NADINE GORDIMER

WRITERS IN SOUTH AFRICA: THE NEW BLACK POETS

Nadine Gordimer (1923-2014) was born in Springs, Transvaal (now Gauteng)—a mining town near Johannesburg, South Africa. She attended the University of the Witwatersrand but dropped out after one year. Her early stories were collected in *Face to Face* (1949), and she then published the novels *The Lying Days* (1953) and *A World of Strangers* (1958). In 1960 the arrest of a friend and the Sharpeville massacre inspired her to become more active in the anti-apartheid movement, and her novels *The Late Bourgeois World* (1966) and *A Guest of Honour* (1970) reflected her growing disillusionment with the apartheid system (both novels were banned). In the late 1960s she taught at several American universities, including Harvard, Princeton, Northwestern, and Columbia. The following excerpt is from an essay published in the winter 1973-1974 issue and included in the collections *Exile and Tradition: Studies in African and Caribbean Literature* (1976) and *Telling Times: Writing and Living, 1954-2008* (2010).

IN THE 1950S AND EARLY 1960S prose writing by black South Africans was some of the best on the continent. Nearly all those seminal black writers went into exile in the Sixties, and their works are banned. The lopping-off of a young indigenous tradition—as distinct from the central tradition of the European language the black writer uses—has had a stunting effect on prose writing. No fiction of any real quality has been written since then by a black writer still living in South Africa. It seems that a certain connection has been axed between black fiction writers and their material. Aspirant writers are intimidated not only by censorship as such but also by the fear that anything at all controversial, set out by a black in the generally explicit medium of prose, makes the writer suspect, since the correlation

of articulacy and political insurrection, so far as blacks are concerned, is firmly lodged in the minds of the Ministers of the Interior, Justice, and Police. Polymorphous fear cramps the hand. Would-be writers are so affected that they have ignored gigantic contemporary issues that have set their own lives awash. Such stories as there are, for example, re-pulp the clichés of the apartheid situation—the illicit drinking den, the black-white love affair—that have been so thoroughly blunted by overuse in literature good and bad that they can be trusted to stir the censors and police as little as they can be trusted to fire the people's imagination. Meanwhile, apartheid has bulldozed on over black lives since the 1960s and brought experiences such as forced mass resettlement that make the shebeen and the bedroom marginal by comparison.

Out of this paralytic silence, suspended between fear of expression and the need to give expression to an ever greater pressure of grim experience, has come the black writer's subconscious search for a form less vulnerable than those that led a previous generation into bannings and exile. In other countries, writers similarly placed have found a way to survive and speak through the use of different kinds of prose forms. Perhaps, if black writing had not been so thoroughly beheaded and truncated in the Sixties, there would have been creative minds nimble enough to keep it alive through something like the *skaz*—a Russian genre, dating from Czarist times, which concentrates a narrative of wide-ranging significance in a compressed work that derives from an oral tradition of storytelling, and takes full advantage of the private and double meanings contained in colloquial idiom. Both the oral tradition and the politically-charged idiom exist in black South Africa.

Or the solution might have been found in the adoption of the Aesopean genre—as in a fable, you write within one set of categories, knowing your readers will realize that you are referring to another, an area where explicit comment is taboo. Camus used this device in *La Peste*, and again, Stalin's generation of writers learned to be dab hands at it.

The cryptic mode is a long-established one; it has been resorted to in times and countries where religious persecution or political oppression drives creativity back into itself, and forces it to become its own hiding-place, from which, ingenious as an oracle, a voice that cannot be identified speaks the truth in riddles and parables not easily defined as subversive. In South Africa there are 97 definitions of what is officially "undesirable" in literature: subversive, obscene, or otherwise "offensive." They are not always

invoked, but are there when needed to suppress a particular book or silence an individual writer. Seeking to escape them, among other even more sinister marks of official attention, black writers have had to look for survival away from the explicit if not to the cryptic then to the implicit; and in their case, they have turned instinctively to poetry. Professor Harry Levin defines a poem as "a verbal artifact" whose "arrangement of signs and sounds is likewise a network of associations and responses, communicating implicit information." In demotic, non-literary terms, a poem can be both hiding-place and loud-hailer. That was what black writers within South Africa were seeking. . . .

The themes chosen by the new back poets are committed in the main to the individual struggle for physical and spiritual survival under oppression. "I" is the pronoun that prevails, rather than "we," but the "I" is the Whitmanesque unit of multimillions rather than the exclusive first-person singular. There is little evidence of group feeling, except perhaps in one or two of the young writers who are within SASO (South African Students' Organization), the black student organization whose politico-cultural manifesto is a combination of negritude with Black Power on the American pattern.

The themes, like those of the poets who preceded the present generation (they were few in number and were forced into exile), are urban—although it is doubtful whether one can speak of the tradition or influence of a Kunene or a Brutus, here. Few of the young aspirants writing today have read even the early work of exiled writers: it was banned while they were still at school. The striking development of Dennis Brutus' later and recent work, for example, is unknown except by a handful of people who may have spotted a copy of Cosmo Pieterse's *Seven South African Poets* or *Thoughts Abroad* that has somehow slipped into a bookshop, although the statutory ban on Dennis Brutus would mean that the book itself is automatically banned. It is axiomatic that the urban theme contains the classic crises: tribal and traditional values against Western values, peasant modes of life against the modes of an industrial proletariat, above all, the quotidian humiliations of a black's world made to a white's specifications. But in the work we are considering I believe there also can be traced distinct stages or stations of development in creating a black ethos strong enough to be the challenger rather than the challenged in these crises. . . .

Preoccupation with the metaphysics of hate belongs to the station of rejection of the distorted black self-image: James Matthews refers to the book

he has published with Gladys Thomas as a collection of "declarations" and the unspoken overall declaration is that of those who have learned how to hate enough, and to survive. His is the manifesto of the black ethos as challenger, confronting the white ethos on black ground. In a kind of black nursery jingle by Gladys Thomas, entitled "Fall Tomorrow," it speaks to blacks:

> Don't sow a seed
> Don't paint a wall
> Tomorrow it will have to fall

and to whites:

> Be at home in our desert for all
> You that remade us
> Your mould will break
> And tomorrow you are going to fall.

The book is called "Cry Rage!" and the theme is often expressed in terms of actual and specific events. James Matthews is not diffident about taking a hold wherever he can on those enormous experiences of the long night of the black body-and-soul that prose writers have ignored. His obsession with the subject of resettlement is no more than an accurate reflection of the realities of daily life for the tens of thousands of blacks who have been moved by government decree to find shelter and livelihood in the bare veld of places dubbed Limehill, Dimbaza, Sada, Ilinge—often poetic names whose meanings seem to show malicious contempt for the people dumped there:

> Valley of plenty is what it is called;
> where little children display their nakedness
> and stumble around on listless limbs
> . . . where mothers plough their dead fruit into the soil
> their crone breasts dry of milk
> . . . where menfolk castrated by degradation
> seek their manhood in a jug
> of wine as brackish as their bile. ("Valley of plenty")

Njabulo Ndebele invokes the intimate sorrows of forced removal less

obviously and perhaps more tellingly. Limehills, Dimbazas—these valleys of plenty seldom have adequate water supplies and the new "inhabitants" often have to walk a long way to fetch water:

> There is my wife. There she is
> She is old under those four gallons of water,
> It was said taps in the streets
> Would be our new rivers.
> But my wife fetches the water
> (Down Second Avenue)
> We drink and we eat.
> I watch my wife: she is old. ("Portrait of Love")

And Oswald Mtshali also takes as subjects some dark current events. He uses the Aesopean mode to write devastatingly of a ghastly recent disaster anyone living in South Africa would be able to identify instantly, although its horrors are transliterated, so to speak, into Roman times. A year or two ago a prison van broke down on the road between Johannesburg and Pretoria; the policemen in charge went off to seek help, leaving the prisoners locked inside. It was a hot day; the van was packed; they died of suffocation while the traffic passed unconcerned and unaware:

> They rode upon
> the death chariot
> to their Golgotha—
> three vagrants
> whose papers to be in Caesar's empire
> were not in order.
>
> The sun
> shrivelled their bodies
> in the mobile tomb
> as airtight as canned fish.
>
> We're hot!
> We're thirsty!
> We're hungry!

The centurion
touched their tongues
with the tip
of a lance
dipped in apathy:

"Don't cry to me
but to Caesar who
crucifies you."

A woman came
to wipe their faces.
She carried a dishcloth
full of bread and tea.

We're dying!

The centurion
washed his hands. ("Ride Upon The Death Chariot")

James Matthews writes of the Imam Abdullah Baron, one of the number of people who have died while in detention without trial. He writes of "dialogue" as "the cold fire where the oppressed will find no warmth." Perhaps most significantly, he reflects the current black rejection of any claim whatever by whites, from radicals to liberals, to identify with the black struggle:

They speak so sorrowfully about the
children dying of hunger in Biafra
but sleep unconcerned about the rib-thin
children of Dimbaza. ("They Speak so Sorrowfully")

And again, in a poem called "Liberal Student Crap!":

The basis of democracy rests upon
Fraternity, Equality and not LSD
I should know fellows
Progressive policy the salvation of us all

You just don't understand
There's no one as liberal as me
Some of my best friends are
Kaffirs, Coolies and Coons
Forgive me, I mean other ethnic groups
How could it be otherwise?
I'm Jewish; I know discrimination
from the ghetto to Belsen
So, don't get me all wrong
Cause I know just how you feel
Come up and see me sometime
My folks are out of town.

Whatever the justice of this view of young white people militant against apartheid—and increasing numbers of them are banned and restricted along with blacks—on the question of white proxy for black protest he has a final unanswerable word:

can the white man speak for me?
can he feel my pain when his laws
tear wife and child from my side
and I am forced to work a thousand miles away?

does he know my anguish
as I walk his streets at night
my hand fearfully clasping my pass?

is he with me in the loneliness
of my bed in the bachelor barracks
with my longing driving me to mount my brother?

will he soothe my despair
as I am driven insane
by scraps of paper permitting me to live?
("Can The White Man Speak For Me?")

He does not spare certain blacks, either, nor fear to measure the fashionable

against the actual lineaments of the black situation. He addresses one of the black American singers who from time to time come to South Africa and perform for segregated audiences:

> Say, Percy dad
> you ran out of bread that you got to
> come to sunny South Africa to sing soul
> or did you hope to find your soul
> in the land of your forefathers?
> . . . Say, Percy dad
> will you tell nina simone back home
> that you, a soul singer, did a segregated act
> or will you sit back flashing silver dollar smiles
> as they cart the loot from your Judas role to the bank. ("Say Percy Dad")

And he accuses:

> my sister has become a schemer and
> a scene-stealer
> . . . songs of the village
> traded in for tin pan alley
> black is beautiful has become as artificial as the wig she wears.
> ("My Sister Has Become a Schemer")

Matthews uses indiscriminately the clichés of politics, tracts, and popular journalism, and these deaden and debase his work. But occasionally the contrast between political catchwords and brutal sexual imagery carries a crude immediacy:

> democracy
> has been turned
> into a whore
> her body ravished
> by those who pervert her
> in the bordello
> bandied from crotch to band
> her breasts smeared
> with their seed . . . ("Democracy Has Been Turned into a Whore")

And in the context of fanatical laws framed in the language of reason, within which he is writing, even clichés take on new meaning: they mock the hollowness of high-sounding terms such as "separate development" or clinical ones such as "surplus people"—the behaviouristic vocabulary that gives a scientific gloss to mass removals of human beings.

James Matthews is a paradigm of the black writer in search of a form of expression that will meet the needs of his situation by escaping strictures imposed on free expression by that situation. He is older than other writers I have discussed; more than a decade ago he was writing short stories of exceptional quality. There were signs that he would become a fine prose writer. Whatever the immediate reasons were for the long silence that followed, the fact remains that there was little or no chance that the themes from the cataclysmic life around him he would have wished to explore would not have ended up as banned prose fiction. He stopped writing. He seems to have accepted that . . . what he saw and experienced as a coloured man slowly accepting the black heritage of his mixed blood as his real identity might be written but could not be read. . . .

At its best, "turning to poetry" has released the fine talents of an Mtshali and a Serote, a Dues and a young Ndebele. At its least, it has provided a public address system for the declarations of muzzled prose writers like Matthews. But if he stands where I have put him, as the symbolic figure of the situation of black writing, the sudden ban on his book "Cry Rage!" (during the very time when I was preparing these notes) suggests that black writing in South Africa may once again find itself come full circle, back again at a blank, spiked wall. This is the first book of poems ever to be banned within South Africa. If there were to be a lesson to be learned in a game where it seems you can't win for long, it would seem to be that only good writing with implicit commitment is equal both to the inner demands of the situation and a chance of surviving publication, whatever the chosen literary form.

In terms of a literary judgment, yes, it is never enough to be angry. But unfortunately this does not hold good as an assurance that black poetry of real achievement can continue to be published and read in South Africa. Some of the best writing ever done by South Africans of all colours has not escaped, on grounds of quality, banning in the past. Black Orpheus, where now? How? What next?