

The White South African Writer in our National Situation

by

Ntongela Masilela

[The following essay which appeared in the West German scholarly journal *Matatu* in 1988 ended with the following words: “Nonetheless Nadine Gordimer is in many ways the very air of our cultural climate in South Africa today.” Reading her latest collection of critical essays published two years back, *Living in Hope and History: Notes From Our Century* (Farrar-Straus-Giroux, New York, 1999), this estimation of our great writer to this author still holds. It would seem that from the very beginning of her literary project her critical and literary imagination has been profoundly integrative and totalizing in the representation of South African cultural space. Though she started writing seriously from the early 1950s when her themes were purely ‘white’, by the late 1950s, at the time when she encountered the Sophiatown Renaissance writers and joining in their cultural movement, her imagination had already begun projecting and gesturing itself in integrative ways, as can be seen in her review of Noni Jabavu's *Drawn in Colour* (“From The Third World”, *Contact*, April 16, 1960) as well as in the novel of 1966 which established her incomparable voice: *The Late Bourgeois World*. Her imagination not only integrated the cultural space of South Africa, but also the historical and geographic space of Africa in political ways as can be seen in her magisterial essay of 1960-1 which in effect is a critique of Joseph Conrad: “The Congo River” (assembled in her collection of essays *The Essential Gesture* [1988]). This author ‘discovered’ Nadine Gordimer in his profoundest moment of spiritual crisis concerning Marxism upon reading this great essay immediately upon its appearance at the American Library in Warsaw: “Living in the Interregnum”, *New York Review of Books*, January 20, 1983. Within a month of this discovery, this author read *The Late Bourgeois World* on a particular day at the British Council Library in Warsaw. From the moment of that terrible Winter in Poland, Nadine Gordimer has been at the center of this author's intellectual engagements. It is very instructive and exhilarating that a full decade after the collapse of Communism in the Soviet Union and in Eastern Europe Nadine Gordimer in *Living in Hope and History* re-affirms her alignment with the ideology of Marx. There could be no greater lesson than this in April 2001. This essay of 1988 attempted to evaluate how had a few but very important white South African writers had succeeded or failed in constructing an integrative national culture when white supremacist ideology was the order of the day. Nadine Gordimer was the intellectual inspiration of this cultural cartographing. But fundamentally the essay made the political argument that

black nationalism would be unacceptable in a post-apartheid South Africa as white nationalism had not been acceptable in the apartheid whatever its hegemonic pretences. The lessons of Nadine Gordimer are inexhaustible.]

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It would be difficult to dissent with the view put forth by a group of young South African Marxist historians that the central problem of our national historiography should be to give a historical explanation as to how a group of white minority settlers was able to impose itself on a majority population of indigenous African peoples.(1) For these historians, who by their conceptual interrogation of the objective coordinates of our national history and by providing rational explanations to its structural movement have revolutionised our understanding of its structure, the fundamental issue of our historiography is not the question of the frontier, and its attendant ideological mystifications, but rather, to indicate the unique compatibility between the ideology and philosophy of Apartheid and the development of capitalism in South Africa. Hence, in our national context, the elimination of either one, presupposes the eventual elimination of the other. Their indissoluble unity logically compels their mutual historical destruction.

It has been necessary to say these preliminary words on the peculiarity of the central problematics of our national history because, as the recent books, by commentators, on and interviews with Raymond Williams have shown, literature, whether in the form of fiction, or drama or poetry, embodies within its mode the social experiences and the imaginative historical sensibilities of a particular moment.(2) This has been particularly so in our national context, even if some of our best writers have pretended otherwise. Literature at its eminently conscious moment is an active imaginative representation of the social history of a particular country, whether in the instance of Tolstoy in *Anna Karenina* in relation to the freeing of the Russian peasantry from the manacles and chains of serfdom in 1861, or in the case of Balzac whose cycle of novels portray in sorrowful terms the justified defeat of the landed gentry at the hands of the rising bourgeois class, or the example of Chinua Achebe in *Things Fall Apart* where the catastrophic confrontation between imperial European history and the emerging African national histories, is graphically illustrated, and in our immediate context the exemplary instance of Nadine

Gordimer in *The Late Bourgeois World* which argues for the inseparability of the political destinies of both black and white South Africans in a post-revolutionary era. Each of these writers, in their different and complex ways, show that history, whatever its multifarious configurations and disguises, is at the center of the imaginative literary enterprise. That is so in South Africa, is self-evident to everyone, even to those who vehemently argue to the contrary. In fact, the principal aim of our national literature, whether in its black or white shadings, whether in the African languages, European languages or Indian languages, which is presently being contested in class and race terms. That this is so will be evident on examining a profoundly disquieting essay by Andre Brink on the significance of history for the literary imagination, which forms part of the profile to be studied. To put it calmly, Andre Brink does not seem to have understood the tragic dimensions of our national history.

Though South African literature in English is of recent formation, tracing its origins in the sketches of Thomas Pringle in the middle of the last century, it has with the passage of time become the most dominant, compelling all writers, white and black (including Indians and peoples of mixed parentage, the so-called Coloureds), to write in its stream and mode. It has monopolized and totalized within its parameters the literary imagination of the South African experience. The literary dominance of this literature in our national culture has been facilitated by the intrusion and the subsequent victory of English imperialism and British history in our cultural landscape and historical social experience. The pretensions of Afrikaans literature to dominance through administrative fiat, not through ideological struggle and literary brilliance, is in a tangent angle part of this whole historical process. The victory of South African literature in English has been at the expense of the indigenous literatures in the African languages. The disappearance from our national literary imagination of heroic poetry and dramatic poetry is part of the cost of the present defeat of our indigenous literatures. In place of this poetry, lyrical poetry has constructed for itself a literary house of absolutism. This particular example shows very well that shifts and alterations in the adoption of literary genres is usually in direct relation to the political, social, class and cultural struggles in the general domain of history. As it ought to be clear, the arrival and construction of South African literature in English on our cultural landscape has had the consequence of dislocating and disrupting the indigenous literature in the African languages, which has been in existence for millennia in South Africa. At the moment this literature exists in a state of temporary defeat. It is a literature whose natural evolution has been disrupted and momentarily side-tracked. As the hidden consequences of the present political and social crisis (1984-1986) are beginning to indicate, especially on the cultural plane, the relationship between our literature in English and our indigenous literature in the African languages will have to be re-examined and

re-defined in the post-revolutionary or post-Apartheid South Africa. The point of reference or contention will probably be by the outstanding poetry of Mazisi Kunene, which is presently published only in English translation and not in its original Zulu language (the re-appraisal of Mqhayi and Ntsikana will be part of this process). The example of Kunene clearly indicates the distorted nature of our literary and cultural structures in South Africa today. The cultural question posed historically by Ngugi wa Th'iongo as to whether the present African literature written in the European languages is truly African literature will have to be confronted by the post-revolutionary South African culture. This does not imply nor should it imply that in this historical era of post-Apartheid South African literature in English and Afrikaans will cease to exist or to be written in those languages. At that moment, the political, cultural, economic and social supports which uphold their present dominance will have been removed. If the dominance of our literature in English should persist and continue in that era, it will be because of its literary productivity, fertility and brilliance. But to return to matters in hand.

Most of the white South African writers who will be my concern in this short sketch are those who have written or write in English. This is because, as already indicated, this literature holds absolute sway in our literary landscape, and also because these writers have been troubled by the tragic nature of our society and its history. Only recently have white Afrikaans writers been affected in their literary endeavours by the dimensions of this crisis. Only a very few white Afrikaans writers previous to the Siestigers writers have been troubled by the fact that we Africans, their compatriots, lived and continue to live in the state of oppression and exploitation. The selection of the writers for this sketch is historical rather than personal and arbitrary. Rather than examining the literary imaginative works of these writers, the sketch will concern itself with their critical and social essays. Only the pertinent works for the purposes of this sketch will be surveyed. The reason for the choice of critical, social and cultural essays rather than imaginative works for surveying, is because in the former works the ideological position and political stance of white South African writers is clearly delineated. What is of interest is the ideological workings of the minds of our writers in negotiating the problematics of our history.

If the origins of English literature in South Africa is usually located in the writings of Thomas Pringle, its real beginnings, in the sense that Edward W. Said in his book *Beginnings* (3) has given significance to this word, meaning innovation, tradition, influence and convention, is to be found in the writings of Olive Schreiner. Schreiner is not only important in our literary history, but is also a colossal figure whose shadow covered practically all the central forces of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, South African history. The still undefined and nebulous forms of South African nationalism converged

with her awareness of herself as a South African writer writing in English, in contrast to the Englishness of her near contemporary George Eliot. The colouration of her prose was determined by different historical happenings and social experiences from those that were central to the literary imagination of her English friends. Another instance which indicates the importance of this great woman in our cultural and political history, is that it was through her that elementary forms of European socialism found transplantation on the African continent. As though that were not enough, astonishingly, she was also one of the founders of feminism. Her relationship to Marx's daughter, Elineanor Marx, full of richness and complexities, still awaits a serious investigation. The figure of Olive Schreiner has been so overwhelming that later writers and thinkers, especially of the second sex, have had to come to terms with her. Hence, Doris Lessing has written an essay on the importance of Schreiner for her intellectual development, and Ruth First has felt compelled to devote her energies to a magnificent biography on the life of Olive Schreiner. It is after Lessing and First had cleared the pathway that another great writer of our time, our national writer, Nadine Gordimer could storm the heavens of literary kingdom without suffering from the anxiety of influence in relation to the literary works of Olive Schreiner. All of the above factors make it clear that the beginnings of South African literature in English were truly with an auspicious figure. But the crucial question is how did Schreiner negotiate and understand the position of us Africans in the contested terrain of cultural history and national history! What has been her ideological contribution in the struggle against racism and the systematic oppression of her black compatriots? Was she oblivious to this historical problem or did it exercise and tax her literary and historical imagination?

If the quality of prose in the social and literary essays of Olive Schreiner is muscular, sharp and effervescent, this reflects not so much the nature of her personal predilections, as much as the social forces that were contesting the formation and construction of a society that was passing through a transitional period from merchant capitalism to industrial capitalism. This is the historical moment that lies between the discovery of diamonds in 1867 in Kimberley and gold in the Witwatersrand in 1883 and the founding of the Union of South Africa in 1910. It is in fact in this period that the crux of the South African conundrum was constituted through economic exploitation, political intrigue and struggle. It was in this interregnum that the capitalist mode of production established itself as the most dominant, with the concomitant consequence that it subordinated the pre-effect of this was the restructuring of the social system and the class structure. British imperialism, in the form of the figure of Cecil Rhodes, penetrated brutally to the innermost corners of South Africa. The proleterianization of the African peasantry was in full development and the dislocation and practical destruction of African states and kingdoms, of the

Zulus, Xhosa, Sotho, etc., was at its zenith.

It was in response to this whole complex historical processes that Olive Schreiner wrote some of her eloquent and exemplary works, however much they may be infirmed as literary figurations. For instance, Trooper Peter Halket of Mashonaland, which is an uncompromising and unrelenting attack of British imperialism in Rhodes' Rhodesia (present-day Zimbabwe), is distended, as a literary form, between a documentary novel and a realistic novel, hence its fissiparousness. Schreiner had not managed to integrate the elements of its structure into a harmonious whole. Nonetheless, it captures the social tensions and social conflicts that were characteristic of this formative moment of South African history. Even her literary masterpiece of 1883, *The Story of an African Farm*, unravels on the cultural landscape supported by the background of these historical conflicts. Two political issues were central to Olive Schreiner: the emancipation of women and indigenous people from all forms of oppression. In many ways completely identified with the suffering of the African peoples. In a chapter, "The Native Problem", in her book, *Thoughts on South Africa*, Schreiner articulated her position. This is truly salutary. Nonetheless Olive Schreiner was capable of expressing shocking racist attitudes, especially in relation to blacks of mixed parentage, the so-called Coloureds. She could write such statements: "When we have dealt with the dark man for long years with justice and mercy and taught him all we know, we shall perhaps be able to look deep into each other's eyes and smile: as parent and child."⁽⁴⁾ Or: "I would die for the right of our Kaffir boys to decent treatment as I would for our splendid oxen. But I would not dream of making my home with them. Our Dutchmen with all their faults have never been guilty of cohabitation with the Kaffir women as too many of your British slave owners and soldiers have."⁽⁵⁾ These condescending and outrageous statements should be evaluated in relation to her positive undertakings on behalf of the oppressed and the dispossessed. In short, they ought to be posited in a dialectical relationship to each other, in their progressive and regressive movement.

In such a historical context, it would not be possible to postulate as Patricia Morris has done, that future generations of South Africans will find Olive Schreiner to have been "... that primitive phenomenon, a racist phenomenon."⁽⁶⁾ On the other hand, the apostasy of Alan Paton in relation to the necessary dramatic and revolutionary change in South Africa is even more unacceptable, for who such a change presupposes the destruction of literature including the works of Olive Schreiner: "The novels of Afrikaner life would not only disappear from our literature, they would disappear from literature altogether."⁽⁷⁾ Since Alan Paton rarely writes to inform and enrich the intellect, but rather to wreck the nerves and to frighten the timid, one requires inexhaustible patience to make sense of what he writes. To state what should

be obvious, the works of Olive Schreiner will always possess significance for all of us South Africans, not only because they are works of real quality but because they also reflect the historical moment of their production in all its complexity and richness. The nature of that significance will change from moment to moment reflecting the then critical historical conflicts and cultural struggles. If for the generation of William Plomer, Sol Plaatje and Laurens van der Post Olive Schreiner was important as a great writer who had established a particular tradition of English writing in parallel and simultaneous existence with the indigenous literatures, for the pleiad of writers represented by Doris Lessing, Nadine Gordimer, Bessie Head and Ruth First she was significant as a feminist star of the unsurpassed brilliance. For the generations of South Africans of all shades of colour living in a post-revolutionary and post-Apartheid South Africa her consequential nature may lie in having been a socialist of unclear focus who could not fully negotiate the struggles and collisions of her time. Even after a "violent and pitiless revolution", which Alan Paton conjures up as the consequence of a demand for radical change in South Africa, Olive Schreiner will occupy a prominent place in our literary history, albeit a shifting and alternating one.

One of the salient features of our literature in the English language has been the predominance of women as its premier practitioners. This is especially true in relation to the novel genre. The high peaks reached by Olive Schreiner or Nadine Gordimer have proved unattainable to Alan Paton or Ezekiel Mphahlele. Though that predominance seems to be ebbing, nonetheless it is the women writers who have defined, formulated and consolidated the structure of this literary tradition. It is only after Schreiner had achieved a literary breakthrough in the novelistic mode that Campbell and Dhlomo could feel secure to voice their powerful lyricism. Why the women writers should have been able in their novels to totalize the social conflicts and tensions and cultural lineaments of a particular historical period much more profoundly than the male writers is a question that our literary history has still to clarify. For instance, though Ezekiel Mphahlele and Lewis Nkosi are literary scholars and literary critics of outstanding abilities, with very few peers if any on the African continent, writing criticism characterised respectively by, sharp intensity of focus and literary verve of tremendous power, whenever they have ventured into the territory of the novel as Mphahlele has done in the *Wanderers* and recently Lewis Nkosi has in *The Mating of the Birds*, they have not been able to totalize within their endeavors the social experiences and cultural complexities of our particular moment. These can be found in Matshoba's *Call Me Not A Man* or in Nadine Gordimer's *July's People*. Since this appraisal is really not a survey of creative writings but the complex and different ideological positions of white South African writers, it would seem more logical that after Schreiner the survey should consider the positions of Pauline

Smith and Sarah Getrude Millin. To both of them, an African was not a subject, but rather, an object to be held in contempt. Consequently it would seem better to detour beyond them and consider the next generation of writers known as the Voorslag Movement.

If the moment of Olive Schreiner was one in which the capitalist mode of production was restructuring the whole economic and social structure, new social relations of production and new productive forces emerging having been precipitated by the discovery of gold and diamond, the moment of the Voorslag writers (William Plomer, Roy Campbell and Laurens van der Post) was one in which the State (in all its complex components and variations) in formulating the ideology and philosophy of Apartheid made it possible for capitalism to exercise its hegemony through the exploitation of first and foremost the black labour. In the first period one encounters the uprooting of the peasantry, and in the second period one confronts the proletarianization of that class. In each instance, different and particular historical constructs and sociological coordinates were primary in structuring the social structure. Whilst for Olive Schreiner the contradictions of her time were perceived by her as the problem of industrialism, those of her successors were intuited by them as the issue of statism. The imaginative structure of the authoress of *Woman and Labour* was always moving towards the inner-self and that of the others towards the outside. The line of progression (whatever the deflections, meanderings and mediations) from *The Story of an African Farm* to *Turbott Wolfe* is illuminated by, and understood within, these historical differentiations.

In *The Lost World of the Kalahari*, a book of great vivacity, deep empathy and sparkling brilliance, there is a sentence by Laurens van der Post which could be taken as representing or reflecting the philosophical credo of this generation of writers "This is the story of a journey in a great wasteland and a search for some pure remnant of the unique and almost vanished First People of my native land, the Bushmen of Africa."⁽⁸⁾ For what was important in the undertaking of these writers was the attempt to establish the true components of a part of our national culture. To do so, it was not only important to seek their origins in order to draw their hierarchical relationship to each other in historical progression, it was also crucial to trace their patterning forms in dialectical relation to the constantly changing South African sociological landscape. The importance of Plomer, Campbell and van der Post in our cultural history is, for its relevance in the present context is even more fundamental, to have attempted to construct a singular unified structure of our culture. Their achievement has to be seen in context of the fact that the State was moving against this very attempt by instituting the ideology and philosophy of Apartheid. What is even more remarkable is that their sense of history informed them that only by beginning with, and by placing at the center of their

enterprise of, the First People (the Khoisan people), can a historically authentic structure of South African cultural history be constructed. Indeed, the base and fundamental layer of our unified and multi-complex culture, is the still unexamined but incomparably rich cultures of the Khoisan people. (Khoi, so-called Hottentots, and San, so-called Bushmen).

Though neither of the Voorslag writers was politically conscious of constructing or providing the elements for such an undertaking, their historical visions and cultural analyses had this intent. Had they been fully conscious, they would have found it necessary to incorporate within their historical visions the then emerging cultural experience and social resistance of the working people and the working class.

The attractiveness of *The Lost World of the Kalahari* compels one to stop at it for a moment. Its deeply felt empathy is evident in the uncumbersome and elegant prose which seeks to convey the total social and cultural world of the First People. Laurens van der Post writes, of the cave paintings as an indelible part of the artistic heritage of South African culture, of the musical tonalities of the First People's languages which have had a profound influence on other African languages like Xhosa, of the serenity and poise of their behaviour which on certain occasions is explosively intermixed with an unquenchable pride, of the natural integration of the social world of the Khoi and the San people with the natural world, of the complex structures and forms of their cosmology, and finally, of the tragic consequences which the dialectic of South African history has held in store for these heroic people at the hands of both their black and white compatriots. Laurens van der Post captured in poetic strains a great culture on the verge of disappearing from our cultural and historical world. *The Lost World of the Kalahari* is in many ways a threnody and a tragic human to a bygone world. The consequences which one can draw from the book is that the marginalisation of these great nations is the product of the historically skewed nature of the cultural politics that have been dominance in South Africa up to the present. It is the white world of our nation which is primarily responsible for this tragic situation. Indirectly the book is a summon to the politics of cultural resistance. What is clear is that not only the culture of the Khoi and San people recoverable, but it should also be placed in its proper place within the cultures of other nations in South Africa. If one were to voice several criticisms of this exemplary book, is that for Laurens van der Post to enter the culture of the First People is to leave the twentieth century and re-emerge into the past of mankind (p.256), rather than situating oneself within the fundamental layer of our contemporary culture. Secondly, Laurens van der Post constantly refers to ".... the vast black races..." (p.40, p.43) The terms of his criticism, though historically founded, are unacceptable. Thirdly, the Khoi and San people are not child-man as he supposes (p.11), but rather a natural and

mature people. Nonetheless, the importance of this book stands.

It is difficult to attain a sense of proportion when writing and reflecting on Roy Campbell, for he not only brought great dishonour on South Africa by being one of the very few intellectuals to have aligned himself with the fascism of Franco during the Spanish Civil War in the late 1930's, but also because he was infested with anti-isms: anti-Semitic, anti-German, anti-socialism, anti-Protestant in favour of Catholicism, and within this galaxy of prejudices, naturally anti-African or anti-black. At a time when Latin American intellectuals like Cesar Vallejo or Pablo Neruda, European poets like Louis Aragon or Yannis Ritsos, and American writers like Hemingway or Wright, identified themselves with, in fact fought on behalf of the cause of the Spanish people, Campbell choose to align himself with the forces of destruction and barbarism. In his autobiography, *Light on a dark horse*, Campbell exemplifies no sense of understanding of the suffering and oppression of his black compatriots, evidences not even the slightest wareness of the complexities of history, and lacks even an elementary grasp of what culture is, even though he believed himself to have possessed high culture. The phantasmagoria of some of his writings is beyond comprehension, let alone redeeming. Whenever he writes about blacks the passion of madness rises to a truly uncontrollable pitch. For instance, quoting at random: "The Matebeles are a branch of the Zulus. Their founder, Mzilikazi, was reared in the Communist regime of Tchaka, to whom he acted, as a 'Fascist Beast of a Trotskyite', in the role of a Tito... Hypocritical whites, who lament the injustice of Boer rule under Milan, should remember that from the native point of view it is infinitely preferable to the Soviets of the Zulus and Matebeles who gloried in blood and cruelty... The Dutch were in what is now the Union long before the marauding Zulus or Matebeles who were first heard of round Mombasa in the seventeenth century."(9, p.36) And again at random, to indicate the madness of Campbell: "It must be remembered that the Zulus, during the most important period of their history, were subjected to an extreme form of totalitarianism which disoriented them as violently as their shock with white civilization. The Zulus were subjected to Communism, which is supposed to be a modern phenomenon, one hundred and forty years ago... Under Tchaka and Dingaan, almost all who could safely escape without reprisals to their families sought bondage under the whites, in preference to their own Tzars, since they were bolshevized, collectivized, and militarized to a degree beyond anything that has happened in Europe under the National-Socialisms of Lenin, Stalin or Hitler."(p.158) For Campbell, there is not much of a difference between the historical State forms of the Absolutism of the Romanov House and the socialism of Lenin. Campbell even has no comprehension of European intellectual history: "Inexperienced bookworms, like Marx and Nietzsche, imagined that by such simple expedients as the elimination of the top-dog or

the under-dog, a desirable state of affairs could be attained... The Zulus are therefore savages, ..." (p.159) Not much can be salvaged from such a cultural mishap and historical wreckage. It only remains to draw the distinction between the horrendous diabolism of Campbell and the romantic angelism of van der Post.

The portrait of William Plomer which emerges from Laurens van der Post's recent autobiography, *Yet Being Someone Other*, is of a man profoundly occupied with the problems of reason and intellect in the modern world, in contrast to, and in distinction from, the intuitivism which van der Post sees as characteristic of his personality. (10, p.121-122) The profile of Plomer which emerges from his writings, especially that which can be abstracted from his astonishing novel *Turbott Wolfe*, in contrast to those of Roy Campbell and Laurens van der Post is one of pessimistic rationalism. It is therefore not surprising that Plomer possessed one of the purest minds among South African white writers unclouded by the pollution of racism and feelings of superiority. To parody a famous saying, he possessed a fine mind which was incapable of violating ideas. One is compelled to assent to van der Post's assessment of Plomer's famous novel that "...*Turbott Wolfe*, a truly remarkable work of art, was by far the most devastating exposure of the evils of racial prejudice in southern Africa that had yet come from an English pen." (p.117)

The real paradox represented by the life of William Plomer is that the one writer who truly identified with the tribulations of the oppressed and the dispossessed, and possessed a deep awareness of the historical problems afflicting our then emerging body politic, was compelled to renounce his South Africaness: "... I should be no more justified in pretending to be a South African than in declaring myself a Bantu." (11, p.9) This very act of renunciation structures the structure and movement of *Double Lives*, his autobiography in which the quoted statement appears in the second sentence of the book. This renunciation is historically motivated, in that Plomer sees his birth in South Africa not as an arbitrary act of nature, but rather, as a by-product of the historical penetration of British imperialism in South Africa. In the first chapter of the book titled, 'A Bourgeois Family', Plomer examines the structure of his family and traces its formation in the conflicts surrounding the English Civil War of the 1640's. For Plomer therefore, the arrival of his parents coinciding with the arrival of Cecil Rhodes and many chartered English companies is not unfortuitous, but the expression of the inner logic of a particular history superimposing itself on another. The title, *Double Lives*, signifies: the subordination of various indigenous histories to English imperial history; the relationship between England and South Africa; the oppression of the black majority by the white minority; the situating of the individual within society; and his personal choice, or more appropriately, the uncertainty of this

choice between culture and society. It is because of this firm grasp he had of the inner logic of our national history that Plomer could make these pertinent remarks: "... he derived a considerable income from the natives in the form of rent paid by them for land where their forebears had lived for generations before the coming of the white man."(p.74); "..., in my own interest not in that of any fantasy like a `White South Africa'."(p.147); "But he left abruptly after giving offence by exhibiting an entire lack of colour prejudice. Everything comes back to that in South Africa..."(p.154) The difference between William Plomer and Roy Campbell could not be more marked: the bright transparency of a lucid mind in *Double Lives* is different from the dark brooding of a collapsing intellect of *Light On A Dark Horse*.

The three autobiographies by the Voorslag writers stand in an interesting relationship to each: Laurens van der Post's *Yet Being Someone Other* traces the odyssey of a disembodied intellectual spirit in different and complex national cultural climates without reflecting on the particularity of their sociological landscapes; William Plomer's *Double Lives* searches for a proper dialectical unity between subjectivity and objectivity determined by historical coordinates; and Roy Campbell's *Light On A Dark Horse* reveals a disintegrating mind in search of unrealizable and unattainable unities. What can be said with certainty about these books is their having consolidated a literary tradition which was extended and enriched by the later efforts of Ezekiel Mphahlele and Bloke Modisane: respectively *Down Second Avenue* and *Blame Me On History*.

The publication of Ezekiel Mphahlele's *An African Image*, probably the most influential book of literary and cultural criticism in Africa until recently, effected a revolution in our perception and understanding of our literary history in South Africa. Some of the terms of its evaluation and judgement have acquired their own authority, having been proven with the passage of time to have been prescient: the devastating criticism of the work of Alan Paton. One of its fundamental achievements which is only becoming apparent today, a quarter of a century after its appearance, is to have made it possible for new, young and vigorous white Afrikaans writers (the true inventors and owners of the Afrikaans language are the so-called Coloureds, not the Boers, who merely appropriate this social and cultural instrument) to overcome their nationalistic particularisms by writing within the context of a national literary forum which had been established by William Plomer's *Turbott Wolfe* and Sol Plaatje's *Mhudi*. This is what in effect happened with the emergence of the Sestigers writers: Breyten Breytenbach, Andre Brink, Etienne Le Roux, etc. Their emergence was in the extremely politically repressive interregnum, between the Sharpeville massacre of 1960 and the powerful re-appearance of Nadine Gordimer with *The Conservationist* (1974), when most of the African writers

around Drum magazine had fled to exile: Ezekiel Mphahlele, Lewis Nkosi, Bloke Modisane, etc. It is this which justifies the following appraisal, which has been up to the present only been concerned with English-speaking writers. Perhaps a consideration of Eugene Marais and Uys Krige would have been appropriate.

There are many things one finds profoundly disagreeable and disturbing in Andre Brink's book, *Mapmakers: Writing in a State of Siege*, which consists of essays written between 1967 and 1982. The 'Introduction' which attempts to articulate a thematic unity supposedly governing the rest of the essays in the book, evidences serious conceptual confusions in understanding the relationship between politics and culture, and the role of culture in history. Brink makes claims on behalf of the Afrikaners (Boers) which are totally unfounded in our South African history by confusing an elementary distinction between nationalism and national consciousness: "It took four great events during the next three and a half centuries to forge the national consciousness which today determines the concept of Afrikanerdom: and it should be added that only on these four occasions was a brief and glorious experience of national unity achieved. In between everything remained very much in a state of flux, characterized by division, hostility, infighting and suspicion." (12,p.14) These two sentences are very critical because they structure both Brink's argumentation in practically all the essays in the book and his understanding of the politics of our cultural history. The misunderstandings and misapprehensions evidenced by these two sentences are profoundly disquieting. First, it is not national consciousness but rather white nationalism which determines the concept of Afrikanerdom. A national consciousness can never be forged by a single minority group in a national context consisting of other ethnic groups. A national consciousness presupposes the national integration of all the people in a democratically elected political and cultural destiny. The Afrikaners in South Africa have forged the nationalism of Afrikanerdom while theorizing and imposing on other nations, peoples, and groups the ideology and philosophy of Apartheid which is based on white supremacy. How can the Afrikaners forge a national consciousness for the whole nation of South Africa predicated on the nationalism of Afrikanerdom and its accompanying racist ideology? The confusions by Andre Brink are legion. It may perhaps help matters by quoting Frantz Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth* on the essential distinction between nationalism and national consciousness: "If culture is the expression of national consciousness, I will not hesitate to affirm that in the case with which we are dealing it is the national consciousness which is the most elaborate form of culture....National consciousness, which is not nationalism, is the only thing that will give us an international dimension. This problem of national consciousness and of national culture takes on in Africa a special dimension. The birth of national

consciousness in Africa has a strictly contemporaneous connection with the African consciousness."(13) It should be noted too that when Andre Brink speaks of National unity in the above quotation, he does not mean the unity of all the people of South Africa (white, black, Indian, so-called Coloureds and the First People), but rather, he means the `national unity' of the different segments of Afrikanerdom, which have time to time been in conflict about the interpretation of Afrikaner nationalism and the ideology of Apartheid, not about their dissolutions and historical destruction. What is one suppose to think of this shocking substitutionalism? What is clear is that Andre Brink has not sufficiently broken from the crutches and clutches of the nationalism of Afrikanerdom, for he still operates with its premisses, presuppositions and prejudices. The break of Breyten Breytenbach with the ideology of Afrikanerdom is clear and irreconcilable, hopefully permanent. It ought to be clear that a break of a few Afrikaner intellectuals from the clutches of Apartheid ideology is not an earth-shaking matter as Andre Brink supposes, but rather, it is a regional matter within the cultural politics of Afrikanerdom. What would be a historic and national matter would be the break of the Afrikaner working class with the ideology of Apartheid and from the state institutions of Afrikanerdom. In Mapmakers Andre Brink does not seem to be aware of this truly historic issue. What would be important is knowing the political and cultural configurations of the consciousness of the Afrikaner working class.

When one examines the "...four great events which forge.... the concept of Afrikanerdom...." one encounters severe difficulties with Andre Brink's presentation. Only a few examples will suffice. Brink's thesis is that the Afrikaans language was invented and forged by Afrikaners in their struggle to establish Afrikanerdom in South Africa. Nowhere does Andre Brink mention another people which was equally responsible, if not more, for the invention and formation of this great language, Afrikaans: I mean the people of mixed parentage, the so-called Coloureds. In a recent conference of South African writers and scholars of South African literature in English here in West Germany, at the Evangelische Akademie in Bad Boll, Vernie February in a lecture, "The South African English Novel and the Agony of Apartheid", which was mainly a tribute to the late Alex La Guma argued strongly and convincingly that the so-called Coloureds contributed enormously toward the formation of the Afrikaans language.(14) Vernie February argued further that in a post-revolutionary South Africa, in a post-Apartheid and democratic South Africa, the Afrikaans language will reveal its richness and greatness in a democratic space constituted by the different cultures of South Africa. The other point by Andre Brink which raises a series of objections is that though he is quick to refer to British penetration in South Africa as colonization process, and rightfully so, he demurs in referring to the `Great Trek' as equally a form of

colonization vis-a-vis the black states and chiefdoms which were displaced and destroyed in that movement. He writes revealingly: "...in the end it led to a splintering of the Trekkers as they spread across a great tract of land laid bare by the impis of Chaka Zulu."(p. 16) The implication here is that the Afrikaner nation never displaced anyone, or for that matter never colonized anyone, since the Zulu state had already done that. This is a false understanding and interpretation of the Mfecane phenomenon in South African history. What needs to be emphasised here is that national consciousness and national unity have never been at the center of Afrikanerdom. As Andre Brink himself writes at an unguarded moment: "Apartheid, which defines Afrikaner unity since 1948, needs an image of historicity, preferably of eternity for its success; dissidence exposes it for what it is."(p. 17) The dissidence Beyers Naude or Bram Fischer is politically and historically informed because it is based on a proper understanding and interpretation of South African history.

It should perhaps be stated that *Mapmakers* is in many ways a brilliant book, bristling with cosmopolitan culture, carrying its point of references from Beckett and Pasternak through Sartre and Brook to Cortazar and Debray, written with tremendous verve and indicating a very troubled fertile mind. The book is so powerful that it perhaps has already defined a new literary moment in our literary history. That it has caused a revolution within the cultural space occupied by Afrikaans literature is beyond dispute and argumentation, and in that sense it can be compared with Harold Bloom's *Anxiety of Influence* in America and Mikhail Bakhtin's *Dostoevsky's Poetics* in the Soviet Union. Of course a sense of proportion should be maintained. Yet at the center of its achievements there is something hollow something terribly wrong. For instance. In five essays, 'Introduction: a Background to Dissidence', 'The Position of the Afrikaans Writer', 'Writers and Writing in the World', 'On Culture and Apartheid' and 'English and the Afrikaans Writer', which are in effect an attempted diachronic and synchronic construction of Afrikaans literary history, when Andre Brink refers to Afrikaans writing, Afrikaans writer and Afrikaans poetry, he invariably means only the tradition of white South African writing totally excluding the tradition of Afrikaans literature to which Andre Brink situates himself and his follow Sestigers is from Eugene Marais and C. Louis Leipoldt through Jan Rabie and Uys Krige to Etienne Le Roux and Chris Barnard: belonging to it it would seem is determined by race, rather than the possible structural poetics of particular works of art or the political determinants of cultural configurations. What is clear is that for Andre Brink South African Afrikaans literature is not a multi-cultural and multi-national enterprise, but rather, a "mono-for" structure belonging to a privileged nationality. The writings and poetry of Adam Small, Christopher van Wyk and others are not considered. When he does refer to Adam Small, he does so in order to rebuke him for switching to English language from Afrikaans. The

supreme irony here is that Brink himself has recently been writing in English to enhance, or perhaps to inflate, his international reputation. Is this not a form of apartheid in literary matters? What are terms of judgement which could justify this aberration? Again, this would seem to indicate that Andre Brink has not completely left the Mad House of Afrikanerdom. Other substantive non-literary matters could be raised against Mapmakers, but that would be entering into purely political issues not immediately related to literary factors. Though Andre Brink's book is powerful and is some ways fascinating, it is essential to maintain a critical distance towards it; a new Canadian literary review of Marxist provenance, *Borderlines* (15) has not maintained the distanced in a sufficiently critical manner.

It would be difficult to dispute with the claims made by Andre Brink on behalf of Breyten Breytenbach that "... he is indeed one of greatest poets Afrikaans literature has yet produced; but what makes him politically relevant is that to an overwhelming majority of people who have never read a single line of his verse, he has become a symbol of resistance to oppression." (16) Andre Brink is mistaken in thinking that for a majority of the oppressed people of South Africa Breyten Breytenbach is important only as a symbol of resistance to oppression, for this view not only indicates a lack of understanding of the political form of dissidence and resistance represented by Breytenbach and Fischer, but in effect belittles the fact that Breytenbach embodies within himself the living political force of resistance whose intent and aim is to overthrow the present state of things in South Africa today. In fact one could go even further and argue that Breytenbach as a historical figure embodies the synthesis of literary innovation and political renovation. This could equally be said of Nadine Gordimer, though the differences between them should always be situated within a historical perspective. Although this is not the place to attempt a detailed analysis of Breytenbach's truly remarkable book, *The True Confessions of An Albino Terrorist*, as it will be analysed in another context (17), it is quickly apparent that the cultural politics articulated in this book are in total divergence to those in Andre Brink's *Mapmakers*. It is Breyten Breytenbach contra Andre Brink; this issue will one day take the importance it deserves in our literary history, not only in Afrikaans literary history. But it is important to indicate the forms of opposition between them, even if in the form of stenographic notations. Whereas for Andre Brink Afrikaans emerged through the fusion of French and Dutch dialects among the Afrikaner people during the period (eighteenth and nineteenth centuries) of the formation of their nationalism (p. 15-16), for Breyten Breytenbach the invention of the Afrikaans language was a product of a multi-national and multi-cultural participation: "Afrikaans is a Creole language. (For this contention I'll be eaten alive by Afrikaans linguists and historians.)...The Afrikaner establishment historians and academicians, the lords of culture and of tribal unity, pretend that

Afrikaans is the youngest in the family of Germanic languages. They need to say this because they must accentuate the European heritage and predominance with all its implications of cultural-imperialist 'superiority' not yet disavowed.... The language, however, was born in the mouths of those - imported slaves, local populations - who had command of no European tongue and who needed to communicate in a lingua franca among themselves; who had to be able also to understand the Master. Not for nothing was it referred to as 'kitchen Dutch' for so long." (18, p.353) The difference between day and night, in that one enlightens while the other obfuscates. While Breytenbach is seriously conscious of the disastrous consequences and effects of the intervention of the Broederbond - "...an Afrikaner secret organization, started in the early years of revived Afrikaner nationalism ...which... directs Afrikaner political ideology and practice, as well as its economy and its cultural life. And, by extension, the country." - in Afrikaner cultural politics(p. 64n), Brink shows not the slightest awareness of this problem.

The contrasts and differences could be drawn even further: whilst for Breytenbach the renewal of Afrikaans resides in the tongues of the plebeian masses and finds little reflection in the writings: "Afrikaans is not even now the exclusive property of the Whites - already it is spoken by more so-called Coloureds, and in form or another by a larger number of Blacks, than there are Whites in the country....the language which is spoken in township and prison and in the army, on fishing-boats and in the factories, has escaped entirely from the control of the Afrikaners. In that shape it is a verile medium, ever being renewed, which so far finds but little reflection in the writing."(p.354), for Brink it is by implication, constantly being renewed in the writings of Afrikaner writers only.

(p. 15,25,27.....) (While it is not objectionable to refer to whites and blacks in small letters, it is profoundly objectionable when Brink writes on page 25:".... the coloured poet S. V. Petersen....": Again it is important to note the different gradations of sensitivity in the designations of Brink's and Breytenbach's).

To bring this schematic comparison between the former Sestigers writers to a conclusion, it remains to say a few words on their reflections on their common past: the terms of reference from Breyten Breytenbach are caustic and sharp, while those from Andre Brink are nostalgic and sentimental. While one may not fully assent to Breytenbach's violent condemnation of the Sestigers phenomenon, the historical importance of his appraisal is beyond dispute:"..... the self aggrandizement and the bloated self-importance of these authors, have helped entrench the reactionary forces in the country....by the Sestigers (obscuring the far more important political issues of the time (suppression of Black parties, impoverishment of the majority.....), including the wiping out of a decade of Black writing which was of greater significance for the future....;

and secondly because the charade was foisted upon the world that Sestiger dissidence (as for that matter White dissident writing at present) could influence the political future....."(p.355) Andre Brink's book is in direct line of this fire, for it is an endless litany of the power of the Afrikaner dissident writer. Nonetheless, Andre Brink's judgement of the Sestigers era is interesting in and of itself: "It was a movement...with purely literary origins, starting as a revolt against hackneyed themes and outworn structures in Afrikaans fiction. But because so much of it was European in inspiration....the iconoclastic ardour of these writers soon caused them to collide head-on with most of the established religious and moral of 'traditional' Afrikanerdom. The vehemence of the cultural collision and the extent of its reverberations throughout Afrikanerdom cannot be fully understood from the outside unless the real horror at the thought of anyone leaving the laager is appreciated."(p.26) Probably these terms of judgement were jotted down in 1983, probably the first in Pollsmoor prison and the other at Rhodes University. Again the difference is apparent: whilst Breyten Breytenbach seeks to evaluate the Sestigers phenomenon from the perspective of the oppressed and within the political context of the whole country, Andre Brink is content with a merely moralistic appraisal from the viewpoint of inmates in the MadHouse of Afrikanerdom. The death of a literary period could not be more apparent. Perhaps the reason why J. M. Coetzee writes in English rather than in Afrikaans may be because of the felt need to escape from the collapsing house of Afrikanerdom.

It would be hard not to agree with the view expressed recently in a short essay by J. M. Coetzee published in The New York Times Book Review, that the one element deeply characteristic of the imaginative work of Nadine Gordimer is the political dimension.(19) This is equally true of Coetzee's own work, which pulses with the predicaments of our national history. In both, to a large extent, the essential and fundamental elements of South African history are grasped. For in another context, in The New York Review of Books, in an article wonderfully and symbolically titled, "Waiting for Mandela", J. M. Coetzee has written with indignation of the "... silences, gaps and evasions..." apparent in the writing of Afrikaner history by Afrikaners.(20) Not much can be said about J. M. Coetzee in the context of this short sketch for he is still in the process of emerging and has not as yet fully consolidated his critical powers in order to unravel the problems of our cultural history. But Nadine Gordimer! She is truly a phenomenon in the literary history of South Africa, comparable to Machado de Assis in Brazilian literary history. Her beliefs and convictions are unwavering, characterized by the absence of cant, piety and received opinions, as when she boldly disagrees with the view attributed to Andre Brink that "... if you're white you cannot write convincingly of the black situation, and vice versa." (21) This is because in her the political and the imaginative are wedded together in an exemplary fashion. Nadine Gordimer's grasp and understanding

of the political dynamics of our history is astounding: "A revolution doesn't happen overnight. The Russian Revolution started in 1905, and it went on through the century. And if you look at the pattern, our revolution is happening; our revolution started a long time ago, at least in the sixties, if not the fifties, and we go from phase to phase inexorably. I'm not talking about revolution in classic Marxist terms, obviously; when black majority rule comes, it will not necessarily be the dictatorship of the proletariat...it may be black capitalism, though I doubt it... Politically I've become socialist in my general outlook, philosophically speaking, despite the fact that these are the years where one has seen the greatest failures of socialist experiments. But still, it's not my nature to be totally cynical." (22) This contrasts remarkably from the apostasy of a few years ago by Susan Sontag, though in all fairness she has recently written a powerful essay pleading for the release of Nelson Mandela. (23) On literary matters also Nadine Gordimer is equally lucid and clear-sighted: "I can't imagine how there could be a novel of high ambition without ideas; to me, ideas become themes. They are the thematic and the transcendent aspect of any imaginative work, novels and poems alike... So I think that ideas are of supreme importance." (24) Probably as in no other South African writer, perhaps with the possible exception of Alex La Guma, one finds in Nadine Gordimer politics and literature textured in a harmonious way onto the imaginative structure of a singular national consciousness.

It is because of this that when one talks of Nadine Gordimer, one is compelled to situate her within an international context. In such a context, the colossal dimensions of her greatness emerge in their full complexity. Placing her beside Jean-Luc Godard, the Swiss-French director who has changed fundamentally the history of the cinema and the structure of film, is not far-fetched as it may seem on first reflection. Colin MacCabe has written of Godard in his recent book *Godard*: "Throughout Godard's early films the search for a form of politics is also the search for a form of cinema which could discuss politics... But as the political pressure of the 1960's grew more intense..., Godard's search for a form adequate to the demands of politics which would also constitute a politics adequate to the demands of form became increasingly desperate... For Godard it is not a question of posing the problems of politics in terms of popular art, nor of posing the problem of popular art in terms of politics... the problems of politics and art are articulated in the same terms: the terms provided by the forms of cinema." (25) This could equally be said of Nadine Gordimer in the context of literature and the novel. Her position today in pre-revolutionary South Africa will undoubtedly have serious repercussions on the question of politics and art in the post-revolutionary and post-Apartheid South Africa. Indeed, it would seem from our context today, that in post-revolutionary South Africa when the question of the relationship between art and politics is re-formulated, Nadine Gordimer will be the point of contention,

as much as Mazisi Kunene would seem will be then the center of contestation when the issue of language and literature is re-opened.

If criticism is to be made of Nadine Gordimer is that she has not integrated into her prodigious imaginative structure the rich indigenous cultures of her black compatriots, especially those that exists in the African languages. It would have immeasurably added to her literary richness if she had bothered to learn at least one of the South African languages. It would have unified the different and complex literary cultures in South Africa at a deeper level. In fact, she is too European and less African in her literary culture and literary references. This is partly to two serious misapprehensions on her part. She has cast asseverations on the possibility, or even the need, of African literature being written in the African languages. (26) But then, on this point she is in solidarity with Lewis Nkosi and Ezekiel Mphahlele. Secondly, she has said in an interview: "Blacks in South Africa rewriting mainly in English: what forms are they using? They are writing plays short stories, novels and poems. These forms come from Europe." (27) Now this is totally unfounded, historically and culturally: long before the coming of Europeans to Africa, or long before there was any contact between Europe and Africa, there existed in Africa, by implication in South Africa, heroic and dramatic poetry, the telling of tales, and the telling of ancestral mysteries or powers in the form of plays. Here an understanding of African languages would have clarified this misapprehension. Nadine Gordimer seems to think that the genre structure exists only in written literature and not in oral literature. And when she adds: "Blacks have a rich oral tradition but they did not have a written literature.", that seems more pious than real. The novel genre came from outside Africa. As to whether the origins of the novel are to be located in Cervante's Don Quixotte (Spain) or in Lady Murasaki's The Tales of Genji (Japan), is a matter for literary historians to settle.

Nonetheless, Nadine Gordimer is in many ways the very air of our cultural climate in South Africa today.

Yes, So be it, though we already know
A long time that this would come, and few
Of us were startled for we had seen most
Clearly it would happen as it must.
-S.E.K. Mqhayi

When this great generation
Has won its battles
And cleansed its weapons,
It will celebrate the coming of sunshine

And the smell of the flower.

-Mazisi Kunene

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- 12) Andre Brink, *Mapmakers: Writing in a State of Siege*, Faber and Faber, London, 1983.
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16) Andre Brink, *op. cit.*, p. 86.

17) In relation to Ngugi wa Th'iongo's *Detained* and Wole Soyinka's *A Man Died*.

18) Breyten Breytenbach, *The True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist*, Faber and Faber, London, 1984.

19) J. M. Coetzee, "Into the Dark Chamber: The Novelist and South Africa", *The New York Times Book Review*, January 12th, 1986, p. 35.

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21) "A Conversation with Nadine Gordimer", in *Salmagundi*, no. 62 Winter 84, p. 27.

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