

Njabulo S. Ndebele: I would like to first of all express my appreciation to *TriQuarterly* for having made it possible for us to come and share our experience of some of the problems of the written word with you in the particular context of South Africa. And notwithstanding jet lag, that is still very much with us, we will do our best to be as enthusiastic as possible in this matter.

What I'd like to talk about very briefly, in an attempt to highlight an area of particular interest to me, is the whole question of the relationship between storytelling and fictionality in South Africa. Whether there is a distinction or not is a matter that people can make their minds up about, but I'll begin from the assumption that there is a difference and that this difference has played an important role in the history of black South African literature. I begin from the premise that there has been a strong tradition of storytelling in South Africa, one that stretches way back. We have more storytelling than fictionality as a result, because the latter is an historically recent phenomenon. The storytelling has very long roots; in fact a few minutes ago through this wonderful evocation of the story of Senkatana and how he rescued the people there, we have heard a living example of this tradition. On the other hand we have the tradition of fictionality, which is relatively new and is in my view destined to play a very important role in the development of South African culture in general. This is because the movement of the South African revolution, I believe, is towards a greater institutionalization of science and the scientific attitude. This is inevitable because of the nature of the society that, as I will be talking about this afternoon, we are going to inherit: the complexity of it. In the context of this broad distinction, I would like to highlight the problem of the imagination.

It is my understanding that, regarding the storytelling tradition in South Africa, not as many demands have been made upon it as such, as have been made on fictionality. The reason is that the storytelling tradi-

tion, being somewhat informal, has partaken of a sense of self-confidence which is a feature of cultures that have an inherent sense of history. They can define, they can approach, the concept of universality through their own practical, indigenous experience: the storytelling tradition has been nourished by this sense of self-confidence. But the problem is that over the years, because of the nature of South African history, the storytelling tradition has not been accorded the official recognition that has been accorded to the tradition of fictionality—the implicit judgment here being that what is written is more important than what is spoken. That is the implicit judgment of history, the history of conquest, in South Africa.

But, nevertheless, because the storytelling tradition has been put in a kind of official limbo, demands were made on the written word to articulate the problems of modernity, specifically of oppression and the need for liberation. And precisely because of these demands, the area of interest, the area of focus, in the field of fictionality has been somewhat heavily restricted. And the dimensions of this restriction are defined to a very large extent by the demands of exposition such as we find in the world of journalism, such as we find in the writing of essays, in which the articulation of the need for freedom and justice is more direct. In that field, the field of direct exposition, the world of metaphor and language use is generally restricted and put in a subservient position to the message itself. And because the history of journalism has been at the forefront of this articulation of injustice and the need for freedom, and because of the very fact that the majority of our short stories in the English language were published in magazines, in newspapers, and so on, it has meant that the fictional tradition has developed very closely with the tradition of political exposition. So when many of our writers, the majority of them, take to the pen, they also want the story, the poem, to be as combative as the word of direct exposition.

This has meant that the social imaginative compass has somewhat been restricted. This, of course, is historically understandable. But I think the situation is now changing drastically because of the impact on the imagination of the changes currently taking place in South Africa. What we see is evidence of a reawakening which expresses itself in diverse forms—the most obvious of which, for example, is in the field of trade-union activity, in the field of general cultural mobilization, where we are aware, as we are going to have the testimony later on, of how culture, particularly growing from the storytelling tradition, is coming out of the factories of South Africa. We are aware also of the tremendous sense of struggle and optimism that is taking place in the townships—the creation of street committees, for example, as the single, smallest, most important democratic unit. The emergence of people's courts, the emergence of the concept of education, means that the search for alternatives has been broadened in such a way as to encompass the entirety of social cultural expression. And it means, therefore, that a new language, a language of struggle and optimism, is developing. It means that there is what one might refer to as a broadening of the social imagination, in which everything is being subjected to close scrutiny, and that new perceptions of the world around us are emerging, because we can see the end in view. The resulting sense of optimism is releasing the potentials of the imagination and is making the imagination fly in all kinds of directions.

Let me go back, then, to the question of storytelling and fictionality. The world of storytelling has never, in any manner, suffered from exactly the kind of restriction referred to earlier, because in that world people were free to be humorous, people were free to be satirical. They were free to take in the whole world without the anxiety of being politically irrelevant. The general society rather than politics as such was the framework of human interest. The world of story-

telling is characterized by a broadminded self-confidence. And I think this self-confidence is beginning to invade, as it were, the world of fictionality also. And that in fact, for the world of fictionality to participate in this reawakening, it has to free itself of its limitations and draw from the world of storytelling so as to broaden the interest of the imagination. It means that the fiction of today should not and probably will not be afraid of experimenting with form, on the understanding that in South Africa to say that you cannot have art for art's sake will not mean anymore that you cannot have good art. In other words, the absence of the doctrine of art for art's sake does not mean the absence of good and socially relevant art. I think there is an increasing self-confidence that you can tell a story in as interesting a manner as possible—be interested in the form—without necessarily sacrificing a broader social and political interest. On the contrary, the more inventive you are, the more you are participating in, and adding to, this reawakening.

Perhaps I should give a different example here: take the situation where people—workers, for example—have been experiencing themselves as tools. You are in a factory, and all you have been doing is that you have been taught how to operate this machine. But you were not permitted to make suggestions about how you can make this machine perform better. I think that what is happening on the factory floors of South Africa is not only an interest in how the machine is working, but also in how the machine can be made, how it can be subjected to one's imagination—so that the machine itself can be part and parcel of a worker's expression of the new world around him or her. At a certain point, the politics governing the new relationship between the worker and the machine should give way to a tradition of invention. And as I said, this feeling is taking place in various ways, in various aspects of society. And it is bound to make an impact on the way we write our stories, on the way we plan a story, on the way we write

our poems. And I think that tendency is well on its way and is going to gather momentum.

So what I'm really talking about here is the release of the imagination, in the context in which there is a confidence, a lack of fear of experimentation, a lack of fear of trying new things—because the world around you demands new things. It demands the opening of perception, the deepening up of perception, and the exploration of every avenue of society. And I think this is what is happening at the moment. In most of the stories, in *TriQuarterly* #69, the issue that has brought us here together, you will see this reflected. A shift away—but not an abandoning—a shift away from the overtly, as I say, political as such, a tactical shift away from it in order to accommodate the breadth of life and experience in South Africa. That new terrain of imaginative exploration has a direct impact on the way we imagine the possibilities of the future. That we can experiment with all kinds of forms means that society itself is ready to experiment with all kinds of ideas in the march towards an alternative future. And I hope that, as South Africans, this will be our single most important contribution to the world, the universal world of culture. It is beginning today and it is my understanding that it is likely to continue well into the future.

Perhaps in this regard, I should mention that writers—cultural workers—are organizing themselves today in South Africa, precisely with the view to equipping the author, the dramatist, the photographer, everybody, with the tools of the trade. Because the task before us demands that mastery. There can be no way back, there can be no concessions to that potential that is out there waiting to be opened up. I think I will stop there, at the moment.

Thank you.

Sheila Roberts: I'm going to limit my remarks to white South African writing in English. There are two points that I would like to make but that I'm making from a position of some ignorance, seeing that I've been living in the United States for the past ten years and have only had a few visits back to South Africa, and I could have a distorted vision.

The first point is that South African writing in English by whites—since 1948 with the publication of Alan Paton's book, *Cry the Beloved Country* [New York: Scribner's]—has kept in a kind of lockstep with political activity—not quite a lockstep as I read the writing through the fifties and sixties; it seems to me that what writers do in those decades is respond to what the government has already done. So that Gordimer's fiction, to cite one example, moves politically in response from her first book, *The Lying Days* [New York: Simon & Schuster, 1953], where what ideology infuses it is liberal, through to *Burger's Daughter* [New York: Viking] in 1979, where she is seriously having a character discuss communism as a viable political alternative.

She is responding, responding, to what is happening politically. But in the past few years, it seems to me what has happened with writers is that they have left the government and its various regulations behind and are projecting to a future that could or could not happen, or could happen or not happen the way they envisage it. So that in *July's People* [New York: Viking, 1981] Gordimer shows us the revolution already in action and white people fleeing the cities which are being bombed by the black fighters. In John Coetzee's book *Life & Times of Michael K* [New York: Viking, 1984], again he depicts the country in a state of revolutionary flux, with a movement of population. So what I'm saying is that, while previous writers have been one step behind government activity, two important white writers, at least, have stepped ahead and said, "This is what the future is going to be like."

But that brings one to the question of where do they go from there? They will have to then imagine a situation—postrevolutionary—and construct a society in which their characters can interact, one that is already, we hope, peaceful. The other thing that they could do, and which perhaps they are doing, is take a kind of refuge in fable or a rewriting of texts. John Coetzee's latest book, *Foe* [New York: Viking, 1987], shows us another possibility of Daniel Defoe's book *Robinson Crusoe*: that there was a woman on Crusoe's island and that she tries to get Defoe to write the story, but what she also wants is for Friday to tell his side of the story, except that Friday has no tongue. Of course, when Foe, as he's called in the book, writes the book we have, he leaves out the woman and he leaves out the black man's story. And so as I read Coetzee's book, I understand that he is saying you cannot tell the story without the woman and you cannot tell the story without having the black person's interpretation of history as well. So that's one direction that the South African white writer can go in.

Now the second point that I want to make very quickly is that in my observation, South Africans don't read their own literature. Any publisher there will tell you his sad tale of woes: nobody seems to make any profit. I'm surprised they keep going. I've just published my fourth book there and I can tell you sad stories of very tiny royalty payments. When I was there in August, I went to every bookstore I could and checked out what they carried, and they carried very few of the books I was looking for. I had to go to the publishers' offices or write for them. The people I spoke to hadn't read most recent South African publications. So I asked myself, why do South Africans not read their own writing—white South Africans? And I think the answer lies in an article that Christopher Hope wrote in which he describes South African white writing in English in this manner:

The subjects are certainly large and important enough, but they are also aspects of one

central problem: race, the single issue which dominates our politics. And the result is a certain sameness, a predictability, a certain familiar ache in the heart of the South African novel which has become increasingly burdensome.

In other words, the ordinary South African person reading the literature written by South Africans is presented again and again in a very predictable manner with the same set of problems, the same set of horrors, the same sense of paralysis. But it's something, in various ways, people know and live with, so what they do if they read a South African, is they read the adventure stories of Wilbur Smith, and at least there is some escape. But South Africans must begin to read their literature and not only make it a financially viable proposition but also derive from it the kind of enjoyment people all over the world derive from their own literatures. And it's my sense that as this happens, as white South Africans simply write from the imaginative enjoyment of observing the world and the interaction of human beings, undaunted by this boring burden-clumsy, single-issue ideology—that the black writers will continue doing what they are doing currently and which my two colleagues have spoken to, and that is, create for their readership a sense of their own history and their own place as writers in the society.

Thank you.