

Written long before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was established, *Age of Iron* is the anguished confession of a woman who continued to live a normal life in a country in which the resistance had declared that there would be no normal living under abnormal conditions.

The novel is the declaration of all of us who persisted in going about our lives in the normal way and turned deaf ears to the call for heroism, a call answered by those who fought, were killed, imprisoned, and survived to build a new dispensation.

What makes *Age of Iron* a masterpiece is not its brilliant expression of a soul in anguish, of a consciousness that failed the challenge to be truly human, its depiction of the shame of collusion, of battenning on oppression, like a homeless parasite lying in a cardboard shelter taking handouts. No, its searing truth is what makes it a masterpiece; its unwillingness to rationalise, to compromise; its determination to reveal the rot that lies beneath the civilized veneer: the corruption of denial in all its manifestations, even the most subtle.

‘A crime was committed long ago. How long ago? I do not know. But longer than 1916,
certainly. So long ago that
I was born into it.

It is part of my inheritance.

It is part of me, I am part of it.

‘Like every crime it had its price. That price, I used to think, would have to be paid in shame:
in a life of shame and a shameful death, unlamented, in an obscene corner.

I accepted that.

I did not try to set myself apart.

Though it was not a crime I asked to be committed, it was committed in my name.

I raged at times against the men who did the dirty work - you have seen it, a shameful raging as

stupid

as what it raged against - but I accepted too that, in a sense, they lived inside me.

So that when in my rages I wished them dead, I wished death on myself too.

In the name of honour.

Of an honourable notion of honour.

Honesta mors.

(149 - 150)

'I have no idea what freedom is, Mr Vercueil. I am sure Bheki and his friend had no idea either.

only what is unimaginable.

heless, we know unfreedom when we see it - don't we?

Perhaps freedom is always and

Nevert

Bheki was not free, and knew it.

You are not free, at least not on this earth, nor am I.

I was born a slave and I will most certainly die a slave.

A life in fetters, a death in fetters:

that is part of the price, not to be quibbled at, not to be whined about.

'What I did not know, *what I did not know* - listen to me now! - was that price was even higher.

mistake come in?

to do with honour, with the notion I clung to through thick and thin, from my education, from my reading, that in his soul the honourable man can suffer no harm.

I had miscalculated. Where did the

It had something

I strove always for honour, for a private honour, using shame as my guide.

As long as I was ashamed I knew I had not wandered into dishonour.

That was the use of shame as a touchstone, something that would always be there, something you could come back to like a blind person, to touch, to tell you where you were.

For the rest I kept a decent distance from my shame.

I did not wallow in it.

Shame never became a shameful pleasure; it never ceased to gnaw me.

I was not proud of it, I was a shamed of it.

My shame, my own.

Ashes in my mouth day after day, which never ceased to taste like ashes.

It is a confession I am making here, this morning, Mr Vercueil,' I said, 'as full a confession as I know how. I withhold no secrets. I have been a good person. I freely confess to it.

I am a good person still.

What times these are when to be a good person is not enough!

'What I had not calculated on was that more might be called for than to be good. For there are plenty of good people in this country.

We are two a penny, we good and nearly -good.

What the times call for is quite different from goodness. The times call for heroism.

A word that, as I speak it, sounds foreign to my lips.

I doubt that I have ever used it before, even in a lecture.

Why not?

Perhaps out of respect.

Perhaps out of shame.

As one drops one's gaze before a naked man.

I would have used the words
heroic status
instead, I think, in a lecture.

The hero with his heroic status.

The hero, that antique naked figure. (149 - 151)