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Notes on Contributors

ROBERT BOYERS is completing a book on Politics In The Novel, 1945-1980, with chapters on Gordimer, Grass, Solzhenitsyn, Semprun, Naipaul, Garcia Marquez, Carpentier, and others . . . STEPHEN CLINGMAN's paper on Gordimer is taken from a Doctor of Philosophy thesis on Gordimer he has written for the University of Oxford. . . . EUGENE GOODHEART has just moved to Brandeis as E. Macy Gross Professor after serving for some years as Chairman of the English Department at Boston University. His books include *The Failure of Criticism* and *Culture & The Radical Conscience* . . . NADINE GORDIMER's most recent work is the novella published for the first time in this issue of SALMAGUNDI. Earlier novels are now mostly available in paperback editions published by Penguin Books . . . ROWLAND SMITH is Chairman of the Department of English at Dalhousie University in Nova Scotia, Canada. He has written frequently on third world fiction in the past and on other works by Nadine Gordimer . . . LEON WIESELTIER is the literary editor of THE NEW REPUBLIC for which he has written a variety of important articles on literary and political subjects. He has also contributed articles to the NY REVIEW and other publications.

A Conversation With Nadine Gordimer*

INTERVIEWERS: ROBERT BOYERS, CLARK BLAISE,
TERENCE DIGGORY, JORDAN ELGRABLY

PART I

R.B.: Would you argue that ideas, and by this I mean really *abstract* ideas, are indispensable to a serious novel of high ambition, not merely as motive, but as texture? It's often thought that ideas fatally endanger novels in the way that ideas are often said to endanger lyric poems, for example. I think of this in connection with Henry James' famous notion of a mind so fine that it couldn't be violated, even by its own ideas. I often remember that when I read your fiction. Though there are a great many ideas in the work one doesn't feel that the mind has ever been violated by any of them because they're always converted into sensuous texture. Do you agree that ideas are important in a novel of high ambition?

N.G.: I can't imagine how there could be a novel of high ambition without ideas; to me, ideas become themes. They are the thematic and the transcendent aspect of any imaginative work, novels and poems alike. When I write a novel, there are usually two or three themes running concurrently. I see them as layers. I don't consciously seek that, it just seems to happen, perhaps because life is so complex. Human beings are complex, and we writers strive for the ultimate expression of the section of life that we dredge out from time and from place. So I think that ideas are of supreme importance, but the word "ideas",

*This is an edited transcript of two interviews. The first (Part One) was conducted in October 1982 at Skidmore College before a large audience. The second (Part Two) was conducted by Jordan Elgrably in Paris in July 1982. Our special thanks go to Martha Callahan and Sarah Strickler for preparing this transcript in its early stages.

to me, comes afterwards. You analyze the themes of a novel, and often there are themes that one person would find that another would not. There are themes that come in without the right of being there. I think they may come from some kind of collective consciousness. Often they appear, not by the writer's intention, but from the society which acts upon, influences him or her.

I'll give you an example. To my astonishment and that of those who know me, one critic, writing of *Burger's Daughter*, said that it was a profoundly religious book. Yet when I really think about the book, I can see that it could be interpreted that way. At one point in the book, Rosa, who is starting out from under a political interpretation of the meaning of life, finds that this interpretation is not quite adequate to the mystery of life. Yet, in the end, she comes to accept her father's attitude towards life and his ideological political stand because she realizes that political commitment is not only about suffering but that it is actually an attempt to end suffering. When I think about the people in *Burger's Daughter*, I find that what they're trying to do is reorder society in such a way as to do away with as much suffering as possible. The idea of putting your life on the line, and risking suffering, is not only a political but a traditionally Christian idea: first comes suffering, then redemption.

R.B.: And the fact that these characters, themselves, don't think of it in religious terms, but have translated it into secular terms, doesn't make it less religious.

N.G.: Yes, the central idea of *Burger's Daughter* is transcendence. And though the characters act on behalf of secular goals, one could certainly see their belief in the cause and their ability to transcend immediate difficulties as *religious* in nature.

R.B.: Have you ever paid deliberate attention to the danger, represented vividly by the writings of Camus, that strenuous moral analysis in fiction may turn, as I think it sometimes does in Camus, to a kind of sentimentousness? I thought about this recently when I read an interesting statement you had made some years ago, namely that "the only dictum I always remember is André Gide's 'salvation for the writer lies in being sincere, even against one's better judgement.'" I thought that was a remarkable statement. I wondered if you'd say something about it.

N.G.: I think that the decision to be sincere is an artistic one. It's the kind of decision I often face when I'm writing because I have strong political convictions in the country where I live. I am partisan, yes. Sometimes when I'm writing, there will be a character who belongs to

"my" side, the side of radical opposition to apartheid, but who is devious, perhaps exhibitionistic, and represents certain lies that are told on "my" side, too, for expedience. If I were Lionel Burger I would no doubt say, "Well, what does this artistic sincerity and integrity matter? What matters is the cause." But I don't accept that. As a writer, I feel that my first duty is integrity as an artist. I have a superstitious notion that if I lie, my characters will be damaged, somehow; their verity will be destroyed. I'm making that kind of decision all the time, while knowing that I'm writing something that would be criticized and regarded as disloyal by the people on whose side I am. Lately, I've written a couple of stories where this decision has become a minor obsession with me because in a society like that of South Africa there are so many people, and so many sides. There are people whom one trusts absolutely who turn out to be police agents. I've talked to people like Kundera who know that too well. It's a very extraordinary thing to take someone into your confidence only to discover that all along he's an agent who's been paid to spy on you.

R.B.: While we're on the subject of the role sincerity plays in the writing of fiction, I'd like to discuss a very minor though perhaps an important criticism I've heard levelled at *Burger's Daughter*; it focuses upon the section of the novel in which Rosa Burger goes to France. The criticisms are basically levelled in terms of the incoherence this introduces into a book which is otherwise unified in place, and in terms of the human types that are used. The notion is that, in France, Rosa meets up with people who are altogether different. Not only does the setting change, but the tone of the book changes. It has always struck me as one of the most wonderful things about that book that it can accommodate that kind of seeming incoherence. I think about that in connection with what you've just said, as a decision that has more to do with sincerity than with the careful or the correct aesthetic choice. It seems to me, if you wanted to be absolutely safe and correct, you might not have included that section of the book. Am I misreading?

N.G.: No. I don't ever want to be safe and correct. I want to say what I think, what I see, and what I think needs to be said. First of all, looking back on it, I think that that section of the book is too long. It should have been shorter. I could have said what I wanted to say less expansively. Now I'd have to say also that there was too much about Rosa getting out of South Africa. But — I stress — the section which takes place in France cannot be looked upon as self-indulgent or as something that is not germane to the book. It was necessary to have

Rosa leave South Africa in order to show *how impossible it was for her to stay away*. It was not just the frivolity of those people in France, their political irresponsibility and inability to understand Rosa's concrete South African experience. For Rosa, these people seem as if they're from another planet. Yet the attitudes of Europe are a large dimension of that which threatens life in South Africa.

T.D.: We've been talking for a while about *Burger's Daughter*, but I'd like to ask you about something which struck me while reading *The Conservationist*. Earlier, you mentioned your concern with the landscape in that book. It's occurred to me, in the little reading I've done of novels coming out of Africa, that there seems to be a distinction in the approach taken by white writers as opposed to blacks. Alan Paton, for example, refers to the land a great deal in *Cry the Beloved Country*. With black writers, it seems the identity is with the people as opposed to the land. Does that jibe with your knowledge of such writers?

N.G.: Yes. I think there's something very interesting there. I think that whites are always having to assert their claim to the land because it's based, as Mehring's mistress points out, on a piece of paper — a deed of sale. And what is a deed of sale when people have first of all taken a country by conquest? Tenure is a very interesting concept, morally speaking. When you come to think of it, what is tenure? What is "legal" tenure? Blacks take the land for granted, it's simply there. It's theirs, although they've been conquered; they were always there. They don't have this necessity to say, "Well I love this land *because* it's beautiful, *because* it's this, that, and the other."

T.D.: Does the anxiety for whites, then, become not only the need to establish that tenure of the land, but to compensate for a lack of interpersonal identity? Or is there a genuine sense of identity with the people in the way that blacks can respond to a community rather than to a landscape?

N.G.: No, the whites identify themselves as a racial community too. I should have mentioned that the farmers, who are mainly Afrikaners, have much more of a relationship with the land than other whites have because they've tilled it for so long and are very close to it. The pit is that this is used as a justification on the part of the white power structure, for owning it exclusively.

T.D.: I wonder if I could ask a journalistic question, in connection with your own interest in other African writers. You've done a lot, not only to make your own contribution to the novel, but to bring attention

to what else was going on in the literature of that region. What writers, currently, do you especially admire, in South Africa, or on the continent as a whole?

N.G.: There are quite a number of black writers in South Africa that one wishes were better known. A white writer whom I admire very much is somebody who was unknown here until very recently. Five years ago I tried to interest my own publishers in an earlier book of his, and they were stupid enough not to take it up. Last year Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* was published here. I'm sure many of you have read it or seen it. I think he's a wonderful writer and marvelous things are going to come from him. Among black writers, there is one who is particularly well-known, Es'kia Mphahlele. He has written very fine essays and short stories which are being reprinted here and there. He's also a novelist. He was a professor at the University of Pennsylvania. He was in exile from South Africa in various parts of the world for nineteen years, and now I'm glad to say that he's back. He's written a wonderful autobiographical book called *Down Second Avenue* that I'm sure is available in paperback here; and a critical work (I don't think critical works can ever really be outdated) called *The African Image*. A wonderful black novelist in exile is Alex LaGuma.

There are very talented younger people coming up who've been published locally in South Africa, including some good playwrights, but they haven't published much and you can't get their books here. There's also a South African Indian writer who is very good, and I'm trying to get somebody interested in him here. His name is Ahmed Essop. He's written a short, very strange, ironic novel called *The Visitation* and also a book of stories. He writes with a special feeling for details of people's lives and for strange lives hidden behind walls.

R.B.: Are there regular contacts between black and white writers in South Africa? Is it, for example, considered legitimate for serious white writers to comment publicly upon works produced by blacks?

N.G.: Well, the contact is invariably politically charged. When a white writer includes black characters in his work he expects to come in for a lot of criticism — which is more political than literary in nature. During the seventies, when the black consciousness movement was particularly strong, there was a withdrawal on the part of black writers, painters, and actors from contacts with whites, and from any kind of professional association or professional loyalty and interest. In other words, it's the old division, again, based on the idea that a black non-writer and writer have more in common than a black writer and a white

writer — which on the professional level, of course, isn't true. There is now in South Africa some informal contact between black and white writers. There's much more contact in the theatre. Indeed, we writers sometimes look with an envious eye on the way black and white seem to work together in theatre. The actors don't concern themselves with the criticism that they are working in a non-racial organization when it is "correct" to work only with blacks. They ignore their differences and go on because they feel that they're doing good work, they're enriching their range. The trouble with writers is that we theorize much more and do our work alone. The people associated with the theater belong to a community; their work requires that.

In 1976, we started a writers' organization that lasted for two years. As you know, 1976 was the year of the Soweto uprising, which spread all over the country and exacerbated the feeling between blacks and whites during that time. We didn't have many white members, because we decided that this couldn't be, so to speak, a "corporate" organization. We couldn't worry about strictly literary matters. What we had to worry about were writers who went to prison, writers whose books were banned, and writers who, themselves, were banned — meaning that they couldn't move around freely or work and publish freely. We raised money to help support their families while they were in jail. This sort of thing, of course, didn't make us very popular with the government. And on the other hand, if you were in that organization, you had to be committed to the idea of black liberation. So we lost a lot of white writers because of this. They would argue that they were writers, not political activists. For two years we were useful, but then the black journalists' organization began to pressure the black members of our group to form an all-black writers' organization. Our fellow black writers were put in a difficult position; many of them resisted for a long time, although they were also being harrassed by the police and advised not to mix with these trouble-maker "white leftists." They were being pulled from both sides, so eventually we had an extraordinary meeting where we decided we would have to dissolve our organization, which we sadly did, but without hard feelings. I still have black writer friends who were in that organization.

R.B.: Is there a substantial community of readers in South Africa itself? Or do you essentially feel that you write for readers outside of South Africa?

N.G.: Well, that's really two questions. First of all, I, myself, don't write for any audience. I simply write for anybody who is there to read

me. Unlike Rosa Burger, I never have any idea of whom I'm addressing. She had to because she was trying to see herself, to put herself together out of other people's ideas of her. I often say that the best way to write would be as if you were already dead. That way, you don't have to worry whether you're going to offend your grandmother or your lover or child; more particularly, the people whose political views you share. You have to take that freedom for yourself. I often find when I've finished a book or a story that it really may have awful consequences for me personally. But it's done, and there it is. While I'm writing it I have this crazy illusion that it's only for me, and that I don't need to worry about who's going to read it.

You ask about the community of readers in South Africa. Until a few years ago, the figures were quite high, considering the size of the country and of the literate population. Because of political reasons, we only got television four years ago. The officials were worried that it was too risky. I don't know why, because it's entirely government-owned and everything is highly censored. They don't let anything out over any of the channels that could possibly harm them. But since there has been television, apparently there has been a significant drop in the readership figures. Perhaps our readers will return to books once they get sick of the government-controlled box.

C.B.: You've written, in various autobiographical sketches, of the rather typical Commonwealth upbringing you experienced: the colonial schools, the repressive and imitative social rituals, the slighting of the indigenous culture and history that surrounded you in South Africa. As a Canadian, my immediate reaction is to place you in the Commonwealth tradition, in the company of such authors as Joyce, Naipaul, Katherine Mansfield, Doris Lessing, and Patrick White. Others might link you with the Russian and English authors of the nineteenth century or, understandably, with the literary tradition of the African continent.

Could you help us by placing yourself within a tradition and perhaps talk about your formation as a contemporary South African writer? What did you have to overcome? What writers influenced you most early on and with whom do you now feel most closely identified?

N.G.: I'm going to start off with an objection. It's always easy to start off that way. I think that Patrick White and I have a completely different basic identity from the other writers that you mentioned, because we are *still there*. But, to answer your question, I think I was very lucky when I began to write at the early age of fifteen, because

I was able to write in a very unselfconscious and natural way. I enjoyed a strange kind of freedom, living as I did, in such a cultural backwater from the point of view of the rest of the world, a place which totally ignored what was on its own doorstep and instead was always looking toward the main cultural streams abroad. There was the local public library in the small gold mining town in which I lived, and I was like a calf in clover there; nobody guided or advised me; nobody told me which books I ought to read if I wanted to become a writer. I read a lot of French and Russian nineteenth-century novels, in translation of course, and I drew, completely unselfconsciously, from whatever there was for me to feed on there.

But, at the same time, as I was beginning to write, I felt that nobody would be interested in the world that I knew, that indeed I wasn't living in the world, that the world I knew about in books was something to aspire to, perhaps to see one day; to walk in Virginia Woolf's and Dickens' London, to come to Nathaniel Hawthorne's and Ernest Hemingway's America. Faulkner I read later: I might have found some parallels with my own life if I'd read Faulkner in my teens, but I didn't — at least not until my late teens.

Then I read Katherine Mansfield's stories, which rang a bell because she was somebody *also* living at the end of the world, knowing that she did, and writing about simple things in her own life. This made me feel that this gold mining town in which I lived, the people around me there, the little dramas in the street — that these were things one could write about, and which, perhaps, somebody might even be interested in reading about.

Growing up as a white colonial in South Africa, I spoke, read and wrote in English because, at that time, we were part of the British Commonwealth. Naturally, these political realities caused me to identify with English literature and culture, rather than with American or other Anglo-Saxon cultures, and in spite of the fact that the province in which I was born in 1923 had been a Boer republic. I remember as a little girl celebrating the twenty-fifth anniversary of the ascension to the throne of King George VI: it was autumn and I went out into the garden and cut off branches of leaves to decorate the house, and felt very patriotic. It was *our* king and queen. So I would have to admit that at the beginning, if I could claim any tradition, I claimed the British tradition.

But more precisely, when I began to write I chose as a model, from the point of view of attitude (I'm not talking about a stylistic model

but an approach to the world), that of British liberal writers, and in particular, the Bloomsbury people, such as E.M. Forster. Forster's *Passage to India* was another book that spoke to me in a way that I didn't quite understand, yet it represented the only British liberal tradition of that era and, at the same time, it referred to a foreign country in the way that my own country was a foreign country. D.H. Lawrence, De Maupassant, Chekhov, and Hemingway were also a great influence on me when I first began to write short stories, very different as they all are. But, then who is there, what modern writer of short stories has not been influenced by those four? They created the modern short story. So in a way, I suppose my influences were the same as anybody else's writing in the English language.

What came later was a kind of analysis of my own work, of the attitudes that it implied and, in some cases, of the inappropriateness of following those foreign, imported attitudes. I'm telling you this now in an analytical fashion. It didn't happen to me that way. I simply felt my way out of aping the way British liberals thought because it was inappropriate to the life that I was living and to what was around me. I had to find a way to express what I had to say because it was coming out of my own life and that society in which I lived. So I had to break with that English liberal tradition and range further.

C.B.: How does one break with the English liberal tradition and still remain an English-speaking liberal?

N.G.: Well I don't think *that* kind of English-speaking liberal exists any more in South Africa. If this person does exist, he or she is an anachronism and the work is likely to be anachronistic.

C.B.: Could Alan Paton have been that at one time?

N.G.: No, not really, because if you look at *Cry the Beloved Country*, which was such an important book in political terms — it made the rest of the world wake up to South Africa in a way that it hadn't before — you'll find the thinking was a British, Christian, liberal tradition with a strong emphasis on *Christian*. Whereas the liberals I'm talking about in literature were indeed agnostics, if not atheists. Certainly the whole Bloomsbury crowd were; Forster was the ultimate humanist writer, surely? So Paton, I think, was linked more to the missionary tradition. This attitude didn't have any meaning for me at all, because I didn't have any religion. I'm Jewish, but have never had any kind of Jewish upbringing; I have never been to a synagogue except for a wedding, etcetera. In fact, I read the Bible as literature, when I was growing up. The lack of a religious upbringing had made my

approach to literature different from Paton's. Our respective motivation for writing was not the same: Paton wrote *Cry the Beloved Country* at forty out of social indignation. Whereas, I started to write at fifteen the way other kids dance or sing: because they just have some drive to do so.

T.D.: In looking back over the development of your career, you recall your concern about people not being interested in the world that you had to write about. In a review of Wole Soyenka's autobiography published last year in *The New York Review of Books*, you praise especially the precise, concrete detail that Soyenka brings into the work which, you say, enables us to make contact with the world he writes about. Your own work has been both praised and faulted for its accumulation of precise detail. Do you feel this density of detail is what makes the strange world you write about more accessible to people elsewhere?

N.G.: No, I don't think so. It's *significant* detail that brings any imaginative work alive, whatever the medium. If you can't see things freshly, if you can't build up through significant detail, then I think you fall into cliché, not only in the use of words and phrases, but even in form. That fresh eye is the most valuable thing in the world for any writer. When I look at my early stories, there's a freshness about them, there's a sensuous sensibility that I think you only have when you're very young; after that you go on to analyzing your characters, you go on to narrative strength. But first, you've got to have that fresh eye with which to see the world.

What I sensed in Soyenka is that, for the most part, as a middle-aged man he is able to look back on his childhood and still see his early life with that fresh eye. However, I see in myself the tendency to lose it as one gets older. I don't think that in my later work I've got that vividness quite to the extent that I had it, though I may have gained other strengths. I have lost that freshness because I've seen everything too often.

T.D.: What other strengths would you say you have gained?

N.G.: Well first of all, I think that narrative was often weak in my early work. I've always been interested in literature that was held together by what I think of as invisible stitches or invisible connections. But when attempting a complex novel, like *A Guest of Honour* or *Burger's Daughter*, one can't depend solely on that kind of intuitive observation. So in order to develop complex themes you have to develop narrative strength. Perhaps that's a compensation then: a little of the one went and I gained with the other.

T.D.: I'd like to pursue the issue of detail one step further. In *The Conservationist*, the protagonist, Mehring, is endowed with the kind of consciousness that causes him to sometimes focus very closely on precise detail, and in one passage of the book, speaking through Mehring's consciousness, you say: "distress is a compulsion to examine minutely." Is your compulsion to examine minutely any sign of distress, or, are your examinations simply a matter of artistic intuition?

N.G.: No, I was referring purely to times of stress when you feel that in order to hang onto your nerve you've got to look at that paper cup on the table because that cup is *there*. It's made of paper and it's full of water and you can touch it: it's real. I was thinking of those moments in life when there seems to be no solid ground underfoot; when you cling to some apparent sanity, as evinced in a concrete object.

C.B.: . . . the very cupness . . .

N.G.: Yes — indeed. However, the criticism that you mention about the accumulation of detail, I think, comes from comparison with my earlier books, where there is much less descriptive detail. But in *The Conservationist*, the landscape is the most important character. So therefore, it had to be allowed to speak and the land could only speak and come alive for the reader through my finding its significant details.

R.B.: In *July's People* you describe a South Africa in the throes of political revolution. Though it's not possible to say what exactly will occur in the later stages of that revolution, it does seem likely that white people will not want to stay around to see it through. Do you think there will inevitably be a time, in the near future of South Africa, when sensible whites, whatever their political convictions, will have to get out in order for blacks to consolidate their gains?

N.G.: I would hope (and there are some signs) that "sensible whites" are busy trying to find ways to stay, not to go. Nevertheless, this may be difficult, because we whites have been brought up on so many lies; we've been led up the garden path, or sold down the river by our ancestors in South Africa. In other words, whites have developed a totally unreal idea of how they ought to live, of their right to go on living in that country. Consequently, they must undergo a long process of shedding illusions in order fully to understand the basis for staying in South Africa. Unfortunately, there aren't enough people who have the will to attempt this. It's very hard to peel yourself like an onion, without producing a lot of tears in the process. Yet, it is absolutely necessary for anybody who wants to stay. People say to me: "Isn't it a terribly depressing place to live?" Well in some ways it is and one

gets filled with self-disgust for being there. But, at other times, it's completely the other way, because there are people there who are so remarkable. The wonderful thing is, that every time you think now it's all finished; this one's gone off to jail, or that one has emigrated, that one is forced into exile, and you allow yourself to think there are not going to be any more people of that caliber, you're proved wrong. Because with each generation there are more people who grow up and rise to the occasion, and this gives you back your faith in the human spirit.

It's just over a year ago that, at last, black trade unions were recognized. I say that to you in one sentence, but it's very complex because there are all kinds of conditions that hedge about this new right that has finally been given after three hundred and fifty years. The fact is, working for this right provided an opportunity (looking at it from the white point of view because that's what you're asking me about) for young whites in universities to work *with* blacks not *for* blacks — no patronizing proxy — in a productive and progressive way, that didn't require blowing up somebody or hurting anybody. These young whites began to work with blacks in trade unionism. Blacks have, perforce, had no experience of union organization. Trade-union affairs, as we know, are very complex. So, it became necessary for young whites to move in among blacks, to offer their expertise so that blacks could establish union rights.

Well, this has been done at great risk; ultimately, one white even lost his life. Neil Agett was a young doctor who decided that he could do more for blacks if he worked as a trade-union organizer. He moved into this work and did it extremely well, stepping out of leadership as soon as people could take over themselves. Of course, to organize people in South Africa, to provide a rallying point, means that people do get a political training from the experience, as well. And when there's some trouble, when there are strikes, the usual thing that occurs is that the government looks around for "agitators." They don't believe that people are simply trying to assert their rights. So then, the police look for those who seem to know the most and who have the access to help from outside. So they round up these young whites. Many of them spent months and months in preventive detention last year, where all sorts of terrible things happened to them. Indeed, Neil Agett was found hanged in his cell. That, of course, is tragic, as well as inspiring, depending on which way you look at it.

I'm quoting this to show you that there are some whites who, one way or another, are looking for ways to prepare themselves, to live differently under a black majority government in a non-racial state. They believe in a non-racial state and they think that the way toward it is through black liberation. I'm one of them.

R.B.: Are there external political models available to those who wish to create a revolution in South Africa? Would you yourself think of the revolutions that have been consolidated in other countries, in Latin America, in Africa, in Asia and so on, as appropriate models, or is the South African situation so very different that no external model will do?

N.G.: Well it gives me a little shudder when you speak of models for a revolution, perhaps because one's unlikely ever to hear of ideal revolutions in one's lifetime. These other models are pretty bloody and terrible, aren't they?

R.B.: Yes, they are. But do you hope to achieve the drastic changes which need to be achieved in South Africa without a revolution? And if a revolution is to come, wouldn't one want to consult at least some of the available models, however one regarded them?

N.G.: It seems to me that there are plenty of models, but they are not necessarily the models that one wants to follow. I have the obstinate utopian notion — and I'm not alone in this — that we must try to achieve this revolution without the terrible bloodshed that has happened in other places. But, whether one can do that or not, I don't know. I think the accompanying thought is that no two situations are the same. History *more or less* repeats itself, but never in quite the same way, though there are lessons to be learned from social upheaval elsewhere: things to be avoided, things to try to attain. However, South Africa musn't be confused with other countries in Africa. It's different because it is by far and away the most industrialized, the most advanced, and the most developed of any country in Africa.

R.B.: Of course, studying your portraits of Marxist revolutionaries, one has a sense that they are utterly different from the figures one reads about in novels by French and Soviet writers; as incomparable as the Rhodesian communists depicted in Doris Lessing's earlier writings seem to be. But let me shift direction a bit and ask what do you make of the idea, which is quite popular in some circles, that the most interesting writing, including your own, is almost inevitably produced under repressive circumstances? Of course, one can think of all sorts of exceptions here, but is there something about repressive circumstances

that makes the writings of Solzhenitsyn, Kundera, and Gordimer, seem much more compelling than others? Is it only that they seem much more compelling to people who live in much more comfortable circumstances? N.G.: I really don't think so. I almost interrupted you and said, "Of course we must remember Proust in his cork-lined room." I don't think that one should look to repression as something that nurtures talent or ability. But, in order to come up with a definitive answer, one would have to bring up a lot of names and conduct a sort of comparative study. In general, I think that this is an illusionary idea that we have; that a society under pressure produces better writers. Of course, you talked about the Soviet Union and the Soviet satellites. We know so few of the Russian writers, though we have reason to believe that the ones we know are the outstanding ones, and the people who are living inside under that repression produce a lot of mediocre work.

So what lesson are we to draw from that example? In South Africa, and in Latin America, societies where there is repression and stimulation through the tremendous contradictions in society, an awful lot of indifferent and downright bad work is produced. Very often a writer writes pretty indifferently even though his heart is, so to speak, on the right side, particularly if he wants to ride the band wagon. Given the book of such an author to review, you and I would feel very bad about panning it because the sentiments are right. So, there comes this awful question of the morality of art and the morality of life, and it's very difficult for critics to find their way through this dilemma. I see it in French literary journals. It's amazing to see the kind of writers in France who are highly praised, beside the one or two writers, to my mind, of real genius. Consequently, a Michel Tournier novel will be reviewed on the same level as some third-rate novel that deals with what the French did in Indo-China, simply because the latter writer's sentiments are appealing.

C.B.: Among your many stories and among your many novels, what are your personal favorites and why should they be that?

N.G.: My choice has little to do with "merit," so you may agree or not. In other words, the book in which you've achieved most, often might not be your favorite book because it might be connected with a period in your life and private events in your life which were painful. Whereas, you may have a very tender feeling for another book that is connected with a pleasant time in your life.

But, if I tried, at least, to be objective I think that I would sit back and say, "you did well with *The Conservationist*." In that book, I

decided to ignore whether I was going to be understood or not, and I decided to trust the reader, and to trust myself. By not bothering about whether the transitions could be followed I was able to write the most lyrical of my writings. I trusted to my own ability to carry the reader across, and I seem to have managed, by and large, to do it, though I've discovered that some people misunderstand the ending of that book and think that the main character Mehring is dead. But then they didn't read very carefully because a few days after the incident where they think he died, the people on the farm telephone him at his office to ask for money to buy wood to make that coffin. I went over that book on a kind of tight rope; teetered now and then, but didn't fall and that has given me a special feeling for it.

I had a different sort of feeling for *A Guest of Honour* because it is not about South Africa. It's what I call a "post-South African" novel. *A Guest of Honour* has little to do with "black and white," but rather something different. In order to write that book, with all its political and human complications connected around trade unionism, I had to do research which I thought I was ill-equipped to do. Usually, I'm lazy about research, but there I proved that I too can go to libraries if I'm sufficiently motivated. I like *Burger's Daughter* for another reason entirely. I had wanted *somebody* to write a novel of that nature for years, someone directly from the center of that milieu. However when the right people did write they wrote non-fiction books, and never attempted novels. I had always felt that it would be presumptuous for me to do so. But, in the end, I decided to be presumptuous and go ahead and do it . . . For me it's the only novel of mine that has a purpose outside simply writing it. It is for me a kind of homage to that group of early communists.

C.B.: Of all your novels, *Burger's Daughter* is the book that's touched me the most. It seems to me to be a book that grows out of *The Late Bourgeois World*. This seems apparent because of the particular rhetorical style of that book. There's an obvious hunger, I think, to convince and to persuade. There's an implied audience, a population, in fact, that is listening to Rosa's narration, to her appeals, which begin as a direct address to Conrad, her feckless young lover, who has no real political convictions, and who thinks of himself as an entirely free man. Rosa tries to tell him what is earnest and real in her life. Next she addresses her thoughts to Baasie: then — at the end — she addresses her father, Lionel. There are rhetorical flashes in this book that are pure dry narration, there are other almost surreal flashes that

are hallucinated and are the expression of the extraordinary amount of personal passion she brings to bear. I'm aware as I read that book, as I am not so entirely in your other books, of the conviction that history, society and politics are as valid a point of departure for character, as psychology or personal experience. You have wedded psychology and history, as Faulkner did in *Absalom, Absalom!* You've achieved a kind of personalizing of history and politics, in a sense much broader than Faulkner knew.

How do you do this? Is it a reflection of that surplus of commitment and that habit of advocacy that is part of your experience in South Africa? Does it require the amount of disillusionment, the amount of suffering and tragedy that the South African experience entails, or is it art? In other words, is it an artful decision or is it your attempt to render the vastness of the experience?

N.G.: It's an artful decision because the vastness of the experience is Rosa Burger's, not mine. I have always been fascinated, astonished, and, in the end, awed, mystified by the incredible overriding passion and commitment in certain people. One hears talk about being a "new man" or a "new woman." These people anticipated that; they are already new men and new women who rose above so many of the personal conflicts that distract the rest of us in our own lives.

I'm interested in what you said earlier, that the point of departure is history rather than psychology. Indeed, you are right, but I would say that this was the psychology of history.

T.D.: I wonder if I could follow up on that with another question about *Burger's Daughter*. This concerns your description of the passionate engagement of the group of people that you're dealing with, in the context of Rosa's life and what happens to her eventually. The problem you explore with Rosa is that she doesn't have that kind of involvement, that kind of engagement throughout much of the novel. To what extent does her problem arise from the fact that she is Burger's daughter rather than Burger's son? Does it make a difference that she is a female rather than a male protagonist?

N.G.: I don't think so because I've seen the same thing happen to males, as well. Perhaps with a male, there is more likely to be a conflict between father and son. Had Rosa been her father's son, she might have rebelled earlier, but otherwise, I don't believe her gender was that important, no.

T.D.: I'd like to broaden that question, then, and apply it to your work in general. Critics have remarked on your ability to speak through both

male and female characters. How do you decide which to use in planning your work? Do you simply imagine the character and find yourself speaking through that character, or is there something that helps you to decide whether the protagonist is going to be male or female, whether the voice is going to be male or female in the book?

N.G.: The choice would depend on the type of experience. In *The Conservationist*, for example, it simply wouldn't be possible to have a woman portray the kind of businessman that Mehring is. So the story occurs to me as the story of a man. There is no ambivalence in my attitude, no moment of indecision at all whether this is a story about a man or a woman. The story occurs to me simply in the way that it has to be. It's similar to deciding whether you're going to tell a story in the past tense, in the present tense, or in the first person. I don't think any writer can explain this, and I think if the writer arrives at this decision through trial and error, then there's something very wrong with that story. You've got to hear it in the right voice.

T.D.: Since we've brought up the topic of sex difference, let me ask you a social rather than a literary question. I think from an American perspective we have a view of South Africa as a land which is divided into an infinite number of categories. You have the Indians, the blacks, and at least two separate groups of whites. Can such divisiveness also be seen at the level of male/female relationships?

N.G.: No, it's all based on color, you see. I'm often asked this kind of question by feminists and I have to reply — somewhat in the way I replied to an earlier question about black and white writers — that the white man and the white woman have much more in common than the white woman and the black woman, despite their difference in sex. Similarly, the black man and the black woman have much more in common than the black man and the white man. Their attitude towards life is much more similar. The basis of color cuts right through the sisterhood or brotherhood of sex. It boils down to the old issue of prejudice and the suppression of blacks of both sexes, to the way that they are forced to live.

The black woman doesn't carry a pass, but her movements are virtually just as restricted as a black man's are. If you're black, you suffer this restriction from the time that you are a little child. Indeed, black parents have to teach their children this, or they'll get hurt inside, damaged psychologically. They are taught that there are certain things they're not to do and there are certain ways that they must learn to address white people. Thus, the loyalty to your sex is secondary to the

loyalty to your race. That's why Women's Liberation is, I think, a farce in South Africa. It's a bit ridiculous when you see white girls at the University campaigning for Women's Liberation because they're kicked out of some fraternity-type club or because they can't get into bars the way men do. Who cares? A black woman has got things to worry about much more serious than these piffling issues. White women have the vote; *no* black, male or female, has. White women have many more rights than black women. Black women are concerned with such basic things as being entitled to own a house, or continuing to live in their house in a black ghetto when their husbands divorce them or die. Until just last year, a black woman had no right to have a house in her name, so if her man walked out on her she had to quickly marry somebody else in order to stay in her home.

PART II

J.E.: You have suggested that the goals of the feminist movement are trivial compared to those of blacks fighting apartheid. And yet you seem to look forward to a day when black women will have the luxury of becoming feminists as well. When you say that they will become militant and fight, do you mean that they will fight against black men?

N.G.: Against their own men, yes, because many are very much exploited by them. But at present they see it in the broader light: a consequence of the exploitation by whites. A common position in South Africa is one where a man living in one of the homelands — the so-called national states, where only 13% of South Africa is available to 80% of the South African people — will be recruited there for the mines or by a large construction company, to come and work for a year on a project. When that project is over, perhaps he'll get another job in the same industry, and he'll be granted permission to continue living in the town; he's wanted as a unit of labor. He will *not* get permission to bring his wife and family. So the woman remains stuck away in the country. As time goes by he will find another woman and will probably have children by her. And then he'll have this conflict of loyalty: to whom shall he send the money he earns? Will he send it home, or contribute it to the household of the woman he's shackled up with? That woman in the country is being exploited by the male because she's literally left carrying the baby; she's left to work the bit of land, bring

up the children, alone. Often the man disappears altogether. Now, where does the blame lie?

J.E.: This was July's predicament in *July's People*.

N.G.: It was, and is a very mundane and terrible one.

J.E.: The West Indian novelist, V.S. Naipaul, talks somewhere about "the dignity of the woman of Africa." Assuming he is implying black women, as a white woman how do you feel you share that dignity?

N.G.: There is no particular dignity attached to being a white woman in South Africa! Far from it. However, it does hinge on what kind of woman you are and how you live. There are some white women with immense dignity attached to them. Helen Joseph¹ is one of them. She has spent virtually her entire life fluctuating in and out of house-arrest. She is closely identified with the black cause and with the left among whites. Most people can suffer house-arrest for a few years — Europeans I'm talking about — and then they leave South Africa. It is not much of a way to live. If you are under house-arrest your ability to act, to further the cause of liberation, is so obviously constricted that you become tremendously frustrated. You feel it's better to leave because you may be able to accomplish more on the outside. But of course there is a certain dignity about being immovable, about just sitting there, *if you can take it*. Helen Joseph is now in her mid-70's. She is very remarkable indeed, and people literally go on pilgrimages to see her, blacks and whites from Europe and within South Africa. Joseph is allowed to go out and work, but she has to be home by six o'clock every day. From six to six, all night in fact, and from Friday until Monday morning at six o'clock. She is not permitted to receive visitors at home. It's possible to go and see her at her place of work and to have lunch with her in a public place. But a banned person such as she is not allowed to go to any assembly (an assembly being three people or more). It is very hard to live like this for many years.

J.E.: Does she have the use of a telephone?

¹ Joseph emigrated from England and became a South African national in the 1930's. Castigated by whites as *kaffirboetie* (a "nigger lover"), she was serving the last day of a five-year detention sentence in 1967, when the government quietly informed her that the original sentence, filed under the "Sabotage Act" of 1962, which charged that her activities furthered the aims of Communism, had been extended for another five years. When government officials indicated to Joseph she could escape her internal exile on a one-way exit permit out of South Africa, she said: "This is what the government would like me to do. And that's why I won't go. My home is here, not overseas." Highly recommended is Helen Joseph's autobiography, *Tomorrow's Sun, A Smuggled Journal From South Africa* (New York: The John Day Company, 1966).

N.G.: She has a telephone; tapped, you know.

J.E.: Which must bar her the freedom of saying what she wants.

N.G.: Oh, she does say what she wants in any case. People like that are not afraid to speak out.

J.E.: I find many parallels in your personal life and your work. Your home, for instance, is open to everyone, as was Lionel Burger's in *Burger's Daughter*. A great number of whites and blacks involved culturally and politically in the anti-apartheid movement come to you free and unhindered. Why haven't you ever been under house-arrest, or banned?

N.G.: First of all, I would say I'm not brave enough. I have never taken any direct political action. Someone like myself takes calculated risks. And everybody has his or her own particular ceiling of risk. Alas, for the majority of whites that ceiling is so low that they don't take any risks at all. And of course by being afraid to do anything they help a repressive regime. This is, I find, the worst kind of intimidation and loss of self-respect, for people of any race.

J.E.: Are your friends followed and suspected by the police?

N.G.: Yes, lots of my friends are in bad straits. But it is a point of honor for banned people to defy these political taboos. They are not supposed to meet other banned people but they often take the risk. If a banned person breaks the ban then he or she may go to prison, and often does. Most of them are extremely brave people who would not otherwise be banned. They are not watching carefully to see that they don't break the ban — they are *trying* to break it.

J.E.: Baiting the authorities?

N.G.: Exactly. They turn tables. So, my view is that if they're prepared to take the risk, that's fine with me, and the lesser risk my friendship involves, and which I am prepared to take.

J.E.: You are often questioned about your reaction to the banning of your books, and once replied "I've been protected all my life and still am." What did you mean by that?

N.E.: Well, I don't know the context. I haven't been protected. By whom? All their lives whites share a certain protection — not protection, privilege is the word: whether you like it or not you are privileged. You don't carry a pass in your pocket. You can move around South Africa absolutely freely. If I want to leave Johannesburg and go and live in Cape Town tomorrow, I haven't got to go to an office and apply for permission to do so. I can just pack my bags and get on a plane and go. But no black can do that. That is what I meant

that I have been privileged since I was born. When it comes to protection, that is something else. I must have meant that if you are fortunate enough to gain some kind of reputation in the outside world you are much closer to comparative freedom. If I do things the South African government doesn't like — and I'm always doing things they dislike — they will hesitate before taking away my passport, or doing anything of that nature with me. I have to make the calculation. Because the outside world will say, the writer Nadine Gordimer, etcetera.

J.E.: Raise hell.

N.G.: In the case of *Burger's Daughter* that occurred. You've got Heinrich Böll, Nobel Prize winner, writing from Germany, you've got John Fowles from England, you've got various well-known writers in America, all signing a protest against the banning of my book, or writing articles of outrage here and there. The government does not like that because they feel that so-called "bad press" does their image more harm than if they show "tolerance" and let a book like *Burger's Daughter*, which is a difficult book — you can hardly call it a rabble-rouser — be published.

J.E.: You're saying that not everyone is likely or able to read and discern the central conflicts in the novel?

N.G.: It is a calculation, yes. The book is unlikely to inflame the masses. So the government calculates that perhaps to let it go free in South Africa will inflict less damage for the government than if it were to remain banned and occasion a bad reaction in the outside world. Nevertheless, we still have censorship of books. There is still a list, each week, of books currently banned.

J.E.: Is this a public list?

N.G.: Well, it's published in something called the Government Gazette. The newspapers always pick up the list. Not only are books banned, but records, posters and even tee shirts, such as the one with the Black Power legend (a clenched fist, the logo of the African National Congress) across it. The ANC² is a banned organization and so the tee shirt must be removed from the market. This Gazette comes out every

² The African National Congress was formed in 1912 and unsuccessfully pursued a course of non-violent protest for black majority rule until 1960, when after pass-burning during the National Anti-Pass Campaign and the Sharpeville incident the ANC was banned by the S.A. government. A year later Umkhonto we Sizwe (The Spear of the Nation) was formed, as the underground wing of the ANC, and continues up to the present to challenge the South African government in traditional military and guerilla terms. Two of the organization's most influential leaders, Nelson Mandela and Walter Sisulu, are serving life sentences, while President Oliver Tambo lives in exile.

week on Friday and one can see what is banned. There has been some relaxation when it comes to sexual explicitness in books. But then there are some surprising exceptions. They banned Updike's last Rabbit novel, *Rabbit is Rich*. The very same week that he got the Pulitzer Prize! But that ban was purely on grounds of sexual explicitness and has nothing to do with politics. Years ago they banned *Couples*.

J.E.: They also banned William Styron's *Sophie's Choice*.

N.G.: Released, finally. The censors are going through a strange period now. They've a great desire to show that they are worldly and enlightened. There is a new director of the Publications Control Board. And indeed, it's a crazy situation. The Director's committees, those that read the books and recommend a ban (whereby the book in question is Gazette-banned), are sometimes subject to an appeal by the Director himself: He appeals against his own committees' banning. The book will then be given fresh consideration by a committee of so-called literary experts.

J.E.: Who are certainly not known publicly as anti-apartheid?

N.G.: No. There are some fringe figures who are not pro-apartheid, but who feel that if you can't beat them, join them. They offer their services to try to assure that books of literary merit are let through. A totally false position, in my opinion. I don't think anybody can tell you or me what we should or should not read. I don't care which professor he is or what knowledge of literature he may have. But there are people who think differently and who believe they are doing a service to serious literature by offering to serve on such an appeal board.

J.E.: Have they approached you to that effect?

N.G.: Oh no, they haven't asked me. That, of course, would be ridiculous. They do ask academics, some of whom are not government supporters, but who are still quite obviously conservative people.

J.E.: Why was the ban on your early novel, *A World of Strangers*, lifted after ten years?

N.G.: Largely because it had become a period piece. A later book of mine was *The Late Bourgeois World*, published in the mid-sixties. By that time the sort of people you meet in *A World of Strangers* were disillusioned with passive resistance, with liberal non-violent action, and had started the Armed Resistance Movement. They were employing violence, so you see that by the time I wrote *The Late Bourgeois World*, which was banned immediately, these people were far more militant than those in *A World of Strangers*, which became an innocuous book by comparison.

J.E.: Mama Mkhonza, the wealthy black woman in *Burger's Daughter* who is a token example of black success in a white capitalist society: Is that character based on someone?

N.G.: There are many like her whom I've known. They are people caught within the power struggle. This kind of grey area is a very interesting one in South Africa. The South African government has to try to find friends among the blacks. From the outside it appears that they simply have the iron heel on them, but it is not as facile as it looks. No, they must try and win them over as well; the famous battle of the hearts and minds. A minister of defense told the South African government in no uncertain terms that the army has the sophisticated weapons and can hold the border (which is enormous and is totally surrounded by places where freedom fighters can set up camps and infiltrate), but that he cannot hold the internal situation. And that is where psychological warfare comes into play. The South African government is always looking for middle-of-the-road blacks. No good winning over a real Uncle Tom, because he'd be totally discredited by even the most moderate black opinion. There are these attempts to buy off, with a little bit of power, the blacks who falter between loyalties. Look at what we formerly called the "Bantustan" leaders, now known as the homeland leaders of these so-called national ethnic states which have been carved out of South Africa. There the government takes someone and begins by bestowing upon him the title of Tribal Authority. He receives a nice house and a big car and a monthly allowance. Stage by stage he brings his people to the day when they shall accept "independence." And on that day the new flag is run up. In the meantime a beautiful house of assembly will have been built with South African taxpayers' money. A border post is thrown up. And, finally, he is officially Prime Minister or President. There is an ostentatious handing-over ceremony. The puppet has been offered a certain measure of power and a lot of perks. When he travels — and this is something I can never get over! — when one of these chaps arrives in Cape Town, it's called a state visit! He is in his own country and he is moving only from one area to the next. But this is what the South African government has done. He arrives in Cape Town and he is honored with a 21-gun salute and members of the South African government run to the airport and meet him, bowing and scraping. A Balkan farce! But, as you can understand, there are always people who'll be tempted by this kind of pacification. There are others, certainly, who'll have nothing of it. The homeland leaders are despised among militant Africans.

J.E.: Are these chieftains-cum-prime ministers as unpopular in their own homeland?

N.G.: Their local situation is more complicated. All of a sudden people there are given the opportunity to acquire land, and as there is this tremendous land hunger, they nibble at the carrot, and as there is this sort of other little privileges. On the other hand, all suffer because they lose their South African citizenship. If they want to travel they never can because nowhere else in the world are the passports of these little puppet countries recognized. And thus, by the stroke of a pen, the entire population loses its citizenship and cannot get a South African passport. Eight million South Africans out of a total population of 26.5 million have been robbed in this way. All black.

J.E.: Are they not allowed to travel in South Africa proper?

N.G.: They may come to South Africa. But suppose somebody from one of these "statelets" goes to school or university in South Africa (there being little opportunity for higher education where they live) and then turns out to be rather clever. He or she is offered a scholarship to go to the United States, England or somewhere in Europe. What's he to do? He can't get a South African passport and Bophuthatswana or Transkei or Venda, whichever of these little places he belongs to, can only issue him a passport which is invalid everywhere in the world. So he cannot go.

J.E.: It's an awful hoax.

N.G.: It's a terrible hoax. Recently, while I was in Israel, I inquired about a very prominent, brilliant and important black woman who'd been invited to Israel. She'd accepted to go but when she applied for a passport she was told that she is, by her tribal origin and by her native tongue, a Tswana, and that she may not have a South African passport. They say she is a citizen of Bophuthatswana, where in fact she was *not* born and where she has never lived. She must apply there for a passport. But the supposition is ludicrous, for you can't go to Israel or anywhere else on a Bophuthatswana passport.

J.E.: As you're speaking of travel, I was wondering how you've been able to combine the wife/mother role with all the traveling that you do?

N.G.: My children are grown up now, so the mother role is much more relaxed. When they were younger I didn't travel quite so much. Indeed, I didn't leave South Africa until I was 30 years old, which now seems incredible. I had neither the money nor the opportunity to leave the country. I have been fortunate in that as I've published more books and have more invitations and opportunities to travel, this has coincided

with a greater freedom in my private life. Insofar as my marriage is concerned, it's the kind of marriage where I've been absolutely free to do what I like and go where I please, on my own.

J.E.: Engagé writing: do you feel it is more paramount than visceral, personal literature? If, for instance, you did not write about apartheid . . .

N.G.: I don't write about apartheid. I write about people who happen to live under that system. I'm not a propagandist, I'm not a reporter. I am a natural writer. By that I mean that I began writing as a child, when I didn't know what apartheid was. Not only didn't I know what it was but apartheid was not officially formulated yet. I was obviously living in a society of intense racial prejudice, but I did not know. I simply accepted that that was the way of the world. I am not, you see, a writer who has been made by my situation. There are some writers who became writers because they became so indignant and were stirred to creativity. I began writing out of a sense of wonder about life, a sense of its mystery, and also out of a sense of its chaos. To me, all art is an attempt to make a private order out of the chaos in life, whether you're a painter or a musician or a writer. So that is how I started, and then the other thing came in implicitly. I was writing for a long time before I stood outside and could analyze what I was doing in terms of politics.

J.E.: André Brink said something I wonder whether you would take issue with. He believes that whether you are writing in Afrikaans or English in South Africa, if you're white you cannot write convincingly of the black situation, and visa versa.

N.G.: I disagree. I think that is too broad a statement. I have said, and I stand by it, that there are certain areas of life, on both sides, which each side cannot write about in terms of the other. There are areas of white life, a kind of ivory tower white life, that are so remote from black experience that I doubt if any black writer could write very convincingly of them. I have had several black characters in my novels and occasionally in a short story and have dared to do it from a black point of view. This has always been within my orbit of experience, my close experience of blacks. But there are some areas where I know I wouldn't succeed. Take the Soweto Riots of 1976, the uprising of young blacks. If I were to sit down tomorrow and write a novel from the point of view of a 15 or 16 year old boy or girl who lived through that experience, it would be false. It is not a matter of generation gap or age difference; I've been a child myself and I've had children of my

own. And writers have very strange powers of identifying themselves with other people and lives different from their own. I think they are strangely androgynous beings as well. But I know I couldn't write about those particular children because they experienced the kind of childhood and adolescence I haven't experienced myself nor really been close enough to anyone who has, to know. I'd never attempt such omniscience.

J.E.: Brink referred to the fact that white and black childhoods are too dissimilar.

N.G.: Yet to say we *cannot* write about each other . . . This is very much concurrent with the black-consciousness view. I am not afraid to contest it as untrue. For over 350 years we have been kept apart in some ways, but locked together in many others. After the working day is over, blacks stream to their ghettos, whites to the suburbs. And yet for years, for generations, because South Africa is a highly industrialized country and blacks have gone through this industrial revolution, whites and blacks have worked alongside one another. Observing each other, absorbing each others' "vibes." We know a great deal that is never spoken and this is a whole area rich in material for any novelist.

J.E.: Could you speak about the "white-consciousness movement" which purportedly is turning away from European culture and trying to establish roots within Africa?

N.G.: Yes, I am for the white-consciousness movement and in my own way I belong to it. It was actually initiated by young whites, university students who, becoming adults in the seventies, inherited a situation where those movements of the left to which they would have naturally belonged were all banned. Blacks were near the beginning of the present period of disaffection with white liberal organizations. They no longer wanted to sit on committees talking about change with white liberals and they even withdrew from student movements. All through my childhood and adolescence the fight among students, primarily in the National Union of South African Students, was to prod the government to allow blacks to belong to that movement. Blacks were with us on that issue, then. By the time my children's generation came along, black students were saying, we don't want to belong to your union. You stem from the ruling class: you must in some way harbor self-interest. You cannot look upon questions of repression from the same point of view. Thank you very much, but don't bother to campaign to let us into your NUSAS because we do not want to join. And we're starting our own student organizations. Which they did. And they have worked out their

own black-consciousness philosophy. They had their publications, alas, all banned now. Steve Biko³ was eminent among them. There was an extremely interesting publication called *Black Review*, published twice a year, where they went into every aspect of intellectual life, conceptualizing what their lives were in a completely new way, divorced from the preconceptions put upon them by their association with whites. It was a period of great self-doubt and soul-searching as well as assertion, and I think it has been imperative for blacks. They were influenced by people like Franz Fanon,⁴ and Fanon watered-down by Americans like Eldridge Cleaver and the Soledad Brothers. Fanon's books were bibles for them. Their ideas were also imbued with Negritude, from West Africa, the teachings of Gandhi (important in the old passive-resistance movement), Marxism, Maoism, you name it, though their fracture with whites mainly came about through the separation of the black-consciousness movement in America.

J.E.: The fact that blacks split themselves off from white liberals encouraged whites to form their own consciousness movement?

N.G.: Well, these young whites were in a vacuum. What were the choices open to them? They might either join the thinking of the laager,⁵ with its white separatism and the perpetuation of white supremacy, or the laager of liberalism, which favored change only insofar as allowing blacks into the existing capitalist system of South Africa. They had come to the conclusion that capitalism and racism in South Africa are totally integrated and entwined, and tried to find a way to convince blacks that, although white, they could opt out of class and race privilege.

³ One of the most intrepid and determined young leaders in South Africa, Steve Biko was still a student when he almost single-handedly formed the black-consciousness movement in 1969. He was co-founder of the Black People's Convention and of the South African Student's Organization. In 1977 the Vorster government banned a number of protest groups. Biko was arrested on August 18th and died on September 12th as a result of ill-treatment and neglect. Despite the massive international protest and support of the investigation into Biko's mysterious death, police were absolved of any wrongdoing. For a fascinating biography see Donald Woods, *Biko* (New York: Paddington Press, 1978).

⁴ Inspired and influenced by Aimé Césaire, the Antillean poet and politician, and Jean-Paul Sartre, Fanon was born in Martinique and studied medicine in France. He became a psychiatrist and was assigned to a hospital in the Algerian War at Algiers. His experience with blacks there turned him against France; sufficiently embittered and disillusioned, he joined the Algerian rebels. Fanon died in 1961 at the age of 36. He had contracted leukemia but learned of it too late, and his political activity prevented him from entering a hospital in Washington, D.C. until there remained no hope of surviving the disease. He wrote *Black Skin, White Masks*, *A Dying Colonialism*, and *The Wretched of the Earth*, which has been called one of the greatest political documents of our time.

⁵ Now a figurative term, a laager was the Afrikaaner encampment of pioneer wagons. Boers formed to protect themselves from marauding black tribes.

J.E.: They were accepting the fact that the rise of "democracy" has always run parallel with the rise of slavery?

N.G.: There was certainly this feeling that you cannot solve the problems by letting blacks into the system. You've got to change it because the country's economy is based on it. Here you've got these younger whites who could not give any allegiance to the white setup, whether conservative or "liberal," and who sought a third way for themselves, and who went to the blacks and said, we believe in what you believe in. We know that we shall only be liberated when blacks liberate themselves; whites shall implicitly be liberated from racism. But what can we do? We can't just sit here, living under privilege, which we can't help. Can't we work with you? And the blacks said NO.

J.E.: It is over?

N.G.: Over. But what you *can* do is work among your own people to change them, because if white people are to survive in the true sense, which doesn't merely mean saving their necks, it means learning to live in a new way, then they must rethink all their values. It is on this rethinking of values that white-consciousness is founded.

J.E.: And are they repudiating European culture?

N.G.: No. You can't repudiate European culture because some of the very concepts even blacks themselves are using come from Europe. In literature, for example, you cannot say "we are going to throw off European influence." Blacks in South Africa are writing mainly in English: what forms are they using? They are writing plays, short stories, novels and poems. These forms come from Europe. Blacks have a rich oral tradition but they did not have a written literature. It came with conquest . . . Each country and nationality has borrowed from another. There is a commonwealth of literature and it belongs to all of us. A Shakespeare sonnet belongs as much to a black man writing poetry as it does to you or me. This is all ours, the entire world of literature is ours to use as we please. There is no question of negating that, though there are other values. A simple example: When I was a little girl growing up in a mining town, I would go on Tuesdays and Thursdays to learn to play the piano and to dancing class. On Sunday mornings when I woke up, I would hear the drumming and singing drifting over from the black compound, the barracks where the mine workers lived. This was regarded by my parents and by the people around me as noise blacks were making. Nobody ever told me it was music. The drumming was marvelous.

J.E.: When did you grow to appreciate it?

N.G.: Oh, years afterward. I came to it, like my understanding of apartheid, from the outside. This is the kind of thing we must recognize, that there is a black cultural heritage which we, as whites, have been deprived of. We were never told that this wonderful drumming was part of being born in Africa. I had a right to regard this as my musical heritage, but it was never given me. Whites are beginning to think this way now. There are many who want to strike down roots into a new culture, a third culture. Whether that'll come off, whether politics will sabotage it or not . . .