# Writing South Africa

Kelwyn Sole

## Review Article

*Writing South Africa:*
*Literature, Apartheid, and Democracy, 1970—1995.*
Edited by Derek Attridge and Rosemary Jolly
Cambridge, New York and Melbourne: Cambridge University Press,
1998, xvii + 288pp.
ISBN 0 521 59218 6; 0 521 59768 4 (pbk)

This collection consists of essays, interviews and position papers not published before, with the exception of Albie Sachs' well-known 1989 intervention and an interview with Serote. According to the editors, the contents are intent on exploring the relationship between art and politics in South Africa. They approach issues relating to the writer's responsibility, the interrelationship between class, gender and racial identities and representations in literature, the relationship between aesthetics and ethics, and questions of form and language. In addition, the specificity of the country's literary traditions, and their relationship to wider African and metropolitan traditions, is under scrutiny; underpinned with examinations of the usefulness of designations of 'modernism', post-modernism' and 'post-coloniality' to an understanding of the field. These are of course, all crucial concerns for anyone trying to comprehend the complexity and diversity of our literary and cultural practices.

Of the essays in this collection a few are complex enough to demand a basic summary. The interchange between Parry and Attwell about the effects of the fiction of John Coetzee is one of these instances. Despite Coetzee's efforts in his novels and critical writing to disrupt the social and discursive authority of the West/colonialism, Parry suggests that his work can be eventually seen to sustain Western modes of perception. This is because he represents the oppressed in his fiction via characters and viewpoints 'situated as objects of representations and meditations which offer them no place from which to resist the modes that have constituted them' (151); thus effectively pre-empting non-Western knowledges. The withholding of any gesture towards a politics of 'fulfillment' or any prospect of a different, transformed, social order results in a 'textual practice which dissipates the engagement with political conditions it also inscribes' (164). Similarly, his refusal to engage with the textures of the South African landscape (made clear in his criticism of 'white writing') becomes, ironically enough, a denial of any possibility of connection to the land. Attwell responds by pointing out that

such options are not available to Coetzee. Given his theoretical bent, such options would render him liable to problems of epistemological and cultural misrecognition based on a disregard for the limitations of his own positioning and viewpoint: Coetzee's narrative mode rather encodes its social vision in terms of its commitment to aesthetic self-reflection. Thereafter diverting somewhat from this point, Attwell seems prepared to concede some of Parry's point *vis-à-vis* works like *Foe*, but suggest that *Age of Iron* 'thematizes, performs, and thus reflects on, various modes of alterity' (167).

Attwell's decision to focus on one work in order to answer Parry's more general critique is somewhat disappointing. Moreover, it becomes apparent that he is taking the opportunity to read Coetzee in terms of his own endeavour to rid South African postcolonial theory of the problems associated with 'strong' othering; stating that Coetzee does not wish to suggest a version of alterity that would leave no grounds for 'intersubjective recognition', and that both Ndebele and Coetzee refuse to entertain a 'dogmatic insistence on absolute difference' (170).

While questions of identity are visible in many of the discussions, it is Wicomb's article on the position of the 'coloured' within the national reconstruction of South Africa past and present which examines this issue forthrightly. Her article focuses on the textual construction, ethnographic self-fashioning and political behaviour of 'coloureds' as a 'condition of postcoloniality' (92). The 'shameful vote' of the 'coloureds' for the Nationalist Party in the Western Cape shapes much of her argument, and she finally pleads for 'new discursive spaces in which modalities of blackness can wipe out shame' (106). It becomes increasingly clear that 'shame' is principally mobilised as a moralising term in this essay, which results in an emotional tone insufficiently harnessed to her attempts to understand and explain 'coloured' stereotypification, behaviour or self-identification. An assumption that certain kinds of blackness are more authentic than others (at least as far as political conduct is concerned) therefore haunts, and contradicts, the theoretical thrust and logical process of her argument, which is in turn noticeably ill-knit and fragmentary. The references to gender are not carried through, and her suggestion that there is a need to revise popular definitions of postcoloniality to include the co-existence of oppositional and complicit forms of behaviour, while true, is nothing new. In particular, the proposition that socio-economic imperatives and notions of self-interest might have influenced voting behaviour in the Western Cape appears rather as an afterthought, rather than being positioned as fundamental to the issue.

The interest in the relation of postcoloniality and postmodernism to notions of 'blackness' are echoed in Nkosi's essay on black writing and postmodernism. Herein he makes a number of observations he has made elsewhere, reiterating his belief that a racial split continues in South African writing between 'on the one side an urgent need to document and to bear witness and on the other the capacity to go on furlough, to loiter, and to experiment' (75). This point can be partly accepted: and Nkosi's trenchant assertion that what is read off as cultural diversity in the different norms of writing between races is sometimes a sign of social disparity and 'technological discrepancy' (75) stands out particularly starkly against some of the other pronouncements in this collection. His scepticism about the arrival of the 'post-modern' in recent South

African literature is also well-founded, given (as he argues) the incompletion of any modernist agenda, generally speaking, among South African writers: but his insistence that the examination of indigenous and vernacular literary traditions would demonstrate that they derive from, and serve, rather different narrative and linguistic traditions and systems to mainstream European-derived writing demands rather more discussion. His conviction that postmodernism, as it has taken root inside the country, is 'a movement wholly occupied, managed, or dominated by white critics' (77) seems overhasty. In addition, his position as an expatriate renders him liable—and he is certainly not the only person in the collection who does this—to make sweeping generalisations which do not encompass the full scope of contemporary literary practice in South Africa. For example, and despite his caveats, the rote manner in which he aligns what he calls 'oppositional' black literary practitioners with nationalist agendas and agency cannot make sense of contemporary poets such as Rampolokeng and Nyezwa or critics such as Mngadi and Losambe; while he does not demonstrate in what sense black writers and poets who now make a living praising foreign delegations, or Nelson Mandela, or (like Mzwakhe) performing for Cremora and Spoornet TV advertisements, can be called 'oppositional' at all. As with Pechey and Brink's articles in the collection, the broad gestures of his argument contain a degree of stereotyping and generalising that is extreme.

It becomes increasingly apparent, speaking more generally, that these articles serve a polemical as much as a scholarly purpose. The editors, and a preponderance of their contributors, appear to subscribe fully to the hegemony current in the South African literary academy. This can most obviously be seen in the manner in which Sachs' and Ndebele's interventions in debates over the last decade are constantly reiterated—rather than discussed—as sources of legitimation and authority; as well as in the frequent positive valorisations of the pronouncements and example of J.M. Coetzee, both as writer and commentator.

For this is a collection with a mission. While there seems to be an uncertainty prevailing as to precisely how to define the critical tools used, or characterise/periodise South African colonial- and postcoloniality (Wicomb's definition that it is a discursive field exhibiting a variety of meanings such as 'oppositionality, resistance, the practice of radical readings, neocolonialism, as well as the interrogation of the very term' (92) is indicative), among the theoretically-concerned essays at least there is a credence that the dismantling of apartheid may allow the opening up of possibilities to move past the stifling ideological and stylistic habits and compulsions of the apartheid era, critically and creatively speaking. The desire is for a ludic, 'carnivalizing' (in Pechey's words) practice; for experiments with new, anti-realist and fantastic forms; for multi-generic utterance. For Pechey, it is the interaction of European and African oral and literary traditions, especially in burgeoning urban contexts, which announces most clearly a new cultural hybridity that (making particular use of the energies of South Africa's African majority), will begin to forge a cultural expression implicit in the assertions of the African diaspora for centuries—an expression which may not only evade the canons of the metropolis but transform these in a 'reverse colonization' (65). In similar vein, Boehmer observes in her essay that it is the 'mongrelizations' of contemporary South

African identities and cultures which represent 'a challenge to writers of fiction, a transformative way of addressing a rapidly transforming world' (55); furthermore, it is the mixing of forms in literature she hopes will result which will supply 'an occasion and a framework for new imaginings' (47). Polyphonic utterance is positively viewed, as is a pluralising spirit now possible in literature. Horn, Boehmer, Brink, Pechey and others agree that there is the potential for a multi-voiced South Africa to move forward now in a spirit of heterogeneity and transculturation free from nationalist (and, presumably, other master-narrativising) reconstructions.

'Opening the silences' that beset apartheid South Africa is an opportunity to destabilise centre and margin; to inculcate and fashion a new society free of prejudice and hierarchies. Pechey approaches hyperbole in his discussion of these possibilities: despite the rising crime rate and the possibility that South Africa might merely be entering the latest of its neo-colonial phases, the country 'still bids fair to be the Gesellschaftswunder of the late twentieth century' (59); Ndebele's stories may 'transform the victory over apartheid into a gain for postmodern knowledge' (58), and so on.

These essays are therefore filled with a utopian spirit which occasionally verges on the evangelical, and one feels somewhat mean-spirited pointing out that the re-entry of the country into the world community means that we are now merely one of many polities striving to deal with a global system overdetermined by unequal and often unjust structures. Nevertheless, Serote's acute observation that, for some time to come, 'the two opposites, the ideal world and the real world, are going to form the basis of a very strong articulation' (183) in the work of younger writers will probably be borne out.

At worst this utopian tendency verges on a romanticisation of the 'unuttered/unutterable' (so to speak) spaces available for resistance and potential counter-utterance. This is especially noticeable in the way in which the discourses and perceptions of indigenous and oral societies and non-Western epistemologies are constructed, especially on the part of some of the white critics who seem to subscribe to a stronger notion of 'othering' than Attwell. These become an 'other' space beyond the cognition of—but central to the desire of—Western/white critics: places where subversive and transformative counter-urges lour beyond limits. At its most extreme, there is a tendency (visible here in Horn) to place all his objects of approbation within this realm, and then elide them within a discussion ranging freely from one to the next. He thus sees no problem in blurring discussions of orality, myth, political silencing and the unconscious as analogous in their resistance to, and incommensurability with, official and dominant discourse.

In line with current trends, there is also a vigorous debunking of the realist and mimetic modes of expression with which, it is suggested, anti-apartheid literature was saturated. Such a persistent reiteration of horrendous 'facts', Brink tells us, 'blunts the mind' (21). 'History' is perceived as a tyrannical form of discourse in South Africa, that claims a representativeness and a connection to truth it does not rightfully possess. In such a scenario, 'fiction' and the uses of the imagination are given enormous subversive and transformative power; for, according to Horn, they can 'enter the space of the

possible which is negated and silenced by the documents that claim to represent the real' (31): while Brink in turn regards it as an important task now to 'imagine the real' (24). Of the writers working within this ambit of conception, only Nkosi qualifies his attack on realism as referring to the 'petty realism' he believes black South African literature is suffused with, with its 'formal insufficiencies, its disappointing breadline asceticism and firm disapproval of irony' (77). In all these discussions, though, there is scant incisive or prolonged discussion of the exact relationship between 'history' and 'discourse', 'realism' and 'fantasy', apart from Boehmer's qualification that they must not be seen in simply binary opposition to one another. As a result the discussions about 'history' and its relation to language and discourse are sometimes facile; at worst leading to Macaskill's idealist reference to 'that incoherent and fundamentally linguistic dream we know as apartheid' (200).

There are a few positive aspects to this anthology. Pechey's attempt to place South Africa and its literature within the fraught experiences of global modernity and discourses of modernism is to be welcomed; and his readiness to try to understand and theorise the 'opening' of the demise of apartheid in terms of Russian thinkers of their immediately pre- and post-revolutionary period (such as Bakhtin) is both courageous and stimulating. His suggestion that the schism caused by the lateness of Russia's transformation into the modern world gave Russian intellectuals a position from which to muse, albeit briefly, on the effects of modernisation more deeply than any available to other Europeans whose countries were modernised 'on time' is interesting; and the analogous opportunity he hints has been afforded South African intellectuals to diagnose and avoid the 'social and spiritual pathologies' (61) modernism has elsewhere spawned is exciting. Indeed, the insistence by contributors such as Pechey, Boehmer, Parry, Wicomb and Nkosi that South Africa's apartheid and colonial past continues to shape its present is salutary. Horn initiates an interesting discussion about the transfigurations that happen when oral forms are taken from their lived environment and transfixed to the page (his focus is Watson's *Return of the Moon*), giving voice in addition to a scepticism as regards the limits of scope and effectivity of the T.R.C. His observation cannot be disputed that the pathologies and psychoses occasioned by apartheid will remain, even if some of the truth silenced by the previous regime is rediscovered. Wicomb's critique of the marginalising of 'coloured' activists after the demise of the mass democratic movement and the failures of A.N.C. policies bent on securing the 'coloured' vote in the Western Cape will also, hopefully, prompt further examination.

In the long run, though, a glaring weakness of this collection lies in the manner in which Attridge and Jolly have selected material to try and address the period in question. Noting the period this book claims to cover in its title, one could suggest that it is well nigh impossible to cover such a complex and diverse history in the limited space these articles afford. As a result, the omissions are multiple and glaring. There is only one article on poetry—and that on a single poet—while little space is given to fuller examinations of many literary figures of importance. Nadine Gordimer is only the most obvious of these. In the final analysis the ideological proclivities of this volume are so pronounced and crippling as to allow practically no empathetic or, indeed, scholarly

study of the two decades of literature prior to 1990. This is true not only of two decades of literary texts, but also of the debates surrounding literary, cultural, socio-economic and political events and issues which have taken place. There is a general sense of a lack of detailed knowledge of these periods, and minimal gestures towards them except dismissal. For instance, the attacks on the realist predilections of these decades surely need at least to acknowledge, and temper their commentary with, some reference to the debates on 'magic realism' that Farouk Asvat initiated in the columns of *The Sowetan* and live forums in the early 1980s. Boehmer's definition of apartheid South Africa as 'a unique situation of internal colonization in a post-colonial world' (52) would benefit from further discussion, given the debates that flourished from as early as 1975 amongst intellectuals and activists such as Wolpe, Hudson and Cronin about 'Colonialism of a Special Type'; while her belief that anti-apartheid writers' obsession with mimesis and concomitant lack of urge to experiment stylistically, even if true, appears unaware that some writers of this period voiced as part of their project a wish to break with received stylistic and aesthetic traditions—surely there should be some musing on, and dissection of, the avowal by Black Consciousness writers that they were producing a 'new writing'; or of Mutloatse's 1980 polemic in *Forced Landing* urging black writers 'to pee, spit and shit on literary convention ... to experiment and probe and not give a damn what the critics have to say', or his usage of a new experimental form he called 'proemdra'? It is furthermore odd to read Brink's sweeping generalisations about the acceptance of the binaries of 'history' and 'text' and the triumphalist mode of thinking he claims is present among all literary activists and critics during the apartheid period, or about the supposedly uniform approval of the usage of realist and mimetic modes, without wondering how much he has missed of the critical arguments in process at the time concerning *inter alia* historical representation, ideology, authority and form. In line with Sachs' simplifications, all critical activity and debate before 1990 is made to seem merely an aspect or effect of 'solidarity criticism', which is not the case.

The literary and cultural production of the 1970s fuelled by the Black Consciousness Movement, and of the period of the States of Emergency, serve as negative reference points for the majority of authors here represented, including the editors themselves. Given the fact that the early 1970s produced the most noteworthy and theorised effort to date by black writers to undermine white and liberal aesthetico-political assumptions, there is a woeful lack of effort to understand (changes in) the cultural and literary production of two decades of the quarter of a century under purview—surely a prerequisite for critique. Indeed, there is little evidence of research in the field apart from the reading of creative texts. Writers and performers enormously popular in the period of Black Consciousness hegemony are simply disregarded—the 'Soweto poet' Madingoane appears only in the bibliography, as do Gwala and Sepamla, who were important theoretical as well as literary contributors in their time; a popular fiction writer such as Matshoba receives only passing, and denigrating, commentary. The 1980s fare no better. Discussions merely assume the current characterisation of its literary output as below par, obsessed both with political function and mimesis. All the attempts during the period to democratise culture, explore different notions of form, mould artistic expression or even criticise prevailing political practices are simply

scrubbed away. Thus, Asvat's chillingly provocative poetry collection *A Celebration of Flames*, critical of the internecine conflicts among the oppressed during that decade, evinces no interest apart from its bibliographical mention; trade union and worker initiatives in culture are ignored, except in the position papers by Mda and Maponya and in vague asides by Pechey; and Mzwakhe—possibly the most popular and well-known poet in South Africa even today—does not even get into the bibliography. What results, I would argue, is an exceptionally distorted picture of two decades of the twenty-five years this collection purports to examine. These two decades are presented, with few exceptions (the three articles by Barnard, Heyns and Walder, the position papers and Tlali and Serote's responses in their interviews) in a manner which reduces them to a rote pronouncement of clichés tailor-made to bolster up the general ideological direction of this book. Thus, what began as a legitimate critique of the crudities and assumptions of the literature of the apartheid years flounders on its own glibness and, it must be said, historical ignorance.

A glaring problem with this volume (and this point can be generalised to rather too much of the critical output taking place in journals at the moment as well) is that, while 'post-colonial' thought acknowledges the implication of literary practice in a wider cultural provenance, there is very little evidence of explorations of the wider materiality that informs and responds to literary production and discussion. One looks in vain for any reference to recent sources which discuss political and economic issues, such as Fine and Rustomjee's *The Political Economy of South Africa*. One also looks in vain for any discussion—apart from two of the position papers, asides by Serote and brief mentions in the articles on theatre—of the wider institutions of cultural activity during this period, such as censorship boards and policy, literary magazines, cultural venues and spaces, or community cultural groups. Absent is any debate over changes that have taken place in literary practice occasioned by economic or political transformations: in the post-1990 period, for instance, it could be expected that changes in publishing brought about by increasing multinational involvement and control, the dearth of bookshops, bulk buying practices, the rise in book prices etc. would be of interest.

Even more tellingly, despite the invocation of concepts relating to the local and the 'ordinary', there is little effort to look at the regional and local taxonomies and effects of culture, where current notions of identity diversity and associational politics would presumably be useful. When debate about the 'local' appears, it is in the single instance of its effect on the *oeuvre* of J.M.Coetzee—and even here little recognition is forthcoming that all local cultures are diverse and differently experienced (one thinks, for instance, of aspects of Cape Town culture that Coetzee chooses to ignore, such as its Trotskyist and left-wing traditions). Moreover, the concept of the 'ordinary/everyday' is accepted on faith. It is surely useful only if it is problematised.

If one looks for any evidence of primary research or careful social investigation here, in the long run one is liable to be disappointed. Too many critics are prepared to read texts about texts about texts (I am, of course, using the narrow meaning of 'text' here), with the final effect of an infinite regression of mirrors. On the other hand, it is striking that (Wicomb's brief remarks about Bhabha and Ahmad excepted)

there is little sign of efforts to re-align and re-examine overseas critics engaged in debates about postcoloniality and colonial discourse theory to fit in with local conditions at all. On a different plane, one could query the relative lack of interest in questions of language usage and indigenous literatures generally, apart from Nkosi. While one can but wonder at the wearisome display of inaccessible expression and language in several of the essays, it seems to have escaped some of these critics that political practice in criticism includes the question of how to reach an audience beyond the theoretically adept.

Despite the fashioning of a notion of 'materiality' in line with much post-structuralist argument, what the project here assembled appears to accomplish is one that simply inverts the emphasis of the old history-literature/form-content binaries previous South African literary criticism is criticised for assuming. What begins as a legitimate assertion of the relative autonomy of writing (and its non-answerability to political injunction) goes at times far further, into a realm where literature is given extraordinary ability to save South Africans' experience of modernity and post-modernity from drowning in a bog of politics and history. For Pechey (the echoes of Ndebele are strong here) literature can promise more appropriate forms of wisdom and longer-term political commitment, relating to its environment as 'self-reflexive self-knowledge' (57); while its mythologising properties and potentialities can free it from the marginalising urges of Western forms of rationality. To him, the novel in particular is 'the great generic invention of early modernity by which late modernity might be saved from itself' (62). In turn, Attwell reinterprets Ndebele and Coetzee to highlight the latter's 'emphasis on allowing *writing* to circumvent prevailing socio-ethical conditions and assert an alternative frame of reference' (171 e.a.).

However tempting it may be, it is perhaps over-simplistic to see South Africa's 'post-al' turn as merely a retreat into an aestheticism and idealism freshly shined up for the twenty-first century. Attwell mentions an aspect of the South African version of post-colonial thought that, as it stands, increasingly appears to me to be the crux of any debate around the local turn of 'post-al' theories. In more recent work by critics such as Attwell and Leon de Kock there is an insistence on the importance of the ethical dimension of literature, which Attwell reiterates here as part of his attempt to explain Coetzee's belief that writers need to follow a 'transcendental imperative' at a time when 'any transcendental basis for ethics is being denied in the name of politics' (quoted 172f) in a context (such as that shown in *Age of Iron*) where the problem is whether 'the society in question has a culturally embedded code of ethics to which most of its members have shared access' (176).

It is accurate to claim that questions of civil society are central to cultural and other debates in South Africa today. But there is a specific political agenda at work here. I have suggested elsewhere that the post-colonial project in South Africa is not simply a reorientation and refurbishing of critical and expressive modes, but a humanistic and (as suggested already) a utopian project, based on a notion of revamped ethical behaviour and literature as a vehicle for the transmission and enactment of more appropriate (open, pluralistic, non-judgmental) values through acts of language and reciprocity. In line with this, Brink appears to embrace a notion of literature as a

potentially enormously powerful tool in the transmission of values and appropriate modes of behaviour via individual writers and readers communing through the artistic text, as well as in the demonstration and staging of what it is (im)possible for an author to represent and claim authority for in 'other' contexts. In more rigorous formulations, Attwell (citing Michael Marais) claims that the self-conscious textualisations and deconstructions of discourse someone like Coetzee undertakes in his fiction transfers authorial responsibility from writer to reader (178); while Parry cites Attridge's suggestion that Coetzee's fiction 'engage(s) with—to stage, confront, apprehend, explore—otherness' (quoted 151). Thus, Attwell speaks of Coetzee's 'dabbling into the language of the sublime' as a sign of the latter's 'muted ethical utopianism ... a utopianism that amounts to an attempt to work around the denial of reciprocity that seems entrenched in colonial relationships' (177).

In the long run, and despite the post-modern inflection of its covenant, I remain sceptical as to how a relationship between writer and reader based on 'transformative acts of language' is in essence different in conceptualisation from more conservative forms of critical theory taught in South African universities for years. In a manner analogous to—but paradigmatically different from—Ndebele, what is being suggested here is that literature can serve as a powerful modelling tool and performative process for readers. The point may be argued that such a project of ethical modelling, if made from a 'post-al' position, lays itself open *inter alia* to charges of contradictoriness.

It is symptomatic in many of these essays that certain lynchpin terms of a new orthodoxy (such as 'storytelling', 'the local' and 'the ordinary') are not interrogated at all: for these are the key terms of a new dispensation, to be naturalised and narcotised. One finally comes away from this volume with the sense of a generally uncritical approach to the hegemony currently dominant in the academy. Boehmer notes (as Tony Morphet has in his 1990 *Pretexts* article) that the language of South African literary criticism is still very much one of injunction, where gestures towards openness flounder on ideological proclivities. In light of this, while the desire to subject conceptual and aesthetic conventions to scrutiny and confront literary-political canons in post-modernist and post-structuralist practice is welcome, what this volume seems to indicate—and there is evidence elsewhere as well—is that a new set of assumptions about literature and a new canon are being put into place with remarkable celerity, often by proponents of theories and aesthetics who proclaim themselves as eschewing such closure. It is also remarkable how often models for this new canon resemble the very list of 'great books' earlier radical critics in the country have sought to displace. This is evident in Boehmer's positive evaluation of *Mhudi* and *The Story of an African Farm* due to their 'multilayeredness' (43), their multi-generic aspects, the indeterminancy and hesitation of their endings and their authors' desire 'not to fix a single frame on the future'; as is her praise of Ndebele, Head and Coetzee for their stylistic achievements in the 'parched' (sic.) contexts in which they have had to work. But at the same time it is discernible that such characteristics are qualified to certain kinds of texts, rather than universally applied. For example, the ending in *July's People* is argued away as belonging to a different, less propitious, hesitation, as are the lacunae at the end of the

'Sowèto novels' of the late 1970s and early 1980s; while the mixture of generic expectations and options in a work such as *To Every Birth Its Blood* is downplayed, presumably because it belongs to the literary practice someone like Boehmer is wishing to expunge. Even as one accepts Boehmer's discussion about how the use of form and endings of Schreiner, Plaatje and Ndebele (in 'Uncle') differs in kind from the others mentioned, one begins to suspect that it is not the formal aspects that differentiate these examples in her mind as much as the social and political conceptualisations that underlie them. If this is a general phenomenon, which I suspect it is, it renders problematic the supposed aesthetically-based emphasis essays such as hers claim to be involved in: or the teleological certainty of the move towards 'better' literature than many of these critics assume.

It is ironic, then, that it is usually the less theoretically weighty and stylistically onerous essays that contain the more interesting insights. Walder's article on narrative, gender and the politics of South African theatre is particularly stimulating and thoughtful, while Heyns' explorations of gay writing under the States of Emergencies and Colleran's on the reception and re-imagining of South African theatre in the United States open up a number of fascinating areas for further study. Walder asks a number of pertinent questions about the taxonomy of the new South African State, and its relation of cultural and theatrical practice. He also provides an interesting critique of Fugard, especially this playwright's selective marshalling of the 'universal' and 'local' to forestall criticism of his work. Heyns' readings of Gray, Prinsloo, Galgut *et al* are suggestive; while his discussion of the claims that gay oppression is analogous to and interchangeable with black oppression (a debate similar to one that already exists around gender) is to the point. Indeed, what this raises is the precise nature of the imbrications of the personal and political in a concrete situation, and this is refreshing after the more nebulous formulations contained elsewhere. Walder's positive evaluations of the 'oral' and 'storytelling' however seemed to me slightly overblown: it is noticeable that his discussion of the former ignores the way in which the apartheid authorities bypassed the fact that (in Mzamane's words in *New Classic* in 1977) 'the microphone is difficult to censor' by eventually simply banning and killing activists. Furthermore, his discussion of gender and storytelling relies only on non-South African sources for its characterisation of the circularity of women's stories: some reference to *iintsomi* would be more convincing. It would be fascinating, as well, to study Gcina Mhlope's, and other's, use of oral storytelling on SATV at present, in order to see how the tendency towards identity-plus-community-through-storytelling Walder isolates as gender-specific would articulate with the overdetermining nation-building ideologies present in the national broadcaster.

Colleran's sketching of the vagaries of the reception of South African theatre in the United States (where it fluctuates between being characterised as 'familiar' and 'exotic') shows that more of this kind of work is necessary if South African literature is going to evolve a literary culture independent of metropolitan acceptance or rejection; in this regard further discussion of the way in which the revolutionary aspects of the South African struggle have been appropriated (for instance as part of a black 'civil rights struggle') is essential. Barnard's semiotic examination of the literature of the

States of Emergency is also interesting, although her desire to read black South African 'people's culture' as an expression of a 'poor' literature intent on 'remaking' the world sits uneasily with her realisation that elements of such expression held the potential, even under apartheid, to transform themselves into just another hierarchical discourse of power. At the same time Maponya's and Mda's position papers, although brief, raise questions relating to 'more mundane issues of the fortune and survival tactics of local arts practitioners' (252-3) and appropriate forms of theatrical practice in a new dispensation in a compelling way: Mda's criticism of the weakness of a 'theatre of resistance' in creating a critical audience consciousness, and his discussion of an alternative 'theatre for development', will prove interesting to many readers. Macaskill's examination of the overlapping of 'lyrical feeling' with materialist traditions and socialist impulse in Jeremy Cronin's poetry makes a few useful additional points to previous scrutiny of this poet, although it is noticeable that he tends towards perceiving an absolute split between poetics and politics—an ultimately conservative move depressingly familiar to all who have followed debates about poetry in this country over the last quarter of a century. It is instructive to point out, as he does, that Cronin's poems allow him to 'stage a passion' unavailable to him in the discourse of his critical essays, but one feels that Cronin's essays about literature could have done with greater discussion and it is a pity that his critique of Campbell's 'Rounding the Cape' in a 1984 *English in Africa* is not considered. It is also noticeable that poems from *Inside* which fit less easily into Macaskill's hypothesis, such as 'Death Row' and 'Motho ke motho', get short shift.

Yet, when all is said and done, the teleological vision underlying the omnipresent discourse of an obvious progression from the (formally and politically bad) past to the (formally and conceptually more promising) future belies the gestures of openness made. There is an overall sense that the terrain of South African literary studies is being limited to certain issues and certain questions: which, as it is transmitted to less adept critics, will result in the reiteration of a new set of stultifying clichés about cultural production in this country. At worst, one gets a feeling that the present 'post-colonial' imperatives of metropolitan theory are being utilised without sufficient musing on what their strengths and weaknesses in a local context might be; in particular one comes away with the uneasy feeling that the present psychological and linguistic imperatives of a guilty Europe are simply being transmitted by (predominantly) white critics who can identify with this guilt. This is coupled with a distaste for any discourses and practices of politics ('history') which appear to invade their subjectivity, sense of the future, or artistic and social interests. As a result of this, only those who have some knowledge of the period will find beneficial aspects to this collection. For those with only a passing knowledge of the debates, discussions and controversies that have influenced and characterised South African literature since 1970 this book will not clarify and stimulate as much as puzzle.

Department of English
University of Cape Town