

DICTIONARY OF LITERARY BIOGRAPHYNJABULO SIMAKAHLE NDEBELE (4 July 1948 -)Lewis Nkosi
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In one of his poems featured in the 1989 Penguin collection of South African Verse titled "The Revolution of the Aged" Njabulo Simakahle Ndebele, better known for his critical essays and richly textured stories, wrote: "If you cannot master the wind, / flow with it / letting know all the time that you are resisting." In the same poem the writer alludes to the impatient, angry young "who burned with scorn / loaded with revolutionary maxims / hot for quick results." In his most celebrated theoretical statement, Turkish Tales and Some Thoughts on South African Fiction, the link between the sentiments expressed in the poem and Ndebele's critical perspective on South African writing is subtly made but for all that is too palpable to miss. There he writes: "It seems clear, therefore, that it is humanly unrealistic to show a revolutionary hero who has no inner doubts. All great revolutionaries from Lenin, through Nkrumah, to Che Guevara, among others, have had to grapple with inner fears, anxieties, and doubts."

Given the scarcely to be ignored fact that he is black in a society long dominated by white game-keepers Ndebele's ascension to a position of pre-eminence among South African cultural theorists is as novel as the respect which theory itself is currently enjoying—if not in the black neighbourhoods where such things are matters of intuition ^{like} but certainly in academia and in those areas of social life where cultural contestation has become a continuation of the liberation wars by other means. Nor given the absence of

grandiose rhetorical gestures or ostentatious theoretical turns, with their accessories of specialised jargon and proliferating neologisms which now clutter discussions of postcolonial theory, is it easy to account for the extreme resonance which Ndebele's work provokes. This is all the more surprising because, as his poem suggests, in the cut and thrust of cultural debate Ndebele's voice is deceptively calm, circumspect, civil if sometimes sceptical, in polemical discussions, first "flowing with the wind" of an opponent's argument before delivering his coup de grace.

Njabulo Simakahle Ndebele was born on 4 July 1949 at Western Native Township in Johannesburg of middle-class parents, if one can use such a classification to characterise a couple then living at a time when apartheid was notable for the levelling effects it had on the black population, tending to reduce all class differences to the common denominator of race and skin colour. Of Zulu ethnic background, Nimrod Ndebele the father was first a teacher at Madibane High School in Johannesburg, then became an inspector of schools; the writer's mother, Regina Makhosazana Ndebele née Nzala, is of Swazi ethnic origin from across the border from South Africa, a nurse by training. When his turn came to start a family, Njabulo Ndebele married a social worker, Mpo, with whom he has three children, two daughters aged 16 and 17 and a 22 year-old son. In a social environment racked by political turmoil, confounded by widespread disruption of family life and personal failure, Ndebele's family gives the impression of uninterrupted professional achievement and uncommon stability; and given this background, it is hardly surprising that apart from stories which show a quick sympathy for children, Ndebele's most telling fiction in his prize-winning collection Fools and Other Stories (1983) is devoted to an unremitting - what seems at times

even guilty - exploration of the constricting values of the small burgeoning middle-class of African professionals. And if it is true, as I have already suggested, that with its emphasis on racial difference apartheid temporarily kept all class distinctions in abeyance, it is all the more impressive that in his own fiction Ndebele has been working through and across racial politics to a careful annotation of all those inchoate class identifications registered by his middle-class characters in stories like "Fools", more explicitly in "The Music of the Violin" but also, if marginally and obliquely, in "Uncle" and "Death of a Son."

Ndebele's obsessive fascination with the predicament of children, some of it inspired by his reading of Dylan Thomas, has resulted in the publication of some of the most affective childhood stories of which "The Test", "The Prophetess," "Uncle," and, of course, Bonolo and the Peach Tree (1991) are striking examples. It is important to note, however, that though some of this fiction may be concerned with exploring conflict rooted in the psychology of children, none of the stories can be relegated quite simply and exclusively to the world of childhood; at a minimum these stories often reflect on the world of adults as it appears within the narrow but intense focal gaze of children; but in broader terms, too, in their punctilious attention to child psychology, to the competitive games children play and the relations of power which, alarmingly, quickly become manifest even among the youngest children, these stories indirectly manage to cast a lurid light on what will later become heightened features of moral behaviour among adults. Frequently, the stories illuminate the chilling propensity among children to unleash violence on the weak; but they also portray, very movingly at times, feelings of guilt and the desire for expiation that the more privileged among

them display for having more or better than their luckless peers; such is Thoba in 'The Test', for example, who "yearned to have cracked feet" like Nana, Vusi and Simangele, because "Thoba remembered that he had three pairs of shoes, and his mother had always told him to count his blessings because most boys had only one pair, if any shoes at all, for both school and special occasions like going to church." Social vanities and social ambitions, obscure determinations of hierarchies in and out of school, they obsess these children as much as they surely do adults, even without exactly proving the truth of Thomas de Quincey's observation that "all that is now broadly emblazoned in the man, once was latent... as a vernal bud in the child."

Ndebele's own schooling reflects not only the fact of his cross-border mixed parentage but also the extreme mobility, voluntary or involuntary, of black children during the worst years of apartheid. In order to escape the deleterious effects of the Bantu Education Act of 1953 which was designed, in Dr. Verwoerd's own words (then Minister of Native Affairs), not to educate black children above certain forms of labour, parents who could afford the alternative usually sent their children out of the country into neighbouring African states, chiefly Swaziland, Botswana and Lesotho. Ndebele spent his childhood years mostly at Charterston Location in Nigel, but after completing primary school education at the Mzimkhulu Lower Primary in 1957 and Zakheni Higher Primary School in 1960, he was in 1960 sent across the border into Swaziland where he attended the Luyengo Primary before enrolling at the prestigious St. Christopher's High School which for academic reputation has been compared favourably with St. Peter's, the famous Anglican missionary school in Johannesburg, which counts among its distinguished alumni the writers Peter Abrahams and Ezekiel Mphahlele and political leaders like the

late Oliver Tambo, former president of the African National Congress.

In 1966 Ndebele matriculated from St. Christopher's with a Cambridge Overseas School certificate and between 1966 and 1969 he was back in South Africa, teaching English, Zulu and Mathematics to pupils at Elukhanyisweni (Zulu for place of Enlightenment) Secondary School, before crossing the border once again, this time into Lesotho where he enrolled at what was then the University of Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland, with campuses in all three former so-called "British-protected" territories. In 1973 he graduated from the University of Lesotho with a first-class degree in English and Philosophy, presenting for his dissertations an essay "**Toward a Theory of African Development**" and a critique of the works of a fellow black poet Oswald Mtshali from South Africa, a portion of which he later adapted for publication in a collection of essays, **SOWETO POETRY** (~~McGraw-Hill, 1982~~) edited by Michael Chapman.

While seeming at times oddly prescriptive, some might even say legislative in a fashion quite alien to the way Ndebele normally performs his critical task, his reading of Mtshali's verse (~~"Artistic and Political Mirage: Mtshali's Sounds of a Cowhide Drum"~~) does succeed in disclosing the underlying themes in Ndebele's general critique of black South African literature, which is continually to oppose to the merely realistic descriptions of black oppression an art which, in his own words "can effectively contribute to the awakening of the suppressed consciousness of the oppressed, thus liberating their humanity by instilling in them a determination to struggle toward the realisation of a creative life." (**Soweto Poetry**, p.190) In conformity with such a reading, Ndebele will then seek in poem after poem to distinguish between verse which aims merely to arouse "pity" rather than create what he calls "true sympathy" with the oppressed. For example, in the same essay he explains

his negative reaction to one particular poem, "Man in Chains": "Again there is [in this poem] utter hopelessness, and one's reaction ^{to these men is} is likely to be that of pity rather than of true sympathy. After reading the poem one is left with the impression that, after all, nothing can be done; suffering is inevitable." Ndebele concedes that Mtshali's verse is a "world of concrete images" and grants the poet his "powers of detailed description" but it soon becomes obvious that this is faint praise indeed. In a poem titled "The Face of Hunger" Mtshali portrays the physical deformation of a man caused by hunger: "I counted ribs on his concertina chest; / bones protruding as if chiselled / by a sculptor's hand of Famine." Ndebele's reaction to the poem is frosty: "This sort of realism aims to shock the reader into a recognition of the black man's plight, as if the appropriate concrete description can prompt the appropriate emotion."

A reader may, with reason, wonder what else would provoke such an appropriate emotion, but anyone who knows anything about poetry can recognise at a glance that there is something fundamentally flawed about Ndebele's theory of artistic representation here. Ndebele may appear to be denouncing a "naive realism" in Mtshali's verse but in fact it is his own epistemology that is naive, which assumes that description is nothing more than a respecter of surfaces. In a way one feels that as a poet Ndebele is undone by his own theory. He began publishing verse in the late ^{1960s} ~~60s~~ in such journals as The Classic, Purple Renoster, Izwi, Contrast and Staffrider. Except for his much anthologised piece, "The Revolution of the Aged", compared to the precise images and tension of line in Mtshali's poetry, Ndebele's verse often sounds chatty - "There are voices in this house / I don't know which / I'm in the warm darkness / of my blanket" ("The Man of Smoke"); and when it is not chatty, his verse is relentlessly folklorish: "i,m afraid,mama - the elephant - / it

flaps its ears now; i can hear./ chase it away,mama,/ let it go away,ma / lest it eats us up." ("A Child's Delirium"). And of course, this kind of verse wears its allegorical intentions on ^{its} sleeve. But whether or not one considers Ndebele's reading of Mtshali's poetry justified, what is made explicit throughout the essay is an aesthetic grounded inescapably in a commitment to exploratory and transformative art. "Poetry should not only shock us into a fresh recognition of familiar situations," he tells us, "but should force us to consider dismantling oppressive structures." (p.193)

After completing his first degree in Lesotho, Ndebele taught English and Mathematics at the local St. Agnes High School before proceeding to Cambridge University where, under special arrangement for overseas students already in possession of a first degree, he was able to take in 1978 his Cambridge tripos in only two years instead of the usual three, presenting two essays for his dissertation, 'Creativity and Morality in Dostoevsky' and an essay on 'Stephen's Aesthetic Theory in James Joyce's Portrait of a Young Man'. By the end of the 1970s and throughout the next decade, a climate of ~~armed~~ ^{the Artist as} intervention reminiscent of the years of Leavis and Scrutiny periodically racked English studies at Cambridge, which were sometimes conducted in an atmosphere fraught with factious politics, in which traditionalists were often pitted against Marxist structuralists, and strait-laced textual exegetes took to the barricades against deconstructionists and other vanguards of cultural theory. Ndebele admits to have come under the influence of lecturers like Colin McCabe, himself the focus of one of the bitterest ideological wars occasionally fought out at the university over candidates considered too revolutionary or subversive in their approach to the study of literature. But on returning to teach at the University of Lesotho Ndebele found fresh

impetus for his own creative efforts in sharing the company of two older writers, Ayi Kwei Armah, the Ghanaian novelist, and Luis Bernardo Honwana, the Mozambican short story writer, both of whom seemed, paradoxically, to have found temporary shelter in Lesotho under the very shadow of what was increasingly becoming one of the most murderous regimes fighting for its very life across the border in South Africa.

Except for another short spell abroad, this time in the United States where in 1983 he obtained his doctoral degree in English Literature and Creative Writing at the University of Denver, Ndebele has rarely been far removed from Southern Africa, from the smell of tear gas and sound of gunfire. For his doctoral dissertation, he offered his short story collection **FOOLS and Other Stories** which in 1984 won him the prestigious Noma Award for original works first published in Africa. Faithful to his aesthetic, to the intention of rescuing the ordinary from the shadow of the spectacular, his stories are engaged less directly with the political process and much more with the interior lives of his black characters; reflecting a quiet confidence that such lives are significant, the stories are written in a straight forward language, stripped bare of any false rhetoric or verbal dazzle. In his book **The Mind of Africa** Allister Sparks refers to this quality of "a rising confidence that surmounts their pain and humiliation" which he found exemplified in the African characters of "Fools."

Though publication of these stories might have led to some recognition for him, it is Ndebele's writing on culture and politics rather than his fiction which has attracted the widest attention at home and abroad. Domiciled for a time in Lesotho, which is an enclave within South African borders, the writer could hardly have felt himself really exiled from the country of his birth.

Nor, it would appear, did many people involved in cultural work regard him as much of an exile, as the numerous invitations for him to speak inside the country would seem to attest; all the same, there is some evidence that by the end of the 1980s the South African regime was beginning to be irked by Ndebele's frequent interventions in the cultural debates within the country. For example, until 1992 he was prevented from taking up his appointment to the Vice-Rectorship of the University of Western Cape on the grounds that a so-called "Coloured" candidate would be more suitable for a post in a university catering largely to a "Coloured" population. Nevertheless, following the partial dismantling of apartheid in 1990, Ndebele was back in South Africa and between 1991 and 1992 he was appointed head of the Department of African Literature at the University of ^{the} Witwatersrand, one of the country's top academic institutions. Surprisingly, his stay at what is still a predominantly *not black* white university was to be extremely short. The cause of his sudden departure from Witwatersrand has never been adequately explained but, at any rate, dissatisfied with the way things were run at that institution, in 1992 Ndebele was off again to take up his long-awaited appointment as Vice-Rector of the University of Western Cape. At the time of writing, the latest word is that after only a year Ndebele has been lured away from the University of the Western Cape to take up another post at the predominantly black University of the North. Such constant migration could mean either restlessness or universal demand for Ndebele's skills as an educator.

With the possible exception of nursing or social work for women, medicine and the law for men, education has long been the single most important channel for intellectual work among black South Africans. If this generalization is true, then at the time that Ndebele was growing up, his parents - a father who

was a teacher, then school inspector, and a mother who was a nurse - probably represented what was then commonly thought to be the pinnacle of achievement in the black community. Similarly, for his parents' generation Ndebele must represent the very apotheosis of personal and academic achievement: from the headship of various English and African literature departments at the Universities of Lesotho (1984) and Witwatersrand, Johannesburg (1991-2), to the Vice-Rectorship of the University of the Western Cape (1992 -93), he now occupies a strategically very important position as Vice-Chancellor of the University of the North. For such office he has had adequate preparation. At the University of Lesotho not only was he professor of literature but he also briefly acted as Dean of Humanities (1987) and in 1988 became Acting Vice-Chancellor at the same university.

In looking back over Ndebele's career it is surprising how many of its various strands hang together to produce a coherent pattern. Behind him is seventeen years of teaching, two of which were at high school and the rest at university levels, with supporting work in research and university administration. Among South African blacks, with the possible exception of Es'kia Mphahlele, he is the only one who comes to mind who can demonstrate this commitment to teaching and educational administration while pursuing a parallel career as a writer. In this latter vocation he also performs such ordinary tasks as are expected of writers who struggle for the nurturing of a national literature, which means in South Africa giving support to other aspiring, especially younger, writers. Since 1987 he has been president of the Congress of South African Writers and sits on numerous editorial boards of academic and literary journals, including Southern African Review of Books, Raven Press, Perspectives in Education, and Current Writing, as well as

participating in jury panels for the awarding of literary prizes. Many people would consider this catalogue of duties and responsibilities too long for any one person. Nevertheless, what can not now be in doubt is that Ndebele currently occupies a position of unique, even unparalleled power, in the cultural institutions of post-apartheid South Africa. And yet his influence has arisen only partly as a result of his performance as a creator of exceptional fiction; ^{it came} ~~but~~ most significantly, as a result of his lucid critiques of what he has elsewhere referred to as the "outworn epistemological structures" of South African society. "The aim is not to allow ourselves to be overwhelmed by this culture and the rigidly entrenched methods of its operation, which has ^{ve} become second nature to those whose behaviour ^g has been completely conditioned by it," Ndebele told a symposium on South African culture and politics at Northwestern University in 1987. "Rather, it is to understand it, throwing away all its evils, while making its best aspects available to the enrichment of the emergent and highly creative alternative culture." (~~Rediscovery, p.131~~)

What is rare in Ndebele's writing on South African cultural politics is that this criticism is not simply and exclusively directed, as one might have expected, against the political institutions of the dominant official culture; in fact, as often as not, it is the failure of the oppressed to conceptualise ^z for themselves alternative forms of self-representations ^a in which vertical structures of oppressor over oppressed are subverted, which draws his most persistent criticism. At a time when internal resistance to apartheid was about to reach its climax, Ndebele offered the directest challenge to the liberation movement - "the political wing of the struggle," as he called it - not to regard the arts as "a mere means to an end - as a means to manipulate

public thought, for example." In his view, such a function could easily "degenerate into being a purely manipulative venture in which even those in the forefront of the struggle can use art to limit and contain the expressive capacity of the people. In other words, instead of asserting that we need the arts to mobilize people, as a primary goal, rather we should say we need the arts because they extend the limits of democratic participation."

~~Rediscovery, p.130~~ 1) And what the speaker was proposing at this conference was "a determined groping towards fundamental and liberating alternatives," as he put it.

Interestingly, Ndebele's address followed a speaker from the A.N.C. (Keorapetse Kgotsile) who advised the writers to "cut out the pseudo-academic, pseudo-intellectual, whatever whatever, and just address ourselves to life." Ndebele seems to have ignored this advice, but what one notices about his general criticism is that it is always couched in a language of extreme civility, of deliberate circumspection. Indeed, what immediately strikes one about this language is what Ndebele probably admired most in Sol Plaatje, a pioneer among African writers ^{earlier in} of the early century, and about whom he wrote ~~in 'Actors and Interpreters', reprinted in the Rediscovery essays,~~ that "his tactical humility [was] consciously undercut by the confident poise of language and style." In Ndebele's writing it is not so much the "humility" which is undercut by the "poise" and "style" of his language but the civility which carries its own poisonous malignity. He might have been writing of himself when he said of his predecessor: "What Plaatje recognised in language is the dialectic of ambiguity, of understatement, literary tradition, and subtle, highly suggestive allusion and other similar things." (~~Rediscovery, p.78~~)

Indeed, Ndebele's key-note address to the 1986 Jubilee Conference of the

English Academy of South Africa brings together some of these features in an exemplary manner. He begins by commending the organizers of the jubilee for being willing to consult various individuals and groups in order to accommodate the diversity of interests in the discussions which will follow. In his view this is in keeping "with the demand of the oppressed...for full democracy in the conduct of every aspect of the country's life." But no sooner has he made these blandishments than he enters his first caveat almost as though by some peremptory law of rhetorical necessity: "Yet, well-meaning though these attempts may have been," the speaker now cautions his audience, "it is essential, at such times, that we exercise a state of vigilance that will enable us to ^{express tactical reservations - if only to} ensure that all relevant issues have been brought to the surface, so that we can make pure motives even purer." Given the history of the English Academy the muted, muffled irony about "pure motives" is exactly right. The circumspection is typical of Ndebele's language which is in marked contrast to that of the pamphleteers of the liberation movement whose language, as the poem quoted above stated, is usually "loaded with revolutionary maxims." But if the language carries the undertones of the Cambridge high table, ~~where~~, the oblique irony merely intensifies the sardonic intention. What Ndebele is trying to put across is that the Academy's invitation may seem a democratic move but anxiety remains about the possibility of black intellectuals being coopted in order to legitimize the Academy's standing with the oppressed in post-Apartheid South Africa. This anxiety is not so much stated as hinted at: "Viewed from the angle of those towards whom the hand of friendship is being extended, such democratic largesse can become an unintended trap. For example, it should never be forgotten that behind the hand of friendship is the presence of the Academy's

a history that has left its mark on habits of thought in the literature
culture of this country.

14

solid institutional history! Consequently, when such an organisation seeks urgently to respond to certain pressing exigencies of history it will do so from the assumed validity of its organisational base, and such a base would tend to dictate a strategy of benevolent containment in order to maintain, expand, and to exert influence." Shades of Foucault?

Invariably, there are two antagonistic moments in a Ndebele discourse the pattern of which can be noted even in his recent discussions of the belated collapse of apartheid as an ideology. This approach was particularly noticeable in his contribution to the proceedings of the December 1991 **NEW NATION WRITERS CONFERENCE** in Johannesburg. First, there was a celebration of the end of apartheid as such; then quite punctually, in the very next intake of breath, the readiness to deplore the complacency which a premature celebration may engender among the former victims of apartheid. "The various structures that once characterised their exclusion and repulsive, exploitative white power, now may represent opportunity. The glitter of apartheid: buildings, banks, etc., previously an index of the oppressed's powerlessness, now represent disturbingly, the possibility of fulfillment." The oscillating movement between two poles, between the positive and the negative, between acceptance and rejection, between confidence and scepticism, is so characteristic that it has become the trademark of a Ndebele discourse.

A rarely remarked upon fact about Ndebele's critical commentaries on culture and politics is that, more often than not, they have first taken shape in the form of public address; whether or not first written down, his addresses are initially intended to be spoken or read aloud before a live audience, often a mixture of academic and cultural activists, and it is the oral aspect of his

interventions, which has a bearing on the shape and tone of his utterance, which is often overlooked, and yet it is what constitutes, in fact, the very quality of voice to which the reader is forced to respond in the published essays. The manner of their composition and their final transmission to the audience may go some way to account for the fact that in spite of his considerable reading of current theory, Ndebele's essays are distinguished by their quasi-colloquial tone and a surprising absence of specialized jargon. ~~Not too soon,~~ ~~Readers will now be able to~~ ^{can} evaluate for themselves the quality of Ndebele's thought, for these speeches and addresses have now been published conveniently in a single volume under the title: Rediscovery of the Ordinary: Essays on South African Literature and Culture (Cosan, 1991). The title essay, together with his most celebrated critical evaluation of black South African literature, "Turkish Tales and Some Thoughts on South African Fiction," which won him the 1986 Pringle Award in South Africa, have now been placed side by side in a way that best brings out the continuity of his thought over the past decade. These essays have a special resonance when read against the barbarity of the Apartheid State and what became in writing by blacks a habitual response to the fact of their oppression.

Scattered throughout Ndebele's critical evaluation of black fiction, which is given even sharper expression in this volume, is an impatient rejection of flagrant gesture and spectacular event in the portrayal of black oppression; as we have already noted in his comments on Mtshali's poetry, he tends to classify such writing as mere documentation of political oppression which "confirms without necessarily offering a challenge;" in his view, such writing invites easy recognition from those who suffer and "pity" from those who do not share in the suffering. Precisely because it is grand and

ostentatious in its reflection of social reality, such writing is judged at best to be incomplete, inviting instead "identification through recognition and feeling rather than through observation and analytical thought." And the culture out of which such writing grows and by which it is sustained is one that "frowns upon subtlety of thought and feeling, and never permits the sobering power of contemplation, of close analysis, and the mature acceptance of failure, weakness, and limitations. It is totally heroic. Even the progressive side has been domesticated by the hegemony of spectacle. For example, it will lambast interiority in character portrayal as bourgeois subjectivity."

~~(Rediscovery, p. 47)~~

It is out of this concern for human complexity, ^{that} the need to construct a collective subjectivity which can escape from ^{it} at least temporarily, even if finally unable to defy ^{it} all politically imposed restrictions, that there has grown in Ndebele's mode of reflection an aesthetic which exalts traditional story-telling over and above mere fictionality, but that "mere" is made to carry an extraordinary weight, it seems to me. Ndebele has obviously read Walter Benjamin on the decline of story-telling with some profit but perhaps not too carefully. After all, Benjamin's reading of the opposition between the novel and story-telling and his final judgment about the inexorable decline of the latter is diagnostic rather than prescriptive, recognising as it does in that decline "a concomitant symptom of the secular productive forces of history... [which] have gradually removed narrative from the realm of living speech." (~~Illuminations, p. 87~~) How Ndebele would then read Fredric Jameson's gloss of Benjamin in the "Afterword" to his book, SARTRE: The Origins of a Style, is anyone's guess; for like Benjamin, Jameson sees the traditional story-telling as linked to "specific kinds of experience - social and existential -

structurally available in a given social formation" (p.206) and he locates the golden-age of traditional narratives in "an older village culture." Finally, Jameson puts forward the view that "the extinction of traditional story-telling is by no means exclusively to be seen as loss, privation, catastrophe, impoverishment, but can also be celebrated as a very palpable liberation." Ndebele would probably counter all this by arguing that in South Africa, as indeed in many other parts of Africa, the novel and traditional forms of story-telling confront one another - again to use Benjamin's own phrase - in "totally different historical coordinates"; where the experience which breeds the capacity for story-telling is by no means used up. This is what Jameson himself was probably alluding to when he wrote ^{Fables of Aggression} elsewhere that "today the most vital contemporary 'realisms'.. draw their vitality from the marginality of their content, from their historical good fortune in having as raw material social realities which the dominant culture has not wished to see, let alone to express (as in women's literature, black culture, or gay or colonial literature)." (Fables of Aggression, p.64) It is part of Ndebele's indictment against South African fiction by blacks that in its eagerness to denounce apartheid it has forgotten how to tell stories about ordinary human experiences. His own fiction in which white characters sometimes scarcely make an appearance or in which, when they do, they become merely tangential or act only as catalysts to the main action, is intended to underline the importance of a black subjecthood which can operate without having to respond punctually to every political summons.

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LEWIS NKOSI

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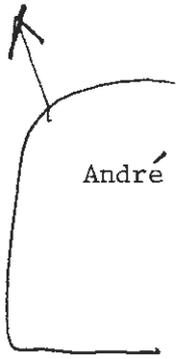
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