Book Reviews

Playing the Postmodern Game

Sinking: A Verse Novella
by Michael Cawood Green
Sandton: Penguin, 1997, 164pp.
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> ... the text is not a line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning ... but a multidimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture (Barthes, 'Death of an Author', quoted in *Sinking* 45).

This is an unusual text to review, to say the least: from the seemingly novel form that the book takes it would appear to be that Cawood Green has been nothing if not brave and adventurous. What we have with *Sinking* is a text that describes itself as a 'verse novella' and deals with the nature of written text as historical record, and which not only takes on board but also seems to assert the primacy of poststructuralist theory and modes of literary and cultural analysis. Cawood Green is described in the text itself as 'the tinker of historiography and the petty thief of poetry' (109). In reviews in the *Sunday Times* and the *Mail and Guardian*[1] its postmodernist pretensions have been looked upon unfavourably, the suggestion being that they 'spoil' the poetry. Lionel Abrahams sees this text as indicative of the literary critics taking over the production of literature—hence the 'self-swallowing' quality to the text, as it pre-empts critical commentary by itself covering all its critical bases—saying that there is nothing in the text that has not been taken care of, there is nothing that is not under control. Indeed, *Sinking* does at times play a self-indulgent and tiresome 'game' between the narrator and the *real* identity of the author's 'dual' identity as both academic literary critic and (with this text) literary/creative writer.

My own feeling is that there is nothing wrong with postmodernism *per se*, far from it, but that *Sinking* fails the test of its own postmodernism. Part of the text's postmodernist strategy is to present itself as a modernist text. What it does not do is convey a sense of the South African modernist 'big picture': that apartheid was South

[1] Review by Lourens Ackermann 1997. A Postmodern Way of Ruining Some Half-Decent Poetry. *Sunday Times* October 19; review by Lionel Abrahams 1997. Sunk by Theoretical Games. *Mail and Guardian* September 12-15.

Africa's great modernist project, and that it had strong links to the right-wing politics of European modernism. It is not, for me, a successful experiment in postmodernist literary practice. At its best, postmodernism challenges, if not confounds, the outworn categories and modes of modernist thinking and literary practice; at its worst it can be accused of being solipsistic and narcissistic. With *Sinking* there is an unfortunate shift in emphasis and primary concern away from the characteristically postmodern interest in the self-reflexiveness and self-reflectiveness of narrative fictions (i.e. with the ontological and epistemological questions of the text), towards a rather narcissistic obsession with the identity of the author.

Sinking is divided chronologically into three sections: 'Past', 'Mediation', and 'Present' which are united either thematically in that they are concerned with the tragic sinkhole incident that took place at Blyvooruitzicht mine in 1964 (which constitutes the 'black hole' at the heart of the text), or with the identity of the poet/author, his history, and the status or significance of what he has written—which is viewed from 'inside' the text, the cycle of poems dealing with the disaster (Section 1: Past). Viewed from the 'outside', however, Cawood Green is the author of the *whole* text: it is his name that is proudly displayed on the book's cover and on its title page. As we shall see, the referential/metafictional game of Greens and Cawood Greens is one that the reader is expected to play. The identities involved here are Michael Cawood Green the musician and author, and Michael Green, the writer of greeting card verse and author of the book's 'secret history', with hints that these textually represented figures could have some connection with figures in the real world, who share their names, but have a single referent. I am not entirely sure what pleasure (in Barthes' sense of the word) the reader, who needs to be familiar with postmodern literary forms and poststructuralist critical strategies, will take in playing these games. The danger, is, of course, that the reader will grow impatient with the whole project, and see it as fatally marred by an authorial pretentiousness. Although there are some attempts at self-deprecating irony, a sense of preciousness edges the text towards sinking into itself. Are we being subjected to a series of private jokes/ironic self-presentations—if so, why? One possibility is that the text wishes to jump start the process of literary canonization within its own pages by advertising its own complexity, thus hoping to qualify as viable academic commodity.

In Green's scheme of things the sinkhole disaster takes on a special significance, providing analogical connection between the idea of the historical and theoretical, between a 'post-hole' South Africa and a post-deconstruction world. In terms of the cosmological metaphor that Cawood Green invokes, what we appear to have then, is a 'singularity', a small black hole suddenly appearing at the (ironically named, in the circumstances) Blyvooruitzicht mine. Reflecting a postmodern fascination with all such boundary-crossing portals as wormholes, dimensional portholes and near-death 'tunnel' experiences, the narrator talks of the possibility that black holes have personalities, that there is something strangely human in their anomalousness. The reference to the black hole is not purely theoretical, but serves to key in the text's darker feelings: particularly its rather nihilistic feelings (almost obsessive) of death and ending. The danger of the kind of preoccupation with death that

we find in this text is one of sliding into morbidity, sentimentality or, at the other extreme, cold callousness. This sentimentality seems to be connected to the fear of many White South Africans of a sudden loss of stability and grounding. The text explores this White paranoia at a conscious level, but it would also seem to operate at an unconscious level, a level at which it informs the actual *writing* of this text and as a kind of blind-spot in the writer's critical reflexiveness.

Where Green's use of the sinkhole incident works best for me is where it is treated as historical metaphor: it becomes the 'sign' of the impending collapse of a White South Africa riding the false economic boom of Verwoerdian apartheid policies, yet utterly corroded from within by the ravages of a rapacious capitalism totally bereft of any economic or geological/ecological foresight. Green's use of the disaster as symptom of a society's malaise, and of the sudden shock of history (horrifying for its victims), works much better than his attempts to explore its significance in terms of what he himself would appear to see as the bleak, but theoretically essential, axioms of poststructuralism. Green is able to communicate a strong sense that there is a particular historical significance to the disaster as the first rumbling of (however feint it may seem), if not the prototype of, the event that will sweep away the delusions of political security and safety of White South Africans; the Soweto student insurrection of June 1976.

Cawood Green puts the significance of the sinking into the mouths of his characters, as an allegory the truth of which they are able to speak. He does this in preference to allowing the reader to come to his or her own conclusions about the symbolic meanings of things in the text. Green self-consciously treats the text's symbolism as something which is obvious, as a 'given', rather than as something that needs to be explored:

> —just in time, of course,
> For other sorts of underground problems
> To surface;
> But with this the allegory
> Becomes rather heavy-handed (74).

This manoeuvre raises the problem of what the voices 'know' and the degree to which they have been 'informed' by the poet to the extent of becoming quasi Tiresias prophet figures able to 'foresee' the disaster. Cawood Green provides a rather disarming confession regarding the nature of this knowledge (such as it is) before it is translated into the language, and conceptual framework of the poem: 'Nothing set down here/ Would have been/ In English, of course' (51). The poetry of the first section of the book includes political, geological, scientific, economic and other discourses as its own 'raw material', giving a certain scientific rigour to what the text itself refers to as its 'grids of ordinariness' (67). Sometimes the poem becomes chattily prosaic in order to capture the quality of the victims' lives, as far as possible from the inside:

> The words that live beyond you, Hettie
> Written on holiday;

Arrived after you had returned home
Only to disappear
Far more permanently:
Between the posting and the delivery,
Your order to a newspaper
For a liquid carpet cleaner
On special offer
Took on the weight of all the earth
That covered you (52).

The problem of mixing tones and registers, particularly when it comes to mixing the serious and the ironic/comic, is surely one of effect; the ideal being one of a tension or interplay between contrasting or opposing elements. In *Sinking* however, the poetry sometimes oscillates uncomfortably between harsh, blunt, factual and physical treatment of things and a sympathy for the characters that verges on sentimentality. The closer the author gets to the subject of the unfortunate family the more this happens. One of the questions that the text poses but perhaps does not explore adequately enough is the status of the various poetic voices in the poem, particularly those in the opening cycle in the first part of this tripartite text. This part of the text, its 'core', if you will, is surrounded and explained by so much meta-discourse and yet the status of these voices, whether totally imagined, or translated into these poetic spaces, is something that the author might have done more with. The sense that this reader was left with was one of authorial power as the poetic voices are invaded and appropriated by a theoretical discourse.

This brings me to the problem of the extensive use of allusion which at times verges on clumsiness. This is particularly true of the allusions to, and unconvincing parody/pastiche of, high literary modernism, in the shape of T.S. Eliot's *The Wasteland*. The link between *Sinking* and Eliot's poem is not fully realised because the degenerative collapse of White South Africa's apartheid capitalism is simply not comparable to that of European civilisation in Eliot. The 'Tiresias' theme seems to work, like so much in this text, purely at an intellectual or cerebral level rather than to be connecting the idea of false consciousness/ historical blindness to the real experiences of the ghost voices who speak the lines of the cycle of poems. Put in other words, Green's primary allegiance is to academic criticism. Whereas in his campus novels a writer/critic like David Lodge subjects the literary academy to a parodying and relativising textual play, Green reverses the polarities: subjecting this self-same play to the truth of his academic discourses: including the poststructuralist 'truth' that comes from knowing what textual play is all about. The reviewers have mistakenly labelled this postmodernist: I think a better term would be 'academic imperialist'. If, as Barthes suggests, the text is a tissue of quotations drawn from innumerable centres of culture, *Sinking* remains mono-cultural in its privileging of academic discourse.

For me *Sinking* fails because ultimately it either takes itself all too seriously, or allows this misreading to take place because it is unclear where the ironic deflations and postmodern jokes are taking place. I feel that the reader (particularly the non-academic reader) is correct to suspect that sententious contemporary intellectual theories do not

have all the answers, that they are not replacements for the old religious faiths (bringing new certainties and coveted priestly status for their exponents, the new illuminati). But perhaps Green is too seriously committed to the idea of being an academic to have entertained this possibility.

Deafening Silence

Deafening Silence
by John Miles
Cape Town: Human and Rousseau, 1997, 300 pp.
ISBN 0798137045

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Originally published in Afrikaans in 1991, the English version of *Deafening Silence* comes at the most opportune time in our history as South Africans attempt to come to terms with their turbulent past through the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (T.R.C.). In a country with a history of institutionalised racism and disregard for human rights, a writer who chooses to present history as fiction runs the risk of being accused of trivialising inherently sensitive historical events. In *Deafening Silence* John Miles deftly merges history and fiction in an attempt to re-create racial tensions within the South African police force which often had disastrous consequences for those involved. As shown in the applications for amnesty before the T.R.C., junior police officers or agents sometimes had to be 'silenced' because they posed a threat, for a variety of reasons, to people in positions of power within the police force.

The extent of both the historical and literary value of Miles' story may be judged by the fact that his book won the CNA, M-net and Helgaard Steyn awards and has not only been translated into English, but has also been serialised on television. This life-history which is presented in the form of a novel is the story of Tumelo John Moleko and his wife Busi who are murdered by police agents for demanding that a senior white police officer who assaulted Moleko at work should face trial for misconduct. Miles attempts to create a convincing and comprehensive portrait of his main character by tracing the growth and maturation of Tumelo from his childhood in the rural village of Senekal in the Orange Free State to his first job as a sergeant at Hammanskraal police station. In his admiration for the police and his desire to serve his country as a patriotic policeman, the young Moleko is shown to be oblivious to the nature of the apartheid police force as an inherently ruthless and destructive machinery of the state. When he is killed at the age of 35, he is gradually discovering the deviousness, hypocrisy and moral