which imparts a suggestive complexity to what looks at first sight to be a very straightforward poem.

The ambiguity starts with the title which could be merely descriptive of the time, just before dawn (the usual time for such occurrences), when the raid which is the subject of the poem took place. But the grammatical relationship between 'embracing' and 'dawn' is unclear. Is 'embracing' adjectively descriptive of this particular dawn, or does it take 'dawn' as its object? If the latter, then 'dawn' is presumably symbolic of the future coming of liberation and the title would refer forward to the poet's picking up pen and paper and writing verses which will assist in ushering in that dawn.

The first stanza clearly suggests a raid by the 'authorities', in this case police with 'authoritative voices', with doors being banged and torches shone on sleeping faces. The violence of the intrusion is conveyed by the image of the torches 'cutting closed eyeballs' and 'slashing the flesh of night'. But the mode of ambiguity of the title is carried over into the poem
via the overlaying of the image of a gang of political arsonists over the image of the police going about their supposedly ‘lawful’ business: ‘Slash­ing the flesh of the night / Came fire-wielding men.’ The policemen with their torches are also ‘fire-wielding men’, whose intrusion slashes the flesh of the night with a violence equivalent to that of the knife- and torch-wielding arsonists. In the second stanza the electric torches of the police as they scrutinize the poet’s writings, with destructive intent, are described as ‘the tool of flames’ and the associations of ‘slashing’ also carry over into the ‘keen’ scrutiny.

But the attempt to intimidate the poet backfires and instead causes new strength to pervade his being. By the end of the poem the ‘authoritative voice’ has become that of the poet, rather than that of officialdom, as he declares his intention to write poetry ‘in the midst of torture’ – whether the torture is inflicted with total indemnity by the police, or with impunity by the mob. Mkhize succeeds very well in utilizing the ambiguity of poetic language to produce a slashing indictment of the ‘security forces’ without laying himself open to charges under the State of Emergency Media Regulations.

The second poem I want to examine is ‘It’s A Weekend Again’ (24/9/89) written in Imbali under the nom-de-plume ‘Afropoet’:

IT’S A WEEKEND AGAIN

It’s a weekend again
Execution time
Daggers ready to obey orders
Our townships like a hive
Ever swelling with anger
Death staring at us like a hungry wolf
Women wail through the night
African women.
Bullets fly in the air
Unleashing death
Children lying in tatters
Blood flowing profusely
Fresh yet new blood
Wolves parading our streets
Their teeth dripping with blood
It’s yet another procession
Sinathing!
You have seen nothing
The worst is yet to come
Mountain Rise!
You rose and the mountains echoed
Haughtily you swallowed them.
It’s you and I
Locked up there
Peeping through key holes
Watching revolution live.
Is this freedom?

This poem carries an implicit, and very damning, critique of the violence of both sides, and it is presumably this that makes the poet feel it advisable to write under a nom-de-plume. Imbali was the original seat of the violence, insofar as any area around Pietermaritzburg can be identified as such, and criticism of the conflict as a whole could all too easily be interpreted as hostility to either, or both, parties to the conflict – with possibly fatal consequences.

The opening lines appear matter-of-fact in their acceptance of weekends as ‘execution time’ when people become mere killing instruments: ‘Daggers ready to obey orders...’. The collage of images of violence that follows relies heavily on images of animality: the townships’ potential for eruptions of infuriated, mindless and dehumanized violence is likened to that of a hive of the notorious African wild bees; killers swaggering down the streets congratulating themselves on their successes are likened to wolves with bloodied teeth. The progression, via ‘unleashing’, from the image of ‘Death staring at us like a hungry wolf’ to ‘Wolves parading our streets’ suggests that the criticism is being levelled impartially at both sides. Through the stress on ‘our’ streets the wolves are shown to be alien; the poet is claiming possession of the ground on behalf of the community and dismissing both sides as guilty of a violence which is alien to the community. Wolves are not indigenous to Africa.

The image of ‘children lying in tatters / Blood flowing profusely / Fresh yet new blood’ draws, in ‘tatters’, on the portrayal of poverty, which is obviously relevant to an understanding of some aspects of the violence, to produce the horrific image of the dead children lying as ‘tattered’ in their violent deaths as the rags they wear.

The direct address by name to Pietermaritzburg’s two cemeteries, Sinathing and Mountain Rise, the only place names to occur in the poem, suggests that they, rather than the city itself, have become the focal points of activity in the area. The pun on ‘see nothing’ adds a macabre touch of humour, but also carries a weight of foreboding and, given the date of the poem’s publication, reveals considerable prophetic insight into the political dynamics of the conflict – the worst was indeed yet to come. The grandiloquent lines addressed to Mountain Rise, ‘You rose and the mountains echoed / Haughtily you swallowed them’ provide a contrast to the de-meaning situation of the writer and the ‘you’ to whom he addresses the last lines:

It’s you and I
Locked up there
Peeping through key holes
Watching revolution live.
Is this freedom?
These lines not only capture the sense of constriction and fear in everyday life, they also succeed in articulating very starkly the key political issues raised for the poet by his experience of weekend political conflict in Pietermaritzburg's townships. Living locked up in fear of one's life, having to watch the world through a key hole, is not the poet's idea of freedom. The ambiguity raised by the two possible ways of pronouncing 'live' also serves to raise questions about media coverage of the violence and about the contrast between the political theory and the lived experience of revolution. Watching revolution 'live' is very different from watching it pre-recorded and edited to suit particular ideological interests. However, given the almost total absence of coverage of the conflict by the state television, the main thrust of these lines is to articulate fundamental questions about revolution raised for the poet by his experience of the conflict.

In suggesting that revolution appears to him, from his vantage point at the key hole, to consist of packs of human wolves roaming the streets looking for candidates for the city cemeteries, the writer highlights one of the major effects of the political constraints under which this body of poetry was written: the almost total absence from the poetry of any analysis of political process. It is extremely difficult for those locked up in fear of their lives, and viewing the world through key holes, to perceive political causation, to look beyond the immediate conflict (in any direction other than heavenwards) and make the connections between the violence as it is experienced and the underlying political and economic forces which determine it. The poems thus offer valuable insights into the experience of those involved in or affected by the conflict, but cannot be expected, except by default, to provide much insight into its political dynamics.

This is not, of course, to suggest that the poems don't shed a good deal of indirect light on political process. A symptomatic analysis of this poem, for which there is not the space here, would want to focus attention on the frames of reference drawn on for its imagery, and through that on the ideological derivation of its perception of the conflict. 'Wolves' is clearly Eurocentric, while the image of the townships like a 'hive ... swelling with anger' may have a local frame of reference but is clearly being applied in a way uncomfortably reminiscent of van der Post's comparison of 'rioting' black dockworkers to swarming bees in The Hunter and the Whale.

CONCLUSION

I want, by way of conclusion, to return briefly to the question of evaluation. Poems like the ones under discussion have the effect of revealing that there exist social and political circumstances - experienced by their victims in the destitution and oppression of daily living - which, if successfully communicated by literature, in however rudimentary a way (and
my analysis will, I hope, have shown that many of these poems are by no means rudimentary), must bring the ‘objective’ ideals of academic literary criticism into tension, if not contradiction, with the liberal sympathies which inform the academy’s institutional political stance. If the liberal humanist values advocated, and said to be cultivated, by the study of ‘great literature’ are engaged in the reading of poems written about the experience of oppression, and if the poetry is successful in its intention of awakening in the reader an awareness and appreciation of what it means to live through these political circumstances, that will involve a taking of sides. This obviously need not necessarily be at the simple level of choosing between the UDF on the one hand and the Inkatha/South African state alliance on the other. Withdrawal from the position of initial engagement, to the elevated and detached vantage-point of ‘balance’ or ‘neutrality’ under the dictates of academic ‘objectivity’, must also constitute a process of political distancing.

Literary criticism needs to find ways of engaging seriously with the ‘voice of the voiceless’, with such articulations of the people’s experience as those looked at in this paper – which has attempted to examine the poems in the light of the objective conditions under which they were produced. To ignore these poems on account of the journalistic or popular cultural medium through which they were published, to dismiss them from consideration on the grounds of their functionalism, or their lack of ‘literary’ polish, would have rather too much in common with the oppressor’s rejection of the voice of the oppressed for comfort. One would not wish the waste-paper baskets of literary criticism to become the cultural equivalent of ‘the garbage bins of parliament’.

This is a revised version of a paper given at the EACLALS conference in Lecce in April 1990. It was written while I was in Britain on sabbatical leave undertaking a research project with the financial assistance of the Institute for Research Development of the Human Sciences Research Council, whose assistance is hereby acknowledged. Opinions expressed in this paper and conclusions arrived at are those of the author and are not necessarily to be attributed to the Institute for Research Development or the Human Sciences Research Council.
NOTES


REFERENCES

Mzwakhe Mbuli: The People’s Poet

Mzwakhe is a household name in South Africa. He is a prominent and successful participant in the political culture or the people’s culture which centres around political meetings and mass funerals. One of the legacies of the Soweto uprising in 1976 was that writers’ groups were formed to give popular expression to the people’s cultural values and to express the new mood of defiance in terms of politically critical theatre and oral poetry, or ‘read poetry’. The purpose of this was—and is—to take culture to the people and to explore their problems, concerns, antagonisms and protests in forms which are readily available to them. In terms of theatre this means workshopping agitprop, open space type plays, on street corners, in community halls, townships or on farms, and in terms of poetry it means reciting poetry to large gatherings, such as student or trade union meetings, funerals of apartheid victims or mass rallies. These meetings are always of a political, and often, of a highly emotionally charged nature. The task of the poet is to catch the mood of the group and to express their anger or sorrow in a linguistic form which is enhanced, so as to set it apart from other public oral genres, such as political speeches, slogans, chants or sermons, but which at the same time is easily accessible. ‘Read-poetry is for the People’, says the poet Dumakuda ka Ndlovu. ‘It gives them a message to take home. It is simpler than written poetry, so that even a layman can understand it.’ Simplicity, and a message which carries anger, sorrow and defiance are the characteristics of Mzwakhe’s poetry. The vocabulary is mostly that of political slogans and clichés, a ready made kit of pop art images, carrying instant messages way beyond their literal meaning. These ‘signs’ are organised into long, formulaic, aggregative incantations which are delivered at high speed and in rhythmic fashion. Mzwakhe’s poem ‘I am the Voice of International Anger’, which he recited to an enthusiastic crowd of fourteen thousand at the national launch of the United Democratic Front in August, 1983, exemplifies these characteristics.

Ig-no-rant
I am ignorant
I have been fortunate
In the business of ignorance
I am South African
Without Residency
I can read,
I can write,
However ignorant I may be
I know Mandela is in Pollsmoor jail
Though I do not know why.
Oh, people of Africa
Help me before it is too late
Emancipate me from my ignorance.
For freedom is getting rusty
On the pavements of oppression.

In addition to performance and verbal skills a personal history of resistance, in fact, heroism, is an important factor in the status of the poet. Mzwakhe has survived four assassination attempts and has been detained eight times since 1976, including six months in solitary confinement in 1988, during which time he composed and memorised the poems which became the album, *Unbroken Spirit*. Mzwakhe is politically active in the UDF and was elected media officer in the Transvaal in 1985; he has also taken part in the activities of the South African Musicians’ Alliance (SAMA), and he is now vice-president of the Congress of South African Writers. In July 1991 he visited Denmark as part of an extended tour of Europe, USA and Canada and the following interview took place during his visit.

NOTE

Mzwakhe Mbili: The People's Poet

INTERVIEW

Mzwakhe Mbili was interviewed by Kirsten Holst Petersen in Aarhus, Denmark on 6 July 1991.

I went to your concert last night, and let me tell you, you are in the presence of an admirer. What is it like to be famous?

It feels great to be famous, especially when I listen to what people think and say about me and how much they become impressed and appreciative when I recite poetry and sing. Yes, it is something that makes one feel good.

You are not only a singer, like a Western pop-star, you are also a symbol of the resistance in South Africa. Is that an extra heavy weight to carry?

Well, you know, I am called the people's poet, but again, something is happening here. I am becoming a singing poet, but I know my limits, and I don't overstep them. I know that there is a leadership which is authentic and genuine, people like Nelson Mandela, so I don't even think that I am in that position. It is just that I have another role, just as the church has one role, and in sport some people have a role, I have another role in culture, and in this case it is poetry and music, so obviously I have a message, I don't sing or say empty words. I don't sing songs about 'squeeze me, baby'. I have a message, and it is not only confined to South Africa.

Obviously, if you were to stand for election in South Africa, a lot of people would vote for you. Are you going to become a politician in independent South Africa?

No, I am not prepared to become a politician; I want to continue with the role I already have and to improve my career. My band is two years old. I formed it in 1989, and I want to work on new songs, producing albums and albums, performing all over the world. So you see, I still have a very big task ahead. I am very determined, and this has made me tell myself psychologically that the world is not big, really, and I will be able to cover a big distance in a short length of time. I have to take it from zero, because I may be popular at home, but in certain countries abroad I am not known, but I have recorded something new which I believe is a worldwide devastating album which will really boost my image.

You choose oral literature rather than the written form as the model for your poems. Why is that?
It is an African poetic tradition, so it means that the roots of that poetry have always been oral, even if people can read. I prefer to be a live performer, not a reader, not to look at the book, but to look at the people and communicate so that even my hands are expressive; it is my whole being which becomes involved. What I am saying is that our traditional literature is oral. The poets used to appear before chiefs and kings, and they used to do that without writing anything down or reading it out, so my poetry could be an update of that. The tradition has a dynamism, it is not static, it has changed and developed.

*And those poets used to sing songs, not only of praise, but also of criticism.*

Yes, there is no limit in terms of songs. That is why one song I sing from the beginning to the end, another song I only sing once, then I recite poetry, and here I use different styles. I have made it a point, that if I have a hundred poems they are all different in style. If I have forty or twenty songs they are different in style, so I don’t create repetition. There are people whose music is always the same. If you have listened to the first two or three songs the rest are the same. The beat in the rest is the same. Mine are not like that.

*Are you what the English would called a dub singer?*

No. I am something not far away from that, but I am not a dub singer or a dub poet or rap singer, no. When you listen to my music, it is not somebody else’s music, it is original. I am not from any institution of higher learning in terms of music. These things come from the head, the mind, the words spring up from everywhere. Critics can tell that this is funk, that is rock, this is rap, but it is difficult to classify my music. I use many different types of arrangements. I have realised that my voice works well without instrumental backing, but it also works well with choral backing and with a cappella type arrangements. It works, too with reggae beat, with traditional instruments, with percussion only, and the different arrangements work better when mixed with my poetry.

*What are your musical roots?*

I do not come from the West, I come from Africa, so my style, even if it is my own, is African. That is where my roots are. It is in my blood. It does not matter which country you come from, as long as you are from Africa, you are an African. However, I see myself involved in music, and music is universal. My music is not confined to people in Africa, or only listened to by people in Africa. I am here in Scandinavia now, and I have also been to Holland and Germany, and the response is always the same, irrespective of the language. I have something which I am sure that people
will understand. Even at home there are those that speak a language which is not Zulu, but they will say ‘Well, much as I do not understand those poems in Zulu, I still like them.’

When you perform you also dance? What are the dances you do?

They are traditional dances, resembling most of all Zulu dancing, but really, what I do is African dancing. There is so much dancing in Africa. Yes, I do many things. I write, I compose, I dance, I sing, I recite; it just happens to be like that. And I have a voice which people claim is a bit different, in fact, some say it is unique. Other people have thick voices because they smoke, but I do not smoke. Mine is a natural voice, it is a gift.

You said earlier that you were not just a singer, but a singer with a serious political message. Your activities have landed you in jail several times. Could you describe what it is like to be arrested and what happens.

To be arrested is not a nice experience, especially in South Africa. There is a knock at the door; it always happens in the early hours of the morning. The police knock down doors with rifle butts, they jump into the house, they are like gorillas, they set up a reign of terror. It should not be accepted in any part of the world. The house becomes under siege, you are not given a chance to breath, to answer back, you cannot move, you must keep quiet, you have guns pointed at you. And your wife and children go through the same trauma. Later, you are interrogated for eight to ten hours, standing naked, splashed with water, blindfolded. It is a painful situation. You are then placed in a cell of detention and you stay for months and months. Later you are released. Let me tell you something which is still fresh in my mind. In 1988 I spent half a year in prison, and when I was released the officer in charge said to me, ‘You must say “thank you”, because if it wasn’t for me, you would have been here longer. I am doing you a favour, so go home and stop all this nonsense.’ You see, that made me very angry. You don’t spend half a year in prison and go through the despair, and the determination too, and then say ‘thank you’ when you are released.

What were you charged with?

I have never been charged. On March 17th, 1989 there was another bomb plant. The police raided my home, and they claimed to have found two grenades. The trial took until February 5th this year, so it is two full years of going to court, and after all that I was acquitted. I did not run away, I was always in the court, but the police who claimed to have found the grenades never appeared in court. The charges were just a lie, orchestrated by the police. This is a situation which I have read about from Nigeria and
Zimbabwe; when an artist is a problem for the regime they raid his home and claim to have found marijuana or cocaine or whatever, but fortunately I don’t drink or smoke, so the government has a problem. People are saying that De Klerk is changing things, but that is not so. I have had endless passport refusals, and even now my passport is not valid for five years like it is for white South African citizens. We are still the target of the regime. But I am beginning to realise my power. People like me are a problem to the regime, and I have such extraordinary power that it is actually shaking the foundations of the regime.
Mzwakhe Mbuli

THE CROCODILES

I am the product of hunger
I am the product of social injustice
I represent victims of tyranny
And I come from apartheid land.
I recite for a nation
I represent a nation
A peace-loving nation
A nation that never enjoyed freedom.
My land is blood-stained.
From time immemorial
Human corpses have replaced pockets of cement
In building the future of the post-apartheid land.

Nevertheless, no oppressive might is eternal.

How hard and tormenting it is
To write about the pain and not the joy
How hard and tormenting it is
To write about the slavery and not the freedom.
When shall I write about the daffodils?
How can I write about the beauty of nature
When the ground is daily soaked with the blood of the innocent?

Nevertheless, Agostinho Neto
The late poet president
Used both the pen and the machine
To achieve the liberation of Angola

They build like crocodiles in the river
And no one can find the crocodiles inside the river
South Africa, why therefore bide time
When the crocodiles are against you?
Why give chase to the lizards
When the crocodiles are against you?
The minority may not rule over the majority forever.
When the world is for justice and peace
South Africa is for reforms.
When ancient slavery was abolished
The slaves were set free
When the pass laws were declared abolished
Freedom loving South Africans
remained in bondage.
Nevertheless, the dove of peace
Also belongs to us in the South.
No regime can press down
The hot lid of a boiling pot forever.
The land is the key to social order
And the tradition of 'no surrender'
Is the name of the game
To total emancipation.
The tradition of 'never give up'
Is the name of the game
To total democracy.
Santu Mofokeng

LIKE SHIFTING SANDS

These photographs are from Santu Mofokeng’s exhibition Like Shifting Sands which focuses on the life and realities on the farms and in the rural towns in Transvaal. The exhibition, in the words of the photographer, attempts to depict ‘ordinary Black South Africans going about the day-to-day business of living’. In the process Mofokeng establishes his subjects as actors, neither as pseudo-heroic, nor as helpless victims. At the heart of this work is a sensitive and compassionate insight into the low-key but profound resistance inherent in the ‘basic decency of marginalized and deprived people’.

This selection of images probes the presence and silences of the black population ensnared as labour tenants on white farms in the rural areas of the South-Western Transvaal. His focus is on a farm named Vaalrand in Bloemhof and on the adjacent town of Zevenfontein. These rural settlements on the banks of the Vaal River constitute the matrix of his careful probe into the way in which the agricultural cycle is synchronized with the imperatives of labour exploitation. Mofokeng’s images reveal what cannot pass in silence like shifting sands.
Fina Moss (seated) and her cousin, Kebueng Morgabi (12 years old), Vaalrand, Bloemhof
Paul Dihtshi, at the shebeen, Vaalrand.
Limbless doll – Jakkalsfontein.
Another day, Vaalrand, Bloemhof.
Family bedroom, Vaalrand, Bloemhof.
Outhouse, Klippan, Klerksdorp.
Koos Maine washing his face from a hubcap, Vaalrand, Bloemhof.
Sunflower harvest, Klippan, Bloemhof.
Long After the Night Watch

Vukile was at last free from the maniacal pressure to go to school. He had at last passed his Senior Certificate. The aggregate wasn’t anything exciting at all. It was the usual School Leaving certificate everyone was only too glad to receive. Vukile had always thought in terms of receiving his education rather than working it out himself. One always received information, received marks, received certificates; while, on the other hand one could also receive punishment or receive nothing at all, which was a clear indication of one’s worthlessness. The school is well-known for its caprice and sinister nature. Anyhow, all that, at least for him, was now in the past. His parents had been blindly enthusiastic about his education. They had themselves not stayed at school for more than six years. Magqadaza, as the people called his father, had passed Std 2, and that was all; and his mother, lovingly called Kodu by the kids, had struggled until she passed Std 5. By that time she was a full-blown woman of 22 with other and more engaging interests in her life.

In those days it was common for girls of her age to attend school in order to give their boyfriends a chance to meet them, something the parents shouldn’t hear of, but often did. His mother often spoke of her education and complained all the time that her father deprived her of the best opportunity to be one of the renowned school people by his absolute refusal to take a girl too far into the sphere of influence of school education. That would be a senseless waste of time, for quite soon, the girl would be married, he believed. His father, on his part, thought he was born to be a herdboy, and he believed that anything exotic and complex in appearance was meant for sons and daughters of the ever-ambitious teachers and ministers of religion.

Vukile enjoyed the idea that his parents now thought him educated and ready to face the world. They had all of a sudden withdrawn into the background to watch and see their son in action. Already they were practicing the role of old invalids with a worthy son to look after them. He had not started to look for a job. He was soon to learn how it was almost impossible for him to obtain work in Transkei.

Five years passed after Vukile’s completion of his Senior Certificate. He had spent all these years visiting employment offices in every small town of Transkei to no avail. He had worked for small businesses, taken to the insurance business, written numerous aptitude tests, visited offices of
important relatives to beg for favours and borrowed money in accumulating amount from a wide range of associates and friends. Magqadaza and Kodu had long given up any hope of his ever getting any work. They had even stopped pretending that they were growing old and that he should take over the responsibilities of the house. They just did not know what to do with him. What affected them most was the disillusionment they had about the education they now regarded as a white elephant. Fate had simply not smiled on the family, and they would never see a young teacher coming out of their hut to meet the morning in the school room, books under his arm and a cigarette dangling from his lips.

It was on his fifth year after matric that Vukile came to his parents with the fresh idea of going to Cape Town. So far away from home! Did he know anybody there? And where was he going to live in Cape Town? After what seemed a long argument, however, Vukile put his parents at ease when he said that although he knew no one in that city he would stay safely with the workers from home at the hostel. More than this, his parents were persuaded by their own anxiety to get him out of the eyes of the ever inquisitive villagers who had yapped, laughed and scorned at this family more intensely than ever in the last five years.

Cape Town, when he got there, was a different place from home. There were times when Vukile almost completely forgot that he had come to the city to look for work. Cape Town had everything – at least everything a simple country, work-seeking young man would ever need. Somebody suggested a visit to the top of Table Mountain and offered to pay the R7 return each to the top by cable car. Soon, Vukile was laughing, shouting and peering at a red framed telescope. The first object to stare broodingly at was, of course, Robben Island. For a number of thoughtful moments his eyes settled on this small, cap-like piece of land that had acquired so much notoriety.

Inside the restaurant he annoyed a young serving lady whom he kept calling ‘waiter’ – ‘Waiter’, come this way! Where are my chips, ‘waiter?’ Until his friend nudged him and warned him the lady was mumbling something about being called a ‘bloody waiter’.

‘Isn’t that what she is, I ask you – a bloody waiter?’ asked Vukile sarcastically after the serving lady had disappeared behind the counters. ‘No, chum, you call her “waiter” and yet she is a waitress.’

‘Well? Isn’t the job she is doing just the same type of job anybody else would do?’ Why should this job have two names just because underneath the aprons people are not the same sex?’

After an uneasy silence, his friend said simplistically, ‘You will have to be careful what you say here. This is Cape Town...’

Before his friend could finish what he was saying, Vukile had leapt to his feet shouting excitedly. A tall, lanky lad approached with much less enthusiasm than he showed. The new-comer looked sinewy and hard – the type one finds toi-toing down the street or marshalling jostling crowds
whose salute shakes the foundations of city streets ‘Ama-andla!’ They held hands for what seemed a long moment, chatted at the top of their voices and laughed. All the time, Vukile’s friend showed less enthusiasm than he himself was radiating. It was quite understandable; he met very few faces he knew in Cape Town. None could envy him this rare break. When he finally returned to his table, he explained to his unimpressed friend that the ‘guy’ he had been talking to was his contemporary at Buntingville High School, Transkei. At school, this ‘guy’ knew all sorts of things, important names of the heroes, activists involved in the struggle for black freedom in the country, the Freedom Charter – the lot.

‘He was such a politically enlightened fellow,’ said Vukile, ‘and from what he tells me, I think now he is even more informed than ever. He has given me his address – NY 133, Gugulethu. My God! I shall be there tomorrow.’

Indeed, at 9 o’clock the following day, Vukile was walking along N 133, watching the house fronts closely for the desired number. It was on a Monday morning, and most people had already left for work. In the township it is relatively quieter at this time of day, and there is less danger of being molested as the bread winners and bag snatchers are fighting it out with jostling market-goers, making their way through crowded streets and cutting through angry traffic somewhere in the big city – in fact all over the city. At last he saw the number written in big, bold, black paint. The artist, whoever he was, had not bothered to think about shape and proportion. It now looked as though the light-green paint of the wall had two mighty scars in permanent black paint. He almost thought there was nobody inside when his knock summoned no willing footsteps to the door and no voice rang back to his ear. Just as he was beginning to look up to see if there was anybody in the row of doors of the backyard flat, the yellow door before him suddenly stirred and rattled feebly as it started to open.

A timid little girl stood before him in the doorway. Her wide and clear forehead made him wonder why she was not at school. She had the making of a professional woman of the future.

‘Is “Moscow” home?’

The little girl visibly shuddered at the mention of that name, and just before she could make up her mind whether to answer or not, an elderly voice called sharply from the inner rooms, ‘Nomhle, ufunani loo mntu?’ (What does that man want). And then with a ring of impatience, ‘Yiz’apa – come here. And stop talking to idle street-walkers, you hear me?’

The little girl dashed back into the darker recesses of the little house, leaving the door open. Vukile came in awkwardly and stood hesitatingly at the doorway. He listened guiltily like an accused person awaiting the verdict, as his little solicitor was apparently presenting her case on his behalf somewhere inside. He was now in a sort of lounge – depressed old settees, a little black-and-white TV, a silly old-fashioned frame around the
words 'GOD BLESS OUR HOME', cheap plastic ornaments here and there and a pot-plant with a plant whose dry stem crouched like a starved little lemon with its shrivelled leaves that looked like burnt ears.

'Nlfuna ntoni enye ngoku?' (What else do you, people, want) asked an abrupt voice from an old woman at the door of the adjoining room. Vukile had not heard her approach. But she stood with her hand holding onto the door post like a hanging cloth. She looked tired but aggressive. Vukile was still considering the possible reasons for him being addressed in the plural and at the same time being regarded as a nuisance when the old woman's voice cracked again: 'Just go away and never come back here again!'

'But, Ma, I've just come to see "Moscow"...'

'Moscow your buttocks! First you call this child all sorts of strange names; then you have him detained and shot at. How long have you been answering questions about names we never heard of before? Go away before I have you burnt to ashes.' At that very moment a short but stout and heavily built young man sauntered into the room, eyed Vukile distastefully and asked, 'Mother, what does this fellow want? Have these murderers returned for yet another victim?'

'No, you misunderstand. I'm his friend. I'm only from...

'Look here, you mpimpi (police informer). We haven't even washed our hands following "Moscow's" burial, but you're here already. Now I am going to kill you before you can lay your hands on the next victim.'

'But I saw "Moscow" only yesterday. I was with him on Table Mountain.'

"Moscow" died last week in a prison cell. You know it because you are with the Special Branch, and you did the interrogation. Sies! You're a cold-blooded sell-out! It is a shame your skin is so black.'

'I'm no policeman. I'm looking for work in Cape Town.'

'Mama, I'm killing this dog now.'

'Oh, no my child! Stop it now! We've seen so much blood already.'

'But, you haven't seen a police informer's blood yet, Mama.'

At that he drew out a thin-bladed knife and lunged forward. Vukile could hardly move from where he was standing. The whole drama was so unexpected that he did not budget any time to step out of the knife's way, which was now already digging hungrily into his body. When he looked again, his shirt was red with blood and a gush of hot liquid was coming down his arm from somewhere in the neck. The old woman was screaming and the little girl was clutching at her skirts and whining fearfully. The door was now blocked by onlookers from the street and everyone was shouting something. Vukile took a few steps towards the door, staggered and collapsed.

'You must go home for a while after they discharge you and let your parents see you,' said Solly, a distant cousin of Vukile who stayed at the hostels and worked for the municipality.
'How long have I been here?'
'A month. You were in a coma all the time. They were sure you were dead. The police found you near a rubbish pit.'
'Police? Why was it the police who found me?'
'You were lost, — missing. We did not know where you’d gone,' said the cousin defensively, thinking that their negligence was the point of Vukile’s question.

Vukile didn’t pursue his question, however, but instead asked, 'Then how did you find me?'
'The police found our address in one of your pockets. Tell me, who attacked you, and why?'

And why indeed, thought Vukile, but even then he could not think clearly. He could not be sure that such a thing as this attack had happened. He lied feebly about someone who challenged him in the street and attacked him. The whole story was an enigma — even the true version. But what he wanted most was for the cousin to leave him alone at once so that he could sort out the confusion of facts in his mind. He had been trying to do just that now for a week without success. Finally Solly left his bedside, promising, however, to come and see him again. Before he was discharged.

Vukile would have dismissed the unfortunate incident of his attack as having been caused by mistaken identity or something like that. But he could not understand how ‘Moscow’ could be said to be dead. He went over his whole meeting with ‘Moscow’ inside the restaurant on Table Mountain to try and detect any indication that he could be a ghost, an apparition. There was no such evidence. The whole conversation had taken place on a purely human level and in broad daylight too. Then he tried to recall the manner ‘Moscow’ uttered his home address and telephone number. He had repeated every number and word after him and had read this to him after taking it down. Just as their teacher had wisely advised them to do. No. There could be no mistake about that. And then the actual street and number? He had asked several people and had seen the number himself. Impossible! Could he be an informer then … and did not know it? How could such a thing ever happen? And yet the fury of ‘Moscow’s’ people ... That was real enough. He could still see the face of ‘Moscow’s’ male relative disfigured with fury.

Vukile would have preferred to stay in hospital much longer (for he had twelve deep wounds on his body), had it not been for something that happened on the evening after ‘Solly’s’ visit. Three suspicious-looking boys obviously from the township walked into the ward in which he slept. His fear of these township fellows was impulsive. He closed his eyes and pretended to be asleep. It was a long moment as he waited for them to pass. Soon he could hear their shuffling steps and his whole body recoiled impulsively. Then he heard one of them say, ‘Hey. Do you see this fellow?’ The shuffling stopped, and there was a long pause. Then something like
a long hiss pronounced a shock, 'It's that dog! So he's here! Uyaxok'uzawuhamb'uS-sathan! – the devil deceives himself, he's going!'

'Wait until he comes out. I know where he stays,' said another. As they moved on their voices gradually became inaudible. So it was true! He was the undesirable element in the township. And more people than 'Moscow’s' family apparently knew him. But how could he suddenly acquire so much notoriety for himself? He knew little about political activities and about Mandela he knew as much as any other ordinary individual. He was not a hero of anything, nor was any other member of his family. Were they not perhaps mistaking him for someone else? His immediate thought was to go home. Go home and away from Cape Town. He thought of a number of options – about begging the doctor to discharge him earlier, escape from hospital, cook up a story about a sudden death in the family. He soon realized the folly of leaving the hospital alone. He knew very little about Cape Town and the moment he was outside the hospital gates, he would not know what to do. He decided to wait for the doctor to make his rounds. That could be the right time to ask. Then he would send for Solly. There were nurses from Section 1 here, where Solly lived. They could pass the message easily.

The doctor came at 7 p.m. He listened sympathetically, but was obviously not concentrating on the elaborate reasons. Vukile had two, very deep wounds but they did not seem to have complications. Pumping out the abscess three days ago had helped the healing. It would be just another week. He slumped back helplessly. A week! Give the township a whole week to mobilise against him. He felt weak in the knees.

The week passed slowly but uneventfully for Vukile. He was discharged in the evening, and Solly with a number of young men were there to fetch him. At the hostel he packed his little suitcase slowly. His back was in unspeakable pain and his muscles were numb. He felt that his treatment was not as effective as it had been when he had been lying in a hospital bed. The wounds felt raw, raw, raw. Solly ran around borrowing money for Vukile's journey to Transkei. He collected R100 and some loose money and made numerous promises to various creditors. One creditor was a shrewd smokolo runner. She gave him R30 with a curt warning that the money should return by the end of the month together with the money for weekend beers. All the same, Vukile was in a Transkei-bound taxi by 10 o'clock the following morning. The quest that brought him to Cape Town had misled him. He was now turning his back on the Mother City with its enigmatic dwellers and its cursed hill.

But a more enigmatic experience awaited him at home. It was after two o'clock in the afternoon when his tired feet finally brought him to the rugged road leading from the bus stop into the village. He could see his home below an overhanging hill – or maybe where his home should be. But he wasn't certain if that was indeed his home until he got to about five hundred yards or so of the homestead. The place was crowded with
people, the numbers one would expect at the funeral service of a popular figure. Vukile was puzzled because in his father’s house there were no such people – his parents, his uncles and aunts, his three sisters, his younger brother ... who else? But as he approached, a procession led by a team of priests and a casket draped in a black-green and gold cloth floated like a barge over the crowds. Black-green and gold, and red flags were hoisted high. Accompanying these were banners – UDF, COSATU, AZAPO, AZASO, COSAS, IDASA and many others. Divisions of what looked like students and pupils jostled and danced the toi-toi, their fists occasionally coming up like myriads of mysterious question marks punctuating the air. Who could be in that coffin? Had he, Vukile Dolo, perhaps died of his wounds and did not know it – not just yet? But he was no hero. What could he have done?

As he approached, with his suitcase on his shoulder, nobody took notice of him. Those who looked in his direction glared absent-mindedly and again looked ahead. The graveyard wasn’t far, and the casket was being carefully lowered to the ground. He put his suitcase on the veranda thinking to join the crowd at the graveyard. A fireplace with about fifteen black pots featured in front of the main building. Here young married women busied themselves checking if the food was ready to serve when the mourners returned from the graveyard. Vukile knew none of these women and they obviously did not recognize him. He decided to go to the graveyard at once and ask his questions there.

For a while he stood at the fringes of the crowd at the graveyard, hoping to see someone he knew so he could ask whose funeral this was. But finding himself standing amongst complete strangers he urged forward. He was hoping for a chance to see the body if they allowed him. Still he was not sure if he wasn’t himself a Spirit, and forced his way to where the coffin was, mainly trying to test if those he leaned against could feel and see him. People at a funeral are not always fussy about how others jostle them about, so he was met with solemn indifference that told him nothing. The anxiety caused by the fear that he might find his face glaring back at him in the coffin made him to press forward more forcefully.

Then he bumped against Sipendu, who cast one suspicious glance at him and pulled him guardedly out of the crowd. Vukile found himself following helplessly, like someone under a spell.

‘Uncle, whose funeral is this?’ asked Vukile as soon as they were at the fringes of the crowd.

‘Look, I’m not going to answer such questions now,’ said Uncle Sipendu with solemn harshness. ‘I want you to know that you are not wanted here. Go to my home at Bongo village and ask your cousins to keep you there until I return,’ he said with fierce paternalism.

‘But, Uncle, what’s the matter? I have only just arrived from Ca..’

‘No! Don’t mention that place here! Do you wish to die?’
'But, Uncle,' pleaded Vukile almost desperate, 'Uncle, I don't understand. Isn't this my home anymore? I have so many questions to ask. I have just escaped from death. Where's my father? Where's my mother? Where are my parents?'

At that, his uncle leaned forward and whispered ominously, a grave look of fear in his eyes. 'There are people from Gugulethu in this crowd. They have inflamed everyone with hatred and they have told the most gruesome stories about you. Now go at once, or before you say 'nay' you'll be dead.'

At the mention of Gugulethu, Vukile did not hesitate. There seemed no end to his escape. Ever since he saw 'Moscow' on top of that stupid-looking hill he had become a perpetual fugitive. Yet no would tell him why.

Vukile could have believed it if someone told him he'd gone mad. His madness had encroached upon him without his knowing. Anyway, does a madman know it before he is cured? He sat on the low hand-made chair, his head between his knees. His little cousins and their friends eyed him curiously, but said nothing. A serene silence fell over the little hut.

'Uncle, please tell me - what have I done? What is wrong with me?' asked Vukile anxiously as soon as his uncle had gone through the formality of greeting him and asking after his health and had settled down on a low, shiny block of wood. His aunt had returned first from the funeral. She was obviously shocked to see him in her lounge but she had said very little. Except to reassure him that his uncle was on his way home. Uncle Sipendu looked down for a long moment and said without looking at him, 'Vukile, things have changed radically in our villages. They are no longer the same. All our shops were burnt down - we travel distances to buy a box of matches and paraffin. Today we buried someone we thought a complete stranger when he first came here more than a week ago.'

'Who was it?'
'Msokoli ...'
'Who is Msokoli?'
'Msokoli ... or something like that ...'

Vukile jumped to his feet. 'Moscow'? Was this old man trying to tell him about 'Moscow'? Why the enigmatic name again? 'Who is this Moscow? Who is he?' Such a question could obviously not be meant to be answered by Sipendu. He looked briefly into the confused face of his nephew and spread out his hands in a gesture of despair as if he had hoped the name would extract some meaning from him. Then suddenly he became alert and accusing, 'Why did you kill those poor people? What did you think you were doing. Had you not gone to look for work in Cape Town? What is this we hear about the night watch?' Vukile sat up. He felt like a trapped rabbit and, somehow, did not care anymore.
‘We had no choice. Everyone who stayed there had to join in and fight. They had no right telling people not to go to work. If we didn’t kill first, they would have killed us anyway. Why should they single me out?’

‘Your police friends are so confident of you they even take you to the mountain resorts now, don’t they?’ asked Sipendu almost accusingly. His nephew looked down at his dusty shoes. He failed to answer the question.

‘So it is true then?’ continued Sipendu almost as though he expected a different answer.

‘Yes.’

‘Everything we heard today?’

‘Yes ... everything you probably heard ...’

‘Oh, the horror of it all ...’ pursued the older man and stared far beyond the door. There was nothing to see but darkness.

Forums and Forces: Recent Trends in South African Literary Journals

ANDRIES WALTER OLIPHANT

Literary journals are important sites of cultural production. They perform a variety of roles which include providing forums for new developments in literature by publishing emergent voices. They help mediate and shape the direction in which a national literature develops by means of critical essays, reviews and debates. In most societies journals are often the barometers of the general literary life.

What is required, especially in a survey of literature journals, is to remain alert to general cultural developments and the particular historical context in which literary production occurs. The production and dissemination of cultural products, information and opinions are socially based activities involving a wide range of processes which constitute, reproduce, oppose, resist, and transform the socio-cultural environment. As Bernth Lindfors has indicated, many journals have a short life span, and so they tend to be of a transitory nature. This means that their function in a particular context is inevitably linked to the concerns of a particular time.

In the current context of social and political ferment, where the hegemony of the racial domination is confronted with the unstoppable rise of non-racial democratic forces, it is important to be alert to the ways in which journals relate and respond to, as well as participate in socio-cultural change. Journals, it must be said, do not merely reflect certain social and cultural trends but also deflect, resist, displace, silence and contradict the actual and symbolic practices in a society. The conflicting social groupings and the rival ideological and cultural perspectives inherent in South African society therefore invariably enter into the production and function of journals.

Over the last forty years, since the rise of the Afrikaner Nationalists to power in 1948, up to the present crisis and the impending demise of apartheid, the conflict which has marked the history of South Africa acquired particularly intense and violent forms. This conflict turned around the contradiction between the anti-democratic monopoly of political and economic power by a white minority on the one hand, and the struggle for national liberation and the desire for a non-racial democratic state by the majority of the population on the other. Cultural production in general, and literary life in particular, have had to establish their places and roles in relation to
these forces. In this regard the struggle between the cultural imperialism associated with the colonial history of apartheid and the national democratic movement has resulted in attempts by the opposing forces to develop a 'confluence of cultural levels of the various social categories' for the purposes of domination or liberation.\(^2\)

A survey of some of the publications in circulation today reveals that they can be located within clearly discernible interest groups with particular, if often unarticulated or deliberately obscured ideological perspectives on literature and culture. Generally speaking, these interest groups consist of a white English liberal tradition, a non-racial democratic tradition, a black Africanist tradition, a white Afrikaans conservative and racist tradition, and a liberal white and black Afrikaans tendency. While these groups have their own internal contradictions and conflicting class components they, generally speaking, also stand in conflict with each other on a wide range of matters.

From a literary point of view a number of journals can be identified in relation to these groupings. Three journals with predominantly white liberal and English speaking contributors and readership are in circulation at present, namely *New Contrast*, *New Coin* and *Sesame*. In addition, there is *Staffrider*, established in 1978. It has a black and white readership and both black and white contributors and, although politically unaligned, it is supportive of the non-racial democratic movement. In 1988, a year after the establishment of the non-racial Congress of South African Writers (COSAW), which also subscribes to the national democratic struggle, a number of regional journals were established in the Cape, Natal and Transvaal. The content, orientation and readership of these COSAW journals vary from region to region while adhering to the broad democratic, non-racial and non-sexist perspective of the organization. Presently there are also attempts by the African Writers' Association which adheres to broad Black Consciousness and Africanist perspectives, to revive *The Classic* which has not been published since 1985. Progressive Afrikaans interests are catered for by the magazine *Stet*.

Most of these publications have a relatively small circulation, printing between 500 and 1000 copies. They therefore belong to the genre of little magazines. *Staffrider*, which in the 1970s had a print run of 10,000 and currently prints 4000 copies, is an exception. The content of most magazines consists mainly of creative and discursive writing covering the traditional literary genres. In this respect *Staffrider* is also much more broadly constituted. It publishes popular history, social documentary photography and art and hosts an annual exhibition of photography and art.

*Contrast*, established in 1960, is the oldest journal in circulation. In 1990 it amalgamated with *Upstream Magazine* and is now known as *New Contrast*. This Cape Town based magazine has served a sector of South African writers for the past thirty years. Its founders consisted of authors such as Guy Butler, Jack Cope, Alan Paton and Uys Krige. While predominant-
ly English and liberal in its orientation the magazine also publishes work in Afrikaans. This bi-lingualism to some extent explains the title of the journal. This confluence between the relatively strong English liberal editorial strands and, the until recently feeble impulses of liberalism in white Afrikaans cultural circles, has given the magazine a progressive profile in the context of overwhelming white conservatism. Despite this, black writers, with the exception of Richard Rive, have over the years featured only marginally in the magazine which published poetry, fiction, playtexts, literary reviews and cultural essays as well as reproductions of graphic art, mainly as illustrations or to provide some visual variation to the literary material.

On examining the statements made by some editors of the magazine, one is struck by the persistance of an unbending insistence on vaguely formulated ‘universal aesthetic principles’. This is buttressed by claims of ideological independence and objectivity. For instance, in a review of a celebration issue of *Contrast* after its first year in circulation, C.J. Driver cited the claim of the editors that the magazine is politically, ‘independent, unfettered and unbiased’. Driver argues that this claim of non-alignment is a ruse and points to the hidden policy, bias and ideological affiliations of the magazine, discernible in the financial institutions and individuals who sponsor it, as well as the editorial statements and kind of work selected for publication.

The preoccupation with cultural upliftment and civilization which dominates liberal English discourse is, for instance, evident in the ‘Comment’ of Volume 1, Number 3, of the magazine. It states that the philosophy of the journal is based on the notion ‘that writers dealing with the “race theme” will not last because until the artist can touch all humanity with compassion he has not advanced beyond the blundering steps of a primitive’. A number of assumptions are disclosed and concealed in this statement. It avers that a concern with the social and political realities of the South African society is a trap which denudes literary works of their universal human and aesthetic value. Socio-political concerns are equated with cultural primitivism. At the heart of it lies a contradiction and an implicit derogatory reference to the indigenous people of South Africa. This is the contradiction: If primitives are human, and aesthetic values timeless and universal, then surely the earliest and least developed societies, including the ‘primitives’ must have had access to these values. If not, then the category of ‘humanity’ in this statement is unconsciously reserved for a particular middle class individual of European origin. Thus the European in his liberal guise becomes the epitome of humanity. The hidden racism which governs the unconscious of this position is evident.

The editor is so blinded by his own assumed sophistication that he completely fails to understand that there are no inherent inferiorities in the various themes writers choose to explore. What gives writing a lasting
quality, are not the themes chosen by the writer but the content and form given to a specific theme. Shakespeare’s treatment of the psychology of racism in *Othello* is sufficient to explode the fallacy of thematic prejudice. Nor for that matter does the concern with the history and consequences of colonialism in African literature, for example, render it inferior to European literature concerned with the processes and effects of industrialization.

Despite the fact that the liberal views referred to here have been under attack since the seventies they still persist. Thirty years later a similar statement is made by the poet Douglas Reid Skinner, the previous editor of *Upstream* and present editor of *New Contrast*. In his first editorial of the amalgamated magazine he writes: ‘The editorial standpoint will not differ from those previously held by the editorial staff: a belief in the centrality of tried and tested aesthetic and moral values in the creative enterprise, yet remaining open to a diversity of opinions and understandings.’

This conception is clearly ignorant of the extent to which socio-historical circumstances and the material culture of a particular society are inscribed in the aesthetic practises of its writers and artists. It postulates a static unchanging notion of beauty and morality. It reveals a typical liberal tolerance towards divergent ‘opinions’ and ‘understanding’, and an authoritarian refusal to concede that different, differing, opposing or rival aesthetic traditions do exist in South Africa and elsewhere. Readers are told without any substantiation that certain aesthetic and moral values are not only central to the magazine but also to the creative enterprise. What are these central and mysterious values? Why are aesthetic and moral values conflated here? These nagging questions remain unanswered. A strategic silence, which elevates ignorance and mystification to the realm of a special inaccessible kind of knowledge, prevails.

The reader must therefore infer what these values are. If one concludes that the values evoked here are a particular brand of South African liberal humanism with all its colonial implications, then Skinner is likely to protest. In a recent interview I probed some of these issues. Skinner explained his editorial approach by referring to his experiences as editor of *Upstream*, started by the poet Allen James in 1983 as a journal exclusively devoted to poetry. Skinner took over the editorship in 1987. He explains: ‘I expanded the magazine to include other literary genres. I had no specific or coherent editorial policy. Selection was made by personal choices, schooled reading, taste, education and a history of choices based on a recognition of traditional aesthetics.’ These values, still vaguely articulated but clearly rooted in the personal and social background of the editor, were transferred, or more correctly, found a congenial forum in the merger of *Upstream* and *Contrast* to *New Contrast* in 1990.

Scrutinizing the creative contributions, reviews and critical essays published in *Upstream* under Skinner’s editorship, a liberal humanist aesthetics fiercely hostile to socially oriented literary practices emerges. Thus,
Stephen Watson, a current associate editor of the magazine, charged with selecting critical essays, takes the following self-damning view of the poetry produced by black writers since the 1970s:

Overwhelmingly, the black poetry of the last two decades consists of a number of half-assimilated European conventions which are frequently patched together in so confused and piecemeal a fashion that one thinks, reading the work not in terms of a ‘renaissance’ or ‘breakthrough’, but rather with anger and dismay at what has happened in this country that such beginnings should remain largely unfulfilled. The more one absorbs this poetry, the more one is reminded of the old truism that declares bad art always to be totally determined by its socio-historical context, good art never.²

The sweeping nature of this statement, its ethnocentricity, masks a profound aversion to a significant current in South African writing and would qualify it for dismissal as sub-standard in any critical discourse. The aggressive postulation of ‘European conventions’ at the centre of evaluation, or as the criterion, norm and measure of fullness, of which local black writing is but a ‘half assimilated’ version, suggests a discursive process in which racist attitudes are displaced into the field of literary aesthetics. If this interpretation seems uncharitable, or even unfounded, let us recall the reactionary epistemology of racism and its corollary of cultural supremacy. According to Tzvetan Todorov the concept ‘racism’ signifies a pattern of ‘behaviour which consists in the display of contempt or aggressiveness toward other people on account of physical differences (other than those of sex) between them and oneself’ ³ This inability to deal with difference lies at the heart of the problem. For Watson ‘European conventions’ are superior to any other literary traditions. This aesthetic authoritarianism requires that all literature be measured against some unspecified European tradition. Consequently he fails to understand that the model he invokes is not universal. It is a cultural specific reference which he wishes to enforce with all the coercive aggression and violent negations associated with colonialism.

This is all rather distasteful. But given what is at stake in South Africa it has to be pursued to its logical conclusion. Brushing this under the carpet, as has been done for so long, would amount to critical expediency. Unfortunately this view, despite its historical obsoleteness, persists. It is representative of those white English-speaking liberals, who constitute a sector of South Africans, who seek to control cultural discourse by arrogating to themselves, their language and writings some fabled universal aesthetic referent. This myopic attitude of exclusion underpins the past cultural practices, referred to by Albie Sachs, in which attempts were made ‘to force everyone into the mould of the English gentleman, projected as the epitome of civilization, so that it was even an honour to be oppressed by the English’.⁵
The 'old truism' concerning the inherent inferiority of socially determined 'art' is indeed a tired liberal cliché. The relationship between the warnings to early writers who concern themselves with the 'racial question' and work 'totally determined by socio-historical context' should be evident. This stagnant cultural perspective is what constitutes Skinner's 'tried and tested aesthetic and moral values'. This tradition which dominates institutionalised academic literary practices has been criticized by Mike Kirkwood, one of the founders of Staffrider, in the 1970s. Kirkwood exposed the complicity of South African liberalism with the racial arrogance and human negations associated with colonialism and called for a radical liberatory literary approach.9

More recently Rory Ryan criticized the aesthetic and moral absolutism which inheres in South African English liberalism by drawing attention to the political imperatives which govern such practices of cultural exclusion:

One of the most seriously hegemonic and repressive gestures produced by humanism has been to offer its socio-cultural goals as 'truth', and its methods (of self-perpetuation and glorification) as 'truth-seeking'. The recoverability of transhistorical truth is thus at once demonstrated and subordinated to humanist authority, so creating the idea of real knowledge beyond time and ensuring that no unauthorized personnel ever 'find' this knowledge.10

The complicity of liberalism with the oppressive techniques associated with cultural domination in South Africa is evident. This hegemony within English literature, although not in complete agreement with the more extreme conservative forms in Afrikaans culture, has nevertheless established fields of exclusion to the disadvantage of black writers. This is also the case with the magazine Sesame, edited by the poet Lionel Abrahams. Abrahams has been involved with a number of journals since the late 1950s. Between 1957 and 1971 he worked on Purple Renoster. In the 1970s he produced a number of issues of Quarry published by Ad Donker. In the 1980s he was associate editor of The Bloody Horse. Since 1982 he has produced Sesame.

Surveying Abrahams' past and present projects one becomes aware of the extent to which he has consistently tried to establish outlets for local writers. He preferred working in intimate and close-knit circles where his literary authority is deferred to. The advantages of personal intimacy thus afforded are, however, undercut by its broader social disadvantages and the inevitability of exclusion which accompanies it. The work published in the magazines edited by him drew material from a circumscribed and predominantly white group. Where black writers such as Oswald Mtshali, Mafika Gwala, Wally Serote and others managed to penetrate this laager of exclusivity it was strictly on the terms set by the editor. In the case of Serote the programme of the white liberal editor and the radical black poet clashed to such an extent that Serote sought the advice of Steve Biko
to ensure that his work was not diverted, and his integrity as a poet was not compromised.\textsuperscript{11}

Abrahams explains his editorial approach as follows:

If I have an editorial policy at all, it is to follow the writers who display a degree of talent rather than to follow the trends. I am a pragmatic editor. I don't select the creative work because of the time or historical circumstance although some of the non-creative work I chose to publish is, however, a reaction to specific issues raised at a given time.\textsuperscript{12}

This insistence on timelessness and talent as well as its function within liberal aesthetics has been discussed. Abrahams has, in line with this time­less preoccupation, consistently attacked writers and organizations who actively support the Cultural Boycott against the white minority state, by equating the boycott with censorship. While the censorious dangers inherent in the boycott should not be brushed aside, Abrahams has shown little understanding of its local and international role in bringing about change in South Africa. Consequently, he has defended the right of the artist to 'ignore political matters or to be politically out of step'.\textsuperscript{13} This freedom, as far as my knowledge of South African literature is concerned, has never been threatened by writers opposed to cultural domination. There is nothing objectionable in artists who choose political irrelevance in times of social injustice and crisis. It is, however, rather dubious when those, who insist on artistic freedom, elect to attack writers committed to political and socio-cultural change as well as freedom for all. Here the agenda of the liberals, whether they are conscious of it or not, coincides with the forces of repression. Blinded by the desire to retain the cultural high ground, their refusal to participate in the struggle for social change is directly related to a disenabling and narrow view of freedom. This ironically serves to undermine the very values apparently cherished by liberalism.

A welcome change, within the predominantly liberal forums, has been Robert Berold’s editorship of \textit{New Coin}, the poetry journal established in 1960 by the Institute for the Study of English in Africa at Rhodes University in Grahamstown. Berold has remoulded this dull and conservative journal into a lively forum which publishes a wide range of South African poetry. He has given space to poets preoccupied with inner contemplation as well as to those concerned with wider public issues. His openness to aesthetic diversity and not a mere tolerance to different opinions concerning poetry is evident in the following passage: 'We do have poets who can speak with voices of a whole people. But there are other voices, the secret colour of joy, of those who lost love somewhere and don't know where (and those who know exactly where). All these voices have a place in our poetry, and not only these.'\textsuperscript{14}

The dominance of liberal forums has over the years been challenged by radical writers. Forums seeking to articulate the experiences of black and
white opponents of Apartheid have been established in the process. In 1951 Drum, a news and feature articles magazine aimed at the black urban population, published short stories and gave rise to writers such as Es’kia Mphahlele, Can Themba, Richard Rive, Bloke Modisane, Casey Motsisi, Alex La Guma and others. In the context of the ascendency of Verwoerdenian Apartheid, it is hardly surprising that many of the stories encode aspects of the socio-political process. Michael Chapman, in this respect, correctly asserts: ‘Most of the writers were concerned with more than just telling a story. They were concerned with what was happening to their people and, in consequence, with moral and social questions.’

During the 1950s and 1960s there were also a number of other journals open to blacks and social critical writing. The Classic, edited by Nat Nakasa, and The New African, a radical monthly based in Cape Town, which began to circulate in 1962, provided forums for anti-Apartheid writing. Other outlets for counter-hegemonic writing included publications such as New Age and Fighting Talk. These developments in radical indigenous writing came to an abrupt end in the wake of the proscriptions which followed the banning of the African National Congress and the Pan Africanist Congress in 1961. Many of the writers productive at this time were banned, prohibited from writing or left the country. In many cases it became a crime to circulate and read their work. This resulted in a situation where South African literature in English, in the wry words of Richard Rive, ‘virtually became White by law’.

Against this background of repression and white domination black writing re-emerged in the course of the seventies, initially under white liberal patronage. Later the Black Consciousness Movement gathered momentum, and its tenets of black self-reliance stressed the need for black autonomy in all spheres of life. Thus, in 1978, in the aftermath of the Soweto uprisings of 1976, Staffrider Magazine was launched by Ravan Press. The journal sought to provide a forum for the various community-based cultural groups which sprang up in the urban townships. It also published the work of individuals drawn towards the establishment of post-Soweto culture.

To implement the concept of self-reliance and move away from the traditional top-down editorial style the notion of ‘self-editing’ was introduced by the editorial group. This practice was premised on the assumption or expectation that the various community organizations would select and edit the work of their members before submitting it to the magazine based in Johannesburg. These ideas proved rather difficult, if not impossible to implement. Given the centralized nature of the magazine, extensive secondary selection, editing and the entire production had to be undertaken by a series of unacknowledged, behind-the-scene editors and production personnel employed by Ravan Press. In the first ten years a succession of individuals edited and produced the magazine. They included Mike Kirk-
wood, Mothobi Mutlostse, Jaki Seroke, Rose Zwi, Dorothy Wheeler, Mzwakhe Nlabatsi, Chris van Wyk and many others.

As for the communal projections of the publication Mike Kirkwood, one of the founders of the magazine, recalls the early years of the magazine in the anniversary anthology *Ten Years of Staffrider*. He writes somewhat nostalgically:

It used to be suggested, in the pages of *Staffrider*, that a writer was in some sense the voice of a distinct community, which thus spoke to other communities via a network of those interlocutors and their readers. Banners appeared over bundles of poems and stories ascribing the milieus of Sebokeng, Katlehong Mamelodi, etc. to the work presented. Often enough the writers had indeed formed themselves into groups. As often, the universal application of this layout principle conferred 'community' on writers living in a state of blissful anomy. Our failure to think this issue through, or rationalize it as a proper operating principle, was the clearest indication of our populist tendency. In the end, as the groups withered away, we simply dropped a rubric which had always been somewhat symbolic.  

The accentuation of the social location of the artist, the social origin and reference of literature and art which dominated the early years of *Staffrider* was largely a reaction to, as well as an attempt at breaking with the ahistorical and universalizing aesthetics of liberalism and its narrow framework of the isolated individual as the basis of creativity. *Staffrider* attempted to locate the writer and the work within a collective context, defined as a community, more specifically, an oppressed community, involved in a cultural and political struggle against apartheid. This radical orientation was grafted on to a mixture of Africanist populism and inchoate revolutionary tendencies based on somewhat romantic notions of collectivism.

*Staffrider*, nevertheless, published a variety of cultural work ranging from poetry, fiction, drama, and essays to social documentary, photography, art and popular history. During the seventies and early eighties it pioneered and supported a new movement in social documentary photography led by figures such as Omar Badsha and Paul Weinberg. By means of the *Staffrider Series* it established a new generation of writers such as Njabulo Ndebele, Mbulelo Mzamane, Miriam Tlali, Mutuzeli Matshoba, Athmat Dangor, Jeremy Cronin, Wally Serote, James Matthews, Daniel Kunene, Donald Parenzee. In addition writers such as Gladys Thomas, Jayapraga Reddy and Gcina Mhlophe were first published in this magazine. It also reinserted writers from the previous decade, such as Es’kia Mphahlele, Can Themba, Casey Motsisi and Nat Nakasa into the contemporary literary discourse. It evolved from the early Black Consciousness period of the seventies to participate in the revival of the non-racial democratic movement of the early eighties, inaugurated by the launch of the United Democratic Front in 1983, to play an important role in the providing a forum for upsurge in working class culture which developed under the
auspices of the labour movement. Today, steered by an editorial board consisting of Njabulo Ndebele, Nadine Gordimer, Gcina Mhlophe, Ivan Vladislavic, Paul Weinberg, David Koloane, Luli Callinicos, Gary Rathbone and Jeff Lok, and faced with the challenges to reflect and direct the new transformative concerns within social and literary circles, it stands as a monument to the processes of cultural resistance, renewal, affirmation, and inclusiveness in the context of a repressive past.

A significant development on the literary front in recent times has been the formation in 1987 of the Congress of South African Writers. This is a nationally constituted organization with branches in the Transvaal, Natal, Free State, Eastern Cape and Western Cape. Although not formally affiliated to any political organization, it sees its work as part of the broad national democratic movement. One of the immediate goals of the organization is to provide a home for writers with education and training as its main activities. It also produces and disseminates written and oral literature in all the languages of the country, which reflect the heritage and visions of all South Africans. Regular workshops are held and a number of regional publications have been established in the course of 1988 and 1989. Writers' Note Book in Natal, Ingolovane in Transvaal and Akal in the Western Cape have been compiled and edited by members elected to the publications committees in the various regions. These journals display a sensitivity to the language clusters within the different regions, such as the Afrikaans, English, and Xhosa groupings in the Cape, the Zulu and English clusters in Natal and the cosmopolitan diversity of the Transvaal. Despite this sensitivity to multilingualism English is predominant.

The regional nature of the magazines implies that the forums can move closer to local communities and emergent writers than any centralized national publication such as Staffrider. This, however, has not eliminated the problem whereby academics and the established writers dominate the regional forums at the expense of emergent voices. Nor have the magazines succeeded in highlighting the regional particularities of the contributors and readership in relation to their context. According to Abduragheim Johnstone, the Western Cape publications officer, 'this top down initiative ran counter to the democratic principle as posed by the organization and has resulted in a gap between established and aspirant writers. To correct this imbalance it has been decided to establish publishing forums for members in the various local branches in the region'. In 1990 the first edition of Local: Western Cape Region appeared. It is a cheaply produced journal which provides space for writers who might otherwise be overlooked by journals drawing material from a larger membership of the general public.

Two other significant forums representing important cultural tendencies remain to be outlined, namely developments in the black Africanist and Afrikaans journals. The Africanist forces and values espoused by the African Writers' Association have been articulated in their journal The
Classic. The journal was originally founded in 1963 by Nat Nakasa and later edited by the playwright and director Barney Simon. It became defunct but in 1976 it was resuscitated and edited by Sipho Sepamla who renamed it *The New Classic*. It again disappeared to resurface under the name *The Classic* edited by Jaki Seroke and was published by the African Writers’ Association in the early 1980s. This organization was formed in 1981 after the dissolution of the multiracial Johannesburg centre of PEN. The literary programme of the African Writers’ Association, governed by broad Africanist principles, seeks to provide an organizational and publishing forum as well as ‘to establish bonds of fellowship among African writers in South Africa’.

This perspective is rooted in those streams of African Nationalism associated with the Pan Africanist Congress of the 1950s and the Black Consciousness Movement of the 1970s, both of which are still significant currents in South African politics today. It centres around a reaction to, and rejection of, white domination. Its programmes are based on a call for black exclusivity embracing Africans, so-called Coloureds and Indians on the basis of their shared oppression.

*The Classic* has, however, appeared infrequently and went out of circulation in the mid 1980s. A recent advertisement in a local newspaper calling for contributions indicates that the magazine is to be revived once again under the sponsorship of the African Writers’ Association. According to the organizing editor, Nhlanganisio Dlala, the revival of the magazine is underpinned by a desire to combine an anti-apartheid orientation with deliberately African sensibilities in cultural expression and a strong opposition to European cultural traditions. Going over some of the back-issues one is left in no doubt about the emphasis in *The Classic* on the literary and cultural experience of blacks and their relationship to traditional and emergent nationalist cultural forces specific to Africa and the diaspora.

In Afrikaans the conservative journal *Standpunte* was closed by its sponsors, Nasionale Boekhandel, in 1987 when there was a possibility of its radicalization with the appointment of the author and academic, André Brink, as editor. Brink planned to widen the purview of the magazine to include black Afrikaans writing, as well as social critical tendencies. At the moment, apart from the conservative *Tydskrif vir Letterkunde*, the only vibrant Afrikaans outlet for literature is *Stet*, sponsored and published by Taurus Publishers, an independent anti-apartheid publishing house based in Johannesburg. The magazine has an iconoclastic orientation and a distinctly non-elitist attitude to literature. It serves as a forum for the new rebellious voices in Afrikaans which began to emerge in the early eighties at a time when the upsurge in the national democratic movement coincided with a growing radicalization among certain sectors of Afrikaner intellectuals. *Stet* is clearly opposed to the conservative values which have dominated Afrikaans literary circles for decades, and its opposition often
takes on the form of subversive humour and a calculated indifference to reactionary morality.

This overview has indicated that many literary journals in South Africa are related to a variety of social tendencies. Given the crucial phase of cultural re-evaluation and the challenges of transformation facing writers and cultural workers in South Africa at present, the continued availability of publishing forums open to a wide range of cultural practices and forces is vital. For, as argued at the outset, journals constitute a site in which the forces at work in a given society are reflected, articulated, analysed, recreated and developed. What has become urgent for South Africans is the challenge to give greater space to a diversity of ideas and forms of expression, to subject this to evaluation and criticism in ways which will free the South African society of all forms of cultural arrogance and oppression. This freedom is necessary for the development of a new multidimensional literature and democratic culture in which the experiences and visions of all South Africans are reflected. The emergence of new voices and ideas which will contribute new directions out of the present cultural crisis cannot happen without the forums provided by journals.

NOTES

Andries Walter Oliphant

THE HUNGER STRIKER

I hear my voice like the sombre rattle of a diviner's bones:
After a life of eating porridge
with my hands from a dixie
I dream of waking up at home.

I sit at a table with a knife and fork.
The earth's edible crust
steaming in my porcelain plate.
I drink the sky distilled from a glass.
There is happiness the size of freedom in my cup.

But then I hear the stout voices of men in shorts
washing tin plates up.
The house in which I left a wife and child
is now deserted
and infested with rats and mice.

I go into the street and come across myself shackled in leg irons
digging a hole in the sidewalk
big enough to hold my shrinking body.
The spade I was given has become an axe.

The baker from my childhood is in his doorway
with flour on his hands.
He speaks and I see
roasted corn spill from his mouth
like a praise poem to labour and productivity.

A girl passes on a bike and waves at me.
It looks like my daughter
in the clothes of my wife.
I cannot free my hands from the axe to wave back.
I try to raise my leg but the irons restrain me.
My neighbour passes in an empty bus.
Through a broken window
he shouts at me:
The earth is full of yellow bones
which you must dig up!

I laugh like one immersed in life’s conviviality
amid table cloths and serviettes.
Amid the repertoire of knives and forks,
the bright taste of pain
strikes me like a sharpened axe.

AFTER LIFE
In memory of my father

In the month of your star
the sky teems
with barbels, carp, yellowtail and snoek.
On the banks of the Blesbok
you cast a line.
I cast a line at Dwesa from the rocks.
I see the split cane and the conoflex bend.

Late afternoon my car drones
through the rain.
I drive through the city
with the image of your catch
and our laughter
to the fire in your bed.

The gown they dressed you in
mimics the colours
of my infancy: yellow, blue and red
rectangles on a birthday shirt.
Your hands with which you speak
refer to udders round with milk.

And the truck you drove laden with pumpkins,
tomatoes, carrots, beetroot
and the fruit that kept me out
of other people’s orchards.  
When your land was taken  
your right to live was confiscated.

How far did you cycle through that night?  
With brown bread and pilchards  
you kept us all alive.  
While I made wire cars  
with fish tails  
which nobody would buy.

I came with a booth full of memories  
swimming through my head like fish.  
The rain was at the window  
beating out a message which I could not read.  
You said it was your mother, the midwife  
and left me with your taciturn hat and pipe.
Sipho Sepamla

ALL VOICES BECOME HOARSE

Step by step
we rise
as the goldminers
dig
deeper and deeper
moment to moment
we live
as the death-row
inmates wait
for the noose
day by day
politicians
pontificate
as freedom chants
swell
shrill voices
abroad
louder and louder
come the demands
as lower and lower
descends
the commandant's strident orders
order
all voices become hoarse

TOUCH ME NOW

Touch my heart
here where the beat pounds
is it faint
is it louder
Touch my face
here on the cheeks
is the tear drying on its own
is it flowing salted warmly

Touch my hands
here where a stone is enfolded in one
is it a hard rock
is it hot with waiting

Touch my brow
here where it meets its own madness
are the folds hardening
are they sweating out the anger

There’s nowhere you can touch me
without the realisation that
I am not the person of yesterday
The fangs are bared for action

Mxolisi M. Nyezwa

POEMS AND PAPERS

but not for now
you sat, you looked thwarted
knowing what the moment meant
(at last hell has constricted
your soul too!)
you laugh, you dance no more
my good friend.
TRANSCENDENCE

While a man sits thinking
tree leaves fall
valleys form
and die
mountain-birds perish
in the crowded sky

roots quench water
tree leaves fall
birds tumble
in a crooked universe

failing in their lives

prayers bound for other existences
are silenced
pale eyes now deadless
and lifeless in the cold.

While a man sits thinking
life is like a cat's padded paws.

A POEM

here she comes
today much nicer
today beneath my roof
my house her shelter
talking of Chaucer and FRENCH caviar.
Peter Clarke

[Image: Walking Between Reeds]
but one's personal life is a journey, so to speak. Right from
the start. One had to find the way.
Sometimes one travels on a wide-open road. At other times it is not
even a pathway. It's a track, some vague route taking one walking
deviously between reeds. Occasionally one goes trekking through
the veld or thrashing about in forests & swamps.
Sometimes one sees seemingly barren desert— & then trans-
formations after rain.
But at a certain time when looking forward one becomes elated
by the inviting vista. There's all that-open space & you know
movement will become easy.
PHULAPHULANI

Tired, bored, 
Reluctantly we sit & wait.

"Phulaphulani;"
They say the trains are running late again. 
The air is cold & yet more rain is here. 
Summer is not remotely near & neither is the train.
Tired, waiting bodies on the seat, hunger pangs, cold limbs, cold hands, cold feet.
Bored eyes meet the Pepsi poster, The sight of bare midriff & exotic blue-jeaned buttocks swinging as if in dance, Hands clutching cool drinks under the legend in Afrikaans,

"Pepsi mense voel vrij."

On summer one would feel okay,
Not now, not this way.
Not this icy winter day.
One will look at this poster and think "how unseasonal."

"Phulaphulani;"
The trains are late, They’re in a muddle.
We sit on the platform, wet with rain.
And see the Pepsi poster reflected in a puddle.
There's a hint of more rain in the air.
Two schoolboys play as if they couldn't care.
Such is the way of their world
Though it looks odd.
They just can't care too much
About the trains running late.
For that attitude, thank God.
There's always more.
We grown-ups sit here miserable and mope.
We wait.

But the sight of those schoolboys gives hope.
Soon we think of all the scope
That possibly there'll be
When they are men.

They'll have their views by then
And will be free to choose.
Perhaps they'll be the ones
With the brains that guide the trains.
Perhaps they'll see that the trains
Don't stall at all.

Then who ever's white will see it's quite all right
And that nothing's wrong
And that things, in fact,
Are swinging with a song.
For some.
The train must come.

PhuluPhulani: (xhosa) “Attention, please” “Listen, please.” etc.
Pepsi Mense Voel Vry: (afrikaans) “Pepsi people feel free.”
BLOODHOUNDS

EYES KEEN IN THE DARK,
SLINKING AROUND CORNERS OF SITUATIONS,
THEY LURK IN THE SHADOWS
OF YOUR LIFE.

FINGERS PRYING HERE & THERE,
THEY FOLLOW TRACES,
TURNING OVER STONES,
OPENING PAGES & SCANNING LINES.
THEY EXAMINE BARE BONES.

THEY WATCH YOU,
WAITING TO CATCH YOU WITH YOUR EYES CLOSED,
HOPING TO CATCH YOU NAKED AND ASHAMED.

THEY WILL NOT LEAVE OFF IN THEIR BLOODHOUND PURSUIT OF YOU
UNTIL THEY FIND THEIR PREY HAS NOTHING AT ALL TO HIDE
AND IS QUITE INNOCENT AFTER ALL.
YET EVEN THEN THEY'RE NOT QUITE SATISFIED.
'At unlock' every morning (to use the prison parlance) there are approximately 120,000 people in prison in South Africa, with its population of 35 million. Britain, in comparison, has a daily prison population of 55,000 for a total population of 57 million – proportionally one-fourth of the South African figure. This depressing reality of an inordinate number of South Africans having become criminalized as the result of an unjust political system is further compounded by the detention of about 73,000 people under Emergency regulations since the first State of Emergency in 1960 – 32,000 in the period between 12 June 1985 and September 1988 alone. How South Africa became what Breyten Breytenbach calls 'the land of banning, censorship, prison' has been documented with varying degrees of candour and necessary masking in an ever-growing body of prison writing. The experience of detention and imprisonment is a major determinant of literary production in South Africa today.

Autobiographies and biographies of political and cultural leaders such as Nelson Mandela, Alan Hendrikse, Frank Chikane (General Secretary of the South African Council of Churches), trade unionist Emma Mashinini and dissidents such as Norma Kitson and Andrew Zondo all have in common a section dealing with the imprisonment of their subjects. The tradition of the prison memoir which began in the mid-60s with Ruth First's 117 Days and Albie Sachs' account in The Jail Diary of Albie Sachs of his bid to hold out against his interrogators during his detention and solitary confinement under the notorious 90-day law, was continued by Hugh Lewin in 1974 with Bandiet, a memoir of his detention under the same 90-day law and his subsequent seven-year prison sentence under the Sabotage Act. Both Moses Dlamini in Hell-Hole, Robben Island: Reminiscences of a Political Prisoner in South Africa and Indres Naidoo in Island in Chains: Ten Years as a Political Prisoner in South Africa's Most Notorious Penitentiary have recorded their incarceration on 'The Island' in works that have helped to establish the prison memoir as a significant genre in South African writing, the genre in which Molefe Pheto has documented his experiences in And Night Fell: Memoirs of a Political Prisoner in South Africa which he
himself describes as ‘the narrative of a nightmare that had lasted for 281 days in South African prisons, 271 of them in solitary confinement’, and as has Caeserina Kona Makhoere in No Child’s Play: In Prison under Apartheid. It is also within the general framework of the prison memoir that Breyten Breytenbach undertakes in The True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist his metafictional essay on the nature of examination and confession.

A semiotic analysis of the South African prison memoir and its fictional variants reveals certain salient characteristics. In the first place, the prison memoir is consciously narrated by a subject whose identity is established by his experience as a ‘political prisoner’. The title of Hugh Lewin’s memoir Bandiet is precisely such an exercise in self-identification, the term being defined for the reader by way of prefatory explanation:

*Bandiet*

an Afrikaans word meaning *convict*. No longer in official use because considered derogatory. Unofficially – i.e. in common use throughout South African jails – a prisoner is called a *bandiet*. Plural *bandiete*.

Similarly, Moses Dlamini introduces himself on the title page of his memoir *Hell-Hole, Robben Island* as ‘Prisoner No. 872/63’, the label preceding his name. Indres Naidoo also publishes his account of his imprisonment on Robben Island under the signifier ‘Prisoner 885/63’. It is in the same spirit that even before the title page of the British edition of his autobiography *No Life of My Own* Frank Chikane reproduces in full as his particular South African identity document his Notification of Admission to Prison certificate (on a charge of treason).

A second distinctive feature of the prison book is its Dedication which affirms a continuing community of the imprisoned. Dlamini’s memoir is ‘Dedicated to Sobukwe, to all Azanian patriots who are languishing in prison, and to those who died at the hands of the police and in prison in their noble struggle for a free Azania’; Lewin’s is ‘for Bram Fischer, for all political prisoners inside South African jails, for Jock Strachan (who made things so much better inside) and for all those out of jail but still restricted in South Africa’; and Breytenbach’s *The True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist* he dedicates ‘to the multitude of detainees and tortured ones and prisoners in the land of my birth’.

Thirdly, the actual narrative of the detention or prison process has identifiable contours: an autobiographical introduction; an account of arrest and pre-trial detention; the individual response to solitary confinement, the various methods of interrogation and degrees of torture; the ritual pattern of the security trial with its statements extracted often under duress, witnesses under police control and proceedings in courts often closed to the public; the sentence; induction into prison life; the routine humiliations of prison and the strategies of adjustment and survival that evolve; descriptions of superintendents and warders, prison doctors,
psychiatrists and ministers of religion; the enforced and frequently tense fellowship of convicts and political prisoners; the various systems of support and antagonism among prisoners; the compulsion to develop channels of communication and cultivate human contacts; the solidarity with condemned prisoners; the knowledge of how people behave in the face of execution; all the habits of body and mind that define the prisoner until the day of his release. The narrative design is not peculiar to South African prison memoirs; it is a universal one, structuring the memoirs of the Africans Soyinka and Ngugi, the Argentinean Jacobo Timerman and the Egyptian Nawal el Sa'adawi, the Cubans Jorge Valls and Armando Valladares and the Russians Irina Ratushinskaya and Natan Sharansky.

Two features of the detention and prison experience recounted in the South African prison memoirs offer themselves as providing valuable access to these books as literary constructs. The first is actually contingent upon the second, but needs to be considered before it. A particularly traumatic stage of the induction into prison is the stripping naked of the prisoner and the body search prior to being given prison dress. Makhoere returns almost compulsively to this detail of her experience, recording no fewer than three occasions on which she was obliged to undress. On the first of these, she says,

one of the wardresses, whom I later learned was the head of the prison in the women's section, ordered an elderly wardress to strip me and search my belongings. A thorough search was done of my clothes and I was ordered to open my mouth, put my hands up, and spread my legs apart. She found nothing and ordered me to dress. The door of the room was locked. I was alone. Thus began my solitary confinement.3

One recognizes in Makhoere's description in No Child's Play the formings of the metaphor of the stripping away of the prisoner's humanity that Lewin used in Bandiet to describe his entry into prison life:

You are stripped of everything inessential. You are stripped bare and given back only what they think is necessary. They strip you at the beginning and they go on stripping you, endlessly, to ensure that you have only what they think is necessary. You are stripped bare of everything that you can call your own, constantly stripped bare of anything that you make your own; you are stripped bare in an endless process of peeling off your protective covering and leaving you naked. So they can watch you. So that you, like the corridor, are without decoration, without covering, with nothing behind which to hide, with nothing they can't see into and watch.4

The metaphor applies equally to Emma Mashinini's account in Strikes Have Followed Me All My Life of her sense of total exposure when the police invaded and searched her home in the early hours of the morning and she herself was later stripped in Pretoria Central Prison: 'I was cold. Everything was taken. I had a gold chain which my daughters had given me for
my fiftieth birthday. That was taken. Everything was removed, up to my rings. I sat in that place with nothing to read. Just with myself. The bare me. And in *Hell-Hole, Robben Island* Moses Dlamini offers as concretization of his introductory claim that South Africa is ‘a place where you are stripped of every vestige of human dignity – debased, demoralized, dehumanized’ not only the humiliating stripping and crude rectal examination of the entire group of political prisoners on arrival at the Robben Island prison (they were kept naked for three whole days before being given prison clothes – ‘Criminal convicts were surprised as we walked, to see a long line of naked chained bodies taking their food’ (p. 20)), but also the bizarre daily *tauza* of the convict labour teams before being allowed their food:

We were commanded to strip naked and stand in eight lines. There was absolutely no privacy. In front of each line was a warder who had to do the searching. Jumping on the left leg, while the right floated in mid-air as though to make a side-kick, simultaneously clicking the tongue to the warder and clapping the hands together, afterwards spinning round on the left leg, then turning round, bending and showing the warder your arse – that was the *tauza*. And we watched, in astonishment, as one by one the criminal convicts indulged in the orgy, some doing it in style to the pleasure of the warders. When the turn of us political prisoners came, we handed the warders the clothes, opened our mouths, lifted up our hands, turned round with naked dignity and refused to do the *tauza*. (pp. 37-8)

Enforced denudation suggests, however, a kind of narrative *tauza* to Dlamini: the exposed self can be deliberately and calculatedly revealed in a narrative about the prison experience in which the reader becomes discomfitingly obliged to occupy the position of witness to the paraded truths of the prison memoir.

The second feature of the prison memoir that is narratologically significant is to be found in the very many accounts of interrogation during detention. The various modes of interrogation, sometimes recurring in cross-examination ploys during the trial and often shaping the various interviews later by prison officials such as superintendents, psychiatrists and even doctors, form an interrogative matrix for an eventual process of self-investigation in narrative. The following example of interrogation during detention must suffice here to dramatize the morbid relationship between interrogator and detainee. It is an extract from the actual inquest proceedings into the death of the detainee S. Looksmart Ngudle who died in detention in 1963:

Q If a detainee, this man or any other, on being interrogated after he has been detained, says ‘I am not under any circumstances prepared to give you any information whatsoever’ do you leave him alone or do you take further steps?
A Well, he’s got to be asked again.
Q And again?
A Yes.
Q And again?
A Yes.
Q And again?
A Yes.
Q And again?
A Yes.
Q I see. The idea being to wear him down I suppose?
A I make no comment.
Q Well, what is the idea, you give me your comment?
A Well, he is there to give information that’s why he’s detained.
Q But he’s already told you two or three times that he won’t talk?
A Then he’ll eventually let go.
Q Well then supposing you had a case of a suspect who was detained because you, the police genuinely believed that he could give certain information, and if in fact your belief was wrong and this man couldn’t give you information, would you keep on questioning him over and over again?
A I would question him, yes.
Q You would, over and over again?
A Yes.
Q That would be a dreadful thing to happen to a man, wouldn’t it, if in fact you were wrong?
A Yes.
Q It would be. And all that man would be able to see as far as his future is concerned would be an endless vista of imprisonment coupled with repeated questioning?
A Yes.7

This pattern of inquisition, frequently misnamed information- or intelligence-gathering, is the standard one that can be recognized in most accounts of interrogation. It is the strategy described by Coetzee’s Colonel Joll of the Third Bureau in his novel Waiting for the Barbarians for the probing of a prisoner who apparently has nothing to yield. Training and experience, he maintains, has taught him to recognize the tone that enters the voice of a man who is telling the truth: ‘I am speaking of a situation in which I am probing for the truth, in which I have to exert pressure to find it. First I get lies, you see – this is what happens – first lies, then pressure, then more lies, then more pressure, then the break, then more pressure, then the truth. That is how you get the truth.’8 Pain is truth, Colonel Joll’s interlocutor bears away from his conversation with the torturer; all else is subject to doubt. In her bewilderment and fear from being at the receiving end of such relentless interrogation at John Vorster Square, Emma Mashinini is able in her autobiography to describe the mind of the inquisitor: ‘Always they wanted the truth, when I had no more truth to tell. I don’t think they ever really understood that in fact there was nothing to give away. But they always tried to find it, this nothing’ (p. 75). Molefe Pheto also describes how he had reached breaking point and stated the simple truth about himself to his interrogators during his detention in 1975. Finally, he says, the confession they had all been
awaiting came suddenly, as he could no longer endure. Enough was enough:

'It is the truth now. No more. And the truth is that I do not know what has happened to the missing pages of my passport! I don't know any of the Coloured people except Clarence-Hamilton, and I am not a Communist. That is all!'

I felt very tired after that. The silence in the room was stunning. Only my breathing and whimpering could be heard.

His disbelief was unimaginable! I must have been the devil himself. He sucked in a deep breath. 'Is that the truth?' [sic]

'It is the truth.'

The truth insisted upon in each of these interrogations emerges as the unequivocal ignorance of the victim, as an irreducibly simple statement of fact, or as the idée fixe, the fiction into which the mind of the interrogator is obsessively locked and for which he seeks verification. Interrogators, says the Romanian philosopher Constantin Noica in 'Pity for the Powerful', can never learn anything: 'They are here for the sole purpose of attaining a pre-established result, which is to make other people see eye to eye with themselves.' The 'truth' of the interrogator provides the detainee with no relief from the burden of supposed guilty knowledge nor respite from the process of interrogation itself. 'Truth' surrendered through systematic torture is meaningless. Ultimately, the only incontrovertible truth that each interrogation yields is the one contained in Colonel Joll's banal and terrible equation, 'pain is truth'.

The experience of detention, whether accompanied by actual physical torture or not, is the experience of pain. Detention, Ngugi argues in his prison diary - that is, the fact of being wrongfully held in captivity for an indefinite period, the termination of which is entirely dependent upon somebody else's political fears - is in itself torture. 'These people have fine ways of torturing you,' Mashinini corroborates, 'They let you torture yourself' (p. 65). The actual physical pain that a tortured person undergoes, Timerman asserts in Prisoner Without a Name, Cell Without a Number, is impossible to transmit: 'it is a pain without points of reference, revelatory symbols, or clues to serve as indicators.' The solitary universe of the tortured has to be inhabited alone. It is best, he offers, 'to allow yourself to be led meekly toward pain and through pain, rather than to struggle resolutely as if you were a normal human being' (p. 35). In his Jail Diary Sachs explains his need to understand that the pain of detention is neither an attitude nor a state of mind, but a reality, not ennobling and not useful, apropo of nothing but itself and simply destructive. In Bandiet Lewin first gives an account of his own interrogation during which he reached a stage of detachment from his own violated body and the sound of his own screaming voice, and later describes the same terrible detachment from the effects of psychological torture inflicted by the arbitrary pettiness of prison warders. 'What kind of nightmare is this?' is the title given by Pheto to
the two sections of his memoir dealing with the physical assaults on him during interrogation by the Security Police as he is thrust over the threshold of pain so that it alone fills his awareness.

The literal truthfulness of the accounts of torture and the actual degree of pain experienced behind these South African prison memoirs is less important than an understanding of the full implications of the relationship between interrogator and detainee that gives these works their real narrative interest. If, as Ngugi insists, detention without trial should not only be interpreted as a punitive act of physical and mental torture of certain individuals (and, Elaine Scarry reminds the very word 'pain' has its etymological home in poena or 'punishment'), but also as a calculated act of psychological terror, 'a terrorist programme for the psychological siege of a whole nation', the psychology of the detainee in relation to his interrogator is of the utmost significance.

A recurrent motif in the prison book is the need for the prisoner, in order to survive in such a system, to cultivate a particular frame of mind. Lewin refers to it as the ability on the one hand to accommodate the system so as not to be ground down by it, yet on the other hand constantly to fight it so as to retain one's self-respect. Soyinka refers to a similar dual condition of the mind: 'the duality of its numbed despair and the weird instinctive cunning'. But a closer examination of all these prison books reveals a more far-reaching ambivalence in the detained person resulting from the relationship with his captor. Different personalities have different styles of coping with stress that is outside the range of normal human experience, but, as the young revolutionaries in Driver's novel Elegy for a Revolutionary all learn, in the end almost anybody can be broken: 'Some are broken by violence, some are strengthened by it; but all are destroyed by being alone.' There are no heroes and no traitors in the interrogation room. The so-called truth obtained under duress is the result of the lines of demarcation between fiction and reality being blurred deliberately or unwittingly in the mind of the detainee since the end of the interrogation process is simply to produce compliance in him.

The value of the prison book as literature is to be found in Soyinka's testimony in The Man Died: 'I testify to the strange, sinister byways of the mind in solitary confinement, to the strange monsters it begets. It is certain that all captors and gaolers know it; that they create such conditions specially for those whose minds they fear.' The psychological matrix of the interrogator-detainee relationship and consequently of the extensive body of writing it has produced, is what West calls the D D D - for Debility, Dependency and Dread - syndrome: the complex of forces that seem to make people compliant to their captors and likely to provide what they want in the way of testimony or confessions. It is the syndrome that Breytenbach discusses in the 'Note on the Relationship Between Detainee and Interrogator' and in the 'Note About Torture in South African Cells and Interrogation Rooms' at the end of his True Confessions: 'The detainee
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J.U. Jacobs

and the interrogator both know that there is, obscurely, a measure of ritual involved in their relationship, a ritual as old as the history of human intercourse.¹⁸

*Debility* is the term West uses to describe the consequences of all the factors that grind a prisoner down physically – fatigue resulting from painful physical exercises or alternatively from enforced inactivity, physical injuries or sleep deprivation – and produce a general state of deterioration that can cause mental changes, misperceptions of reality and distortions of recall. It is this debility induced by physical assaults, solitary confinement and the degradations of prison life that Pheto records in *And Night Fell* as having contributed to his decline and disorientation to the point that he failed to recognize his own daughter. In his own words, when he realized the toll interrogation had taken on him, ‘As we Africans say, “I wept like a woman”’.¹⁹ A comparable instance from Emma Mashinini’s autobiography is her account of the occasion when she was so traumatized by the experience of detention that she simply could not remember her youngest daughter’s name: ‘I’d go without eating, because this pain of not being able to remember the name of my daughter was the greatest I’ve ever had’ (p. 86).

The second factor is the one West identifies as *dependency*, the dependency of the captive on his captor because the captor has the power to destroy him – to kill him or let him die, and so all degrees of care between that and being treated like a member of the family depend upon the motives of the captor’ (p. 72). This dependency tends to grow during captivity, West says, especially if the captive is held in isolation since he has to depend on his captor for immediate social intercourse and for life itself. And since all power rests with the captor, this leads to startling behavioral aberrations such as identification with the aggressor. In order to survive, the detainee needs to understand his captor, to adapt himself to his personality and to explore those few precious areas of intimacy in what is otherwise a wall of hostility. He comes to understand the idiom of his captor and even to adopt his language. Eventually, devastatingly, he finds himself having to come to terms with the almost inconceivable ordinariness of his captor, the fact that the figure of power who is keeping him in limbo simultaneously inhabits an everyday world of kinship and fellowship – belongs, in fact, to a breed of men who, in the words of Coetzee’s magistrate in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, can ‘pass without disquiet between the unclean and the clean’. ‘Do yourself a selfish favour,’ Breytenbach advises, ‘if you want to remain whole, recognize the humanity of your enemy’.²⁰ A few of these must suffice to represent the brotherhood of interrogators in South African writing: Brigadier van den Bergh, head of the Security Police as seen by Hugh Lewin: tall and elegant, looking like a smooth English businessman, polite and quiet; the Security Police officer Heystek whose office in which Molefe Pheto was assaulted was decorated with a Van Gogh print and photographs of his family; the
Robben Island warder Oom Dellie, whom Dlamini describes as both brutal and sentimental, later becoming a sectarian lay preacher and finally a suicide; the head of the Kroonstad prison, Brigadier Venter, whom Makhoere presents as ‘hard to describe,’ warm and approachable, diplomatic – and cunning; and lastly, the infamous man known as ‘The Controller’, mentioned by Mashinini in her autobiography as the one she most hated, but described here by Bruce Loudun in The Sunday Times of 10 October 1982 during the inquest into the death in detention of Dr Neil Aggett:

He’s young, with boyish good looks. He’s smartly dressed in a black suit and what look like Gucci shoes. He peers through fashionable teardrop glasses.

... The ‘Controller’ is Lieutenant Steven Peter Whitehead, a member of the Security Branch of the SAP and the officer in charge of the late Dr Neil Aggett from just before Christmas last year until February 5 when the doctor turned trade unionist was found dead in his cell at John Vorster Square. (p. 17)

The third factor in the D D D syndrome is dread, which West defines as ‘a type of continuing and pervasive fear that is made up of all the small fears a captive is entitled to have; a fear that the captivity will continue indefinitely, fear of what the captors might do, fear for the safety of one’s loved ones’ (p. 72). It is the unknown, he continues, that is most frightening, especially where one’s freedom is concerned. Indefinite confinement is a fearsome thing.

Elements of the D D D syndrome, to be found in varying degrees in most South African accounts of detention and prison books, are also subsumed into the psychiatric classification of the post-traumatic stress disorder, the clinical features of which are also amply documented in these works. To illustrate, the condition that Caesarina Makhoere explicitly states as her increasing paranoia and hallucination during her periods of punitive isolation in prison, and exemplifies in her apparent indifference to receiving the news of her father’s death, has as its equivalent Emma Mashinini’s retrospective diagnosis of her own state of mind:

I did not know anything about the psychological effects of trauma. These are things I’ve only learnt about since coming out of hospital. I thought instead that I was going mad. Really going mad. And I was fighting very much against it because now I could read in the newspapers that people were going into psychiatric hospitals and I didn’t understand that you could go mad from being arrested. I just thought I was sick. (p. 86)

It was, however, Mashinini’s treatment after her release in the Danish Rehabilitation Centre for Torture Victims that first motivated her whole autobiographical enterprise. In direct contrast to her initial obedience to the police instruction not to discuss her detention with anybody, in this second place of confinement she was encouraged to tell what had
happened to her during the whole period of her imprisonment, 'to dig and dig and speak about everything' (p. 92). Therapeutic interrogation was not without its problems at first. The Danish doctor was initially perceived as yet another in a line of white women in positions of detentive authority, yet by eventually coming to terms with her feelings of fear and shame, Mashinini learned the value of self-interrogation as healing, and when she later approaches Dr Liz Floyd, friend of Neil Aggett, for assistance, narrative is consciously perceived as therapy: 'when I went and told her about all my problems it was like a psychological release. I started emptying and talking, and it was a great relief. This was not a doctor and patient discussing. It was two friends who'd come from prison, and prison is not something you can leave behind' (p. 105).

The stripping of the prisoner, both literally and mentally by a series of interrogators provides the metaphor for the compulsive baring of self that is autobiography, conscious self-disclosure through narration. The former victim of a relationship in which he or she was forced into compliance - to see eye-to-eye with an oppressor - now engages intersubjectively with a sympathetic hearer in a relationship of I-to-I. The certainty of having experienced pain, of having been reduced to a state which, as Elaine Scarry argues in *The Body in Pain*, language itself has been destroyed to the pre-language of cries and groans, is recorded in a work that also documents 'the passage of pain [back] into speech' (p. 9). Physical pain, Scarry says, is destructive of language:

Torture inflicts bodily pain that is itself language-destroying, but torture also mimes (objectifies in the external environment) this language-destroying capacity in its interrogation, the purpose of which is not to elicit needed information but visibly to deconstruct the prisoner's voice.... The prolonged interrogation ... graphically objectifies the step-by-step backward movement along the path by which language comes into being and which is here being reversed or uncreated or deconstructed. (p. 20)

In this unmaking of one's world in which the self is turned inside out and one's most secret and inward parts revealed, Scarry continues, all disintegrates: 'World, self, and voice are lost, or nearly lost, through the intense pain of torture and not through the confession as is wrongly suggested by its connotations of betrayal. The prisoner's confession merely objectifies the fact of their being almost lost, makes their invisible absence, or nearly absence, visible to the torturers' (p. 35). The confession of the prisoner Scarry sees as a halfway point in the disintegration of language, 'an audible objectification of the proximity of silence - the torturer and the regime have doubled their voice since the prisoner is now speaking their words' (p. 36). This halfway point, it seems to me, is extremely suggestive for the way in which the body in pain is transformed into voice in the prison memoir. The restoration of voice can occur through the victim's confessional echoing of the voice of the interrogator, through his being
compelled to return to his interrogator the desired text of himself and through his involuntarily assimilating by being tortured the methods of interrogation and employing them himself as strategies of self-interrogation in the memoir.

In their study *Detention and Torture in South Africa* Foster, Davis and Sandler outline the various distorted communications that are used as the stock-in-trade of interrogation: verbal abuse; false accusations; contradictory information such as when detainees are given information only to have it denied later; sham total information in which the prisoner is weakened by the impression that all is known to the interrogator in any case; counter-effect, or the good-guy, bad-guy or Mutt-and-Jeff method of locating the victim between alleged brutes and friends in the interrogation situation; double-bind techniques to trap the unwary victim; the standard verbal and non-verbal reinforcement ploys of ordinary conversation; hypnotic techniques and the common coercive device of lack of information. Their analysis of the frequency of these methods of interrogation is corroborated by the exposure in the newspaper *New Nation* last year (4 (25) June 30-July 6, 1989) of a highly confidential manual, allegedly used by the SA Defence Force during interrogation, and which in its 119 pages details an identical range of psychological ploys interrogators can use to exploit the weaknesses of individuals and force them to give information to their interrogators.

In conclusion: the prison memoir is best approached within the general category of autobiography, and more specifically as confessional narrative. It shares with autobiography that combination of a process of self-discovery with the art of self-invention. Autobiographical truth, Eakin maintains, is 'not a fixed truth but an evolving content in an intricate process of self-discovery and self-creation', ceaseless identity formation based on the 'intimate and necessary linkage between the acquisition of language and the emergence of self-awareness'. In its very broadest sense, a confessional narrative, according to Dennis A Foster, 'involves a narrator disclosing a secret knowledge to another, as a speaker to a listener, writer to reader, confessor to confessor'. Confession is an attempt to present the self as a knowable object, he argues, 'through a narrative that 're-structures' (Lacan 48) the self as history and conclusions'. In each of these South African prison memoirs the first-person narrator recounts the deconstruction of his own world and language by a whole range of physical and psychological stressors, up to the point where the compulsions to confess provide the very means of restructuring the self, and the interrogator's devices for destroying the language of the victim become the victim's strategies for self-creation. On the most obvious level memoirists like Makhoere and Dlamini extend their understanding of the debility, dread and dependence syndrome to embrace not only the relationship between all overseers and their political prisoners in South African jails, but also the very relationship between an oppressive regime
and the oppressed. On a more sophisticated level, however, Makhoere describes her sustained campaign of resistance in the various prisons in which she was held – her refusal to wear prison clothes, to do prison work, to accept food discrimination, to attend church services in prison, or to be interviewed by the prison psychiatrist – as part of a larger political agenda specifically formulated in terms of the prison experience. Detention and the structures of interrogation have stripped her of a sense of self; those very structures of undoing are employed to re-create and define a resistant self: When visited by the different prison officials asking for complaints, she returns to them the stubbornly distorted communication of the interrogator: 'we took a resolution that we were not going to speak to them: they knew our position. They would come and we would ignore them. We called it 'dis', for 'disregard' – you 'dis', you give them 'dis'. That one weapon completely frustrated them; they became flustered. They did not know how to handle that.'\(^25\) And on a level of still greater narrative self-awareness, Moses Dlamini confronts the reality of post-traumatic stress disorder after his incarceration on Robben Island ('I could imagine leaving prison like a vegetable, unable to speak coherently ' (p. 33)), in a narrative in which the denial of the most ordinary standards of human decency evokes the dispossession of an entire people of their humanity. Prison gangs invite comparison with township gangs, the violent rapes, other physical assaults and killings on Robben Island merely symptomatic of the structural violence in society outside. The histories of other prisoners are recorded together with his own story, as texts are opened up within the framing text and reminiscences yield up further narratives in a structure of parallelism and reflexivity. Voice is restored to a being stripped on Robben Island to a state of virtually inexpressible pain in a narrative in which hypnotic intensity alternates with descriptive assault, information is sometimes withheld and sometimes fully given, and reinforcement ploys are constantly used in an elaborate – and representative – act of self-interrogation.

NOTES

1. Indres Naidoo (as told to Albie Sachs), Island in Chains: Ten Years as a Political Prisoner in South Africa's Most Notorious Penitentiary (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983).


17. Dr Louis J. West, ‘Effects of Isolation on the Evidence of Detainees’, in A.N. Bell and R.D. Mackie, eds., op. cit., pp. 69-80. All further references are to this edition and are included in the text.


24. Ibid., p. 10.

Emergency Series, I
Emergency Series, II
Emergency Series, III
The Boy with an Extraordinary Mind

It was six o'clock on Friday – a cool summer Friday morning. A tall and thin young man entered the kitchen in which he had had breakfast for twenty-one years. It was familiar. The room was small, the size of a store-room. A paraffin stove and a twenty litre gallon of water were the only outstanding features.

Benjamin Thobela was proud of this slum. For the twenty-one most momentous years of South Africa’s modern history he hadn’t left this slum. He lived with his old pensioned grandfather. His friends called Benjamin ‘Extra’ – the boy with an extraordinary mind.

But today Benjamin was sad. The security forces said Benjamin was a threat to the community. They say I am starting politics, he thought. But how could a person like him who couldn’t even do simple arithmetic be an expert in politics when politics were much more difficult than physics? What were politics all about? Weren’t his neighbours all blacks?

The wrinkled old man studied his grandson for a moment. He was deeply concerned about Benjamin’s silence since yesterday when he returned home from work. The boy had spoken little, eaten little and had slept little.

‘Did you have a bad day yesterday, son?’

The old man had lived eighteen years together with Benjamin. He knew when the boy was upset or excited. And today he was depressed. Alone in spirit, the strange boy whom nobody understood paced inside the hut. Finally he sat down, with his grandfather looking down at him. Through the open door blew an early morning breeze.

‘Nothing important, grandfather, just a ... a ... mood.’

The old man smiled. He was certain that behind that face was a tormented soul. ‘We all experience that, don’t we?’ the old man said at last.

But why lie? The truth now is much better than a lie found out later, Benjamin thought. But could he tell his grandfather what he thought of Mr Viljoen, the senior white clerk? Could he? He knew already what his grandfather would say. And he hated it.

Then, suddenly, he lost his appetite. He looked at the black tea and the four plain slices of bread with resentment. He stood by the window and fixed his gaze at the bus stop. There were already a few people scattered around. If he didn’t hurry he would be late.
It was a beautiful and promising day. Immediately his mood fell in love with the sunshine of the day. The old man looked curiously at his grandson now and then.

'Say, grandfather, what does it mean when your senior gives you a half-eaten hamburger?'

The old man laughed and said, 'Why! he likes you, Binji. Did he do that to you?'

'Yes,' he replied nonchalantly.

'Ouch' you should be grateful, child. Is that what's been bothering you lately?'

'My senior sent me to buy him a packet of chips and a hamburger,' Benjamin said spontaneously. 'When he'd eaten what he wanted he gave me the half-eaten hamburger.'

To the old man's amazement the boy was angry. Was he angry because his senior had sent him to the shop, he thought. It couldn't be. The old man couldn't sense the gist of the matter. But in a way he felt elated now that his grandson had been given a hamburger by his senior.

'You should be proud of yourself, son,' the old man beamed with joy. 'In fact we should celebrate when you come back from work.'

'A celebration! What for?'

'Look here, son, the old man said his face glowing with joy. 'You're a lucky boy, Benjamin. If you follow my advice you'll achieve everything you ever wanted in life sooner ...'

'What are you talking about, grandfather?' the boy asked.

'When your senior gives you something to eat you should be grateful. It shows that he appreciates you. Definitely you'll be promoted soon.' The old man sat down slowly and folded his legs.

'But, grandfather, couldn't he ...'

'Just a moment, son,' the old man interrupted. 'Don't get too excited.'

Benjamin shook his head. Who wanted to be promoted? That was the last thing he would ever hope for. Take communication for instance. Before his senior would recommend him for promotion he would first have to welcome and accept Benjamin's ideas that would make his junior's job easier and more efficient.

'What was I saying?' the old man said when he had relaxed.

'You said I was being promoted,' the boy said airily.

'Yes, and what were you saying, son?'

'Couldn't Mr Viljoen have done it another way?'

'How, son? Now that you are a man you must behave like one. A man never beats around the bush but aims straight at the buck.'

That was like grandfather, Benjamin thought. The old man could get quite heated about a subject. 'What I mean is if Mr Viljoen really appreciates me we could have shared the hamburger together.'

'Binji,' the old man shouted. He was quietly hurt, terribly, as only a grandfather can be hurt who has tried hard and done well and been
refused, or again as only a grandfather rejected by his grandchild can be hurt. ‘You’re a clerk and not a gourmet. You could have refused the hamburger or put it in a dustbin. Against that there are no laws. Remember you were lucky to be employed. Do your work as instructed and nothing else.’

The morning wore on, people began to fill the streets. Buses moved, dogs barked and people began shouting, all rushing to their respective jobs. Benjamin cursed the fact that he didn’t have a car as he ran down the road to the bus stop. Sometimes he wondered if he would ever own one. Anyhow he was still young.

Everybody could see a sense of eagerness in him as he mounted the bus. He felt relieved now that he had talked to his grandfather. He blamed himself for not having had the guts of telling ‘baas Viljoen’ yesterday.

Benjamin followed his daily routine in the office. The sun was gathering heat every second. He loosened his tie and sat behind the desk and smiled thinly as ‘baas Viljoen’ swaggered by. He felt he could afford a smile. ‘That sonofabitch, I’m gonna teach him a lesson today.’

Later that day Benjamin picked up a pile of letters for signature and walked to an air-conditioned office. In the smoke hazy room sat four whites. The oldest of them was Gert Viljoen. He was sitting on the desk smoking like a chimney. He had a militaristic moustache and wore a white shirt. They gossiped about the latest political trends.

Benjamin had often heard them gossiping about politics and undermining their black colleagues. This time they didn’t see him at the door. ‘Heard the news lately?’ asked the youngest of them.

‘A darkie smashed his boss’s jaws this morning.’

Mr Viljoen was both shocked and angry. ‘What was that again? I wish he did that to me or my old man. I just wish he did that to me.’ One guy in a brown Italian suit stood up and said, ‘I would die to lay my hands on that Thobela guy.’

‘That bastard also is moody and cheeky, just wait until I lay my hands on him,’ Mr Viljoen said furiously.

They chattered on about this and that. Most of their conversation flowed to the black women. They all fancied them. And they all had ‘black affairs’ — as they called it.

‘You make me think of our maid at home. She’s got such a provocative derriere and firm boobs like Samantha Fox’s,’ said the youngest of them all.

Benjamin entered and they all looked up in embarrassment. There was an instant deadly silence. ‘Afternoon, meneer,’ he said to Mr Viljoen, presenting a pile of letters to him. Mr Viljoen shouted at the boy nervously. ‘How many times do I have to tell you, Binji? Now I’m saying it for the last time.’ He pointed a trembling finger at Benjamin and said: ‘I am not a meneer, ek is die BAAS!’

‘I’m terribly sorry, mene’ ... baas.’

‘Don’t play games with your senior, Binji,’ the guy in an Italian suit said.
'Thanks, I would be grateful if you call me Mr Thobela.' They looked at each other while Mr Viljoen studied the papers.

'Tell the typist to correct this letter and make sure you bring it back now.'

Benjamin studied the letter and glanced at his watch. It was fifteen minutes to one. Carefully he placed the paper on the desk before Mr Viljoen. 'I'll come and fetch it after lunch. Right now I'm off to eat.' With those words he turned to go.

Instinctively Mr Viljoen looked at his watch. 'But it's not time yet.'

'Maybe. But I'm hungry already.' He stood and watched his senior's face for a moment, then strolled out of the office and down the stairs before anyone could utter a word.

I won't be eating in the park today, he thought. Instead he would go back to his office.

Benjamin opened his office door and went to sit on the chair. It was when he had eaten what he wanted that he put his legs on the desk and leaned back on the chair. He lit a cigarette and exhaled a long curly smoke.

'Baas Gert! Baas Gert!' Everyone knew without a shadow of doubt whose voice it was. Even where it came from. But that was unusual. And everybody was already in Benjamin's office when Mr Viljoen entered, sweating. On the desk was a half-eaten loaf of brown bread, and few remains of chips.

'You can have the bread and the chips, baas,' Benjamin said after a deep drag from his cigarette.

The manager listened with bewilderment at the drama. To his right stood Benjamin, smiling at him.

'I thought of you as a fine boy with an impressive record in the office, Mr Thobela. But tell me, why on earth did you do all this?'

'Baas Viljoen gave me a hamburger yesterday, sir. I regarded that as a sign of brotherhood and took it for granted that he liked me. And, since one good turn deserves another, I felt obliged to do exactly the same today.'

Mr Viljoen and the manager exchanged glances.

'Now Mr Thobela, go back to your office. I'll call you back later.'

Abruptly Mr Viljoen stood up and put his hands in his pockets. 'If he's not fired, I resign!'

The manager called out. 'Benjamin!'

'Sir!'

'You're fired!'

Mr Viljoen thought it was the end for Benjamin. But for Benjamin it was just the beginning.
I want to use a group of prison narratives by South African women to contest some of the implications of the current terms ‘post-colonial’, ‘post-apartheid’ and ‘post-feminist’. The ‘post’ prefix in all cases seems to suggest a movement beyond the struggles of the past, to describe an already existing or desired state beyond the dialectic of power struggles figured in the earlier terms ‘colonialism’, ‘apartheid’ and ‘feminism’, which connoted sites of struggle organised around nationality, race, and gender. The assumption seems to be that those struggles have become dated and unnecessary, as we now live in an era in which a destructive cultural encounter is changing to an acceptance of difference on equal terms. Both literary theorists and cultural historians are beginning to recognize cross-culturality as the potential termination point of an apparently endless human history of conquest and annihilation justified by the myth of group ‘purity’ and as the basis on which the post-colonial world can be creatively stabilized.¹

It is argued in this view that comparative methodology and the ‘hybridized and syncretic view of the modern world which this implies’² is the gateway to a new dispensation both in socio-political forms and critical methodology. This critical line often privileges texts which are themselves hybridized, syncretic, deconstructive and self-referential, such as those of Wilson Harris and J.M. Coetzee. Only texts which self-consciously deconstruct European ‘monoliths’, which erode their own biases, are seen as offering liberation into a world ‘in which one’s own identity may be created or recuperated ... as a process, a state of continual becoming in which both author/ity and domination of any kind is impossible to sustain’.³ These sets of analogies between political structures, literature and criticism are attractive but, I think, misleading in terms of the ways in which power structures and the shaping of identity in response to those power structures continue to operate in the ‘real’ world. Prison writing offers us a model of a literature responding strongly, with all the resources of one particular, limited human identity, thrown back upon itself, to a particularly punitive expression of a given state’s power to curb dissent (to limit
discussion to political prisoners for the moment). Imprisonment can become a very flexible cosmic metaphor, but it is also a term for a physical incarceration of the body which can be conjugated with some variety through different societies, history and geography. Though it punishes individuals, it must be seen, as Kenyan writer Ngugi wa Thiong'o argues, in the context of ‘the historical struggles of [a] people against economic, political and cultural slavery’. Ngugi’s prison diary issues from post-colonial Kenya, thus indicating one of the first disjunctions in the terminology which equates ‘post-coloniality’ with ‘freedom’. He writes:

A year as an inmate of Kamiti [prison] has taught me what should have been obvious: that the prison system is a repressive weapon in the hands of a ruling minority determined to ensure maximum security for its class dictatorship over the rest of the population and it is not a monopoly exclusive to South Africa and England.

In the context of colonialism, imprisonment should also be seen as simply another inflection of the kind of control previously expressed in slavery and indentured labour. As Lucy A. Delaney’s nineteenth century slave narrative puts it, when she hears the key turn in the prison door:

My only crime was seeking for that freedom which was my birthright! I heard Mr Mitchell tell his wife that he did not believe in slavery, yet, through his instrumentality, I was shut away from the sunlight, because he was determined to prove me a slave, and thus keep me in bondage. Consistency, thou art a jewel!

The same point is made a century later by Caesarina Kona Makhoere, author of No Child’s Play: In Prison Under Apartheid, when she was imprisoned in South Africa after the school and township resistance of 1976 to the imposition of Afrikaans as language of instruction. She describes how black women prisoners are forced to wear the ‘doek’ (headscarf) and apron, which symbolize their domestic servitude outside the prison. ‘We do not live in the daydreams of the apartheid gods’ she writes. Ngugi, too, places imprisonment in the context of resistance during both the colonial and post-colonial periods: ‘the first prerequisite for this resistance was a rejection of the slave consciousness contained in the colonial culture of imperialism’.

Imprisonment, then, tries to confirm the pattern of slavery by breaking those who dissent from it but, in doing so, it calls into being a further excited and resistant avowal of individual identity which is the best bulwark against domination and which, through an enforced isolation from the rest of humanity, forges in suffering new and stronger forms of solidarity with that community. Those who survive are stronger for knowing what ultimate abuses of power can inflict: prison, as Ruth First notes when she sees the names of former political prisoners scratched on the exercise yard door, is a place of reunion and an archive.
which the forces of liberation have gathered. This roll of honour, chequered by human frailties, again suggests the intransigence of human identity: the first act a prisoner performs is to write his name on the cell wall.\textsuperscript{12} The prison memoir, especially, is rooted in an individual resistant identity which feels itself to be in a special relationship with a historical collectivity and thus reminds us that literature is, as Barbara Harlow points out, a ‘political and politicized activity’\textsuperscript{13} and that the history of colonial struggle is made up of acts of resistance which include writing about that struggle, whether or not the person who entered the prison was already a writer and was being punished for that form of permanent disidence, permanent individuality. Prison seems to make even the reluctant writer, the activist, into a writer: the difficulty of the task, the silence, call forth the activity. If toilet paper is the only paper, and cell walls the only blank surface, people inscribe on them the communications which cannot yet reach outward, to others.

To turn to the more complex relationship of the terms ‘post-apartheid’ and ‘post-feminist’, I want to consider briefly the role played by gender within South African prison narratives, and to examine some of the differences revealed in the negotiations between family and state which these narratives enact.

In South Africa, where the state has been so evidently and abusively built on racial classification and discrimination, the distinction between political and common-law crime becomes blurred, as Makhoere points out (‘all prisoners, black and white, are political prisoners’).\textsuperscript{14} In a non-democratic regime, all crimes become in themselves accusations: Rose Moss’s novel, \textit{The Schoolmaster}, based on the Johannesburg station-bombing by John Harris, makes this case well in the courtroom scene, which often serves to articulate the moral basis of political ‘crime’ in prison literature: ‘The law itself is criminal.’\textsuperscript{15} Makhoere feels solidarity in prison with domestic servants who have killed their white madams; Ellen Kuzwayo, a writer and social worker, also briefly detained, mentions how her attitudes toward juvenile crime have changed over the years of resistance.\textsuperscript{16} The release of Mandela and other political prisoners, great event though it is, does not in itself usher in a post-apartheid regime, and even a post-apartheid regime may have prisons like Kenya’s Kamiti prison.

In women’s prison narratives the issue of ‘the law’ becomes even more problematic. Women are natural outlaws, as Christina Stead tells us; they have to find themselves in complex negotiations around patriarchal laws in family and state. If the law is identified with the father, and the father is the one who is empowered both in family and state, how is the woman writer to attain to independence, power, and authorship? Women writers make complex affiliations with paternal roles and identities in their fiction, and the writing itself may enact an emancipatory or conservative trajectory (Olive Schreiner, S.G. Millin and Pauline Smith are all interesting
here). But though prison is a place where a deep solidarity is forged between black and white (Hugh Lewin argues that only through prison experience can whites feel exactly what it is like to be black) prison narratives also reveal the effects of apartheid structures and mythology. The double load of black women is most graphically revealed in Makhoere’s prison memoir, as her father was a policeman and actually led the police to her hiding-place. Family and state both become authoritarian betrayers and Makhoere’s narrative reflects this in its scenes of verbal and physical violence, and in the long act of resistance that her prison career was at every level of prison life. She had also been a single teenage parent before her sentence and imprisonment. As a result the collectivity she invokes is that of militant sisterhood completely outside the system and the country: armed resistance. She admires militarized women both for their abandonment of feminine stereotypes and their military power to destroy their enemies. Inside the prison she seeks to politicize and bind groups in resistance, and celebrates every minor victory. Bessie Head’s prison story, ‘The Collector of Treasures’, set in independent Botswana, shows a similar movement from anger at unbearable degrees of subjection to male domination through an act of violence (Dikeledi murders her husband by castration) to the prison where she finds the ‘treasure’ of other women’s affection. Dikeledi’s crime is a common-law offence which Head links with the politically inspired breakdown of male integrity and family life over the time spans of traditional tribal life, colonialism and migrant labour, and independence. She points out that in all three eras in Botswana, women have been regarded as an inferior form of life. Dikeledi, however, also has special traditional female skills: she can knit and thatch well. She is an image of the storyteller’s interweaving and an instance of the way those creative skills are distorted and rechannelled into violence by intolerable levels of humiliation. This is a post-colonial society where the burdens on women have intensified, not eased. Post-colonial does not necessarily mean post-feminist. It is a comment on this society that the only freedom for Dikeledi is found in prison.

South African novelist Miriam Tlali’s account of a ‘detour into detention’ is also very angry, outraged at every level by the violence done to her and others on the occasion of a group arrest just before Steve Biko’s funeral. The violation is experienced intensely and subjectively at all levels, as a black woman, as a mother, as an oppressed citizen. She draws on metaphors of motherhood as a key image when she sees a young girl being molested by a policeman:

My God! Whose daughter was it, I asked myself. It could have been my very own, I thought, all the nerves of my abdomen curling up into a painful knot. I could not bear the sight. The poor girl turned her eyes to me, and in them was a look no mother could mistake. It was a challenge, an appeal from a child, a female, to its mother.
Here the family and the oppressed black ‘nation’ are experienced as one: as the trade union slogan puts it: ‘an injury to one is an injury to all’. Even while recording the breakdown of family life, then, both Makhoere and Tlali draw on metaphors of family bonding as the deepest connections they know. Political violence summons up the need for care and protection, which family love is meant to guarantee even if it has not been actively experienced. There is no self-conscious fictional manipulation or criticism of the family itself, and no suggestion that certain power structures or abuses may be replicated within the family, even in the case of Makhoere, who sees her father as trapped within his collaborative role, which indeed he is.

The two ‘white’ prison narratives I wish to consider, those of Ruth First and Nadine Gordimer, are both by middle-class intellectuals who wish to record the experience of imprisonment in South Africa, though one is a memoir and the other a novel. Both writers reveal the difficulty of being the ‘half-colonized’, i.e. women who may have experienced forms of domination within a patriarchal culture but whose position of power over a black majority is guaranteed by that same culture. Ruth First was the only woman associate of the Rivonia group, and was detained in 1963 under the Ninety-day no-trial law. The police pointed out to her that she occupied a ‘special place’ because she was a woman:

We know all about that meeting at Rivonia. It was a meeting of picked people from all over the country. Mandela was there, and Sisulu. The pick of the bunch. You’re the only woman there ... and you try to pretend that you know nothing of what happened, that you can’t remember, that nothing happened worth knowing. We know all about you ... You can count your lucky stars that we still have respect for women in our country. You could have been charged in the Rivonia case. But we didn’t want a woman in that case. We still have some feeling for women.22

First’s most obvious solidarity is with a particular class, a Johannesburg Jewish intelligentsia committed to the Communist party, often lawyers with a strong sense of justice and its abuses in the country, the class, in fact whose inner predicaments Nadine Gordimer explores in her fiction (she may well have been drawing partly on her knowledge of the First/Slovo family in her novel Burger’s Daughter). First reveals her contempt for the Afrikaans prison wardresses on the grounds of their ignorance, their blind political affiliations, and their vulgarity (She calls them, after Snow White’s seven dwarves: ‘Shrill’, ‘Raucous’ and ‘Pained’). Makhoere’s resistance towards her wardresses, on the other hand, is often physical, though she also despises their stupidity, and her physical fights with them reflect their far greater readiness to use physical violence on her than they would on a white woman. First shows no solidarity with common-law prisoners, but writes of them with a mixture of amusement and social worker’s sympathy.23
First’s allegiance is to a political group and their programme, broadly the Freedom Charter and the multi-racial politics of the original ANC cell. This is revealed in her narrative structure: she constantly broadens the scope of her own prison memoir by recounting other prison lives, whether parallel to her own or not, in italicized sections within her narrative, the stories of Dennis Brutus, Dennis Goldberg, and Looksmart Ngudle. These italicized sections offer historical information, court proceedings, dramatic escapes, political events, interrogations and torture. They form extensions of her own experience, dramatize the noises she hears outside (the gunshot she hears at Brutus’s arrest, for instance), and recount information she only had access to after her release. These stories add colour and drama to the monotony of her ‘117 days’ and add the stories of other lives and selves unlike her own, black experience of torture, male parallels to female experience. They offer a sense of a larger commitment, of continuity and repetition. They reveal both her desire to be more inclusive and representative than she feels she is, and her skills as a journalist and writer. Her story becomes a complex interwoven narrative, creating solidarity by intellectual and artistic means, not as a visceral response drawing on vivid emotive metaphors (as Tlali does). She is consciously broadening the scope of a white middle-class woman’s experience by including other lives, other fates.

First reveals no special solidarity with women as such, and she deliberately keeps her children’s lives in the background; she makes a conscious decision not to think of them too much. Her narrative is like her own lifelong political commitment: it takes the same shape. She strives for detachment from her own experience and suffering, to see them in their historical perspective. She offers her own biographical data last, as if to suggest her own minor role, to show that she does not see herself as central or representative in the political struggle. These are the signs of her own intellectual courage, and they did not prevent her from receiving the same punishment, eventually, as other more representative political prisoners.

First, then, shared the fate of the oppressed people with whom she sympathized and identified, but her narrative shows that the act of writing in her case becomes a self-conscious bridge between herself and a dispossessed majority. She is not a feminist, but she reveals the courage of independent thought and action which have made her an inspiration to later women in the political struggle. The ‘special place’ the police told her she occupied is riddled with the ambiguities of special treatment: ironically, had they not given her the special treatment meted out to a woman, she might have been kept alive by the same incarceration as the rest of the Rivonia group, later delivered after many years in the belly of the whale. Her fate is almost a metaphor for the penalties incurred in that ‘special place’ reserved for women by the respect of men. Respect is no substitute for equality and justice.
Nadine Gordimer is not a declared feminist either, but her fiction keeps exploring the psychic and physical manoeuvring space open to a half-colonized white woman in South Africa. A short story, 'The Smell of Death and Flowers' suggests that a young white girl has to confront her own sexuality and perhaps break the patriarchal taboos of the white tribe before she can be liberated into the real world of political choices and political action.24 **Burger's Daughter,**25 as the title indicates, sets up complex metaphoric transferences between family and state, daughterhood and citizenship, prison and liberation. The daughter of the title, Rosa Burger, seeks to find herself in the untrammelled pleasures of European culture, climate and art. Seeking to flee both a politicized family and the penalties they have incurred (her parents have both been political prisoners; her father dies in prison) she turns to the sunny pleasures of the Riviera and the company of her father's former mistress, Katya, but a love affair with an older man and a quarrel with a young black 'brother' in exile send her home again, more experienced both in love and in grief and able to take on new commitments after these semi-incestuous experiences have freed her from the compulsions of the nuclear family. Rosa Burger arrives at a point where she takes her father's place in prison: the watermark of light on the prison wall repeats an earlier watermark she used to notice in her father's house.26 Some critics have read this ending as a non-feminist capitulation, but Rosa is imprisoned while working with young black children, a 'feminine' and nurturing occupation which leads her into her new place, a freely chosen 'prison' in which she accepts the meaning of daughterhood. The final space she occupies, where friends visit and joke about the family, is not compelled: her experiences have taught her that law, in the family, might not be dissociated from love and that recognition unlocks her ability to challenge unjust laws in the state. She is able to repeat her father's commitment without feeling forced to do so by her position as his daughter. Both daughterhood and citizenship become choices, not submissions to authority.

An earlier experience in the novel, the death of a hobo in a city park which Rosa witnesses without comprehending until she reads about it in the newspaper27 is a trigger for an understanding of mortality outside prisons, outside the apartheid system, for which there is no blame and no exoneration. Her family have taught her that everything would change once political change was effected, after the revolution. But here she confronts the 'mystery itself' of absolute limitation, and absolute freedom:

Nothing that had served to make us sure of what we were doing and why had anything to do with what was happening one lunchtime while I was in the square. I was left with that. It had been left out. Justice, equality, the brotherhood of man, human dignity - but it will still be there, I looked away everywhere from the bench and saw it still, when - at last - I had seen it once.28
Family life seems to supply us with metaphors for a humiliating dependency as well as a liberating acceptance of self: prison and prison literature seem to do the same. They remind us that boundaries exist and that individual identity, whether personal or national, is always fought for and maintained at a price. Individual rights, like the rights of peoples, need to be constantly re-asserted in a process of historical struggle. Independence, these writers seem to tell us, is found in the testing of limits. Our identities are corporeal, and we all speak from specific places and cultures which shape our responses, to life as well as literature. If we are to be emancipated, Gordimer's novel suggests, the microcosm of the family, which relies on the relationship between love and law, could provide a way into a more equitable model of the state. Shakespeare's Portia, in The Merchant of Venice, provides a similar insight into the paradoxical liberation of female identity; hemmed in by her father's prohibition in the ritual of the three caskets, she discovers that this paternal injunction has been constructed, like a magic gate, to let in the one suitor who is worthy of her and, for that reason, the one suitor she is capable of loving.

There is no post-feminism in the sense of moving beyond struggle, but the liberation the individual finds in the acceptance of personal responsibility, for which I've been using the model of liberated daughterhood, is the only guarantee we have that our post-colonial or post-apartheid worlds will be an improvement on the old world of dominance and slavery. Our surest path into a shared trans-national human condition lies in the defence of specific rights, and specific freedoms.

NOTES

2. Ibid., p. 37.
6. Ibid., p. 4.
10. Ngugi wa Thion'g'o, op. cit., p. 43.
13. Ibid., p. 28.
19. Ibid., pp. 91-92.
21. Ibid., p. 11.
22. Ruth First, op. cit., p. 120.
23. Ibid., p. 31.
26. Ibid., p. 361.
27. Ibid., pp. 74-76.
28. Ibid., p. 80.

Tyrone Appollis: 'Homeward Bound'. Pen and ink.
Gillian Cargill

SCENES FROM SOME SOUTH AFRICAN WEDDINGS

These photographs were part of a larger series exhibited at The Market Galleries in Johannesburg in 1990. This project deals with the changing and unchanging aspects of the nature of the wedding ritual as it is practiced in various South African communities.

One of the main functions of conventional wedding photography is to service the wedding ritual and affirm its centrality in conservative western society. In this series, however, the approach is to represent moments outside the formality of the institution; to emphasize the incidental pauses between accepted ceremonial highpoints, and in this manner, reveal, sometimes humourously, the continuous fabric of human interaction.

Generally, Gillian Cargill's concern is with social rituals and rites in South Africa that reflect life's continuity in the midst of violent political change.

Gillian Cargill writes:

The photographs in this series represent an attempt to convey what it is like attending some South African weddings.

Although prompted in part by a desire to understand modes of matrimony in different cultures, the pictures are neither a quest to illustrate nor statements about nuptial procedure in these communities. My concern is mainly with side-line action outside the formality of the ceremonial ritual, that reveals something of the absurdity, mundanity, resignation and wit that such occasions create.

I have worked on photographing weddings over a period of ten years. During this time I was continually daunted and repelled by both the overt violence and the undercurrents of aggression that continue to pervade all levels of South African society. Socially integrating rituals, like weddings, while providing only temporary capsules of light relief against the horror, seem to me, in some oblique way, affirmative of our will to compete against it.
A bride and groom, unable to afford an entourage, pose with bridesmaids borrowed from another wedding couple met in the park. August, 1990.
A Portuguese wedding.
Yasmin Shariff waiting for her husband at their nikah in the Pietermaritzburg City Hall. February, 1987.
Going down the aisle of a township Community Hall, Alexandra, Johannesburg, October, 1988.
Reverend D.J. Mbona leads a procession around his church after the engagement service of Michael Mkheze and Joyce Sosibo at Nkanda, Zululand, 1980.
John and Lulu Poulton with their two children in a Johannesburg park after their wedding on the 25th October, 1991.
Bride receiving instructions on how to look after her home and husband.
Soweto, 1986.
Deela Khan

...........

Fellow walker
You talked about the past we had to redeem:
sparks of memory that had to be caught and bottled
to stop them from going irretrievably –
She walked through the doorway of her historical present
as shrinks, occupational therapists, nurses with
needles of pain lined the avenue-table.
Oral and ward round burst their liquid borders.
She sat stunned on the fire-stool as
dragons clothed in the images of her friends
chipped at the stone of her sanity.
His majesty the Father burned bright
at the head of the altar.
His archangel presided over the rites with his trident.
She who rides the sea
paints the flowers
mends the animals and trees
had to be scanned had to be killed.
They tried
to strip her of every grain of worth
to arrow her darkness
to reveal the light at her core
to sink into her shawls of shadow
to unleash the primal howl from the
canyons of her being
    The glare was blinding
    the voices droned endlessly on
to deafen
    to mute
    to mutilate.
They crucified her to fertilize a
patch of weeds to decorate the
sinking halls of learning.
The walker who once deluded herself into
finding the lost road
now builds the highway
future generations will walk.
SO HARD TO HEAL IN A HARD AGE

What Gods preserve you Analyst
as you storm through
private lives.
Imbued with the clamour
of your day ... where
do you find the airy
words you say?

You’ve seen rains of ice-tears
crystallized on the sunken cheek
blast the psyche
and gnaw at the eye.
You walk with the young man
who cut his throat as
the orange glare lifted the
mists of his acquired patriotism
and screened the murders he’d fallen for.

Etched on your heart are the eyes
of droves of lonely people you
just cannot appease as you brave
the ravages of forced separations ...
of lives forever blown apart.

You’ve come to know that soothing words
can split facades and open graves ...
and burst healed scars ...
You bank on a distant Hope and
emit your healing rays in hope
they find the tortuous path
to the heart.

You’re forced to wrack your brain
in pursuit of eternal resourcefulness.
But do not despair ...
Stride on for
it’s so hard to heal
in a hard age.
The shebeen was full of raucous people having a great old time. But Satha noticed that his friend Muthu didn’t look too happy. The old man had come into the shebeen a few minutes ago and simply plopped down in a chair. He had taken his first drink in one gulp and was now staring at his empty glass like a zombie. That wasn’t like Muthu, ruminated Satha, not like Muthu at all. Satha’s bleary eyes focussed glassily on his friend and he asked him why he was looking so depressed.

‘That Trishen’s robbing me blind, man.’

‘He’s running your Shakas hardware shop for you, eh, Muthu?’

‘Ja, and the money he’s bringing in isn’t ‘nough to pay the bleddy rent!’

‘But why for you running that small shop when you’ve got a nice, big hardware store next to your house?’

‘It’s for the licence – I run my big business on that small business’ licence.’

Satha nodded sympathetically. ‘Ja, and I suppose it’s difficult for our people to get a licence for a business?’

‘Ja man; where a Coolie like me’s gonna get a licence from the Wur­(ropean man?’

‘Ja, that’s true... White people don’t like giving us a business licence; pity, man.’

‘Ja,’ commented Muthu, ‘Europeans don’t like competition from Indians.’

Satha contemplated Muthu’s morose face for a while. Then he said, ‘Why you don’t change your name? You know, to White people’s name?’

‘What! Can’t do dat!’

‘But can, man – look my cousin-brother, his name’s Jaybalan... White people call him Jess. He change his surname from Appalu to Appolos – that’s a Greek name. When he write letter now to White man, the White man think him foreign-White man. He now getting top-class foreign-White treatment! You know foreign-Whites getting best treatment in our coun-

try?’

‘But he can only do this when he’s writing to somebody?’

‘Ja, but man, he getting lot privileges with letters... because they thinking him one Vet-Oh, not a bloody Coolie!’

‘But that must have been long ago?’

‘No man, it’s happening now. Yay! You go, change name from Coopoo-
samy to something important sounding; now what I heard that Major Mungle calling you? What was it, let me see... Cooper, that’s it, COOPER!'
'Go 'way man, you mad!'

'How then you gonna get licence? That Trishen's getting fat. You wasting time, money on that Shakas shop. You can't be two places one time; you got to look after one shop, man.'

'Ja, but the White man will never let me get a White man's name. Besides I'm not Christian.'

'Look you Hindu, you always Hindu. This White name just to bluff the Vet Oh's. White name don't make you Christian. My cousin Jaybalan, he not Christian just because White people call him Jesse.'

'Ja, but I don't know; my family always had Indian name. What are my relatives gonna think?'

'Your relatives, they not clever like you. If they had half your brains they'd make money like you, and they too would have English names. What use our Indian name? Only get us into trouble.'

Muthu suddenly looked serious; and sober. 'Ja, but it's like spitting on our ancestors, our culture; our names are symbolic of everything that gives us a rich heritage, our identity...'

'Addah, man, what you talking? What's in a name? One name's as good as another. And you know for the White man we're nothing. We just non-whites; he know nutting 'bout our culture, 'bout us. We nothing for him. At least when we use his name we might get somewhere... you not cross when the White customers call you 'Michael' or 'Cooper?'

'No I'm not cross. But I donno, Satha; fifty years I been Muthusamy Coopoosamy; now suddenly you want me to become 'Michael Cooper'... I don't know whether I can adjust to it.'

'For more than twenty years the White people kept name 'Michael' for you. All you doing is making the thing legal, that's all.'

'Hell, I don't know...'

'You'll adjust, man, we Indians know lot 'bout 'dapting. We good at it; the White man, he always closing the front door; we always finding the back door, the side door...'

Muthu: 'Heck, Satha, I feel lousy 'bout this; these damn White people... they name us like they name their cats and dogs; now we add insult to injury by going one step further and making their 'pet-names' legal...'

Satha was not to be put off: 'Well, you might feel bad about it, but man, it serves a higher purpose: it's gonna help your upliftment.'

Muthu looked away from Satha. For a few moments he became oblivious to the noise around him. He stared into space and pondered what Satha had said; much as he did when he played chess; in a crazy way it made sense. It was not the first time he had been forced to eat humble pie in order to get ahead. And it was the kind of tactic that had helped people like him to survive. He reflected to himself, 'We make it by using the opportunity, seizing the initiative, not by sitting on our backsides and letting events overwhelm us! Sometimes it paid to sacrifice the Bishop and gain the Queen.' A gleam came into Muthu's eyes.
Satha noticed the change in Muthu’s face. ‘Look,’ he said, ‘I got one lawyer friend; he tell you.’

The lawyer confirmed Satha’s story. Muthu thought about the matter for a few more weeks but there was no hope of getting his hardware licence through a normal application. It was a big thing changing his name, yet he had got used to being called ‘Michael’ and ‘Cooper’; even his friends and most of the Africans and Indians were calling him by these names. His wife didn’t object and he had no children. Secretly she actually liked the White name and often called him ‘Michael’. It was becoming the vogue for Indians to have shortened English names like ‘Pat’ for Pathmanandan or ‘Tom’ for Thiag.

Muthu felt very afraid and nervous, but he consoled himself with the thought that not for nothing was he also known as ‘Bullet-Muthu’. He did his thinking and his work at considerable speed and the local people had affectionately given him the name. He had very little land – certainly not enough to farm and survive on. So he had set up a hardware store in a bundu when other people thought that he was mad to do it. But he had stocked what the Farmers wanted and his prices were keen; he had behaved with humility and the White farmers had not felt threatened; it was to their advantage to buy from him rather than go to the distant White town and buy hardware.

So Muthu made the long journey to the Department of Indian Affairs in Tegwhite to change his name. He was directed through a maze of offices (and was often given wrong directions by irritable clerks) till he finally arrived at the section that handled many things including name-changes. The waiting area was empty. The only person in the Front Office was an Indian clerk who was busy writing at his desk. The man noticed the sheepish-looking, badly dressed Indian come into the office but he continued writing. There were no seats in the reception area and there was just the one solitary desk behind the counter. A plastic name plate on the desk proclaimed, ‘Ahmed Mayet’. Muthu could see a closed door at the back of Ahmed’s open office. The fancy brass name plate had emblazoned on it, ‘SENIOR SUPERVISOR’ and below it in elegant capitals: ‘MR. BALLARD.’ Muthu stood respectfully for a minute thinking the important looking clerk had noticed him. After another minute muthu gave a discreet cough. Ahmed ignored the lone, dark man. Then a White man entered the office.

Ahmed put on a warm, welcoming, obsequious smile and said, as he stood up: ‘Good afternoon, Mr. Nuttall, Sir! Can I help you, Sir?’ ‘Hello, Ahmed! Yes, I’m just going to see Mr. Ballard.’ The White man was already entering Ahmed’s office through the swing-door. Ahmed’s smile widened and Mr. Nuttall urbanely breezed through into Mr. Ballard’s office after barely a knock and a calling out of his name.
Muthu said, 'Eh, excuse me, Sir.'

But Ahmed acted as if Muthu was not there. The old man didn’t know what to do. He needed a service from that clerk, and he couldn’t afford to get upset; so he waited meekly. Finally, after a further two minutes Ahmed stopped writing and deigned to cast an imperial glance at what looked to him like a country-bumkin.

'Ja?' he barked, his hand still holding his pen.

'Please, Sir,' said Muthu in a plaintive tone as if he was back at school, 'I want to change... to change my name,' Muthu was hunched forward in his shabby clothes clenching his hat in his hands. He looked thoroughly servile. Ahmed grinned to himself; this was going to be an amusing day after all!

'Ja, well, what is your name now?'

'Muthu, Sir; Muthusamy Coopoosamy.'

'And? What are you going to change your name to? Poo-poo or Coo­poo?' Ahmed grinned.

'No Sir.' Years of bureaucratic rudeness and insults had largely inured Muthu to any minor attacks launched by second-rate front office clerks. With great dignity, as if he was already a White man, Muthu said, 'I want to become... eh... I want to be called... I mean...'

'Yes man, out with it; what’s going to be your new name?'

'Michael; Sir. Michael Cooper!' Even Muthu couldn’t believe he had so much effrontery.

'What?!' said Ahmed, his eyes bulging. His pale face turned a shade of pink and he pushed his glasses back. This coal-black Coolie wanted a White man’s name; everybody knew that lots of Coolies were crazy but this...! Ahmed had some White blood in him and he felt he was more en­titled to take on a White man’s name than this, this... but he had stuck to his own name. Now here was a Coolie with the gall...'

He struggled to maintain his composure and said, 'Why do you want a White man’s name?'

'Oh no Sir, it’s not that, it’s not that at all; it’s just that I got a business and my European customers, they always call me ‘Mike’ or ‘Michael’. My name ‘Muthusamy’... well, it’s difficult for White people to say. Then, all the White people they calling me ‘Cooper’ instead of Coopoosamy. Me, I’m thinking, ‘Michael Cooper’ is a nice-sounding name... and it’s not wrong, because the clever White people... they’re already calling me like that. So I thought nice to make it legal on the pass-book.' Muthu had spoken earnestly and respectfully and Ahmed had listened attentively.

'Really? Well, I don’t know about this. Why aren’t you proud to be an Indian and have a nice Indian name? You can change your name if you want, but change it to an Indian name. Otherwise the White people, they might get suspicious.'

'Begging pardon, sir, but this way I make things easy for the White man... and this is the White man’s country...’
Ahmed shook his head... the tricks the Coolies got up to... they were too much. He had heard the Europeans say that you couldn’t keep them down no matter what you did. They were too cunning, that was the trouble, said the Europeans.

And he knew that the new laws allowed people to change their names to just about anything... that was bad... soon you’d have a whole lot of subservices changing their name to that of seditious swine like ‘Mandela’. This reform business was really getting out of hand. The non-whites didn’t seem to know their place anymore; and ‘elevated’ non-whites like himself who were so indispensable to the White Baas were coming increasingly under pressure.

Reluctantly he pushed the necessary forms across to Muthu and told him to advertise the name change in the daily newspaper three times in three weeks.

Muthu felt as if he was walking on air when he left the office. 1959 might be a lucky year after all.

Two months after the adverts appeared in the paper and after he had personally handed the application forms to Ahmed, Muthu had still not been given official notification of the name change. He went in to see Ahmed.

Ahmed found it difficult to ignore the bumbling old man completely and after only two minutes he spoke to him.

‘Yes?’

‘Please Sir, when will I be informed of my name change? It’s gone more than two months now. There haven’t been any objections to my name change, have there, Sir?’

‘No, there haven’t been any objections; but you must be patient, Coo-poo-sammy, these things take time; many important Government Departments must be notified of this thing you want to do. My supervisor, Mr. Ballard, is a very busy man. The government can’t be hurried you know. You must be very grateful that we allowed you to do all these things.’ Ahmed didn’t think it was right that a grand thing like a White man’s name should come easily to a Coolie.

But Muthu was getting a bit irritated now; (almost like a White man, he reflected to himself with mild surprise). ‘But Sir,’ he remonstrated, ‘I have filled in all the forms and I have advertised as you instructed at great personal expense and nothing’s happened.’

Ahmed looked at the Indian with astonishment. Was the fellow completely barmy? Did he think that a White man’s name made him even slightly into a White man? The old man was even speaking with a degree of confidence that was not there before and he stood a lot straighter. He was actually looking Ahmed in the eye. This was a Coolie who needed to be kept in his place! He had not passed the ‘Cooper’ file across to Mr. Ballard. Now he wondered idly whether he ever should?
‘You must go home and wait, Mr. Coo-poo-sammy’ he said sternly. ‘Patience; patience is a virtue that certain races will do well to imbibe,’ he added in the same tone of voice that he had heard the Europeans use when they said that sort of thing. The blank bureaucratic wall was impenetrable. Muthu left.

However, Muthu was finally summoned to appear before District Supervisor Ballard. Dressed impeccably (after all, he was going to see a White man this time) by Satha in a new three-piece suit and tie, old man Muthu presented himself at the Indian affairs office. Nowadays he brought a book along that he was studying, so that he could keep himself busy while Ahmed made him wait. The book was ‘LEARN TO SPEAK ENGLISH PROPERLY’. He arrived ten minutes early for his appointment but Ahmed only allowed him to see the European half an hour later.

Trying to look as innocuous as possible, Muthu entered the office and stood respectfully at attention till the White man decided to look at him. It was a very large, very untidy office full of files and books all thrown higgardly-piggedly all over the place. After about a minute the White man cast a scalding look at Muthu as if he was a ‘oribly filthy mess and curtly asked him from his sitting position: ‘Now what’s all this about you wanting to change your name to a...’ Ballard couldn’t bring himself to say it. He was a big, hairy fat man with a huge beer belly that made him look many months pregnant. His brown safari suit bulged in an unseemly manner over his abdomen. His hair was an unruly brown thatch. Ballard was not yet fifty and had lived the good life in what had been a model colony. But now things were changing... as was personified by this ebony, cringing little toad.

The awful expression on the European’s face was thoroughly intimidating. This man was a cold, hostile wall that Muthu was facing, somehow worse than Ahmed outside. At least with Ahmed you felt that beyond all the crude harassment was a fellow-being with at least some feeling; that the silly superciliousness was in a sense childish playfulness. But this... this was a cruel monster. Muthu thought that the white man could quite easily issue a decree for him to lose his business or be kicked out of his home. He waited for the supervisor to complete the sentence, but then he finally said, ‘Sir, I’m not trying to be difficult. I serve the White people, Sir. They call me ‘Cooper’. Mr. Mungle is a rich farmer, Sir; he told me ‘Cooper’ is a nice name for me, Sir. With respect, Sir, I’m not trying to be a cheeky Coolie, Sir.’Muthu had rehearsed his defence many times at home and he felt quite pleased with his delivery. Even Mr. Stevenson, the author of the English book might have been pleased, reflected Muthu. ‘Well, I don’t know about that...’ Ballard glared at the uncomfortable-looking Coolie and remembered that he had named his dog, ‘Adolph’. Well, what was wrong with the name ‘Cooper’ for a Coolie? It was a good
Anglo-Saxon name and perhaps it was all part of the march of Western Culture. The American Negroes had all lost their own names and languages. Perhaps that was the destiny of the Indians too. Besides whatever name the Coolies used, they were still Coolies.

Muthu had known that he would be treated provocatively, but as he planned, he kept cool. With a great deal of effort he suppressed the fury welling up within him and he said in an even voice, 'I beg your pardon, Sir, but I have a letter from Major Mungle, Sir.'

'Really?' Ballard was surprised.

The Indian handed the Supervisor the letter. Ballard opened the sealed envelope. It was neatly typed and stated:

'**TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN**

I have known Muthusamy Coopoosamy for the last thirty years. During that time he has rendered valuable service to the local European farming community through his hardware and poultry businesses. He has often served us even on Sundays. During that time he has become known to the local farmers as 'Michael' and at times has been referred to as 'Michael Cooper'. He has always been of a cooperative disposition and I am sure that a name change will merely legalize what has become a statement of fact.

It was signed with a large flourish by the Major. Ballard was impressed. This was the right sort of Coolie, then; not one of your agitators. And it seemed the ape was serious about this name change thing. Ballard played with his little beard, enjoying the feeling of the fur and the sense of power he always revelled in when he tormented a non-white – much like a cat playing with a cockroach.

Suddenly he transfixed the Indian with his cold 'White man' look and said imperiously, 'You may go now.'

Muthu slid out of the office feeling very inferior, very stupid and a real nuisance. Why had he let Satha talk him into this crazy thing?

After another month, Muthu came into Ahmed’s waiting room. This time after only two minutes, Ahmed said, with just a touch of irritation, 'Yes?'

Muthu was tired of everything: coming here, being treated like a pest, everything. But he had spent good money on this thing and it was only right that he got what he had paid for. After all, what he was doing was not against the White man’s law.

Muthu didn’t say anything. He just looked with a haggard expression on his face at the clerk.

Ahmed stood up, threw his pen down on his desk and said, ‘Ah, Mr. Coo-poo-samy! We’ve got to know you well!’ He grinned at the old man and came over to the counter. ‘You know, old man, the trouble with us Indians (Ahmed’s heart almost gave a lurch when he said this: he didn’t really think of himself as an Indian, well not the ordinary kind of Indian anyway) is that we tend to work very hard on doing something like build-
ing a fine house, but we lack the finishing touch – what the White people call finesse. You know an Indian will sweat blood to build a house, but he won’t spend a rand on getting the front lawn cut... he’ll build a fancy hotel and all the area around the hotel will be like a pig-sty... and he’ll pay his staff peanuts. He’ll study hard and qualify as a doctor but he’ll talk like a motor-mechanic. Now people like us, you know what I mean,’ Ahmed winked a few times at the old man and gave a conspiratorial grin, ‘who try for something better with our lives.’

Muthu’s face feigned ignorance.

Ahmed: ‘Oh, come on now, you know what I mean; we are birds of a feather, you and I... you trying to take on a White man’s name like ‘Cooper’ of all things and me here... well if you want a White man’s name, you better learn to be a little like him...’

‘You mean this finesse thing?’

‘Precisely, old man, precisely!’ Who said you couldn’t teach an old dog new tricks? though Ahmed. ‘Look here Muthu,’ he said aggressively, ‘you don’t look stupid to me (well not completely stupid, cogitated Ahmed). But you’ve come unstuck here because you haven’t put the ‘finishing touch’ to this thing!’

‘Finishing touch, Sir?’

‘Yes, man; the ‘finishing touch’ – a bit of gravy, you know what I mean, some butter on the toast, a bit of grease on the...’

Ahmed looked knowingly at the Indian.

For a few moments Muthu was puzzled but then suddenly the devious expression on the clerk’s face made sense... ‘have to learn to be a little like the White man’ thought Muthu. Is there anything in particular you would like, Sir, I mean in the way of gravy?’

‘Well, I happen to know that Mr. Ballard likes Chicken Biryani... and his mouth absolutely waters for Dhall-roti... now if you could see your way clear to...’

‘Oh, certainly Sir, most stupid of me Sir! I have a little poultry-farm I run on the side, Sir, do you think Mr. Ballard would like some eggs too, Sir?’

Ahmed’s face was one big wolfish grin.

Satha and his friend were drinking; and why not? This time they had good reason – they had something to celebrate!

‘Mr. Cooper, Sir, now that you have Trishen in your big shop and under your thumb, are you going to squeeze?’

‘Like a White man, Satha, like a White man! With finesse, Satha, with loads of ice-cold, decorous finesse!’

‘Ice-cold what?’

‘Decours finesse Satha, decorous finesse. It means to handle something carefully... with a fine, careful touch. I’m reading all the books the White people read, Satha; they can’t stop us from doing that.’
'Really, Mu, I mean Michael.' Satha's eyes were blood-shot and bulging. He was really impressed. He gripped his drink tightly in his left hand and stared at 'Mr. Cooper'.

'Yes, man, and I listen to them very carefully when they talk, the White people; don't you think I am beginning to sound like them now?'

'Mr. Cooper, Sir, I think you are.'

'And I've enrolled in a Speech and Drama class... you just wait and see; soon, when I talk to you on the phone you won't be able to make out that Mr. Cooper is anything but a dyed-in-the-wool Englishman.

'Died in the what?' Satha was getting quite confused by his White-named friend.

'Michael' grinned. 'A pukka Englishman, Satha; a real, honest-to-goodness English bull-dog!'

Satha: 'Ja man, that's true; the other day you rang my house; my niece answered, you know the fancy one who think she's very clever – the girl who's going to Varsity – she thought you were a White man; she was very impressed. 'I didn't know you know White people so well they actually phone you!' she said. I think she respects me more now, Michael.'

Michael gave his friend a benign look of self-assured superiority that he had so often seen the Whites give the non-whites.

Satha looked with awe at his friend. 'Is it true you even got treated at the Coloured section of Paddington Hospital?'

Michael: 'Yes, well, the non-white hospital is far too busy, Satha; it was no problem; once the Indian clerks saw my name I just filled a form and I was seen by the doctor in less than half an hour.'

'So quickly? My aunty, she wait 'ole day by King's Hospital. Then the clerks say she must come next day for the medicines; but what race you put on the form?'

'I put 'Other Coloured'.

'Other Coloured? What's that?'

'Well, the government has a classification for those who don't fit into the normal Coloured classification: you know, those who are not Cape Coloured or Malay.'

Satha: 'Ay, look's like I gave you good advice, ay Michael? Imagine being treated in a White hospital!'

'No Satha, the Coloured section of the White hospital; but, Satha, I must thank you for your advice; it's transformed my life.'

'Well, let's celebrate now, eh, Mike. These days you even drinking like a vet-oh!' He held up his drink with a flourish: 'Here's to your new name, Michael, here's to your hardware licence, to the Licencing Bureau, to Capitalism, here's to...'

Michael clicked glasses with Satha: 'To the Indian Affairs bums... to Western Civilization, to Free Enterprise, and Satha...?'

'Yes, my friend?'

'Here's to the Finishing Touch!'
Eighteen months after President De Klerk gave his historic speech of 2 February 1990, South Africans are beginning to show signs of believing that things are actually destined for change, and that change will be irreversible. This has brought on a frenzy of hope and doubt, of feverish excitement (as of people before a gathering storm), of joyous instability and aggressive possessiveness, as though they are afraid to lose what they’ve known all through the years of oppression. Visiting South Africa after many years, one soon finds oneself joining in the medley, and it is hard to pause and observe the fast changing, never-to-be-repeated history in formation. But it is precisely at this momentous time that we must pause and observe and record, for this time of transition, when we bury the past, is also the beginning of life as it shall be. This is a time of sorting out, when South Africans must resolve what it is they must discard or carry into the future.

The women of South Africa are busily engaged in this sorting out process. For many, over a long period of time, there has been a desire to identify themselves as South African women, to work together as such, and not as black women and white women separately, as the state for so long insisted that they must. And now that their right to the fulfilment of this aim is here, there is both euphoria and doubt. Many are anxious that the women’s movement should reach its full potential as an instrument that must influence social change. On the surface, when one looks at the broad spectrum of political organisations this seems very obvious. But, under the surface, in other areas of social endeavour, it is intriguing to observe the nature of the alliances, the power relations at work in the efforts to forge new links between these oppressed groups. The effects of Apartheid socialisation play a major role in the present situation. The inability to confront issues that occur as a direct consequence of Apartheid experience and culture is compounded by class differences and the desire to paper over these legacies of history. In situations where black and white women seem to be working together in the fight against the oppression of women, the question of unequal power relations is not addressed, as it is in other situations where white women are clearly oppressing blacks.
What exists is an implied reconciliation, where there ought to be a deeper, more honest appraisal, of these historical relationships. This is particularly obvious among the educated professionals, where the emerging blacks are trying to flex their muscles. It will be observed that white women in the literary field are writing about and appraising black women’s writing in the total absence of the black women themselves in the forum and debate. This was very obvious at the Oxford literature conference in March 1990, and even more so at the EACLALS conference in Lecce, Italy, in April of the same year. These conferences outside South Africa reflect the situation as it obtains inside South Africa herself. Very little serious critical attention has been directed towards the creative energy and expertise of the black female cultural producer. This applies to all facets of culture; literature, theatre and film making. This is so despite the paucity of practitioners of these art forms. One would have thought there would be a scramble to ‘find’ suitable candidates. Except for a few endeavours like the Theatre Workshop in Johannesburg, the African woman is often alone in prising open the artistic doors. And when, or if she does, she faces the mammoth task of shifting traditional attitudes that are still firmly embedded in our patriarchal societies. Talking of theatre, Gcina Mhlophe puts it most succinctly:

Briefly, the struggles faced by black women in theatre are, trying to find one’s own voice; being able to speak up when in disagreement with the director or other actors in the cast; trying to make the best of scantily written female roles (people who do not know what it is to be an African woman writing her roles); it means struggling to find transport to the criminal infested locations after every show late at night. But above all, it means earning some kind of respect among one’s male counterparts, fighting sexual harassment and being looked down upon as a cheap woman by one’s own community, for that is what it still implies. Here, there still exists a tradition of all male casts and when there is a woman’s role it has been played by a man dressed like a woman.

Clearly, if South African women are going to emerge stronger, equal and able to speak in their own voice, there should be a greater readiness on the part of others to create room for them and a willingness to step aside from positions of leadership which have been guaranteed by privileges in the past.

While these cross-colour, cross-gender realignments and debates are going on, and national selfhood is approaching, African women are self-consciously appraising their own position among other African women. As we try to find our true identity in the new emerging society and we construct theories by and for ourselves, we are struck by the deep diversities among the so called ‘African women’. Who are ‘we’? We as black women, though bound by ties of history, race, and gender, are yet so profoundly divided by education, income, family background (which is class) that our experiences, relationships, and socio-economic options are ser-
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iously threatening our unity. The ending of the common political struggle is eating away the cross-class solidarity that has existed for many years, and focusing on new antagonisms.

The master-servant relationship is a concept that has traditionally marked black-white relationships. Domestic service is the most notable form of employment which places black women and men securely in the position of 'servant'. If, and when, one black woman has worked for another, they have both tried to couch the relationship in words and deeds of sisterliness. For instance the black servant in a black house will often eat at the same table and be referred to as 'sister'. However, the present situation is threatening this new unity across class lines. There is a shift in the power base, from white madams to black madams. The dynamics attendant upon such a shift are both interesting and surprising. The black madams often fail to appreciate the business nature of the arrangement, and under the social pressures that still attend much of their own lives, will expect a 'sisterly' extension of 'understanding' on the part of the 'maid'. But often this does not mean better pay. It will be understood, of course, that black women, even educated ones, are still badly paid compared to their white counterparts, and that many of them will take on a 'maid' out of need rather than as a badge of status or affluence. This means that it is possible that overall they may be paying less than they should. And when they do pay well, it is often taken for granted that they should. On the other hand, the 'maid' resents any taking of liberties, much more than she would, if the 'madam' were white. She may be choosy about the kind of chores she is prepared to undertake. She may be more ready to show her unwillingness to extend the usual courtesies. This may also be observed where servants in hotels have to serve a black customer. The concept of courteous service has, over the years, in the mind of the servants become closely identified with white skin. Any black who expects otherwise runs a risk of being accused of pretensions.

So, as black women, we find that race and gender unite us, but class divides us. This of course, has implications for the black women's political voice. What right have the 'madams' to speak for the 'maids' as a class. It is almost traditional within feminism to grandly amalgate the histories and experiences of different groups of women into one all encompassing middle-class paradigm. This is a posture that the South African black middle-class had better think about. Do the middle classes have the right to appropriate the experiences, the voices and the realities of traditional and working class women in South Africa? A great deal of the violence that is taking place in South Africa today is perpetrated against working class women. By this I am not saying that any one person, or group of persons, deliberately target working class women. But the social and psychological dynamics of the location environment leave working class women powerless and exposed. The traditional concept of one's home being a fortress or castle is totally absent in a typical location. There is a
vulnerability that is hard to conceptualise if one has never known a house that has no perimeter, where there are no boundaries marking an entrance to one's domain. People walk in and desecrate the home and out again without any psychological prohibition; more so, if it is the home of a powerless woman who cannot defend her rights physically. This contrasts sharply with the few homes of the middle-classes which are dotted about in the locations, where the houses have been transformed into beautiful homes with ornate fences and securely locked gates at night.

In the mindless attacks on people in crowded places like the trains, women are not spared. Even here, the women who die in such places will almost inevitably be poor working class women, because most middle-class women have, with the escalation of these attacks, resorted to their cars. There are even more disturbing trends that point to a concerted attack on old, poor women. There are many cases, too numerous to be dismissed as fortuitous, where young militants armed with their powerful guns, and bored, with little to do, will accuse some old woman of witchcraft, and as a consequence, she may be waylaid or summoned to the 'people's court' for a sentence to death. Often they are burnt to death in their sleep. There are frequent reports in the press, but there is as yet no outcry from any quarter. The present writer had the misfortune to have two old women neighbours who were butchered with AK 47's in the middle of the night, with three of their grandchildren. So far this accusation of witchcraft has been reserved for poor old women, who look the part of witches. To the writer's knowledge, there are no pretty, young or rich, educated women who have suffered in this way. Neither have any men. The exception is a couple who have had to seek the protection of the police and had the luck to get press publicity. It remains to be seen if this focus on their case will save them or not. This information is the result of random experiences gathered during a five-month visit to one particular part of South Africa. So, it would seem reasonable to assume that the practise is quite prevalent. So far, there have been no remarkable material changes for anyone in South Africa, despite the euphoria. But there are notable changes of attitude, hope, fears and disbelief.

African women have always been very active economically, but their wages have been so low compared to other groups that it has left them the poorest group in the society. There are however, sporadic efforts to train women to run their own small business undertakings. To call their efforts 'business' may be stretching the point, for up until now women have had very few possibilities even to borrow from the banks. It must not be forgotten that the legal status of women, especially married women, remains tenuous, more that of minors than of adults, whose words therefore do not count in a court of law. Oppression lives long in the mind, long after the chains have fallen off. It remains to be seen how long it will take before the bank managers will talk to women customers as easily as they will accept black male customers. To forestall this,
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women are seeking political guarantees that will open doors of development banks to women. It is all in the future. South African women remain very strong, and will go down in history as having done much to carry the nation during the trying times of oppression.

It would be erroneous at this stage to comment on what is happening on the political front, as nothing concrete has yet happened. The only obvious pointer to the times ahead has been the number of women who have been elected into the executive of the ANC on the one hand and the central committee of The Inkatha Freedom Party on the other, the two largest black political organizations. It is noteworthy that the numbers of women in both structures are significantly smaller than those of their male counterparts, although proportionately, the IFP has a higher percentage. The ANC has 9 women out of an executive of 90 and the IFP central committee has 32 women out of a total number of 116 members, a little over a quarter. These figures are a disappointing pointer to the future. But we shall wait and see.

In the state of South Africa right now nothing is, but everything is becoming. Black women should soon grow confident and find room enough to speak for themselves, so that others will no longer find it possible or necessary to speak on their behalf. They should no longer ask to be given what is theirs as a right. We all hope that the youth of South Africa, who triumphed in the years of struggle will find new roles and new forms of service to their community, and in doing so, discard their fears and their search for scapegoats. Above everything, the youth should love their people more. The possibilities for all this lie in the hands of all South African politicians, men and women of all races. This is the time for all male politicians to open the gender door a lot wider that it is today (judging from the above figures), for we need women politicians. They have a great role to play in stabilising society.

NOTE

1. The case under discussion was reported in the City Press, Johannesburg, 14 July 1991. It concerns an elderly man who has been assaulted several times, accused of witchcraft. He and his wife had been forced to leave their home and send their children away to stay with relatives; when the article appeared they were camping out in the police compound, awaiting rehousing and scared to leave the compound. The international magazine Newsweek also took up this problem in an article ‘An Infestation of Witches’, 30 September 1991.
The Search for a Role for White Women in a Liberated South Africa: A Thematic Approach to the Novels of Nadine Gordimer.

The impetus for this paper, and also its centre of concern is the puzzlement, spilling over into plain irritation with which many critics received *A Sport of Nature.* The irritation centred around the portrayal of the main character, the young girl Hillela. She seems to drift aimlessly through the 396 pages, surviving mainly by attaching herself to a series of men, often, it seems, simply because they come in handy. Feminists were outraged. Critics were looking for a serious discussion about options in the deteriorating political climate in South Africa. (This is what one had come to expect from Gordimer who has increasingly taken on the mantle of white radicalism). Radicals and socialists were outraged. As I count myself among the feminists and socialists, I took this outrage seriously, and this paper is really a debate with myself about this perceived failure or defection in Gordimer's authorship, which up till then I had admired. I found - at least a possible - answer by positioning the novel *A Sport of Nature* in the authorship and seeing it as an inevitable outcome of the thematic positions Gordimer has taken up in her previous novels, even though this seems paradoxical in view of her increasing radicalism. Nadine Gordimer's fiction covers the period from the late '40s to the early '90s, and during this period she has acted as chronicler of events and their effects on the people who were caught up in them; she has searched ruthlessly for a viable moral standpoint for whites in South Africa, and she has herself changed, forced by the burden of a fast changing social reality. Finally, she has attempted to visualize possible alternatives to white roles, both in present, oppressed South Africa and in a future liberated South Africa. In this way she not only reflects, but influences the choices open for whites who are searching for a standpoint in a country they consider theirs, but with whose ruling ideology they do not agree. Nobody writes in a vacuum, and Gordimer's fiction takes its starting point from the tradition which was established when she started to write in the late 40s, the liberal humanist tradition, imported from England.
The basic tenants of the liberal world view, human understanding, Christian love, the power of reason, change through constitutional means, evolution rather than revolution, abhorrence of violence and an emphasis on the importance of the individual rather than the group have fared rather badly in South Africa. Turning the other cheek or 'the solution of love' are ineffective means of change in the climate of violence prevailing there. Politically speaking the liberal position has occupied a space between black and Afrikaaner nationalism, and liberals have tended to act as spokesmen for blacks, playing the role of benevolent paternalists, advocating patience and gradualism on the one hand, and on the other trying to ameliorate the harsh conditions through charity. The combination of a strong sense of moral responsibility with powerlessness has produced in the liberal psyche intense feelings of guilt.

The fictional vehicle of this view is the realist novel; South African writers have used this form to express their moral outrage in terms of criticism of the system of apartheid and their guilt feelings in terms of a theme of introspection. The emphasis on the individual gives rise to Bildungsromane and novels which offer individual solutions to social problems, (e.g. Alan Paton's Cry The Beloved Country). To this last category also belongs the theme of miscegenation or a black and white love relationship. Finally, the feelings of estrangement and powerlessness give rise to a discussion of exile or return to England, and this is often the solution, both in fiction and in the lives of South African authors.

Gordimer writes directly both into and against this established literary tradition. Her first novel The Lying Days (1953) is a Bildungsroman. Its main character, Helen, struggles to disassociate herself from her narrow white middle class background and tries unsuccessfully to connect across the colour bar, only to end up still suffering from 'slow corrosive guilt'. The following novel, A World of Strangers (1958) briefly suggests that hope can be found in a black white friendship, but already by her third novel Occasion for Loving (1963) events in South Africa, like the Sharpeville Massacre and the banning of the ANC and the PAC, put an end to any optimism and set the characteristic tone for the rest of the authorship, which I would define as an argument against current standpoints or views, either in the public debate, in the literature of the time, or in her own previous novels. In this way she resembles Ngugi wa Thiong'o who also charts flawed or failed solutions to the problems of his country.

This mode of writing could be defined thematically as a kind of fictional revolutionary handbook, outlining things to avoid, or to borrow a chapter heading from Fanon 'The Pitfalls of National Consciousness'. Occasion for Loving argues that a black and white love affair does not solve the problems of Apartheid, and it exposes the helplessness of the liberal stance. In The Late Bourgeois World (1966) Gordimer discusses a different sort of failure, namely the failure of the white armed guerrilla campaign which ended in ignomy in the late 60s, and, contrary to other commentators, she
has a grudging respect for this group which after all had the courage to try, even though it failed. In *The Conservationist* (1974) liberal problems are not the centre of concern; here, Gordimer is at pains to point out how close the ruling conservative ideology is to certifiable madness. After having exposed the ruling position and rejected the liberal alternative the choice is narrowed down. The political situation deteriorates throughout the period, and with the increased repression Gordimer finds that under the watchful eyes of the secret police ‘we prance back and forth ever closer to the fine line between being concerned citizens and social revolutionaries.’

In *Burgher’s Daughter* (1979) Gordimer sets out to investigate the ramifications of living as a revolutionary, untainted by liberal compromise and hypocrisy and aware of the costs of this honesty. *Burgher’s Daughter* was briefly banned; one of the reasons given for this was that it was ‘an outspoken furthering of communism’. This ‘furthering’ was mainly carried out by the Burgher of the title who had dedicated his life to the struggle. To rub salt into the wound the character is closely based on Bram Fisher, a well respected, Afrikaans lawyer whose ‘defection’ to communism left a particularly sore bruise on the Afrikaner psyche.

Gordimer’s obvious admiration for Burgher’s uncompromising, revolutionary stand provides a fixed point in the narrative. It forms the moral backbone of the book, a parameter of moral integrity, against which every South African woman with aspirations to honesty can measure herself. They all become, in a sense, Burgher’s daughters. This inheritance poses important questions: What kind of options does it offer you? Do you want it, and if you do, how will it affect your life?

Brought up in an intensely political atmosphere with her parents in and out of jail Rosa feels trapped. She sees her choices as being between a life of private gratification versus one of public commitment and responsibility. The terms of this opposition are stated in a discussion Rosa has with her lover about their childhoods. He wanted to fuck his mother and kill himself for it, and he reduced life to two constants, sex and death, whilst she remembered that ‘we belonged to other people’ and that to her parents loneliness meant ‘to live without social responsibility’. In the novel the debate develops into an internal tug-of-war between the cerebral values of duty, responsibility and inevitable suffering on the one hand, and on the other, the simple instinctual and natural desires of the body, like sex or an instinct to turn from suffering. ‘Even animals have the instinct to turn from suffering. The sense to run away’ (p. 73). Slowly, a resentment builds up in Rosa against being defined as her father’s daughter, she grows ‘sick of the maimed, the endangered, the fugitive, the stoic; sick of courts, sick of prisons (p. 70). She wants something which Gordimer presents as very ordinary, very reasonable; ‘I want to know somewhere else’ (p. 187). On the strength of this desire she goes to the South of France, which to the Anglo-Saxon imagination seems to embody the essence of luxury and decadence, and here she has it all: a love affair and
a circle of friends who drink wine, discuss food and collect art. She enjoys it, living naturally through the senses, but she is pulled back by the ties of the community she has left behind. She comes to fear the futility of life without a moral purpose, and she comes to the realisation that even their highly politicised life had room for individualism and the life of the body. With this compromise between the public/political and the private Rosa returns to South Africa and continues the struggle, and predictably, she ends up in prison.

Up to this point Gordimer has outlined a possible scenario of an opposition between political commitment and private fulfilment, and has in turn rejected it. There is, however, a hitch in the neatness of this circular pattern of commitment, flight from it and return to it. We are not told how Rosa arrived at her decision to return home, in fact, we are deliberately kept in the dark. ‘I solved nothing but was no longer badgered’ she says after a traumatic conversation with a former black step-brother. ‘There’s no explanation for how this comes about. Silence’ (p. 331). Although the tone of the prose indicates that Rosa’s decision has the author’s approval, Gordimer seems unwilling to argue or reason for it, and this is uncharacteristic of the authorship, which up to then has been a debate in fictional terms between various options. We are left with a problematized solution, arrived at in the dark, and this is a feature, which becomes even more prominent in A Sport of Nature.

However, in the following novel, July’s People (1981) Gordimer does not try out yet another possible scenario for survival. Instead, she pauses, or so it seems to me, and takes a close look at the most painful aspects of this new world order which she desires, but which obviously, she also fears. Fleeing from civil war in the city, a white family is given refuge in their servant’s village, and the book outlines an inverted Robinson Crusoe/Friday relationship in which the white woman fails to come to terms with the changed power structure despite her initial good intentions. I can only interpret the ending as her running away from her painful confrontations with July and from the necessity of making major psychological adjustments to the changed situation. She does, of course, have nowhere to run to – Gordimer has always excluded exile from her ‘honourable’ solutions – and so in her next novel, A Sport of Nature, Gordimer makes her, by now fairly embattled protagonist, (of many names) return once more to the battle and to yet another scenario for survival.

Obviously, with each book, and each rejection of choices, the possibilities are narrowed down. In A Sport of Nature Gordimer takes stock of her authorship. The main character, Hillela is carefully surrounded by characters who represent all the attitudes or ideologies which Gordimer has outlined, and in the main rejected, throughout her authorship. Her aunt Olga is the rich, conservative South African who tries to exclude politics from her world, her other aunt, Pauline is yet another woman character who attempts protest within the liberal mode and is destroyed by it. Her
lawyer uncle Joe provides legal aid for dissidents, but stops short of what Pauline calls 'the unimaginable darkness of the Underground' (p. 82). Rosa Burgher appears in person, apparently out of jail and working for 'the unimaginable darkness.' Hillela's cousin, Sasha quarrels with his mother Pauline - a quarrel which resembles Gordimer's with liberalism - and follows in Rosa's footsteps, which also leads him into prison. Her mother, as far as is known, has lived the private life of the body, disappearing in search of a Portuguese fado singer with whom she was in love. This outlines the positions already taken in the authorship and mostly rejected. The book becomes an obstacle race between rejected positions or an exercise in the logics of exclusion.

Hillela is almost overdetermined as a new departure in the authorship; the novel opens with her travelling from one unknown place to another, she changes her name in the first sentence of the novel, she has an unknown mother who may or may not be dead, and her known, but absent travelling salesman father may in fact not be her father. We can have no expectations of her, she, or Gordimer, is free to invent new modes of being in an old and tied situation.

To steer a course between the rejected positions Gordimer sets up what you might call sexual drift as a principle. Despite her political upbringing Hillela reacts instinctively and excessively in terms of private, sexual priorities. She gets thrown out of school for going out with a coloured boy; as a teenager, she makes money by dancing gogo in a shop window, and finally, she transgresses a real taboo, the incest taboo, when she seduces her cousin, Sasha, with whom she has grown up as a sibling. The success of her rebellion can be measured by the comments made about her. 'A little tart, like her mother,' as her aunt Olga's husband rudely reminds her (p. 114). 'She's a-moral' says her politically active, liberal aunt Pauline (p. 56), whilst her cousin Sasha stays secretly in love with her for the rest of his life, as the warm and gratifying possibility which is mostly excluded from the life he chooses. Up to the point when Hillela leaves South Africa, having 'attached herself to some man' (p. 145) the novel centres around an opposition between unexplained, but amiable sexual drift on the one hand, and objections to this from various ideological standpoints (Victorian moral outrage, or committed liberalism). It seems to be a battle between drift and principle.

At this point in the narrative Hillela disappears from view and moves beyond the ken of her South African background. The point of view changes, and the story is taken up by an exasperated biographer, trying to piece the life together for some kind of publication. As Hillela moves through Africa, America and Eastern Europe she frequently disappears from view, only to re-surface, sometimes inexplicably in a new place and situation. This technique seems to be an elaboration of the silence which took the place of an explanation of Rosa Burgher's reason for returning to South Africa. It makes environmental, psychological and ideological
explanations of patterns of behaviour impossible or at least patchy. It exonerates Gordimer from presenting the closely reasoned psychological developments which we find in her earlier novels and which are part of the genre of the realist novel.

Hillela drifts through Africa, a born survivor, who always gets herself into a comfortable situation, mainly through her sexual attractiveness. In terms of ideology, she is deliberately ambiguous or indifferent. The man she follows out of South Africa is supposedly working against the regime, but is suspected of being a spy for it. In the course of her meanderings she falls in love with an ANC official, with whom she has a daughter, and when he is murdered by South African army gunmen she finds herself ‘an honourable black’ as a victim of the regime’s brutality, a position which Gordimer had previously seen as exclusively for blacks. ‘For a long time to come’, she writes, ‘any white South African must expect to find any black man, from any African territory, considered by the black South African as more of a brother than the white South African himself ... it is a nationalism of the heart that has been brought about by suffering. There is no share in it we can hope to have.’ Hillela has it, caused by shared suffering, but for the shared suffering to earn a person a place in this brotherhood, the suffering has to be either enforced or chosen, but certainly not just drifted into.

The construction of Hillela runs into a problem here. However much Gordimer tries to make her character rely on instincts and shed the ideals of duty and responsibility and the ideological approach to commitment in the struggle, she cannot leave out the commitment itself. So when Hillela witnesses her husband’s violent death, a sense of wider commitment is born in her, obviously as a result of her personal grief, and in this way the two worlds of emotion and commitment are combined. Gordimer discusses this in terms of ‘the handclasp’ which is something different from the embrace, and which seals a bond of shared commitment to the struggle. So Hillela joins the struggle in order to honour this bond, first with her dead husband and later with the African general whom she marries. This aspect is definitely upsetting to a feminist sensibility. Hillela seems to simply follow in the wake of some man, acting out a secondary role to his commitment and fight. Gordimer, however, approaches this from another angle; she is not concerned with male, female roles, but with black versus white roles in a future South Africa. She quotes a letter by Desmond Tutu to Frontline in which he says, ‘Whites unfortunately have the habit of taking over and usurping the leadership and taking the crucial decisions’, and Gordimer continues ‘whites must learn to listen – wrote the black South African poet Mongane Wally Serote, in the seventies. This is the premise on which the white segment to which I belong lives its life at present.’ Hillela lives out this commitment; she lives in a polygamous family set up, with an African president who has come to power through dubious uses of military force. In this role she conquers where her liberal
and socialist forerunners have failed: in the last scene of the book she is a guest of honour as the wife of an African president at the Independence celebration of a liberated South Africa. Her willingness to adapt to an African way of life, then, is her truly revolutionary aspect; it represents the new move on the complicated chessboard of Gordimer's fiction.

Arrived at in this way the character of Hillela seems logical, in fact almost inevitable. There are, however, also signs in the narrative that Gordimer does not feel complete solidarity with the position, but rather seems to bow down to the inevitable. One sign is the many gaps in the narrative where Hillela simply disappears from view, and there are inexplicable changes and moves and even several versions of attempted explanations as to why she left one place and turned up in another. Through these Gordimer distances herself from her heroine. She is offering her as a logical or perhaps even necessary outcome of a tied and circumscribed situation and as a reversal of an ideological or philanthropical approach to the struggle; Hillela's rebellion is instinctive and organic, and this is seen as positive. The outcome, however, is not necessarily what Gordimer wants or likes, it is simply what the options have narrowed themselves down to: a scenario for survival with as much dignity as can be salvaged.

There is, however, also a sense in which Gordimer is saying 'Is this really what we have to do?' The subordination which the position demands, both in terms of gender and race seems extreme and is obviously seen as a revenge for decades of wielding too much power, as a way of expiating the sins of the past. History's demand for passivity or even silence is a sophisticated and tortuous revenge on a group of people who have always been very vocal. The very existence of A Sport of Nature is an indication that although this demand - and the reasons for it - are understood, it is not necessarily heeded; a lifelong habit of arguing and commenting is not broken that easily. Gordimer obviously suffers herself from the narrowing down of choices which she outlines. The role of Hillela is not wholeheartedly endorsed in A Sport of Nature, it is merely presented as a possible way out of a dead-end situation.

NOTES

5. Nadine Gordimer, *Burger’s Daughter* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980), p. 77. All further references are to this edition and are included in the text.

Tyrone Appollis: ‘In the Last Train’. Pen and ink.
NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

TYRONE APPOLLIS was born in Cape Town in 1957 and has lived most of his life in Mitchells Plain. Much of his work has been inspired by the environment and the prevailing conditions in the townships. He studied at the Community Arts Project, which has produced many of the present generation of artists in the Western Cape. He also studied with Cecil Skotnes. His first one-man exhibition was at the age of fifteen at Shawco, in Freeton, Cape Town in 1972. Then followed the second in March 1982 held at the Rocklands Library, Mitchells Plain. In 1987 the S.A. Association of Arts Cape Town hosted his third one-man exhibition. His work entitled 'Emergency' currently hangs in the National Gallery, Cape Town.

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PETER CLARKE comes from Cape Town and is both a writer and an artist. He is deeply involved in artists' movements in the townships who work together to put on group exhibitions of art, photography and sculpture which are combined with music, readings of poetry by the poets, and drama performances. These events take place in the townships.

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STEPHEN GRAY was born in Cape Town in 1941. He is novelist, poet and critic and his publications include John Ross: The True Story and Time of Our Darkness. He is professor of English at Randse Afrikaanse Universiteit, Johannesburg. Dangaroo Press will publish a collection of his poetry, Season of Violence, in 1992.
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DEELA KHAN lives in Wynberg, Cape Town, and is at present completing her degree in English at the University of Western Cape. Her poems have appeared in South African magazines including Staffrider, Upstream, Contrast and in Siren Songs, the first South African anthology of women’s poetry.

SANTU MOFOKENG was born in Johannesburg and grew up in Soweto. Since 1988 he has been a documentary photographer at the African Studies Institute, University of Witwatersrand. In 1991 he was awarded the Ernest Cole Award for documentary photography. His photographs have been published in South Africa and abroad.

ENOCH A. MONKWE lives in the Northern Transvaal. He has published fiction and poetry.

SALLY-ANN MURRAY teaches English at the University of Natal (Durban). Her publications include the anthology Signposts: Poetry for Today and, in 1989, she was awarded an Arthur Nortje Prize for her poetry. Currently, she is editing a new edition of Olive Schreiner’s Trooper Peter Halket of Mashonaland.

MZWAKHE MBULI, known in South Africa as the ‘People’s Poet’, is a well-known political poet/musician and theatre activist. Aged 32, he was brought up in a strict Zulu family, and much of the inspiration for his music comes from mbube choral contexts and Zulu praise poems. He has made three records and written one book of poetry. In 1991, he and his band, The Equals, had a major and extremely successful tour of Europe, USA and Canada. For further biographical details, see interview on pp. 65-72.

LAURETTA NGCOBO was born in South Africa and has lived in exile in England for 28 years. She has recently made extended visits to South Africa and intends to return and live there permanently. She has published two novels, Cross of Gold (Longman, 1981) and And They Didn’t Die (Virago, 1990). She has also edited a collection of essays by black women writing in England called Let It Be Told (Virago, 1988). She is at present working on an historical novel and a collection of stories in which she is trying to capture South Africa in transition.

M. ABNER NYAMENDE is a lecturer in the Department of African Literature and Language at the University of Cape Town. He has published poetry and critical essays on African literature.

MXOLISI M. NYEZWA comes from Port Elizabeth and writes both poetry and short fiction.

ANDRIES WALTER OLIPHANT was educated at the University of Western Cape and in the United States of America where he was a Fulbright Scholar in Comparative Literature. He is an exhibited painter. He was Resident Playwright and his play The Bicycle received an Amstel Award in 1979. He has published poetry, short stories, reviews and literary criticism in both English and Afrikaans. In 1988 he published At the End of the Day, a collection of poetry, and co-edited the anthology Ten Years of Staffrider. Oliphant who lectured at the University of Transkei for several years is currently editor of Staffrider Magazine.
DEENA PADAYACHEE describes himself as a 'non-white' physician who writes as a hobby, mainly about the peculiarities of South African society. He is a member of PEN, the ANC affiliated Congress of South African Writers and the South African Writers' Circle. Over the years he has won awards from the Grahamstown Festival of the Arts and the South African Writer's Circle. His short stories have appeared in South African magazines like Staffrider, New Contrast and Writer's Ring. One of his short stories appeared in the Vita Anthology of New South African Short Fiction. In the USA his short stories have been published by Short Story International of New York. He also writes poetry and short stories for children.

KIRSTEN HOLST PETERSEN is a graduate of the University of Aarhus and the School of Oriental and African Studies, London University. She has taught at the universities of Aarhus, Adelaide, Ahmadu Bello and Stockholm. From 1983 to 1986 she was the Danish Research Scholar at the Scandinavian Institute for African Studies, Uppsala. She has published widely in the field of post-colonial studies. Her publications include Criticism and Ideology: Papers from the Second African Writers' Conference, Stockholm, and she is the author of the chapter on South Africa in the recently published The Commonwealth Novel Since 1960 (Macmillan, 1991).

ANNA RUTHERFORD is a graduate of the University of Newcastle, NSW, and since 1966 has taught at the University of Aarhus, Denmark. She was founding editor of Kunapipi, and in 1986 was elected international chairperson of ACLALS. She has published widely in the field of post-colonial studies and is founder/director of Dangaroo Press. She chaired the international panel for the Commonwealth Poetry Prize in 1987 and 1989 and was on the international judging committee for the Commonwealth Fiction Prize in 1987, 1988 and 1989.

SIPHO SEPAMLA was born in 1932 in Krugersdorp, South Africa. His first profession was that of teacher, and his career as a writer started only in the mid-sixties. His main literary mode has been poetry. His collections include Hurry Up to It! (1975), The Blues is You in Me (1976), The Soweto I Love (1977), Children of the Earth (1983), and Selected Poems (1984). He has also written plays, short stories, and three novels, The Root is One (1979), A Ride on the Whirlwind (1980), and Third Generation (1986). Since the late seventies he has worked with the Federated Union of Black Arts (FUBA) in Johannesburg.

KELWYN SOLE was born in Johannesburg in 1951, but works at present in Cape Town. His first book of poems, The Blood of Our Silence, was published by Ravan Press in 1988. It subsequently won the Olive Schreiner Prize and was a runner-up for the Noma Award.
This volume plunges the reader into the lively cultural debate of South Africa on the brink of liberation from Apartheid. The parameters of what is possible have changed radically, and this has called for new visions and brought about new debates. In the cultural sphere the new popular forms of participation theatre, mass rally poetry and people’s parks challenge the established forms of performance theatre, written literature and the various forms of visual art. The critical debate strives to incorporate the new forms and re-assess the old, and the established writers and artists look for new ways to give artistic expression to the new reality. The volume has contributions from leading South African writers and critics, and it includes discussions from the cultural debate as well as fiction, poetry and art work.

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