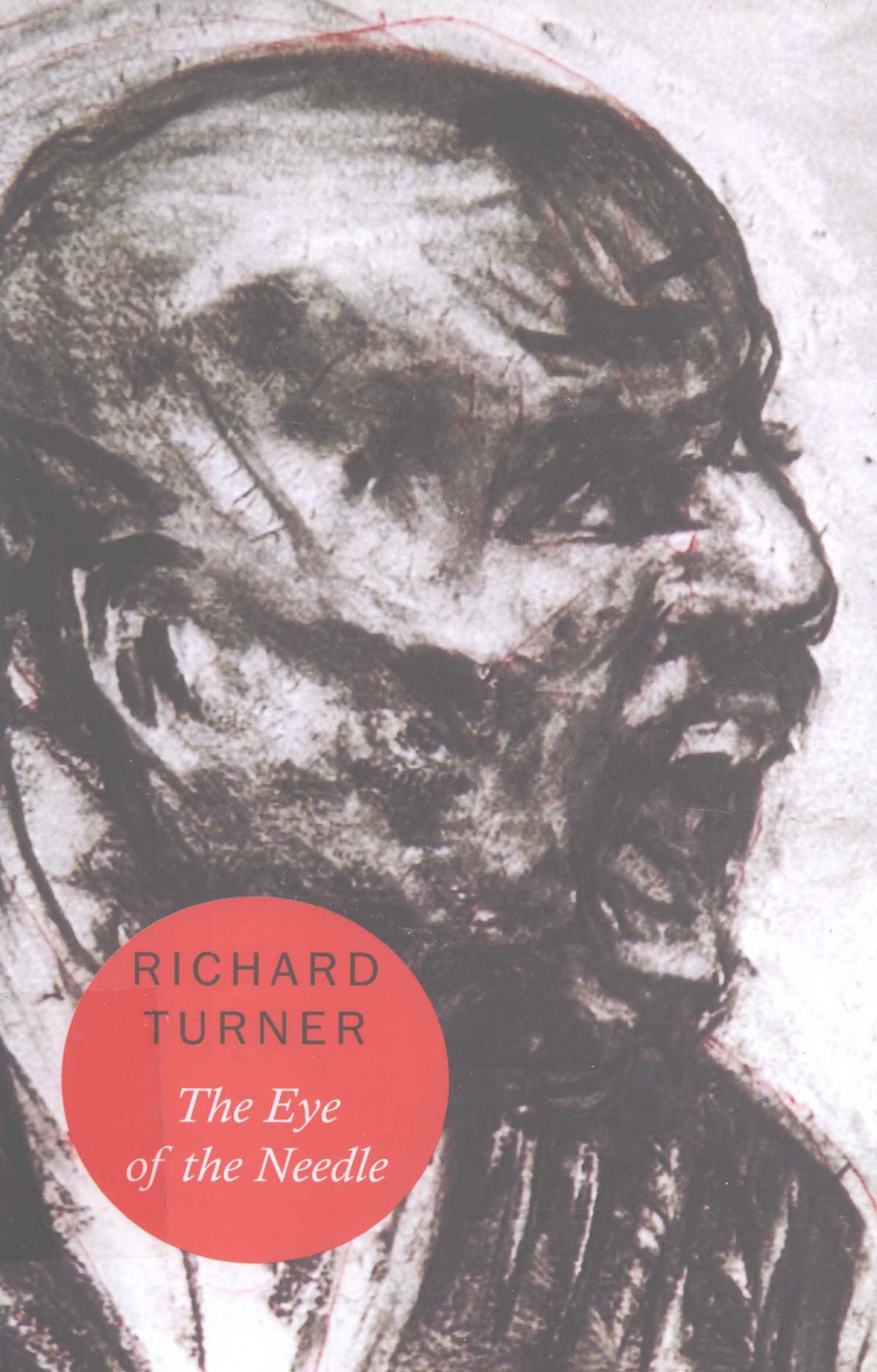
RICHARD
TURNER
The Eye
of the Needle

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The Eye of the Needle

Towards Participatory Democracy in South Africa

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If I read the book correctly, it condemns capitalism and subscribes to participatory democracy. Work would be given a new and satisfying meaning. All gross inequality would disappear. The means of production would become the property of society. The rule of law would be restored, and all humiliation of persons would cease.

How does one get there? By the growing power of the workers, by which they will wrest concessions from the rulers, who will presumably recognize the inevitable, and will experience—if not exactly a change of heart—at least a change of attitude.

Alan Paton

Foreword to the 1978 edition

NOTE TO THE NEW EDITION

Rosalind C. Morris

Why Rick Turner? Why now? It is four decades since Richard (Rick) Turner published *The Eye of the Needle* in 1972. His assassination by South African security forces in 1978, shortly after the more spectacular (and well-remembered) assassination of his contemporary, Steve Biko, cut short his life and marked a turning point in South African oppositional politics. Turner had been a student of Sartrean philosophy, and was deeply influenced by the turn of events in France and elsewhere in 1968. In 1973, when strikes broke out in Durban, he attempted to draw parallels between the emergence of direct action protest in Europe and the labour unrest in South Africa. But by then he had already been banned, and the conditions of his arrest encouraged philosophical meditation more than organizational politics or street action. By 1976, the forces that had erupted among college students in Europe would be given form by school children in Soweto, though inscribed within a much longer history of anti-apartheid protest, and the world would be horrified by Sam Nzima's photograph of Hector Pietersen's young body borne in the arms of his teenaged comrade Mbuyisa Makhubo and flanked by his grieving sister

Antoinette Sithole. But if the future of the anti-apartheid movement would draw energy from the uprisings in Soweto, its programme would ultimately lead it away from direct action towards the elaborate form of a shadow state in exile and opposition, one whose assumption of power twenty years later saw the relatively swift encompassment of former insurgents within a newly legitimated bureaucratic order.

By the end of the 1970s, with Nelson Mandela in prison, most of the opposition in exile, Biko and Turner dead (among so many others), the relatively short horizon of emancipation was perhaps hard to imagine—and much had to happen for that to be realized. Nonetheless, it is even more difficult to conceive of a return to 1970s oppositional politics, today, after the end of apartheid, the fall of the Soviet Union, the rise of China and the rending of the new nations in Africa by ethno-national conflict. And yet, the traces of that return are everywhere. They are evident not only in the growing interest in and citations of Turner's work, as Tony Morphet elaborates in his postscript to this volume, but also in the resurgence of many factors which might otherwise seem particular to a parochial decade. In some cases, these factors seem to be a function of the ruling African National Congress' (ANC) failure to materialize the promises for which it was entrusted with so great a mandate in its early years. In other cases, they seem to emanate from the party's own efforts to displace critique of its own embrace of neoliberal capitalism. Thus, for example, we see a renewed rhetoric of black consciousness (BC) in the discussions of race that fill the popular press, despite the fact that the ANC has retained an official policy of non-racialism.

For several decades, Biko's black consciousness movement (with which Turner had strong sympathy) had an awkward status within the ANC by virtue of its insistent non-racialism; today, its tenets may be espoused in the face of a growing chasm between the richest and poorest members of 'the previously disenfranchised' class, some of whom are beneficiaries of the ANC's black capital formation initiative, which began under the name of Black Economic Empowerment. With massive unemployment and high rates of poverty, direct action protests against the ANC are increasingly common. Often cast as a demand for better service delivery, they are nonetheless rarely articulated as part of a class discourse that would completely transcend racial solidarities. In this context, Turner's insistence on class consciousness seems both dated, insofar as the rhetoric of class has all but been abandoned even within Marxist theory, and urgent, insofar as racial identity has come back as the uncanny ghost of apartheid logics, covering over class in the place where it was once mystified *as* race. To the extent that recent returns to the more capacious solidarity of race restore what was torn asunder by ethno-nationalism, especially in Durban, where Turner's and Biko's work had their centre and where the conspiracy of patriarchies—apartheid and Zulu nationalist—produced a virtual civil war, it cannot be dismissed. But to the extent that race becomes an alibi for turning away from the critique of structural economic violence, and its new beneficiaries, Turner's lesson returns once again as a call for auto-critique.

Morphet's postscript, including essays written in 1990 and 2010, provides us with a history and context for Turner's work, and gives us a glimpse of its changing

status within oppositional discourse in South Africa. It also lets us see how the changing fortunes of a single text can, in turn, illuminate the changing status of oppositional discourse in a given political space. His verdict, that the narrow but deep influence of Turner's interventions helped to shape and direct the itineraries of Western Marxism in South Africa make clear why the book deserves a new audience. For, the assessment of Marxism's various projects, in South Africa and elsewhere, remains an urgent task in the twenty-first century.

Turner's enormous personal influence had a great deal to do with his charisma as a teacher, his energetic activities as an opponent of apartheid, and his situation in Durban, where, with Steve Biko and others, he helped to catalyse a labour-based oppositional movement. His eclipse, as Morphet explains, was partly the result of changing directions and strategic conflicts within the anti-apartheid movement. Though Morphet doesn't use such language, one can, in retrospect, cast that conflict as one between two vanguardisms: that of the Althusserians and Soviet-styled Marxists on one hand, and that of Turner and the organic intellectuals he sought to cultivate (in the absence of a Gramsciian idiom) on the other. The former were trapped in a fantasy of leadership, which could only reproduce hierarchy as its means. The latter were enclosed in a residual liberalism that remained blind to the inescapability of its own interests, and which assumed that the work of demystification could suffice to transform consciousness.

If, in the end, the party partisans won out over the more pedagogically minded and existentially oriented followers of Turner, the critique of white liberalism that Turner enunciated in *The Eye of the Needle* remains, and

has been recently reclaimed, as a model for new forms of critical practice. Ironically, as Morphet shows, the return to what he terms Turner's 'paradigmatic fiction' has emerged at a point of crisis in South African public intellectual discourse. That crisis could perhaps have been anticipated in 1990, but it has intensified as the ANC's hold on power has become increasingly tenuous. The associated marginalization of the critical humanities in the university, and, more generally, the attempt to contain practices of critique (in the press and in the arts), is in many ways the result of neoliberal policies embraced by the ANC as part of what Morphet calls its 'coup de théâtre'. But if Morphet is correct, that in South Africa the rise of a new power in the aftermath of apartheid's demise saw intellectual activism replaced by pragmatism and politics by policy, the threatened predicament of the humanities is a more widespread phenomenon, the corollary of neoliberalism's consolidation on a global scale.

There is much to be learnt by rereading Turner's work with reference to the conflict between vanguardisms. This is because, today, around the globe, we are confronted by two distinct but convergent tendencies. On the one hand, a crisis of the state and a generalized doubt about representative politics coupled by the turn to direct action protest politics. On the other, the turn to religion as a source of moral authority and alternative institutional structures for the delivery of social services perceived to have been hijacked by capital and diverted by agents of one or another state. A certain populism informs both of these tendencies, as does a sometimes arch repudiation of vanguardism. Examples of the direct action protest politics would include such far-flung events as the Khutsong

anti-demarcation uprisings in South Africa, the Occupy Wall Street movement in the United States, the Red Shirt movement in Thailand, the uprisings in Tunisia and the Arab world and the alter-globalization protests in Europe. All of them are marked by expressive theatricality and take place in public space, making a claim on social justice not through forms of deliberative discourse but through an ironically mass-mediated self-presencing. In the sheer materialization of bodies in the street, they attest to the failure of representation, even as they call for recognition.

To the extent that these movements succeed in fomenting substantive change, however, it is because direct action is supplemented by something else. Direct-action campaigns cannot escape the demands of organization, or the need to negotiate with legal structures, nor to strategize with others, elsewhere. In the end, participatory democracy emerges in the leavening of direct action with a constantly repeating discursive interruption. We can call this the ongoing moment of reflective critique. Turner would perhaps have called it the moment of theory. In any case, this supplement also poses the question of a division of labour. For if, in a pure participatory democracy, everyone could assume all of these tasks, it is nothing but liberal fantasy to suppose that everyone is already equally enabled to do so. This is where the questions of vanguardism and education arise. How is it possible to bridge the gap between those who are able to access power—because they master its idioms, understand its protocols, know to whom and how it distributes resources—and those who suffer the burden of extreme disenfranchisement? Turner's solution—formal education on the shop floor—may seem naive from the vantage

point of 2015, not least because so few people are employed in industrial labour. But its aim, to cultivate a critical theoretical attitude, and its means, to address people in their own languages, are surely still laudable.

Inevitably, education implies vanguardism. And it was education that Turner thought was the necessary ground of political transformation. In the aftermath of the 'consciousness raising' movements that defined political activism in the 1970s and 80s, we have grown sceptical of the power of 'unveiling' as a means to transformation, and certainly that was the essence of Turner's pedagogical philosophy. Our scepticism roots itself in the painfully learnt lesson that knowing never suffices to reorient desire (a fact that preventive health educators everywhere have to confront on a daily basis). As Slavoj Žižek has reminded us, ideology today does not entail mystification of the truth of things, for which truth-telling would provide an antidote. Rather, it consists in the fact that people know the nature of socioeconomic exploitation and participate in it anyway—because they cannot conceive of doing otherwise. The sense of 'no alternative' weighs on the brains of all those who live in the aftermath of Soviet decline (a false alternative in any case) and in the shadow of the so-called post-historical moment. But the task of education, as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak told us so many years ago, is to learn to desire differently. The imparting of knowledge does not suffice. Of course, this is difficult, because the poor and the working classes everywhere are required to desire in excess—so that capital may continue to grow. To theorize the nature of that excess and its systematic cultivation is a task far beyond the purview of this note to the new edition, but it would

be necessary if one were to understand, for example, why it is that the frustrated efforts to escape that demand so often mutate into the destruction of the material world in which poor people live. Think here of Khutsong in 2009 or the Banlieus of Paris 2010 or London in 2011 or Chicago in 1968.

The hubris of vanguardism in its most presumptuously violent form lies in its belief that one group has knowledge which another lacks, and can either hold that in trust or deliver it as a kind of political gift—leaving itself intact and always a little ahead. The virtue of Turner's intervention was its insistent attention to self-transformation as the corollary of the vanguardist educative initiatives. Indeed, self-transformation was the primary aim of *The Eye of the Needle*. Turner was addressing his own social milieu as much as the black labourers of the Durban factories. More particularly, he was addressing the white liberal opponents of apartheid, for whom Afrikaner nationalism was a total origin myth, blighting radical critique with an ahistoricism that covered over the histories of English colonialism and its racisms, as well as the analysis of racial capitalism in general. That milieu was emphatically Christian.

It is here that Turner's work offers its second lesson for our contemporaneity. For, the necessity of finding a ground for radical critique within the frameworks of religion is all the more pressing at a time when religion offers itself to so many as an adequate form of critique, although only in opposition to an other's religion. There are many factors that may be adduced to explain the apparent resurgence of religion today: the existential inadequacies of secularity; the misrecognition of Western secularism's Christian biases; the retraction of the state under

neoliberalism and the outsourcing of social services to religious institutions; the defensive culturalization of religion under globalized conditions; and the development of capitalized multinational religious media. No doubt, there are several factors involved at once. The point here is not to explain that development, but to recognize the possible merits of Turner's strategic move, namely, to address people from within the axioms of their own lived reality—not in order to accept them but, rather, to grasp fully how they operate and what would be necessary to dislodge their status as axiomatic. But that final move would have to be accomplished by the reader who had assumed a theoretical attitude. Morphet speaks of Turner's work in terms of a paradigmatic fiction for this reason, because he shapes a narrative within the terms of his moment's possible readings. If this meant he had to borrow the characterological structure of Christian myth, with Jesus as the bearer of freedom in the form of choice, then that is what he would do. Again, the point is not to repeat this gesture, but to see in its form a possible praxis. Its distinctive element was not its assumption of religious forms but, rather, its insistence on the self-critical element within that structure. In other words, it de-transcendentalized the religious narrative within which it operated, and sought an auto-critical element at its core. This capacity, for auto-critique and the de-transcendentalizing of narrative is, perhaps, available in every (religious) tradition, just as its disavowal is present in every tradition. Rereading Turner shows us this possibility, and in this way holds open a door, if not the needle's eye, to a democracy yet to come.

What is perhaps less visible in the text of *The Eye of the Needle* is Turner's combativeness, his wit and his

intellectual thoroughness—the penchant of a philosopher battling over ideas, as though over life itself (as indeed was the case) without ever relinquishing the possibility of persuading his opponents of their mistakes. Those qualities emerge from a broader reading of his journalistic rebuttals to criticisms of his book, his unpublished philosophical writings and his occasional essays and lectures on the Durban strikes. We hope that the publication of this book will prompt scholars and students to reread those texts, as well as those of his contemporaries, both to learn from Turner's own intellectual and political struggle, and to think anew about how to sustain the function of critique in a public sphere that is constantly under threat from both political and commercial interests.

Tony Morphet was a colleague and confidant of Rick Turner. His wise essays, conjoined in a single postcript at the end of this volume, constitute a rare form of tribute, being both illuminating and honestly critical. They help us to learn to read across time, while making that reading the occasion of self-reflection. Both he and I wish to thank Rick's widow, Foszia, and their two daughters, for permission and assistance in bringing Turner's work back into publication and into the public sphere, where, we hope, it may contribute to that kind of critical practice on which justice always depends.

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ONE | THE NECESSITY OF UTOPIAN THINKING

There are two kinds of 'impossibility': the absolute impossibility and the 'other things being equal' impossibility. It is absolutely impossible to teach a lion to become a vegetarian. 'Other things being equal', it is impossible for a black person to become prime minister of South Africa.

'Given that the whites are in power in South Africa and that they will continue to want what they want now, it is impossible to have a just society in South Africa. So let us try to see what changes they can be persuaded to accept within that context. Can we perhaps persuade them at least to eat old goats instead of our prize lambs?' This has been the typical approach of South African liberal groups in general. We need to go beyond this. We need to ask whether in fact white South Africans are absolutely and inevitably carnivorous. Let us, for once, stop asking what the whites can be persuaded to do, what concessions, other things being equal, they may make, and instead explore the absolute limits of possibility by sketching an ideally just society.

There are two reasons why it is important to think in long-range 'utopian' terms. Christianity does not just condemn racism. It constitutes a challenge to all accepted

values, an invitation to continuous self-examination, to a continuous attempt at transcendence. We need therefore to explore, and, if necessary, to attack, all the implicit assumptions about how to behave towards other people that underlie our daily actions in all spheres.

We may find that Christianity is incompatible not only with racism but also with many of the other norms regulating our behaviour, and that in order to live in a Christian way we will need radically to restructure our society. For what is a society? We sometimes tend to speak and think of a society and of social institutions as though they were natural entities, part of the geography of the world in which we live. The geography of an area determines, with fair rigidity, the possibilities of movement open to us; we can go around a mountain, or over it, but not through it—although at a pinch we could build a tunnel through a small part of it. But we would never even dream of moving the whole mountain. Similarly, we tend to see the institutions of our society—the type of economic structure, the family, the school system, the existence of nation states, the polity and so on—as natural entities imposing certain rigidities on our behaviour. We see our area of choice in interpersonal relations as being marked out by these institutions. We can pay our employees slightly higher or lower wages, but we cannot do without a wage system. We might try three successive monogamous marriages, but we wouldn't consider polyandry. We may even tinker slightly, building a tunnel here and a bridge there, by simplifying divorce laws or legislating against trade unions. But the great core institutions remain essentially unaltered and unalterable.