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

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Abstract
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'.

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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 naïve 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 retribalising 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. 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.

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, 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 Menán 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 reassembled 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 sloganisers; 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 canoni-
ations 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 evol-
utionary 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,26 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 be-
lieves that important books matter in the intellectual life of any country
struggling out of the disjunctures of colonialism. His priorities are, how-
ever, 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 con-
cerning 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,27 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, Kham 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

16. Stephen Watson’s letter, Southern African Review of Books (April-May 1989), pp. 22-23. See also Gareth Cornwall’s review-article ‘History and Value’, where I am charged with genuflecting before the authority of black political experience, New Contrast, Cape Town (Autumn 1990), pp. 27-30. Although he had access to the present stage of my response, Cornwall chooses not to refer to any ‘theory of reconstruction’.
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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Tyrone Appollis: 'Mitchell’s Plain Train’. Woodcut.