

The way forward

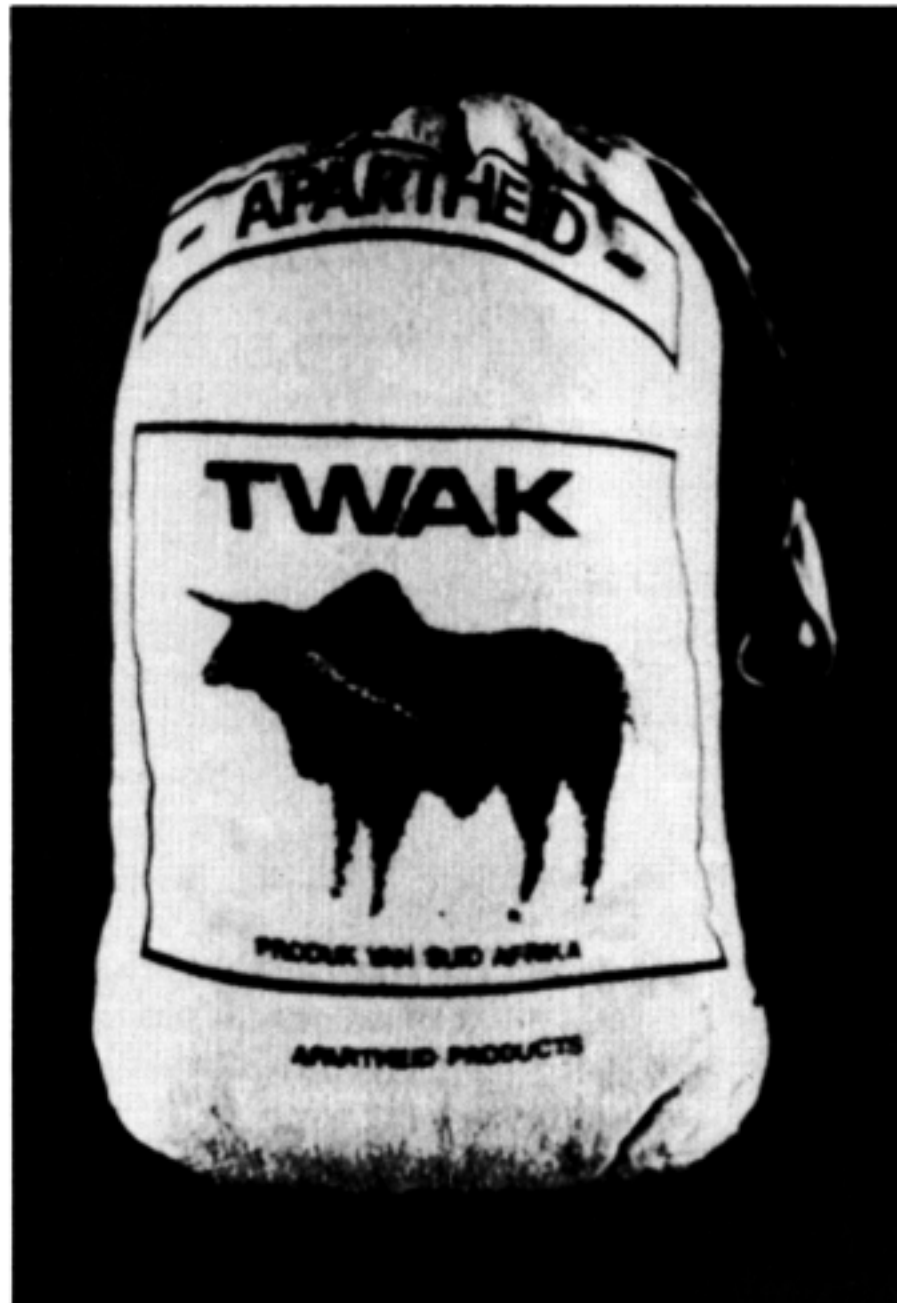
Ek gaan onderweg probleme optel, wat ek plek-plek sal aandui en probeer omseil, miskien omdat ek paradoksaal tog nog vryer is in Afrikaans as in ander tale, of vlugtiger en vlugryker van tong.

IT IS AN UNCOMFORTABLE experience to be thus addressing a group of South Africans on my literary intentions and history. Difficult also because it could so easily degenerate into the tracing of an alienation, perhaps even a perversion. But it is important to try.

I'm the dog wanting to recognize the coded smell deposited long since to mark out the tree or the hedge or the lamp-post of its passage, or returning to the battle-ground where the bone lies buried. Can my writing be considered as part of South African literature? This is the theme I was asked to talk about. Using myself as prototype — *aan die hand van myself*, I shall attempt to say something about the specificity of the writer, his (or her) local root system or natural bent, and the universality of his (or her) craft. Put differently — I'd like to see where his (or her) lines run, both privately and publicly, the lines which on occasion will tie him (or her) onto knots — *die lyne wat by geleentheid knooploop om ooptes*.

South African literature is faced by a multitude of mirrors. It is of course an invaluable privilege to be thus obliged to measure our cultural awareness, consciously, against the demands of South African society, to move into and out of areas of expectation. Our literature, in all its

articulations, mirror the community. Perhaps therefore inevitable it will show us a broken image, a partial vision: historically we are a cracked society. Since some considerable time now we live in the sign of regrouping of forces — a realignment not defined by ethnic or even cultural affinities, but by the striving for the same values. Our shared consciousness nevertheless still remains shredded, and it is only natural that we should



each have our own ways of looking at reality through the cracks of our experience. Sometimes we are a part of the babbling, at other moments we may warble or mouth (or think we mouth) the intensity of South African silences.

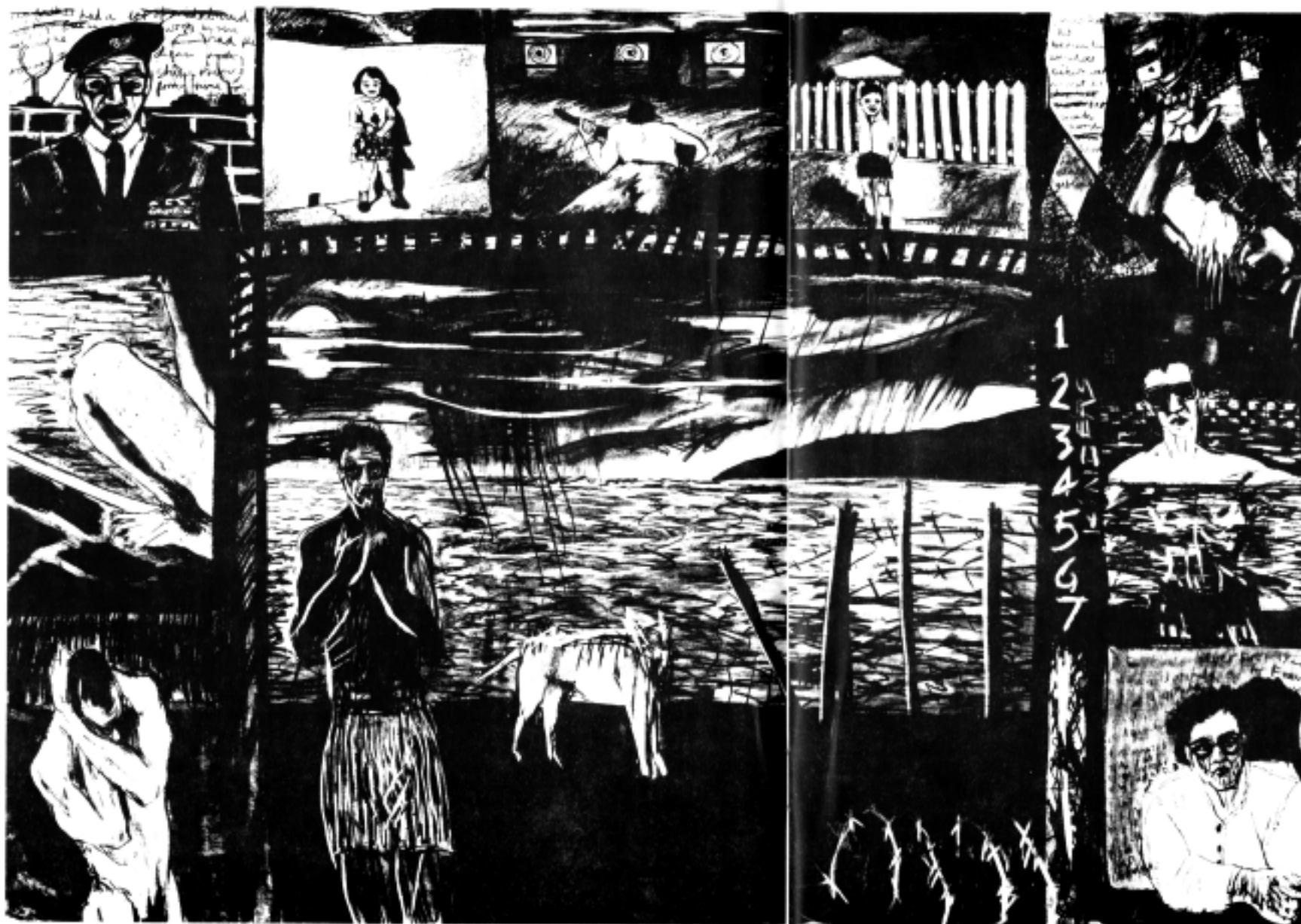
I am by now too old to still believe in the solution of existential ques-

tions, but along the way of searching, I have come to know a fraction more about process. And my old fractures, or cold bones, tell me that our South African culture, in its unique blend of diverse strains, carries within it the metaphors and the means of a moving forward towards true integration (*dat dit die trekkings en die meddele koester van a voorbeweeg na werklike integrasie*). That indeed need not be just the expression of morbid phenomena, of decay and estrangement. *Iewers word 'n lyk weer gesond*. The parallel fact remains, nevertheless, that Afrikaans culture — of a peculiar tradition, in terms of a certain reading thereof — is coming to an inglorious end (*dat dit aan die uitvrek is*). Some Afrikaans writers, also because they wish to be 'true to the people', actually reflect this cul-de-sac, *hierdie sakgatstraat*, this deadendstreet. What is authenticity? Surely it must be when you can sense and interpret the people of your community, when you are experienced and extrapolated by them, when you bleed the shared dreams and anxieties. In other words, when you are become a means of expression.

It must then be of the utmost importance to know which community you are from, who your readers are. Later on, I shall try to indicate that one can already now in South Africa choose the community you aspire to be identified with and which you hope will recognize and understand you. And that this community is defined by a cluster of values cutting across cultural separa-

Bag of Apartheid Twak by Ben Kotzen

*Writing is the mould of memory,
or its image. Without memory
there is no possibility of imagination.*



tions. In the time of surfacing the structures of our consciousness, as writers, we are dreaming the structuring of South Africa.

dit is waar dat sommige beginsels
waarop ons aktiwiteite berus
voordurend
in twyfel gebring en reggestel moet
word;
ons moet met die ore tussen die
grasbloms lê
om op te vang wat miskien nog geen
uiting gevind het nie
maar reeds as 'ideologie' onder die
volk bewe;

maar in ons soeke na opregtheid
moet ons ons nie laat mislei deur
vaderlikheid
of 'n valse neerbuiging nie;

veral, evaluasie moet 'n transformasie
verwoord
en nie net 'n ligte somerjassie van
kritiek op die nasie
wees oor 'n soliede lyf van
aanvaarding nie;

die gras moet weet van gras as
grasheid,
ons moet weet watter vasteland ons
roer -

This poem was written on January 25, 1974. I just had to sneak it in.

Writing is the mould of memory, or its image. Without memory there is no possibility of imagination, not even that of an imagined memory. Without imagination there is neither space nor creativity. When we are deprived of creativity, we end up in a state of emergency, in the convolutions and convulsions of a Total Strategy, then we have stale totalitarianism. Heiner Muller quotes Brecht where he says

*Beloftes, charcoal on paper, 1988,
by Leon Vermeulen*

that the problem with the Germans is that they have never carried through a revolution, that they never digested their history, that they started building their new superstructures without first clearing out the rubble in their cellars Muller then asks: 'Is it possible ever to forget that which you have buried?' The answer must be no.

We Afrikaans writers, aren't really there yet. *Ons wil ons rooi vlae uithang by die smal spleet-vensterjies van ons voortorings. As ek die ding so dophou, dan lyk dit vir my die Afrikaner intellektuele soek nog steeds witvoetjie by regse denkgedrogte van oorsee, hier uitgespoel – dekonstruksie (as dit maar dek-konstruksie was!) post-modernisme – met wasgoedpennetjies oor die neuse. Maar die dag kom ook; elke hond kry mos syne.* (Note: I do not depict those forms of thought-acting as decadent because they were from Europe and America, but they are the results of another terminal history, and the fact that the Boere are making pigs of themselves with a mess of lentils. This spells out intellectual flatulence, on their part in order to escape other unplaceable realisations. Certain clever white tricks definitely constitute a form of moral insouciance.

So then, da donde vengo? *Waar kom ek vandaan?* I am tempted to say: *'van soentoe tot hiertoe.'* All history starts with a story. The language, of necessity, is my earth. Perhaps it would be possible to eventually use it as if it were a thing with neither breath nor flesh on its bones, *maar ek glo nie van daai nie.* The language stays with me as a



I could not, cannot, not even by approximation, fit word to the suffering of my black compatriots.

shadow, a runner, a reminder, and thereby it is imagination. *Daar sit klanke en verbuiging en prente en verwysings en stomp goete in wat herlei na 'n geografiese gebied, na 'n geskiedenis van waarneming van spasie en ritme en tyd en verhoudings en natuur en klimaat, na 'n manier waarop die hond so al langs sy eie pote bly draf. Dis nie 'n opsie nie.* Then there are the people, the South Africans, with whom I am involved in ways which can never be the case with any other people. Then there is the struggle as *raison d'être*, as the catalyst of a consciousness of life, as the way and the means of situating myself within ethical and even aesthetical dimensions. Africa made of me a South African, Europe made me an African. How can I then not see my work as that of an agent of perception. (*'n wortel van gewaarwording*) within the context of Africa? Foucault says: 'To work means to think differently from the way you thought before.' (*'Arbeiten heisst, anderes denken als das, was*

man vorher dachte.')

A further origin, or source (*'n verdere waarvandaan*) must be the way in which you made yourself, your usefulness on the ground, how you forget yourself for the purpose, for the cause. That, for me, is an old story, prehistory, the walking tune played on the bone flute. I am the bone I lay away in the earth to ripen.

Que hacer? Wat maak? Writing is an individual action which can only come into being fully when it is not divorced from its historical crucible. With historical context or reception zone, I am pointing at the assumed or shared ground of meaning. Borges has shown via

Mesnard, in re-writing Cervantes, that no work can be autonomous and unchanging.

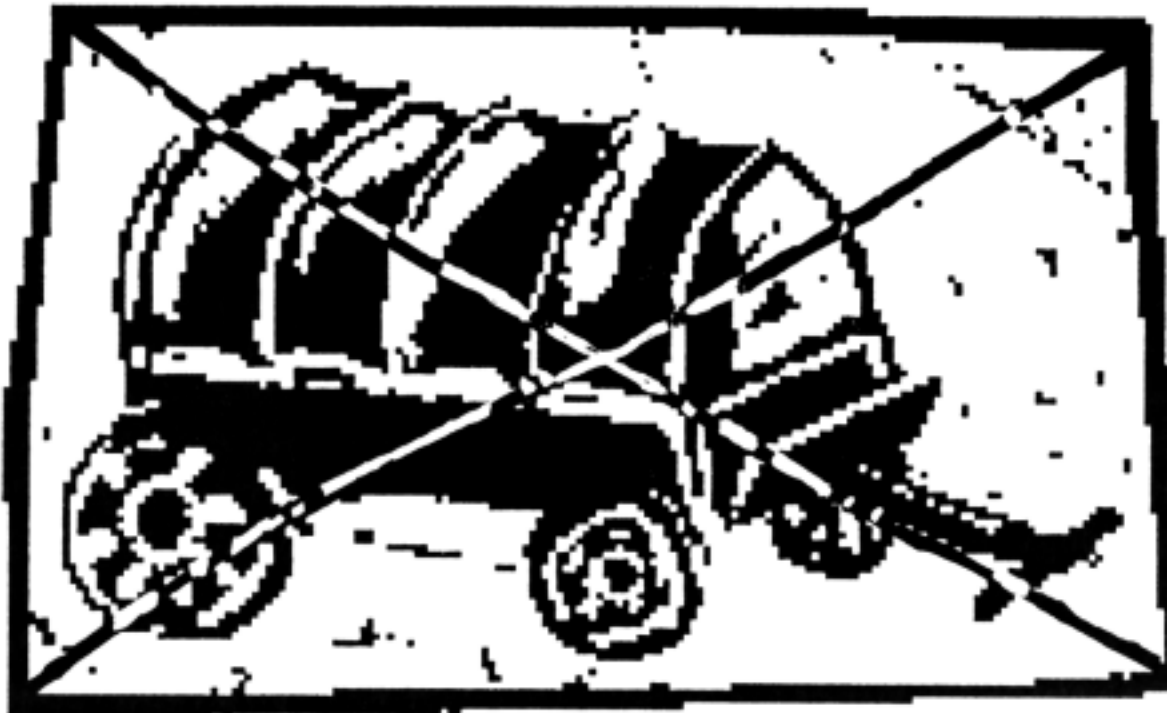
I tried working subversively. I could not, cannot, not even by approximation, fit word to the suffering of my black and brown compatriots (although writing is that extension of experience which allows you to be the other); and is the search for freedom and justice among whites (in general) not still too feeble to be able to speak, as a Whitey, of *'onse stryd'*? What I could and did try and do (as many of you here also), was on the one hand to undermine the petrified positions, the cultural stratagems and institutions, the retarded conceptions of the dominant Afrikaans culture, and on the other hand to sharpen the knowledge of the implications of the South African regime. At the outset of my intention was perhaps not moralistic, though implicitly it must have been a search for ethics, and I have to confess that I may be totally naive in my belief that a broader awareness must

lead to a greater sense of responsibility. Here I ought to admit to my Buddhist convictions that ignorance is a sin, and that a growing consciousness will constitute the grounds for transformation.

I attempted trespassing upon areas which may well fall outside the fields of concern of most South Africans. I am talking of Zen, surrealism, Pan-Africanism... Does that make of me a typical Western intellectual? Like bloody hell! (*Se moer, man!*) But I refuse to see my horizons shrink one single hairline, even in the name of the urgency and the specificity of the struggle. One pointedness is not contradiction with a scope of thinking. We are also universalists, inheritors of the cultural riches and diversity of humanity. *Mits dese trap ek maar net in die voetspore van 'n Soyinka, 'n Ngugi, 'n Achebe, 'n Laboutansi, 'n Kateb Yacine, n Sjeig Anta Diop, 'n Hambate Ba, 'n Tutuola, 'n Sembene Ousmane, om slegs enkele Afrikane te noem. Dit is 'n ander sin van skrywe, the plural name of writing.*

Dit moet seker erken word dat ek weinig interaksie het met my mede Suid-Afrikaners. Nou die dag nog het a wolf dit gestel dat ek eintlik irrelevant is, 'n soort skoenlapper anargis of 'n bourgeois libertyn, 'n literêre dandy, 'n ballas-krappende uitgewekene wat op buitelandse verhoë pronk met die geleende vere van 'n volk se droefenis om sodoende die sensasie-beluste paternaliste jags te maak en natuurlik klinkende

munnt daaruit te slaan. Well yes, there was indeed a time when I (and others) were thought to be more disruptive. But the situation has meanwhile changed. First of all because we can no longer pretend that the longed for modifications will come about by a change in the hearts and minds of those who rule South Africa. The essential battle is not for the high ground of the Afrikaner heart – to think thus would be Afrikanocentric – although Afrikaners must, and I'm sure, will ever more, become part of the transformation, as South Africans.



As a writer I shall continue attempting to plot and chase the shifts in power and conceptions; to help keep alive the dream of a free, democratic, decent and just South Africa.

Drawings by Brett Murray

The real transformation has already taken place in attitudes, in power relationships (the state of emergency is a victory of the people), in awareness (which is why you are here today), in dimensions and modes of struggle.

How does the Afrikaner Become part of the majority? (Because there is a conscious majority, however

diverse in its constituent components there is life after apartheid.) Beware of wishful thinking! We can shape our destiny as we are being shaped by historical forces. We have the chance of entering history, and not to be mere rejects, to become the subjects of history, not mere objects thereof. But to every birth its blood. Entering the struggle is the means of becoming a South African. In entering the true homeland of expanding solidarity, we may indeed write ourselves.

We are tied by the bonds of horror and the history of blood. Listening to

the poetry of the other night, I was struck by the recurrence of images of blood. I then remembered the blood and the soil references of our crypto-fascist ancestors, the blood with which the pioneers claimed to have bought the land, the supposedly 'mixed blood' in the veins of those who are the offspring of our marriage with Africa, the bad blood then and now between warring factions, the red blood of suffering, sacrifice, and ultimately revolution, the thin blood

of exile ... But we are also linked by the struggle and our adherence to the values crystallized in the struggle. Those constitute our specific universality, our contribution to the sum total of human aspirations. They are what make up our awareness of a South African cultural identity.

Which are these values? To name a few: anti-racism; non-racialism; one country, one land, one people –

Our contribution is our rich diversity, our recognition of the need to go beyond ourselves.

this really means the inviolability of our shared heritage; majority discipline; anti-chauvinism; the recognition of the example of workers' experience; the shift away from elitism; the road to socialism; a creative and transformative and healing view of the role of culture; third-worldism; Pan-Africanism; the practice of dialogue and tolerance and fellow-responsibility and democracy. For my part, I'd like to see more humanism, Marxism, self-reliance ... but I'm just greedy.

As a writer I shall continue attempting to plot and chase the shifts in power and conceptions; to help keep alive the dream of a free, democratic, decent and just South Africa; to help foster the notion of the ethics of resistance; of the need to build democracy, to elicit dialogue, to test ideas, to promote resilience, to nurture revolutionary patience; to ask for respect for the texture of consciousness; to shore up international solidarity; to shore up fire...

Our contribution is our rich diversity, our recognition of the need to go beyond ourselves, to enlarge, embrace; draw forward, maybe even to blend extremes whilst keeping the common good in mind.

I think I'm some way along this road. *Gee die hond nog net so n bitjie wind.* Nobody here wants to be prescriptive, but if you, my fellow Afrikaners, were to ask me for advice, I'd say – rather aphoristically and in a haphazard and incomplete fashion: He who travels alone travels fastest, but together we shall go further. You have as much cause, perhaps more, to be involved in the

process of transformation as those against whom apartheid is aimed. You need nobody's permission to join the struggle. Guilt feelings and self-flagellation are self-indulgent sentiments, but an understanding of responsibilities gets you moving. It is in walking that you learn how to walk. Watch out for exultation of the hair shirt. Clear out the cellars. Watch out for the corruption of suffering, of self-pity. Don't go and sell yourselves as brave warriors.

To be against apartheid is normal, not heroic. Recognise the hidden racism of the white outside world who will carry you on the hands and sing praises to your courage, whilst conveniently forgetting your black comrades. Don't profit from anti-racism. Don't turn South Africa into an experimental terrain for your writer's fancies and fantasies. Keep moving, way beyond liberation.

Nothing is gained or established forever, no solution or form can be permanent, so remain vigilant. Probably nothing is lost forever either. It is a bastard to be a human being, but a dog doesn't even get a sip of wine. Know then that you, we, are privileged far beyond what we deserve, because we share in the writing and the struggling and in Africa. Remember that ours is the most noble cause that mankind could imagine, well worth living for. Go well.

As for me, an off-white Afrikaans-speaking South African African living temporarily abroad, I shall lift my nose to the wind: there's a smell of victory in the air. But just in case I get above my station, as a scribbler, I'd like to quote to you, finally, a rough approximation of a Brecht poem:

VRAE VAN 'N LESENDE ARBEIDER

Wie het Thebes van die sewe torings gebou?
 In die boeke staan die name van konings.
 Het die konings die rotsblokke nader gesleep?
 En Babilon wat verskeie kere vernietig is -
 wie het dit so dikwels weeropgetrek?
 In watter huise
 van die goudstralende Lima het die bouwerkers gewoon?
 Waarheen het die messelaars saans gegaan
 Wanneer 'n stuk muur van Sjina voltooi is?
 Grootse Rome is vol triomfboë. Wie het dit opgerig?
 Oor wie het die Cesars geseë vier?
 Was daar
 in die veels besonge Bisantium dan slegs paleise
 vir die inwoners? Selfs in saamgeprate Atlantis
 het die besopenes snags om hulle slave gebrul.

Die jong Alexander het Indië verower.
 Hy alleen?
 Cesar het die Galliers verslaan.
 Was daar ten minste 'n kok saam met hom?
 Flip van Spanje het gehuil toe sy vloot onder die branders verdwyn. Het niemand anders dan nie?
 Frederik die Tweede was die oorwinnaar van die
 Sewejarige Oorlog. Wie behalwe hy het ook gewen?

Elke bladsy 'n sege
 Wie het die oorwinningsmaal gekook?

Elke tien jaar 'n heldefiguur.
 Wie het die gelag betaal?

So baie berigte.
 So baie vrae.

Breyten Breytenbach