



AGAINST PAMPHLETEERING
THE FUTURE

From the theme of this conference, 'South Africa: Beyond the Platitudes', it could be suggested that there are at least two ways by which ruling authorities can exert control over people. The first way involves the creation of a climate of political debate in which people are made to feel that they are at the cross-roads of history, and that difficult and fundamental decisions have to be made and serious sacrifices demanded of everyone. A series of principles are set forth as determining the shape of the future. It is on such principles that the nature of government may have to be altered, and new opportunities for the governed created in the fields of education, industry, commerce, agriculture, and general social welfare. Ultimately, to facilitate the birth of the envisaged kingdom, even the way people think and behave will accordingly have to be altered drastically. A new, ideal person will have to be brought into being according to the requirements of the future. In other words, everyone must be made to feel that there is a formidable mission to be undertaken.

It can reasonably be asserted that for the white people of South Africa, the period between 1910 and 1948 may be regarded as a formative one in which were established the major determinants of

This essay was presented as the keynote address at the inaugural conference of the Congress of South African Writers, Johannesburg, July, 1987.

a white kingdom of power and prosperity. However flawed the debate, it would be hard to deny that from the point of view of the white electorate, this period was essentially constructive. It was constructive not in an ethical sense, but in the sense that a defined political direction consolidated itself into a powerful national movement setting a dominant pattern of social behaviour for all of us.

After a relatively long passage of time, in our case forty years of Nationalist rule, we witness an historical transition to the second way of social control. For the vast majority of whites the predominant social reality of apartheid was no longer something to be actively argued for or justified on moral, political, social, religious, or other grounds. It was a given universal reality that has been there and would always be there to the end of time. The serious issues of national construction, of defining a vision (no matter how flawed the vision) and the human attributes necessary to achieving that vision are no longer there. Instead, intellectual activity in general has shifted away from a concern with original principles, to a concern with the maintenance and consolidation of a political and material culture that is a legacy of forty years of dominance. Consequently, under the social habit of domination, the general political and intellectual culture of white South Africa has suffered a gradual decadence as it slowly shed its constitutive features in order to assume a purely manipulative character.

But the relative absence of a redemptive intellectual culture does not mean the absence of intelligence. It simply spells the social trivialisation of the collective intellect. We have now entered the age of platitudes in which the search is no longer for ultimate solutions, but for convenient adjustments. Indeed, it is the age of ad hoc councils, various advisory bodies, consulting agencies, commissions of all kinds, research institutes, marketing surveys, and opinion polls of all shades. All these take advantage of an academic culture that has been turned into a commodity after having been subdued by a technological approach to society. Thriving on the euphoria of the political and economic success of the last four decades, this age

responds to the needs of both the whites and the oppressed by striving to suggest that all is well; that any problem can be efficiently taken care of.

To the whites, the age encapsulates them in a cloud of comforting benevolence towards the oppressed. It says to them: 'we are in charge; here to stay. But we must find a *formula* for letting them in. Our lifestyle is the supreme international standard. They are lucky to have us here. Let us educate them. Let us guide them carefully through the intricacies of our thought, our institutions, our customs. We are the way to their salvation. Let us turn them into ourselves. That way, we can ensure the continuation of our usual lifestyle. Some minor adjustments will have to be made but nothing will really change. You'll be taken care of. Look around you at the glaring evidence of our achievements!'

The age then turns to the oppressed and says: 'look at all the evidence of the white man's achievement around you. You really didn't have to spend agonising moments thinking and planning all this. You were spared the difficult tasks. Yet, now, these wonderful things are yours to enjoy. You, the most fortunate among oppressed peoples. The most honoured. Take it all: the ninety-nine-year lease, so that you can build any kind of house you like; every cinema and restaurant is available for your entertainment; register your children in a white private school; rise to the highest managerial levels of any company. The sky is the limit. The freedom of this land is yours only if you concentrate on enjoying its wealth and its institutions. In all these things, the rules, regulations, laws, social customs, and a host of procedures have been set in place for you. They have been carefully thought out and set in place over the years. Don't worry. Don't worry about governing the land. Don't even think about it. It's too daunting a task. Okay, we'll give you some local authority and 'own affairs' business. But in general, government is in good hands. Just follow the rules and regulations. Just be good and all will be well. Okay? All the best!'

Behind all this, as we can see, is a manipulative intelligence which despises the intelligence of the entire population at the same time as

it proclaims their humanity. That, is the measure of its decadence. It calls for the infantilisation of the oppressed by asking them to be civilised oppressed people. The chief mark of the civilised oppressed person is that he can see 'civilisation' without seeing the oppression. He is one whose critical consciousness has been lulled by promise of material gratification.

I am now going to spend some time looking at some of the mechanisms of modern South African oppression. I use the word 'modern' to underscore the fact that the techniques of oppression have evolved over the years, assuming greater refinement in line with the increasing technical competence of South African capitalism. In doing so, though, I'll be addressing myself specifically to the uses of the written word in so far as it is used to create the impression of a social order so appealing and comforting that the resulting illusion can blunt the legitimacy of the struggle, thus severely compromising it. I am going to use, as a context of discussion and analysis, a recent phenomenon that has occurred in Duduza.

Ever since the people of Duduza rose up against the terrible conditions of life to which they had been so insensitively subjected over the years, they have witnessed a strange, relatively new phenomenon: the planting of pamphlets. They grow fast, these pamphlets, like mushrooms. Suddenly they'll be there in the morning, when they were not there before people went to bed the previous night. Or they will be found at home in the evening when people return from work. They'll be there, waiting to be picked up freely and read, promising the revelation of truth and the coming of redemption. Certainly, some 'mysterious force' has suddenly acknowledged that indeed, the people of Duduza are people. They definitely can read; that they too are capable of deriving some benefits from the civilising activity of reading. Here is an unedited example of one of the original pamphlets mysteriously bequeathed to the people of Duduza as a gift of the night:

Each one reach one — for peace
WHO ARE THE STOOGES OF RUSSIA

IT IS THE ANC, THE UDF AND CIVIC ASSOCIATION

What did these comrades reach through their struggle. They caused the death of your brothers and sisters, children and innocent people. They caused the loss of peoples homes through arson, the disruption of schools so that your children will remain uneducated WHILE THEIR CHILDREN ARE SAVE IN PRIVATE SCHOOLS OR EVEN OVERSEAS TO GET EDUCATION. They caused the bus boycott which has let your fathers and mothers to walk and suffer unnecessary.

They cause the consumer boycott to destroy and confiscate you and your childrens hard earned food. Thus they prevent you the freedom they shout about so loudly.

THESE SO CALLED FREEDOM FIGHTERS ARE THE PUPPETS AND STOOGES OF RUSSIA. They even use your churches to meet instead of to worship God and to live a life of love as God teach us to do. Love your fellowmen. Love that do not put a necklace around you brothers neck. Love that we respect and honour each other and that will bring happiness.

WHY IS THERE PEACE AND NO TROUBLE WHILE THE SELF APPOINTED SO CALLED LEADERS AND PUPPETS OF RUSSIA ARE IN JAIL BECAUSE THEY ONLY WANT DESTRUCTION, CHAOS, DEATH STARVATION AND HATRED

WE DO NOT WANT PEOPLES COURTS WE DO NOT WANT TO BE RULED AND LASHED BY CHILDREN WE WANT TO MAKE USE OF THE BUSSERVICE

We do not want our groceries destroyed by children

Let us join hands, let us join forces, let us stop fithing and let us build Duduza again.

Let us be quiet and think. Think what damages was done.

Think what we are to do from now and into the future to improve our township, our lives, our homes, schools and families.

Let us not teach one to destroy but rather let EACH ONE REACH ONE FOR PEACE Down with struggle, rather

communicate and co-operate in order to get progress in our township.

Let us work together

Let us pray together

Let us stay together

DUDUZA PEACE MOVEMENT

The effect of this pamphlet depends less on what it says than on what it leaves unsaid. Behind the direct attack on identified targets, the 'stooges of Russia', is the assumption that there is something of value that has been threatened. The pamphlet suggests that there is a community of interest that exists and has always existed in Duduza. This community of interest also implies a strong sense of collective responsibility on the part of each and every resident of Duduza. The pamphlet then conjures before the people a seemingly unmistakable common sense of purpose, one that has always brought the people of Duduza together. It says that Duduza has always been a secure, well ordered community, centred around the family, the church, the school, the community hall, shops, and the administration offices. Consequently, the people of Duduza have always happily boarded their busses to go to work; have always returned from work to enjoy a happy drink at the beer hall; have always done their shopping without problems; have worshipped with grace and sincerity, without any interference; have loved one another as fellowmen. Order, peace, love, and plenty have reigned supreme in Duduza for as long as anyone can remember. Until the coming of 'the stooges of Russia'! Even more wonderful, this perfect state of social being appears to have been achieved without any kind of strife, struggle, and sacrifice. The people of Duduza have always forged ahead effortlessly, and everything just worked out: until the coming of 'the stooges of Russia'! All these truths are self-evident: that since there has never been crime in Duduza; since there has never been a single incident of police harassment; since there has never been any alcoholism; since there have never been crowded, ill-equipped,

understaffed schools; since there has never been a time when there was no sewerage system, or water in every house; since there has always been street lighting; and, yes, since there has never been a single instance of embezzlement of church funds, Duduza has no history of discontent. Therefore, there is absolutely no reason for any kind of discontent. Discontent is an irrational expression of ingratitude; and ingratitude must be stamped out resolutely. People of Duduza, 'let each one reach one for peace'.

But why does the pamphlet adopt an inherently disingenuous position. Why does it display no sense of irony whatsoever? Firstly, the writers of the pamphlet may actually believe in the illusion. Their collaboration with the status quo may have resulted in a package of personal benefits for them such that their capacity to differentiate between truth and falsehood became distorted. They have so internalised the image of the oppressor that they have become indistinguishable from him. Secondly, the pamphlet may have well been produced by people who were fully aware of the vast resources of the science of deception. These are masters in the manipulation of human perceptions. These are the creative inventors of platitudes. One thing they have depended upon in this pamphlet, something of direct interest to this gathering, is the complex history of the written word, a history which they have thrown with great vigour at people who, by and large, have been deprived of the opportunity to understand that history. They know that there will be many people in Duduza who will look at the pamphlet and doubt the evidence of their own experience. They know that these people, like the bewildered animals in *Animal Farm*, will look at the indisputable evidence of the written word, and agree that indeed, other animals have always been more equal. It has always been so.

People can be affected this way by writing because writing is essentially a subversive act. It has the powerful capability to invade in a very intimate manner, the personal world of the reader. Whenever you read, you risk being affected in a manner that can change the course of your life. This power of subversion lies in the seemingly infallible testimony of the written word. Consequently, its authority

is potentially tyrannical. But then, the source of this authority has a long history. It is a history that has surrounded the written word with awe, persuading us that what is written necessarily contains unalterable, profound wisdom. The priests of Ancient Egypt long effectively established this awesome power when they prevented commoners from ever getting near the written word. This imbued it with magic, with the result that the written word loomed large in the imagination of the larger population as something mysteriously powerful, delivering unalterable judgements. Later, there followed religious texts of all sorts such as the Bible, the Koran and others which became texts containing ultimate and unquestionable wisdom. And so down the path of history, government proclamations, and a host of 'official documents' became repositories of uncontested truth. Indeed, where lies the authority of the school, the university? Certainly, and in large measure, in the presence there of textbooks, of the library, of written rules and regulations, and of the authenticated certificates of teachers. The certificate on the wall! There it is, on special paper, decorated, signed and framed as the ultimate witness to an uncontested truth.

And so, in Duduza, the declamatory pamphlet soon gives way to something more permanent. It was followed by a newsletter. In the context of social strife, a context tactically denied by the system, a newsletter works on the assumption that tremendous events are taking place and people need to be informed. It assumes an admirable democratic public spiritedness on the part of the producer of the newsletter. So, taking advantage of the fact that finally, a sewerage system was going to be introduced in Duduza, the Duduza administration released what was first called *Duduza Press*, subtitled 'A Newsletter that tells you Everything that is Happening in your Township'. However, after a competition obviously meant to advertise the newsletter as well as to create public identification with it, the newsletter was renamed *Duduzani*, and here is how the results of the competition were announced:

The competition announced in the previous edition to choose a suitable name for the newsletter, was won by Florence

Sepenyane of 2170 Nala Street, Duduza. She suggested we call the newsletter 'DUDUZANI', and won herself R50,00. Congratulations Florence, you can collect your prize money from Mrs. Henning at the administration offices.

The character of this issue of *Duduzani* can be gleaned from the headlines on the various reports: 'News Received from the Apex Training Centre', 'Urgent Notice to Parents', 'Holiday Programme', 'FREE Video Shows', 'Christmas Greetings', 'Competition Time Again', 'A Note from the CIRCUIT INSPECTOR', 'GOOD NEWS for our Senior Citizens', 'SADF vs Local Teachers', 'Reunion: Hiking Trip', 'Chess', 'Soccer', 'Sports Course: Zandspruit', and 'Boxing'. The total picture presented is one of absolutely calm, peaceful and normal society. Moreover, it has always been like this. There is no conflict in Duduza, and there never has been any, really. If there is any conflict at all, it is of the friendly kind in the context of organised sports: what with the SADF playing soccer and chess against Duduza residents! The confusing ambiguity this kind of thing causes in people unsure of themselves, people who have not built up defenses against this kind of onslaught, may very well result in their grudging agreement that indeed, there have always been animals more equal than others. What we have is the quintessential, manipulative politics of platitudes.

This publication, *Duduzani*, coming in the wake of the long delayed improvement of the physical infrastructure in Duduza, brings up before us another kind of text, perhaps more menacing under the circumstances. The infrastructure represents another kind of pamphlet: it is the high-rise office buildings, houses of parliament, the complex network of roads, railways, and airports, military academies, white universities, private schools, hospitals, research institutes, chambers of commerce, banks, factories, hotels, opera houses, sports arenas, in other words, all the visible symbols of capitalist achievement, all of which the oppressed would like to claim. All these, as shown above, are suddenly available to the oppressed, there for the taking, provided they agree to be law abiding, civilised oppressed people.

With the sewerage, the newly tarred streets, new schools, the people of Duduza are well on their way. Clearly the activity of reading is not confined only to deciphering the written word, reading also takes place as we walk around absorbing the language of architecture, and being affected by the various uses to which the art of building has been put to suggest the power of orderly society.

Looked at from a necessary historical perspective, if only to show how little the essential mechanisms of domination have changed, we need to make the intriguing observation that the mirrors of old, together with those intoxicating bottles of whiskey, presented by European settlers to fascinated Africans, in exchange for cattle and vast tracts of land, are still as fascinating as ever. The main difference, of course, is that today not only have we had a hand in their making, but also that this time, it will not be land and cattle we will be giving away, but something infinitely more valuable: our very humanity, acquired through our engineered compliance. And so, in this way, the attraction of 'civilisation' is rendered more powerful in comparison to the need to revolt on behalf of something new and untested. Indeed, the pervasive power of technical efficiency, extended to an array of government institutions, commerce, and industry can create the overwhelming impression that it is far better to be absorbed and conform, and utterly useless to resist. The culture of technical efficiency aims at creating a sense of social well-being which depends on the instant satisfaction of needs. To be caught, it is necessary to be placed firmly in the cycle of need and instant gratification.

What are the implications of all this on South African writing? The power of the written word in the moulding of social perceptions should never be taken for granted. The professional manufacturers of artificial social needs for commodities have never taken this wisdom for granted. Nor have they taken for granted the power of the surrounding reality as it presents itself to us as a vast social text sending complex, often competing messages. These texts complement each other closely. This close relationship suggests that the business

of writing and that of defining and then transforming the world are more intimately related than is usually granted. Both texts are a visible manifestation of the history of social thought as well as the history of the practical satisfaction of human needs. For this reason, therefore, the oppressed of South Africa will want to re-enter the contest for power in history with both their minds and their hands. They will accept no assurances that the thinking and the doing have been done for them. They will want nothing less than the writing of their own texts.

The path towards the new text should begin with the understanding that it is precisely where the official culture of South African oppression runs aground and becomes decadent and manipulative that the oppressed must come up with a reconstitutive political and intellectual culture that will recreate and re-energise civilisation in this country. In practical terms it means that a manipulative culture must be confronted squarely through a consistent exposure of its emptiness, as well as through a radical substitution of that emptiness with reconstructive content. As far as the latter is concerned in particular, the oppressed will need to say: 'we have thoughts we want to validate through the written word so that we too can participate in the historical contest of texts for authority. In practical terms, our writings will be filled with answers to the following questions, among many others: what is the real function of all these buildings? What is the meaning of the home for the aged? The designs of these cities, what needs are they intended to meet? What is the real purpose of all these laws? Why should we drive on the left of the road? Why should we have only two official languages? Why should we vote at the end of every four years? Why doesn't the airline menu include our favourite dishes? Why should we fill in this form that demands the colour of our skins? What is the aim of all this research? Why should there be nuclear weapons? Why are we not there in all the things that really matter? Why is the "Great Trek" not the Calamitous Invasion?' There are thousands of texts to be written. The oppressor, who has deliberately left millions of people outside of all serious human activity, will definitely have to

learn to live with the fact that there are going to be drastic revisions to his own texts.

In general, it means that since our interest is in fundamental issues, since we want to recreate the entire social order, we must avoid the way of the manipulative pamphlet. We must not pamphleteer the future. Nor should we pamphleteer the past. To pamphleteer the future is to reduce complex issues to simple formulations such that understanding is prevented, or at best, clouded. Pamphleteering the future means writing that establishes its case without the onus of proof; writing that challenges without educating, that is heroic without being too convinced of its heroism. Pamphleteering the future might also mean conviction without knowledge. It is writing that is not conscious of the extent to which it may have internalised the textual strategies of the oppressor. Specifically, it means that the common aim of all writers, at this point in our history, is to assail relentlessly the textual authority of oppression and replace it with the textual authority of liberation; and that the essential characteristics of the new text are its seriousness, its radical broad-mindedness, its inventiveness, its unbounded respect for the reader, and its understanding that no aspect of the life of the oppressed is irrelevant as a subject for artistic or expository treatment.

What are the practical implications of these observations? We need to realise, for a start, that, although this conference has brought together practitioners of a certain kind of writing, there are other kinds of writing that are equally important. In fact, I would submit that creative writing will not grow very much with the simultaneous flourishing of the writings of ideas, of fact and information giving, of genuine polemical debate. We need to create a broad literary culture founded on the understanding that writing in all its various forms represents the attempt of the human mind to reach out towards ever increasing intellectual refinement. It represents an attempt at disciplined reflection. Consequently, we want to aim for a future inhabited by highly informed people. To move towards that society, we want to insist that as many opportunities as possible should be created for people to write, read and to study the word, to understand

both its strengths and its limitations. The aim of our writing should be to break the potentially repressive tyranny of the written word by emphasising the fact that texts are to be questioned and debated with. Here the power of creative writing is particularly relevant, for only there is language freed from association with a purely manipulative function. The truth of literature is to be found in its power to allow readers to formulate insights independently of outside authority. To allow them to recreate themselves by enabling them to freely write their own texts.

It may be wondered why I have put so much emphasis on the written word. What about oral literature? The central belief behind my emphasis is that the written word is an inescapable fact of modern life. This is not to deny the importance of oral literature but merely to assert the fact that the relatively greater impact of the written word in the social contest for power is undeniable. To assert the contrary is to dangerously romanticise the oral tradition. It is to deny the mass reader the opportunity to experience the efficacy of self-education through reading. The aim is to enable the ordinary reader to domesticate the written word for his own liberation.

The people of Duduza have continued to press forward with their demands. They tell us that they have not bought the lie. But they do need the assurance of written testimony that theirs is the way of truth. What are the elements of this truth? The search for those elements and their definition through discussion and debate is what should replace the dead age of platitudes. One of the central challenges of this conference is to find ways of how to go about initiating the newness through the contribution of the art of the word.