

# Words Words Words

"BOTH ARE TEMPTED to live in Europe—particularly her husband who, having fled from Nazi Germany, now sees the same pattern emerging in South Africa." "Both" are Mr. and Mrs. Reinhold Cassirer of Johannesburg and the context is the profile of Nadine Gordimer, (Mrs. Cassirer), in a recent London *Observer*. Who can complain if the Cassirers yield to such a temptation? There are grounds for complaint in the possibility that Miss Gordimer may remain static as a writer if the process of her involvement with reality in South Africa comes to a sudden end: surely her chance of developing from being a very good writer to a great one depends on her getting nearer and nearer to the thudding pulse of South African life, which at present reaches her books as a muted tap-tap, and away from the over-refinement which tends to chisel down the nobility of her writing so that the products are neat, glazed, rather chill figurines of books. To leave now might condemn her to go on carving cherrystones, when her South African impulse is to hew solid marble. This apart, let the Cassirers and people who feel like them go in peace. If they can help "the struggle" while abroad, all the better. If they abandon us altogether, why shouldn't they? Most of our population consists of people descended from men and women who at some point in history abandoned the society they were living in to move elsewhere, and we do not judge them for it. (One does have misgivings about those who leave the country, under no immediate pressure, after publicly proclaiming from platforms and in print that all is not lost in South Africa. Their going seems to give the lie to what they, and the colleagues they leave behind, have been saying.)

OF MORE IMPORTANCE is the reason why Mr. Cassirer in particular is tempted to live in Europe, namely "the pattern of Nazi Germany emerging in South Africa." To quote Verwoerd or Vorster in the past or the present, to analyse the Sabotage Act or the Bantu Laws Amendment Bill—these are the obvious parts of the pattern. Less obvious, because they are emerging even now where they were concealed before, are the parts provided by those who should be opposing Vorster and Verwoerd on proper

grounds, who should be attacking the Sabotage Act and the Bantu Laws Amendment Bill. This is the other part of the Nazi contract, the part provided by the spineless, the apathetic, the ineffective because divided, and by the crypto-Nazi collaborators in unexpected places.

THE OFFICIAL OPPOSITION have for years been known to be made up of all these elements. The great disappointment is the press. On racialism in general, for instance, the *Cape Times*, once a leader of old-time South African liberal thought wrote on 9 April: "The essential fact . . . is that the controlling minority requires that some two-thirds of the people, defined in terms of race, shall be socially, politically and economically subject to the whites, also defined in terms of race." And this, it agreed, overruled moral issues. Look beyond the editor to the ordinary sub-editor and reporter, and you will find the English press, like the English-speaking public it speaks for, rotten with potential collaborators, and the healthy patches that are left, partly infested with such apathy and mean-spiritedness as cannot seem to summon up the moral fibre to say out loud, or even to think in private, apartheid (call it what you will) is wrong because it is cruel, selfish, immoral and dishonest.

WHAT MORE PERFECT COMBINATION of these apartheid characteristics than the Bantu Laws Amendment Bill, which threatens to take away their remaining civic rights from those of his fellow countrymen whom Dr. Verwoerd chooses to call "Bantu", and legalises the paid-slave status against which the law has so far to some extent protected them? And what does most of the English press call the Bill? The "Servants" Bill, because a few of its clauses adversely affect the convenience of white employers in the housing of their African domestic servants.

Again, terrible sentences are being passed against men found guilty of "sabotage", some of it in the fantastically wide definitions of the Vorster Act—and where are the full press reports the public should see? Making way for the sex murders and financial swindles which, our editor friends will tell us, are of so much more interest to the man in the train. The local daily will be filled for days with lengthy reports of a City Hall scandal about building plans, while in crowded courtrooms, sentences are being passed that will affect us all. For it is not, of course, only the period of all-out Nazi rule under which we must suffer, but the inevitable period of bloody exhortation that must follow it. "The grass grows over the battlefield, over the gallows never," wrote Churchill. Yet these cases, truncated and compressed so as to be meaningless, hidden at the back of the newspaper, scarcely reach the man

or woman who could still combine with others to withdraw his or her tacit consent to encroaching Nazism. Those newspapers that are supporting the most ignoble aspects of white public opinion, and are providing the vocal assent to the Nazi contract, are served by the spineless, the apathetic and the internecine squabblers, the sort of people who will when it is too late say, like every other refugee from the Nazis: "If only we could have stopped it."

THE NEWSPAPERS HARBOUR real collaborators as well, and one finds them in unlikely places—a gossip columnist, a magazine feature writer, a sports commentator. Or a book reviewer, such as Miss Mary Morrison Webster in the *Sunday Times*, Johannesburg. Her review of Miss Gordimer's new novel *Occasion for Loving* should have been enough for Mr. Cassirer to see this part of the Nazi contract in action, for Miss Webster dismissed Miss Gordimer's minutely-analysed, deeply-felt judgments on human relations when bedevilled by race discrimination, as "the usual platitudes . . ." Thus does a book reviewer give the stamp of cultivated literary approval to all that is cruel, blind and greedy in the "normal" race responses of white South Africans. Thus does she collaborate.

MORE DISTURBING STILL were Miss Webster's remarks the week before, on John Howard Griffin's *Black Like Me*. The book describes Griffin's horrifying experiences when he darkened his "white" body and lived for some months as a Negro in the Southern States of the U.S.A. Miss Webster's review implied that Griffin found the Negroes racist and hellish, the whites admirable, and that "little was gained by his experiment." "All the whites to whom he spoke in fact, were unfailingly polite. It was in his dealings with Negroes that he was cold-shouldered or rebuffed", writes Miss Webster, with a breathtaking inversion of the facts. To pick out a single quotation in refutation might seem to be engaging Miss Webster in argument about the book: when all one should do is to condemn her version of it wholesale. But one incident near the end does meet a further point of Miss Webster's so neatly as to justify a quotation. Miss Webster writes: "In Alabama . . . his experiences were uniformly pleasant. Even so, he began to feel a great longing to regain his status as a white man . . ." The struggle of the Alabama negroes for their rights, Griffin found indeed uplifting, but here is his own version of the "even so" that brought him back to the white world: "An elderly white man . . . peered intently at me. Then he cringed his face as though I were odious and uttered, 'Phew!' His small blue eyes shone with repugnance a look of such unreasoning contempt that it filled me with despair . . . Suddenly I had had had enough."

Suddenly I could stomach no more of this degradation—not of myself but of all men who were black like me. I felt I would suffocate if I had to look at any more whites baring their hatred for non-whites.”

MR. GRIFFIN WRITES that the Southern newspapers ignored his story when it made world headlines in 1960, except for “one abusive article from Mississippi.” And one pathetic perversion from Johannesburg, which will have reached him from me by the time you are reading this. He has been asked to reply to Miss Webster. But his reply is already in his story. It also makes the best

epilogue to what has been said here, and the best account of the pattern that Mr. Cassirer and so many others so rightly fear:

“The old pattern showed itself again. An organised group essentially subversive, who claim super-patriotic and super-religious motives takes power and quickly becomes oppressive of both whites and nonwhites who are in opposition to it. It is the dictatorship pattern, nothing else. It has been shown as such, analysed, documented. It is a universal phenomenon wherever some popular racial prejudice exists. It espouses a popular cause and drags down those decent souls who think it is on “their side.” Too late

they discover that we have lost freedoms, for the dictatorial group will turn on anyone who does not toe the line. This was the most alarming of my findings. Yet I knew that those very whites whom I sought to protect by exposing this pattern would want my hide. “This is different”, they say. “These groups are fighting to protect us, to protect our children and grandchildren.” But where one bulwark of freedom falls, the next falls easier. Where racial prejudice is fostered against one group, it grows and spreads to others . . . And so the poison spreads, wherever men begin to compromise principles, no matter for what cause.”

## ‘Fighting Talk’ is silenced

J. B. BOOTH

FIGHTING TALK has been silenced. Its rousing, spirited tones will be heard no more, and there are many who will mourn its passing as one of the liveliest monthly journals in our country.

At the beginning of March, after numerous threatening growls from Minister of Justice Vorster, with the Nationalist press obediently giving tongue, a banning order was served on the magazine, forbidding publication and making it an offence to possess even a single copy.

So, in terms of the Minister’s order, not only must *Fighting Talk* cease to exist but, for South Africans at least, its existence must be as if it had never been.

Not that this will ever be achieved. The impact of the journal on the South Africa scene was considerable, and it will yet be shown just how considerable when the times come for an accounting of the forces which shaped the liberation of South Africa.

It had its critics, of course. For many—especially those who declined to read it—it was too left or too strident. But as the grim realities of Verwoerd’s brand of fascism became evident, there were fewer in the opposition groups who voiced this criticism. Its readers fell into two main groups: those who felt there was too much politics—though this was implicit in its founding to act as an unofficial voice of the Congress movement, and those—particularly its African readers starved of thorough-going political analyses and discussion—who felt that it was too literary. Those who read its literary material formed a further two groups of grumblers: those who found it too highbrow, and those who found it too low.

But a few journals can ever hope to escape grumbles, and the very rumbling is a sign of life and vitality.

For those who battled to bring out the magazine each month, the grumbles were simpler: always too little money, problems of sales and circulation in a country where the committed journals are denied the huge distribution machine of big business. There were also the raids on offices, occasional arrests and swoops by the police on news vendors—such events do not help to promote circulation. Writers were a problem too: many articulate South Africans, even if they refused to join the White laager of doomed baasskap, are too intimidated, the social and political pressures too strong for them to think of writing for so belligerent an anti-Establishment journal. Outspoken writing in this country needs political courage of a special sort.

Yet *Fighting Talk* managed to do it. Month after month, in spite of frightened and difficult printers, in spite of tenuous links with overseas correspondents, in spite, especially in the last year, of bans which made it impossible for members of its editorial board to meet, in spite of bans which made it illegal for some of its most constant and valued contributors to write—and in spite of the banning threat ever hanging over the journal, it came out.

It was a grim struggle against funds, printers, time and police but the staff, led by editor and kingpin Ruth First, battled on.

What it must have cost her to bring out each issue, bright with apparent ease, over a period of nearly ten years, no one will be able to calculate—not even she. Towards the end it was being held together by the most fragile threads: staff, writers and funds were dwindling under the relentless pressures of Vorster’s police state, but it kept going gamely until the final silencing ban.

IN THE PERIOD AFTER its switch to a more radical line—it had started after the war as the organ of the Springbok Legion for returned soldiers—it had managed to carry some fine writing. It provided a platform for some of the top political leaders in the country: men like Chief Lutuli, Nelson Mandela, Monty Naicker, Duma Nokwe, Walter Sisulu. The authentic voice of the political opinion of South Africans in the majority could be found in *Fighting Talk*. It demanded political commitment and passion but also factual documentation in its articles; and its analysis of major issues and