
Richard Turner: A Biographical Introduction

The Eye of the Needle marks a particular moment in the political and cultural history of South Africa and more precisely in the history of the opposition to white supremacist rule in South Africa. It also marks a moment in the biography of Richard Turner. In itself it is not a work of major political or literary significance. No critic has suggested that it is and Turner himself made no exaggerated claims for its value. In a letter to the public press replying to a critic, he noted that 'whatever its other faults (it is) cheap, short (86 pages in the original), non-academic and free from philosophical name dropping.' Four years later while under cross-examination as an expert witness in a political trial he readily acknowledged that the book contained many generalisations and that it was polemical and made use of rhetorical language. He did, however, in the course of the cross-examination, reaffirm his commitment to the views and positions defined in the book.

The Eye of the Needle has two kinds of significance. The first kind is evidenced by the fact that the South African state authorities clearly identified the book as a work of theory which had exercised strong influence on opposition thinking since its publication. Turner appeared in 1976 as an expert witness called by the defence in the trial of nine leaders of the Black Consciousness movement under the Terrorism Act. The cross-examination led by the state prosecutor sought to establish that the fundamental concepts

of the book were shared by the accused leaders and that they had been influenced by it. Any assessment of its influence requires that the book be examined within the general context of opposition thinking.

The second kind of significance which the book has lies in the light it throws onto the life of its author, Richard Turner. It stands as a relatively small piece of evidence of the larger life project which Turner undertook. In examining this life project I shall attempt to show the coherence of values and actions which unite the book and the whole life. This coherence culminated in the author's assassination on 8 January 1978. It is my view that the decisive meanings, both for South Africans and for politically committed people elsewhere, lie only partly in the book and possibly more in the conduct of the life. The re-issue of the book in response to demand demonstrates the continuing significance of both the life and the work.

Richard Turner was born in Cape Town in 1941. His parents, both English by birth, had been living and working in the British Gold Coast colony where his father was a partner in a construction business. It was decided that Mrs. Turner should travel south for the birth of the baby because the local medical facilities were inadequate. Returning to Britain in 1941 was dangerous — both the sea voyage and London itself — and Cape Town was the obvious choice. It offered excellent medical facilities, it was sufficiently British in general orientation and it was attractively safe from war-time hazard.

Turner's childhood was spent on the small fruit farm outside Stellenbosch bought by his father but effectively managed by his mother. There the immediate social background to his life was a milieu with strong British colonial overtones. The Cape had never lost the marks of its own past as a British colony though these had been considerably modified by the Dutch and Afrikaner cultural traditions. The politically and culturally ambiguous tradition of Cape liberalism represents a fusion of the two white colonial strands in the history of the province. During the immediate post-war period the colonies of Africa and the East had experienced strong decolonisation pressures and as a result

officials and colonists of all ranks and positions had begun to withdraw to less obviously risk-filled situations. The process was slow but by the late 1940s there were many enclaves of ex-colonials in various parts of South Africa. The Cape drew many. Land and labour were cheap and plentiful. The prevailing standards of living were closer to colonial opulence than to post-war British austerity, and there seemed little threat of future disturbance. Perhaps few of the new immigrants saw themselves as direct beneficiaries of an already elaborate and developed system of exploitation. General awareness of such issues was low and much was done to make immigrants feel welcome and useful. They were rapidly integrated into the white community and failed to see themselves as recruits for the defence of white privilege and control.

The comfortable impression of benevolent trusteeship over the black inhabitants engendered in the English community received a shock with the accession to power of the Afrikaner National Party in 1948. The issue of white authority over black was brought rudely to the surface by the new radically right-wing government. Among British-oriented communities the Afrikaners were seen as a threat; initially threatening British identity but also implicitly threatening the spurious 'stability' and 'harmony' of the relations between minority whites and majority blacks. Afrikaners were stereotyped as fanatical or rabid, their Nazi sympathies recalled, their anti-British feelings deprecated. British groups have during the whole period of Afrikaner supremacy shown themselves capable of adjusting with relative ease to repeated shocks of this kind. This is clearly because whatever plans an Afrikaner government has had they would pose no direct threat to the essential material interests of members of the White ruling group. Identity might come under pressure but access to land, labour and social power would not.

This English milieu, which is still largely intact, produced, and continues to produce, a double influence upon its members. At one, relatively superficial level, it generates an attitude which is critical of existing social relations, but at a deeper and more powerful level it serves to insulate its

constituents from knowledge and a critical understanding of the fundamental power relations between the groups in the country.

Whatever the broader influences of the milieu, within the Turner family it was Jane Turner who was the dominant figure. A personality of great potency, Mrs Turner undertook the direction and management of the family's affairs. Resourceful, independent and extremely active, her dominance remained a consistent influence on her son throughout his life. It was an influence which produced both sharp conflicts in him as well as providing him with a powerfully sustaining confidence. He was compelled to struggle against her during his childhood and adolescence in order to win his own independence. Yet it was from her example as much as from the struggle with her that he learned to realise and depend upon his own autonomous judgements. Despite several breaches in the relationship between them, both mother and son drew strength from each other. The early experience of childhood struggle formed an important base for the later development of critical thought and action.

For the education of an English-speaking child a conventional pattern existed. Schooling in the state institutions was to be avoided if possible and the private fee-paying school, modelled on the nineteenth century British public school, was to be preferred. In 1958 Turner matriculated according to the pattern from St. George's Grammar School, Cape Town, where he had been a boarder. Continuing within the pattern he went immediately to the University of Cape Town where he registered for a degree in Engineering. From hindsight this would seem a strange choice though his father's career was doubtless an important influence. His father had died an alcoholic when Richard was twelve and it seems likely that his intention was to 'replace' his father both within the family and in his career. In 1960, halfway through his second year, he changed his enrolment to Philosophy.

This change of direction and purpose is the first external evidence that he had begun to shape his own life and make his own independent choices. I do not have the knowledge to

say how conscious he was of his decision as a major change of interest, though I suspect that considerable confusion existed in his mind at the time. What cannot be doubted is that the University itself played a major part in causing him to change his thinking.

South Africa in 1959 had two kinds of universities. The Afrikaans universities were created as institutions with a narrow and specific social purpose – that of developing the leadership groups of the Afrikaner 'volk'. They were thus closely bound to the total nationalist enterprise and closed to any 'diluting' influences. The second group was largely English-medium and modelled on the 'universalist' idea of the university. As a consequence they were 'open' in the sense of admitting as wide a range of subjects, teachers and students as possible, and of being committed to the European ideals of academic freedom. Cape Town University was generally recognised as the leading 'open' university. In this character it offered a field of experience which differed considerably from the narrow cultural and intellectual life of the conventional school system. It was common for students to find themselves engaged in preparing new definitions of both self and society out of the broader field of experience open to them.

In the years 1959 – 1960 the 'open' university concept had come under intense legislative attack from the central government. This was part of the transformation of the total educational system to which the government had committed itself. Segregation by race and ethnic group was the principle of the legislation, though the purpose, on occasion frankly and fully admitted, was to maintain the inferior position of blacks in the society. The 'open' universities responded through protests organised by both staff and students. These failed to affect the legislative outcome but they exerted strong influences on student thinking across a whole range of educational, political and social issues. The integration of the general cultural experience of university life with the specifically political dimensions of the 1960 period caused many students to examine their own situations with more penetrating critical knowledge. Turner was one such student.

To begin such a process of re-definition has at any time in

South Africa entailed the discovery of a radically different world. In a memorandum written in 1976 Turner described the process of the changing attitudes of the 'average white critic of racialism'.

His school and home background fills him with racialism. He starts with certain ideas about the mental and social inferiority of blacks, certain emotional reactions to blacks, reactions which go beyond his intellect into his reflexes, and certain habitual ways of behaving towards blacks. One day he discovers, perhaps at university, that it is factually incorrect to believe in the biological inferiority of blacks. He begins to think that after all, 'they' are at least potentially educated, civilised and intelligent, like 'us'; that 'they' are not irreducibly different, but can become like 'us'. This is, of course, great progress in comparison with his old position, but it is only relative progress. He still assumes that everybody essentially wants to be like him. He still sees history through 'white' eyes, as whites civilising the rest. His emotional and behavioural reactions to race are still there.

Very often, when he has made the first step, he thinks he has gone the whole way. He is still very confused about race, but thinks that he is not. He therefore behaves with a mixture of arrogant paternalism – deriving from his view of history – and of over-polite timidity – deriving from his emotional confusion – towards blacks he meets. This is the situation of many liberal white students.

In writing this description Turner refers to the average white liberal student but he is clearly recalling his own discoveries at university as well. In the period of his undergraduate studies 1959 – 62 the process of change was intensified by the national crisis which followed the shootings at Sharpeville in March 1960. The events of the period provided a dramatic and highly visible demonstration of the cleavages and chasms in the social structure. The black mass movements led by the African National Congress and the Pan Africanist Congress were defeated with relative ease but their challenge to white authority made it less easy to ignore the oppression and exploitation which determined black existence.

Two other important results of the crisis were firstly, that

the white opposition groups from the centre to the far left were shown to be ineffectual and secondly, that the government's repressive response severely curtailed the political freedom of all opposition groups both black and white. After 1960 the possibilities of working towards meaningful peaceful change were greatly reduced if not entirely blocked. Groups committed to opposition views were faced with the difficult choice of either moving to a position within the narrow boundaries of officially recognised (and by definition ineffectual) opposition, or of adopting more radical positions which would possibly include the use of armed force. Groupings within the ANC and the PAC made the commitment to armed resistance. Even in the (predominantly white) Liberal Party a small group of members formed themselves into the African Resistance Movement, which adopted a strategy of sabotage against installations. The emergence of these groups indicated the erosion of the centre position of liberal opposition. The pressure on individuals to firm up attitudes and commitments increased sharply.

During this period Turner, now a senior student at the University, involved himself in the liberal-dominated National Union of South African Students. He maintained close personal and political contacts with the student leadership though he was unaware that several of the people with whom he was friendly were directly involved in the African Resistance Movement. His situation at the time (1963) gives a good measure of his general political position. He was clearly well inside the dissenting liberal tradition and was sympathetic to its move to the left towards a more radical analysis, but he was not involved in any commitment to violent action. Commenting later (1974), he said:

In fact the ARM episode, in which disillusioned students tried sabotage, shattered their own and others' lives and did great damage to the cause they were fighting for, made me acutely aware of the danger of students turning to violence.

By 1966 the government could claim total success in its campaign, conducted with new ruthlessness and brutality, to

root out subversion. The leadership of both the ANC and the PAC had been either jailed or restricted under security legislation or driven into exile. The ARM had been totally destroyed through similar action. A form of stability was restored to the political life of the country and in its wake followed a prodigious economic boom fuelled by the inflow of foreign capital. It appeared then that all attempts at developing radical alternatives to the existing situation would prove fruitless and dissenting opinion began to look towards long-term gradualist reform solutions to the prevailing inequalities. The most widely favoured thesis among liberals emanated from within the Anglo American multi-national corporation, and it argued that the inherent rationality of economic development would in time throw off the irrational constraints imposed on the society by racialist ideology. The process of change was, in terms of the thesis, to be automatic and to a large extent inevitable. Its adoption marked the return of the English liberal tradition to a position of convenient and comfortable vagueness.

Early in 1964 Turner, having taken his honours in philosophy, went abroad to France where he enrolled at the University of Paris to take his doctorate in Philosophy under Professor Jean Wahl. His choice of subject is significant – ‘*Quelques Implications de la Phenomenologie Existentielle*’ – and the main focus of his work was on the political work of Jean Paul Sartre. In several respects this was an unusual step to take. If he had continued to follow the conventional pattern for the intellectually gifted South African student he would have proceeded to a British university – probably Oxford or Cambridge. France and existential philosophy were difficult choices for someone who had yet to learn French and who had been trained in the philosophic traditions of empiricism. England would have been in every way a more reasonable choice. Several factors were involved in the decision. There is little doubt that both the philosophical and the political experiences of the years in Cape Town had developed in him a hunger for a fuller and more penetrating understanding of the processes of his society and his own situation within it. The inability of the empirical tradition to provide an adequate account of the

events of 1960 – 63 must have become clear to him in the obvious failure of orthodox liberalism to respond with analysis or action to the political crisis. His own Professor, Andrew Murray, had appeared repeatedly as an expert witness on Communism called by the state prosecution in cases against political leaders. (It should be added that he was consistently discredited by defence lawyers). Philosophy at Cape Town had introduced him to the Sartre texts but with some few exceptions the subject had been unconvincingly taught and he was determined to go to the source, to meet Sartre himself. France and the existential tradition were to provide the necessary intellectual base for new interpretations and attitudes both personal and social.

Turner's marriage, which also took place at this time, caused a deep breach in his relationship with his mother, so that in a very real sense life in France represented a new form of life experience cut off from, but reflecting on, childhood and adolescence. It is this period (1964 – 66) which in my view constitutes the point of Turner's major life choice, in which he conceived of his life as a total project. Until then he had developed within the limits of the given traditions of his particular milieu. The fact that the milieu had come under strain doubtless contributed to the choice, but the decisive changes were made during the period in France and through the processes of philosophic study.

A passage taken from a later re-working of his thesis neatly summarises the core arguments and captures the central thrust of the case. It reads as follows:

Man has no 'nature', because the structure of consciousness, a continual project into the future, is such that it can never be bound to anything, and can always doubt any value. It is this structure of consciousness to which we are referring when we say man is free. He transcends the given towards a goal, a value which he constitutes himself implicitly or explicitly. This transcending is what characterises being human. Man constitutes values in terms of his frame of reference through a process of synthesising all his experience. This process is unconscious, unthematized, but it can be thematized and so become a conscious attempt to construct an objective understanding of the world by means of the various

techniques of thought. In so far as he can also change his values in this way, he is responsible for them but to the extent to which he believes his frame of reference to be an absolute he is not aware of this responsibility. He can, through the techniques of reflection, grasp the contingency of his frame of reference and so make a genuine choice for himself. But, since these techniques of reflection and thought come to him from his society, he is to a great extent conditioned by this society, even though the society and the other aspects of his situation — body, psyche, world, past — only exist for him to the extent that he interiorises and lives them.'

These ideas were not new in the world but for a young South African they were the means of creating a new world. The structure of the argument and the central concept challenged, at the root, the assumption that there was a fixed essence which constituted a human nature which found itself in a given world governed by natural laws; a world in which value choices were confined within the limits of available traditions. At a step Turner placed himself outside the familiar constructs of South African reality and instead located his thought within radical European traditions. Such steps have been taken before and since by South African intellectuals but in the great majority of cases the decision has been accompanied by a choice to remain in Europe. Two factors make Turner's case unusual. The first is his decision to return to South Africa and the second is his refusal, or perhaps inability is a better description, to compromise the insights won in the philosophic study when faced with the South African reality. It was these factors which led to his active commitment, to his writing *The Eye of the Needle* and indeed to his subsequent death. From this point on the life project gains consistently in unity, coherence and depth.

In 1966 Turner returned with his family to South Africa to begin a teaching career, initially with temporary posts at Cape Town, Stellenbosch and Rhodes Universities, and finally in a permanent position at Natal University, Durban. In the Political Science Department at Natal in 1970, he joined Michael Nupen, another political philosopher with left

wing convictions and trained in the traditions of European idealist philosophy. As a teacher Turner proved a rare phenomenon. He was a man with a new vision, offering a new form of analysis, something perhaps of a prophet. Yet he was also a man with the special personal gift of entering the world of discourse of his students. His age and his openly experimental lifestyle placed him at a level very similar to that of his students and his interactions with them were always conducted at their level and through their frames of reference. The complex new conceptual structure and techniques of thought he was introducing were handled with the utmost simplicity and clarity. The process of his teaching was almost never through the formal lecture but through exploratory dialogue with students. Question pursued question deep into the territory of fixed assumptions and unquestioned values. The effect on students was intense and widespread. One student, Paula Ensor, giving evidence to a parliamentary commission enquiring into the activities of NUSAS, spoke of Turner's effect upon her: 'He was good for me in that he would raise objections to the way I thought, or he would challenge my assumptions, and he would force me to crystallise things a lot more.' In a letter to parliamentarians criticising the Commission report, Turner commented:

I do not believe that students learn very much if one simply lectures to them and expects them to take notes. I believe that class discussion is essential, so that students can explore the texture of arguments for themselves, rather than simply accept them preformed from the lecturer. Thus, I encourage questions and discussion in class. I also believe that students should read a fairly wide range of opinions and approaches to a particular topic... I can well understand that this approach... might appear to some to constitute 'radical politics'. Personally, I believe that it constitutes good pedagogics.'

In the South African university environment good pedagogics is inevitably radical politics – though the corollary is not always true.

The general result of Turner's teaching was that he and Nupen began rapidly to develop a constituency of students

interested in radical analyses of political and social structures. They drew to them, in the lecture halls, in the non-formal discussion sessions and outside in a wide variety of alternative learning situations, a group who were ready to issue challenges to the prevailing interpretations of South African reality. The scope of action available to students was small. The spirit of the international student revolt had reached South Africa but the possibilities for employing even some of the tactics in action were extremely limited. Turner, writing in a student newspaper under the heading 'Should South African Students Riot', argued that they should do some thinking instead. He remained throughout his career deeply suspicious of and hostile to any form of 'one-shot revolutionary action'. He was suspicious of and opposed to the formation of small and exclusive student 'cells' and he worked consistently to reach outwards towards individuals and groups who could be expected to be hostile to any form of radical thought. A typical instance was his organisation of a conventional protest meeting into an occasion where students took their case to the general public, arguing and winning support in a door-by-door coverage of the city.

Current attitudes and practice among contemporary students would have dismayed him. Against the steady disregard which the general student body maintains towards critical thought a small sectarian radical group asserts an identity of opposition. A highly differentiated, esoteric and dogmatic radicalism feeds upon itself and fails to engage in even the simplest dialogue with its nearest audience.

Turner's interests lay in analysis, shared understanding, and organisation. He was fundamentally convinced that the bonds which united people had their roots in reason. The task of radical thought was to reveal the reason inherent in men and the world in order to unite them in a movement against self interest and oppression.

A succinct comment from *The Eye of the Needle* pinpoints a crucial weakness of white liberals in South Africa. 'White liberals,' he says, 'remain whites first and liberals second.' Part of the meaning of reversing these two categories can be seen in Turner's private life between 1970 and his death. His first marriage had been under strain since his

return from France and in 1970 it finally collapsed. In the same year he met and subsequently married a young coloured student, Foszia Fisher. The marriage, under Muslim rites, had no civil authority and was in fact illegal since it contravened either the Immorality Act or the Mixed Marriages Act. Unsympathetic critics saw the marriage as a provocative political act challenging the state but this was certainly not the case. The decision sprang rather from the inward experience of both people — a decision from within the consciously constituted value structure which Turner had developed. If he was to be liberal first and white second, then no compromise with irrational constraints, whether customary or legal, was possible at this point. The marriage was a great triumph for both people, yielding to them a personal growth and an emotional richness as well as serving to unify private experience and public life. The marriage aptly symbolises the barriers which Turner was prepared to break through in his quest for a life which unified consciousness, values and actions. The liberal ethos out of which he had grown consistently stopped short of such an authentication of chosen values, withdrawing rather into uneasy compromises which insulated values from actions.

Concrete evidence of Turner's growth away from the confusions of the liberal position came in 1970, in his contacts with the leaders of the emerging Black Consciousness movement. During that year he met and developed a relatively close personal relationship with Steve Biko, then a medical student at the University of Natal. His initial reactions to the movement were characterised by the over-reactive sympathy typical of the guilt felt by white liberals. However, through his relationship with Biko and through his wife, who was herself interested in some aspects of the movement but critical of others, he was able to go beyond the early response. He was later to advance important criticisms of the movement, especially of its tendency to over-simplify and to absolutise the concepts of 'blackness' and 'whiteness'. Nonetheless, he remained a sympathetic critic, anxious to interpret the movement to hostile critics who accused the leaders of adopting a racist ideology. He took the view that black and white were alike involved in a situation

of oppression. 'In an important sense both whites and blacks are oppressed, though in different ways, by a social system which perpetuates itself by creating white lords and black slaves, and no full human beings.'

The late 1960s had formed a period during which there had been considerable experimentation among opposition groups in the country. The situation called for new forms of strategy, new conceptual formulations and new kinds of organisational structures. The non-collaboration strategy of the Black Consciousness movement had been one new development but there were others. Some blacks were prepared to participate in the government-created homeland policy, though generally under the banner of opposition to government objectives.

Turner's discussion of these alternative strategies in the postscript to *The Eye of the Needle* captures with brevity and salience the central issues. Developments since he wrote have shown the conflict between them to be a dominant theme in black political life. The urban-based Black Consciousness movement has, particularly since the 1976 riots, asserted its right to speak in the name of all blacks and this has resulted in sharp conflict between its leadership and Chief Buthelezi who has endeavoured, through his mass organisation Inkatha, to extend his power base into the urban areas. The conflict has deep social roots but it has also been skilfully exploited by a wide range of white 'initiatives' both private and state-directed. The fostering of a property owning, high wage-earning, black, urban middle class now appears to stand high on the agenda of white political interest. This, by definition, is intended to head off the formation of full black solidarity. Turner's perception was of the validity and necessity of both strategies and of the critical role of black labour in the fulfilment of the need for black unity.

Among whites in opposition there was a roughly similar division of opinion and support for alternative strategies of participation and non-collaboration although these were naturally expressed in very different ways.

Many members of the earlier pre-1964 liberal opposition moved towards the Progressive Party which in 1968, was

forced by legislation to become an all-white party. Those who were unable to move rightwards towards political legitimacy, grouped themselves in one or other of the marginally political organisations committed to social change. The Universities, the Churches, NUSAS, the Institute of Race Relations, the black trade union movement, the Black Sash and a host of other smaller groupings comprised this constituency. Among these organisations the opposition struggle was seen more in terms of articulating black or non-racial interests, rather than in campaigning among the white electorate.

Among the many and varied projects initiated from within this latter opposition sector, was the Spro-cas study programme. Its origin lay in *The Message to the People of South Africa*, a theological statement published in 1968 by the South African Council of Churches and the Christian Institute, under Dr. Beyers Naude. The Message dealt with the responsibilities which fell upon the man of Christian conscience living in an apartheid society. The response to the Message in church circles was that though the theology was impressive, the practical implications of it ought to be detailed.

The leaders of the Christian Institute and the SACC decided on that basis to institute a two-year study project which would examine in detail, not only the implications of the Message, but also alternatives to the existing institutions and structures of South African society. Six study commissions appointed from among academics, church and professional men were to report on law, politics, society, economics, education and the church. Turner was considered an essential member for both the political and economics commissions. His work with them involved delivering three papers to the commission members.

The Spro-cas reports amounted to a considerable achievement. They performed a valuable function in drawing together in a common project a wide range of opposition thinkers, but they went further in providing descriptions of the basic institutions and processes of the society. In some reports, key issues were identified and alternative political goals and strategies were defined. Despite these positive

results it remained true that the reports generally failed to go beyond the conventional 'common sense' liberal paradigm of a society. They tended to identify race discrimination as the central problem and to argue in favour of moves away from discrimination. In his original preface to *The Eye of the Needle*, Turner expressed his dissatisfaction, not with what Spro-cas was doing, but with what it was failing to do – in particular with its failure to broaden to its real limits the concept of what was possible in a social system. He wanted to undertake a thorough-going Sartrean reflection on the state of South Africa. *The Eye of the Needle*, the first volume published as part of the second phase of Spro-cas, was the result of his reflection.

In form, procedure and content the book follows the principles expressed in the thesis written six years earlier. Turner addresses himself first of all to the frame of reference within which South African reality is conventionally and unconsciously seen. Under the chapter heading, 'The Necessity for Utopian Thinking', he begins his attempt to make his reader aware of the pre-reflective assumptions which are used in thinking about South African life. Within the scope of the questioning comes the issue of an essential human nature and its linkage with racial stereotyping. Likewise, assumptions about roles are uncovered and examined. But this is only the essential groundwork. Once the assumptions have been grasped and been consciously thematised, the choice of values becomes crucial, and in this instance Turner introduces the conflict of choice between Christianity and capitalism. This issues into the fundamental choice between things or people which is the major theme of the book. The pursuit of things which works itself out in the capitalist social model is shown to be not only in conflict with Christianity but also to be the root cause of conflict in the South African past and present. In the speculative chapters on socialism and participatory democracy, Turner is attempting to define what a society which has people as its central value would or could look like and how it might work. The argument of the original text concluded by demonstrating what changes, in specific and defined South African contexts, would flow from the value choice of people over things.

A year later, in response to questions and interested requests from various individuals, Turner developed a series of lectures he had given at Natal University into a lengthy postscript titled 'The Present as History'. In the chapter he assumes his reader has accepted the argument for radical change developed in the body of the book and he proceeds to examine the potentials for change in the South African situation.

Nothing quite like *The Eye of the Needle* had (or has since) appeared in South Africa. Perhaps most startling of all are the assumptions which are visible throughout the book – specifically the assumption expressed in the tone of the writing – that this society, complex and cruel though it is, rests finally on nothing more than men's choices and therefore, for that same reason, it can be changed. Most South African writing, both in fiction and polemic, assumes a powerful objective dominance in the social structure – men may protest and bewail their fate but little or nothing can be done to effect any change. Turner's writing breathes a different spirit. Men have made the society in a way that can be completely comprehended, and in the same way men can change the society. The distinction between the two forms of writing can best be put as the difference between an alienated and an unalienated perspective.

The Sartre thesis is written in philosophic prose of unusual clarity but it seems complex and even involuted when compared with the lucid simplicity of *The Eye of the Needle*. Turner is, in the book, still directly engaged in the reflective process but he pursues his thoughts in a noticeably public way. He refers constantly to self-evident instances and examples and the argument is grounded in immediate concrete images. The style derives directly from teaching but it has no signs of pedantry or pedagogic stiffness. It is rather as though he has his eye cast back over one shoulder watching carefully to see if his reader is following the argument. Turner knew only too well the habits of the conventional consciousness with which he was arguing; its anxiety in the face of abstractions and philosophical formulations; its habitual unwillingness to go beyond immediate empirical evidence; its unawareness of different

value systems and world views. The book was not, for Turner, the liberating life-changing experience that the work on Sartre had been, where, in the writing, the author himself reached for and achieved a new awareness of himself in the world and consciously constructed a new system of values. In *The Eye of the Needle* it was an effort to make that process available to others – to the members of the various siege cultures which inhabit South Africa.

Of any book it must be asked, 'How successful was it?' In the case of the polemical work that question becomes urgent. Three thousand copies were printed, and in the year before the book had to be removed from the market, all but a few copies were sold. The actual readership was at least half as much again, which for South Africa is considerable. The readership was probably fairly limited in scope and range – students, academics, clerics, mostly white, would have formed the major group. Yet, despite this limited range, the influence of the book was large – among opposition intellectuals it served to shift the focus of opposition debate away from the question of race discrimination and towards the more fundamental choices between things and people, or to put it simply, towards the conditions of exploitation. In government and police perceptions there can be no doubt that the book was seen as a considerable threat. In the SASO/BPC trial I have referred to, the major part of the cross-examination consisted of questions about the book. Estimating its success is, however, extremely difficult because as one member of the Spro-cas commission had commented, 'it is a hundred years before its time.' Its influence will continue because of the way the argument is founded on fundamental philosophical propositions. It is no mere situational polemic.

I have drawn attention to close linkage of themes between the Sartre thesis and *The Eye of the Needle*, but in doing so I do not want to suggest that Turner held a rigidly fixed intellectual system which simply expressed itself in different ways. *The Eye of the Needle* also demonstrates the influence of Turner's involvement in active political work during the period 1970 – 1973. In both the main text and the post-script he places heavy emphasis on the significance of the

position of black workers in the economy. This view derives in part from the second half of the thesis which deals with 'Critique of Dialectical Reason' in which Sartre examines the phenomenon of serial alienation and its antithesis in group praxis, but it also has its roots in Turner's experience in the black trade union movement in Durban.

From 1971 he began to organise, with student leaders, a programme of research in which groups of students would enter industrial plants to gather information from workers on wages and conditions in the factories. A great deal of damning information was in fact gathered and it was used, particularly in the case of foreign-based companies, to alert foreign shareholders and unions to the fact that subsidiary companies were thoroughly involved in the system of exploitation. In some instances the revelations produced strong public reaction and were instrumental in securing pay increases. It would be going too far to suggest that these wage projects led eventually to the various national codes of conduct (ie US Sullivan Manifesto, EEC code) but there is no doubt that they played a role in redirecting attention towards the facts of exploitation.

A second project, designed to move towards the same ultimate purpose of ending exploitation, was planned among the workers themselves. It was a long-term educational project based upon a programmed correspondence course through which workers could obtain a diploma in labour affairs. The main objective of the course was not to grant certificates but to encourage workers to question their world and to provide them with the techniques to do so. It was a start, in simple terms, of the process of reflection and questioning of experience. Turner's banning in 1973 interrupted the project, and it fairly rapidly changed in direction and method when he was forced out by government order.

At a different, slightly higher, level he established a journal of labour affairs written from the point of view of the workers but produced with the possibility in mind of reaching both high-level workers in leadership positions and management. The central case of the *Labour Bulletin* was in favour of strong, well-organised black trade unions. The

arguments for workers' control presented in *The Eye of the Needle* go a great deal further than the case for unions but it is not an essentially different proposal. The union is the tactical means whereby workers can begin to establish a base for action in the industrial system — workers' control of production is the end towards which the means of the union are employed.

The operational contexts of the black trade unions have been significantly affected by recent legislative changes. The publication of the Wiehahn Commission report (1978) was greeted with general euphoria because it pointed the way towards 'rationalising' and institutionalising labour/ management conflicts. Initially migrant workers were excluded from its provisions though this was subsequently changed by the decision of the Minister of Labour. However, a significant voice raised against Wiehahn and the general optimism emanated from the union group with whom Turner had been associated. This group pointed out that the proposals embodied a more sophisticated system of state control of unions through the principles of registration and the control of fund raising. The legislation provided for the recognition and institutional formation of unions in the interests of capital and management. In arguing for the establishment of black unions it had not been Turner's purpose to aid the regulation of the labour-capital conflict in the long term interest of capital, but to help create a truly rational system of production, in which labour controlled capital. Wiehahn, he would have argued, represented an important concession of power but did not constitute a step towards a truly rational social order. Indeed, Wiehahn laid an even more urgent responsibility upon the unions to clarify and work towards genuinely rational social production.

Turner's experience in advising, teaching, and organising during the period 1970 — 1973 provides an important element in the book. In looking at the growth of his awareness the really important point to observe is the way the book synthesises both the insights of the thesis and the experience of the succeeding years. It is his remarkable capacity to synthesise disparate and even conflicting aspects of his life experience that gives to his life project its unity

and direction.

The activity which I have described above rapidly and inevitably brought him to prominence in the public mind and therefore inexorably to police attention. Any person in South Africa who shows capacities for mobilising individuals and groups and who resists the intimidatory and alienatory pressures of the regime receives such attention. Any of Turner's life activities, from his marriage to his writing, would have warranted surveillance — taken together they presented a strong challenge to authority. His first public encounter with the limiting forces of the society came with the Schibusch Commission. This was a parliamentary commission set up by the government to investigate the activities of 'certain organisations' thought to be involved in 'subverting' public order. Among the organisations were the Christian Institute, the South African Institute of Race Relations, the University Christian Movement and NUSAS. Turner was an official adviser to NUSAS at the time and he was called to give evidence in that capacity though, as the Commissioners well knew, he had participated actively in projects of all the other organisations mentioned. Documentary evidence was provided for the Commission by the Security Police and there were no provisions for proper legal procedure in the terms of reference for the Commission. Giving evidence meant little more than facing questioning on the basis of secret police information. Turner was convinced, and correctly so, that he had done nothing illegal and was therefore prepared to appear to answer questions. The record of the enquiry reads as a document of the absurd — a Kafkaesque performance in which the commissioners spend their energy in confirming their lurid stereotypes. Never once is there evidence of them questioning or being compelled to reconsider their assumptions. Their confrontation with Turner was filled with irony. Facing them was a man dedicated to a life-long questioning of fundamental assumptions, to a continual process of reflection and revaluation, and the only way they were able to respond to him was to refuse to even disclose to him what their assumptions about him were. They pressed upon him selective questions, fragments of evidence, absurd linkages of

facts, only in order to confirm their prior assumptions. Turner they saw as an activist, a radical, a revolutionary and as a man with a charismatic capacity to mobilise others. No factual evidence was allowed to contradict the stereotype.

His lucidity, coolness and rationality availed him nothing. The commission produced its report and in February 1973, together with seven members of the NUSAS leadership, he was placed under a government restriction order. He was prevented from attending gatherings, from leaving Durban, from entering factories, trade union premises or the university campus, and most damaging, from publishing, or preparing for publication, any material whatever. Such orders are commonplace in South Africa. They provide the means for the government to exclude any individual opponent from the social and political life of the country.

Banning orders are one of the ways in which the state authority declares the acceptable limits of political opposition. How individuals respond to the arbitrary declaration of limits varies considerably. For many it is a demoralising experience while others find their commitment growing deeper, perhaps narrower, and usually more bitter. It has proved an extremely effective control instrument and no opposition organisation outside legitimate government-recognised institutions has remained free from its effects.

Turner's response lay not only in adapting his personal life style and circumstances to a new set of conditions, but also in developing a fresh impetus towards positive activity. He was helped by the unusually generous and principled decision of the University to continue paying his salary, but he personally discovered in the banning order a kind of freedom. He was freed from the responsibilities of teaching and of immediate organisational action and his intellectual energy was free to return to philosophical research.

He began immediately on a lengthy philosophical project by going back initially to the original Sartre thesis and re-examining it in the light of the experience of the intervening seven years. The discoveries of those years were manifold. Kant, Hegel, Marx, Althusser and Habermas had all formed part of his teaching programme as well as of

the general intellectual life of the milieu in which he had worked. There was also the varied and extensive practical experience of organising, and his range of contacts with political groups both black and white had grown large. The need to integrate and thematise his knowledge was pressing.

This phase of his life reveals possibly more clearly than anything else the basic dynamic of Turner's life-as-project. We can see in his return to pure philosophy the reappearance of the pattern of relations which was evident in the early 1960s. Immersion in activity leads into a need for reflection and integration, only in this instance the experiential element is both wider and more intense and it generates a more ambitious philosophical project. This same late phase also throws sharp light on the dynamic of his relations with authority. Authority imposed limits and though these were not simply rejected out of hand through intransigence, they were examined and transcended. His value goal of free activity could be worked for in many ways and the function of intelligence was to discover new ways forward, so going beyond the limits imposed by irrational dominating authority. At this point, the way forward lay through philosophical enquiry. The project was not completed but there is no doubt at all that it was undertaken to refine and strengthen his knowledge base, in preparation for a fuller, more powerful return to action in the society.

The impression of a repeating pattern is strengthened when the scope and content of the philosophical enquiry become clearer. At his death he had written some 200 pages of extended notes setting out the main lines of his argument. The central problem raised in the discussion is the nature and status of the knowing subject in a materialist dialectic. This problem is traced through the idealist/materialist tradition beginning from Kant's criticism of empiricism and proceeding through Hegel to Marx, Engels and Lenin and subsequently to Sartre, Althusser and Habermas. There are many strands of thought woven into the argument but taken as a whole it appears that the project had two main meanings for Turner. At one level it constituted a rigorous critical enquiry into a genuine unresolved philosophical issue. The

argument is therefore conducted through the medium of a disciplined philosophical prose which makes few concessions to the general reader. In this it distinguishes itself sharply from the simple lucidity of *The Eye of the Needle*.

At a different level the argument about the knowing subject in a materialist dialectic is a reflective enquiry into a fundamental issue of Turner's life. It was an issue which had developed in importance throughout the period of his active engagement in political affairs. He had entered the political scene a convinced Sartrean, holding a view whose fundamental category was consciousness: the category from which all others in Sartre's system derived. In the course of his activity he had encountered a variety of other forms of materialist interpretation. In many situations he had found himself in conflict with what he regarded as a mechanical Marxism or a simplified 'triumphalist' version of the materialist dialectic. In some respects this conflict formed a latent part of his own thinking since from his own original Sartrean starting point he had incorporated elements of more orthodox Marxism. The philosophical enquiry was designed to resolve the latent conflicts in his own thinking but it had a further projected purpose. It was intended to adumbrate a sound philosophical base which would unify the Kantian Kingdom of Ends and the materialist dialectic. From such a base his intention was to develop a theory of political action which would found itself on the materialist interpretation of history and which would not exclude the hard-won bourgeois freedoms expressed in liberal theory. The category through which this unification could be sought was that of the knowing subject.

The Eye of the Needle was designed to contribute to debate about the ends and values of a society even although the postscript begins to look at the means of working towards those ends. The later work was intended to unify the consideration of ends and means in philosophical terms. From that base there is no doubt that Turner intended to produce a theory of social change which would have the depth and coherence required to draw together the whole range of political opposition. The theory would have provided the organising principles from which a process of

change could have been generated by a united left. I am by no means suggesting that he had a short struggle in mind. Quite the contrary. He never at any time entertained the dream of a short-term conflict leading to massive change. His concern was with the originating roots of the struggle and with the value-creating processes through which such a struggle would develop. As incidental evidence of this form of concern it is worth noting the distinction he consistently drew between the struggle in Mozambique and that in Zimbabwe. As the Portuguese dictatorship collapsed and the Frelimo leadership began to assume control in Mozambique, Turner taught himself Portuguese in order to follow as closely as possible the developments in Mozambique. He was especially interested in the ways in which the consciously controlled process of the struggle waged by Frelimo had developed and concretised the ends they sought to achieve. By contrast he was gloomy about the prospects for the resolution of the conflict in Zimbabwe. Violence, uncontrolled by any coherent sense of ends, had already become the deciding factor, and he foresaw that the vaguely defined and sloganised socialist programme of the Patriotic Front would simply be swallowed up in an unending succession of bloody civil conflicts. In the absence of any coherent grasp of ends and means, violence was likely to become endemic.

Turner's philosophical work was the act of an extremely strong-willed autonomous individual. In reading it, it is difficult to recall that the intellectual climate within which he was working was narrowing all the time and was permeated by pessimism and despair. The range of tolerance was diminishing consistently and left wing dissidents were being subjected to ever-increasing pressure. The Schlegel Commission had pointed in that direction and as the government began to find itself faced with guerilla activity within and on the borders of the country, the legislature produced the Terrorism Act and the Internal Security Act. In their handling of internal opposition, the Security Police and the Bureau of State Security had always operated with a fairly simple conspiracy theory. The international communist movement, bent on world domination, and with a special

interest in Southern Africa, was thought to operate both through external challenge and internal subversion. After the imprisonment and subsequent death of Bram Fischer, security was faced with the identification of a new leader of the conspiracy. Obviously, without police records it is impossible to state their view accurately, but it seems, from various shreds of evidence, likely that they saw Turner, if not as the leader, then as a strong contender for the position. In this they were grotesquely wrong. Charisma and organising capacity he most certainly did have but he was entirely opposed, as every detail of his life makes clear, to the concept and practice of a small vanguard group. He was constitutionally incapable of following an orthodox Leninist or Stalinist line.

Yet it is possible to understand why the security police should have seen Turner as a figure of major importance. While all other opponents were yielding in one way or another to the intense pressure – some by leaving, others by abandoning the struggle – Turner's critical range was increasing. It is likely that in their understanding he figured as the man who had the potential to draw together a new formation of opposition groups – a formation which might include the whole spectrum of opposition from exiled organisation, to the 'homeland' leadership and rank and file, to white activists and even to some elements of the Progressive Federal Party. In this they were probably, ironically, right.

He had been under close surveillance throughout the period of his banning which was due to expire in March 1978. In January 1978 his wife Foszia visited Botswana and on passing the border post caught the attention of control officers. She was searched and harassed in a manner which suggested more than usual suspicion. That night at midnight an unknown gunman knocked at Turner's front door and, on his investigating the knock, shot him dead through a side window.

Police promised investigations but such dilatory steps as have been taken have yielded no evidence of any kind. The logic of the life situation I have described leads towards a conclusion which is difficult to avoid. Many people felt that

he was assassinated by a person who was acting in the name or interest of the state power. It was the imposition of the ultimate limit beyond which no physical transcendence was possible.

It has been my contention in this essay that Turner's whole life-project manifests a profound value statement and it is this contention that I now wish to defend. In a society of obvious and pervasive oppression all lives are stunted and malformed. The criteria of human potentials and actions are obscured. In the struggle to maintain coherence and identity, individuals prey upon one another. The death of the practice of freedom necessarily entails the distortion of the whole range of positive human values. In such a situation even the bravest individuals are driven towards venal compromise in order to survive. The value of Turner's life lies in its triumphant demonstration of autonomous value-creating thought and action. The demonstration involves a coherent dialectic of action and reflection which has the capacity to transcend all limitations placed upon it by the irrational situation in which the life was lived.

Turner's life had all but one of the elements of tragedy. He lacked only the full knowledge of his own imminent death which would have illuminated to him the full significance of his challenge. Such knowledge is available only to us as observers and in his death we can experience the tragic paradox in which we feel that something of precious value has been lost to the world but, in the losing of it, the value itself has been affirmed. What is lost to South Africa, but in the same moment affirmed, is the meaning of a life lived in freedom. Turner revealed to a society caught in the defeating logic of oppression the shape and substance of life conceived in freedom and lived out through the enactment of rational choices.

For the left-wing opposition tradition, from which Turner had emerged, his life provides not merely an objective standard against which individual opposition action can be measured but it also points unambiguously to the direction which left-wing theory needs to follow if it is to have any measure of success in providing a theoretical position which will generate meaningful consequences in action.

Turner was a wholly secular man and his belief in transcendental values was not based in any way on the revealed truths of religion. Despite this the experience of his death was analogous in every way to a religious moment. Not only his personal friends but colleagues and co-workers from all levels of the society experienced a feeling of bondedness. The meaning of his life exercised itself as a force binding them together in communal loss and collective achievement.

His life remains a triumph and a brilliant vindication of the human value inherent in the traditions of the Left.

Tony Morphet