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NEW FORMS OF STRATEGY — NO CHANGE OF HEART

Nadine Gordimer

Sharing the preoccupations of my fellow writers, I was the first to express the conviction, now become a general stand, that the release from ban of a few books by well-known white writers is not a major victory for the freedom to write, and that the action carries two sinister implications: first, those among us who are uncompromising opponents of censorship with wide access to the media can be bought off by special treatment accorded to our books; second, the measure of hard-won solidarity that exists between black and white writers can be divided by ‘favouring’ white writers with such special treatment, since no ban on any black writer’s work has been challenged by the Directorate’s own application to the Appeal Board.

I don’t claim any prescience or distinction for early arrival at this conviction - Burger’s Daughter (1979), my novel, happened to be the first released as a consequence of the Directorate’s new tactics. It was natural for me to examine the package very carefully when my book came back to me apparently intact, after all the mauling it had been through. It was inevitable that I should come upon the neat devices timed to go off in the company of my colleagues. It was not surprising that they should recognize for themselves these booby-traps set for us all, since a week or two later Andre Brink received the same package containing his novel The Dry White Season (1979). And then, in time for April and the seating of the new Chairman of the Appeal Board, came Afrikaans literature’s Easter egg, all got up for Etienne le Roux with the sugar roses of the old Appeal Board’s repentance and the red ribbon defiant of Aksie Morale Standaarde, the NGK and Dr Koot Vorster - of course, Magersfontein O Magersfontein was not released as the two other books were, as a result of the Director’s own appeal against his Committee’s bannings, but its release on an ultimate appeal by the author’s publishers transparently belongs to the same strategy in which the other two books were ‘reinstated’.

I am one who has always believed and still believes we shall never be rid of censorship until we are rid of apartheid. Personally, I find it necessary to preface with this blunt statement any comment I have about the effects of censorship, the possible changes in its scope, degree, and methodology. Any consideration of how to conduct the struggle against it, how to act for the attainment of immediate ends, is partial, pragmatic, existential ‘space seen against a constant and over-riding factor. To-day as always, the invisible banner is behind me, the decisive chalked text on the blackboard, against whose background I say what I have to say. We shall not be rid of censorship until we are rid of apartheid. Censorship is the arm of mind-control and as necessary to maintain a racial regime as that other arm of internal repression, the secret police. Over every apparent victory we may gain against the censorship powers hangs the question of whether that victory is in fact contained by apartheid, or can be claimed to erode it from within.

What exactly has changed since the 1st April 1980?

What exactly does the ‘born again’ cultural evangelism staged with the positively last appearance of Judge Lammie Snyman and the previews of rippling intellectual musculature displayed by 37-year-old Dr Kobus van Rooyen, mean?

The Censorship Act remains the same. It is still on the statute book. The practice of embargo will continue. The same anonymous committees will read
and ban; a censorship committee having been defined in 1978 by the Appellate Division of the Supreme Court as 'An extra-judicial body, operating in an administrative capacity, whose members need have no legal training, before whom the appellant has no right of audience, who in their deliberations are not required to have regard to the rules of justice designed to achieve a fair trial, whose proceedings are not conducted in public and who are not required to afford any reasons for their decision'. The enlarged panel of experts has some of the old names, among whom is at least one known Broederbonders, and the new ones are recruited from the same old white cadres. The powers of the Board are what they always were.

There is no change in the law or procedure, then. Nor is any promised, or even hinted at.

What we have is a new Chairman of the Appeal Board, in a position whose power we already know: although he does not make decisions alone, the Chairman of the Appeal Board is the ultimate authority and decision-maker in the whole process of censorship. We also know that the head of any institution - and censorship is an institution in our national life - interprets the doctrinal absolutes and directs the tactical course towards that institution's avowed objectives according to his own personal ideas of how these should be achieved. His flair - for which quality he will have been chosen, all other qualifications being equal - will influence procedure, make innovations in the way the same things are done, whether the institution is a bank accumulating capital or a Directorate of Publications controlling people's minds.

Therefore it can only be the philosophy and psychology of censorship that have changed. Why and how is something we shall have to delve into in the months to come, beyond a first snap understanding of what was plain behind the unbanning of a small group of books in quick succession - the hope to placate certain white writers, the suggestion of an attempt to divide the interests of black and white writers. These actions were surely already the product of Dr van Rooyen's thought, since he was running the Appeal Board for some time before he was appointed Chairman in April 1980. They were the first show of the quality of mind, the concept of culture, the concept of the relation of literature to society, to politics, to economics, to class as well as colour, the new Chairman has, and on which - as we see - the nature of what we are up against now will be dependent.

Since he took office he has made policy statements - signification from which it will be possible to trace the grid of his purpose. Taking as given the ordinary motives of personal ambition and good pay in his acceptance of the job of chief censor, we need to know how he sees his particular mission. We need to know what his sense of self and other is. For that is the vital factor in the praxis of censorship, the phenomenon of censorship as a form of social and cultural control. Philosophically speaking, on this sense of self and other is the authority of censorship conceived. A we controlling a them. Dr van Rooyen won't tell us what this private sense deciding his widely affective thoughts and actions is; but we have the right to find out. I'll ask you to look at the evidence of his statements presently, first I want to return to the evidence of his actions - or actions behind which his hand can be detected - the unbanning of certain highly controversial books.

André Brink has pointed out that the week that his novel, dealing with the death by police brutality and neglect of a black man in prison, was released from ban, Mthuthuzeli Matshoba's story collection, Call Me Not A Man (1979) was banned. The reason for banning supplied to Matshoba's publisher was
objection to one of the stories only, *A Glimpse of Slavery*, dealing with the experiences of a black man hired out as prison labour to a white farmer.

Death in prison or detention; the abuse of farm labour. Both are subjects whose factual basis has been exposed and confirmed in the proceedings of court cases and, in one instance at least, a commission of enquiry. Two writers, each of whom can make with Dostoevsky a statement of the writer's ethic: "Having taken an event, I tried only to clarify its possibility in our society"; the work of one is released, the other banned.

Now, in preparation for the new regime, from which we are being persuaded we may expect a new respect for literature, and are asked to accept this as a new justification for censorship, there has been much emphasis on literary quality in recent decisions by the Appeal Board. It seems that Dr Kobus van Rooyen wants to substitute the silver-handled paper-knife of good taste for the kerrie of narrow-mindedness and prudery, as the arbitrary weapon. But although it was decided by a Censorship Committee that there was "not inconsiderable merit in much of the writing in this collection of short stories by the African writer Mtutuzeli Matshoba ... with regard both to the quality of the writing and to the author's insight in the human situations which he interprets", although the Committee members found the stories "generally of a high quality", they banned the book because of a single story. They did this - again I let them speak for their anonymous selves - ostentatiously from the new "literary" angle, claiming that this particular story was flatly written and the accumulation of its events improbable. But what was hatched beneath the peacock feathers was the ostrich with his familiar kick. They banned the book on one seventh of its contents, to be precise. They returned, when dealing with a black writer, to the precept followed in the past, when a work was to be judged 'undesirable' or 'desirable' not in relation to the quality of the whole, but could be damned because of a single chapter, page, or even paragraph.

The sole basis for the ban on Matshoba's book rested ultimately on a declared calculation made in the imperatives of political repression, not literary quality, although literary quality is invoked - the Committee stated that the appeal to the reader of the story "lies not in the literary creation but rather in the objectionable nature of the events which are presented ... even if all these situations ... had occurred in this context in which they are set in the story, the presentation of these scenes in a popular medium would be undesirable".

The italics are mine. The standard used by the censors here is that of political control over reading matter likely to reach the black masses. If this is not so, let us challenge the Directorate to act in accordance with Dr van Rooyen's statement that the banning of a book by the "isolation method" would now be rejected, and therefore ask for the ban on Matshoba's book to be reviewed by the Appeal Board.

My novel, *Burger's Daughter*, was released by the Appeal Board in 1979, although, among all the other sections under which it had been deemed offensive, there were numerous examples cited under D Section 47 (2) of the Censorship Act. One was the remark by English-speaking schoolgirls mouthed prejudices "picked up from their parents: "Bloody Boers, dumb Dutchmen, thick Afrikaners".

Miriam Tlati's novel *Muriel at Metropolitan* in the version found inoffensive and left on sale for several years, was banned in 1979 on the sole objection of three offences under the same section of the Act, the principal being the reference by the narrator-character to an Afrikaans-speaking woman as a 'lousy Boer'.

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Well, these ugly racist epithets are not my personal ones, nor, I think, are they Miriam Tlali’s; but they are heard around us every day, and there are certain characters whose habitual inability to express themselves without them is another fact about our society no honest writer can falsify. Yet Tlali’s book, otherwise quite inoffensive from the censors’ point of view, ultimately is banned while mine is ultimately released. Is it more insulting for a white South African to be abused by a black character in a book than by a white one? What is clear is that a Censorship Committee regards it as necessary to prevent black readers from reading their own prejudices, their own frustrations, given expression in the work of a black writer; outside the considerations assiduously to be taken into account by a new and enlightened censorship there is an additional one, operative for black writers only that nullifies most of the concessions so far as black writers are concerned—they may not say what white writers say because they are calculated to have a wider black readership, and to speak to blacks from the centre of the experience of being black, to articulate and therefore confirm, encourage what the black masses themselves feel and understand about their lives but most cannot express.

And with this trend taken by the Censorship Directorate in the period preparing us for the advent of a new Chairman, we come to the event itself, and the statements of policy made by Dr Kobus van Rooyen since April lst.

He has not said much; and one of his statements has been to the effect that he intends to say even less: he has announced that he will take no part in public debates on censorship. The Star (5/4/1980) editorial pointed out, of public debates—“these insights to the workings of a censor’s mind were what helped speed the retirement of his predecessor. They will be missed.”

Indeed.

Dr Kobus van Rooyen would be unlikely to present the image that emerged from the public appearances and statements of his predecessor. Nevertheless, Dr van Rooyen does not intend taking any risks. What interests us more is that he does not want openly to proselytize his philosophy of censorship any more than he intends to be open to the influence of counter views. This is an autocratic approach—let us not call it an arrogant one. From it we can understand that here is a man whose view of culture is elitist, someone in whose mind, whether consciously or not, is posited the idea of an official cultural norm. The fact that his version of that norm is likely to differ, here and there, in emphasis, does not mean that it is any less fundamentalist than that defined implicitly, along with the law, in the Censorship Act. The shift in emphasis is a real-politik adjustment to catch up with the change in the relation of literature to life that has taken place in South Africa, and that a clever man cannot ignore. The concept—that there is a right for a single power group to decide what is culture, remains the grid on which although like the most functional of contemporary business premises, all manner of interior open-space arrangements may be made to suit the tenant, the total structure must be accepted. The myth of the South African culture sustains a man who is so convinced of his approach to his job that he is not prepared to discuss it let alone admit any necessity to defend it.

Roland Barthes (1973) points out that traditional myth explains a culture’s origins out of nature’s forces; modern myths justify and enforce a secular power by presenting it as a natural force. Sophisticated officials of this government may be openly sceptical of some of the more ritualistic aspects of our societal myth—the Immorality Act, the awful malediction of four-letter words, etc—but sophistication must never be taken for enlightenment;
acceptance of the concept of a culture based on an elite dispensation to the
masses who cannot create anything valid for themselves, acceptance of the role
of literature in life according to that culture, are still firmly based on
a particular myth of power.

Only from within that myth could Judge Lammie Snyman have taken the cultural
standpoint revealed when he said earlier this month that blacks are "in-
articulate people, who, I am sure, are not interested" in censorship (The
Star, 8/4/1980). And what a lightning-flash lit up a whole official men-
tality for us when, summing up his entire five years in which it was his
responsibility to decide 'what was likely to corrupt or deprave an immature
mind, or whether it was likely to horrify or disgust' the people of South
Africa, he added: 'Of blacks, I have no knowledge at all.'

His 'average ordinary South African' - whose standards of morality and lit-
ery judgment he constantly invoked during his term of office - was not to
be found among the majority of the South African population. For this
reason, Dr Kobus van Rooyen has abandoned the creature. But not the idea
that he has the right to create another of his own, whose imaginary or
rather conditioned sensibilities and susceptibilities will be the deciding
factor in what shall and shall not be read by all of us. What is regarded
as Dr van Rooyen's most important statement is his announcement that his
creature will be the 'probable reader'. Important it is, but not, I am
afraid, for reasons assumed some.

The assumption is that sexual explicitness as an integral part of sophisti-
cated literature written in the idiom of educated people will now be passed.
That complex works dealing with contentious or radical political characters
and events above the level of simple rhetoric will also be passed. And
there the effect of the change apparently ends, and so can only be regarded
as beneficial; after all if you have not the educational background and
trained intellect to follow these works, that is hardly the responsibility
of the censors.

Is it not? By putting on the top shelf, out of reach of those masses Lammie
Snyman confessed he knew nothing about, imaginative, analytical presentation
of the crucial questions that deal with their lives, is one not hampering the
healthy cultural development censorship purports to be guarding?

We should like to be able to put that question to the new Chairman of the
Appeal Board, who evidently does know a great deal about those masses. Does
he see the justification of that hampering, in a mission to adjust the stra-
tegy of the myth of hostile forces he well understands?

Why may intellectual readers handle inflammables?

Is it because this readership is predominantly white, and radical initiative
by whites has been contained by imprisonment, exile, bannings and the threat
of right-wing terrorism while the moderate, let alone the revolutionary
initiative for social change has passed overwhelmingly to blacks, and is not
contained?

Why may white writers deal with inflammables?

Is it because the new censorship dispensation has understood something im-
portant to censorship as an arm of repression - while white writings are
predominantly critical and protestant in mood, black writings are inspira-
tional, and that is why the government fears them?
The definition of the 'probable reader' can be arrived at by the old pencil-in-the-hair and finger-nail tests, believe me. The criterion for reading-matter allowed him is not literary worth but his colour.

As a cultural and not merely a politically-manipulable prototype, the 'probable reader' is a creature of class-and-colour hierarchy. He cannot be visualized, in our society, by those of us sufficiently free-minded to see that culture in South Africa is something still to be made, something that could not be brought along with mining machinery in the hold of a ship, nor has been attained by the genuinely remarkable achievement of creating an indigenous language out of European ones. He cannot be visualized by anyone who understands culture not as an embellishment of leisure for the middle classes, but as the vital force generated by the skills, crafts, legends, songs, dances, languages, sub-literature as well as literature - the living expression of self-realization - in the life of the people as a whole.

Behind the 'probable reader' is surely the unexpressed concept of the 'probable writer'. The new Chairman of the Appeal Board has assured us that 'satirical writing will be allowed to develop'. To most of us this is an elitist concession. Of course, nobody stops anyone from writing satire, whatever his colour. But in the relation of literature to life at present, satire is unlikely to appeal to black writers. It requires a distancing from the subject which black writers, living their lives close within their material, are not likely to manage; it requires a licence for self-criticism that loyalty to the black struggle for a spiritual identity does not grant at present. So effective weapon though satire may be, as a social probe in certain historical circumstances or stages, it will not, so far as it is a concession by this government to freedom of expression, fall into the hands of the 'wrong' probable writer ...

Similarly, the new directive that the general public (probable reader distinction again) "does not have to accept literary works and that a writer is a critic of his society and therefore often in conflict with the accepted moral, religious and political values" will benefit - if anyone, since we still have to prove ourselves unharmful and inoffensive to whichever probable reader our work is allotted, in the censors' consideration - will benefit writers of work in the critical and analytical mode but lift no barriers for the inspirational. Yet there is no ignoring the fact that the inspirational is a dynamic of our literature at present. Franz Kafka's standard, that "A book must be an ice-axe to break the frozen sea inside us" is not the censors. Neither is there any sign of acceptance that in South Africa we writers, white and black, are the only recorders of what the poet Eugenio Montale calls "unconfessed history".

That has been made, and is being made every day, deep below the reports of commissions and the SABC news; it is the decisive common force carrying us all, bearing away the protective clothing of 'probable readers' as paper carnival costumes melt in the rain.

In the final analysis, censorship's new deal is the pragmatic manifestation of an old, time-dishonoured view of culture, already dead, serving repression instead of the arts, and its belated recognition of literary standards is its chief strategy. This recognition is shrewd enough to see what Lammie Snyman did not - that the objective validity of literary standards as a concept (there are works of genuine creation, there is trash) could be invoked for a purpose in which, in fact, they have no place and no authority. The criteria by which the quality of literature can be assessed have nothing whatever to do with calculation of its possible effect on the reader, probable or improbable. The literary experts who are instructed to take this factor into
account, and do so, are not exercising any valid function as judges of literature.

And in affirmation of freedom of expression, which is the single uncompromised basis of opposition to censorship, the literary worth or otherwise of a work is not a factor - what is at stake each time a book falls into the censors' hands is the right of that book to be read. Literary worth has nothing to do with that principle.

We must not fudge this truth. The poor piece of work has as much right to be read - and duly judged as such - as the work of genius. Literary worth may be assessed only by critics and readers free to read the book; it is a disinterested, complex and difficult judgment that sometimes takes generations. There is a promise that future judgments by the censors will "more readily reflect the opinions of literary experts appointed". The invocation of literary standards by censors as a sign of enlightenment and relaxation of strictures on the freedom of the work; above all, the reception by the public of this respected and scholarly concept as one that could be enthroned among censors - both are invalid. Let us never forget - and let us not let the South African public remain in ignorance of what we know: censorship may have to do with literature; but literature has nothing whatever to do with censorship.

References