

GO THENBURG.

137. 1. 22

GORDIMER

WHAT DOES IT MEAN FOR AN AUTHOR TO BE IMPRISONED?

In SA writrs hve been bannd, imprisond & pt to death
bt not, as far as I knw, fr wht they hve writtn.

Imprisonmnt & persecution arises frm t writer's responsibility -
fr wht they are as 'more than a writer', as humn beings.

But being more thn... can force u to cease wrtg.
T experience o prsn bcomes indelibly embodied i their wk:

Alex la Guma

Breytenbach

Dennis Brutus

Alfred Hutchinson

Hugh Lewin

Ruth First

Jeremy Cronin : INSIDE (hs head) Beverly Hills poem

poets, novelists, journalists, playwrights; both t immediate
experience; & t long-term effectg - t weldng o their lives
wth t majority people o our country.

Viewd frm a distance, oppression seems ideally suited to lit.
Brink 'Writng i a state o seige'. Bt Zik writes 'Our energies go
into ths conflict to sch an extent tt we dont hve mch left fr
creative worjck! Why isnt ths a spur to creative writng. 'I think
it is paralyng. As writrs we build up ready, stock responses
which always come out i our writngs.'

Worse things thn imprisonment

Banning. Strips writ of hs 'essential gesture' of being a
writr at all. Poet Don Mattera fr 7 yrs bannd frm writng,
publishng, & evn frm readng hs wks i public.

My own bans.

Evn nw, many SA writrs cannt b read i *by those fr whom they write, in* their own country (me)

Bt SA is paradoxical. Majority is totally suppressd, bt lit is
nevertheless only ½-suppressd bcos greatr part o people is kept
semi-literate, & cannt b affectd by bks - (nt as in *the Czechs*)

Exile Fr some writrs - nt all - bcomes worse thn prison.

21k: My personal experience, like tt o hundreds o my fellow-
exiles, has been tt once t sense o adventure began to wear off,
nostalgia & t distance frm meaningful involvemnt, frm relevance,
begn to gnaw at one's vitals.'

Key word is relevance. Writr is cut off frm source. Some continue writng frm past experience (La Guma) (myself) bt thn mst move on frm there - exhaust + past.
Fr many, exile hs meant death. Can Themba, Nat Nakasa, Todd

Experiences o prison hve so far been largely writtn by whites (Govan wrote o toilet papr, bt nt publishd)

Loudest voices Ws: Gordimer, Brink, Coetzee, Breytenbach, Fugard. Packer: 'Inside t struggle against sch an overwhelming evil, t subject itself threatns to silence normal discourse. T blk wrtr comes frm a grp whose humanity is denied, but they hve to find a language fr tt humanity beyond t narrow status o victim tt hs been assignd to thm.'

In past, their perception o prison diff frm tt o Ws - prison is part o t way o life o blk majority. (SA, numbr o prisoners to total pop i 81-82 was 585:100,000. Denmark 62. Holland 23.)

New generation o blk writrs, no longer just a few 'intellectuals' are writng nt as observers bt from heart o struggle.

PARADOXES

Blk poets :

We learned by losng childrn & dying terrible deaths
how to hold a gun & grenade
we know now / how to make fire fire fire

Yet Thabane Ntshiwa, 23-yr-old mechanic, scratchd slogans on steel mug tt he usd fr lunch breaks. Mug confiscatd, arrestd by SP's, chargd undr t Internal Sec Act.

The slogans "PW, we want our land back...Release N Mandela" Inscriptions barely legible. Ntshiwa fired imm, hd spentx 4 mths i jail, so magistrate spoke of his obligation as a Christian & officer o t law to show compassion, bt couldnt overlook fact tt canteen usd by 135 othrs whose passions might hve been whippd up. Sentence: 18mths i jail - more thn a previous conviction fr culpable homicide.

At end o 'Albino Terrorist,' Bret writes

So wht di u dox as an individual, as a writr perhaps? T implications o t unfolding drama are too momentous fr u to afford t luxury o 'tactics' Hgoldng back, hidng yr game, is a ~~far~~ form o paternalism & disdain fr your fellow SA's.

U hve to speak yr mind dirfctly. Fight yr own fear....U are an African. Assume tt fully. . . Strive fr t growng realisation, thru heritage & thru struggle, o one SA cultural identity composd o an incredibly rich variety o sources & expressions. . . . be tolerant, patient. If u are a writr, watch out fr words - they are traitors! Cry if u must. Try nt to go to prison, it's never worth it. Survive, so as to continue t struggle'

CONGRESS OF SOUTH AFRICAN WRITERS (COSAW)

3 pol prisonrs & 2 exiles among patrons electd by COSAW

Congress brought togethr 200 best-known writrs fr 2-day 'Writers' Forum'. Authors, playwrights, poets, actors, journalists pledged to 'ensure tht t production & dissemination o literature shll reflect t cultural heritagē of all t people o our country'

"Art cannot exist in islation frm t interplay o t political & economic, intellectual and technological aspects o society"

Dominant & dominatd culture. Integral part o oppressd community Nation: Openly alignd wth anti-Ap struggle

We'll oppose t attempt to impose cultural domination by t establishmnt media . . . campaign to produce & disseminate literat. i various forms, includng oral media. Publishng material i 'peoples' languages' & children's literat. high on list - non-racial, non-sexist.

COSAW plans to hold regular workshps in writng, theatre, music & visual arts; to set up libraries; & a research unit into all aspects o performng arts

Recognisē critical role tht literat. & othr arts must play i struggle fr liberation.

PATRONS: Jailed Mbeki; detained Zwelakhe Sis & writr Modikwe Martins; exiled Brutus, (poet) & novelist & poet Serote. Also poet Jeremy Cronin; & Nadine Gordimer.

Dr Njabulo Ndebele, novelist & Head o Dept o English art Univ. o Lesotho electd president togethr wth Mzwakhe Mbuli, poet & trade unionist; Mewa Ramgobin, author & Natal Ind C leader; & Mavis Smallberg, Cape T writer, as vice-presidents. Executive includes poets Oswald Mtshali, Hein Willemse, Mike van Graan, Chris van Wyk & Mi Hlatshwayo.

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COSATU CONGRESS hs set up National Cuturel unit headed by Hlatshwayo as full-time co-ordinator. Culture high on agenda.

~~Quats: From Nation~~ (Wht he was - lorry driver)

'more & more we are usng poetry, plays & songs to put forward our own view o hw we see the wrld. Every day t rulng grp - thru its radio, television & apartheid education - shows a false picture abt everythng. Their stories & songs are nt abt us. They say nthg abt our real life undr exploitation. They say nthg abt our proud history o struggle against nat. opp. They say nthg abt our orgs . . . In any society, culture recrods history & makes known t character o a particular country... Culture mst b a mirror & a media. It is frm ths mirror tht we catch a glimpse

o t new liberatd society, free o oppression & exploitation.'

SIMPLISTIC NOTIONS? Hlatshwayo uses concepts tt may seem tix o u to b more suitable to t prop. platform thn to literature.

But art is on the side of the oppressed. (Think b4 u shuddr at t simplistic dictum - NG) Fr if art is freedm o t spirit, hw cn it exist within t oppressors? Wht wrtr o any literary merit defends fascim, racism? Where are t SA wrtrs who produce brilliant defences o apartheid? So I come to the

WRITERS' RESPONSIBILITY

NG P. 137 - 138, Countries like SA make special demands - *tt writer must be more than a writer*

Camus: 'It is frm t moment whn I shll no longer b more thn a wrtr tt I shll cease to wrte.' To b 'no more thn...' ws to put an end to t justification for t very existence of 'writer'.

It is frm their understandg o t need to b 'more thn a wrtr' tt t #persecution arises. All SA wrtrs mst face ths conflict btween t commitmt to an artistic vision & t demands o society & hw they cn b met. In t end there is no division btween t wrtrs role as a creative artist & their involvemnt i pol. struggle.

If you ask 'why are writers persecud i countries like SA?' It is precisely bcos they are more thn wrtrs.

ZWELAKHE SISULU editor o New Nation, hs been i detention undr t S o E fr nearly a yr. He hd previously been detaind fr a yr undr t Terrorism Act. Ths hasnt stoppd t influence o hs wrtngs on local & internatocal communities which hve repeatedly honourd hm. Wrtrs are imprisond, pt on trial, bannd - Don Mattera ws 7 yrs bannd frm wrtng, publishng, even frm readng hs wks i public. (My own bans) Are drivn into exile; & - too manyk o thm - to death. (Can Themba, Nat N, Todd Matzikisa, A Hutchinson, Ruth.)

Tt wrtrs are persecud i SA is proof - if we evr needed it - o t immorality & rottenness o t regime, bt also proof tt wrtrs hve acceptd t responsibility as social beings.

BLACK WRITERS

The world has an insatiable appetite for words about SA; yet most of the words, so far, seem to have come from white writers: Gordimer, Brink, Fugard, Coetzee, Breitenbach; black voices, it seems, are barely beginning to be heard.

But they are there. They are overcoming the obstacles of low literacy among the people; of the necessity to write in a language that may not have been that of their home (Kunene) or of obtaining publication in other than 'marginal' editions (Heinemann's Africa series). But they have not yet overcome the indifference of Western culture that sees everything through its own highly-developed form of critical appraisal.

Western literary culture today wants ambiguity, marginality. But black writers are obliged to ask themselves what every line they write: Will this compromise me as a member of the struggle? as a writer?

Much of black writing, too, is in the idiom of urban life, where there is a mingling of English, Afrikaans, ethnic languages & its inevitable new language - a township slang.

Western publishers must attune their ears to this kind of writing, as they have had to do for West African & Caribbean writers. And Western critics must accept the revolutionary content of black writing & the responsibility that it has accepted - the responsibility of art which is to enable humans to understand & to relate to the world around them, & to point forward to the way it can be changed.

So - What can we do for persecuted writers?

- You can
- x see their voices are heard beyond SA when silenced in their own country
 - x sustain them with your solidarity - importance
 - x campaign, make representations, on their behalf
 - x but, most of all, you can use your own gifts as writers to become 'more than writers', to ensure that this greatest moral issue of our times, of colonisation, of race & power, is resolved by destroying its strongest manifestation - Apartheid in S.A

Whaila, Hillela might simply have spent her life bringing up what she imagined would be her 'rainbow family'—who knows? She's never had any kind of real family, and, as with everything else in her life, she was ready to invent her own. But perhaps that family life wouldn't have satisfied her, contained her. In fiction, the writer pursues only one set of possibilities in an individual life. Events don't allow Hillela that rainbow domesticity; but she's not the type to retreat from any experience, bad or good. And thereafter wherever she goes, and whatever she does, she has entered South Africa through Whaila, where before she was a vagrant.

You feel that many white South Africans are leading that kind of picaresque life nowadays? Or that you may be leading one yourself?

Political exiles, black and white, do. I am lucky enough still to have my roots in South Africa. As you know, it's always been a nightmare in my mind, to be cut off.

Don't you feel afraid there now, with so much violence?

Life is dangerous in South Africa, now, yes—for whites as well, to a certain extent. Remember it was always dangerous for the majority—blacks. They have always been victims of State violence, of being forcibly turned out of your home, being beaten up at a police station. So it's nothing new; it's just that now we whites find ourselves in a situation where we might be caught in cross-fire in a street, or be blown up while driving over a mine laid on a white farmland.

The death of a white child by political violence horrifies the whites at last; what about the death or maiming of many hundreds of black children? The horror surely is that successive white regimes—not only Verwoerd's or Botha's—have brought about a plight where any child may die this way. I'm afraid of that situation, yes.

But I don't think in terms of black masses moving against whites. The ANC, which has the largest following among blacks, would never allow it to happen. I am not brave, but I was very moved by an experience of going into the black township, Alexandra, last year. It was a no-go area, with police and army camped there to quell the anger of the people who refused to pay rent for their squalid hovels, or to accept the dummy local authorities. Some young protesters had been shot by the police that week.

Three hundred whites defied police roadblocks and went in, escorted by the Comrades, to 'cleanse the graves' with flowers and prayers, in the African custom. We were received literally with open arms against a great crush of blacks. What I felt afraid of were the police and army, who watched from a hillock and descended on us with aiming rifles. The gathering had given no provocation.

Of course, on that occasion, so far as blacks are concerned, I was defined along with other whites in a certain context of solidarity with black liberation. I know that's where I belong; but I'm not naive enough to think that my white face, appearing anonymously, by chance, in a context where white vigilantes were

fighting blacks, would be protected. We are at war and some of us will be casualties.

There's a pessimism in the book about the role of white liberals. Have you felt very conscious of the change since the Soweto uprising and Steve Biko's murder 10 years ago?

Oh, let's not talk about white liberals. Bothas (Big PW himself, and Pik) are accepted as liberal now. The term has been hijacked. President Reagan, Mrs Thatcher, Chancellor Kohl—they see the South African Tricameral Parliament, with its outhouses for Indians and so-called Coloureds, as a liberal reform, although the black majority is excluded entirely.

Liberalism used to mean, to whites and blacks, that blacks should be allowed into the existing white structure, legal and governmental. The uprisings that began in '76 and have never ceased, rising to a climax in 1985-86, have made it clear that blacks do not want a third outhouse in the backyard of white supremacy. They are not asking to be let in. They, and many whites who consider themselves liberal, want to dismantle the 350-year-old structure and put up one that will house a majority Government with non-discriminatory rights for all.

The definition of liberal, now, is one who believes in incremental reform; but you can't 'reform' racialism, which is what has always ruled, under many names, in South Africa. The lauded reforms are being made within the framework of segregated education, the Group Areas Act, and the Population Registration Act: the bases of apartheid.

How did the uprising in the Seventies affect relations between black and white writers?

When the young black writers began to be let out of jail after Soweto, there were a lot of readings at which we talked. There was fierce condemnation of whites, very emotional writing, great interest in black heroes of the past, such as Chaka and Dingaan, a need for myths which fed fervour. They needed this phase to raise their consciousness; whites had damn all to do with it. For myself, I accepted that blacks wanted to take over culturally, and that whites must stand in the wings until that developed. Soweto helped white intellectuals to take a back seat, and to realise (like Pauline in the book) that their role, for that period, was to talk to white people.

I didn't feel the hurt or anger that many whites felt about black ingratitude. But it was a difficult time for us: particularly for many whites in the theatre, for instance, when blacks accepted white funds but didn't want whites to have any other role. The South African PEN broke up, and the African Writers' Association, exclusively black, was formed. But I didn't see it as a racist development: it was a historical necessity. Some people suggested I was looking for popularity with the blacks; but I simply recognised that they had to withdraw from us and this included myself.

I don't think I was wrong to feel that black withdrawal was a necessary stage, but I don't support it now when the situation has evolved

towards liberation through other initiatives. The United Democratic Front, the non-racial mass organisation, has proved so effective in limited objectives—for example, the boycott of elections for the Indian and Coloured outhouses of government—that there seems every good reason to believe that liberation can be achieved through the co-operation of all races. Whites who are prepared to be truly committed to black liberation are widely accepted, now—but they must evidence this commitment in word and deed. Naturally, I support the UDF; it is both led by the black majority and is non-racial.

Are you conscious of having become more and more politically committed since the Fifties, when I first knew you?

To be quite honest, in those days I so much admired and was fascinated by people who were totally committed, but I never thought it was necessary to move towards that role. I didn't have the courage—I still don't—to be a complete revolutionary, to face the possibility of jail for life. I had the selfishness of a writer. But as time went on I felt I could not go on living there without moving to meet some of the demands of the time. I realised that being a writer doesn't absolve one from having to do what else one can. But of course I also came to think that writers, as writers, can do something implicitly which others can't: writers with enough respect for their craft and a passion to make sense of life can add to people's knowledge of themselves and their responsibility for the kind of society they are living in.

The first step to change is to be aware of what one is. As a South African—not as a writer—I have to say in all humility that I have taken courage from the magnificent courage of others. In the Fifties people like me could think that by moving socially between the black and white worlds we were working towards the end of apartheid. I accepted complacently that people like Bettie du Toit and Ruth First were doing their jobs as professionals.

But there was always commitment in my writing without my being really aware of it. I think it first came into my story 'Ah, Woe Is Me', which was saying something about the uselessness of white gestures. I wrote it when I was about 18.

When I was staying with you after Sharpeville in 1960 I had the feeling that it was the arrest and detention of Bettie du Toit which affected you more than anything before. It was the first time I'd seen you break your routine of always writing in the mornings.

Yes, it was a big shock in my life, to have someone I loved and knew so well sitting in prison: I went straight round to the Grays (Security Headquarters at the time) and lied. I said that I was Bettie's nearest relative, in order to be allowed to visit her in prison. It was a big break in my sheltered life.

But I wouldn't then take a public position on politics as I am doing now. I can't refuse to take a stand on sanctions, though to support them even as a last resort is a crime in South Africa. I say to those who are against them: believe me, we would seize upon any other alternative to

the horrors of civil war. I ask them: what are these alternative pressures you promise? And there is deafening silence.

Are you worried about the increase in black-on-black violence?

There are two phenomena lumped together under the same heading. There is the violence that breaks out when people from different parts of the country are competing for such basic needs as the use of a water-tap in an overcrowded township, like the battles between the amaPondo and the amaZulu last year. Workless and poverty-stricken Pondos in the 'independent homeland' of Transkei, came down to seek work in an area where Zulus are settled and themselves competing for jobs and shelter. The resulting violence was presented as 'tribal fighting' by the South African Government. But the issues were created by the existence of 'homelands' that cannot support their inhabitants.

The second kind isn't really black-on-black at all; it is a terribly ironic form of non-racialism. Blacks working and sacrificing and often dying for liberation seek to punish those

who betray them outright, or do so covertly by collaborating with the police or Government. They are not brothers by virtue of colour, they are enemies despite that shared colour. The analogy is with the treatment meted out by the Resistance to collaborationists in the Nazi-occupied countries during the last war, not with any special phenomenon of black against black.

Of course, in the crisis we have entered, there will always be the ghastly business of random violence, a release of tension from which criminals profit—and, don't forget, agents provocateurs. Random violence will continue to increase while responsible black leaders—not only at the top but at group level in country places—are detained or held in prison, without bail, while their political trials drag on month after month.

In the book you say 'there has been madness since the beginning, in the whites.' You even describe Hillela's great-grandfather bringing it when he arrived as a refugee from Russian pogroms.

There was and is madness in that horrible racial prejudice. All whites brought it. I think of my own father who arrived as a boy of 13 from Lithuania, trained as a watchmaker but knowing no English. His father was a shipping clerk who had got him a passage to join his elder brother. My father came up to Johannesburg by train in 1906, with a cardboard suitcase, and began mending watches for miners in Springs. I think that seeing the blacks in a worse position than his own gave him an awful kind of security: he could say 'at least I'm white.' He wanted to be on the side of power, protected whatever the price for others. He treated blacks with contempt. My mother tried to change him, but she couldn't. He was basically too historically insecure.

It's sad when people who are escaping discrimination practise it somewhere else. The Jews in Lithuania had many of the same

problems of blacks in South Africa : for instance, only a small quota were allowed to go to high school. Of course, there were other Jewish immigrants who are prominent among the founders of the Left, and of anti-apartheid movements in general in South Africa. Unfortunately, my father wasn't among them.

You talk of the ' tug of history ' in your book : do you feel it strongly ?

Yes, I felt it when I happened, through my friend Cassim Saloojee, to be at the meeting of the Transvaal Indian Congress when Allan Boesak proposed the idea of the United Democratic Front. I felt there was an opportunity for the real involvement of whites. I think every worthwhile human being in South Africa now has to take risks. It's wonderful to see how many people develop when they face up to it. That's how history tugs at present.

' A Sport of Nature ' by Nadine Gordimer is published by Jonathan Cape on 2 April at £10.95.

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