

BLACK WRITING IN SOUTH AFRICA

Twenty years later: in a way this is a return to the scene of the crime! In a much-quoted essay¹ which appeared in my book *Home & Exile* some twenty years ago I expressed some doubts about the direction in which Black fiction was taking in South Africa. I contrasted this literature unfavourably with the examples provided by the evolving traditions of our popular music. In 1985 the eddies and reverberations from that essay are still spreading in ever-widening circles, wider than I could have anticipated at the time, as the latest comments on South African fiction by Njabulo Ndebele amply shows.² Ndebele merely recasts the terms of that essay in *Home & Exile* in his latest formulations in which he argues:

What we have (in fiction by South African writers) is a conflict between the aim of story-telling and that of imparting social information. It is at this point that a competition between creative writing and journalism ensues. Lewis Nkosi's criticism of this 'competition' is well-known.

Ndebele then goes into an analysis of the forms that this 'competition' takes an analysis which though occasionally full of insight, is in my opinion sometimes more confusing than illuminating. This is not the place to pick up the fault lines where Ndebele's analysis strains to "extend" the discussion about the nature of the conflict between, in his own words, 'sloganeering' and 'creative writing.' It is sufficient here only to point out that a racist, capitalist society presents South African writers, both black and white, with special problems in their attempt to grasp and rewrite their reality for fiction.

To put it in a nutshell, though the shell is always larger than the nut in these discussions, I suppose the problem of black fiction in South Africa has always been one of conflict between representation and interpretation. As I argued in that seminal essay Black writers in South Africa have always assumed that their mission is merely

to represent their society, to show the extent of its dismemberment, of its social mutilations. Such a representation, with its naive empirical assumptions, takes as its total aim the mimicking in fiction or the portrayal of social conflict, as the ideal fulfilment of its function. Since such a representation is merely an attempt at adequating language to the fragmented reality it portrays, it stands to reason that the language

his celebrated formulation in *The Eighteenth Brumaire* that men do not make history "under circumstances chosen by themselves", the question arises as to what a South African writer ought to do confronted by the brute facts of his social existence.

The answer, it seems to me, resolves itself into a choice between two conceptions of the role of the artist: *representation* versus *interpretation*. Since representation and interpretation



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too, even at its most overheated, perhaps because of just this uncontrolled calefaction, itself becomes fragmented, disintegrates. Some of Sepamla's poetry cruelly exposes the dangers of this approach; and no one has encapsulated the problem better than Sepamla himself in one of his poems titled *Drum Beat*:

my batteries have charged rage
to an unbridled pitch
if I should stop to rant and rave
i know I won't be counting for
long...

That a writer, producing his work in such an atmosphere of fierce struggle, should conceive "ranting" and "raving" as the imperatives of his historical moment however debilitating, may be understandable but is no less tragic for that! 'Bridling' rage, even in the interests of art, may be thought not necessarily a virtue. However, if Frank Kermode is right to say "we cannot emigrate from our historical moment", which may be taken as simply another annotation on Marx's second half of

can easily coexist within a single work, I would like to present the problem in a slightly amended form as one of choice between *production* and *reproduction*. Current theories of textual production try to distinguish between on the one hand texts which aim at transparency, attempting to smooth out the folds and kinks of narrative representation in the interest of easy, readerly consumption, and on the other hand those texts which invite the reader to an active participation in the *production* of meaning. Texts which merely aim at representation of reality belong to the former group.

The process of writing as a means of reproducing in works of literature the appalling miseries of our social existence has been a dominant mode in writings by Black South Africans. Paradoxically, it was precisely because White writers were able to imagine their lives as existing independently of the black masses oppressed by the system that



Alex la Guma and Family



Miriam Tladi

they were able to construct characters whose lives, however superficial and morally reprehensible, from the outside looked fuller than those created by Black writers. There is an *aporia* here that must be thought through, not merely shrugged aside.

Far from representing an advance on the prose works of the 'Fifties generation', as Ndebele recently argued, in the current stories and novels by Black Consciousness writers like Mothobi Mutloatse, Miriam Tladi, Sipho Sepamla, and in many stories by Njabulo Ndebele himself, the overwhelming impression of Black South African fiction has therefore been one of repetitiveness resembling, and in many ways paralleling, the impersonal objective forms of capitalist social relations of production which these writers themselves must work to transform. As the poems and stories flooded the market, each one replete with quotable gestures, one's powers of concentration inevitably flagged but it was too shameful to admit that one's attention was continually distracted. After all, no accusation

is more damaging than the charge of formalism, the perennial yearning after style.

What has therefore been missing from South African literature is the conception of writing as a process of production rather than reproduction. Equally, nothing was more certain to confer the right credentials than the commendation that one was "telling it like it is." What such simplistic notions of artistic representation forget is that there is no easy unmediated passage from brute reality to artistic forms; if art were simple reproduction of external reality we would not need it.

La Guma's success, it seems to me, has been to operate both inside and outside of the reality he is supposed to represent; the prophetic, daring nature of works like *In the Fog of the Season's End* and *Time of the Butcherbird*, whatever their other limitations, has been to rework reality, to restructure it, to reinterpret it. The effect, necessarily, has been to disrupt our routinised perceptions of the black character in South African fiction as the pathetic victim of circumstance. In this respect, it is appropriate

to recall Merleau-Ponty's comment: "The writer's thought does not control his language from without; the writer is himself a kind of new idiom, constructing itself." (*The Origin of Truth*). The extreme physicality of South African writing, the insistence on sheer physical detail about slum life at the expense of interior life and thought, may sometimes give the impression of extreme objectivity, but *positivism* is simply another version of a sophisticated lie. To recount is to modify and to narrate is to interpret.

Wally Mongane Serote's poetry, especially those disruptive images in *TSETLO*, genuinely transform our perceptions more radically than his first novel *To Every Birth Its Blood* and Njabulo Ndebele's main story in *Fools* contains some of the best insights South African fiction can offer, but it is hard to see that much of the current crop of fiction represent any advance on either Bessie Head's stories or La Guma's fiction. Ndebele may yet be more valuable for his critical work, his insistence on the political significance of technique, quality and craftsmanship, a thesis that 'slogan writers' find merely irritating.

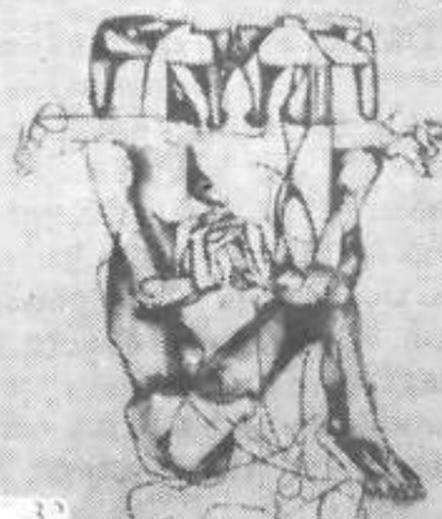
By Lewis Nkosi.

¹'Fiction by Black South Africans' in *Home & Exile* (Longman 1965).

²'Some Thoughts on S. African Fiction' *Staffrider*, Vol. 6 No. 1, 1984.

THE WILL TO DIE

Can Themba



baptism of fire

dikobe wa mogale



Alex la Guma

In the Fog of the Seasons' End

