

Article

‘Letters ... in the thick of affairs’: the place of fiction in *Africa South*, 1957-61

M J Daymond

daymond@ukzn.ac.za

Abstract

What could fiction and cultural debate bring to readers of the magazine *Africa South*? In the late 1950s this magazine published political, economic, legal and other analyses of social life in sub-Saharan Africa, as well as polemics and journalism by writers variously but militantly opposed to the apartheid government’s policies in South Africa. The purpose of its editor, Ronald Segal, was to foster a broad front of opposition to racism at home and to connect with international intellectual movements opposing colonialism and racism. This article argues from Bakhtin’s observations about the radical instability of the sign in fiction, that fiction requires a different kind of reading from factual report. It demonstrates how the short stories in *Africa South* could enjoin on readers a conscious responsibility for sense-making and interpretation. This awareness created a questioning relation to text and thence to external realities that was in itself fundamentally oppositional and hospitable to the subject of socio-political change, for which the magazine as a whole argued. The writers considered here include both the famous and the forgotten: Ezekiel Mphahlele, Alan Paton, Tony O’Dowd and Noel Frieslich. Attention is on the semiotics of reading rather than on the contents of the short stories discussed. Because expectations of fiction change with the times, my question is necessarily an historical one. The article goes on to compare the climate of the 1950s with that of the more revolutionary 1980s, and with the present. For the present era Njabulo S Ndebele’s *The Cry of Winnie Mandela* stands as a possibly representative text.

Introduction

Africa South was founded, as its editor Ronald Segal says, to provide ‘an international forum for study and discussion of the problems of Africa, in particular those agitating that part south of the Sahara [and] ... to help build Africa anew in the image of justice’ (Segal 1956:12).¹ Besides the socio-

political and economic analysis and advocacy of change that therefore dominated its pages, the magazine published cultural debate, short stories, poetry and satire. The question asked here is what a pursuit of cultural debate and the publishing of fiction could bring to readers amidst the magazine's urgent and militant focus on socio-political fact and opinion. The proponents of cultural debate in *Africa South* tended to provide vigorous justifications for their undertaking, and so, in taking up the first part of the question, I will gather the claims of Basil Davidson and others that their project of establishing Africa's long and complex human history was a vital counter to colonialism's die-hard assumptions that Africa was a social and cultural void. The writers of short stories and poetry, on the other hand, left it to readers and critics to arrive at justifications of their work. Therefore, in taking up the second part of the question, I will offer a demonstration of my claims for 'fiction' in the context of *Africa South* through stories by now famous writers such as Ezekiel Mphahlele and Alan Paton, and by now forgotten writers such as Tony O'Dowd and Noel Frieslich.

Underpinning my argument is what Bakhtin (1981) called the radical instability of the sign in fiction. Because readers do not necessarily make a conventional connection between signs in fiction and the actual world, fiction is decoded (or read) differently, and readers find themselves engaged in a mode of interpretation for which they are responsible but in which there can be no certainties. Such reading is significantly unlike that invited by factual reporting or polemical argument. Even the apparently transparent realism of South African fiction in the 1950s could propel readers into consciously taking creative responsibility for the sense-making and interpretation in which they were engaged. Readers of fiction become collaborators with an author rather than, as the communicative model suggests, receivers of a message. As Chatman (1978) showed, readers must gather and classify the elements of a story, must establish for themselves how the ingredients relate to each other in order to create their meaning, and must draw the parts into a meaningful (if not smoothly coherent) whole. It is this actively questioning relation to a text which, I think, then transfers to external realities and engenders an approach to received opinion or 'fact' in the world that is potentially oppositional. In this way reading fiction in *Africa South* could encourage a mind-frame hospitable to the new ways of thinking that are needed for radical socio-political change – not through explicit argument or simply through the content of stories, but through the participatory reading that interpreting fiction requires.

Africa South was begun by Ronald Segal in Cape Town in 1956. Single-handedly he edited, published and distributed the magazine. It was launched as a quarterly and appeared for five years until October 1961. For the last two years of its existence it was published as *Africa South in Exile* from London because Segal had had to flee South Africa. The magazine ceased publication because funds ran out when the Nationalist government froze Segal's bank account and he chose not to accept funding that would have placed him under an editorial board.

As Segal says in his autobiography, *Into Exile* (1963), the immediate occasion of the magazine's launch was the decision of President JG Strijdom to pack the upper house of Parliament, the Senate, so that his party could get the necessary two-thirds majority to take away the constitutional right of the 'coloured' population to vote on the common voters' roll. But the idea of the magazine also came out of Segal's long-standing abhorrence of racism. Therefore he wanted his magazine to create 'an intellectual united front' that would link to the struggles against racism in the rest of Africa and in 'the world beyond' (Segal 1963:109). To this end, *Africa South* published mostly socio-political analysis and comment. It also carried polemical essays, eyewitness accounts, memoirs, and expository pieces which were written variously by historians, politicians, sociologists, journalists, teachers, diplomats, lawyers and jurists, trade unionists, political leaders and activists. As this breadth might suggest, the magazine's radical opposition to apartheid and to colonial injustices throughout Africa was inter-disciplinary, theoretically varied and radical. Its geo-political span was inter-continental as well as transnational, for *Africa South* espoused a pan-Africanism that had clear connections with intellectual movements in the diaspora, and it played a part in sustaining a tri-continental, post-colonial resistance to racism (Sandwith 2009).

In a manifesto for his magazine which appeared alongside a reprint of the 1955 Freedom Charter, Segal also declared an intention 'to provide a home for the literature of Africa, to give something of the promise of what African literature will one day ... be' (Segal 1956:12). Therefore, besides carrying examples of written cultural production in Africa, the magazine attended to the oral tradition and to the visual arts. While no transcripts of oral stories appeared, AC Jordan's 12 ground-breaking essays on Xhosa orature and the emergence of a written literature were published,² thus allowing the magazine to demonstrate that the oral tradition is central to contemporary narrative and poetical practices in South Africa as well as to its literary history. On the

visual side, *Africa South* published lino-cuts, etchings and lithographs, photographs of sculpture and pottery, reproductions of paintings (including one in colour by Gerard Sekoto), and cartoons.

Debating African culture

Contributors to the debate *about* culture in Africa articulated for themselves their purpose of challenging prevailing assumptions that western culture and social practices were superior to those of an undifferentiated 'Africa'. The title of a 1958 article by Basil Davidson asserts 'The fact of African history' and in it Davidson comes swiftly to the crux of the matter: 'Th[e] denial of human history in Africa is the corollary ... of another denial: the denial of African equality' (Davidson 1958:44). The connections between these denials – racism and colonialism – are self-evident. Davidson's claim that throughout Africa there had been centuries of civilised development before the European traders, colonisers and missionaries arrived was made good in *Africa South* by several other historians writing in the same year about particular regions and their cultures.³ Among them was Gervase Mathew (1958) writing on 'The East coast cultures'. Mathew's thesis is representative of the thrust of this Afro-centric history: after a decade of archaeological exploration it was clear to him, he says, that the history of the East coast 'is more easily intelligible as the history of an African culture gradually Islamized than merely as the history of Islamic colonies from the Persian Gulf' (Mathew 1958:59). There was no cultural void into which Arab, Persian and Indian merchants had stepped when they established their trading posts; and what resulted from their presence was a gradual and selective blending of the indigenous and invading cultural practices.

Davidson's claims were further supported in a steady stream of articles on other aspects of African culture which accompanied the work of these historians. There were pieces about sculpture, pottery, and architecture as well as examples of traditional and recent poetry from Madagascar⁴ and West Africa. All this writing and the accompanying illustrations confirmed Davidson's claim that 'Africans south of the Sahara were in fact evolving and progressing towards destinations recognizably the same as Europeans (or Asians) – at a time long before Europeans first came across them' (Davidson 1958:46).

These articles did not, however, target only denialists in Europe. They were addressed as much to readers throughout Africa, and South Africa in particular, as to a trans-continental audience. The surge of liberation that

swept through Africa during these years provides the context: several African colonies became independent states (Ghana in 1957, Nigeria and Congo in 1960 and Sierra Leone in 1961, joining the already independent Ethiopia, Liberia, Libya, Morocco, the Sudan, and Tunisia); others were actively negotiating or fighting for their freedom (Algeria, Kenya, Tanganyika, and Uganda). Yet others were contesting the political future designed for them (notably the Rhodesias and Nyasaland, opposing Britain's plans to make permanent the Central African Federation). Part of the magazine's purpose was thus to invite an African readership to consider the socio-economic prospects of these nascent polities. And as the spreading liberation in sub-Saharan Africa was sharply contrasted in South Africa by a rapid tightening of the apartheid noose throughout the 1950s, the third audience for the magazine was South African readers of various shades of belief who might oppose racial domination.

This multiple readership was not addressed by different sets of articles; rather each article spoke across readerships. Those articles establishing Africa's long human history served to reintroduce African readers to those of their own customs and achievements that colonial rule had threatened, as well as to challenge a residual favouring of Europe models. Those articles contesting the passing of racist laws in South Africa served to remind western readers of their share in apartheid as one of colonialism's avatars; and articles exploring the responses of African peoples to their newly-won independence gave an indication to South African democrats of the tasks that might await them once liberation was achieved.

Reading fiction differently

In discussing the part played by fiction in *Africa South* I will not rely on the content of the short stories but will ask what fiction's representation of imaginary worlds, characters and actions required of its readers. The content of many of the non-fictional articles, such as Arnold Benjamin's 'Jacobus and the barricades' (1960:59-66) or Myrna Blumberg's 'The Mafekeng affair' (1960:39-46), could also have been found in the fiction of the day: all such writing told the stories of what Segal (1956:12) called the 'agonies and aspirations' of individual South African people. But there is still a discernible difference between reading fiction and non-fiction. The latter requires an assent to the writer's interpretation of the facts, rather than a reader's reciprocal creation of meaning as has to happen with fiction. Benjamin's argument that the story of Jacobus, an African child adopted by a white Afrikaner couple, is best seen as an indication that racial barriers in South

Africa could one day ‘simply fall’ (Benjamin 1960:66), is the only interpretation of the story’s larger relevance that the reader is invited to contemplate.

Myrna Blumberg’s article presents a more complex case for reading that is perhaps closer to fiction. In the article, which has been seen as part of ‘an emerging South African “New Journalism”’ also found in *Drum* (Sandwith 2009: 132), Blumberg recounts that Mrs Elizabeth Mafekeng, a trade unionist, had been summarily banished by the Nationalist government for leading a demonstration opposing passes for women.⁵ During the violent protests against her removal she disappeared through the back door of her home, and it was thought she had escaped to Lesotho. All the characters and events in this report are real, but ultimately Blumberg leaves it to her readers to decide the precise meaning to be given to her story – one of heroic triumph or defeat? She closes it with the observation that more and more people are now singing the anti-Pass Laws song, ‘When you strike the women, you have struck a rock’ (Blumberg 1960:46).

Each of the twenty-one issues of *Africa South* carried at least one short story, and usually one poem. There are 33 stories in all, and 20 poems.⁶ In its day, *Africa South* was not unique in including fiction with its political material. In South Africa, *Fighting Talk* published fiction (Bernstein 1989:46),⁷ and so did *South African Opinion*. In Britain, the monthly *Encounter* included fiction and it is from an advertisement for *Encounter*, carried in an issue of *Africa South*, that the title of this article is taken: ‘letters ... in the thick of affairs’ (*Encounter* advertisement 1960:112). As each issue of *Africa South* was only about 130 pages in length, the reasons for short rather than long fiction are obvious; but the result is worth remarking on. The fragment of an implied whole that a short story presents can, in making the reader aware that much is not being said, also lead the reader to venture into uncertainty in order to fill the gaps and, again, to bear responsibility for this sense-making process.

Two further features of the magazine’s publishing practices are important here. Ronald Segal did not specifically commission fiction, as he did many of the documentary pieces, which suggests that the specific topic of a short story was not something that he needed to stimulate or control. Secondly, the short stories are usually placed at the end of each number, while the few that appear in the middle of an issue are satirical and often take up the same topic as the adjacent articles.⁸ This ordering of *Africa South* suggests that editorially fiction was recognised as being different in kind from other writing, and its placing functions as a reminder to the reader that a gear-

change is appropriate for decoding the sign in fiction.

This gear-change, this reading with a difference, is crucial in considering what fiction had to offer *Africa South*. There are at least two aspects to such reading: a formal one and an historical one. Aside from observing that *Africa South* was probably read by those already sympathetic to its anti-racist cause, and thus were a particular reading community within a differently oriented society,⁹ I leave the historical aspect to later. With respect to the formal aspect, one of the best known signals to a reader that fiction offers an imaginary world, and requires a different kind of reading, is the ‘once upon a time’ of oral tales. Calvino (1997:116) calls this device an ‘articulated joint’ that indicates a lift-off into the fictional world. Some modern, written stories still use an equivalent but when such a ‘joint’ is absent the question arises whether fiction signals its presence by using distinctive linguistic properties. When this question was first debated by speech act theorists, John Searle asked:

how can it be both the case that words and other elements in a fictional story have their ordinary meanings and yet the rules that attach to those words and other elements and determine their meanings are not complied with: how can it be in ‘Little Red Riding Hood’ both that ‘red’ means red and yet that the rules correlating ‘red’ with red are not in force? (Searle 1975:319)

Searle is referring to the semantic and pragmatic rules which, according to speech act theory, enable illocutionary speech acts – in this case, those present in the non-fictional writing in *Africa South* – to refer to the actual world. Illocutionary speech acts are, for example, ‘making statements, asking questions, giving orders, making promises, apologizing, thanking, and so on’ (Searle 1975:319). In beginning to outline an answer to his question about narration as a speech act (Pratt 1977:50), Searle suggests that fiction, in working alongside but not using these ‘vertical rules that establish connections between language and reality’ (Searle 1975:326), depends on a set of ‘extra-linguistic, non-semantic conventions’ which break or suspend that connection. These he calls ‘horizontal conventions’ that ‘enable the speaker to use words with their literal meanings without undertaking the commitments that are normally required by those meanings’ (Searle 1975:326).¹⁰ For my purposes, the important point to emerge from Searle’s answer is that the language of fiction does not itself change and that the ‘horizontal’ conventions of fiction, which the reader activates, enable its utterances *to have a special relation to the world*.¹¹

As Searle's reasoning also indicates, whilst a reader (usually without conscious deliberation in the case of realist fiction) might grant individual words and sentences in fiction their conventional reference, the story as a whole is not taken to refer to an actual world but to an imaginary or parallel world. The reader's awareness of creating an interpretation may thus not arise with individual parts of a story, but with the whole that is being created. This is indicated with a question such as, 'what is this text about?' For example, readers have to decide for themselves whether 'Hamlet [is] just about princes, or men of the Renaissance, or introspective young men, or people whose fathers have died in obscure circumstances' (Culler 1997:34), and each of these possibilities may be pursued singly or in combination.

Collaborative sense-making in particular stories

The collaborative activity of constructing the sense of a story and the responsibilities it entails can be indicated through attention to the narrating voices used in two pieces that Alan Paton published in *Africa South*. The pieces deal with related issues. In his 1957 non-fictional piece, 'Association by permission' (Paton 1957:11-20), Paton sets out an analysis of the Native Laws Amendment Bill, then before parliament, which was designed to prevent or at least control all inter-racial contact. His short story, 'A drink in the passage', published three years later (Paton 1960:117-23), represents the brief efforts of two men to make friendly inter-racial contact. The story does not name the particular legislation by then in place, but it does indicate that it was illegal for whites and blacks to drink together in public (if 'public' is how 'the passage' is interpreted).

In his analytical piece, Paton begins, as might be expected, in the third person. He condemns the fatally divisive designs of the Bill which, he points out, would enable government functionaries to prevent at will, or whim, all 'inter-racial gatherings' (Paton 1957:13). Paton likens this to 'pulling up ... the last bridge into the white fortress' (Paton 1957:16). Then, after considering in detail what the legislation will mean to the country's various population groups, to the churches, to social life, to the parties in parliament and to the extra-parliamentary opposition, Paton switches to the first-person for his central point. He has already used the pronoun 'I' for himself as writer of the article, but now he uses 'I' for himself in his personal capacity as a South African citizen. He warns that if freedom of worship and of association is removed from people who 'hold [this freedom] ... an article of faith and a pattern of life' (Paton 1957:18), there are bound to be those who would

sooner be punished than obey such a law. Compelling the reader to map this speaker exactly onto him as an individual, Paton declares 'I regard myself as one of these' (Paton 1957:18). At this moment of individual truth, Paton becomes his own protagonist. It is not only his analysis with which we engage, but also his person as he puts himself on the line and invites his reader to stand alongside him in opposition to the legislation. His courageous stance asks for total agreement with him, or rejection of his declared position.

While Paton's polemic puts a reader in direct, unquestionable contact with his own words and opinions, his fiction does not do this. In fact, it could not do this, for even if he were to narrate in the first-person and put forward all the views for which he was known, once a reader decides that he/she is reading fiction then the first-person speaker becomes a narrator rather than an author, and all is open to question. A reader is then free to decide that the narrator is an imaginary character or voice, expressing a point of view that Paton, the author, needed for that moment of his story but did not necessarily espouse. What Paton does in 'A drink in the passage', is to use the voices (both in the direct speech of dialogue, and in point-of-view narration) of two imaginary characters, and to adumbrate their distinct individuality and – most importantly – their fallibility. In addition, the story asks his readers to arrive for themselves at the naming of what is happening, or what is at issue in the story, and to do so independently of his characters and in the absence of authorial commentary. This is in stark contrast to his political analysis which uses what Searle (1975:322) calls the 'commitment ... to the truth of the expressed proposition' and which names his personal concerns as directly and immediately as possible.

Paton's story opens with an unnamed frame-narrator reporting that a nation-wide sculpture competition, intended for whites only, has been won by a black sculptor, and that a public difficulty was averted only when the winner, Edward Simelane, announced that he could not attend the prize-giving ceremony. The sculptor's direct speech is then invoked by the reporting frame-narrator who recalls Simelane's explanation that his whole family had decided 'that I wasn't feeling up to it' (Paton 1960:117). This combination of voices, or ventriloquism, can be taken as Calvino's 'articulated joint' which invites the reader to bring into play the conventions of reading fiction.

Then the sculptor's own voice takes over the narration as the celebratory glass of brandy that he shares with the frame-narrator leads him to recall an earlier encounter with a white man, Van Rensburg, who also gave him brandy

to drink. They have met in front of a bookshop window which has a sculpture by Simelane in it. Van Rensburg, who does not know that he is talking to the creator of the piece called 'African Mother and Child', expresses his fervent admiration of its beauty. Simelane recounts that Van Rensburg invites him home to have a drink but then keeps him standing in the passage outside his flat while they drink and while his family members come out one by one to greet him. Although Simelane reports that he is made anxious by his knowledge of the apartheid laws that he is breaking – 'I was thinking that one of the impersonal doors might open at any moment, and someone might see me in a "white" building, and see me and Van Rensburg breaking the liquor laws of the country' (Paton 1960:120) – he does not attempt to probe the reasons for Van Rensburg's rather contradictory actions or his visible discomfort. As there is no authorial presence and, at this stage, no frame-narrator to explain matters, the reader has, unaided, to think through the meaning of sharing an illegal brandy and of doing so in a passage, and in the process has to allow 'passage' to take on meanings beyond the usages that a dictionary might record. The reader must also name and interpret the contradictions in Van Rensburg's actions, must imagine how much insight Van Rensburg had into his own actions, and must work out how to explain the ambiguities evident in his blurting out that 'our land is beautiful. But it breaks my heart' (Paton 1960:121).

In the narration, all the advantages of comprehension are with Simelane. To make further sense of the encounter and its present recall, the reader is compelled to imagine why this might be so. The explanation that Paton's story seems to invite goes beyond the moral claim of a common humanity: Simelane's insight is possible partly because he can stand outside the racism that has imposed its views on him (unlike the white man who has grown into and been reduced by its categories even as he yearns to get beyond them), and partly because he has both studied and now practices the creation of human beauty in his sculpture. Simelane's being able to tell the story with a certain compassion for the white man is never commented on (except when he says that his wife wept when he told her about the encounter), but his are the perceptions through which readers meet and must interpret for themselves the actions of both men. Rather than anything that the characters or the narrators say or do, it is in causing readers to engage with the enigmas that have to be explained, and, by implication, to take responsibility for their larger sense – their bearing on the laws of apartheid – that the story makes its key contribution to the oppositional purposes of *Africa South*.

In his analytical piece, 'Association by permission', Paton utters his own warning and it is fierce and uncompromising, but it cannot, as his story does, surprise a reader into realising what was being obscured or threatened by the racist ideology of the day. In other words, the fictional mode has allowed Paton, by exploiting the license that it gives him to speak in another's voice, to dramatise the upshot of his political analysis without running the risk (as he did in his analytical piece) of seeming slightly self-vaunting. In his story, it is not a question of a reader's agreeing or disagreeing with the protagonists, but of being compelled to formulate the reasons why their awkward meeting is so difficult for each of them.

When pure satire appeared in *Africa South* it was placed in the body of the magazine, thus signaling the editorial view that satire is unlike fiction. Its referential operations require it to be read differently. One such satire is 'The potato harvest' by Tony O'Dowd (1959:50-3). This piece was occasioned by the Extension of University Education Act which had just been passed with 'its corollary, the Act for the Transfer of the University College of Fort Hare' (O'Dowd 1959:41) in order to take the most prestigious of the tertiary institutions that African students could attend away from the Ministry of Education, and to place it under the control of the Minister of Bantu Education, Dr Verwoerd. The legislation also further limited the right of white universities to admit African students. O'Dowd's satire is flanked by 'Universities in Ethnasia' by Maurice Pope (1959), in which the crime of using ethnicity as the criterion for admission to a university – to study or to teach – is under attack; and by a piece about Uganda's national university by its Principal, Bernard de Bunsen (1959), called 'The reply of Makerere' (in which Makerere's recent and modestly successful attempts to integrate a diverse student body are outlined).

The setting for O'Dowd's satire is the office of Prof Dr Woltemade Verkeerd who is giving a history lesson to one of the brightest students, Daniel Dlamini. The characters' names are important signals of how the story is to be read. 'Verkeerd' means 'wrong' in Afrikaans, and the figure's first name evokes a national hero, Wolraad Woltemade, whose courage in rescuing people from a shipwreck was regularly celebrated in the process of Afrikaner identity-making. The Germanic usage of the titles 'Prof Dr' could also be taken to suggest echoes of National Socialism. As for Daniel Dlamini, he is in the lion's den although his surname could be thought to assert his ordinariness. Verkeerd explains to Daniel that the finest people that seventeenth-century European civilisation could produce had left Europe

with Jan van Riebeeck and sailed to South Africa because the devil had ‘put the forces of sickly liberalism to work’ in Europe, causing the people to turn ‘their backs on righteousness’ (O’Dowd 1959:51). Since then real civilisation has resided on the southern tip of Africa. When Dr Verkeerdt learns that Daniel has been reading a different version of events in Carlyle’s *French Revolution*, he resorts to the familiar accusation that ‘the Bantu, in spite of all our efforts, are incapable of learning honesty or truthfulness’ (O’Dowd 1959:52) and Daniel is sent for six months’ labour on the Professor’s potato farm.

The target of this robust satire would have been immediately identifiable as Dr Verwoerd, and as forced labour on farms had already been the subject of investigation by Ruth First (1958) in the pages of *Africa South*, the piece would have been read by the magazine’s readers as mockery of specific people, events and ideologies. And that is why such satire finds its place in the main body of *Africa South* and not at the end of the magazine – unlike fiction, but like the accompanying analytical articles, its characters (drawn with the exaggeration of the satirist) stand for identifiable people and events, and any interpretation has to recognise and be controlled by that historically specific actuality.¹²

Satire is not always this distinct from fiction, as is evident in ‘The living and dead’ by Ezekiel Mphahlele (1958:105-15). This story uses satire extensively, but as its placing at the end of the volume would suggest, ultimately the piece asks to be read as a short story. Mphahlele’s white protagonist, Stoffel Visser, is the narrating consciousness in his strand of the story. It opens with Visser’s vigorous complaints that his black servant, Jackson, has not returned from his day off and that without Jackson he cannot wake up on time, get his breakfast or finish the document his employer needs. He is a minor bureaucrat writing a report in which he recommends the absolute exclusion of Africans from white suburbs so that there can be no danger to ‘white civilization’ (Mphahlele 1958:106). The satirical contradiction between his policy and his utter dependence on Jackson goes unremarked in the narration, but this is the point a reader must register and interpret to make sense of what follows.

First Visser is presented as a man in turmoil: ‘you shall not, we will; we can, you can’t; they shall not, they shall; why must they? why mustn’t they?’ (Mphahlele 1958:109). Then he summons up his peoples’ history so that ‘something in his blood ... a brutal historic past’ can prevent his being ‘crushed’ by this turmoil. Then, for a moment, Visser becomes more than a

cipher as his feelings are stirred by the distress of Jackson's wife. Later, when a badly beaten up Jackson appears (he had been detained by the police while taking his children to the zoo), Visser is again thrown into turmoil. Finally he turns away from his servant's plight, retreating with relief into his duty as a party man to maintain the party's beliefs, for '[t]hat was definite, if nothing else was' (Mphahlele 1958:115). This marks his return to being a purely satirical figure. Visser's extreme contradictions illustrate the absurdity of attempting to institute complete separation between 'racial' groups in the 1950s. But it is this character's brief moment of recognition that the choice facing him is between responding to Jackson's humanity and retreating into the promises of his ideology, that marks Mphahlele's work as not being pure satire. His readers are invited to enter, for one moment, Visser's world-view as a probable one, so that when the man chooses to remain trapped by ideology he can be read both as a confused victim and as the perpetrator of an historical crime.

While the context of *Africa South* would probably incline readers to relate the short stories in it to their immediate context, this is not, in principle, necessary. It is always possible for stories to take a reader away from the circumambient world and to run their own course without touching explicitly on actuality. This is not an option that appears in the pages of *Africa South*, but an example of how gaps could be utilised – gaps between fictional events, the larger socio-historical context and the magazine's particular ambience – can be seen in 'South easter' by Noël Frieslich (1958:119-23).

The story opens at night with Dora and her father playing a duet as the wind howls around the house. Beyond the title, no further indication of the setting is given and the reader's text-external knowledge must supply 'Cape Town'. At the piano, Dora is moody and capricious. As she breaks away from their music, she blames the wind for her mood, but this is an inadequate explanation, and deliberately so – perhaps the evasion is Dora's so that the reader is required to register the incompleteness of her words and piece together the reasons from what follows. The narration makes mention, for example, of Dora's present difficulty in making contact with a father who, during her childhood, had told her endless stories about 'dear old England, which was home to him' (Frieslich 1958:120). Then a more explicit and more consequential indication of what might be disturbing Dora comes when Dora's mother's evades the word 'coloured' for herself, her daughter and the man who wants to marry Dora. At this point even a vague sense of South Africa's race policies would enable a reader to recognise that the characters

both participate in and long to escape classification, and thus to understand why part of Dora longs for 'dear old England' rather than marriage. And why she cannot tell her born-in-England father.

When Dora and her lover go outside to sit under a vine because it is the only private space available, a caterpillar dropping on her hand precipitates the story's resolution: entrapment in marriage and a coloured identity in South Africa. Dora is momentarily alarmed by the caterpillar and as she turns for protection to her lover they are both sexually aroused. What follows is not spelt out but in the last line of the story 'Dora [weeps] ... the quiet hopeless tears of her exile' (Frieslich 1958:123). The pathos of her lost 'aspirations' is clear – but it is the caterpillar as fictional sign, itself helplessly blown down by the wind and a creature which exists independently of the story's implied socio-political context, which most clearly marks how a gap may be opened between fiction's referentiality and the methods of the analytical articles in *Africa South*. Recuperating the caterpillar as comedy, as unwittingly and inappropriately bringing about a resolution of Dora's dilemma and sentencing her to a life of personal disappointment and racist deprivation, is to give a trivial item in the world great causal power in the story. Most of the analytical articles in *Africa South* attribute the causality with which they are concerned to acts of power, human greed, cruelty, indifference or foolishness so that the chance invasion of a lowly insect in the story could lead a reader into a thought-provoking moment of interpretation. In any event, giving meaning to the caterpillar is where a reader is likely to feel most acutely the responsibilities of engaging with the represented world and of interpreting its events. It is in the reader's response to the contrast between the caterpillar and the magazine's fierce, committed debate where the key challenge provided by fiction and its distinctive role in the magazine is clearest. The reader has to sort out, or even provide, the connections between the story's ingredients and the circumambient world, and has to satisfy a desire for unity and coherence of meaning in the process.

Before continuing with the subject of gaps and coherence, I will return to the second of the questions prompted by 'reading with a difference': the historical context in which one reads and how it affects interpretation.

The power of historical context

The conventions of fiction discussed so far do not guarantee either their effect or that all writers in South Africa would use each of them to the same ends. As post-structuralists have shown, stories often gain their effects by

being exceptions to the rule. Nor will the capacities of fiction necessarily be taken up in the same way by the same writer from historical period to period, for the imperatives of each moment will lead to different emphases. A changing conception of fiction can be seen in the differences between Nadine Gordimer's statements about her writing made in the 1950s and in the 1980s, while differences in ways of understanding the nature and ends of fiction can be seen in the now well-canvassed divergence between JM Coetzee and Gordimer in the 1980s.

In an early (1965) interview, Nadine Gordimer, who had from the start said that she thought she would have become a writer no matter where she had grown up, responded to questions about the political obligations of a South African writer of fiction by saying:

I am not a politically-minded person by nature. I don't suppose, if I had lived elsewhere, my writing would have reflected politics much. If at all. As it is, I have come to the abstractions of politics through the flesh and blood of individual behaviour. I didn't know what politics was about until I saw it all *happening to people*. (Gordimer in Bazin and Seymour 1990:35, original emphasis)¹³

In the same interview she went further, saying that 'the temptation to put one's writing at the service of a cause, whether it is fighting the colour-bar or "the momentary renunciation of literature in order to educate the people" etc – is a betrayal' (Gordimer in Bazin and Seymour 1990:34).¹⁴ But, by the 1980s, Gordimer's emphasis had changed with the demands of the age as she saw them. In *The Essential Gesture* she argued that South African writers had to accept that 'the greater responsibility is to society and not to art' (Gordimer 1989: 289). Declaring the obligation as she saw it even more forcefully, she added that:

[w]hether a writer is black or white, in South Africa the essential gesture by which he enters the brotherhood of man – which is the only definition of society that has any permanent validity – is a revolutionary gesture. (Gordimer 1989:296)

The demands of the 1980s bore somewhat differently on JM Coetzee. Reviewing Gordimer's essay at the end of the decade, he acknowledged her moral choice to bear 'historical witness' (Coetzee 1992:387), and placed Gordimer as not so much 'a political writer [as] an ethical writer, a writer of conscience, who finds herself in an age when any transcendental basis for ethics (as for aesthetics) is being denied in the name of politics' (Coetzee 1992:387-8). As revolutionary thinking dominated oppositional politics ever

more strongly in South Africa, Coetzee (1988:5) distanced himself from ‘revolutionary art’ and its will to override everything else. In a public address in 1987, he regretted the expectation of the day that fiction should supplement history by offering ‘imaginative investigations of real historical forces and real historical circumstances’, while novels that did not obviously carry out this investigation were treated as ‘lacking in seriousness’ (Coetzee 1988:2).¹⁵ In contesting such expectations, Coetzee did not reassert an over-arching aesthetic but instead suggested that history-writing and fiction-writing are distinct kinds of story-telling and that each should be granted equal right to operate ‘in terms of its own procedures’ and lead to ‘its own conclusions’ (Coetzee 1988:3).¹⁶

These are two writers responding in speeches (deriving stances from their art would be a more complex matter) to the demands of their day as they saw them. What is important here is that the period of *Africa South* seems, for all the urgency of purpose that this magazine conveys, to have exerted different and perhaps less narrow pressures on writers of fiction from those that were operating in the 1980s. This comparative (and perhaps paradoxical) liberty in the national and the publication contexts extended to readers as well as writers. It is why fiction as an art form that follows its own rules – an art form in which those involved could measure their own relationship to their context – could, in the 1950s, bring something distinctive to the radical historico-political oppositional purposes of a magazine such as *Africa South*.

Returning to the caterpillar which precipitates the *denouement* in ‘South easter’, the insect as actor has no crucial connection with the story’s material historical context, nor with the magazine’s purposes, and is thus a good example of the semantic instability that Bakhtin (1981) sees as fundamental to all signs in novels. The caterpillar’s meaning in the story is however clearly more than that of ‘insect’, and this excess meaning could be stated in numerous ways depending on the reader’s interpretation of what is at stake in the story. Bakhtin (1981:31) celebrates the radical uncertainty, the ‘eternal re-thinking and re-evaluating’, that the operation of the sign in fiction opens for a writer and enjoins on a reader. He locates this uncertainty, in broad historical terms, in the rise of modernity in the western world. In the course of modernity’s move away from the religious age, when matters had been seen *sub specie aeternitatis* and all meaning was revealed by God, meaning becomes secular, of the present moment, and rests on social agreements. Bakhtin elaborates on the consequences for interpretation of

the move to secular understanding:

the present becomes the centre of human orientation in time and in the world [and as it does so] every event, every phenomenon, every thing, every object of artistic representation loses its completedness, its hopelessly finished quality and its immutability. (Bakhtin 1981:30)

These effects are, Bakhtin indicates, best seen in the unfolding action of a novel: 'in this inconclusive context all the semantic stability is lost; its sense and significance are renewed and grow as the context continues to unfold' (Bakhtin 1981:30). But his insight into the uncompleted aspect of verbal signs in novels is also relevant to the modern short story,¹⁷ even to the realistic short stories of *Africa South* where caterpillars abound.

Each issue of this magazine was 'dialogic' (Sandwith 2009:132) in that it hosted many divergent voices, many points of view, and did not attempt to bring them into line. Seen thus, the presence of fiction can be understood as adding to the chorus of different voices in *Africa South*, and creating a tolerance of diversity. But I have suggested a further potential for this fiction: an awareness of sense-making which involves discovering that one is responsible for actively making meaning. This is a complex act of individuality within community which, when it is consciously made, can be the greatest of challenges to tyrannies such as apartheid.

To round off the discussion of reading stories in an historical context and the place of fiction in political debate, I want to bring present practices in South African fiction into focus by using *The Cry of Winnie Mandela* by Njabulo S Ndebele (2003). Whereas the stories in *Africa South* belong to the realistic mode of modernist narrative such as DH Lawrence used, Ndebele's is a postmodern novel. This novel confirms that we are now in a very different climate of expectation from that of the 1980s when Coetzee contested the hierarchy allocated to the stories that society was willing to hear about itself.¹⁸ Ndebele's fiction does not indicate a return to the hospitable climate of the 1950s as seen in *Africa South*, but suggests a development that is related to it.

As Alan Paton did some 50 years ago in *Africa South*, Ndebele has recently presented his 'further thoughts about our country' (Ndebele 2007),¹⁹ in essay form and in fiction. In a piece for the *Mail & Guardian* called 'A home for intimacy' (1996:28-9), Ndebele suggests that the destruction of the family lives of African people during the apartheid years resulted in a loss of those intimate personal relationships from which emerge the moral fundamentals of living in community with others. He returns to these

thoughts in his novel but this time presenting them through the troubled perceptions of his characters. Mara Joyce Baloyi is one of four women who try in their different ways to understand their own lives as abandoned women who 'waited' for their husbands to return, and who used their ideas of 'Winnie Mandela' to guide them (Ndebele 1996:1). Their imagined Winnie has, like them and like Penelope of legend, been required to be an icon of loyal wifehood, but she – unlike them and unlike Penelope – has refused to conform. As Mara tries to interpret Winnie's apparent failure to wait for her husband, and her inability to 'find' him once he had been released from jail, she speculates about the enigma that confronts her:

[p]erhaps ... you were telling us to earn our freedom through the conscious embracing of uncertainty and contradiction. The vitality of our newness and creativity lay there. (Ndebele 1996:71)

Mara's conjecture is startlingly different from the one-dimensional, condemnatory or laudatory accounts of 'Winnie Mandela' to be found in the media and is a reminder that fiction requires its readers both to negotiate agreed, established meanings and to entertain disturbing alternatives, alternatives which may be barometers of a community's real needs. This principled uncertainty that fiction can encourage is upheld when Ndebele's character Winnie Mandela enters the action, and tells the other women that she can provide no answers to their questions; that, having no certainties about herself, she can only be an interpreter who works with the self that their thoughts have created.

Conclusion

Although none of the short story writers from the 1950s that I have considered would have aligned their fiction with an explicit, post-modern 'embrac[ing of] uncertainty' (Ndebele 1996:71) in this way, Mara's phrase does suggest an underlying connection between Ndebele's writing and the reader's negotiation of gaps within the desire for coherence that I indicated in 'South Easter'. Creating the reader's obligation to grapple consciously with the fluctuating possibilities of meanings is, I have suggested, where fiction's major role in *Africa South* lay in the late 1950s. The value of such grappling becomes clear in its connection with Ndebele's fiction. The magazine's analytical articles on South Africa all advocate political change in the present as they endeavour to articulate new, non-racist ways in which people might combat inequalities of power and might relate differently to one another. As a way of supporting this advocacy of change, the uncertainties

involved in interpreting fiction could have led readers to understand from within themselves that their present was not a given, that everything is always open to re-thinking and re-evaluating, as Bakhtin put it. Ndebele's novel gives a strong indication that fiction's capacity to lead South African readers to embrace uncertainty is, after the inevitable or necessary narrowness of the revolutionary decades, re-surfacing for recognition in the present day. In his writing, the uncertainties of interpretation move from the reader's domain to also being a subject celebrated in the fiction. The task of interpreting the multiple possibilities that even realist fiction presents to a reader can inculcate a readiness to think about one's self and one's world from different angles, simultaneously occupying different perspectives. As in the 1950s, this most oppositional of stances is one that fiction enjoins, and is one that continues to be required of South Africans.

Notes

1. A selection of essays from *Africa South* is forthcoming from the University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, edited by Daymond and Sandwith.
2. These were posthumously published as *Towards an African Literature: the emergence of literary form in Xhosa* (Jordan 1972). Jordan also translated from Zulu a poem by Dr BW Vilakazi which appeared in *Africa South* as 'In the gold mines' (Vilakazi 1957:115-9).
3. These were all invited contributions (Segal 1963:160). They included Thomas Hodgkin on 'Islam in west Africa' (Hodgkin 1958), Roger Summers on 'Zimbabwe: capital of an ancient Rhodesian kingdom' (Summers 1958), Saburi Biobaku on 'The pattern of Yoruba history' (Biobaku 1958).
4. The poems from Madagascar were translated by Miriam Koshland and two have been included in Stephen Gray's recent anthology (2008).
5. Elizabeth Mafekeng was to be sent from her home in Paarl in the western Cape, to 'a desolate spot of dust called Southey' (Blumberg 1960:39), 600 miles away in the northern Cape.
6. Despite Segal's wish to represent African literature, only one of these short stories is set outside southern Africa and that is 'Ding dong bell' by Kwabena Annan (1959) whose name suggests a Ghanaian writer.
7. Approaching fiction through its contents (rather than its semiotics and the reading practices it invites), and explaining that the Censorship Bill enabled the immediate shut-down of *Fighting Talk*, Bernstein (1989:46) comments: 'Culture had become an enemy, as it was once for Germany, and the enemy had to be suppressed and destroyed. The poet is dangerous – his words break through barriers of race and language; the artist is dangerous – his brush and pencil reflects what exists around him and create commentaries on his life and times'.

8. The former point was inferred from Segal's references to the many 'blowsy' short stories that were sent to him (1963:274) and confirmed in an interview with him in 2006. Segal could not remember having asked any authors to submit fiction. When asked why fiction was put at the end of the magazine he looked faintly puzzled and murmured that it seemed natural that way. None of the story writers are given a by-line, as are most writers of other pieces.
9. Stanley Fish argues that the recognition of (and response to) fiction is shaped by a community's 'collective decision as to what will count as literature' (Fish 1980:109).
10. Identifying these 'horizontal conventions' as definitive has proved problematic. Culler (1997:33) outlines what is currently a consensus among theorists: those formal features of fiction which are thought to be distinctive usually turn out to be shared by other kinds of writing and so are not definitive, a conclusion which supports my emphasis on the reader's role.
11. This is one of the characteristics of 'literature' that Culler (1997) includes in his summary. The others are: its foregrounding of language so that, particularly in poetry, linguistic organisation is an end in itself rather than being the transparent vehicle of ideas; its bringing the elements of language into particularly complex relations; its primary concern being to activate aesthetic values or pleasures; and its being fundamentally inter-textual in the sense that a reader recognizes, say, a poem as a poem by virtue of having read other poems and absorbed their conventions.
12. Satire of this kind was popular. Segal recalls that the publication of Anthony Delius's poem 'Judgment day', subtitled 'The second canto of a South African fantasy', sent the sales of *Africa South* rocketing to 7000 copies. It was, Segal says, a 'satire of parliament, with ... savage assaults on individual members and party programmes ... [and it drew] especially sharp portraits of Strijdom's two principal assistants – Charles "Blackie" Swart ... and Eric Louw' (Segal 1963:140-4).
13. This interview with Alan Ross was originally published in 1965 as 'Nadine Gordimer: a writer in South Africa' in *London Magazine* 5(2): 20-28. In a 1983 interview, Gordimer was invited to reflect on her statement and she responded that she would 'cross out the ... phrase "if at all"' (Bazin and Seymour 1990:216). This subsequent (1983) interview was with Diana Cooper-Clark and was originally published as 'The clash' in *London Magazine* 22(11):45-49.
14. This is clearly a reference to Sartre.
15. In distancing himself from the expectation that fiction should illuminate history, Coetzee did not, however, suggest that he or his writing could escape history. He acknowledges that the 'stuntedness and deformity' (1992:98) produced by apartheid had probably marred his own writing as it had South African literature in general. Apartheid had produced, he says, 'a literature in bondage ... a less than

fully human literature, unnaturally preoccupied with power and the torsions of power, unable to move from elementary relations of contestation, domination, and subjugation to the vast and complex human world that lies beyond them. It is exactly the kind of literature you would expect people to write from a prison' (Coetzee 1992:98).

16. Discussing Coetzee's relationship to two apparently opposed forces which bore on him in the 1980s – the censors and some instrumentalist critics – Peter D McDonald (2004:292) has argued that while Coetzee did not claim 'a privileged aesthetic space' for fiction, he was pushed into making a claim that was 'not without risk' when he said that in the current climate 'the novel ... has only two options: supplementarity or rivalry' (Coetzee 1988:3). This is risky because 'rivalry' implies a hierarchy of written forms in which fiction could 'displace the authority of the historical categories [of] ... race, class and gender' (McDonald 2004:294).
17. Graham Pechey has demonstrated that, for Bakhtin, genres were not always absolute categories and that Bakhtin's thinking shifted from 'forms to forces, from "types" within "structures" to "lines" within histories' (Pechey 2001:65, original emphasis).
18. Segal's puzzlement when asked why *Africa South* had included fiction – 'why ever not?' was implied – is a strong indication that he did not subscribe to a hierarchy in the various kind of stories that could be told.
19. This is the subtitle of Ndebele's collection of essays *Fine Lines from the Box* (2007). He explains that the box in his title refers to a wooden crate where his father kept 'a treasure trove of banned books' (2007:9) which Ndebele found hidden in his father's garage in the mid 1960s. Among the books that he says caused his 'heart [to leap] with disbelief' were copies of *Africa South*.

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