Broadcasting Corporation news; it is the decisive common force carrying us all, bearing away the protective clothing of 'probable readers' as paper carnival costumes melt in the rain.

In the final analysis, censorship's new deal is the pragmatic manifestation of an old, time-dishonoured view of culture, already dead, serving repression instead of the arts, and its belated recognition of literary standards is its chief strategy. This recognition is shrewd enough to see what Lammie Snyman did not – that the objective validity of literary standards as a concept (there *are* works of genuine creation, there *is* trash) could be invoked for a purpose in which, in fact, they have no place and no authority. The criteria by which the quality of literature can be assessed have nothing whatever to do with calculation of its possible effect on the reader, probable or improbable. The literary experts who are instructed to take this factor into account, and do so, are not exercising any valid function as judges of literature.

In affirmation of freedom of expression, which is the single uncompromised basis of opposition to censorship, the literary worth or otherwise of a work is not a factor – what is at stake each time a book falls into the censors' hands is the right of that book to be read. Literary worth has nothing to do with that principle. We must not fudge this truth. The poor piece of work has as much right to be read – and duly judged as such – as the work of genius. Literary worth may be assessed only by critics and readers free to read the book; it is a disinterested, complex and difficult judgment that sometimes takes generations. There is a promise that future judgments by the censors will (I quote) 'more readily reflect the opinions of literary experts appointed'. The invocation of literary standards by censors as a sign of enlightenment and relaxation of strictures on the freedom of the word; above all, the reception by the public of this respected and scholarly concept as one that *could* be enthroned among censors – both are invalid. Let us never forget – and let us not let the South African public remain in ignorance of what we know: censorship may have to do with literature; but literature has nothing whatever to do with censorship.

Nadine Gordimer

Living in the Interregnum

(1982)[1]

By the 1980s South African fiction began to be preoccupied with thoughts of revolution in South Africa; Gordimer's eighth novel, July's People *(1981)*[2] *was set at the future moment of revolution itself. There were perhaps good reasons for this overall concern. By this time South Africa's neighbouring countries, Mozambique, Angola and Zimbabwe, had won their independence. Inside the country the Soweto Revolt had been quelled, but it had initiated a longer-term period of political upswing. By the 1980s an independent black trade-union movement was gathering in numbers and strength. There was also renewed organisation against apartheid, both at the local level and on a broader national basis: within a year of the essay which follows here the United Democratic Front had been established, the first such mass movement, legal and active above ground, since the banning of the African National Congress and the Pan-Africanist Congress in 1960. After its own extraordinary impact the Black Consciousness movement was waning in authority, and with the renewed ideological ascendancy of the African National Congress there was again a more general commitment to 'non-racialism' in opposition to apartheid. Whereas Gordimer had attempted – and in some ways succeeded – in both her fiction and non-fiction to come to terms with the Black Consciousness challenge, the context in which her commitments could find affirmation was now once more beginning to widen.*

This process was by no means straightforward, however, and as far as the following essay is concerned (originally given by Gordimer as a James Lecture at the New York Institute of the Humanities) there are two major strengths. One is the full realisation that South Africa was already *in a state of revolution, and had been so for some time. The second is the awareness that this was not an unambiguous condition. What follows here must surely rank as one of the most powerful statements of what it is like to live*

out the symptoms and contradictions of a state of 'interregnum': firstly to understand them, and then to live them through. At the same time there were signs of crisis elsewhere in the world. From her embattled position in South Africa Gordimer used this lecture to remark on a more global state of 'interregnum', as well as the need for a renewed commitment to deal with it.

Police files are our only claim to immortality
Milan Kundera[3]

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 – and 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 legalised land- and mineral-grabbing, open in the labour exploitation of indigenous peoples, open in the constitutionalised, institutionalised racism that was concealed by the British under the pious notion of uplift, the French and the 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 civilisation dropped, and there it was unashamedly, the ugliest creation of man, and they baptised 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 co-ordinates 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 novel *July's People* 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 towards 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 overwhelmingly 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

* [In a slightly different translation in] *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, edited and translated by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1971), p. 276.

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 colour 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† – 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 white 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, 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'

* 'Cultural Criticism and Society', in *Critical Sociology: Selected Readings*, (ed.) Paul Connerton (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), p. 271.

† Total population 1980, 23·7 million, of which 4·5 million are white. *Survey of Race Relations in South Africa 1981*, (ed.) M. Horrell (Johannesburg: South African Institute of Race Relations, 1982), p. 52.

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. In cities the kind of stores and services offered will change when the life-style of the majority – black, working-class – establishes the authority of the enfranchised demand in place of the dictated demand. At present the consumer gets what the producer's racially-estimated idea of his place in life decrees to be his needs.

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. 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 to be innocent.'† 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, which is so highly developed in modern man ... saps his 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,[4] defines that participation:

> what I consider to be the place of the white man in this – popularly called the 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

* Rainer Maria Rilke, 'Ein Frauenschicksal' (A Woman's Fate), in *Selected Poems of Rainer Maria Rilke*, translated by C. F. MacIntyre (Berkeley and Los Angeles, Ca.: University of California Press, 1941), p. 71.

† Edmundo Desnoes, *Memories of Underdevelopment* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), p. 104.

‡ *Native Realm: A Search for Self-Definition*, translated by Catherine S. Leach (New York: Doubleday, 1968), p. 125.

§ *Headbirths, or The Germans are Dying Out*, translated by Ralph Manheim (London: Secker & Warburg; New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich; 1982).

> 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.*

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 realisation exist; the symbolic action of the like-minded in signing a letter to a newspaper or the lobbying of 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, the coincident co-operation is reassuring; that, at least, should be a straightforward form of

* Bishop Desmond Tutu, letter to *Frontline* (Johannesburg), vol. 2, no. 5 (April 1982), p. 4.

† Paraphrased from the poem 'Ofay-watcher, throbs – phase', in *Yakhal' Inkomo* (Johannesburg: Renoster, 1972), pp. 50–1.

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 also 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.

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 three thousand 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 non-negotiable 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, non-racial South Africa, recognising 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 organisation 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 recognise the 'homelands'.

What are the Black Sash women doing here? They don't recognise 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 – 'Amandla! 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 recognise 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 off surrounding states that give shelter to South African freedom fighters, and create support for a proposed 'constellation' of southern African states gathered protectively around the present South African regime; finally, 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, scandalised 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,[5] 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 also between two identities, one

known and discarded, the other unknown and undetermined. Whatever the human cost of the liberation struggle, whatever 'Manichaean poisons'* 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 the 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: 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 Abram Fischer to Helen Joseph and Neil Aggett,[6] 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

* Czeslaw Milosz, 'The Accuser', in *Bells in Winter* (New York: The Ecco Press, 1978), p. 62.

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 recognised 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 get into the South African army despite their opposition to apartheid.[7] 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.

* *Native Realm*, p. 120.

What is poetry which does not save nations or peoples?
Czeslaw Milosz[8]

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[9] and Sarah Gertrude Millin.[10] If blacks were the subjects but not the readers of books written about them, then neither white nor black read much of what have since become the classics of early black literature – the few works of Herbert and Rolfes Dhlomo,[11] Thomas Mofolo, and Sol Plaatje. Their 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 1950s urban blacks – Ezekiel Mphahlele, Lewis Nkosi, Can Themba, Bloke Modisane, following Peter Abrahams[12] – began to write in English only, and about the urban industrial experience in which black and white chafed against one another across colour 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 colonised 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, such as the novelist Alex La Guma and the poet Dennis Brutus, made of their ideologically-channelled 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 criterion of 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.'[13]

In the 1970s 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 organisations, the African National Congress, the Pan-Africanist Congress, and others – in the 1960s. 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 industrialisation 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 organisations, the

banning of freedom songs and platform speeches, there came from blacks a changed attitude towards culture, and towards 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*.* 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 Prospect.† In the bunks of migratory labourers, the 4 a.m. 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 is there, too, a match dropped by the builders of every ghetto, waiting to be struck. The difficulty, even boredom, many whites experience when reading stories or watching plays by blacks in which, as they say, 'nothing happens', is due to the fact that the experience conveyed is not 'the development of actions' but 'the representation of conditions',‡ a mode of artistic revela-

* Walter Benjamin, 'What is Epic Theatre?', in *Illuminations*, edited with an introduction by Hannah Arendt, translated by Harry Zohn (London: Fontana, 1973), p. 152. [Gordimer's italics.]

† Nikolai G. Chernyshevsky, *Polnoye sobraniye sochinenii [v. 10-i tomakh* (St Petersburg, 1906)], vol. 8. Paraphrased from the translated quotation, 'The highroad of History is not the sidewalk of the Nevsky Prospect', in Tibor Szamuely, *The Russian Tradition*, edited with an introduction by Robert Conquest (London: Secker & Warburg, 1974), p. 167.

‡ Benjamin, 'What is Epic Theatre?', p. 152.

tion and experience for those in whose life dramatic content is in its conditions.

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.[14]

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 quali-

* 'Creativity', *Observer* (London), 9 May 1982, p. 27.

ties of prescience and perception that will always differentiate him from others and that 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 recognised 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 re-creating 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 writer's duty – his revolutionary duty, if you like – is to write well.'[15] 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 having been '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/élitist 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 coexistence 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 co-ordinates 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.[16] It was from that level that the yearning of black schoolchildren 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

* *Carnets 1942–51*, p. 104.

* *The Theory of the Novel* [as quoted by Walter Benjamin, in the translation by Harry Zohn: see 'The Storyteller', *Illuminations*, p. 99].

† Ibid. [Both here and in the previous quotation the extracts differ somewhat from the standard translation by Anna Bostock, *The Theory of the Novel* (London: Merlin Press, 1971), pp. 127, 129.]

‡ 'Homage to Yalta', in *A Part of Speech* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1980), p. 12.