

https://dspace.org/

The writer as storyteller?

Vaughan, Michael

1988-03-07
http://hdl.handle.net/10539/9935

Downloaded from a DSpace repository. https://dspace.org/

UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND

A F R I C A N S T U D I E S I N S T I T U T E

African Studies Seminar Paper
to be presented in RW
4.00pm MARCH 1988

Title: The Writer as Storyteller?

by: Michael Vaughan

No. 226

The Writer as Storyteller?

I

In recent times, new schools of literary theory have appeared in South Africa. First came the materialists to challenge the liberal hegemony, and then the structuralists, who, in some of the later versions of theory, see the materialists themselves as too much wedded to liberalism and humanism. And then there is also Njabulo Ndebele, who seems to be something of a phenomenon in himself. Perhaps this is because he is African, not white. Literary theory in South Africa is, of course, largely monopolised by white academics, and this has, no doubt, some consequences for the character of the resultant theory. It is noticeable, for example, with perhaps few exceptions, that materialist and structuralist theorists in South Africa derive their conceptual apparatus from the West, intact and ready-formed. All that remains is to apply it, as well as may be, to the local material. In other words, such local theorists are in an essentially pupilage relationship to the theorists of the West, who are vastly more sophisticated, inventive and original. Indeed, it could be said that the real theoretical work is being done in the West, and only imitated here, in a muffled sort of way. This is not said with the intention of deriding the efforts of local academics who attempt to grapple with and apply materialist and structuralist theories. I am, after all, one of those involved! There seems to be no other way, and this way does offer a certain scope. Imitation is never simply repetition, and perhaps this imitation is never, in any

case, simply imitation. If local critical theory is derivative, this is a reflection on the nature of the relationship between South Africa and the West, on the nature of the South African education system, and on the separation of the upper reaches of the education system from the major realities of South African life. The separation of academic life from social life makes it very difficult, if not impossible, to be conceptually productive.

All this is by way of prelude to some consideration of the distinctiveness of Ndebele's contribution to literary theory in South Africa. For in his case it does seem that critical discourse emerges out of a somewhat different process. For the white academic alienated from the liberal humanist orthodoxy, it is exciting and innovative to engage with materialist and structuralist theory, and to apply this to the local material. It is a case of one academic theory confronting and displacing another. In Ndebele's case, however, a crucial factor in his discourse is the articulation of a powerful populist tradition that derives from other, non-academic areas of South African life. Populist discourses, institutions, practices, are indeed pervasive in the political and cultural life of the disenfranchised. Ndebele's achievement is to bring some of the concepts, issues and demands of this populism to bear on the field of literary criticism. (Furthermore, he has brought literary criticism to bear on populism.) In fact, he draws freely, eclectically, on Western theorists, but these borrowings are tempered and subdued to the demands of a body of ideas of local provenance, populist ideas. The results of this co-operation and tensionof ideas may sometimes be confused, contradictory or unclear, and in this way be the echo of unfinished, unclarified debates and struggles in the wider society. But it may also, I think, be conceptually productive. Ndebele may at

this stage be a phenomenon unto himself. He also points the way, I suspect, towards a future, genuinely South African critical discourse, or, at any rate, the elements of discourse on which he draws will be forces to be reckoned with in the formation of a truly South African critical discourse.

II

What I have been arguing so far can be summed up quite simply: Ndebele in his literary criticism is more directly in touch with wider social debate in South Africa than are most literary critics. This is the reason why his criticism has such a distinctive quality, and why it is worth close attention. To engage with Ndebele, I feel, is not simply to engage in a debate over the "reason" of literary things, no matter how necessary and valuable such a debate must be for literary theorists. It is to engage with social voices, with social discourse.

The focus of my discussion in this paper is upon the concept of the writer of fiction as a "storyteller." In introducing, or re-introducing, [1] this concept to the centre-stage of critical debate, Ndebele is signalling the distinctiveness of his perspective. Debate, at least in the context with which I was familiar, tended to be locked on the question of the opposition between art and politics. The liberals wanted to sustain that opposition, whereas the materialists, the "radicals," wanted to break it down. Writers of fiction and critics tended to take up their positions according to whether they wanted to stress the distinction between art and

politics, or to show their interpenetration. Both sides were at one in their opposition to apartheid, and in their belief that the study of literature should counteract apartheid, but they disagreed about the modality of this opposition. The liberals saw the "human nature" component in literature as a natural dissolvent of the pathological distortion of apartheid, whereas the materialists argued for the necessity of explicit political commitment, a commitment which would be expressed through an exposure of the social and historical, rather than the "human nature," determinants of apartheid. "Human nature" thus became a battle-ground in this debate. For the liberals, "human nature" represented timeless norms of human motivation and evaluation, which it was the genius of the writer to "make speak." For the materialists, "human nature" was a construct of ideology, which served the purpose of mystifying the organisation of human society by deflecting people from the examination of its social and historical determinants. The liberals focussed upon "human nature" in the individual, seeing the genius of the writer in being able to make "human nature" speak for itself self-evident, as being dependent on the ability to articulate the deepest well-springs of individual experience. The materialists, in reflex, saw the individual as the very locus of a mystificatory ideology that permanently prevented human beings from understanding the causes for their conditions of life. At stake here were not only conceptual apparatuses, but also syllabuses. The liberals looked to a stable order of classic works of literature, in which "human nature" was most profoundly made to speak. The materialists, on the other hand, looked to those works of literature that would best reveal the social and historical dimensions of the living conjuncture.

It would be incorrect to assert that these liberal and

materialist positions on the opposition between art and politics were unresponsive to, or unreflective of, wider social discourses in South Africa. On the other hand, their relation to these discourses was of a very indirect and distanced, or muted, kind. The whole dynamic of debate tended to be of an inwardly-turned nature, positions being defined in an academic dialectic of premise and counterpremise. Furthermore, the essential validity of the concepts, the positions, being debated was of a predetermined nature, in that these vocabularies had been produced, tested and refined elsewhere, in different social conditions from those in the regions within which, duly stamped as of export quality, they were so gratefully received. More energy was then expended in comprehending these often arcane critical languages, in justifying them in the clash of controversy, and in applying them to the local material, than in testing them by the criteria of the local society. The reason for this can only have been the already mentioned attenuated relationship between the academic debate and the wider social discourses of this local society. Since academics did not have access to the languages of the wider society, then these languages could not be invoked as a means of qualifying, refining or transforming these received foreign vocabularies. (Another reason, or another way of putting the reason, could be that being a country with a small, largely "third world" population, South Africa is not theory-intensive, and tends to be dominated by imported theories.)

Turning now to the critical writings of Ndebele, we find in them the presence, or at least the reference to, wider discourses of the local society. The discursive pressure of the African population, the wider society of the disenfranchised, the oppressed, the alienated, the impoverished, but also of the combative, the resilient, the

resourceful and the inventive, is indeed a dominating reference in Ndebele's criticism. In seeking to establish the aesthetics of Black literature of the 1950s and 1960s, in terms which will validate this body of writing against the liberal criticism of its "crude," "too political" quality, Ndebele suggests that this literature addresses itself to an "effective" rather than an "objective" audience. He is making a distinction between the audience to which the writer feels accountable, and the audience that objective conditions imposes. According to Ndebele, the writers of the 50s and 60s felt an overriding sense of accountability to the majority Black population, even though this population could not possibly have constituted the readership for their publications. The writers therefore composed their works as though the majority Black population was their readership: they addressed their fiction to the experience, sensibility and judgement of this "effective" audience. If this "effective" audience had indeed been the "objective" audience, Ndebele argues, its response would not have been to criticise the "crudity" or polemical transparency of the fiction, but to delight in its "spectacular" treatment of social experience. [1986a, 148-49]

We could invoke Ndebele's conception of an "effective" audience to definethe quality of his own criticism. Does he too address himself to an "effective" audience? If this is going too far, then it does seem to me that he invokes the accountability of the critic, and the writer of fiction, to an African population beyond the actual readership of literature. We do not actually have to imagine this population peering over Ndebele's shoulder as he writes, making comments and suggestions, and directly dictating the shape and terms of his argument. What is rather the case is that he gives a central place to the concept of a wide social accountability in his

criticism. He presents a concept of the majority African population as one to which the writer is accountable, and his critical exposition involves an implicit examination of ways in which that account can best be rendered. On the one hand, the writer is required to speak on behalf of a population that has been denied a voice by the apartheid system. On the other hand, that population claims the writer's concrete engagement with the forms of its culture, as a means to counteract the tendency of the literary culture to become distanced from more popular cultural life.

Perhaps it seems that with regard to Ndebele I am exaggerating. After all, isn't it true that for a long time, if not always, traditions of populist accountability have been very strong amongst Black writers? That may be the case, in which case my point is that Ndebele is breaking some new ground here. Those Black writers who in recent years have asserted strongly populist orientations have not really made such assertions the basis for a comprehensive rethinking of the social responsibility of the writer. No one, before Ndebele, has really thought beyond the terms of the opposition between art and politics debate, with the respective positions it offers, to which I referred earlier. [2] Let me quote an example of the more concrete way of considering the relationship between the writer and the wider population, and the accountability of the writer to this population, that differentiates Ndebele from other populist adherents. The concreteness with which he evokes the forms of the wider culture raises difficult questions for the writer, questions not simply of rhetorical adherence:

> When Sipho Sepamla in the interview agrees with Miriam Tlali that "we have to go to the people," for "it is the man

> in the street that I feel we must listen to," he is probably establishing the premise on which is based one fundamental assumption shared by all three writers: that the "political" writers are writing what the African masses really want. Is that assumption a valid one? When Sepamla listens to " the man in the street" what does he hear? I have listened to countless storytellers on the buses and trains carrying people to and from work in South Africa. The majority of them have woven masterpieces of entertainment and instruction....And we have to face the truth here: there were proportionally fewer overtly political stories. When they talked politics, they talked politics; when they told stories, they told stories. If any political content crept into the stories, it was domesticated by a fundamental interest in the evocation of the general quality of African life in the township. Where is the concept of "relevance" here? [1984, 47]

In this example, the concrete consideration of the art of the local storyteller leads to a recognition of the distance between the culture of the wider population and the culture of the "committed" writer, and hence to an undermining of that populist rhetoric that would comfortably assimilate the two. Instead of confirming that rhetoric, the leap of the critic's mind, from a discussion of the art of the writer of fiction to a recollection from first-hand experience of the art of the local storyteller, actually produces a number of awkward, difficult questions, stimulating fresh thinking on what was apparently a closed case. That leap of the mind from the literary to the oral, from the universal to the local, is an excellent example of what I mean by the distinctive quality of Ndebele's concern with

accountability, and the role of this concern in the tendency of his critical discourse. In this instance, that leap, that readiness to listen to and invoke the concrete evidence of the wider, the extra literary culture, produces a problematisation of the populist position. The writer is confronted with the problem of the difference between the discourses of the wider culture and literary discourse, the problem of how to utilise the skills and overcome the limitations of a literary and political education based on narrow social premises. In other words, what Ndebele does is to address an unavoidable tension in the relationship between the radical intellectual and the wider population.

At this point, it is worth returning to the debate over the opposition between art and politics which I have discussed earlier. Ndebele does not take up a position within this debate, in the way that practically everyone else has been doing, instead he problematises the accepted terms of the debate, and suggests a new position on it. He achieves this in a number of ways. In the first place, the debate over the opposition between art and politics generally issued in a preoccupation with "art" on the one hand, or "politics" on the other. Ndebele overcomes this polarisation by declaring the necessity for a conjunction between art and politics. Earlier theorists have suggested something similar--for example, Benjamin, in "The Author as Producer"--but Ndebele conceptualises this conjunction in a different, to my mind more convincing, way. At the centre of his conception is the relationship between the writer and the reader. He emphasises that the writer of fiction enters into a particular kind of understanding with the reader, who brings certain desires, expectations and standards into this relationship. The writer has an obligation to meet these basic demands of the

reader, and this requires the possession of a specific craft-knowledge and craft-skills. In other words, the writer has to know how to tell stories, to be a storyteller. Only on this premise can the writer honour the primary bond with the reader (the notion of accountability is once again present here).

The writer is in the first place a teller of stories. In what way does this assertion effect a conjunction between art and politics? By emphasising the primary role of the art of the storyteller, Ndebele provides a centre for his discussion which is outside the purely literary relationship between the writer and the reader. What is at stake is not simply the mutual recognition of certain formal literary conventions. The point is rather that the image of the storyteller conjures up with it an idea of the active culture of the wider society, of the ways in which people in that wider society formulate their responses to, and interpretations of, the diversity of their experience. Thus, in invoking the concept of the storyteller, Ndebele is requiring the writer to adopt a particular stance towards that active culture: to approach it in a spirit of respect and curiosity, to be open to what it signifies rather than to be condescending about it, to acquire knowledge of it rather than to be satisfied with rhetorical gestures, and, above all, to think about ways of meeting it half-way, to diminish by concrete narrative strategies the distance between intellectual and popular discourses. In becoming a storyteller, the writer puts to the test the claim to be political, the claim to have something to say that really concerns the well-being of the people. Contrarily, to play down the art of fiction, to focus exclusively on the transmission of a pre-determined political message, is to insult the active culture of the people, and to perpetrate a political self-contradiction.

The "political" writer, then, engages in a dialectical relationship, offering political wisdom to the reader, while at the same time being politicised, in the very process of practising the narrative craft, and thus being brought into more intimate, testing contact with the active culture of the wider society.

Ndebele's intervention in the debate over the opposition between art and politics is, in effect, to suggest that "politics" has been too narrowly defined in this debate. "Politics," in the terms of this debate, refers to the political ideas of the intelligentsia, which are then offered to the wider society as the means of its salvation. An alternative, and more democratic, route to politics is for the literary intelligentsia to acknowledge the power and validity in the established notions and practices of the wider society, and to locate the language of politics in negotiation with these notions and practices. The resources for this democratic political language are therefore much more widely dispersed, much more diverse, than has generally been recognised. Popular energies that are expressed in apparently "non-political" ways are not to be despised: rather, they offer a challenge to the political imagination and commitment of the literary intelligentsia. Ndebele makes the following comment about the way the writer Joel Matlou presents the leading character in one of his stories:

> The political school of criticism will be exasperated by the seeming lack of direct political consciousness on the part of Matlou's character. But we must contend with the fact that even under the most oppressive of conditions, people are always trying and struggling to maintain a semblance of

> normal social order. They will attempt to apply tradition and custom to manage their day to day family problems: they will resort to socially acquired behaviour patterns to eke out a means of subsistence. They apply systems of value that they know. Often those values will undergo changes under certain pressing conditions. The transformation of those values constitutes the essential drama in the lives of ordinary people. [1986a, 154]

In a similar vein, he commends some writers who

> are storytellers, not just case makers. They give African readers the opportunity to experience themselves as makers of culture. They make it possible for people to realise that in the making of culture, even those elements of life that are seen not to be explicitly resistance oriented, are valid. Indeed, the latter may upon reflection...be found to represent a much wider, and richer, because more inclusive, context of resistance. [1984, 48]

The writer as storyteller, then, is precisely the writer who acknowledges the creativity of the people as "makers of culture." That writer can only succeed as a storyteller who enters into a committed, validating relationship with popular beliefs and customs. Such awriter may attempt to initiate change in these popular conditions, but only on the basis of an imaginative comprehension of them.

There is an aspect of Ndebele's treatment of the theme of the writer as storyteller that leads into an area that I find very

difficult, but which may also be illuminating. This concerns his recourse, or apparent recourse, to the vocabulary of liberal humanism. The epistemology of liberal humanism is distinguished by the privilege it accords to categories of individual experience: it is through the processes of individual experience that such transcendent qualities as "truth" and "reality" are encountered. This being so, personal experience is the locus of the "real." What lies outside personal experience is comparatively "unreal," not quite valid. One of the effects of this privileging of individual interiority is, apparently, to separate the most humanly meaningful processes, the processes of individual interiority, from the general organisation of society, within which they occur. The general organisation of society, which cannot be explained in terms of subjective human processes, appears comparatively "meaningless." It becomes a remote effect, rather than a significant, an empowering structure. Conversely, it is characteristic in bourgeois ideology for there to be a vast domain--the domain of subjective experience--that is taken to be "beyond politics."

Recent materialist and structuralist theories have assailed the epistemology of liberal humanism, and its privileging of the categories of individual experience. They have denied the capacity of processes of individual experience, located essentially in language, to arrive at such transcendent qualities as "truth" and "reality." They have exposed the objectivist illusion of the capacity of language to effect a wholesale appropriation of a "reality" outside language. They have emphasised the fundamental role of structural relationships in making possible individual processes: the dependence, in other words, of individual processes on non-individual relationships.

These contemporary Western schools of theory have concentrated upon defining the ideological conditions, or determinants, of narrative, and, indeed, of the various positions established in narrative, such as those of the "author" and the "reader." Such positions become ideological constructs, rather than ontological elements. Narrative, then, cannot have such transcendent qualities as "truth" or "reality." The truth- or reality-bearing connotations of narrative have to be bracketed, as the ideologically-determined affects of subjective experience. In brief, these theories on the whole "deconstruct" narrative: they demystify the processes by which narrative appears as immediate, true, real, in subjective terms.

But it is precisely upon the subjective "truth" of narrative that Ndebele's conception of the storyteller depends. It is obvious enough that his critical energies are not essentially engaged in a "deconstruction" of narrative, or of the positions of "author" and "reader" within narrative. On the contrary, he is concerned to validate these positions, and the truth-bearing, indeed liberatory quality of the narrative that establishes them. This validation rests upon the privileging of individual categories of experience. Significance resides in subjective process, which has a spontaneous, self-generative, primary quality. This is evident in Ndebele's account of the reader's response to the good storyteller:

> A remarkable feature of Kemal as a writer in this collection, something I found refreshing, is that he emerges as a writer who is rooted firmly in the timeless tradition of storytelling. A chief characteristic of this tradition is that a story is allowed to unfold by itself with a minimum of

> authorial intervention through which a storyteller might directly suggest how readers or listeners should understand his story. Two key effects result from the lack of such intervention. Firstly, the entertainment value of the story is enhanced, and the emotional involvement of the reader is thus assured. Secondly, such involvement does not necessarily lead to a lulling of the reader's critical consciousness, as Brecht, the German poet and dramatist, would assert. On the contrary, the reader's emotional involvement in a well told story triggers off an imaginative participation in which the reader recreates the story in his own mind, and is thus lead to draw conclusions about the meaning of the story from the engaging logic of events as they are acted out in the story. [1984, 25]

Such crucial terms here as "emotional involvement," "critical consciousness," and "imaginative participation" are not bracketed: they are intended to have immediate and unqualified significance. Does this mean that Ndebele is dependent upon a vocabulary, and hence an ideology, of liberal humanism? A further point here is that the narrative epistemology to which he appears to subscribe is substantially realist. That is, it endorses the objectivist illusion that language speaks the "real." Thus, readers unproblematically recognise the real world, their own real world, in the fiction they read. Literature provides examples of the real, from which readers can learn.

> It seems clear, therefore, that it is humanly unrealistic to show a revolutionary hero, for example, who has no inner doubts. All great revolutionaries from Lenin, through

> Nkrumah, to Che Guevara, among others, have had to grapple with inner fears, anxieties, and doubts. In appreciating this fact, one gains an insight into the human reality of their heroism. A reader, confronted with such heroism, experiences himself as potentially capable of it too, only if he could learn to find a method of dealing with his fears. [1984, 46]

Indeed, as this quotation shows, since the quintessence of the real is located in the subjective processes of individual life, Ndebele argues, with absolute consistency, that the writer who wishes to politicise a reader must not avoid such individual processes, but must deal with them with the greatest possible fullness and complexity. This consistency, it must be understood, is a consistency peculiar to Ndebele, rather than reflective of liberal humanist orthodoxy. Ndebele's concern that the politicising writer explore the complexities of subjective experience is consistent with his concern that such a writer engage with the whole range of the cultural experience of the wider, oppressed population. In both cases, Ndebele is advocating an extension of the vocabulary and strategy of the politicising writer into realms that had previously seemed the preserve of the "non-political" writer: he is advocating the dissolution of the old art v politics debate.

The question remains to be answered: what significance attaches to the apparently liberal humanist categories of individual experience in Ndebele's criticism? The short answer, I think, lies in the way in which he formulates his sense of identification with, and accountability to, the politically repressed but humanly resilient African population.

As I have argued, contemporary Western theories have been concerned with the demystification of ideology and the deconstruction of narrative, as a production point of ideology. In this context, the concept of the indivisible human subject, as the focus of the meaning of human life, has been robbed of the spontaneous naturalness it possessed in liberal humanist discourse. We could see this concern with the demystification of ideology and the deconstruction of narrative as arising out of a preoccupation with the modes of power in Western societies. Of course, these contemporary theories have only been made possible by the theoretical work of previous centuries in Europe, in which the structure of society was made the object of a critical examination, and its regulative codes and relations problemisised: shown to support, not the well-being of the whole society, but the totally unequal distribution of its benefits. Recent theory has built upon this base, but has generalised the critique of power, of the dominative mode in Western culture, even more sweepingly. Thus discourse itself, in setting terms to the process of communication, becomes implicated in the assertion of power over others, the assertion of the dominative mode. In literature, this means that the very language which, in its objectivist illusion, claims to make reality speak, is claiming to speak for all those others who, if they could speak, would speak differently. It is thus suppressing their difference, denying their discursive space. It is an exercise in the dominative mode.

This is a shrewd critique of the ramifications of power and inequality in the central cultural modes of contemporary Western societies. We could see it as the outcome of a complex theoretical history, and of the problems posed for theory in the practical

sphere. The severest of these problems is the disarticulation between the theory of a humanly natural, or innocent, alternative to the existing societies of domination and inequality emerging from the heart of these societies, and the recent history of these societies. Rather than the overthrow of domination in the name of a liberated "humanity," domination becomes more insidious. A further point here is that the civilising mission of Western culture in world history has been brought into question by its supposed beneficiaries, and this provides a devastating context for the "deconstruction" of the dominative mode in Western culture (as in the novels of J M Coetzee). The radical Western theorist engages in a remorseless deconstruction of all claims to absolute truth, or access to reality.

As I suggested above, Ndebele makes his identification with the politically suppressed, but humanly resilient, African population. In other words, he finds in this suppressed but resilient people the "natural" or "innocent" alternative to the dominative society that for radical theorists in the contemporary West has become an increasingly elusive or "unspeakable" quality. Ndebele can, in fact, speak for this natural or innocent alternative society because of his membership of it. (Of course, as I have suggested, he does not treat this membership as unproblematic.) That he can claim to speak for this alternative society of a suppressed, but still humanly vital, population indicates, of course, that he has quite different intellectual affiliations from those of the radical Western theorist: affiliations with African populism. These affiliations are scarcely compatible with the deconstruction of discourse, the deconstruction of the dominative mode. The immediate issue for the populist intellectual is that discourse, the discourse of the oppressed people, has been suppressed, disallowed, its intellectual and

political--its fully human--articulation disabled. Of course, the dominative mode of Western discourse is recognised, but as an exterior, hostile force, encountered from the other side, the side of the "Other." Significantly, this discourse is seen as having failed to achieve hegemony over the oppressed people:

> However, the fact of the matter is that for the vast majority of South Africans, western civilisation has not been the glitter that it has been for those who brought it here. For the majority of the oppressed, the experience of western civilisation has been the experience of poverty, malnutrition, low wages, mine accidents, police raids, selective justice, and a variety of other similar negations. Consequently, this majority has not been, as it were, hegemonised to any great extent. For example, thanks to apartheid, they are so largely untouched by much of the discourse of western political philosophy such that even at the popular level, buzz words and expressions such as "human rights," "free enterprise," "human dignity," "self-determination" and other standardized political vocabulary, have not been absorbed to the extent that they would figure prominently in the people's subjective experience of political language. On the contrary, the relatively few who have been aware of such political vocabulary are those who have experienced it as applying to the privileged writes....Hence, black people's experience of western civilisation in general has been premised on their exclusion from its perceived advantages....the oppressed have to experience themselves as tools. [1986b, 9-10]

In this context, it is not the effectiveness of the dominative mode of Western culture that Ndebele acknowledges, but its weakness, its incapacity:

> White South African culture, highly developed in its technical features, is unlikely ever to reach maturity. That is to say, it is unlikely by itself to provide a sufficient context within which the creativity of all the people of this country can flourish along lines that reflect the specific creativity and dynamism of our environment. [1987]

> Ultimately, South African culture, in the hands of the whites, the dominant force, is incapable of nurturing a civilization based on the perfection of the individual in order to permit maximum social creativity. Consequently, we have a society of posturing and sloganeering; one that frowns upon subtlety of thought and feeling, and never permits the sobering power of contemplation, of close analysis, and the mature acceptance of failure, weakness, and limitations. [1986a, 150]

The African population has been oppressed by the dominative mode of white culture, rather than participant in it. It has been denied even the semblance of an adequate expression in this culture. It has not been hegemonised. On the contrary, the African people have proved to be resilient and inventive in the face of systematic oppression, and have evolved forms of cultural life that express this resilient humanity. This culture of the people is more promising than white

culture, with its dominative mode: it offers a better human norm or balance. It is thus the basis for the possibility of a new, more democratic, more adequately human society.

Ndebele refers to an "area of cultural autonomy." According to him, writers have an important role to play in linking this "area of cultural autonomy" with political struggle, embedding this link in the imaginations, the consciousnesses, of their readers:

> the task of the new generation of South African writers....is to look for that area of cultural autonomy and the laws of its dynamism that no oppressor can ever get at; to define that area, and, with purposeful insidiousness, to assert its irrepressible hegemony during the actual process of struggle. That hegemony will necessarily be an organic one: involving the entire range of human activity. Only on this condition can a new creative, and universally meaningful democratic civilization be built in South Africa. [1984 (1985), 40]

The "storyteller" thus contributes to the political process by broadening its themes, linking politics to the range of human activities.

Ndebele also comments on a change that is taking place in African perceptions of politics, a change towards a more active involvement in the structuring of an alternative social order: "Indeed, there has been a remarkable shift in African attitudes towards the unfolding political situation. There has been a shift of emphasis from the need to participate to the need to create." [1986b, 11 and ff]

There is, now, a gathering momentum amongst the African people towards the making of a new society. The "area of cultural autonomy" is undergoing a process of dynamic expansion, of hegemonic assertion. This is a crucial element in the situation for the writer in South Africa today, an element that Ndebele makes central to his critical reflections. In this dynamic context, his preoccupation is not with the dragging, determinative weight of structure, but with the role of human agency, of volition. He sees the struggle to make a new society as a complex one, with difficult, even traumatic, implications for the individual persons involved. In proportion as the struggle becomes a truly revolutionary one, so all the areas of cultural life will be drawn into the processes of transformation. Individuals will have to make many difficult decisions about where they stand in relation to these changes. The new society can only be a democratic one if the people as a whole participate actively in these decisions, and if they participate over the range of the culture as a whole, and not just in certain narrow areas. Once again, the role of the writer as storyteller, as Ndebele sees it, is to help to create the environment for a commitment of this kind. It is not to mobilise people to join the "party," but rather to see every element of the society, no matter how humble, ordinary, or taken-for-granted, as capable of a re-making:

> These three stories remind us that the ordinary day-to-day lives of people should be the direct focus of political interest because they constitute the <u>very content</u> of the struggle, for the struggle involves people not abstractions. If it is a new society we seek to bring about in South Africa then the newness will be based on a direct concern with the way people actually live. That means a range of complex

> ethical issues involving man-man, man-woman, woman-woman, man-nature, man-society relationships. These kinds of concerns are destined to find their way into our literature, making it more complex and richer. As the struggle intensifies, for example, there will be accidental deaths, missing children, loss of property, disruption of the general social fabric resulting in tremendous inconvenience. Every individual will be forced, in a most personal manner, to take a position with regard to the entire situation. The majority will be riddled with doubts. Yet, there will be those marked by fate to experience the tragedy of carrying their certitudes to the level of seeming fanaticism. It will be the task of literature to provide an occasion within which vistas of inner capacity are opened up. [1986a, 156]

As I have suggested earlier, Ndebele in his critical writings (and the same is true of his fiction, I believe) privileges the categories of individual experience, and accepts a realist epistemology. I have followed up this privileging of the individual, and this realism, with a view to understanding their significance in the context in which he is writing. I have left out in this following-up a factor of obvious importance: the use of the English language, with its implied relation to critical, fictional, and wider social discourses in English. Ndebele shares the individualist and realist premises of the world-wide users of these discourses. I have singled out for attention some more specific elements of his context as a writer: populist discourse, and its relation to the oppression of the African population, and the concern with the role of human agency, of individual volition, in a time of social transformation.

Deconstruction is a problematisation of the received modes, specifically the dominative modes, in which the "real" is interpreted. For Ndebele, the dominative mode expressed in the oppression of the African population does not need deconstruction. The priority is rather with the construction of an alternative mode.

Ndebele is a critic who has thought freshly about so many things. His privileging of the individual subject, and his realism, do not make him a liberal humanist. There would really be no point in labelling him in this way. His criticism is a striking innovative enterprise (I feel he has changed the orientation of my own thinking about literature considerably.) It is focussed very concretely upon the issues and problems of the South African writer and critic, and it connects these issues and problems integrally with the major processes of the wider society. The figure of the storyteller is at the centre of Ndebele's innovative contribution to criticism. Through this figure, he problematises received ideas about the relation of the writer to society, and, more particularly, to popular culture. In so doing, he enriches thinking about how the writer can contribute to the struggle for a more democratic society.

Does this mean that the recent theories about discourse, that I have referred to earlier, are not relevant, where Ndebele's criticism is concerned? I don't think that this is altogether the case. The privileging of categories of individual experience, and the realist epistemology, could be seen to have an ideological significance. Generally speaking, they seem to me to articulate with the ideological dimension in populist discourse.

Ndebele argues for more concrete thinking, on the part of

writers, about their relation to popular cultural forms. On the other hand, the absence of structural concepts in his own criticism leads to a certain abstraction in the way that social relations are considered. He problematises, and enriches, thinking about the relation of the writer to the popular culture of the people, about the relation between politics and popular culture, and about the relation of people, as individuals, to social processes, particularly social processes of radical transformation. Here, the fundamental categories that seem to be operative are those of the "people," the "individual," and the "writer." These seem to constitute a basic triad in Ndebele's discourse.

Ndebele deals sensitively and innovatively with the relations within this triad. However, there is also a great deal that he excludes by means of this conceptualisation. The category of the "people," for example, implies a fundamental unity in popular African experience and response: essentially, experience of and response to racial oppression. Apartheid denies human fulfilment to African people, therefore all Africans are united in their rejection of apartheid by their aspiration towards fulfilment. Where Ndebele suggests differentiation within this unity, it is on the basis of individual experience. This formulation excludes structural differentiating factors such as class, ethnicity, and cultural, religious and political affiliations. This exclusion suppresses the possibility that disunity will manifest itself in the struggle against apartheid, that the articulated aspirations of different groupings will lead to fundamental collisions, and that the aspirations of all sections of the oppressed African population may not be mutually compatible. The exclusion of this possibility seems to be premised on the assertion of a belief that the African people

have preserved an essential "humanity," despite the apartheid system. However, when we begin to be more specific about this "humanity," about the particular terms in which different groupings articulate it, then its generically "African" quality may be cast into doubt.

A further point in this regard is that we would expect that Ndebele would make an important distinction, in his argument about the role of literature in society, between readers and non-readers in the African population. Once again, I would like to reiterate a point I have already made, that Ndebele problematises the relation of the writer to popular culture, counselling the careful study of his/her popular counterpart, the oral storyteller. From this study, important lessons can be derived about the beliefs, values, aspirations and concrete cultural life of the people. In this way, the writer will learn not to address the readership in a narrow, abstracted, or alienated form, but to engage with its real interests. In this discussion, Ndebele makes a constant slippage between the readership for fiction and the people as a whole. The reader of fiction is treated as an ordinary member of the population, and to have the same identity, whether as a reader of published stories or as a listener to oral tales.

What is the effect of this constant slippage? One effect is surely to elevate the role of the writer of fiction in society, and in the struggle towards a more democratic society, beyond what could reasonably be claimed for it if the distinction between the readers of literature and the general population was carefully observed. By treating the readership and the general population as interchangeable, Ndebele establishes the writer in an authoritative position in social discourse. The writer seems to be in a position to

effect a fusion between the "popular" discourse of the storyteller, and the "politicising" discourse of the radical intellectual, and thus have a crucial role to play in the broadening of democratic consciousness. However, this appearance of centrality is deceptive, and is based upon an illegitimate transference from one constituency to another. It is curious that Ndebele, who is so perceptive about the distance between literary discourse and popular discourse, and who sets up such a fruitful tension on the basis of this perception, should simultaneously be so imperceptive, and tend to dissolve the tension.

The writer may have much to learn from the storyteller, but can never take the storyteller's place. There will always be a tension between these two roles, because they are structurally distinct. To dissolve this tension is to elevate literary discourse above what it can reasonably claim, and to claim to speak for all those who, perhaps, would speak differently.

Bibliography

Ndebele, Njabulo [1983] "Life-sustaining Poetry of a Fighting People," Staffrider, 5 (3), 44-45.

----- [1984] "Turkish Tales, and Some Thoughts on South African Fiction," Staffrider, 6 (1), 24-25, 42-48.

----- [1984 (1985)] "Noma Award Acceptance Speech," Staffrider, 6 (2), 39-40.

----- [1986a] "The Rediscovery of the Ordinary: Some New Writings in South Africa," Journal of Southern African Studies, 12 (2), 143-57.

----- [1986b] "The English Language and Social Change in South Africa," Keynote Paper at Jubilee Conference of English Academy of Southern Africa.

---- [1987] "European culture in SA ignores reality," Extracts from address at Senate Special Lectures, Wits University, published in The Star, September 8, 1987.

Footnotes

1. Cf. Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller," in Illuminations, Jonathan Cape (London), 1970.
2. The level of debate at the Gaborone conference on "Culture and Resistance" a few years ago seemed to reflect an inability to go beyond the old terms.

Addendum

The above paper is the first part of what was intended as a three-part argument. In the second part, it was my intention to consider the story collection, Fools, in the light of Ndebele's critical writings, and, in particular, with regard to his notion of the storyteller. His discursive preoccupations with narrative perspective, sensitive characterisation, the interaction between subjective process and objective conditions, the relationship between the politicising intellectual and popular culture, and the involvement of non-politicised aspects of social life in the momentum towards a new society, are all strongly present in his fictional work as well. I intended particularly to dwell on Ndebele's way of dramatising social tensions in African townships.

However, my main critical point--picking up on comments briefly made towards the end of this paper--was that literary culture in South Africa has an essentially "middle-class" character, and privileges, in its focus on individual character, "middle-class" preoccupations, language and perspectives. Ndebele does not escape this bias of the medium, despite his sensitivity to some of its dangers.