Racism's Last Word

Jacques Derrida

Translated by Peggy Kamuf

Translator's Note.—*"Racism's Last Word" is a translation of "Le Dernier Mot du racisme," which was written for the catalog of the exhibition Art contre/against Apartheid. The exhibition was assembled by the Association of Artists of the World against Apartheid, headed by Antonio Saura and Ernest Pignon-Ernest, in cooperation with the United Nations Special Committee against Apartheid. Eighty-five of the world's most celebrated artists contributed paintings and sculpture to the exhibition, which opened in Paris in November 1983. In addition, a number of writers and scholars were invited to contribute texts for the catalog. "Le Dernier Mot du racisme" serves in particular to introduce the project of the itinerant exhibition, which the organizers described briefly in their preface to the catalog:*

> *The collection offered here will form the basis of a future museum against apartheid. But first, these works will be presented in a traveling exhibition to be received by museums and other cultural facilities throughout the world. The day will come—and our efforts are joined to those of the international community aiming to hasten that day's arrival—when the museum thus constituted will be presented as a gift to the first free and democratic government of South Africa to be elected by universal suffrage. Until then, the Association of Artists of the World against Apartheid will assume, through the appropriate legal, institutional and financial structures, the trusteeship of the works.*

A somewhat modified version of "Racism's Last Word" was originally published in the bilingual catalog of the exhibition.

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Critical Inquiry 12 (Autumn 1985)

APARTHEID—may that remain the name from now on, the unique appellation for the ultimate racism in the world, the last of many.

May it thus remain, but may a day come when it will only be for the memory of man.

A memory in advance: that, perhaps, is the time given for this exhibition. At once urgent and untimely, it exposes itself and takes a chance with time, it wagers and affirms beyond the wager. Without counting on any present moment, it offers only a foresight in painting, very close to silence, and the rearview vision of a future for which *apartheid* will be the name of something finally abolished. Confined and abandoned then to this silence of memory, the name will resonate all by itself, reduced to the state of a term in disuse. The thing it names today will no longer be.

But hasn't *apartheid* always been the archival record of the unnameable?

The exhibition, therefore, is not a presentation. Nothing is delivered here in the present, nothing that would be presentable—only, in tomorrow's rearview mirror, the late, ultimate racism, the last of many.

1

THE LAST: or *le dernier* as one sometimes says in French in order to signify "the worst." What one is doing in that case is situating the extreme of baseness, just as, in English, one might say "the lowest of the . . ." It is to the lowest degree, the last of a series, but also that which comes along at the end of a history, or in the last analysis, to carry out the law of some process and reveal the thing's truth, here finishing off the essence of evil, the worst, the essence at its very worst—as if there were something like a racism par excellence, the most racist of racisms.

THE LAST as one says also of the most recent, the last to date of all the world's racisms, the oldest and the youngest. For one must not forget that, although racial segregation didn't wait for the name *apartheid* to come along, that name became order's *watchword* and won its title in the political code of South Africa only at the end of the Second World War. At a time when *all* racisms on the face of the earth were condemned,

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it was in the world's face that the National party dared to campaign *"for the separate development of each race in the geographic zone assigned to it."*

Since then, no tongue has ever translated this name—as if all the languages of the world were defending themselves, shutting their mouths against a sinister incorporation of the thing by means of the word, as if all tongues were refusing to give an equivalent, refusing to let themselves be contaminated through the contagious hospitality of the word-for-word. Here, then, is an immediate response to the obsessiveness of this racism, to the compulsive terror which, above all, forbids contact. The white must not let itself be touched by black, be it even at the remove of language or symbol. Blacks do not have the right to touch the flag of the republic. In 1964, South Africa's Ministry of Public Works sought to assure the cleanliness of national emblems by means of a regulation stipulating that it is "forbidden for non-Europeans to handle them."

APARTHEID: by itself the word occupies the terrain like a concentration camp. System of partition, barbed wire, crowds of mapped out solitudes. Within the limits of this untranslatable idiom, a violent arrest of the mark, the glaring harshness of abstract essence (*heid*) seems to speculate in another regime of abstraction, that of confined separation. The word concentrates separation, raises it to another power and sets separation itself *apart:* "apartitionality," something like that. By isolating being apart in some sort of essence or hypostasis, the word corrupts it into a quasi-ontological segregation. At every point, like all racisms, it tends to pass segregation off as natural—and as the very law of the origin. Such is the monstrosity of this political idiom. Surely, an idiom should never incline toward racism. It often does, however, and this is not altogether fortuitous: there's no racism without a language. The point is not that acts of racial violence are only words but rather that they have to have a word. Even though it offers the excuse of blood, color, birth—or, rather, *because* it uses this naturalist and sometimes creationist discourse—racism always betrays the perversion of a man, the "talking animal." It institutes, declares, writes, inscribes, prescribes. A system of marks, it outlines space in order to assign forced residence or to close off borders. It does not discern, it discriminates.

THE LAST, finally, since this last-born of many racisms is also the only one surviving in the world, at least the only one still parading itself in a political constitution. It remains the only one on the scene that dares to say its name and to present itself for what it is: a legal defiance taken on by *homo politicus,* a juridical racism and a state racism. Such is the ultimate imposture of a so-called state of law which doesn't hesitate to base itself on a would-be original hierarchy—of natural right or divine right, the two are never mutually exclusive.

This name apart will have, therefore, a unique, sinister renown. *Apartheid* is famous, in sum, for manifesting the lowest extreme of racism, its end and the narrow-minded self-sufficiency of its intention, its es-

chatology, the death rattle of what is already an interminable agony, something like the setting in the West of racism—but also, and this will have to be specified below, racism as a Western thing.

2

In order to respond to this singularity or, better yet, to fling back an answer, the singularity right here of another event takes its measure. Artists from all over the world are preparing to launch a new satellite, a vehicle whose dimensions can hardly be determined except as a satellite of humanity. Actually, it measures itself against *apartheid* only so as to remain in no measure comparable with that system, its power, its fantastic riches, its excessive armament, the worldwide network of its openly declared or shamefaced accomplices. This unarmed exhibition will have a force that is altogether other, just as its trajectory will be without example.

Its movement does not yet belong to any given time or space that might be measured today. Its flight rushes headlong, it commemorates in anticipation—not its own event but the one that it calls forth. Its flight, in sum, is as much that of a planet as of a satellite. A planet, as the name indicates, is first of all a body sent wandering on a migration which, in this case, has no certain end.

In all the world's cities whose momentary guest it will be, the exhibition will not, so to speak, take place, not yet, not *its* place. It will remain in exile in the sight of its proper residence, its place of destination to come—and to create. For such is here the *creation* and the work of which it is fitting to speak: South Africa beyond *apartheid,* South Africa in memory of *apartheid.*

While this might be the cape to be rounded, everything will have begun with exile. Born in exile, the exhibition already bears witness against the forced assignment to "natural" territory, the geography of birth. And if it never reaches its destination, having been condemned to an endless flight or immobilized far from an unshakable South Africa, it will not only keep the archival record of a failure or a despair but continue to *say* something, something that can be heard today, in the present.

This new satellite of humanity, then, will move from place to place, it too, like a mobile and stable habitat, "mobile" and "stabile," a place of observation, information, and witness. A satellite is a guard, it keeps watch and gives warning: Do not forget *apartheid,* save humanity from this evil, an evil that cannot be summed up in the principial and abstract iniquity of a system. It is also daily suffering, oppression, poverty, violence, torture inflicted by an arrogant white minority (16 percent of the population, controlling 60 to 65 percent of the national revenue) on the mass of the black population. The information that Amnesty International

compiled on political imprisonment in South Africa and on the whole of the judicial and penal reality is appalling.[1]

Yet, what can be done so that this witness-satellite, in the truth it exposes, is not taken over and controlled, thus becoming another technical device, the antenna of some new politico-military strategy, a useful machinery for the exploitation of new resources, or the calculation in view of more comprehensive interests?

In order better to ask this question, which awaits an answer only from the future that remains inconceivable, let us return to immediate appearances. Here is an exhibition—as one continues to say in the old language of the West, "works of art," signed "creations," in the present case "pictures" or "paintings," "sculptures." In this collective and international exhibition (and there's nothing new about that either), pictural, sculptural idioms will be crossing, but they will be attempting to speak the other's language without renouncing their own. And in order to effect this translation, their common reference henceforth makes an appeal to a language that cannot be found, a language at once very old, older than Europe, but for that very reason to be invented once more.

3

Why mention the European age in this fashion? Why this reminder of such a trivial fact—that all these words are part of the old language of the West?

Because it seems to me that the aforementioned exhibition exposes and commemorates, indicts and contradicts the whole of a Western history. That a certain white community of European descent imposes *apartheid* on four-fifths of South Africa's population and maintains (up until 1980!) the *official* lie of a white migration that preceded black migration is not the only reason that *apartheid* was a European "creation." Nor for any other such reason: the name of *apartheid* has managed to become a sinister swelling on the body of the world only in that place where *homo politicus europaeus* first put his signature on its tattoo. The primary reason, however, is that here it is a question of state racism. While all racisms have their basis in culture and in institutions, not all of them give rise to state-controlled structures. The judicial simulacrum and the political theater of this state racism have no meaning and would have had no chance outside a European "discourse" on the concept of race. That discourse belongs to a whole system of "phantasms," to a certain representation of nature, life, history, religion, and law, to the very culture which succeeded in giving rise to this state takeover. No doubt there is also here—and it bears repeating—a contradiction internal to the West and to the assertion of its rights. No doubt *apartheid* was instituted and maintained against the British Commonwealth, following a long adventure

that began with England's abolition of slavery in 1834, at which time the impoverished Boers undertook the Long Trek toward the Orange Free State and the Transvaal. But this contradiction only confirms the occidental essence of the historical process—in its incoherences, its compromises, and its stabilization. Since the Second World War, at least if one accepts the givens of a certain kind of calculation, the stability of the Pretoria regime has been prerequisite to the political, economic, and strategic equilibrium of Europe. The survival of Western Europe depends on it. Whether one is talking about gold or what are called strategic ores, it is known to be the case that at least three-fourths of the world's share of them is divided between the USSR and South Africa. Direct or even indirect Soviet control of South Africa would provoke, or so think certain Western heads of state, a catastrophe beyond all comparison with the malediction (or the "bad image") of *apartheid.* And then there's the necessity of controlling the route around the cape, and then there's also the need for resources or jobs that can be provided by the exportation of arms and technological infrastructures—nuclear power plants, for example, even though Pretoria rejects international control and has not signed any nuclear nonproliferation treaty.

Apartheid constitutes, therefore, the first "delivery of arms," the first product of European exportation. Some might say that this is a diversion and a perversion, and no doubt it is. Yet somehow the thing had to be possible and, what is more, durable. Symbolic condemnations, even when they have been official, have never disrupted diplomatic, economic, or cultural exchanges, the deliveries of arms, and geopolitical solidarity. Since 1973, *apartheid* has been declared a "crime against humanity" by the General Assembly of the United Nations. Nevertheless, many member countries, including some of the most powerful, are not doing all that's required (that's the least one can say) to put the Pretoria regime in a difficult situation or to force it to abolish *apartheid.* This contradiction is sharpest no doubt in today's France, which has provided more support for this exhibition than anywhere else.

Supplementary contradictions for the whole of Europe: Certain Eastern European countries—Czechoslovakia and the USSR, for example—maintain their economic trade with South Africa (in phosphoric acids, arms, machinery, gold). As for the pressures applied to Pretoria to achieve the relaxation of certain forms of *apartheid,* in particular those that are called petty and that forbid, for instance, access to public buildings, one must admit that these pressures are not always inspired by respect for human rights. The fact is, *apartheid also* increases nonproductive expenditures (for example, each "homeland" must have its own policing and administrative machinery); segregation hurts the market economy, limits free enterprise by limiting domestic consumption and the mobility and training of labor. In a time of unprecedented economic crisis, South Africa has to reckon, both internally and externally, with the forces of

a liberal current according to which "*apartheid* is notoriously inefficient from the point of view of economic rationality."[2] This too will have to remain in memory: if one day *apartheid* is abolished, its demise will not be credited only to the account of moral standards—because moral standards should not count or keep accounts, to be sure, but also because, on the scale which is that of a worldwide computer, the law of the marketplace will have imposed another standard of calculation.

4

The theologico-political discourse of *apartheid* has difficulty keeping up sometimes, but it illustrates the same economy, the same intra-European contradiction.

It is not enough to invent the prohibition and to enrich every day the most repressive legal apparatus in the world: in a breathless frenzy of obsessive juridical activity, two hundred laws and amendments were enacted in twenty years (Prohibition of Mixed Marriage Act, 1949; Immorality Amendment Act [against interracial sexual relations], Group Areas Act, Population Registration Act, 1950; Reservation of Separate Amenities [segregation in movie houses, post offices, swimming pools, on beaches, and so forth], Motor Carrier Transportation Amendment Act, Extension of University Education Act [separate universities], 1955; segregation in athletic competition has already been widely publicized).

This law is also founded in a theology and these Acts in Scripture. Since political power originates in God, it remains indivisible. To accord individual rights "to immature social communities" and to those who "openly rebel against God, that is, the communists" would be a "revolt against God." This Calvinist reading of Scripture condemns democracy, that universalism "which seeks the root of humanity in a set of worldwide sovereign relations that includes humanity in a whole." It points out that "Scripture and History each demonstrate that God requires Christian States."[3]

The charter of the Institute for National Christian Education (1948) sets out the only regulations possible for a South African government. It prescribes an education

> in the light of God's word . . . on the basis of the applicable principles of Scripture.
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> For each people and each nation is attached to its own native soil which has been allotted to it by the Creator. . . . God wanted nations and peoples to be separate, and he gave separately to each nation and to each people its particular vocation, its task and its gifts. . . .

> Christian doctrine and philosophy should be practiced. But we desire even more than this: the secular sciences should be taught from the Christian-National perspective on life. . . . Consequently, it is important that teaching personnel be made up of scholars with Christian-National convictions. . . . Unless [the professor] is Christian, he poses a danger to everyone. . . . This guardianship imposes on the Afrikaner the duty of assuring that the colored peoples are educated in accordance with Christian-National principles. . . . We believe that the well-being and happiness of the colored man resides in his recognition of the fact that he belongs to a separate racial group.

It happens that this political theology inspires its militants with an original form of anti-Semitism; thus the National party excluded Jews up until 1951. This is because the "Hebrewistic" mythology of the Boer people, coming out of its nomadic origins and the Long Trek, excludes any other "Chosen People." None of which prevents (see above) all sorts of worthwhile exchanges with Israel.

But let us never simplify matters. Among all the domestic contradictions thus exported, maintained, and capitalized upon by Europe, there remains one which is not just any one among others: *apartheid* is upheld, to be sure, but also condemned in the name of Christ. There are many signs of this obvious fact. The white resistance movement in South Africa deserves our praise. The Christian Institute, founded after the slaughter in Sharpeville in 1961, considers *apartheid* incompatible with the evangelical message, and it publicly supports the banned black political movements. But it should be added that it is this same Christian Institute which was, in turn, banned in 1977, not the Institute for National, Christian Education.

All of this, of course, is going on under a regime whose formal structures are those of a Western democracy, in the British style, with "universal suffrage" (except for the 72 percent of blacks "foreign" to the republic and citizens of "Bantustans" that are being pushed "democratically" into the trap of formal independence), a relative freedom of the press, the guarantee of individual rights and of the judicial system.

5

What is South Africa? We have perhaps isolated whatever it is that has been concentrated in that enigma, but the outline of such analyses has neither dissolved nor dissipated it in the least. Precisely because of this concentration of world history, what resists analysis also calls for another mode of thinking. If we could forget about the suffering, the humiliation, the torture and the deaths, we might be tempted to look at

this region of the world as a giant tableau or painting, the screen for some geopolitical computer. Europe, in the enigmatic process of its globalization and of its paradoxical disappearance, seems to project onto this screen, point by point, the silhouette of its internal war, the bottom line of its profits and losses, the double-bind logic of its national and multinational interests. Their dialectical evaluation provides only a provisional stasis in a precarious equilibrium, one whose price today is *apartheid.* All states and all societies are still willing to pay this price, first of all by making someone else pay. At stake, advises the computer, are world peace, the general economy, the marketplace for European labor, and so on. Without minimizing the alleged "reasons of state," we must nevertheless say very loudly and in a single breath: If that's the way it is, then the declarations of the Western states denouncing *apartheid* from the height of international platforms and elsewhere are dialectics of denegation. With great fanfare, they are trying to make the world forget the 1973 verdict—"crime against humanity." If this verdict continues to have no effect, it is because the customary discourse on man, humanism and human rights, has encountered its effective and as yet unthought limit, the limit of the whole system in which it acquires meaning. Amnesty International: "As long as *apartheid* lasts, there can be no structure conforming to the generally recognized norms of human rights and able to guarantee their application."[4]

Beyond the global computer, the dialectic of strategic or economic calculations, beyond state-controlled, national, or international tribunals, beyond the juridico-political or theologico-political discourse, which any more serves only to maintain good conscience or denegation, it was, it will have to be, it is necessary to appeal unconditionally to the future of another law and another force lying beyond the totality of this present.

This, it seems to me, is what this exhibition affirms or summons forth, what it signs with a single stroke. Here also is what it must give one to read and to think, and thus to do, and to give yet again, beyond the present of the institutions supporting it or of the foundation that, in turn, it will itself become.

Will it succeed? Will it make of this very thing a work? Nothing can be guaranteed here, by definition.

But if one day the exhibition wins, yes, *wins* its place in South Africa, it will keep the memory of what will never have been, at the moment of these projected, painted, assembled works, the presentation of some present. Even the future perfect can no longer translate the tense, the time of what is being written in this way—and what is doubtless no longer part of the *everyday current,* of the cursory sense of history.

Isn't this true of any "work"? Of that truth which is so difficult to put into words? Perhaps.

The exemplary history of "Guernica" (name of the town, name of a hell, name of the work) is not without analogy to the history of this

exhibition, to be sure; it may even have inspired the idea for the exhibition. *Guernica* denounces civilized barbarism, and from out of the painting's exile, in its dead silence, one hears the cry of moaning or accusation. Brought forward by the painting, the cry joins with the children's screams and the bombers' din, until the last day of dictatorship when the work is repatriated to a place in which it has never dwelled.

To be sure: still it was the work, if one may say so, of a single individual, and also Picasso was addressing—not only but also and first of all—his own country. As for the lawful rule recently reestablished in Spain, it, like that of so many countries, continues to participate in the system which presently assures, as we have been saying, the survival of *apartheid.*

Things are not the same with this exhibition. Here the single work is multiple, it crosses all national, cultural, and political frontiers. It neither commemorates nor represents an event. Rather, it casts a continuous gaze (paintings are always gazing) at what I propose to name a continent. One may do whatever one wishes with all the senses of that word.

Beyond a continent whose limits they point to, the limits surrounding it or crossing through it, the paintings gaze and call out in silence.

And their silence is just. A discourse would once again compel us to reckon with the present state of force and law. It would draw up contracts, dialecticize itself, let itself be reappropriated again.

This silence calls out unconditionally; it keeps watch on that which is not, on that which is not yet, and on the chance of still remembering some faithful day.

1. See *Political Imprisonment in South Africa: An Amnesty International Report* (London, 1978).

2. Howard Schissel, "La Solution de rechange libérale: comment concilier défense des droits de l'homme et augmentation des profits" [The liberal alternative as solution: how to reconcile the defense of human rights with increase in profits], *Le Monde diplomatique,* Oct. 1979, p. 18. For the same tendency, cf. René Lefort, "Solidarités raciales et intérêts de classe: composer avec les impératifs de l'économie sans renoncer au 'développement séparé' " [Racial solidarity and class interests: meeting economic imperatives without renouncing "separate development"], *Le Monde diplomatique,* Oct. 1979, pp. 15–16. For the same "logic" from the labor-union point of view, see Brigitte Lachartre, "Un Système d'interdits devenu gênant" [A system of prohibitions become a nuisance], *Le Monde diplomatique,* Oct. 1979, pp. 16–17, and Marianne Cornevin, *La République sud-africaine* (Paris, 1972).

3. *The Fundamental Principles of Calvinist Political Science,* quoted in Serge Thion, *Le Pouvoir pâle: Essai sur le système sud-africain* (Paris, 1969).

4. See *Political Imprisonment in South Africa.*