

# *Literature and Civil Society in South Africa*

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*here / at the backyard of time  
where people wait and wait and wait  
and time / like pain, will not go away  
multitudes stare with eyes as many as stars  
they are dead silent / in 1991  
when the 21st century is here*  
MONGANE WALLY SEROTE, *Third World Express*

**I**F IT IS TRUE—as Eric Hobsbawm has argued in his *Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century*—that “in the late 1980s and early 1990s an era in world history ended and a new one began” (5), South Africa has undoubtedly played a major role in this historical break. The demise of apartheid and the almost miraculous transition to democratic pluralism in a country that contains so many of the tensions and contradictions of global society within its own borders has been no less dramatic than the dissolution of the former Soviet Empire, and the historical break in South Africa has significant implications not only for Southern Africa, but for the African continent as a whole and for international politics.

In South Africa itself, the drastic changes entailed by the democratic transition to majority rule that have affected so many aspects of society have also had a profound influence on culture, and particularly on literature. In his essay-collection *South African Literature and Culture: Rediscovery of the Ordinary*, Njabulo Ndebele has summed up the necessity for far-reaching re-evaluations of the scope, role and potential of literature in the following question: “with the demise of grand apartheid now certain, what are South African writers now going to write about?” (vii). This

question, which has since been echoed by other South African writers in numerous speeches, articles, and interviews could easily be supplemented by another no less acute query: what are South African *critics* going to write about now that their field has been no less drastically affected? The so-called "Albie Sachs debate" in 1990,<sup>1</sup> the critical discussions on the significance of postcolonial theory in the South African context,<sup>2</sup> the controversies over "Literature and Democratization"<sup>3</sup> and the renewed debates on the relationship between South African Literature and other African literatures and/or the oral tradition<sup>4</sup> amply testify to this fact.

Against this background, this paper suggests that an analysis of the role of civil society in South Africa (focussing on its suppression under the Old Regime and its emergence and growth in the terminal phase of apartheid and the transition to democracy) can throw some light on the development of literature and criticism alike; it also suggests that the problematic relationship between literature and civil society has been a long-standing concern of (both "white" and "black") South African writing.

In order to grasp the ideological and political sea-change that South African literature and criticism is currently faced with, it is necessary to recapitulate some of the historical and political presuppositions in which discussions on the development of South African Literature were embedded during the apartheid era. One of these fundamental presuppositions was that the struggle against apartheid was necessarily a struggle against international capitalism. When, in 1983, Jacques Derrida—of all people—dared to suggest in a short essay on "Racism's Last Word" that the alliance between capitalism and apartheid might not be perennial and that "if one day *apartheid* is abolished, its demise will not be credited only to the account of moral standards . . . because, on the scale which is that of a worldwide computer, the law of the marketplace will have imposed another standard of calculation" (335), he was sternly taken to task by Anne McClintock and Rob Nixon for supposedly supporting investments in South Africa and evading the indissoluble nexus between capitalism and apartheid.<sup>5</sup> What was implied in McClintock's and Nixon's argument was the assumption that the anti-

apartheid struggle was necessarily a struggle against the capitalist world system and that it would be an anti-capitalist dynamic—presumably on a world scale—that would eventually help the South African liberation movements to topple apartheid and to create a non-capitalist “New South Africa.” In the 1970s and 1980s, this view was widely held not only by anti-apartheid activists outside, but also by an overwhelming majority of black intellectuals inside South Africa, where it had a decisive influence on contemporary perspectives on literature. The final passage of an essay by Don Mattera on “Literature for Liberation” provides a striking example of this outlook:

And so must the spirit of this liberatory Literature—both Spoken and Written—march on with the world’s other downtrodden but emerging proletariat. To bring into existence a dimension of Humanhood—the ultimate result of which must be the creation of a new world and a new South Africa, inhabited by a race of strong people. Colourless. Compassionate. And striving towards a New Nation (in South Africa). Rich in justice. Socialist in content. (5)

In its basic contours, this perspective of a socialist “New Nation” was also shared by such white writers as Nadine Gordimer, who in 1982, in her famous essay “Living in the Interregnum,” formulated her views on this matter in the following terms:

The fact is, black South Africans and whites like myself no longer believe in the ability of Western capitalism to bring about social justice where we live. We see no evidence of that possibility in our history or our living present. . . . As for capitalism, whatever its reforms, its avowed self-perpetuation of advancement for the many by creation of wealth for the few does not offer any hope to fulfil the ultimate promise of equality, the *human* covenant man entered into with himself in the moment he did the impossible, stood up, a new self, on two feet instead of four. (282-83)

As it happened, the old mole of history—as it is wont to—eventually emerged in a most unexpected way, undermining not only apartheid but also the belief in a global alternative modernity that had done so much to inspire the struggle against it. The context in which apartheid ended was not a global crisis of capitalism, but the demise of what the late Ernest Gellner (in an essay entitled “Anything Goes”) recently referred to as “Terminal Marxism,” and the subsequent end of the Cold War. In these

circumstances, the apartheid regime—which had been intolerable to its victims all along—became a political and economical liability for some of its internal and international perpetrators. Derrida (not necessarily in his role of poststructuralist philosopher, but as an acute political historian) had been vindicated; the revolutionary “big bang” creating a New Socialist nation did not materialize.

Instead, in the early 1990s, South Africa went through a negotiated process of democratic transition. In 1992, in a conversation entitled “The Future is Another Country,” Stephen Clingman and Nadine Gordimer talked about this experience in the following way:

SC: I think our sense of an ending in South Africa has changed. When you wrote *July's People*, there was a sense that, all right, we were living in the interregnum, to use the phrase that you adopted from Gramsci, but it would come to an end. There would be the big day, and then, somehow, the afterlife would begin. But I think what's happened since the unbanning of the organizations and the release of Nelson Mandela and the others is that the ending hasn't come about in that way. It's a much more protracted and complex experience.

NG: When I wrote that book, we were poised like lemmings on the edge of a cliff, we were teetering on the edge of a cliff. Whether one could pull back from it seemed very difficult and unlikely at the time.

SC: Perhaps we need a different sense of an ending, a different postapartheid view of the world, which may be something quite difficult to fashion.

NG: Yes, in the back of our minds there was this apocalyptic feeling. And perhaps it was always self-fulfilling: we wanted there to be a kind of big-bang ending, because we didn't want to tackle it ourselves. But now it's so incredible and fascinating to see there's no end to the process. (139)

Since 1992, this process has continued to produce new, unforeseen realities, such as the election results in 1994 that for the time being isolated both the extreme right wing and radical groupings like the PAC,<sup>6</sup> or the social and economic policies of the new government headed by Nelson Mandela that R. W. Johnson has recently described as “rubbing along in the neo-liberal way.” How fast and thoroughgoing these changes actually

have been can be fathomed, for instance, by taking another look at the famous "Albie Sachs Debate," in which numerous intellectuals, artists, and writers took part in 1990. The central thesis that Sachs, a high-ranking ANC official, put forward in late 1989, in his paper "Preparing Ourselves for Freedom," originally presented at an ANC seminar in Lusaka, was that a re-evaluation of the relationship between culture and liberation was overdue:

. . . our members should be banned from saying that culture is a weapon of struggle. I suggest a period of, say, five years. . . it behoves us to set ourselves up as the new censors of art and literature, or to impose our own internal states of emergency where we are well organised. Rather, let us write better poems and make better films and compose better music, and let us get the voluntary adherence of the people to our banner. . . . (19-28)

Today, looking at the wide and controversial response that his theses elicited, what seems most striking is the fact that the terms of this debate have shifted so radically. While the main issue raised by many respondents to Sachs's paper was indeed the question of how closely culture should or could be tied to the liberation struggle, it is the concept and perspective of the "liberation struggle" itself that has since become questionable and is rapidly withering away. Thus, in 1993, Mongane Wally Serote could quite casually remark in an interview that the Albie Sachs debate had "petered out," since people had realized "that there are other issues on the table" ("Black Man's Burden," 183).

One of these issues that has come to play an increasingly important part in this transition turns on what might be called the politics of civil society. At first glance it might seem as if the debate on "civil society" is primarily a "Western" or indeed "Northern" preoccupation. Recent major publications on the topic such as John Keane's *Democracy and Civil Society*, Jean Cohen and Andrew Arato's *Civil Society and Political Theory* and Ernest Gellner's *Conditions of Liberty* have all pointed out that the current revival of interest in the politics of civil society has its primary origins in the Eastern and Central European struggles against the stifling authoritarianism of "Terminal Marxism" that led to the historical break of 1989 and the demise of the "communist world." It was in this context that Civil Society was originally rediscovered as—to quote Gellner's definition—"that set of

diverse non-governmental institutions which is strong enough to counterbalance the state, and, while not preventing the state from fulfilling its role of keeper of the peace and arbitrator between major interests, can nevertheless prevent it from dominating and atomizing the rest of society" (5).

Yet the debate quickly spread to other parts of the world. It was taken up in Western societies where the securities of high modernity were increasingly undermined by the modernization process itself and where it seemed imperative to defend and enlarge civil society as a counterweight to the growing pressures exercised above all by an economy busily creating new ecological and social hazards. It was also taken up in Latin America, where democratic movements opposing bureaucratic-authoritarian regimes faced problems that were in many ways similar to those experienced in Eastern Europe, as the extensive and varied Latin American debate that Cohen and Arato draw on amply testifies to. Since—in contrast to most Western societies—the structures of civil society were often lacking, the Latin American debate has often focussed on the necessity of “inventing” them in order to achieve the necessary changes, as this statement from Brazil makes clear: “we want a civil society, we need to defend ourselves from the monstrous state in front of us. This means that if it does not exist, we need to invent it. If it is small, we need to enlarge it. . . . In a word we want civil society because we want freedom” (Cohen 50). The debate was also taken up in many other parts of the so-called developing world, for example, in Africa, where after several decades of “developmentalism”<sup>7</sup> the paramount importance of civil democracy for economic, social, and cultural development can no longer be denied. Peter Anyang’ Nyong’o describes the problem in the following terms:

At the centre of the failure of African states to chart viable paths for domestic accumulation is the problem of accountability, the lack of democracy. The people’s role in the affairs of government has diminished, the political arena has shrunk, political demobilisation has become more the norm than the exception in regime behaviour, social engineering for political demobilisation (i.e. repression) is the preoccupation of most governments; all this has come about to cement one notorious but common aspect of all African governments: the use of public resources as possibilities for viable indige-

nous processes of development is neglected or destroyed altogether. *There is a definite correlation between the lack of democratic practices in African politics and the deteriorating socio-economic conditions.* (19)

It is against this background, as Robert Fatton has pointed out in an essay on "Liberal Democracy in Africa," that "the democratic project or the process of redemocratizing African politics is . . . becoming the hegemonic issue in African Studies" (455) and that questions of civil society have been gaining an increasingly higher profile in the African<sup>8</sup> and particularly in the South African context.<sup>9</sup>

These questions are particularly acute since under the apartheid regime, civil society was ruthlessly suppressed and a racist authoritarianism ruled the day, impelling oppositional forces to transform themselves into liberation movements, to adopt an often enough necessarily clandestine politics of resistance, and to pursue the capturing of the state as their ultimate goal. If civil society, as Jürgen Habermas has pointed out in his recent discourse theory of law, "is no *substitute* for a historically-philosophically designated grand subject that should bring society as a whole under its control and act legitimately for it at the same time" (450),<sup>10</sup> it can hardly come as a surprise that it remained notoriously underdeveloped in South Africa during the apartheid era. This, one might add, would also go a long way to explain the unprecedented levels of violence that marked the sudden transition from apartheid authoritarianism to a new democratic dispensation, and the deeply disturbing fact that the struggle for democracy claimed many more lives among the black population than the struggle against apartheid.<sup>11</sup>

South African literature has in many ways been shaped by this problematic. As Kelwyn Sole pointed out in an essay on "Democratising Culture and Literature in a 'New South Africa': Organisation and Theory" (that recently sparked off a heated controversy in *Current Writing*), "despite the fact that growth, change and interaction *has* taken place in South African cultural history—even between racial enclaves—the acceptance of a common civil society in this country was never accomplished, or even desired. This is now a task for a future dispensation" (2). While acceptance may still be a long way off, South African

literature has nevertheless attempted to address the problem with a wide variety of political and aesthetic strategies.

Numerous examples of this could be found in the 1950s (for which Lewis Nkosi coined the term “the fabulous decade”), when the apartheid system was systematically subduing those mainly urban rudiments of civil society encompassing both black and white, but had not as yet completely destroyed them. Black writers of the *Drum*-generation could use these rudiments as a reference point in their struggle against the encroaching absurdities of apartheid (sometimes, as in Casey Motsitsi’s famous “bug stories,” with a strikingly ironical perspective),<sup>12</sup> while white writers could draw on them as exemplary, though by no means unproblematical instances of a “common culture” (as Gordimer did, for instance, in *A World of Strangers*). This involvement of South African literature in the waning civil society of the day may well explain why there has been a growing interest in the literature and culture of the 1950s and early 1960s in the post-apartheid transition.<sup>13</sup>

The focus of my discussion, however, is on two pairs of novels from the 1980s, each pair comprising one novel by Gordimer and one by J. M. Coetzee—works that mark the beginning and the end of “terminal apartheid” and engage with the impotence and the growing strength of civil society in South Africa.

The first pair, Coetzee’s *Waiting for the Barbarians* (published in 1980) and Gordimer’s *July’s People* (published in 1981) were written, to use Gordimer’s term quoted above, “on the edge of a cliff.” After the suppression of the Soweto uprising, the apartheid regime showed no signs of relenting, the abyss between black and white was widening and the perspectives for organized, civil change seemed bleaker than ever.

Both novels focus on speechlessness, on the impossibility of communication with the “other.” In *Waiting for the Barbarians*, the Magistrate’s attempts to read the tortured Barbarian girl’s mind through her body remain useless: “The body of the other one, closed, ponderous, sleeping in my bed in a faraway room, seems beyond comprehension” (42). When he finally manages to bring her back to her own people, no communication is possible: “I cannot make out a word. ‘What a waste,’ I think: ‘she could have



spent those long empty evenings teaching me her tongue! Too late now.” (71-72). In *July's People*, Bam's and Maureen's attempts to communicate with their former servant July become increasingly absurd once the master/servant relationship that obtains in their liberal suburban household begins to disintegrate in the rural setting to which they flee after the eruption of war between apartheid and its enemies. The new situation does not encourage mutual understanding; instead, the very concept of “understanding” is undermined beyond repair when Maureen and July finally try to “talk it out”; the only thing to be understood are the crumbling mutual constructions of otherness behind which there is nothing but unbridgeable difference:

Suddenly he began to talk at her in his own language, his face flickering powerfully. . . . She understood although she knew no word. Understood everything: what he had had to be, how she had covered up to herself for him, in order for him to be her idea of him. But for himself—to be intelligent, honest, dignified for *her* was nothing; his measure as a man was taken elsewhere and by others. (152)

This absolute breakdown of communication is compounded by the setting of these novels: in *July's People*, an apocalyptic war where the “other side,” though presumably engaged in a fight to rid the country of apartheid, is never seen and remains a faceless threat against all whites; in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, an almost allegorical, timeless war between a vengeful, but crumbling Empire and its others, the unknowable, but somehow victorious Barbarians.

The second pair, Gordimer's *My Son's Story* and Coetzee's *Age of Iron* (both published in 1990) have a different story to tell. In the late 1980s, new networks of resistance had been built, broad political organizations such as the United Democratic Front and the National Forum were working openly inside the country, and increasingly powerful black trade unions challenged the economic status quo. In both novels, apartheid is still there, to be sure, and violence is ubiquitous, but both works enter into closer relationships with contemporary political discourses and explore painful questions that are related to the—however precarious—perspective of civil society and the shape of a post-apartheid South Africa.

Among the most striking features of *My Son's Story* is the fact that it is the first of Gordimer's novels to focus on black characters as the main protagonists. In the strained relationships that the "Coloured" teacher Sonny, his family and his white lover Hannah enter into, there is no easy model of multiculturalism to be found, but the absolute abyss that separated black and white in *July's People* has gone. How much still separates them becomes obvious, for example, when white demonstrators join a rally in a black township and are jolted out of their "armchair idea of courage" by police brutality (116); yet, they do go there, not as teachers, but as apprentices in their own affairs. If *July's People* is a novel about growing speechlessness, *My Son's Story* is an exploration of the obstacles and potentials of civil communication. The novel is informed by a difficult and complex perspective for change that enables a white author to reflect on the strains that political struggles impose on black families—something quite unconceivable barely a decade before. It is probably because this perspective is so difficult and complex that the novel makes use of a peculiar narrative inversion that, while not devaluing the affinities of literary and political discourse, undermines any claims to absolute historical authenticity: What is announced in the title as "My Son's Story" is actually the story of the father, Sonny, told by his son Will, whose last words in the novel jolt the reader out of the conventions of realist fiction:

What he did—my father—made me a writer. Do I have to thank him for that? Why couldn't I have been something else?

I am a writer and this is my first book—that I can never publish.  
(277)

While the protagonist of *Age of Iron* is white, this novel's intersections with contemporary political discourses and its engagement in the predicaments of civil society are no less striking. It is precisely because Elizabeth Curren, the elderly classics teacher dying from cancer, can by no stretch of the imagination be associated with the new dispensation that will emerge out of the apartheid end-game staged in the novel, that her—often enough drastically helpless and contradictory—observations can engage in a startling dialogue with the politics of township insurrection. She too goes to the black townships, to be con-

fronted there with a violence that she can do nothing to stop. Challenged to comment on a massacre she has just witnessed, Elizabeth Curren admits to her impossible position:

"These are terrible sights," I repeated, faltering. "They are to be condemned. But I cannot denounce them in other people's words. I must find my own words, from myself. Otherwise it is not the truth. That is all I can say now."

"This woman talks shit," said a man in the crowd. He looked around. "Shit," he said. No one contradicted him. Already some were drifting away.

"Yes," I said, speaking directly to him—"you are right, what you say is true."

He gave me a look as if I were mad.

"But what do you expect?" I went on. "To speak of this"—I waved a hand over the bush, the smoke, the filth littering the path—"you would need the tongue of a god." (91)

Yet, despite the presence of the inscrutable Verceuil, the vagrant Angel of Death, in her house, it is not simply the unfathomable "other" that Elizabeth is confronted with, and *Age of Iron* is not only concerned with deconstructing the apartheid order of things, but, like *My Son's Story*, also in exploring the possibilities of a dialogue that is bound to fail time and again but has to be attempted all the same. Elizabeth's conversation with Florence, her black house-keeper, about the schoolchildren fighting the apartheid machinery in the townships provides an impressive example:

"And when they grow up one day," I said softly, do you think the cruelty will leave them? What kind of parents will they become who were taught that the time of parents is over? . . . They set people on fire and laugh while they burn to death. How will they treat their own children? What love will they be capable of? Their hearts are turning to stone before our eyes, and what do you say? You say, 'This is not my child, this is the white man's child, this is the monster made by the white man.' Is that all you can say? Are you going to blame them on the whites and turn your back?"

"No," said Florence. "That is not true. I do not turn my back on my children. . . . These are good children, they are like iron, we are proud of them."

. . . Children of iron, I thought. Florence herself, too, not unlike iron. The age of iron. (46)

While Elizabeth clearly does not occupy a moral position from where her perspective could claim any special authority or truth,

her observations nevertheless touch on vital problems that are relevant not only to the terminal phase of apartheid, but also to the resources of civility that a post-apartheid future will be able to draw on. The most striking example of this blending of fictional and political discourse is to be found in a conversation with Mr. Thabane, the black teacher, who tries to explain his views about the young “comrades” to Elizabeth:

When you are body and soul in the struggle as these young people are, when you are prepared to lay down your lives for each other without question, then a bond grows up that is stronger than any bond you will know again. That is comradeship. I see it every day with my own eyes. My generation has nothing that can compare. That is why we must stand back for them, for the youth. We stand back but we stand behind them. That is what you cannot understand, because you are too far away.

“I am far away, certainly,” I said, “far away and tiny. Nevertheless, I fear I know comradeship all too well. The Germans had comradeship, and the Japanese, and the Spartans. Shaka’s impis too, I am sure. Comradeship is nothing but a mystique of death, of killing and dying, masquerading as what you call a bond (a bond of what? Love? I doubt it.) I have no sympathy for comradeship. You are wrong, you and Florence and everyone else, to be taken in by it and, worse, to encourage it in children. It is just another of those icy, exclusive, death-driven male constructions. That is my opinion. (136-37)

In a similar move to that found in *My Son’s Story*, *Age of Iron* also ends with a narrative paradox subverting the authenticity of the story, which, the reader is told in the beginning, is actually a long letter that Elizabeth writes to her daughter in America. The last paragraph, still written by the first-person narrator, can actually be read as Elizabeth’s final meeting with the Angel of Death, so that she literally dies in the narrative—rather than in “real life” outside, as the conventions of realist fiction would demand. Yet, given the other features outlined above, this self-referentiality of the text can hardly be taken to prove that it is nothing but a self-contained system of significations and that its “textual resistance” lies in its refusal to be attached to reality.<sup>14</sup> Instead, it should rather be seen as part of a wider literary strategy that includes an affinity with and openness towards other discourses and is closely related to the emerging politics of civil society. There is a wide territory between the extremes of the autonomous play of the

signifier in self-referential texts on the one hand and essentialist constructions of potentially hegemonic master narratives on the other that literature can and does explore.

While in Coetzee and Gordimer these explorations seem to move from a zero point of “otherness” towards a reconstruction of civil communication, they are shaped by a quite different dynamic in the works of black writers engaged in a startling re-orientation towards perceptions of society beyond the often homogenizing and identitarian perspectives of the “liberation” phase. The roots of this re-orientation go back far beyond the Albie Sachs debate, of course, with Lewis Nkosi pointing out the shortcomings of “Protest Literature” in the 1960s<sup>15</sup> and Ndebele calling for “Redefining Relevance” and warning against “Pamphleteering the Future” in the 1980s.<sup>16</sup> Yet, understandably enough, it was only after the break of 1989-90 that it gained full momentum, as can be seen, for example, in the case of Wally Mongane Serote. His long poem *A Tough Tale*, published in 1987, is not only shaped by the violence and oppression of Emergency apartheid, but also by a collective vision of a victorious people:

I smile / for war shall have taught us  
 and Africa shall have taught us / and the world shall have taught  
 that equality of a people / is a firm foundation for progress. . . .  
 the masses, the workers, the students, the learned  
 defend and built the ANC, Sactu and the SACP / with many  
 painful days  
 which / like the hour-arm on a clock / takes time to come and go,  
 we organise ourselves / and so engrave hope and optimism  
 on our future (47-48)

In Serote’s *Third World Express*, published in 1992, the verities of this historically guaranteed progress have made room for a less certain and more questioning tone. The poem begins with an almost nostalgic, extended search for the lost collective vision of *A Tough Tale* (“In the heart of this time / it is simple things which are forgotten . . . What is it we need? / a thought to share / about the bread we broke and together ate / a song we shared, which left magic in our hearts” [1]) and ends on a politically ambiguous note; the approaching Third World Express is certainly not an inevitable train of progress, and it remains unclear whether the “here we go again” of the last line, attributed to the young

men and women who died in the struggle against apartheid, refers to a vicious cycle or to a stubborn *la luta continua*.<sup>17</sup>

If Serote seems only reluctantly to move away from an all-embracing vision of an alternative modernity, younger writers such as Lesego Rampholokeng, whose poems and raps in *Talking Rain* are saturated with the violence both of the final stages of apartheid and the transitional phase, mark a much more radical break with such visions:

We spin in circles of terror / caught in cycles of a nightmare  
of judgement / where the mirror / of the present  
shows the face of error / in transition . . .  
wailing around the burning tyre / we raise a sacrificial pyre  
songs of struggle turn quacks / in the quagmire  
in transition we wear our hearts / on the outside  
in t-shirt fashion trend style / colourful speeches popular talk  
of hypocrisy / by the graveside / in transition . . .  
thus we rush to the future / unless the wheel of time  
gets a puncture (17-18)

I would like to end with some observations on the current debate on the role of literature in a new South Africa. As Zoë Wicomb has remarked in an essay on "Culture beyond Colour? A South African Dilemma," South African society "remains umbilically linked to the matrix of apartheid so that parturition is a slow affair" (28). This is not only true of the economic and social fields, where tremendous tasks still lie ahead in overcoming the legacies of apartheid, but also in the cultural field where potentially authoritarian concepts derived from the era of the anti-apartheid struggle intermingle with pluralist perspectives based on the politics of civil society. In a recent essay entitled "Many Happy Returns? Repatriation and Resistance Literature in a New South Africa," Bernith Lindfors ends his deliberations on the future of South African literature on a deeply pessimistic note:

Disillusionment will set in, just as it did in postcolonial African states further north. Writers accustomed to serving as watchdogs of their society will bark their warnings and howl their displeasure. A fresh wave of protest writing will begin, this time aimed against leaders who in an earlier phase of the transformation of South Africa had been hailed as conquering heroes. . . . South Africa's Nkrumahs, Kenyattas, Bandas and Kaundas will be seen to have feet of clay. And South African literature will have entered into another adversarial relation-

ship with another unpopular, discredited regime. Writers will be locked up, dissent suppressed, censorship reimposed. South Africa will once again be at war with itself, and outspoken individuals will be early targets. (79)

While nobody would deny that such a development is indeed possible, one may well have second thoughts about its probability. To the north of South Africa, the democratization process remains on the agenda and is likely to receive additional impetus from a successful democratic transition from apartheid.<sup>18</sup> Inside South Africa, there is a growing debate on the dangers of new authoritarianisms and ethnic essentialisms; as Breyten Breytenbach has pointed out in a speech entitled "Democracy: The Struggle against Power," neither the unqualified affirmation of "difference" nor its negation are viable options:

The opposition between republican democracy, rooted in citizenship and equality, and pluralist democracy, based upon cultural diversity and freedom, cannot be bypassed or even resolved, but must be accommodated or, at the very least, kept in balance. For us to ensure that these contradictions are fruitful and not pretexts for repression, we have to strengthen and expand civil society's fields of accountability. (63)

Thus, it would be misleading to conceive of the relationship between literature and civil society in terms of cultural identity. The creation of a unitary South African culture based on a common identity is a highly questionable notion, not only because of the legacy of apartheid, but also because, after the historical break of the late 1980s, an alternative modernity as source of such an identity is no longer at hand.

Strengthening civil society thus amounts to establishing procedural rules and creating conditions of possibility rather than to furthering particular political or cultural agendas. It would be a mistake to expect something like a clearly defined or uniform "literature of civil society" to emerge in South Africa (or other postcolonial societies engaged in democratic transitions). What might be expected, however, is a multiform and varied literature that explores and expands these new possibilities and displays a sensitive interface with the politics of civil society. The growth of such a literature may well be an indicator for the dynamics of South Africa's democratic transition.

## NOTES

- 1 See de Kok and Press, *Spring is Rebellious*; Brown and van Dyk, *Exchanges: South African Writing in Transition*; and Bertelsen, "An Interview with Albie Sachs."
- 2 The critical landscape has changed considerably since 1991, when Kenneth Parker drew attention to "the unwillingness to engage with postcolonial theory" in South Africa ("Traditionalism vs. Modernism: Culture, Ideology, Writing" [41]). See, for example, Carusi, "Post, Post and Post"; Clayton, "White Writing"; Johnson, "Importing Metropolitan Post-colonials"; Jolly, "Rehearsals of Liberation"; and the contributions of Attwell, Bethlehem, and De Kock in the "Post-colonial Theory" issue of *Current Writing*.
- 3 See Sole, "Democratising Culture and Literature in a 'New South Africa'" and the critical responses to his theses by Cornwell, Hofmeyr, Nkosi, and Willoughby, in the same issue of *Current Writing*.
- 4 See, for example, Mda, "Learning from the Ancient Wisdom of Africa."
- 5 See McClintock and Nixon, "No Names Apart" and Derrida's response ("But, beyond . . .") in Gates.
- 6 For a more detailed analysis of the political processes leading up to the South African elections of 1994 and their results, see Southall (1994).
- 7 Cf. Shivji: "The central element in the ideological formation in post-independence Africa has been, what we call, the ideology of developmentalism. The argument of this ideology is very simple: 'We are economically backward and we need to develop very fast. In this task of development we cannot afford the luxury of politics.' . . . Even marxist scholars and 'politicians' echo the ideology of developmentalism, albeit in their own vocabulary" (1-2).
- 8 See, for example, Bayart, "Civil Society in Africa"; Bratton, "Beyond the State"; Chabal, *Political Domination in Africa and Power in Africa*; Diamond, "Introduction: Roots of Failure, Seeds of Hope"; Fatton, "Liberal Democracy in Africa" and *Predatory Rule*; Nyang'oro, "Reform Politics and the Democratization Process in Africa"; Osaghae, *Between State and Civil Society in Africa*; and Rothchild, *The Precarious Balance*.
- 9 See, for example, Mufson, "Toward a Civil Society"; Friedman, "An Unlikely Utopia: State and Civil Society in South Africa"; Fine, "Civil Society Theory and the Politics of Transition in South Africa"; Mandaza, "The State and Democracy in Southern Africa"; and van Wyk, "Civil Society and Democracy in South Africa," as well as Chapter 8 ("Civic Associations and Popular Democracy") in Murray, *The Revolution Deferred* (167-78).
- 10 Translated by the author, the original text reads: "Aber sie tritt nicht an die Stelle eines geschichtsphilosophisch ausgezeichneten Großsubjekts, das die Gesellschaft im Ganzen unter Kontrolle bringen und zugleich legitim für diese handeln sollte."
- 11 Cf. Southall, 633: "There were 2,450 fatalities from political violence between September 1984 and December 1988, at the height of a period of intense popular mobilisation against *apartheid*. In contrast, there were as many as 3,400 such deaths in 1990, 2,580 in 1991, 3,446 in 1992, and 4,398 in 1993, most as the outcome of fighting between supporters of the ANC and Inkatha in the PWV [Pretoria/Witwatersrand/Vereeniging, F.S.E.] province and Natal. Violence then surged even higher in early 1994, when deaths in Natal ran at a level double the 1993 monthly average."
- 12 For a more detailed analysis of Casey Motsitsi's "Bug Stories" in the general context of the "Drum-Generation," see Egner (85-88).
- 13 See Egner, 274-76.



- 14 While it is possible to see this textual "politics of refusal" at work in *Waiting for the Barbarians* and to credit it with some subversive potential in South African politics of the Apartheid Era (cf. Reckwitz, "I Am Not Myself Anymore" [3-10]), it is hardly convincing to posit the "auto-referentiality" of postmodern texts as "subversive" *per se*, let alone to set postmodern aesthetics in Europe and the USA as a politically advanced norm, against which the presumed "retardation" of South African literature can be measured (Reckwitz [20-21]).
- 15 Cf. Nkosi, "Fiction by Black South Africans," *Home and Exile*, 131-38.
- 16 These are the titles of two of Ndebele's essays in *South African Literature and Culture: Rediscovery of the Ordinary*; see also "Beyond Protest: New Directions in South African Literature." In his own short stories (cf. *Fools and Other Stories*), Ndebele made a significant break with "protest literature" and initiated a literary "Rediscovery of the Ordinary."
- 17 Cf. Serote's own comments in "Stoking the Third World Express," 62-63.
- 18 The dramatic developments in Nigeria in late 1995 are an indication of the historically ironic reversal of roles between Nigeria and South Africa. While Nigeria had been a long-standing supporter of the South African liberation movements as long as Apartheid lasted, it is now rapidly moving towards taking Apartheid South Africa's pariah role in international politics, with exiled intellectuals such as Wole Soyinka calling for the international isolation of the ruling junta. Following the cold-blooded judicial murder of Nigerian writer Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight of his civil rights co-activists in November 1995, Nigeria was suspended from the Commonwealth, while Nelson Mandela demanded international sanctions against the military regime.

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