

comes as a timely reminder especially to literary critics and researchers focusing increasingly on the oral tradition(s) of these earliest inhabitants of southern Africa, of the question of advocacy. We use glib phrases—for example—such as ‘recovering our lost heritage’ or talk of ‘reconstructing voices from the past’ with reference to the extinct /Xam group’s oral tradition (which Bleek and Lloyd, 1911 and later G.R. von Wielligh focused on). It is all too easy to romanticise these ‘little people’ or ‘harmless people’ as symbolising the original South African presence. But are we perhaps merely recolonising exotic material into our defunct white canon with the aim of revitalising it? The politically powerless people of Kagga Kamma, Nyae-Nyae and the community living in tents at Schmidtsdrift act as shocking reminders of other pressures and issues than the merely aesthetic and literary.

Fiction, History and Nation

Fiction, History and Nation in South Africa

by Annalisa Oboe

Venezia. Supernova, 1994, 217 pp.

Supernova Edizioni, C.P. 58, Rialto, 30100 Venezia, Italia.

Reviewed by Jean-Philippe Wade

CSSALL

University of Durban-Westville

After recently re-reading a disastrously inaccurate critical study of the novels of J.M. Coetzee by an American scholar, Susan VanZanten Gallagher, (*A Story of South Africa: J.M. Coetzee's Fiction in Context* (Harvard 1991)), I have become wary of foreign scholars dipping desultorily into South African literature. However, Annalisa Oboe, a researcher in the Department of English and German Languages and Literatures at the University of Padova in Italy, has written a fascinating and scholarly book which is sensitive both to the specificity of our national space and to the research produced by South African literary critics.

Fiction, History and Nation in South Africa ‘focuses on the South African historical novel in English, from its first appearance to 1990’. While

using a great many novels to illustrate her arguments, these are considered to be 'representative ... in order to offer a comprehensive panorama of the fiction which centres on the problem of historical myth-making and nation-building'.

In her examination of these discourses of national 'foundational fictions' in the South African historical novel, Oboe has scrupulously engaged with recent revisionist analyses both of historiography (Hayden White, Barthes, Foucault, etc.) and nationalism (Hobsbawn, Benedict Anderson, Gellner, Homi Bhabha etc.). The confident nineteenth century opposition between history and fiction is crumbling before semiotic and discursive critiques, while nationalist discourse is now seen not as some mimetic representation of a given essence, but as a political-ideological 'invention' given to consolidating myth-making. Oboe is thus convincingly able to reveal the inverted logic of much of this writing (here of Sarah Gertrude Millin):

The present, which claims to find its 'origin' in the ancient border experience, in fact 'invents' that origin by writing its own contemporary racism into it, so that the cause can be made to carry the blame for the effect (1994: 178).

This recent scholarship enables Oboe to perceive historical novels (the prototype here is the novels of Sir Walter Scott) as nation-building fictions which turn to history to 'supply a basis for communal identification and cohesion'. Given her awareness of the limits and silences of nationalist discourses, Oboe's analyses—indebted to post-colonial theory—favour those literary voices which speak of intercultural hybridity rather than exclusive and ethnic solidarities.

Recognising along with Hayden White that literary and historical meaning is dependent upon 'emplacement', Oboe devotes most of her study to a narratological 'typology of the recurrent plots of South African historical fiction', which she divides into 'Border', 'Settlement', 'War', and 'Crossroads' stories.

The 'Border' novels are those which, in that individual confrontation with the fluid ambiguity of the frontier, either reinforce white colonial identity (Stuart Cloete, Haggard's *Marie*, Millin's *King of the Bastards*), provocatively deconstruct it (J.M. Coetzee's *Dusklands*), or turn it into an occasion for cross-cultural hybridity (Anthony Delius' *Border*, Stephen Gray's *John Ross*). The 'Settlement' novels deal with the 1820 Settlers and the Great Trek, 'endorsing Boer, British or white "South African"' national identities by locating 'in the communal past the birth of the future nation'. The 'War' novel defines the 'collective inside against the outside, instills internal solidarity, and determines the supremacy of the community over the

individual', and, in a country so remorselessly prone to civil conflict, these foundational narratives tend to encourage ethnic separatism. Oboe's chapter on 'Crossroads' historical novels is particularly valuable, dealing intelligently with Bessie Head's *A Bewitched Crossroad* and Sol Plaatje's *Mhudi* (her lengthy analysis of *Mhudi* is the deserved centre-piece of her book)—both deliberately anti-colonial re-writings of South African history. Against the grain of so much *white writing*, both these books—themselves hybrid in form—emphasise syncretic 'moments of convergence and exchange between tribe and tribe, race and race'.

Oboe then identifies three important *motifs* which intertextually recur across these various novel-types and which are central to the fabrication of national discourses: those of the farm, romantic couples, and of adoption. The pastoral narratives of the 1920s-1940s, 'portray the birth of the idea of the nation in the disclosures of farm life', for example rooting Afrikaners in possessed soil to construct an ethnic and divisive identity. Oboe interestingly argues that romantic love in historical fiction 'make desire the motivation for literary/historical/national projects' which is 'essential to the wish-fulfilment dimension of foundational fictions'. This 'political erotics' can be used to unite the white cultures of Boer and Briton, the family becoming a microcosm of the larger nation. She further points out that the notion of monogamous love—with its anti-traditional 'civilised' claims—becomes, in the dissident writings of Peter Abrahams, Bessie Head and Sol Plaatje, the very model for a progressive nationalism, a 'new kind of men and women endowed with all the qualities necessary to give birth to a solid black nation'. Finally, Oboe draws helpful attention to the motif of 'adoption' as a way of forging inter-ethnic national links on the grounds of choice rather than biology. If in novels by Haggard and Francis Brett Young it is used to unite Boer and Briton, it is also used 'subversively', most famously in Stephen Gray's *John Ross*, to enact intercultural communication with the erstwhile Black other.

In a study of the *historical* novel, Oboe could perhaps have devoted more intellectual energy precisely to those shifting historical contexts in which these narratives were both produced and received. While not strikingly original in her detailed analyses, Oboe is nevertheless an accomplished synthesizer of the primary research of others, and has made a significant contribution to the study of the South African historical novel. Her comprehensive bibliography will be of value to students. We must also acknowledge yet another success from the Supernova publishing house in Venice, Italy.

