

'Brushing History Against the Grain'

Oppositional Discourse in South Africa*

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Our first concern this afternoon is with connection and continuity. This is a formal lecture whose first term is the recalling to the public memory of the significance of the life of Richard Turner. I am conscious of the honour done to me by the invitation; and of the responsibility which it entails.

Poetry, from classical times, has had its formal procedures for such moments — for linking individual recollection and the public memory. I am speaking of the elegy, whose form and function permits the poet to recall his subject from death, and, out of the resources of his art, to give back the lost life; and then, at the formal moment of closure, to return the dead one to his proper place in the public memory.

The poem I want now to read will do this for us. Its author is Peter Sacks — a student of Richard Turner's in the early 70s now living in the United States and teaching literature.

FOR RICHARD TURNER

Assassinated in Durban, South Africa, 8 January 1978

You wrote on the back page
of my last essay ('Political
Education in *The Republic*')
'Good ideas, but style
too literary. Use of images
evades the final point.'

When I left,
you thought me still evasive,
trying to pass off
my own fear of suffering
as a form of wisdom.
I'd said, 'There's nothing left
for us, not even martyrdom.'
You smiled:

* The Richard Turner Memorial Lecture, delivered in Durban on 27 September 1990.

'At least stick to political philosophy. Remember, literature's too easy'.

You'd smile again to see me
seven years later,
wintering in Florida
between a set of Eighteenth
Century novels and the sea.
A morning swim,
a day of marginalia,
lazy ambles on the shore
in the late afternoon;
eight thousand miles
from where, last night
a little after twelve,
a gunman called you to the door.

* * *

This morning, when I came in
from the beach, a neighbor asked,
'You're from South Africa,
did you catch the news
about a doctor killed there,
Richard Tanner; the name
mean anything to you?'

So rapid the flood of it —
not medical doctor, *Turner*,
Richard, you . . . and the voice
from somewhere in the sudden
darkness, 'Yes, Turner.
Did I upset you?' —
the premonition
must have gathered here for years.

You sat among us on the floor
translating Althusser,
barefoot, jeans, a pale blue shirt,
your black-rimmed lenses doubling
the light, the red shock of your hair.
At some slight turn of argument
your freckled hands followed
the actual phrasing in the air.
'I know it's difficult in this country,
but we've got to think more clearly
than the State allows.'

Three years later, you were banned;
 neither to be published
 nor quoted in any form.
 Forbidden to teach.

* * *

Long after midnight,
 walking through the pines
 into a thin sea wind,
 startled as each line of water
 shatters in the dark,
 I half-prepare to meet you
 further up the shore;
 as though your dying meant
 they'd only driven you out
 to lead a half-life
 here in the wind, this walk
 between the water and pines
 of another country.

Richard, if I keep to words,
 believing nothing in our history
 will make this right,
 will what I say at last
 be difficult enough
 for you?

(Peter Sacks, *In These Mountains*, London, 1986)

Lying obliquely in the poem is a second strand of the theme of my lecture. In his reference to the debate between Rick and himself on the relative claims of political philosophy and literature, Sacks accurately reflects Turner's position that literature was 'too easy'.

Turner privileged philosophy because, as Michael Nupen has put it, 'he never wavered in his belief that a transparent consciousness was possible'. For him philosophical self-reflection could, and would, give unmediated access to material reality. The real question was how to uncover the dialectic of relations between reflective subject and the materiality of history. He had no doubt that this could be done. *The Eye of the Needle* was his first, avowedly popular, attempt along this path: the later unfinished and unpublished papers mark a much more serious endeavour in the same field. The claim to privilege by philosophy has, however, over the last 15–20 years, largely been lost. The general ground on which the challenge to its pre-eminence has been constructed (from Wittgenstein and Saussure onwards) has been the so-called 'turn to language'.

Language, the argument goes, not only masks for ever, behind

its interpretative veil, the materiality of history; it is also the constructive medium through which individual and collective subjects are produced. 'Texts', 'discourses' and 'narratives' become the sites and activities through which we come to know not only where we are but who we are and what we are doing. So I think Sacks wins the debate — even if only for now. And he gives me my justification for approaching Turner not as a philosopher would, but through cultural criticism.

The question I am asking about Turner in this lecture is not about the truth of his ideas but about their cultural authority. My procedure will be to identify and examine (however briefly) the very unusual construction of meanings which we find in Turner's writings and to trace, in a highly truncated way, their contribution to our own present. My title, as many will have recognized, comes from Walter Benjamin — in the theses on the idea of history.

There has never been a document of culture which was not at one and the same time a document of barbarism. And just as such a document of culture is not free of barbarism, barbarism taints also the manner in which it is transmitted from one owner to another. A historical materialist therefore dissociates himself from it as far as possible. He regards it as his task to brush history against the grain. (W. Benjamin, 1973: 258–9)

There were many reasons prompting the choice of this text to focus the perspectives of cultural criticism. Not the least was its impact here in the period when Turner was at work. Another was its continuing influence on local cultural discussion but the most important was the sense that this formulation caught (or 'textualized') the 'structure of feeling' (to use Raymond Williams's phrase) which was making itself felt here in the early 1970s. It provides, I think, a critical point of entry to the questions of oppositional discourse because it identifies and signals a moment when there was a new sense of 'the grain' of South African history and a new perspective of the possibilities of 'brushing against that grain'. This was the moment between 1970 and 1974 when here, at this University, at least four major intellectual projects were being constructed. I think it neither nostalgic nor pretentious nor grandiose to speak of a 'Durban' moment. There is plenty of popular anecdote which will bear this out but consider the simple formal evidence:

- Turner was at work on *The Eye of the Needle* and after that on the much more far-reaching philosophical work; as well as on his numerous practical political projects.
- Steve Biko was in the process of formulating not only the intellectual core, but the political discourse and practical

programmes of Black Consciousness.

- Dunbar Moodie was busy with a major reinterpretation of Afrikaner power.
- Mike Kirkwood produced the first terms for a thoroughgoing reinterpretation of South African English literature.

To mention only these inevitably misses the atmosphere of intellectual ferment and the countless details signalling a structural shift in the received intellectual patterns of the social world. Moreover, the things I have mentioned refer only to an intellectual élite — both white and black — and what was going on beyond the limits of the élite was still more surprising. The unpredicted, unexpected and revelatory 1973 Durban strikes alone suggest that the Durban moment was more than a small eddy in a muddy pool. When we look back and ask what it was that was taking place, it is then that Turner becomes an important source — and it is Benjamin's formulation that lets us see just how important.

Benjamin poses a dialectic of civilization and barbarism — each in and of the other. Turner, working along a completely different route reached, in 1972, a similar point:

The word civilization has long bedevilled rational thought about relationships between Europe and Africa. The polarization of the issue into a civilized/uncivilized dichotomy has prevented a clear analysis of the differences and similarities between African and European culture. Furthermore, by describing European culture as civilization one unconsciously tends to see it as unchanging, as final. One takes the greatest cultural achievements and the most lofty sentiments of the age and then tends to assume that everybody in the period was involved in those achievements and practised that ethic. (R. Turner, 1972: 23-4)

This is written in Turner's patient, teacherly style but the point he is constructing is not far from that of Benjamin — although he had no knowledge of him at the time. Turner is on the way towards the dialectic because his effort is to overcome the false dichotomy which lay at the heart of conventional liberal discourse.

But there is a still deeper linkage between the Benjamin text and Turner's work, and, complicated as it is, it is here that we can identify the critical point in what I have loosely termed the Durban moment. The linkage turns on the notions of Utopian thinking and critique.¹ The first chapter of *The Eye of the Needle* was titled, 'The Necessity for Utopian Thinking'. It was the part of the book which caused most difficulty — at least to liberals for whom Dr Verwoerd exemplified the Utopian thinker. The issue is deeply constructed in the Benjamin text but it is there nonetheless. The document of culture is also *at the same time* a document of barbarism — great

creators *and* forced labour are both present in the text. The task of the historical materialist (or in the terms in use in this lecture, 'the cultural critic') is to see *both* — to maintain distance and to reveal the meanings of *both*. These seem to be the implications of the phrase 'To brush history against the grain'.

In Benjamin's terms the cultural text exposes within itself both the Utopian impulse and the ideological construction of denial and oppression. The Utopian impulse is a figuration of the vision of human solidarity in the face of necessity; the ideological construction is the vesting of the Utopian figure in a social particularity — a particular class or group, who are affirmed and secured, and whose domination is thereby carried forward. In thinking through the Benjamin text two cardinal points declare themselves. The first is that his perspective on historical transition is very, very long. His notion of 'transmission' is virtually timeless — the spoils pass from one victor to another. The struggle for and against domination does not reach any easy or quick end. The second is the evenness of his attention to culture and to barbarism. The critique of domination requires for its claim to historical illumination the validation of the Utopian impulse within the barbarism — and vice versa. These are the conditions of dialectical thought.

The central paragraph of the first Chapter of *The Eye of the Needle* captured precisely these concerns and expressed them in Turner's own unique clarity and simplicity:

To understand a society, to understand what it is, where it is going, where it could go, we cannot just describe it. We need also to theorize about it . . . Theory is not difficult. What is often difficult is to *shift oneself into a theoretical attitude*, that is to realize what things in one's experience cannot be taken for granted. (R. Turner, 1972: 5)

The final phrase loses some of the power of Benjamin's formulation but the central point is secure. The *theoretical attitude* meant, for him, being able to hold together simultaneously a double perspective or (to use Paul Ricoeur's terms) — a double hermeneutic: the hermeneutic of hope ('where it could go') and the hermeneutic of suspicion ('what it is and where it is going?') In the final chapter of *The Eye of the Needle* called 'The Present as History' we can see Turner putting his double hermeneutic to work. It was the presence of the double hermeneutic, or dialectic, in the work of Turner, and of Biko, that gave the definitive intellectual energy, to what I have tried to identify as the Durban moment. And it was this in the praxis of both men that 'brushed history against the grain'. The deaths of both, showed with all too brutal a clarity, just how hard their brush against history had been.

There is a sense that the Durban moment which I have been trying to describe occurred in a gap in the flow of history — something in the nature of a break between the boom conditions of the repression in the 60s and the reorganization of resistance in the 70s. This is perhaps why it is so visible. Andrew Nash, whose regrettably unfinished essay on Turner is the best commentary on his work, argues that the major weakness in both Turner and Biko's thought is its strangely a-historical character. The issue is critical no matter from what perspective one starts. At one level it poses the questions: 'how could these two men, breaking the moulds of conventional thought, fail to see the power of the historical context?' and 'what consequence did this have for their subsequent direction and influence?' For this lecture the issue is important because it throws the discussion forward towards 1990.

In pursuing these issues towards the present, I want to try to maintain the cultural perspective on Turner by posing the question Alasdair MacIntyre puts in this way:

The key question for men is not about their own authorship; I can only answer the question, 'What am I to do?' if I can answer the prior question, 'Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?' (A. MacIntyre, 1981: 201)

In this lecture the question becomes: 'Of what story or narratives was the Turner, or the Durban moment, a part?' The immediate answer is simple — and somewhat disconcerting. The narrative line into which Biko and Turner entered in 1972 was the intellectual disintegration and defeat of the late 19th century liberalism of the élite. And yet, whatever the tendential directions of their arguments, their grounding category was the traditional conceptual bastion of liberalism — the *individual consciousness*: the view that the inner intentionality of people counted, in the end, for more than their public meaning. In this sense both men were still liberals. This goes some way to answering the question I asked earlier about their failure to grasp the power of context.

But South African liberals, they argued, no matter whether they were Christian, white and rich, or the opposite, and many of them were, had failed to value consciousness properly. Trapped within the false dichotomies of civilization and barbarism they could be neither radical, nor critical, nor reflective enough. White liberals were white first and liberal later, was the way Turner put it. Develop a critical and radical consciousness, they said, of the conditions of exploitation and repression. Social change would follow. At this point they began their fierce break with liberalism and opened the way towards new forms of discourse.

The broad outlines of the narrative of liberal disintegration and

defeat in the 1970s have been rehearsed sufficiently often to require no repetition here. What are perhaps slightly less often given salience are the terms, conditions and grounds of the newly hegemonic discourse of materialism which followed in behind the intellectual break produced by Turner and Biko. The shift in the key terms is clear enough. The preoccupation of the liberal discourse with the problems of secular individual moral witness was replaced by the concern with political agency. Whom you worked with became more important than what you stood for. And equally in turn the concern with private intentionality — with *motive* — was replaced by the notion of theoretical awareness. It was your intellectual framework and not your good heart that counted.

The principal intellectual grounds on which these decisive shifts took place were the materialist reinterpretations of South African history, and the structuralist theorizations of the State. The intellectual authority of materialism was established on its capacity to remake the past and to reveal the present in terms of the master category of class struggle. This was an attempt to place South Africa as a part of the long world historical struggle as formulated by Hegel and Marx.

The interpretative power of this discourse became clearly evident in the period after 1980 when it demonstrated its capacity to elicit, focus and direct the aspirations and experience of the vast mass of black South Africans. People became aware of themselves as different actors, on another stage in a different drama. In the narrative of white domination the central figure was no longer Afrikaner nationalism. Capital and its state apparatus was placed in the leading role. In the narrative of black resistance the leading role passed from defensive communal solidarity against oppression to offensive class solidarity on the road to power.

These were crucial shifts with critical consequences for us all today, and in the time available I can do little but sketch some of the most obvious features. The first, and possibly the most decisive, was the transformation of the meanings of the word 'struggle'. In the philosophical formulation of materialism 'struggle' held world historical connotations, and it was teleological. It was about man, necessity, production, exploitation and the unfolding towards reason and freedom. Its end was the Utopia of classlessness. In the oppositional discourse of South Africa, struggle was about the defeat of white domination by black resistance. The key transformation took place when these two meanings of 'struggle' were conflated within the oppositional discourse. The consequence of this conflation was to give the struggle over power in South Africa a dramatic historical and symbolic dimension. Both black and white people were subsumed

as unified entities within historically given roles. The direction, duration, leadership and end point of the struggle between them, could all, in a manner, be taken for granted — the end of apartheid would be freedom, the triumph of reason and the fulfilment of history. South African history gained its own teleology. The freedom of black South Africans from white rule was conflated with the classless Utopia.

In a recent paper Johan Muller and Nico Cloete describe this period (intensifying through the 80s) as 'hyper polarized by the unmediated antagonism of "the State" and "the people" where "the state represented the simple denial of the needs of the people" and in which the polarized antagonism "had the effect of justifying absolutely the legitimacy of the struggle for liberation *tout court*, as well as all means of achieving it"'.¹

Muller and Cloete go on to reflect on the position of intellectuals during the period as follows:

There was literally no social space that could have been occupied outside the camps of the 'people' or the 'state'. The question of being 'with the people' was further sharpened in terms of whether intellectuals were 'aligned' to the movement or not, which meant, at least for whites, whether intellectuals belonged to small frequently vanguardist organizations, ideologically committed to the movement, or not. The question of intellectual contribution could be raised only after the question of political membership had been settled. Many of the best progressive intellectuals, refusing this implicit blackmail, were rendered socially invisible during this time. (J. Muller & N. Cloete, 1990: 7)

In their description, the position of black intellectuals was even worse. I expect their description to find responsive echoes among many here in the audience. Their reference to intellectual contribution can serve to recall us to the work of Turner.

Examining our recent experience in the framework of 'the theoretical attitude', or of Benjamin's dialectic, two things are immediately evident. The first is the drastic foreshortening of the historical perspective. Benjamin's counsel of 'dissociation' has been lost. The second is the collapse of the double hermeneutic. The projection of *hope* finds itself caught within the limits of the Freedom Charter. The work of *critique* is confined to the obligatory recapitulation of the crimes and failures of the state. The terms and conditions of the struggle are to be taken for granted. What has gone is dialectical thought. What has emerged is intellectual activism. One of the goals of intellectual activism is narrative closure. Its means are the coercive imposition of a closed symbolic order on the unfolding meanings of narratives. It generates a fixed format of representations and positions in the

struggle. Any form of dialectic is suppressed. The theoretical attitude is exiled. 'Desks' speak. Lines are given. Intellectual borders are patrolled. Thought is put under a state of emergency. The spectre of totalitarianism begins to show itself.

But, to return to broader questions of discourse, all narratives resist closure. And the dangers of symbolic closure imposed upon materially realized discourses is nowhere more evident than in the events of February this year. February 2nd made us witness to the rupture of the oppositional symbolic order. The state refused its 'historically assigned' role and assumed another, returned in fact to the buried and displaced terms of liberal pragmatism. And, more surprisingly, the opposition leadership did the same. The reconstruction of rule replaced the struggle — but where the power lay was always less than clear. In the *coup de theatre* activism turned to pragmatism in a day. Yesterday's mobilizers became tomorrow's 'marshalls'. Yesterday's critique became tomorrow's policy. Policy is the dominant word in the current discourse of opposition intellectuals. It is the word which has replaced 'struggle'. The end of apartheid and the arrival of liberation are neither as synonymous nor as unambiguous as they had seemed. It is worth recalling that the father of policy was neither Mill nor Marx but Machiavelli; and the Prince, as Muller and Cloete, speaking of the ANC, remind us, has little time for the 'theoretical niceties of critique'.

But to suggest that the oppositional discourse as a whole has closed its accounts with power — and with theory, is to go too far altogether. The Prince may not have a need for theory but there are others who do. Andrew Nash, discussing the current position of Marxist discourse in South Africa — particularly in relation to destalinization and the oppositional access to power — speaks of the

historical task of building a Marxist tradition in South Africa which is both rational and militant, which seeks the greatest possible degree of theoretical rigour and coherence, and also addresses itself as directly as possible to the concerns and aspirations of the oppressed masses. None of us can tell in advance how the masses will make use of the resources of Marxism which are at their disposal. We know only that their struggle against exploitation and oppression will continue, and we can expect it to intensify, and that they will have need of these resources. No Marxist should be scared of putting their ideas to the test of free and open debate, and eventually to the test of mass struggle itself. (Nash, 1990: 16)

This is a long way from policy positions and scenarios. It recovers the conceptual language of Turner and Biko and puts it to work in the thick of the 'present as history'. It opens up once more

the dimensions of the historical struggle and it returns the theoretical attitude to the centre of action. It also shows us, or lets us see once more, the long, dangerous, interrupted, narrative to which Benjamin gave the terms 'To brush history against the grain.' It is in that narrative that Turner's cultural authority becomes evident.

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NOTE

1. Much of my argument on the Utopian impulse in Benjamin's formulation is derived from Frederic Jameson's *The Political Unconscious*.

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