



# On the importance of imagining

work for most of the year at the Gorée Institute off the coast of Dakar where we are engaged in trying to see the world at large and Africa in particular as clearly as possible.

We know that “seeing” is also an act of imagination and, particularly, that in the present void with its absence of horizons of expectation, we need to explore and promote a collective moral imagination and the fearlessness of creative thinking shot through with the doubt brought by uncertainty, in order to be of use to the younger generations. I tried to formulate part of this idea during a workshop of Africans involved in artistic and cultural facilitation.

We from the institute proposed an open-ended endeavour: to imagine Africa. And then to start making it concrete through specific actions, even if small. To “imagine Africa” is simply, among other meanings, the recognition of the dialectical relationship between the imaginary and the real.

I take it as common cause that part of the human condition, maybe the essential flame, is the process of imagining ourselves. We are who and what we are only in becoming. We survive, we live, because we conceive of the nature and the purpose of being. Our consciousness is invention, or recognition bounded by the possible.

Maybe this is not unique to the human species. After all, do birds not imagine their territory and perhaps also the nature of their being through flight and song? Animals come to an experience of themselves through movement leaving traces as markers of memory.

It could be that life as we know it is awareness because it knowingly strives for imagining existence and thus questioning the sense and the finality of the process.

Leaving traces of ourselves, as in creative productivity, could be read as part of the definition of consciousness for us as well.

We know that in order to progress we must strive for something just out of reach – if only for an existence that will be more compassionate and decent than the cruelty, paranoia, greed, narrow corporatism or narcissism we mostly indulge in and find such ample justification for.

And so we dream. There’s the personal dream to come to terms with the inevitability of being finite; there’s the communal one of justice and freedom upon which we hope to secure the survival of the group. And then there is the dimension of a moral imagination.

This is our world. We know no more than people before us did. Every generation lives in the fullness of its own comprehension. Our minds are as ever bordered by darkness, except that we now live in an infinitely more dangerous place.

But by the same token we cannot indulge ourselves – for reasons of political correctness or tribal guilt or cynicism or common greed – in the rainbow intoxication of knowing and understanding less than those before us did.

What is our horizon? Globally, that behind the burning fields as smokescreen of worldwide insecurity we encounter poverty

– endemic and brutalising and deepening. And the greed of the insatiable predators: the arms manufacturers and the oil guzzlers and the smugglers of people.

At the core of our barbaric new age, however much dolled up by the gadgets of modernism, we find fundamentalists exterminating thousands of innocent people as “collateral damage” – from despair for what they believe to be the religious cause of their cruel and jealous god. In demagogic chambers of states claiming to be liberated and democratic, the cynical rule unrestrained in their lust for power and profit.

In the whitewashed institutions of our so-called enlightened societies we see the same obdurate and institutionalised discrimination against women. At the heart of this deep forest of cruelty we still lack any compassion for the children.

What we experience in Africa may not be worse than other parts of the world. Maybe our problems are just more acute and intractable. A new American president may well close down the penal colony of Guantanamo and start recognising and making up for the war crimes committed in Iraq and in Afghanistan.

The rulers of China may be obliged to start looking after the interests of their peasants and workers and to stop polluting and cheapening the world, even Israel may conceivably be prevailed upon to stop trying to exterminate Palestine as an entity and start giving back what they have stolen.

But who in Africa is going to put an end to the impunity of the criminals ruling over us? Who is going to resolve the genocide in Darfur and the mass raping of women in the Congo? Who in Africa is going to face the consequences of something like 200 000 child soldiers?

How are we going to come to terms with the fact that our nation states are a fiction for the benefit for our dictators and their ruling clans? Who is going to get back the money our politicians stole from the people? Who is going to take responsibility for condoning the rule and extending the protection of international legitimacy to a maniac like Robert Mugabe? And how are we going to stop this seemingly irrevocable “progress” of South Africa to a totalitarian party-state?

This is our world. Fiction/imagination is an unveiling of what we didn’t know we knew. In so doing we write into and from the pre-existent underground of images, memories, thoughts, etc – “uncovering” the shared Atlantis of the imagination.

Perhaps we know no more than those who preceded us, but it is as true that we have to transcend our limitations, that we must cling to the notion of an utopia (call it “clean and accountable government” or “common sense”) as justification and motivation to keep on moving and making a noise.

For the mind has to be kept free if we want to stay it from reverting to despair and narcissistic self-love only. To survive, we must assume the responsibility of imagining the world differently.

Imagination gives access to “meaning”. Storytelling is a system of knowledge; the very act of narration carries a presumption of truth.

Writing as the production of textured consciousness is the



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mediating metaphor between fact and fiction. It is in the movement of the heart-mind and the thinking awareness of physical and/or cultural displacement that creativity is born – as sequences of perception bringing about new combinations of past and present, projecting future shapes and thus helping to shape the future.

We are hardwired to see intention in the world, and thus predisposed to the art of learning by intervention. We become by making. We realise ourselves through acts of transformation.

And these journeys bring with them implications of accountability. By imitating the forms of creativity we apprehend the contents of meaning; by enacting the prescriptions of ethics we learn about the will to have being emerge: together these constitute the freedom way.

Ethics inform aesthetics when there is exactitude in telling – and the other way round. The act of writing – surface, texture – will suspend the demarcation between “subject” and “material world”.

Marx, echoing Hegel, believed that artistic production was at bottom a form of self-representation or even self-production. But the “I” is a fiction, a construct concocted in part by culture and history and theology, by the need to believe life is worth living.

It is of course also a crutch to consciousness as passage for observations, the dark glass through which we look. The less “I”, the less self-indulgence and false indignation, the less we are obsessed by a predicated “right” to happiness and “private space”, the less we think of ourselves as victims, the less infantile our crying for “understanding” and for “healing”, the less judgemental and moralistic we are – the more room there will be for things and events to speak for themselves.

Through rhythm and texture you will promote textual space – and no creativity without space, no hope for conscience without the creativeness of awareness. We need to leave the reassuring and self-caressing domain of the “possible” to extend the reach of the impossible/unthinkable (such as, respect for the sacredness of the individual human life in a country like South Africa).

And these ethics, this neutrality demand that one allows emptiness for a certain moral imagination – that is, spaces for the promotion of doubt and for the unexpected, even and perhaps especially for what we as writers did not expect to find, but always with compassion for the weakness and the human dignity of the other.

In the interview Njabulo Ndebele gave to *City Press*, he also says: “The South African of the future will live comfortably with uncertainty because uncertainty promises opportunity, but you have to be robust about it, you have to be thoughtful about it, you have to contemplate it to get the full richness of it, and I think that is the challenge of

being South African: to run away from unidimensional and definitive characterisations of ourselves... The capacity of the country to imagine the future depends on nurturing imaginative thinking from the beginning of a child’s life right up to the end. We’ve somehow given all that up along the way.”

When a few writers visited Mahmoud Darwich, the Palestinian poet, some years ago in the besieged ghetto of the West Bank, he spoke to us of the role of poetry. He ended by saying: “It is true that all poetry stripped of another life in another time is threatened by a quick dissolution in the present. True that poetry carries its own future and is always

being reborn... But it is as true that no poet can put off for later, in some other place, the here and the now. In our time of storms it

is a matter of the existence, the vital energy of poetry... To give life to words, to give them back the water of life, can only be by way of bringing back the sense of living. And all search for sense is a search for the essence which confounds itself with our questioning of the intimate and the universal, that interrogation which makes poetry possible and indispensable, that questioning which has as consequence that the search for sense is also a search for freedom.”

I may have sounded a pessimistic note here. (In defence I may say I came neither to praise Caesar nor to bury him but to ask what he has done with the trust of the people.) But of course I believe that, with accountable leadership and full participation, this continent can be turned around.

Our dreams can be realised – and when I say this I very much have in mind the examples of Steve Biko and of Robert Sobukwe.

I dream, and I will continue to strive, for an integrated continent of generosity, economic justice, creativity, civil and civic responsibility. A continent that will develop its own sustainable modernity far away from Western universalist models of globalisation serving only the masters.

A continent that knows its primary riches is its diversity of cultures. A continent whose citizens will stop blackmailing and whitewashing one another and the world with politically-correct subservience and the “blame-us-on-history” syndrome.

A continent that will understand the sense and the importance of the public good. A continent that will stop begging and stealing, and where the totalitarian conflation of nation and state and party in power will be abolished and where prancing will be confined to the catwalks of fashion shows.

A continent where the ancestors are alive, certainly, to dance with. A continent that will never again accept second-class citizenship and will be neither the playground for Western phobia or self-interested charity nor the dumping

ground for Chinese junk.

A continent that will respect and celebrate life – the life of the planet.

A continent that will plant crops and feed itself. A continent that will eradicate small arms and have no purpose for submarines and other criminal and corrupting nonsense. A continent that will be the guardian of the past, all the pasts, and the custodian of our future – and where we will know that future lies with the women.

A continent of profound metissage and thus of reciprocal enrichment. A continent where no racism will be tolerated – and by that I also mean the racism and the humiliation of poverty.

I believe we writers, wordmakers, rooted in civil society, need not be the clowns and the fools of those in power. In fact, I believe we should think freedom of the mind as a conscious and constant attempt to unthink order and authority.

To think against hegemony of any variety, including the liberationist and the nativist – particularly the insidious, moralistic mawkishness of political correctness.

To think against the dictates, the values and the property of consumerist societies. To think against the laziness of narcissism.

We need to remember that as wordmakers we are bastards and forget that we’re obedient citizens.

Let us go to the further edge of thinking, to where the hand sings. For who will take us to the underworld of belonging and of growth except the movement of creativity?

*This is an edited version of the keynote address given by Breytenbach at the 11th Time of the Writer International Writers Festival hosted by the Centre for Creative Arts at UKZN on 25 March 2008. For the full version go to: <http://www.ukzn.ac.za/ccafest2008/KeySpeech.htm>*