

Opening Conference : Writing in South Africa Today

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Opening Conference: Writing in South Africa Today

The North American novelist and journalist Joan Didion began her haunting essay on the sixties with the axiom: "We tell ourselves stories in order to live." It seems to me that in this brief and simple statement Didion arrived at one of the truths that has been a distinguishing characteristic of the human experience: narratives give us definition and they allow us to explore how we see ourselves.

Daily we take events and try to fit them into a story that in itself is based on an idea of what life means. Often the narrative runs into episodes that seem absurd, gratuitous, inexplicable but even when faced with this we continue because, I believe, we are essentially heroic beings. Sceptics will undoubtedly disagree and say we are myopic, deluded about our meaning — or, more particularly, our inherent lack of meaning — but I prefer to see us as stoics: people who for the most part go about their lives despite what happens to them.

"What happens to us" has both a personal and a public aspect. On a personal level there are a myriad events that make up a life (births, deaths, marriages, diseases, accidents, disappointments, triumphs); on a public level there is the history of the times we live through. This history inevitably impinges on our personal lives — our actions become the

history of our age — and it is how we tell this history that determines what narrative we write about ourselves.

In South Africa over the last half century we have told ourselves a number of narratives and these narratives have not presented a coherent picture. Perhaps this very incoherence is common to the narratives of most countries but it seems to me that in South Africa the incoherence of the narratives actually led to a state of schizophrenia, at least for some — mostly the ruling — sectors of the population.

I became aware of this loss of contact with reality when I realised that the story that had been told to me — by my parents, by school teachers, by the media — was a lie. In part a deliberate lie, in part a lie that was subscribed to by so many people it became, to them, a truth. In short this lie went that our forebears were settlers who came to this country and tamed it, consequently we are founders, developers, with us came the modern industrial world. We have created wealth and all the lives in this country have benefited.

The tellers of this narrative were historians interpreted by school teachers and reinforced by the media, most particularly radios, but also the newspapers. The story justified white rule and was never contradicted by anyone in my immediate circle. It meant that at age 20 if I had been asked to estimate the size of the black population I would have numbered them as significantly less than the white population.

Why?

Because up to the age of 20 I lived in white suburbs, I never saw a black township, our cross country excursions on holiday stuck to the national roads and the town planners made sure that no townships were visible from the main roads. So the only blacks I came in contact with were the domestic worker, the gardener, the four or five men who collected the garbage once a week, and the odd buses one saw passing filled with black commuters. I had no impression of black children, or of black elderly, in other words every aspect of my life went to reinforce the dominant, the master, narrative.

Except that I chose to be a journalist and the nature of my work, and the sudden resurgence of history with the 1976 uprising first in Soweto and then across the country, led to the realisation that the narrative I had been told was a lie. Suddenly everything had to be re-contextualised, new truths had to be sought. Fortunately — in the latter part of the seventies — there was a lot of this going on and we were beginning to tell some new and very different stories about ourselves.

The incoherence in the master narrative that I first encountered as a young adult occurred in the discrepancy between the history I was taught at school — the presentation of the past — and the daily country recorded in the newspapers — the presentation of the present —, and the imaginative literature. The first two seemed to be more or less consistent, but the imaginative literature, most specifically in this case the work of Nadine Gordimer, presented a very different country.

I remember as a student in 1972 finding a copy of her novel *The Late Bourgeois World* in the book-shop across the road from the University of the Witwatersrand. At the time the book was banned. I took it hurriedly off the shelf, glanced round to see if anyone was watching me, then went quickly to the cashier. I didn't really expect that I would be allowed to buy the book and I fully expected the cashier to call the manager. However, nothing happened and I escaped with my purchase which I told no one about and only dared to take out of my bag when I reached home. What I read called into question the entire narrative that I had been told during my life. The country was not the one I had been led to believe it was.

During the seventies the imaginative writers I was reading began to construct another country for me. This happened through the work of now internationally renowned writers like Athol Fugard, André Brink, Breyten Breytenbach, J. M. Coetzee, and Christopher Hope. The seventies also saw the ever increasing publication of books by black authors for example, the poetry of Wally Serote, the novels of Sipho Sepamla, the short stories of Mtutuzeli Matshoba, the faction of Myriam Tlali. This is a very limited list chosen as the names come to mind, but its impact was significant and one I can never underestimate.

At the same time there was a fundamental shift in the historiography as a new generation of historians began to question the given story and present new interpretations.

I think here particularly of the work of Charles van Onselen who in his two books *New Ninevah* and *New Babylon* presented a picture of early Johannesburg that showed a town not built on gold alone, but on the exploitation of labour, prostitution, illegal liquor, gangs, and a class of people struggling to sell their labour in the face of industrialisation. The story of my forebears, the founders, bringing light and wealth to the land began to change.

There were other shifts in our history. For instance an essential myth had been the myth of the vacant land, the myth that the interior of South Africa was uninhabited during the initial centuries of white colonisation. So when the *voortrekkers* in their oxwagons decided to move into the interior away from British colonial rule it was stressed to us as school children that the country they found was empty. This fact was important because it gave a legitimacy to their taking possession of the land. It meant that nobody was deprived of land.

About three years after I left school at the end of the sixties the myth of the vacant land changed. Suddenly school history had it that once people had lived in the interior but due to Zulu aggression they had been forced to flee to strongholds in the mountains deserting the grass plains. Suddenly apartheid historians could no longer ignore what is called the Zulu Mfecane, a major political and social upheaval during the mid-nineteenth century which did much to change the way of life in many parts of southern Africa. For decades it had been suppressed in order to give prominence to Voortrekker mythology but, given the revisionist historians, this was no longer possible.

In short the Mfecane was an aggressive movement by a number of Zulu chiefs which led to an expansion of the Zulu empire during the middle of the nineteenth century. Happily for the apartheid historians its consequences went to explain why the land was vacant. For the story

still suited them because it continued to show that they had not acquired the land by conquest.

Recently the narrative of the "empty land scenario" had another factor added to it. In this story being propounded by the historian Julian Cobbing of Rhodes University, the interior of South Africa was empty because slave trading had caused the depopulation.

Either way that we are looking at it, there are layers of aggression and violence that have gone into the making of the history and until very recently have been denied.

But the essential point I wish to make here is that our notion of what our history is has changed. What had been a very simple reading has been replaced by a complex narrative that is far from complete. Almost daily the historic narrative is being added to, broadened, deepened, in fact made richer. But, of course, this too leads to an instability for most of this decade and particularly since 1994 we have been trying to reimagine ourselves, to escape from the cultural prescriptions of apartheid but we will only truly be able to do that once we have a fuller picture of our past.

However, getting rid of apartheid does not only mean reassessing history: the business of reinventing, of reconstructing ourselves can also come through the media. Here I wish to focus particularly on the print media where I have some experience.

It seems to me that history sets the context within which the media operates. Certainly the Afrikaner reading of history, where rights were procured by possession, negotiation, sometimes conquest, and development, gave a context to the media during the apartheid years and probably the current state of indecision and vacillation within the newspapers is because they have yet to develop a meaningful historic sense.

There has been some contention in recent weeks that the newspaper industry should make a submission to the Truth and

Reconciliation Commission by admitting their compliance with the regime during the apartheid period. In a submission two weeks ago to the Truth Commission, Tony Weaver, a journalist once charged with breaking the Police Act in his coverage of the riots in the townships outside Cape Town during the eighties stated that "elements of the media are guilty of collusion with the apartheid regime, either by remaining silent or actively suppressing the truth."

He was also reported in the *Mail & Guardian* as saying : "The so-called liberal English press bent over backwards to accommodate versions of the truth put out by the police and the National Party. During the period journalists were operating not only in the milieu of a hostile police and government but also in the employ of a hostile management."

During that period his editor on the *Cape Time*s was a man called Tony Heard. In the same *Mail & Guardian* article Heard commented: "What the media did could not be classified as a gross violation of human rights, but we certainly made it possible for those violations to happen — more than the medical or legal professions. When people say today they did not know what happened, we are the reason for their ignorance."

Certainly, like most other journalists, I can support both Weaver's and Heard's accusation that the English press, by sins of omission, facilitated the National Party's narrative of South Africa. My own experiences are not as harrowing as theirs but they do reveal how pernicious was the in-built system of censorship.

In 1976 when the student protests galvanised the public in Soweto and Alexandra I was sent to cover the uprising by the news magazine I worked for. This magazine, called *To The Point*, was a centrist publication which nevertheless espoused some liberal ideals. However when, after two days, I returned to the office filled with the excitement of witnessing a major event — nothing less, as I have said, than the resurgence of history — I was patted on the head and given space for 500 words at the bottom of a page. That week's cover story was devoted to South Africa's mineral potential.

Some years later as an environmental reporter on *The Star* I went to KwaZulu where it was alleged by a group of people on *The Star* excessive soil erosion and the local white farmers were indignant about the loss of top soil. What I found was a community that had been uprooted and dumped in a barren region as part of the forced population in what were then known as Bantustans. Of course there was soil erosion but to focus on this was to miss the major issue that people had been put in an area where there were inadequate water supplies, the pasturage was too sparse to sustain cattle, and the ground too poor to grow crops. To me this seemed like genocide. But that word was too strong for my editor and the story was spiked.

The final anecdote took place in the mid-eighties when I worked for a prestigious socio-political magazine called "leadership." This magazine took great pride in its liberal persuasion and you would find between its covers interviews with people like Archbishop Tutu — when he was regarded as the devil incarnate — alongside a piece on a National Party cabinet minister. The policy was one of whoever had something to say got the space to say it. Ironically under P. W. Botha the government adopted a more intelligent approach towards sectors of the print media as they realised that by waving copies of magazines like *Leaderships* abroad the government could show how tolerant it was of opposing attitudes. Certainly "leaderships" was never banned although I am convinced that if some of the material had been presented in other publications those magazines would have been closed down overnight.

The incident I'm going to recount took place at a time when sanctions were seriously damaging the economy and causing much debate. "Leadership" published a special issue on the subject and, according to policy, reflected all views, including the views of Bishop Trevor Huddleston who was president of the anti-apartheid movement in London.

For years Huddleston had been the proverbial thorn in the government's flesh and true to form he had harsh things to say about them in the "Leadership" issue. As a result the Department of Foreign Affairs which regularly bought a substantial number of each print run

refused to place an order unless the Huddleston interview was dropped. With considerable trumpeting about freedom of speech the editor refused to comply and the magazine was published.

However it had failed to attract sufficient advertising and looked like being a financial disaster. As we all know, money talks and what it says often has very little to do with morals. To give some balm to whatever troubled consciences there were, an interview with the Minister of Constitutional Affairs, Chris Heunis, was also dropped. Of course it goes without saying that the Department of Foreign Affairs bought most (if not all) of that issue.

Nevertheless, despite the inherent moral laxity and self-censorship and the truly draconian censorship laws that prevented press freedom I must take issue with Heard's claim that the public can profess ignorance of the apartheid atrocities because the newspapers didn't report them. I believe enough was reported to give an idea of what was going on.

As a public and through the press, we knew about deaths in detention. We knew about forced removals. We knew that people were placed under house arrest. We knew that newspapers and books were banned. We knew about segregation. We knew that a war of sorts was being fought in Namibia. We knew that people were blown up by parcel bombs. We knew that a person could be arrested on the streets and jailed for not carrying identification. We knew that people were tortured. We knew that people had gone missing. We knew that activists were killed.

We may not have had empirical evidence that these killings were being done by the government's security apparatus but it is hard to believe that normal people who read the carefully worded reports of these activities in their daily and weekly newspapers did not have some idea of the country they were living in. Even if you did not read imaginative literature and had no idea of the work of revisionist historians there was enough information in the print media to give you an idea of the true nature of the main narrative. So when, these days, I am confronted by bewildered people who claim to have had no idea of what was happening I am inclined to think they did not want to know.

Today such proclamations of ignorance are no longer possible thanks to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Almost single-handed this Commission has become the major vehicle for the South African story.

Since April we have been told by a succession of witnesses of the heartache and suffering that went on in ordinary homes during the turbulent years of the last two decades. In reporting these stories the newspapers have shown an extraordinary willingness to be the main teller. With this decision the narrative that had been told in fiction and the narrative that had been told in the media converged for the first time since the publication of Nadine Gordimer's early works and the publication of Alan Paton's *Cry, the Beloved Country* in the late 1940s.

For the moment it is probably true to say that because of the stories being told to the Truth Commission the newspapers have actually usurped the role of fiction writers because the lives they are recounting are so saturated with hurt and courage and forbearance that fiction cannot compete.

This is obviously a temporary situation and once the Truth Commission has finished its work I believe the process of dealing with the apartheid years in the imaginative literature will begin. However, I very much doubt that we will see a return to the political realism that characterised the work of writers like Gordimer and Brink during apartheid. Today the demands have shifted and these demands insist on new ways of telling.

It seems to me that already these new ways of telling have manifested themselves in the literature in three tendencies: the first is in autobiography or autobiographical fiction; the second could be called, for want of a better description, metro fiction; and the third resorts to history to re-imagine what happened not just during apartheid but in the colonial centuries.

The autobiographical writings started some time ago with such works as Breytenbach's "Paradise" series, and his surreal prison record *The True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist*, followed by Rian Malan's *My Traitor's Heart* where reportage — that useful device that fuses journalism with novelistic techniques — was used to re-examine the landscape, the history, and the siting of individual lives within particular moments. This tendency has given rise to two recent novels - one by a self-confessed Security Police spy, Mark Behr, the other by a journalist, Jo-Anne Richards — which both use an autobiographical approach.

Metro fiction, on the other hand, is a very new phenomenon (although I think it has strong links to the black journalists/writers — like Can Themba — who worked for a magazine called *Drum* in the 1950s) and at this stage has only a single flagship in English called *Love Themes For the Wilderness* by Ashraf Jamal. (This sort of writing has been prevalent in Afrikaans for some years, however).

Why I have chosen to call it metro fiction is because of its strong urban environment, its plotless immersion in the day to day lives of a fairly large cast of characters, its continual references to current movies, books, pop groups, its attempt to link into a global community that would be equally at home in parts of New York, or Paris, or Sydney, or Santiago, or Tokyo or Cape Town. The historic forces at work in a particular society have no universal meaning. The intention, I think, is to wrench readers into a new world, a new country.

The third tendency is an attempt to re-imagine the country in terms of the new historiography. This does not necessarily mean writing historical novels — although I am sure there would be room for that too — but, and this is what particularly interests me and what I have tried to do in most of my work, is to use historic incidents as overlays on contemporary society. In other words trying to reconstruct from the past the themes and forces which one sees being played out today.

I would like to illustrate this briefly by describing a recent murder that I reported on for the *Mail & Guardian*. It happened in October in a small village in the Karoo where people were so unconcerned by crime that they felt no need to lock their doors or windows. To

them crime was something that happened in the cities. Then one night a gang of men — who became known in the media as the Flower Gang, because the flowers bloom in that part of the country in October — broke into a farm house and killed a four-year-old child, her mother and their 60-year-old friend — also a woman — who owned the house.

They committed these murders in order to steal a television set, a microwave oven, some jewellery and two hunting rifles. Their deed done, they went back into the night. Four or five days later they were all caught but the aspect of the story that captured my imagination was its violence and the fact that it was random, gratuitous. The stolen items merely seemed to emphasise this.

We are coming to realise that throughout our history these sort of murders have occurred again and again. Each time they are shocking but they are inextricably part of our narrative. I ended my report by mentioning an incident that happened in 1835 in a region newly colonised by British settlers. One of the settlers kept a diary and in it he recorded how some of is neighbours chased a black man for no apparent reason. The man tried to hide in a hole in the side of a riverbank. The settlers set the grass on fire and smoked him out. When he emerged they shot him.

There is no rational explanation for this just as there is no rational explanation for the Flower Gang's killing spree. But the point is that in telling the one story we must be sensitive to how it resonates elsewhere in history. As I have pointed out the new historiography goes some way towards the reconstitution and reconstruction of ourselves. But it does not go all the way. We also need created stories to fill out the historical record. Texts that describe how we were. For who else but imaginative writers can tell us what is was like to be a bandit on the scrublands in the 1860s? Or a gold miner in 1888? Or a whore in Johannesburg ninety years ago?

What, for instance, was it like for the diamond diggers who were kept in a "purging cage" before they were allowed to go home to their distant villages? I have a photograph of three men in such a cage.

It was taken in Kimberley in 1894 by J. Benjamin Stone, a British photographer who travelled through South Africa in that year. His pictures form one of the most detailed records of life in South Africa at the end of the nineteenth century.

The three men in his portrait are desperately poor; one is wrapped in a blanket, the others wear oddments of clothing. The man on the left shows a certain defiance, his hands on his hips; the blanket wearer, a stoic dignity. But the third man is bent forward in a posture of fatigue. He has on an old waistcoat; beneath it his torso is bare. There is a feeling that he may fall forward at any moment, collapse beneath the inhumanity he has been made to suffer. Perhaps he won't make it home! Perhaps he will be gratuitously murdered on the *veld* by passing bandits!

The "case" confining the three men, and others out of focus in the background, is a large compound completely encased in wire mesh. No black diamond diggers were allowed to leave the mine's premises until they had spent a week in these "purging cages," emptying their bowels of any diamonds they may have sought to smuggle out. I cannot help wondering what the long empty days in the dust were like for those three men? Or how this system must have weighed on their souls? How it must have stripped all dignity from those who laboured there?

As essential and intriguing as these questions are, and as necessary as it is to create fictive answers, very little thought has yet been given to them. Clearly, the historical legacy presents "realities" with which writers still have to deal. In this, a priority demanding creative description is the colonial era.

So many of the problems that afflict us today have their genesis in those years, particularly, the seemingly mindless and obsessive violence that currently convulses our society. It seems to me that some attempts are being made in the print media and more especially in the historiography to deal with these issues but there remain great gaps in the literary narrative — gaps that have not been attended to in the last half century because of the all absorbing influence of apartheid. But I believe we have reached a point in our history where the incoherence of the narratives we have told and been told can be reworked into a story

that while it may not make sense of what we do, will at least present us with a consistent description.

I began with a quote from Joan Didion that we tell ourselves stories in order to live. The quote is from her essay *The White Album* where she reflects on the Sixties. By the time she reaches the end of her essay 10,000 words later she concludes "writing has not helped me to see what it means." At first glance this seems to contradict her opening remark but when you look at it closely I don't think it does. When we take what F. Scott Fitzgerald described as "privileged glimpses into the human heart" it may not always be clear what we are looking at. But we all know that by telling stories we manage to contain the world and although we may not know what the story means at least by describing events we have had to place them in a context and we have had to face them. This is the process that occupies us in South Africa today: the new narrative that we produce may not give meaning to our existence but it will at least describe how we live. And in that description I believe we will cease to live under the burden of a lie.

Mike Nicol



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