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WRITER AND COMMUNITY: THEORY AND PRACTICE IN THE WORK OF NJABULO NDEBELE

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This essay is part of a larger study of the theme of "storytelling" fiction.[1] My original intention was to include in the essay discussion of works by John Coetzee and Njabulo Ndebele of South Africa, and Fazil Iskander of the Soviet Union. The section on Ndebele grew too long, however, to allow for this. In this section, I look critically at some of Ndebele's claims for "storytelling" fiction, in the light of his own fictional practice. In the second section, however, I consider the implications of "storytelling" fiction both more broadly and more positively.

I

I am concerned here with two publications by Njabulo Ndebele, a critical article, "Turkish Tales, and Some Thoughts on South African Fiction," (1984) and a collection of stories, Fools (1983). In the article, Ndebele develops a thesis about storytelling, and the relationship between storytelling and fiction-writing. He takes his admiration for the stories of the Turkish writer, Jashar Kemal, as the basis for a diagnosis of what is wrong with fiction by African writers in South Africa. Kemal's strength lies in his understanding of the conventions of storytelling, and in his ability to draw on the oral storytelling traditions of Turkey in the composition of his own written stories. Kemal's stories are critical stories, exploring the predicament of an impoverished rural population dominated by a ruthless, if paternalistic, landowning class of Aghas. Because Kemal understands the conventions of storytelling narrative so well, and because of his familiarity with local storytelling traditions, he can draw his reader into an "imaginative" yet critical reflection upon the social processes of rural Turkey.

What of local African writers? They are not like Kemal. They also want to write critical stories. The apartheid laws by which a minority white population holds a majority black population down in impoverished subjection offer as pressing an occasion for critical reflection as the predicament of rural Turkey. Unlike Kemal, though, local writers show little regard for the conventions of storytelling, and little interest in the oral

storytelling art that is so popular amongst the wider African population. Instead, in order to provide their stories with the desired critical character, they resort to sloganising, and to a journalistic rather than a storytelling mode of narrative, presenting the reader with "evidence" of the cruelty of apartheid rather than composing a thought-provoking story.

Some of the blame for this Ndebele attaches to the conception of political commitment that is prevalent amongst African writers. The inadequacy of this conception he in turn explains in terms of the predicament of the radical African intelligentsia. On the one hand, this intelligentsia is denied access to the centres of intellectual research and analysis in South Africa. This means that the ideas of this intelligentsia are overly dependent upon the work of white intellectuals who, though critical of the apartheid society, are necessarily Eurocentric in their conceptual orientation, and who research African experience of apartheid from a vantage point outside that experience. The limitation of this kind of work by white intellectuals, valuable as it may be, is that it cannot resonate very far into the wider African society, and neither can it be very sensitive to the "inner" initiatives and processes of this society. It cannot help this society become more truly conscious of itself. A radical African intelligentsia which is heavily dependent on work suffering from these limitations is thus severely cramped in its capacity to offer intellectual support or guidance to popular initiatives against the apartheid order. On the other hand, this intelligentsia, denied significant access to the centres of intellectual research and analysis, which are consequently dominated by Eurocentric categories of analysis, has also allowed itself to become cut off from its own wider African constituency. Ndebele comments, for example, on the absence of a literature which, like Kemal's, deals seriously with the predicament of the African rural population.

In this context, an inadequate conception of political commitment is prevalent amongst writers. Political commitment comes to mean, broadly, condemning apartheid and its agents, especially African "sell-outs," and sympathising with the plight of the majority of the African population, who are the victims of this policy. It does not involve a serious analysis of the <u>culture</u> of this "victimised" population, of the themes that resonate in the daily lives of the people. It fails largely to connect with these resonances, to engage with them imaginatively or analytically.

Political commitment has overlooked culture: it has confined itself to a comparatively narrow range of attitudes and slogans, shared or debated amongst the intelligentsia. This is where Ndebele's conception of "storytelling" comes in as an

antidote. Storytelling requires precisely the cultural insight or capacity for imaginative analysis--analysis which engages seriously with the resonances of popular experience--that has been wanting in the literature of African writers.

Storytelling is the antidote suggested by Ndebele for the ailing condition, as he sees it, of African fiction-writing. This antidote arises out of a profoundly critical reflection on prevailing conceptions of how to express political commitment in literature. How well does Ndebele's own book of stories, Fools, accord with his recipe for politically committed fiction?

What characterises each of Ndebele's stories is its prominent and sensitive treatment of the "inner life"--the intellectual and emotional processes--of the protagonist. This concern with the inner life, focussed upon a strategic theme or incident, provides the principle of coherence of each story. It also differentiates Ndebele's stories from those which he criticises for their sloganistic and journalistic ambiance. Little of the fiction published by African writers in South Africa shows the same degree of concern with the exploration of the inner life that Ndebele exhibits. Clearly, it takes a lot of skill and insight into the craft of fictional narrative to compose the fascinating accounts of personal experience that distinguish the stories in Fools. Furthermore, the skill involved in composing these accounts is inseparable from the practice of cultural analysis.

This is so because the issues that preoccupy the mind of the protagonist are issues of culture. In each story, without exception, the protagonist is male, "middle class," and a member of the intelligentsia (this membership may be either nascent or achieved). By middle class, I mean that the protagonist's parents are teachers, doctors or nurses, and the protagonist is himself destined for or occupies such an occupation. The issue in each story revolves on the problem of identity of the protagonist. This problem of identity turns out to be the problem of negotiating the total culture of the African township, and of establishing a meaningful position, in an "inner" sense--a sense of self-ratification--within this total culture. The child or youth protagonist is thrown into crisis, for example, by his inability to endorse the way in which his parents affirm their middle-class position. This is because he is so keenly aware of the other cultural modalities in the township, such as those of the tsotsis (the "juvenile delinquents"), modalities which are hegemonic over large areas of township life. In sum, the nascent middle-class intellectual is confronted, in his struggle to achieve a meaningful sense of identity, by the powerful presence of working-class and, especially, "lumpen-proletarian" cultures.

There is an implicit agenda for the intellectual in these stories. This is the agenda of leadership. The destiny of the intellectual, as Ndebele imagines it, is to provide an intellectual guidance and leadership for the wider, largely non-intellectual, society of the township. To fulfil this destiny, however, the intellectual has to undertake a serious analysis of the cultural life of the township in its every aspect, as the basis for guiding this cultural life on to a higher plane of self-consciousness and mutual cooperation.

This "serious analysis" is not to be conducted in the study--or only there. On the contrary, the intellectual can only conduct his analysis of the cultural life of the township on the requisite level if he engages with the "inner" quality of this life. He must engage with the terms on which this life proposes itself to its participants, the terms in which they think, feel and act. He must engage with its idioms, and enlarge his own idiom accordingly. (It is perhaps just this concern with the "inner" quality of patterns of living that defines a "cultural" level of analysis.)

What this means in storytelling terms can be illustrated by an example from the story "Uncle." The protagonist of this story is a schoolboy whose uncle, a musician, comes to visit. Uncle assumes the role of intellectual counsellor and guide with his nephew. In the course of his stay, he comes into conflict with the local tsotsi leader, Nzule. He wins Nzule's girlfriend away from him. Things get to the point where Nzule decides to exact a violent revenge on Uncle. He advances upon him, bearing a knobkerrie and a shield. The protagonist is astounded when he sees that Uncle has left himself defenceless, or at least has only thought to protect himself with a small pile of stones. As Nzule comes on, so Uncle retreats, until he is in full flight, with Nzule pounding after him. What a humiliation for his watching nephew! But then the situation changes. Nzule begins to tire, as Uncle draws him back to the place where he has his pile of stones. He begins to pelt Nzule with them, and now it is Nzule, thoroughly winded and outmanoeuvred, who is finally in retreat!

This little episode is an interesting example of how Ndebele translates his concern with intellectual leadership within the African population into "storytelling" terms. It also illustrates his concern in his stories with culture, with the "inner" dimensions to the patterns of township life. It seems, then, that he is at least in some respects successful in following up in his stories the advice he gives to African writers in his critical article, "Turkish Tales, and Some Thoughts on South African Fiction." The stories show that Ndebele takes care over the composition of his narrative, so that it has a fascinating

fictional texture, and also that he makes his stories a medium of cultural analysis. However, in some other respects, the stories diverge from the criticism--or perhaps more exactly, they exemplify some ambiguities or "silences" in the criticism.

Although the stories are well crafted, so that they establish their subject-matter in effective fictional terms, the skill with which they are composed seems to owe little to the "timeless tradition of storytelling" to which Ndebele refers in his article. What he has particularly in mind by this phrase, I suppose, is the oral traditions of storytelling which he believes to be very much alive in both Turkey and South Africa--or if not these oral traditions alone, then also a practice of fiction-writing that maintains a close relationship with oral traditions. Oral tradition, however, seems to contribute little to the composition of Ndebele's stories. It is true indeed that the oral culture of the African township contributes to the subject-matter of the stories. The story "The Prophetess" provides an example. This story opens with the visit of a young boy to the home of the prophetess, to have her bless a bottle of water with which to cure his ailing mother. The prophetess is an imposing and mysterious woman, about whom many township stories, acquiring an almost legendary character, have grown up. The narrative evokes the superstitious awe and fear of the boy in the company of the prophetess, as well as his insight into her perhaps more human and vulnerable aspects. The prophetess is an important figure in the oral culture of the township--the boy remembers overhearing a dispute amongst the passengers on a bus concerning the reality of her powers, the great majority being persuaded of this reality--and Ndebele acknowledges, through his characterisation of such figures and through the roles they occupy in his stories, their significant "resonance" in this culture (Nzule is such another example).

Oral culture enters into the subject-matter of the stories, then, rather than into the principles of their narrative composition. Indeed, Ndebele seems to me to be a skilful composer of stories in a Western, realist tradition of fiction-writing. I cannot see any significant element in the composition of the stories that is extraneous to this tradition; only the subject-matter is distinctively South African. Characteristic of this Western, realist tradition is its close-up focus on the inner life of the protagonist, a focus which provides the narrative with a significant principle of organisation. What particularly is focussed upon in this inner life is its problematic relationship with the world around it. The protagonist, in other words, finds the meaning of life problematic rather than given. That meaning has to be negotiated through experience of relationships in the world, as the protagonist pursues the realisation of a self-ratified identity. This is the characteristic

agenda in the Western, realist tradition of fiction-writing. I doubt whether the stories that arise out of oral storytelling traditions, or that are closely modelled on these traditions, share this agenda.

That Ndebele should compose his stories according to the agenda of a Western, realist tradition is not surprising. It seems to follow "naturally" from an English-language education, and from the decision to write stories in English. Ndebele's education enabled him to make a close study of literature in the English language, and it would be difficult, if not impossible, for him to be unaffected by the fruits of such a study in the composition of his own work.

Ndebele has, however, omitted any consideration of the part played by the Western, realist narrative tradition, in the fiction-writing of African writers in English, from his discussion of the practices available to the "politically committed" writer. He juxtaposes two possibilities only for such a writer, one to be rejected, the other to be supported. What is rejected is what, according to Ndebele, most writers have been doing up to now; this involves a practice of fiction-writing which is overly dependent on the "information" supplied by white intellectuals about the apartheid society. What is advocated, in place of this, is a "storytelling" practice of writing, which maintains a close, even an "organic," relationship with oral culture and oral narrative traditions.

At this point, a perhaps symptomatic ambiguity in Ndebele's deployment of the concept of "storytelling" needs to be clarified. This concept seems to have <u>two</u> functions in his argument. One function is to refer to the skill required of the fiction-writer in the composition of stories. The writer, as storyteller, must be a skilful composer of stories. It is possible to arrive, on a level of the utmost generality, at certain "universal" conditions of such skilful composition. These, then, become the basic conditions, the tools, of the writer's craft. Another function of the "storytelling" concept, however, is to refer to oral traditions of narrative, and to the writing of stories which maintain a close affinity with these oral traditions. These two functions of the "storytelling" concept are quite distinct, yet, in Ndebele's argument, they overlap and become confused. The net result of this blurring of the concept is that one function is enabled to stand in the place of the other. One function refers to what it is quite possible for the African fiction-writer to achieve: the skilful composition of stories. The other function refers to what is quite impossible, or at least is far more doubtful: an organic relationship with oral culture and oral narrative. Through the blurring of functions in the concept, however, it appears as though <u>both</u> functions are

equally possible. The practicability of the one lends credibility to the impracticability of the other.

Why is an organic relationship with oral culture an impractical aim for the fiction-writer to pursue? Large issues are involved in this question, issues of culture and of class. These issues concern the cultural relationship between literacy and orality, with the added complication that literacy involves, at some stage, transition to education in a non-vernacular language; and also the contribution of the distinction between literacy and orality to the class differentiation of the African population. Some clarification of these large issues might be achieved, however, if we adopt a particular focus--a focus upon the adherence of Ndebele's stories to a Western, realist tradition of narrative.

This adherence indicates another possibility for the African writer, besides the two juxtaposed by Ndebele. Ndebele's stories are not overly dependent on white "information;" they are skilful narratives with their own fictional centres, and they contain an "inward" cultural analysis of South African township life. Neither are they organically connected to oral narrative traditions: they relate more closely to a Western, realist tradition. They are an example of a practice of writing in the English language in which a Western, realist narrative tradition is adapted to a South African subject-matter.

This practice gives expression to one, but not to the other, function of "storytelling." This practice has no organic connection with oral culture: what it depends upon, what it is "organically" connected to, is rather a specific, English-language literary education. When I refer to this practice as adapting a Western narrative tradition, I do not mean that the Western portion of the world's population has a privileged relationship to this tradition, in the form of an exclusive claim to it. Neither do I mean to imply that Ndebele is betraying his African identity, his roots in the African population, by writing in this tradition. What I mean, rather, is that this narrative tradition originated in the West. It has since been adopted, and adapted, all over the world, where European-language education systems have been established.

This has both cultural and social implications. Let's take the cultural implications in the first place, and focus upon some aspects of Ndebele's narrative. What strikes me is the sophisticated scepticism of the narrative voice. This sophisticated scepticism, this realism, of the narrative voice is transmitted, in some degree, to the "inner life" of the protagonist, upon which the narrative concentrates. The scepticism of this inner life is never as sophisticated as that of the narrative

voice. It serves, however, to liberate the protagonist, at least provisionally, from the authority of custom, convention, traditional belief. It is, indeed, the premise of the problematic identity, the painful yet also exhilarating freedom, of the protagonist.

The scepticism of the narrative voice is "sophisticated," in the sense that it involves the ability to entertain mutually conflicting positions in the mind, without demanding the immediate resolution of this ambiguity. The narrative delays judgement, and invites enjoyment of the play of opposites. This scepticism does not, for example, lead to outright rejection of custom, convention and traditional belief, but rather to a more complicated position whereby the "resonance" of these practices is acknowledged, without being positively endorsed.

What is the significance of this subtle scepticism? What is the relationship between the sophisticated scepticism of the narrative voice, and the organic connection with oral culture which Ndebele advises the writer to aim at? Is there not a discrepancy here? The discussion can be given more point by a return to the story, "The Prophetess." Here, the visit of the young boy to the prophetess involves an encounter with "superstition," in the sense that the old woman is attributed magical powers. The narrative entertains a teasing ambiguity about this attribution. There is certainly no question of treating the magical aura of the old woman with contempt, of being brutally dismissive of the "resonance" of this aura in the local population. On the contrary, the narrative treats her with a certain reverence. However, in the end there is also no question of the narrative's scepticism, its secular "realism." This becomes manifest in the climax of the story. As the boy returns home with the "holy" water to cure his mother, he is knocked over by a cyclist, and the water is spilled. Recovering from this calamity, the boy refills his bottle with "ordinary" water, which his mother believes to be "holy." After drinking the water, she seems to be on the mend. In a sense, it no longer matters whether the old woman has magical powers or not. What is finally more important is the "inner life" of the boy, his concern for his mother's well-being, his will to help her, an "inner" force which appears to be transmitted to her, as she falls into a deep, peaceful sleep.

The concentration upon the inner life, the problematic identity of this inner life, the scepticism of the narrative voice--all these features of Ndebele's stories are entirely characteristic of the Western realist narrative tradition; indeed, I suspect, they are specific to it. They have no organic connection with oral culture and oral narrative. Rather, what they depend upon is the intervention of an English-language edu-

cation. It is this which enables these stories to be written in the way they are, and which also creates a readership capable of understanding and appreciating the way these stories are composed. The education enables and encourages certain practices of reading and writing.

These stories are not composed for just anybody to enjoy. There is an agenda to them; the agenda of intellectual leadership. It is the members of this nascent intellectual leadership, as they conceive it, who can best enjoy the emphasis in the narrative on the problematic freedom of the inner self, which is a freedom from custom, convention and traditional belief, also articulated in the sophisticated scepticism of the narrative voice. Does this nascent intellectual leadership relate "organically" to the wider African population? Whatever the relationship is--and it doubtless may be a very complex one, when all its factors are taken into account--it is not an organic one. This is so, because of the way in which non-vernacular, English-language education intervenes in the development of this leadership cadre. It is this education which introduces the particular agenda of a sophisticated scepticism towards the customs, conventions and beliefs which resonate in the largely oral culture of the wider population. That culture does not "organically" give rise to an intelligentsia with a sceptical attitude towards its point of origin. It does not "organically" give rise to a preoccupation with the problematic freedom, in the leader-protagonist, of the inner self. These are the effects of the intervention of a particular, non-vernacular education system. It would seem, then, that Ndebele's stories are in various ways the product of an education that has no organic relationship with the wider African population.

What, then, of the claims Ndebele makes for the organicity of the writer's relationship to the wider society, and its largely oral culture? What of his advice to the writer to listen humbly to the oral teller's "masterpieces of entertainment and instruction"? What of the acute diagnosis of the "disembodied" conceptions of the wider population entertained by the radical intelligentsia, in for example the story, "Fools"? Or the satire of the uneasy disdain displayed by the middle classes for the oral culture of the township? Or the respectful treatment of the "resonance" of characters famous or notorious in that oral culture?

What these points indicate is that Ndebele believes that the "politically committed" writer, the writer who wishes to commit the practice of writing to the cause of the emancipation of the African "nation" from cultural and economic bondage, must forge a relationship of understanding and respect with the largely oral culture of this population, this "nation." In this,

he deploys the agenda of intellectual leadership in a different manner from some African writers, particularly of earlier generations, who have adopted disparaging and dismissive attitudes towards the culture of the "uneducated" people. It is certainly no part of Ndebele's intention to endorse such attitudes in any way. Furthermore, he is keenly aware of some of the difficulties the politically committed intellectual experiences in trying to forge this relationship, and of the mistakes made while in pursuit of this goal. It is therefore on the limitations of the intelligentsia, rather than on those of the general population, that Ndebele frequently focusses in his fiction and his criticism. To return to a point made earlier in this essay, a crucial example of this is where he criticises writers for adopting too narrow a conception of political commitment, one which fails to engage with issues of culture in the general population.

All this does not mean, however, that Ndebele's idea of the "organic" relationship between the writer and the African population, as expressed in the theme of the writer as "storyteller," is not more an example of mythmaking than of clear-sighted analysis. Such an analysis, I have argued, must give greater attention, amongst other factors, to the role of English-language education in the development and definition of the literary intelligentsia. I would argue, further, that the "storytelling" agenda might have the effect of endowing the practice of English-language fiction-writing with a more inclusive social legitimacy than it warrants. I say this because this agenda suggests that the practice contributes "organically" to the self-liberatory momentum of the wider African population. Perhaps, though, all that can more reasonably be claimed for it is that it contributes to processes of cultural self-definition amongst a section of the population, an "intellectual" section--and further, that it explains and advertises these processes, in an imaginatively "inward" way, amongst an English-language readership inside and outside South Africa. What bearing this has on the wider African population may not at this stage be clearly evident.

In further pursuit of this point, I come to the last stage of this critical discussion of Ndebele's "storyteller" theme. I suggested earlier that Ndebele sees the need for the politically committed writer to establish a relationship of understanding and respect with the largely oral culture of the African population. In summarising his argument in this way, however, I left a area of ambiguity in the implication of this argument unexamined. Is Ndebele's concern really with the writer's forging of a <u>relationship</u> with the wider African culture, or of an <u>attitude</u> towards it? This distinction is pertinent, in that the essence of a relationship is reciprocity, whereas an attitude only comes from one side.

Of course, as a human being and as a political agent, the writer may, and must, enter into relationships of various kinds with people from various sectors of the population. However, through the practice of writing, the writer enters into a more specific and exclusive relationship: that is, with a readership. This readership engages in a reciprocal relationship with the writer's practice, in the sense that this practice requires the response--interpretation, internalisation--of the readership in order to achieve its realisation. The "meaning" of a written story derives not only from the writer's composition of it, but also from the way this composition is interpreted by its readership. The wider, non-reading population cannot engage in a relationship of this kind with the writer's practice. This population may have a "significant" role assigned to it in this practice, by means of the attitudes towards it or the images of it that are expressed there. However, the response of this wider, non-reading population is not required for these attitudes, or images, or the composition as a whole, to achieve their\its realisation.

It follows that we can never derive the nature of the non-reading population's "response," its "relationship" to the writer's practice, from the terms in which this population is conceptualised in the practice. Thus, if the writer's stories conceptualise the non-reading population in terms that are "positive" or "sensitive," rather than "disparaging" or "patronising"--terms which the narrative invites the reader to endorse--this is no basis for assuming that this population accepts, or takes pleasure from, being conceptualised in this way, or is positively influenced in its own self-conceptualisation. It is no basis, in itself, for assuming anything about the response of this population.

My conclusion, then, in general, is that the writer cannot, through the actual practice of writing, enter into a relationship with the non-reading population. What the writer can do is more one-sided than this: it involves the composition of a conceptualisation of the non-reading population. This conceptualisation is "realised" amongst a readership, and may influence the way this readership understands its social role, and acts upon this understanding. However, the significance of this for the non-reading population cannot be read off from the terms of this interaction, this relationship, between writer and readers. In saying this, I wish merely to insist on the difference in cultural modality between the fully literate and the barely- or non-literate sections of the population, and to suggest, on the basis of this insistence, that the responses of the latter cannot be subsumed within those of the former. In brief, the writer cannot, in a really organic sense, write for the non-reading population, but only about it.

This is all the more the case where, as in Ndebele's stories, the principles of composition derive from a Western, realist tradition of narrative rather than from local, oral traditions. Let us return once again to the concern in these stories with the inner life of the protagonist. Ndebele, the critic, links this concern with the inner life to the analysis of cultural processes. In order to understand cultural processes, we have to learn to respect the terms in which people think and feel, we have to form a conception of their identity as subjects. How are these ideas borne out in the stories Ndebele composes?

It is certainly true that these stories engage with cultural process, as focussed in the inner lives of various protagonists. However, these protagonists are, in each case, middle-class intellectuals or nascent intellectuals. Thus, the concern in the stories with cultural process seems, at the level of characterisation, the inner life, or subject-identity, to have a particular social weighting. The overwhelming weight of the narrative is devoted to the growth of the inner life in one section only of the population. It is true that this weighting is presented with a certain complexity. The inner growth of the protagonist generally involves a dramatic and challenging encounter with personalities in the oral, or at least "non-intellectual," culture of the township: an encounter which may lead to self-criticism, and an altered self-perception. Such personalities may be more or less vividly dramatised in the stories, so that a sense of their cultural "resonance" is communicated to the reader. In some cases, these personalities may be attributed more valuable human resources, for example, more moral power or human wisdom, than the protagonist possesses.

This does not mean, however, that the narrative of cultural process, with its focus on the growth of the inner life, passes over to these personalities, who then displace the middle-class intellectuals. On the contrary, these personalities remain in a marginal narrative position, stimulants to the growth of the protagonist's inner life in a certain direction, rather than potential alternatives to it. As readers, we do not experience them with the same narrative "inwardness." In consequence, we are forced to "realise" the theme of cultural process as a middle-class intellectual phenomenon, rather than as one embracing the whole population.

Earlier, I discussed some of the ways in which an English-language education provides the basis for an agenda in Ndebele's stories. It seems appropriate, at this point in the argument, to consider some of the more specific effects of the English-language medium of the stories.

The narrative of a work of fiction in the realist tradition is probably composed of a number of different voices, each with its own distinctive elements of vocabulary, idiom and intonation. This is so, even if we regard the prevailing voice of the narrator as being a single one, consistent and homogeneous throughout the narrative. There are various ways in which other, subordinate voices can be introduced into the narrative, such as by means of the direct or indirect speech of characters in the story. The most dramatic means available within the realist tradition, and much used therefore, is the direct speech of characters. Important effects are derived in this way. One effect is to give the impression that no constraint is put upon the expression of the characters by the prevailing narrative voice. The characters are enabled to speak in their own voices, no matter how different from that of the narrator. The use of dialect is a forceful example of this: different principles of expression, derived from region and class, are allowed free play within the narrative. This effect of freedom within the narrative, the freedom of characters to speak in their own voices, makes possible another effect. This is the setting up of tensions between the prevailing narrative voice and the subordinate, but "free" voices. This state of narrative tension, this disturbing of a set narrative pattern, can play a central role in the reader's enjoyment and understanding of a story.

What we have now to ask, with respect to Ndebele's stories, is: what is the significance of these two effects of the interplay of narrative voices in realist fiction, the effect of freedom, and the effect of tension? The most important linguistic characteristic of Ndebele's stories is that they are in English, and the significance of the effects of freedom and of tension have to be considered in the context of the English-language medium of the stories. The point I wish to make about this reinforces points made earlier in this essay. In linguistic terms, Ndebele's narrative invites the reader to enjoy and reflect upon tensions and issues that are relevant to an English-language medium readership, rather than to the African population as a whole. To this degree, any direct analogy between the oral storyteller and the "storytelling" writer is misleading.

The prevailing narrative voice of the stories is one which employs English with absolute ease and sophistication. This establishes a norm for the reader: the reader's narrative attention is "centred" on the easy, fluent, sophisticated deployment of English. The agenda here would seem to be that this deployment of English enables access to the "real" life of the African township, despite the predominantly vernacular character of this life. There can be no question of the ability of English to "translate" at least some aspects of vernacular culture, other-

wise Ndebele would not have chosen English as the medium of expression for his stories of township life. Ndebele counsels the politically committed African writer to pay serious attention to the modes of thinking and feeling, the cultural modes, of the African population. If he practises his own counsel, and if he nevertheless allows his characters to express themselves in English, it follows that he believes a thoroughly English-language story has the capacity to translate at least some aspects of vernacular culture without significant distortion.

In the context of this issue of translation, or the role of English vis-a-vis the African vernacular, the effects of freedom and of tension established through the diversity of narrative voices in the stories seem to me to have somewhat contradictory implications. The effect of freedom, the freedom of characters to speak in their own voices, no matter how different from the prevailing narrative voice, seems to imply that the English-language medium of the stories places no constraints upon the subject-matter. Township characters can still express themselves authentically. If they speak English, this means that, within the scope of the story, some quality of their vernacular subject-identity can be adequately rendered. Thus the capacity of the English-language medium to encompass the "reality" of township life is actually reinforced by the freedom allowed to characters to speak in their "own" voices.

On the other hand, the effect of tension seems to me to have a rather contrary implication. This narrative tension is established both within the prevailing narrative and between it and the direct speech of characters. What it involves is both the "stretching" and the "limiting" of the fluent, faultless, sophisticated English of the prevailing narrative through its encounter with the speech-patterns of vernacular township culture. The stretching of this narrative to acknowledge the idioms and inflections of the vernacular, albeit in a translated form, indicates the necessity for the English-language medium to "renew" itself, to become Africanised. Its capacity to translate depends upon its Africanisation. The limiting of the narrative arises from the use of direct speech in the stories. The speech of the tsotsis and of the members of the educated middle class who define themselves in opposition to vernacular culture, rather than in solidarity with it, limits the prevailing narrative from opposite sides. The speech of the tsotsis claims a more direct, organic relation to vernacular culture than the prevailing narrative has, and thus calls into question the ability of this narrative voice to "translate" the totality of the township culture effectively. The speech of the members of the educated middle class who distance themselves from the culture of the classes below them, aggressively asserting their own superiority, associates the acquisition of education with alienation

from popular vernacular culture, and thus calls into question the ability of the prevailing narrative voice to assert on convincing terms its solidarity with the vernacular culture. So tensions are set up in the narrative, as the role of an English-language education in African intellectual life is simultaneously affirmed and negated, or, at least, limited.

The point would seem to be that, at this linguistic level of the narrative, the cross-currents within it have a particular relevance for an English-language-educated section of the population. The narrative explores issues and problems which are specific to this section. For such readers, the significance of the characteristic tensions in the narrative, tensions between the language of vernacular culture and the language of the educated, will be plain. There is, however, a limit to the exploration of these tensions in the stories, a limit that is set by their medium of expression, the English language. The cultural difference between English expression and vernacular expression has to be represented <u>in English</u>. It can only be represented so far as English can be "stretched." It has to be explored by limited analogy, rather than in its actual dimensions, in the actual differences between the way English and the vernacular are spoken, thought and felt. It follows that the formation of vernacular subject-identity, in language and speech, can also only be addressed in the terms of a limited analogy, rather than "organically." Earlier arguments are thus reinforced. English-language fiction does not stand in a direct, organic relation to the culture of the general African population. It intervenes in the culture of a section of this population, and may come to have an organic significance in the cultural identity of this section. This section of the African population itself, furthermore, relates to the general population in ways that are both organic and non-organic. The mode of entry of English-language fiction into African culture has a complexity which requires a great deal more careful analysis. One criticism I have of Ndebele's "storytelling" advice to the African writer in English is that it serves at least partially to obscure this complexity.

II

The previous section was concerned with a critical analysis of Ndebele's near-identification of the art of fiction-writing, as practised by African writers in the medium of the English language, with the art of oral storytelling. Both practices he refers to as "storytelling," which has some misleading implications. My interest in Ndebele's emphasis upon "storytelling" is not exhausted by my sense of the need to disentangle these implications, however. Rather, my own insight into what the agenda

of literary criticism might be has been greatly amplified by this emphasis. Other writers besides Ndebele, though in very different contexts, intellectual and political, place an analogous emphasis upon storytelling. This emphasis is juxtaposed by them to other ways of developing political conceptions in writing, ways which are predominant amongst Western radical intellectuals. It is associated with a critique of the predominance of these ways, a critique which exposes their limitations and dangers. In this context of critique, the "story" becomes an alternative means of conceptualising a specific population, its political situation, and the relationship between the conceptualising intellectual and this conceptualised population. The writer, as "storyteller," conceptualises the population which is the subject of the story in such a way as to challenge, or limit, predominant political conceptions, at least amongst the radical intellectuals, about this population. By this means, political thought is problematised. It is no part of the intention of these writers to compose "apolitical" fiction.

The story establishes itself as an alternative means of conceptualisation for two main reasons, I believe. The first reason has to do with culture. The story places the dimension of culture on the political agenda. Some definition of culture seems necessary here. Culture, then, refers on the one hand to human beings as subjects, and, on the other hand, to the customary practices which connect human beings to each other in collective, or collaborative, entities. Cultural analysis tries to coordinate these two terms of reference, the human being as subject, and customary social practices. It is concerned with the constitutive nature of the human "presence" in social practices, and more specifically, therefore, with particular categories of social practice in which the human presence is given more or less elaborate formal expression (in what we might call narratives of the human subject, such as those of religion, or art). This is in contradistinction to economic analysis. Economic analysis is concerned with a specific set of customary social practices, that set which involves the organisation of human labour and the distribution of the fruits of this labour. In economic analysis, however, the nature of the human presence in these practices is disregarded, or, more accurately, is reduced to a skeletal notion of such a presence. In economic analysis, the human subject is a rudimentary mechanism, powered by "interest," or "reason," ("rational calculation") or some such simple and elementary notion.

This comparison, lopsided as it is for the sake of the emphasis required by the argument, explains why the story should be proposed as an alternative means of conceptualisation of the political situation of a specific population. Economic analysis

has provided the basic discourse of radical political commitment. Because economic analysis has founded itself upon a rudimentary notion of the human subject, though, radical political commitment has tended, at least until recently, to push consideration of the constitution of the human subject to the periphery of its attention. Since, as recent theories have emphasised, the human subject has a complex constitution, this tendency has deprived radical political thought of the capacity to engage with political situations in all their significant complexity.

The argument for "storytelling," which is an argument for the restoration of culture and the human subject to the political agenda, can therefore be seen as an initiative to enable this capacity. This argument starts from the position that stories are narratives of the human subject, of the human "presence" in social practices. Stories are a specific type of practice that is concerned with the human subject, and thus they provide a means of conceptualising this area of concern with a more adequate complexity. Oral storytelling traditions give expression to ways in which societies with a predominantly oral culture understand this question of the human subject. The argument for "storytelling" urges the politically-concerned writer to compose fiction which is in analogy to oral storytelling. Such a writer composes on the basis of earlier narratives, either oral or written, that take the human subject as their focus. This composition reshapes and reinterprets the understanding expressed in earlier narratives. This reinterpretation involves, within the work of fiction, a cross-fertilisation between the concepts of the radical intellectual, and the concepts embodied in the narrative tradition, concepts which, at least if they come from oral narrative tradition, may be close to those entertained within the wider, non-intellectual, population. The most interesting example I know of a work composed in this spirit, and one which has guided my argument in this section of the essay, is Fazil Iskander's Sandro of Chegem.

This takes me to the second main reason why the story should be proposed as an alternative means of conceptualisation to those predominant amongst radical intellectuals. This has to do with the nature of the relationship between the intellectual and the non-intellectual population, and with the way this relationship is perceived amongst intellectuals. The "storytelling" writer finds inspiration for the composition of stories from the interaction of a number of preoccupations. For example, the political thought of the radical intelligentsia, a traditional stock of story-material, and memories of the influence of a particular society on the formation of the writer's personal identity, may interact to form a basis for story-composition. In this case, a strong tension is set up in the narrative between

the mode of conceptualisation of the radical intelligentsia and that of the non-intellectual culture of the society the writer intimately knows\remembers from childhood.

An intimate cultural relationship--expressed in deep-seated memories of situations and relationships that contributed to the formation of moral and social preoccupations from the impressionable years of early childhood, and in shared narrative experiences--is an essential ingredient for "storytelling." We cannot imagine Iskander's stories, or Ndebele's stories, being written without the pressure of this cultural relationship. This marks a difference between the relationship the "storytelling" writer has with the population conceptualised in the fiction, and the relationship the radical political theorist or analyst has with the population conceptualised in theory or analysis. I do not mean that the radical theorist is not inspired in any way by cultural relationships., but rather that these cultural relationships do not enter into the practice of conceptualisation, and do not problematise this practice. Thus the practice of producing theoretical concepts is understood as being quite separate from the cultural practices of the non-intellectual population, and as in no way depending on these practices for conceptual inspiration or corroboration. This means, finally, that the non-intellectual population are seen as the objects, rather than the subjects, of knowledge. The production of knowledge seems to circle round its centre in institutions dominated, if not monopolised, by the educated middle class, institutions of a middle-class, bureaucratic intelligentsia.

The contribution of "storytelling" fiction to radical political thought may therefore lie in its ability to foreground tensions between the conceptual practice of intellectuals and the cultural practices of the non-intellectual population. "Storytelling" fiction posits both the relevance of culture to political thought, and the significant complexity of culture.

A line of Marxist literary criticism, which was influenced by the work of Louis Althusser, tended to identify literature as occupying a mid-station between "ideology" (misperception) and "science" (knowledge). Literature, in this view, serves to arouse doubts in the reader about the adequacy of customary perceptions (misperceptions) of society. It cannot, however, provide the reader with the conceptual basis for a true perception (knowledge) of society. My argument in this essay, vis-a-vis "storytelling" fiction, accords literature a more active cognitive capacity than this. It broadens the agenda of knowledge by limiting the scope of the "knowledge" produced by intellectuals at a distance from the culture of the wider, non-intellectual population.

In my detailed analysis of Ndebele's stories, the weight of evidence was tending in a somewhat different direction. There, my argument stressed the limiting of this fiction by its English-language medium, which made implausible the "organic" relationship with oral storytelling and oral culture that Ndebele seemed to be claiming. There is a tension between the tendency of the argument in the second and third sections of this essay, which indicates the need for further clarification of the issues raised by the "storytelling" theme.

Notes

1 This essay is to be published in Davis (ed), Crisis and Conflict. Essays on Southern African Literature, (Essen: Die Blaue Eule, 1989), and Trump (ed), Rendering Things Visible. Essays on Southern African Literary Culture of the 1970s and 1980s, (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1990).

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