

ACROSS THE COLOUR LINE

Some remarks on South African writing

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A DETAILED EXAMINATION of South African art and literature in relation to the development of South African society is a task which awaits undertaking. Until such a work has been completed, interpretation of our cultural life must be confined to a certain amount of generalization which, however, cannot ignore the events which affect society.

The people of South Africa are in the throes of a struggle, the struggle between the forces of reaction and those of progress, between white supremacy in its worst forms and the oppressed non-white masses demanding equality, freedom and democracy for all—a condition essential to the progress of all mankind. In contemplating a policy of armed struggle, side by side with the political, the forces of democracy are ushering in the climax of a long history of national oppression and struggle for emancipation.

Inevitably, the revolt against apartheid and white supremacy in the political and economic life of South Africa has also given rise to a similar revolution in intellectual and artistic spheres. Indeed, the Nationalist Party and its protagonists foresaw this, hence the banning of books since the early stages of the Government's reign, the suppression of writings by listed or banned opponents, and the Censorship Act. Recently the witch-hunting 'Volkskongress' on 'Communism' made much of recommending action against the 'liberalistic' Press, and set up committees to deal with all aspects of the country's life, including education, art and culture. The Nationalist Government took no 'official' part in the congress, but its blessing is clearly implied in its pleasure that the 'anti-communist' policy was 'spontaneous'.

The whole programme of Nationalist concern with art and culture in South Africa is clear proof that there exists opposition to undemocratic practices, on the part of writers and artists.

At the same time it would be wrong to conclude that present artistic protest against tyranny in South Africa is solely the result of the policies of the present regime. Many writers and artists in South

Africa's history have entertained sentiments of genuine humanity towards the underprivileged and oppressed, particularly towards the non-whites; while African writers have in one way or another called for a better life for their people.

Neither do we maintain that all writers who protest against Nationalist interference (like those who protested against censorship) are demanding, through the medium of their work, democracy for all South Africans. It is probable that many of them are concerned only with the right of their own profession to give expression to whatever ideas it wishes. But then, even this demand for liberal democracy in art is a revolutionary one, in the eyes of the Nationalists.

But the emergence of writers who today make no bones about demanding the abolition of the colour-bar, and indeed the entire system of suppression, is the culmination of the evolution of cultural thought which has taken place over decades and which, like the political struggle, is reaching crystallization within the milieu of extreme reaction.

The development of the democratic and socialist revolutions must give rise to more and more revolutionary intellectuals among the non-whites and working-class, particularly, and to the emergence of a revolutionary art and literature dedicated to the winning of a new life for man in Africa.

Progressive attitudes and trends inevitably emerge out of all societies, and no less out of South Africa with its long history of suppression of subject peoples. Society consists of people actively and socially engaged in working with the world of nature and transforming it. As they carry on the labour process, changing the world, adapting it to human use, they both discover the make-up of the world and change themselves.

Art is the product of human beings in society. It makes use of all the socially created means of reflecting and thinking about reality, such as spoken or written language, drawing and painting, musical composition and acting, modelling etc., in order to give objective form to man's consciousness of himself and his changing relations to the outer world of people and nature.

Through the labour process, nature's secrets are progressively discovered, its laws are revealed to become the instrument of human progress, and the mind is enriched by the discovery of its manifold qualities. With the progressive conflicts in and the reorganization of society carried on by people, there is discovery, understanding and mastery of the laws which govern the organization of society. Human relations become more 'human' in the sense that antagonisms are

replaced by kinship and understanding, and through co-operation the individual is enabled to develop more freely.

Thus, the history of art is a record of the successive stages in the humanization of reality, revealing the constant change and expansion of the awareness of life.

Thus, too, despite the black history of South Africa, in the sphere of literature this awareness of changing relations, the humanization of reality has been and continues to be reflected in the works of writers of South Africa's past and present.

It was during the period of the anti-slavery movement that feelings of humanitarianism began to creep into the writings about South Africa by white writers of that time. Thomas Pringle, for example, a leading figure in the abolitionist movement, wrote highly romanticized accounts of the 'Hottentots' in his *African Sketches*, and despite the neglect of any attempt to portray them as dynamic characters, the work nevertheless contrasts with such as *Skankwan Van Die Duine* by the Hobson Brothers.

Olive Schreiner, in her work, displayed greater feeling for the aborigines of this country than did the early Dutch farmers who shot them off like game. It was her outlook, her willingness to explore the truth, which led to her producing one of the greatest, truly South African novels.

Of *The Story Of An African Farm*, Olive Schreiner wrote: 'It has been suggested by a kind critic that he would better have liked the little book if it had been a history of wild adventure; of cattle driven into inaccessible 'krantzes' by Bushmen: 'of encounters with ravening lions and hairbreadth escapes'. This could not be. Such works are best written in Piccadilly or the Strand. . . . But, should one sit down to paint the scenes among which he has grown, he will find that the facts creep in upon him. . . . Sadly he must squeeze the colour from the brush, and dip it into the grey pigments around him. He must paint what lies before him.'

In the preface to his book, *Daniel Vananda—the Life Story of A Human Being* (1922), William Charles Scully came nearer the truth about racial antagonism in South Africa than other writers of his time. He points to the economic exploitation of the Africans, the institution of the 'civilized labour' policy which gave preference to the whites. 'Previous to the Union of South African States, thousands of Natives were employed upon the railways at a daily wage of one shilling and sixpence. Afterwards, however, all were dismissed, their places being taken by poor Europeans who, although much less efficient than the Native—according to the expressed opinion of the superior Railway Authorities—were paid far more than double the Natives' wages.'

Scully states that 'Both European races in South Africa are inimical to the Native', and attempts to give historical reasons for this. He tries to expose the contradictions of the 'civilizing' mission of the whites, and further, 'in its reserves of Native labour South Africa has possessed an enormous and unique economic advantage. . . . Native labour has been the most copious, the most efficient and most amenable of any unskilled labour of which industrialism has had experience. . . . It is commonplace to say that in South Africa ninety-nine hundredths of the unskilled labour of the present day is performed by Black Men. So much the Natives have done for us. What have we done for them? This is a terrible question which will call for an answer on the day of the Great Assize. In the meantime the Native may learn the art of combination—or adopt Mohammedanism. And then—?' In a footnote to the latter remarks, Scully states significantly: 'This was written before Bolshevism was invented.'

Thus Scully's preface is perhaps more noteworthy by virtue of its observations, than the story itself. But *Daniel Vananda* attempts to describe with sympathy, not unmixed with melodrama, the life of an African who leaves his tribal environment to journey to the big city, and his experiences in the modern world.

This is a theme which has been used oft-times by South African writers, but these stories always seem to conclude with the rejection of the advanced life by the African, and his return to his tribal home, overlooking the fact that millions of Africans have over decades come to settle in the cities as permanent members of the South African proletariat.

William Plomer, with a biting sense of irony, rebelled against the accepted values of white South African society, and presented a protest against the immoral principles upon which the conception of white supremacy and the so-called 'civilizing' mission of the whites in Africa, were based.

In the words of the poet Roy Campbell:

*Plomer, 'twas you who, though a boy in age,
Awoke a sleepy continent to rage,
Who dared alone to thrash a craven race
And hold a mirror to its dirty face.*

Over the same period there also emerged the works of indigenous African intellectuals who were bent on portraying the life and history of their people. These writers presented with a sense of pride the powers and achievements of their leaders, consciously or unconsciously challenging the conceptions which the whites entertained in regard to their people. Men like Dr. John L. Dube and R. R. Dhlomo pro-

duced several books in the vernacular, dealing with the lives of Chaka, Dingaan, Cetewayo, etc. These works could be described as the beginnings of African nationalism in the literary field. And it is a tribute to these writers that they did not reject the artistic influence of white poets like Wordsworth, Tennyson, and Byron. Indeed, Solomon Plaatje, first secretary of the African National Congress, brilliantly translated the works of Shakespeare into the Tswana language, apart from turning out other writings.

It is inevitable that in South Africa 'progressiveness' should be measured by attitudes towards matters concerning the non-whites. English-language writers, on the whole, with their association with liberal and social democratic thought inherited from the history of Europe, have preserved much of their advanced opinions in their writings, so that it is relatively easy to trace the course of progressive ideas from the earliest times.

The Afrikaner people have regrettably been associated with reactionary attitudes since their early association with the aboriginal inhabitants, and the Afrikaner withdrawal from the advance of modern society for the confined atmosphere of rural life and feudalism, and the armed laager. Thus Afrikaans writing has in the main extolled the virtues of the voortrekker, or has been concerned with the romantic problems of family life or the beauties of the South African countryside. The non-white has been portrayed either as the marauder, the noble savage or the faithful servant.

However it is impossible for people to exist in a vacuum, and with the development of South Africa, the Afrikaner has become inevitably involved with all aspects of society. It is equally impossible for a people to continue to entertain the ideas and thoughts of their forbears in perpetuity, so that the Afrikaner intelligentsia gave rise to those of its numbers who desired a reassessment of the attitudes towards others who are going to continue to share society with them, whether they like it or not.

Among these dissidents we have the examples of such as Andre Brink and Jan Rabie, both Afrikaners who refused to be hemmed in by the laager of narrow nationalistic conceptions, and who stepped out of the ring to investigate the surrounding world.

Brink is at the moment under fire from Afrikaans 'cultural' bodies who are complaining about his *Lobola Vir Die Lewe*.

A little earlier, another Afrikaner writer, Frans Venter, produced his *Swart Pelgrim* (later translated into English, *Black Pilgrim*), and like Scully in English, attempted to bring to the Afrikaans-reading public a picture of what happens to the black man in the white man's world. The Afrikaans publishers at first hesitated to bring out the book,

for many things said had not been said before in that language. The novel caused a flurry mainly because it was written by an Afrikaner, but as a work it embraced the well-known theme of the 'alien' African trying to adapt himself to the 'foreign' city. It was passed by *Die Transvaler* apparently because the author 'presents the sober facts' of the situation, and 'at no point takes sides'—these are conditions which more often than not guarantee the acceptance of 'controversial' books. Nevertheless, here was another attempted incursion into the real atmosphere of South Africa.

But Paton succeeded with this theme in greater measure. Alan Paton in *Cry The Beloved Country* was less fearful of taking the racial bull by the horns, and as a result the subject was treated with all the realism and stark tragedy of South African society. The breakdown of African tribal life and the effects of the industrial urban areas on the transplanted people, the brutal machinery of modern enslavement together with its attendant humiliation, poverty and hardships are all in the pages of this book. It was his fearless entrance into this world which gained Paton acclaim.

Again, in Nadine Gordimer's *World of Strangers* the portrayal of the African is a departure from the usual picture of a black man, and he is given a more human aspect, and not treated as a curiosity.

The playwright, Athol Fugard, with his *Blood Knot* made another brilliant contribution towards the revelation of the truth of the South African situation.

The handicap under which all honest writers labour in South Africa is the gulf which exists between the racial groups. For this reason they are unfortunately tripped up when attempting to portray life across the colour line. Hence many of the best works have suffered criticism for unrealism when focusing across that line. This can be excused, for while acknowledging that a truly South African literature will emerge in an atmosphere of unity and equality of all people, it would be ridiculous to suggest that all writing on the racial construction of this country cease until that stage is reached.

The point is that, whatever their failing, writers have tried to bridge the gulf to open the eyes of people on both sides to the dilemma of this country.

Once art has opened people's minds and eyes to the qualities of people and nature, this revelation can be permanently theirs. It becomes part of their thoughts and perceptions, and serves to create a greater intimacy between themselves and the real world around them. The revelations provided by art thus become a common social possession. Society ultimately accepts only what serves it, only what enables it to grow, for otherwise it perishes.

A fault of much writing by progressives in South Africa, however, seems to be their preoccupation with the exploration of the non-white people and their lives, and the attempts to present solutions to the 'race problem' thereby, overlooking the fact, apparently, that there exist people other than blacks who have problems. It is high time that a work about life as the white people themselves truly live it today, was written. This would be an admirable contribution to South African literature.

The Afrikaans poet, Uys Krige, who fought for the Republican Government in the Spanish Civil War, has done much in his field to bring his people to life on paper. In his work we get the feeling of the Afrikaner people as human beings, ordinary people who like all others suffer the attacks of life, who are influenced by their prejudices and whims, and who live in a world fraught with contradictions. Krige, with a genuine sense of internationalism, has striven to lift Afrikaans out of mere South Africanism, and at the same time has done much in the investigation of Afrikaans folk-lore, and also enriched the language with his brilliant translations of the works of great Spanish poetry, like those of Lorca.

Following in the trail of non-white writers such as those who have been mentioned earlier, have come several who are today bent on depicting the life of their people in the spirit of protest against the encirclement by racial barriers and the oppression of the colour-bar. That they have adopted an attitude of indignation is to be expected, for being nearest to the oppressed majority of South Africa, they share the humiliation of apartheid. So their portrayal of the life of their people has tended to be truer than the efforts of their white contemporaries.

True, there are at the moment relatively few of them, and the pace of life of the non-whites is such that the short story, rather than the long novel, predominates as the easiest medium of social protest in the literary field. One can point to works by such as Mphahlele, T. H. Gwala, Richard Rive and others, and note that non-white writers have come to part with the approach of their literary forbears who believed that moral and religious argument would change the heart of the oppressors. They demand freedom as a birthright, and unlike their white contemporaries, they have no 'racial problems' to solve by way of idealistic or 'controversial' debate. These are the writers of revolt, who have no qualms about combining art with the struggle for emancipation and democracy.

There are no doubt considerable writers in the vernacular yet undiscovered. Several of these contribute works for use in schools, and so are frustrated in their expression because they have to be passed by the Bantu Education Department. Undoubtedly, a vast amount of

treasure will be uncovered once the impeding rubble of apartheid rule has been removed.

The scrutinizing eyes of officialdom have released for consumption only those things which satisfy the requirements of white supremacy and the *status quo*, and thus South African students and the general readership have for decades been offered the confined works such as Celliers, Leipoldt, Totius etc., and newspapers have opened their pages to story writers who in many instances have brilliantly sketched life, but who consciously or unconsciously, avoided asking to change it.

Never stingy with their praise for their artists, the South African ruling-class have encouraged them with grants, bursaries, medals and awards, and have won over people of brilliant talent.

Poets like Adam Small and S. V. Petersen have employed their great gifts in portraying the life of the oppressed Coloured community by way of their verses. But it is the life of the colourful argot of that people, and of the twanging guitars, the Cockney-like humour, the religion and the wine-drinking, the music and *joie de vivre*. The 'quaint' Coloured community hoping that *alles sal reg kom* one day, or that God will finally solve all their problems. All this too, is life, of course, but it is the life which the white supremacist appreciates. One may criticize, but not demand. It is once again the portrayal of the faithful servant, the noble savage of romantic literature.

In contrast there are other writings about the Coloured community. Alex La Guma in *A Walk In The Night* and several other stories, reaches out to tear away the mask of 'quaintness', and to reveal life among the people in all its tragedy and humiliation; to show them, for all their much-admired *joie de vivre*, as a people, like the rest of South Africa's, struggling for dignity and recognition against the cruelty and injustices of the world; and to condemn the system which causes their degradation.

In the main it is the non-white writer who has come nearest the truth of the South African situation. This could not be otherwise, since the contradictions of a capitalist system aggravated by the colour-bar have in their development brought awareness of its fundamentals more strikingly to the non-whites and the working-class, than to any other section. It is to be expected then, that with the revelation of these contradictions, thought among this section of the people will take on a more and more revolutionary aspect, become more and more socialistic.

The white intellectual, whose political, social and economic superiority is maintained, whether he likes it or not, by the colour-bar, may become genuinely concerned, or even conscience-stricken, and thus attempt to break away and search for 'solutions' to the dilemma of South Africa. This, as we have tried to show, has happened already, but

his cultural and intellectual attacks have hitherto been confined to the superstructure of society. Thus the liberal-bourgeois-democratic artists are concerned with 'injustice', 'the inherent goodness in people', 'greed', 'a change of heart', 'reassessment', 'they don't understand', or morality in general. Admirable conceptions, perhaps, considering the present strategic objectives of the working-class movement in South Africa.

But the famous statement of Marx in the *Preface to a Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* says, *inter alia*:

'The sum total of (these) relations of production constitute the *economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which rises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the social, political, and intellectual life process in general. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness . . . With the change of the economic foundations the entire immense superstructure is more or less rapidly transformed.*' (My italics, S.F.)

It is therefore in the basic structure of South African society that the ultimate answer to the racial question lies.

Of course, some writers might take offence, and argue that it is not the business of art to advocate revolution. To say the least, we are certain that progressive writers do not use social conditions purely as a basis for demonstrations of their talent. The content of art is its discovered truth of life, or in other words, its contribution to social consciousness. The work of art, to be of any merit, must not be divorced from reality, for truth, after all, is to be discovered in reality and its process of change.

South Africa is able to look back with pride upon the contributions made by those who have searched for the truth, and so shine like beacons in our dark past. Writers and artists must be prepared to keep in step with the advance of history in order that South Africa may be enriched by their works, for as we have stated, society, in the long run, retains only those things which serve it.

In the words of the nineteenth-century Russian writer and critic, N. G. Chernyshevsky, 'All human activity must serve mankind if it is not to remain a useless and idle occupation'.