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[Living in the Interregnum By Nadine Gordimer](#)

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Police files are our only claim to immortality.
—Milan Kundera

I live at 6,000 feet in a society whirling, stamping, swaying with the force of revolutionary change. The vision is heady; the image of the demonic dance is accurate, not romantic: an image of actions springing from emotion, knocking deliberation aside. The city is Johannesburg, the country South Africa, and the time the last years of the colonial era in Africa.

It's inevitable that nineteenth-century colonialism should finally come to its end there, because there it reached its ultimate expression, open in the legalized land- and mineral-grabbing, open in the labor exploitation of indigenous peoples, open in the constitutionalized, institutionalized racism that was concealed by the British under the pious notion of uplift, the French and Portuguese under the sly notion of selective assimilation. An extraordinarily obdurate crossbreed of Dutch, German, English, French in the South African white settler population produced a bluntness that unveiled everyone's refined white racism: the flags of European civilization dropped, and there it was, unashamedly, the ugliest creation of man, and they baptized the thing in the Dutch Reformed Church, called it apartheid, coining the ultimate term for every manifestation, over the ages, in many countries, of race prejudice. Every country could see its semblances there; and most peoples.

The sun that never set over one or other of the nineteenth-century colonial empires of the world is going down finally in South Africa. Since the black uprisings of the mid-Seventies, coinciding with the independence of Mozambique and Angola, and later that of Zimbabwe, the past has begun rapidly to drop out of sight, even for those who would have liked to go on living in it. Historical coordinates don't fit life any longer; new ones, where they exist, have couplings not to the rulers, but to the ruled. It is not for nothing that I chose as an epigraph for my most lately written novel a quotation from Gramsci: "The old is dying, and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum there arises a great diversity of morbid symptoms."

In this interregnum, I and all my countrymen and women are living. Ten thousand miles from home, I speak to you out of it. I am going, quite frequently, to let events personally experienced as I was thinking toward or writing this paper interrupt theoretical flow, because this interaction—this essential disruption, this breaking in upon the existential coherence we call concept—is the very state of being I must attempt to convey. I have never before spoken publicly from so personal a point of view. Apart from the usual Joycean reasons of secrecy and cunning—to which I would add jealous hoarding of private experience for transmutation into fiction—there has been for me a peculiarly South African taboo.

In the official South African consciousness, the ego is white: it has always seen all South Africa as ordered around it. Even the ego that seeks to abdicate this alienation does so in an assumption of its own salvation that in itself expresses ego and alienation. And the Western world press, itself over-whelmingly white, constantly feeds this ego from its own. Visiting journalists, parliamentarians, congressmen and congresswomen come to South Africa to ask whites what is going to happen there. They meet blacks through whites; they rarely take the time and trouble, on their own initiative, to encounter more than the man who comes into the hotel bedroom to take away the empty beer bottles. With the exception of films made clandestinely by South African political activists, black and white, about resistance events, most foreign television documentaries, while condemning the whites out of their own mouths, are nevertheless preoccupied with what will happen to whites when the apartheid regime goes.

I have shunned the arrogance of interpreting my country through the private life that, as Theodor Adorno puts it, “drags on only as an appendage of the social process” in a time and place of which I am a part. Now I am going to break the inhibition or destroy the privilege of privacy, whichever way you look at it. I have to offer you myself as my most closely observed specimen from the interregnum; yet I remain a writer, not a public speaker: nothing I say here will be as true as my fiction.

There is another reason for confession. The particular segment of South African society to which I belong, by the color of my skin, whether I like it or not, represents a crisis that has a particular connection with the Western world, to which you in this audience belong. I think that may become self-evident before I arrive at the point of explication; it is not, I want to assure you, the old admitted complicity in the slave trade or the price of raw materials.

I have used the term “segment” in defining my place in South African society because within the white section of that society—less than one fifth of the total population now, predicted to drop to one seventh by the year 2000[1]—there is a segment preoccupied, 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. I cannot give you numbers for this segment, but in measure of some sort of faith in the possibility of structuring society humanly, in the possession of skills and intellect to devote to this end, there is something to offer the future. How to offer it is our preoccupation. Since skills, technical and intellectual, can be bought in markets other than those of the vanquished colonial power, although they are important as a commodity ready to hand, they do not constitute a claim on the future.

That claim rests on something else: how to offer one’s self.

In the eyes of the black majority which will rule Azania, whites of former South Africa will have to redefine themselves in a new collective life within new structures. From the all-white Parliament to the all-white country club and the separate “white” television channels, it is not a matter of blacks taking over white institutions, it is one of conceiving of institutions—from nursery schools to government departments—that reflect a societal structure vastly different from that built to the specifications of white power and privilege. This vast difference will be evident even if capitalism survives, since South Africa’s capitalism, like South Africa’s whites-only democracy, has been unlike anyone else’s. For example, free enterprise among us is for whites only, since black capitalists may trade only, and with many limitations on their “free” enterprise, in black ghettos.

A more equitable distribution of wealth may be enforced by laws. The hierarchy of perception that white institutions and living habits implant throughout daily experience in every white, from childhood, can be changed only by whites themselves, from within. The weird ordering of the collective life, in South Africa, has slipped its special contact lens into the eyes of whites; we actually see blacks differently, which includes not seeing, not noticing their unnatural absence, since there are so many perfectly ordinary venues of daily life—the cinema, for instance—where blacks have never been allowed in, and so one has forgotten that they could be, might be, encountered there.

I am writing in my winter quarters, at an old deal table on a verandah in the sun; out of the corner of my eye I see a piece

of junk mail, the brochure of a chain bookstore, assuring me of constantly expanding service and showing the staff of a newly opened branch—Ms. So-and-So, Mr. Such-and-Such, and (one black face) “Gladys.” What a friendly, informal form of identification in an “equal opportunity” enterprise! Gladys is seen by fellow workers, by the photographer who noted down names, and—it is assumed—readers, quite differently from the way the white workers are seen. I gaze at her as they do.... She is simply “Gladys,” the convenient handle by which she is taken up by the white world, used and put down again, like the glass the king drinks from in Rilke’s poem.[2] Her surname, her African name, belongs to Soweto, which her smiling white companions are less likely ever to visit than New York or London.

* * *

The successfully fitted device in the eye of the beholder is something the average white South African is not conscious of, for apartheid is above all a habit; the unnatural seems natural—a far from banal illustration of Hannah Arendt’s banality of evil. The segment of the white population to which I belong has become highly conscious of a dependency on distorted vision induced since childhood; and we are aware that with the inner eye “we have seen too much ever to be innocent.”[3] But this kind of awareness, represented by white guilt in the 1950s, has been sent by us off into the sunset, since, as Czeslaw Milosz puts it, “guilt saps modern man’s belief in the value of his own perceptions and judgments,” and we have need of ours. We have to believe in our ability to find new perceptions, and our ability to judge their truth. Along with weeping over what’s done, we’ve given up rejoicing in what Günter Grass calls headbirths, those Athenian armchair deliveries of the future presented to blacks by whites.

Not all blacks even concede that whites can have any part in the new that cannot yet be born. An important black leader who does, Bishop Desmond Tutu, defines that participation:

This is what I consider to be the place of the white man in this—popularly called—liberation struggle. I am firmly non-racial and so welcome the participation of all, both black and white, in the struggle for the new South Africa which must come whatever the cost. But I want to state that at this stage the leadership of the struggle must be firmly in black hands. They must determine what will be the priorities and the strategy of the struggle. Whites unfortunately have the habit of taking over and usurping the leadership and taking the crucial decisions, largely, I suppose, because of the head start they had in education and experience of this kind. The point is that however much they want to identify with blacks it is an existential fact... that they have not really been victims of this baneful oppression and exploitation. It is a divide that can’t be crossed and that must give blacks a primacy in determining the course and goal of the struggle. Whites must be willing to follow.[4]

Blacks must learn to talk; 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. Does it sound like an abdication of the will? That is because you who live in a democracy are accustomed to exerting the right to make abstract statements of principle for which, at least, the structures of practical realization exist; the symbolic action of the like-minded in signing a letter to a newspaper or in lobbying Congress is a reminder of constitutional rights to be invoked. For us, Tutu’s premise enjoins a rousing of the will, a desperate shaking into life of the faculty of rebellion against unjust laws that has been outlawed by the dying power, and faculties of renewal that often are rebuffed by the power that is struggling to emerge. The rider Desmond Tutu didn’t add to his statement is that although white support is expected to be active, it is also expected that whites’ different position in the still-standing structures of the old society will require actions that, while complementary to those of blacks, must be different from the blacks’. Whites are expected to find their own forms of struggle, which can only sometimes coincide with those of blacks.

That there can be, at least, this coincident cooperation is reassuring; that, at least, should be a straightforward form of activism. But it is not; for in this time of morbid symptoms there are contradictions within the black liberation struggle itself, based not only, as would be expected, on the opposing ideological alignments of the world outside, but on the moral confusion of claims—on land, on peoples—from the pre-colonial past in relation to the unitary state the majority of blacks and the segment of whites are avowed to. So, for whites, it is not simply a matter of follow-the-leader behind blacks; it’s taking on, as blacks do, choices to be made out of confusion, empirically, pragmatically, ideologically, or idealistically about the practical moralities of the struggle. This is the condition, imposed by history, if you like, in those areas of action where black and white participation coincides.

3.

I am at a public meeting at the Johannesburg City Hall one night, after working at this paper during the day. The meeting is held under the auspices of the Progressive Federal Party, the official opposition in the all-white South African Parliament.

The issue is a deal being made between the South African government and the kingdom of Swaziland whereby 3,000 square miles of South African territory and 850,000 South African citizens, part of the Zulu “homeland” KwaZulu, would be given to Swaziland. The principal speakers are Chief Gatsha Buthelezi, leader of 5.5 million Zulus, Bishop Desmond Tutu, and Mr. Ray Swart, a white liberal and a leader of the Progressive Federal Party. Chief Buthelezi has consistently refused to take so-called independence for KwaZulu, but—although declaring himself for the banned African National Congress—by accepting all stages of so-called self-government up to the final one has transgressed the nonnegotiable principle of the African National Congress, a unitary South Africa.

Bishop Tutu upholds the principle of a unitary South Africa. The Progressive Federal Party’s constitution provides for a federal structure in a new, nonracial South Africa, recognizing as de facto entities the “homelands” whose creation by the apartheid government the party nevertheless opposes. Also on the platform are members of the Black Sash, the white women’s organization that has taken a radical stand as a white ally of the black struggle; these women support a unitary South Africa. In the audience of about two thousand, a small number of whites is lost among exuberant, ululating, applauding Zulus. Order—and what’s more, amicability—is kept by Buthelezi’s marshals, equipped, beneath the garb of a private militia drawn from his tribal Inkatha movement, with Zulu muscle in place of guns.

What is Bishop Tutu doing here? He doesn’t recognize the “homelands.”

What are the Black Sash women doing here? They don’t recognize the “homelands.”

What is the Progressive Federal Party doing—a party firmly dedicated to constitutional action only—hosting a meeting where the banned black liberation salute and battle cry—”Amandhla! Awethu!”: “Power—to the people!”—is shaking the columns of municipal doric, and a black man’s tribal army instead of the South African police is keeping the peace?

What am I doing here, applauding Gatsha Buthelezi and Ray Swart? I don’t recognize the homelands nor do I support a federal South Africa.

* * *

I was there—they were there—because, removed from its areas of special interest (KwaZulu’s “national” concern with land and people belonging to the Zulus), the issue was yet another government device to buy support for a proposed “constellation” of southern African states gathered protectively around the present South African regime, and to dispossess black South Africans of their South African citizenship, thus reducing the ratio of black to white population.

Yet the glow of my stinging palms cooled; what a paradox I had accommodated in myself! Moved by a display of tribal loyalty when I believe in black unity, applauding a “homelands” leader, above all, scandalized by the excision of part of a “homeland” from South Africa when the “homelands” policy is itself the destruction of the country as an entity. But these are the confusions blacks have to live with, and if I am making any claim to accompany them beyond apartheid, so must I.

The state of interregnum is a state of Hegel’s disintegrated consciousness, of contradictions. It is from its internal friction that energy somehow must be struck, for us whites; energy to break the vacuum of which we are subconsciously aware, for however hated and shameful the collective life of apartheid and its structures has been to us, there is, now, the unadmitted fear of being without structures. The interregnum is not only between two social orders but between two identities, one known and discarded, the other unknown and undetermined.

Whatever the human cost of the liberation struggle whatever “Manichaeian poisons”[5] must be absorbed as stimulants in the interregnum, the black knows he will be at home, at last, in the future. The white who has declared himself or herself for that future, who belongs to the white segment that was never at home in white supremacy, does not know whether he will find his home at last. It is assumed, not only by racists, that this depends entirely on the willingness of blacks to let him in; but we, if we live out our situation consciously, proceeding from the Pascalian wager that that home of the white African exists, know that this depends also on our finding our way there out of the perceptual clutter of curled photographs of master and servant relationships, the 78 RPMs of history repeating the conditioning of the past.

A black man I may surely call my friend because we have survived a time when he did not find it possible to accept a white’s friendship, and a time when I didn’t think I could accept that he should decide when that time was past, said to me this year, “Whites have to learn to struggle.” It was not an admonition but a sincere encouragement. Expressed in political terms, the course of our friendship, his words and his attitude, signify the phasing out or passing usefulness of the extreme

wing of the Black Consciousness movement, with its separatism of the past ten years, and the return to the tenets of the most broadly based and prestigious of black movements, the banned African National Congress. These are non-racialism, belief that race oppression is part of the class struggle, and recognition that it is possible for whites to opt out of class and race privilege and identify with black liberation.

My friend was not, needless to say, referring to those whites, from Abraham Fischer to Helen Joseph and Nell Aggett, who have risked and in some cases lost their lives in the political struggle with apartheid. It would be comfortable to assume that he was not referring, either, to the articulate outriders of the white segment, intellectuals, writers, lawyers, students, church and civil rights progressives, who keep the whips of protest cracking. But I know he was, after all, addressing those of us belonging to the outriders on whose actions the newspapers report and the secret police keep watch, as we prance back and forth ever closer to the fine line between being concerned citizens and social revolutionaries. Perhaps the encouragement was meant for us as well as the base of the segment—those in the audience but not up on the platform, young people and their parents' generation, who must look for some effective way, in the living of their own personal lives, to join the struggle for liberation from racism.

For a long time, such whites have felt that we are doing all we can, short of violence—a terrible threshold none of us is willing to cross, though aware that all this may mean is that it will be left to blacks to do so. But now blacks are asking a question to which every white must have a personal answer, on an issue that cannot be dealt with by a show of hands at a meeting or a signature to a petition; an issue that comes home and enters every family. Blacks are now asking why whites who believe apartheid is something that must be abolished, not defended, continue to submit to army call-up.

We whites have assumed that army service was an example of Czeslaw Milosz's "powerlessness of the individual involved in a mechanism that works independently of his will." If you refuse military service your only options are to leave the country or go to prison. Conscientious objection is not recognized in South Africa at present; legislation may establish it in some form soon, but if this is to be, is working as an army clerk not functioning as part of the war machine?

These are reasons enough for all—except a handful of men who choose prison on religious rather than on political grounds—to go into the South African army despite their opposition to apartheid. These are not reasons enough for them to do so, on the condition on which blacks can accept whites' dedication to mutual liberation. Between black and white attitudes to struggle there stands the overheard remark of a young black woman: "I break the law because I am alive." We whites have still to thrust the spade under the roots of our lives; for most of us, including myself, struggle is still something that has a place. But for blacks it is everywhere or nowhere.

4.

What is poetry which does not save nations or peoples?

—Czeslaw Milosz

I have already delineated my presence here on the scale of a minority within a minority. Now I shall reduce my claim to significance still further. A white; a dissident white; a white writer. 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.

For longer than the first half of this century the experience of blacks in South Africa was known to the world as it was interpreted by whites. The first widely read imaginative works exploring the central fact of South African life—racism—were written in the 1920s by whites, William Plomer and Sarah Gertrude Millin. What have been recognized now as the classics of early black literature, the works of Herbert and Rolfes Dhlomo, Thomas Mofolo, and Sol Plaatje, were read by the literate section of the South African black population, were little known among South African whites, and unknown outside South Africa. These writers' moralistic essays dealt with contemporary black life, but their fiction was mainly historical, a desperate attempt to secure, in art forms of an imposed culture, an identity and history discounted and torn up by that culture.

In the Fifties, urban blacks—Es'kia Mphahlele, Lewis Nkosi, Can Themba, Bloke Modisane, following Peter Abrahams—began to write in English only, and about the urban industrialized experience in which black and white chafed against

one another across color barriers. The work of these black writers interested both black and white at that improvised level known as intellectual, in South Africa: aware would be a more accurate term, designating awareness that the white middle-class establishment was not, as it claimed, the paradigm of South African life and white culture was not the definitive South African culture. Somewhere at the black writers' elbows, as they wrote, was the joggle of independence coming to one colonized country after another, north of South Africa. But they wrote ironically of their lives under oppression; as victims, not fighters. And even those black writers who were political activists, like the novelist Alex la Guma and the poet Dennis Brutus, made of their ideologically channeled bitterness not more than the Aristotelian catharsis, creating in the reader empathy with the oppressed rather than rousing rebellion against repression.

The fiction of white writers also produced the Aristotelian effect—and included in the price of hardback or paperback a catharsis of white guilt, for writer and reader. (It was at this stage, incidentally, that reviewers abroad added their dime's worth of morbid symptoms to our own by creating "courageous" as a literary value for South African writers....) The subject of both black and white writers—which was the actual entities of South African life instead of those defined by separate entrances for white and black—was startlingly new and important; whatever any writer, black or white, could dare to explore there was considered ground gained for advance in the scope of all writers. There had been no iconoclastic tradition; only a single novel, William Plomer's *Turbott Wolfe*, written thirty years before, whose understanding of what our subject really was was still a decade ahead of our time when he phrased the total apothegm: "The native question—it's not a question, it's an answer."

In the Seventies black writers began to give that answer—for themselves. It had been vociferous in the consciousness of resistance politics, manifest in political action—black mass organizations, the African National Congress, the Pan-Africanist Congress, and others—in the Sixties. But except at the oral folk-literature level of "freedom" songs, it was an answer that had not come, yet, from the one source that had never been in conquered territory, not even when industrialization conscripted where military conquest had already devastated: 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.

With the outlawing of black political organizations, the banning of freedom songs and platform speeches, there came from blacks a changed attitude toward culture, and toward literature as verbal, easily accessible culture. Many black writers had been in conflict—and challenged by political activists: are you going to fight or write? Now they were told, in the rhetoric of the time: there is no conflict if you make your pen our people's weapon.

The Aristotelian catharsis, relieving black self-pity and white guilt, was clearly not the mode in which black writers could give the answer black resistance required from them. The iconoclastic mode, though it had its function where race fetishists had set up their china idols in place of "heathen" wooden ones, was too ironic and detached, other-directed. Black people had to be brought back to themselves. Black writers arrived, out of their own situation, at Brecht's discovery: their audience needed to be educated to be astonished at the circumstances under which they functioned.[6] They began to show blacks that their living conditions are their story.

South Africa does not lack its Chernyshevskys to point out that the highroad of history is not the sidewalks of fashionable white Johannesburg's suburban shopping malls any more than it was that of the Nevsky Prospekt.[7] In the bunks of migratory laborers, the 4 AM queues between one-room family and factory, the drunken dreams argued round braziers is the history of blacks' defeat by conquest, the scale of the lack of value placed on them by whites, the degradation of their own acquiescence in that value; the salvation of revolt that is there, too, a match dropped by the builders of every ghetto, waiting to be struck.

The reason for the difficulty, even boredom, many whites experience when reading stories or watching plays by blacks in which, as they say, "nothing happens," is that the experience conveyed is not "the development of actions" but "the representation of conditions," a mode of artistic revelation and experience for those in whose life dramatic content is in its conditions.[8]

This mode of writing was the beginning of the black writer's function as a revolutionary; it was also the beginning of a conception of himself differing from that of the white writer's self-image. The black writer's consciousness of himself as a writer comes now from his participation in those living conditions; in the judgment of his people, that is what makes him a writer—the authority of the experience itself, not the way he perceives it and transforms it into words. Tenets of criticism are accordingly based on the critic's participation in those same living conditions, not on his ability to judge how well the

writer has achieved “the disposition of natural material to a formal end that shall enlighten the imagination”—this definition of art by Anthony Burgess would be regarded by many blacks as arising from premises based on white living conditions and the thought patterns these determine: an arabesque of smoke from an expensive cigar. If we have our Chernyshevskys we are short on Herzens. Literary standards and standards of human justice are hopelessly confused in the interregnum. Bad enough that in the case of white South African writers some critics at home and abroad are afraid to reject sensationalism and crass banality of execution so long as the subject of a work is “courageous.” For black writers the syllogism of talent goes like this: all blacks are brothers; all brothers are equal; therefore you cannot be a better writer than I am. The black writer who questions the last proposition is betraying the first two.

As a fellow writer, I myself find it difficult to accept, even for the cause of black liberation to which I am committed as a white South African citizen, that a black writer of imaginative power, whose craftsmanship is equal to what he has to say, must not be regarded above someone who has emerged—admirably—from political imprisonment with a scrap of paper on which there is jotted an alliterative arrangement of protest slogans. For me, the necessity for the black writer to find imaginative modes equal to his existential reality goes without question. But I cannot accept that he must deny, as proof of solidarity with his people’s struggle, the torturous inner qualities of prescience and perception that will always differentiate him from others and which make of him—a writer. I cannot accept, either, that he should have served on him, as the black writer now has, an orthodoxy—a kit of emotive phrases, an unwritten index of subjects, a typology.

The problem is that agitprop, not recognized under that or any other name, has become the first contemporary art form that many black South Africans feel they can call their own. It fits their anger; and this is taken as proof that it is an organic growth of black creation freeing itself, instead of the old shell that it is, inhabited many times by the anger of others. I know that agitprop binds the artist with the means by which it aims to free the minds of the people. I can see, now, how often it thwarts both the black writer’s common purpose to master his art and revolutionary purpose to change the nature of art, create new norms and forms out of and for a people recreating themselves. But how can my black fellow writer agree with me, even admit the conflict I set up in him by these statements? There are those who secretly believe, but few who would assert publicly, with Gabriel García Márquez: “The duty of a writer—the revolutionary duty, if you like—is simply to write well.” The black writer in South Africa feels he has to accept the criteria of his people because in no other but the community of black deprivation is he in possession of selfhood. It is only through unreserved, exclusive identification with blacks that he can break the alienation of being “other” for nearly 350 years in the white-ordered society, and only through submitting to the beehive category of “cultural worker,” programmed, that he can break the alienation of the artist/elitist in the black mass of industrial workers and peasants.

And, finally, he can toss the conflict back into my lap with Camus’s words: “Is it possible to be in history while still referring to values which go beyond it?”

The black writer is “in history” and its values threaten to force out the transcendent ones of art. The white, as writer and South African, does not know his place “in history” at this stage, in this time.

There are two absolutes in my life. One is that racism is evil—human damnation in the Old Testament sense—and no compromises, as well as sacrifices, should be too great in the fight against it. The other is that a writer is a being in whose sensibility is fused what Lukács calls the duality of inwardness and outside world, and he must never be asked to sunder this union. The co-existence of these absolutes often seems irreconcilable within one life, for me. In another country, another time, they would present no conflict because they would operate in unrelated parts of existence; in South Africa now they have to be coordinates for which the coupling must be found. The morality of life and the morality of art have broken out of their categories in social flux. If you cannot reconcile them, they cannot be kept from one another’s throats, within you.

For me, Lukács’s “divinatory-intuitive grasping of the unattained and therefore inexpressible meaning of life” is what a writer, poorly evolved for the task as he is, is made for. As fish that swim under the weight of many dark fathoms look like any other fish but on careful examination are found to have no eyes, so writers, looking pretty much like other human beings, but moving deep under the surface of human lives, have at least some faculties of supra-observation and hyperperception not known to others. If a writer does not go down and use these—why, he’s just a blind fish.

Exactly—says the new literary orthodoxy: he doesn’t see what is happening in the visible world, among the people, on the level of their action, where battle is done with racism every day. On the contrary, say I, he brings back with him the thematic life-material that underlies and motivates their actions. “Art lies at the heart of all events,” Joseph Brodsky writes.

It is from there, in the depths of being, that the most important intuition of revolutionary faith comes: the people know what to do, before the leaders. It was from that level that the yearning of black school-children for a decent education was changed into a revolt in 1976; their strength came from the deep silt of repression and the abandoned wrecks of uprisings that sank there before they were born. It was from that level that an action of ordinary people for their own people made a few lines low down on a newspaper page, the other day: when some migrant contract workers from one of the “homelands” were being laid off at a factory, workers with papers of permanent residence in the “white” area asked to be dismissed in their place, since the possession of papers meant they could at least work elsewhere, whereas the migrant workers would be sent back to the “homelands,” jobless.

“Being an ‘author’ has been unmasked as a role that, whether conformist or not, remains inescapably responsible to a given order.” Nowhere in the world is Susan Sontag’s statement truer than in South Africa. The white writer has to make the decision whether to remain responsible to the dying white order—and even as dissident, if he goes no further than that position, he remains negatively within the white order—or to declare himself positively as answerable to the order struggling to be born. And to declare himself for the latter is only the beginning; as it is for whites in a less specialized position, only more so. He has to try to find a way to reconcile the irreconcilable within himself, establish his relation to the culture of a new kind of posited community, nonracial but somehow conceived with and led by blacks.

I have entered into this commitment with trust and a sense of discovering reality, coming alive in a new way—I believe the novels and stories I have written in the last seven or eight years reflect this—for a South Africa in which white middle-class values and mores contradict realities has long become the unreality, to me. Yet I admit that I am, indeed, determined to find my place “in history” while still referring as a writer to the values that are beyond history. I shall never give them up.

Can the artist go through the torrent with his precious bit of talent tied up in a bundle on his head? I don’t know yet. I can only report that the way to begin entering history out of a dying white regime is through setbacks, encouragements and rebuffs from others, and frequent disappointments in oneself. A necessary learning process....

5.

I take a break from writing.

I am in a neighboring black country at a conference on “Culture and Resistance.” It is being held outside South Africa because exiled artists and those of us who still live and work in South Africa cannot meet at home. Some white artists have not come because, not without reason, they fear the consequences of being seen, by South African secret police spies, in the company of exiles who belong to political organizations banned in South Africa, notably the African National Congress; some are not invited because the organizers regard their work and political views as reactionary. I am dubbed the blacks’ darling by some whites back home because I have been asked to give the keynote address at a session devoted to literature; but I wonder if those who think me favored would care to take the flak I know will be coming at me from those corners of the hall where black separatists group. They are here not so much out of democratic right as out of black solidarity; paradoxically, since the conference is in itself a declaration that in the conviction of participants and organizers the liberation struggle and post-apartheid culture are nonracial. Yet there is that bond of living conditions that lassos all blacks within a loyalty containing, without constraining or resolving, bitter political differences.

Do I think white writers should write about blacks?

The artless question from the floor disguises both a personal attack on my work and an edict publicly served upon white writers by the same orthodoxy that proscribes for blacks. In the case of whites, it proscribes the creation of black characters—and by the same token, flipped head-to-tails, with which the worth of black writers is measured: the white writer does not share the total living conditions of blacks, therefore he must not write about them. There are some whites—not writers, I believe—in the hall who share this view. In the ensuing tense exchange I reply that there are whole areas of human experience, in work situations—on farms, in factories, in the city, for example—where black and white have been observing one another and interacting for nearly 350 years. I challenge my challenger to deny that there are things we know about each other that are never spoken, but are there to be written—and received with the amazement and consternation, on both sides, of having been found out. Within those areas of experience, limited but intensely revealing, there is every reason why white should create black and black white characters. For myself, I have created black characters in my fiction: whether I have done so successfully or not is for the reader to decide. What’s certain is that there is no representation of our social reality without that strange area of our lives in which we have knowledge of one another.

I do not acquit myself so honestly a little later, when persecution of South African writers by banning is discussed. Someone links this with the persecution of writers in the Soviet Union, and a young man leaps to reply that the percentage of writers to population is higher in the Soviet Union than in any other part of the world and that Soviet writers work “in a trench of peace and security.”

The aptness of the bizarre image, the hell for the haven he wishes to illustrate, brings no smiles behind hands among us; beyond the odd word-substitution is, indeed, a whole arsenal of tormented contradictions that could explode the conference.

Someone says, out of silence, quietly and distinctly: “Bullshit.”

There is silence again. I don't take the microphone and tell the young man: there is not a contrast to be drawn between the Soviet Union's treatment of writers and that of South Africa, there is a close analogy—South Africa bans and silences writers just as the Soviet Union does, although we do not have resident censors in South African publishing houses and dissident writers are not sent to mental hospitals. I am silent. I am silent because, in the debates of the interregnum, any criticism of the communist system is understood as a defense of the capitalist system which has brought forth the pact of capitalism and racism that is apartheid, with its treason trials to match Stalin's trials, its detentions of dissidents to match Soviet detentions, its banishment and brutal uprooting of communities and individual lives to match, if not surpass, the gulag. Repression in South Africa has been and is being lived through; repression elsewhere is an account in a newspaper, book, or film. The choice, for blacks, cannot be distanced into any kind of objectivity: they believe in the existence of the lash they feel. Nothing could be less than better than what they have known as the “peace and security” of capitalism. [9]
* * *

I was a coward and often shall be one again, in my actions and statements as a citizen of the interregnum; it is a place of shifting ground, forecast for me in the burning slag heaps of coal mines we children used to ride across with furiously pumping bicycle pedals and flying hearts, in the Transvaal town where I was born.

And now the time has come to say I believe you stand on shifting ground with me, across ten thousand miles, not because I have brought it with me, but because in some strange pilgrimage through the choices of our age and their consequences the democratic left of the Western world has arrived by many planned routes and plodding detours at the same unforeseen destination. The ideal of social democracy seems to be an abandoned siding. There was consternation when, early this year, Susan Sontag had the great courage and honesty publicly to accuse herself and other American intellectuals of the left of having been afraid to condemn the repression committed by communist regimes because this was seen as an endorsement of America's war on Vietnam and collusion with brutish rightist regimes in Latin America.

This moral equivocation on the part of the American left draws parallel with mine at the writer's congress, far away in Africa, that she has given me the courage, at second hand, to confess. Riding handlebar to handlebar across the coal slag, both equivocations reveal the same fear. What is its meaning? It is fear of the abyss, of the greater interregnum of human hopes and spirit where against Sartre's socialism as the “horizon of the world” is silhouetted the chained outline of Poland's Solidarity, and all around, in the ditches of El Salvador, in the prisons of Argentina and South Africa, in the rootless habitations of Beirut, are the victims of Western standards of humanity.

I lie and the American left lies not because the truth is that Western capitalism has turned out to be just and humane, after all, but because we feel we have nothing to offer, now, except the rejection of it. Communism, in practice since 1917, has turned out not to be just or humane either; has failed, even more cruelly than capitalism. Does this mean we have to tell the poor and dispossessed of the world there is nothing to be done but turn back from communist bosses to capitalist bosses?

In South Africa's rich capitalist state stuffed with Western finance, 50,000 black children a year die from malnutrition and malnutrition-related diseases, while the West piously notes that communist states cannot provide their people with meat and butter. In two decades in South Africa, three million black people have been ejected from the context of their lives, forcibly removed from homes and jobs and “resettled” in arid, undeveloped areas by decree of a white government supported by Western capital. It is difficult to point out to black South Africans that the forms of Western capitalism are changing toward a broad social justice in the example of countries like Sweden, Denmark, Holland, and Austria, with their mixed welfare economies, when all black South Africans know of Western capitalism is political and economic terror. And this terror is not some relic of the colonial past; it is being financed now by Western democracies—concurrently with Western capitalist democracy's own evolution toward social justice.

The fact is, black South Africans and whites like myself no longer believe in the ability of Western capitalism to bring about social justice where we live. We see no evidence of that possibility in our history or our living present. Whatever the Western democracies have done for themselves, they have failed and are failing, in their great power and influence, to do for us. This is the answer to those who ask, “Why call for an alternative left? Why not an alternative capitalism?” Show us an alternative capitalism working from without for real justice in our country. What are the conditions attached to the International Monetary Fund loan of approximately \$1 billion that would oblige the South African government to stop population removals, to introduce a single standard of unsegregated education for all, to reinstate millions of black South Africans deprived of citizenship? [10]

If the disillusioned American left believes the injustices of communism cannot be reformed, must it be assumed that those of capitalism’s longer history, constantly monitored by the compassionate hand of liberalism, can be? The dictum I quoted earlier carried, I know, its supreme irony: most leaders in the communist world have betrayed the basic intuition of democracy, that “the people know what to do”—which is perhaps why Susan Sontag saw communism as fascism with a human face. But I think we can, contrary to her view, “distinguish” among communism and socialist democracies just as among Western democracies, and I am sure, beyond the heat of a platform statement, so does she. If the US and Sweden are not Botha’s South Africa, was Allende’s Chile East Germany, though both were in the socialist camp?

We of the left, everywhere, surely must “distinguish” to the point where we take up the real import of Sontag’s essential challenge to love truth enough, pick up the the blood-dirtied, shamed cause of the left, and attempt to recreate the left in accordance with what it was meant to be, not what sixty-five years of power-perversion have made of it. If, as she rightly says, once we did not understand the nature of communist tyranny, now we do, just as we have always understood at first hand the nature of capitalist tyranny. This is not a Manichaeon equation— which is god and which the devil? is not a question the evidence could easily decide, anyway—and it does not license withdrawal and hopelessness. We have surely learned by now something of where socialism goes wrong, which of its precepts are deadly dangerous and lead, in practice, to fascist control of labor and total suppression of individual freedom. Will the witchcraft of modern times not be exorcised, eventually, by this knowledge?

In the interregnum in which we co-exist, the American left—disillusioned by the failure of communism—needs to muster with the democratic left of the third world—living evidence of the failure of capitalism—the cosmic obstinacy to believe in and work toward the possibility of an alternative left, a democracy without the economic and military terror which exists, at present, in both left and right regimes. If we cannot, the possibility of real social democracy will die out, for our age, and who knows when, after what even bloodier age, it will be rediscovered.

There is no forgetting how we could live if only we could find the way. We must continue to be tormented by the ideal. This is where the responsibility of the American left—and liberals?—meets mine. Without the will to tramp toward that possibility, no relations of whites, of the West, with the West’s formerly subject peoples can ever be free of the past, because the past, for them, was the jungle of Western capitalism, not the light the missionaries thought they brought with them.

Notes

[1] Total population 1980, 28 million, of which 4.5 million are white. Survey of Race Relations in South Africa 1981 (South African Institute of Race Relations, 1981).

[2] Rainer Maria Rilke, “Ein Frauenschicksal” (A Woman’s Fate), in *Selected Poems of Rainer Maria Rilke*, translated by C.F. MacIntyre (University of California Press, 1941).

[3] *Memories of Underdevelopment* by Edmundo Desnoes (Penguin, 1973).

[4] Bishop Desmond Tutu, *Frontline*, no. 5, vol. 12 (April, 1982).

[5] Czeslaw Milosz, “The Accuser,” in *Bells In Winter* (Ecco, 1978).

[6] Walter Benjamin, “What Is Epic Theater?” in *Illuminations* (Schocken, 1969).

[7] Nikolai G. Chernyshevsky, *Polnoye sobraniye sochinenii*, vol. 3. Paraphrased from the quotation in the English translation by Tibor Szamuely, “The Highroad of History is not the Sidewalk of the Nevsky Prospekt,” in *The Russian*

Tradition, edited by Robert Conquest (McGraw-Hill, 1975).

[8] Walter Benjamin, "What Is Epic Theater?"

[9] The Star (Johannesburg), August 4, 1982.

[10] The US has a 20 percent slice under the weighted voting system of the IMF and so outvoted all loan opponents combined. The US consequently surely has a corresponding responsibility for how the money South Africa receives is spent. Is there any evidence that this responsibility is being taken up?

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