

Introduction: Symptoms, Theories and Scholarship

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About fifteen kilometres up the coast from Durban, on the warm Indian Ocean, lies the coastal tourist resort of Umhlanga Rocks. Two or three decades ago, this was a little village (for whites only), attracting holiday makers to its sandy beaches. One of its erstwhile residents, Meta Orton, in her privately published autobiography, recalls this much more quiet time, before a mega-mall and crowding skyscrapers arose out of the sugarcane and dune scrub. But the rather quaint title which she has chosen—*The World and Umhlanga Rocks*—reminds us that even then, insularity was not guaranteed.

In attempting to account for the breadth of the subject matter dealt with in this volume I was reminded of Orton's title, since this issue brings together a number of diverse essays whose subject matter could perhaps be collectively described as 'The World and southern Africa' (or vice versa). With papers ranging from those which focus on the syllabi at Fort Hare (David Burchell) to the suppression of indigenous languages in Malawi (Themba Moyo); from Ronnie Govender's Cato Manor (Rajendra Chetty) to G.A. Henty's British colonising stronghold (Damian Clarke); and from Cape Town to Jamaica (Miki Flockemann), this issue demonstrates that there are no boundaries which can keep the world at bay or distinct from our southern part of this continent.

Casting a wide net geographically, the essays also cast a wide temporal net. In addition to those already mentioned, the essays range from those focusing on the Anglo-Boer War (also known as the South African War), at the turn of the last century (Elmar Lehmann's essay on Douglas Blackburn) to contemporary cyber-porn (David Bennett's review essay); from Alan Paton's apartheid South Africa (Jean-Philippe Wade) to post-apartheid fiction (Jabulani Mkhize). Pam Ryan's 'Plain Women and Ladies in a Strange Country' considers the ways in which three colonial women in the British colony of Port Natal in the mid-nineteenth century wrote about home and Home. J.L. Coetser, Myrtle Hooper and Vasu Reddy bring together divergent material in each of their essays. Coetser surveys a century of Afrikaans theatre while Hooper questions the ethics of reading and teaching, with specific

reference to Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent* and J.M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*. Reddy's essay on testimony juxtaposes the memoirs of the Boer War General, Denys Reitz, the anti-apartheid freedom fighter, Albie Sachs, and the Nobel prize-winning writer, Ngugi wa Thiong'o. Sinthi Qono turns her attention to issues which are current (and perhaps, for many, painfully raw), problems relating to globalisation and the economy in post-apartheid South Africa. G.F. Snyman and Wilhelm Verwoerd focus on ethical responsibilities in post-apartheid South Africa.

Many of these essays are clearly at home in a journal dedicated (as the inside cover reveals) to the study of 'Southern African Literature and Languages', but some may seem to be quite foreign to these 'fields'. Is nothing sacred?

Not that long ago, Tony Parr (1996:76) expressed his regret at the loss of a clearly defined discipline of 'English Literary Studies'. There may be numerous *Alternation* readers who sympathise with Parr's wistfulness. Moreover, the desire to keep boundaries intact, to secure definition and demarcation, can be justified on the grounds of manageability; pursuance of specific and localised goals; theoretical and conceptual development within clear parameters; and the maintenance of traditional (and generally acknowledged) trajectories. But the clarity and delimitation were by no means unproblematic. Eurocentrism, élitism, racism and sexism (to name just the most obvious) could flourish quite unnoticed when 'prac. crit.' dominated the discipline. How many readers remember when the 'English Literature' syllabus was almost exclusively British, when American literature was largely relegated to the margins, barely rising above its diminished status as the product of an erstwhile colony, and South African (and Caribbean and Indian and Australian and so on) offerings were hardly able to earn the epithet 'literature'? Such days belong, for South Africans, with memories (probably—hopefully—quite hazy) of the excesses of apartheid: the police state which infiltrated all lives and that deathly Sunday-*verkramptheid*. However, even those whose recollections of the era are uncontaminated by political context would concede, that at this point—having learned hugely from Marxism, structuralism, post-structuralism, deconstruction, feminism and post-colonial theory—nostalgia isn't what it used to be. The unavoidable ventures out of the safety zone of previously seemingly insular knowledge systems such as literary studies have been both necessary *and beneficial* to our understanding. In any case, disciplinary porosity, embraced in the radical theories aforementioned (with what was, at least in the early days of each, revolutionary zeal), cannot be stopped.

At South African universities, partly in response to such theoretical movements and the resultant conceptual shifts, and partly in response to much more recent pressures from the State, inter-disciplinary 'programmes' are increasingly replacing discrete disciplinary 'majors', and multi-disciplinary schools are assimilating departments. Unsurprisingly, this volume comprises essays informed by

diverse discourses whose boundaries are now rather less distinct than they were twenty or even ten years ago. In this issue, analyses which emerge from, and are informed by, the concerns of history, economics, cultural studies, education, philosophy and ethics rub shoulders with—indeed, in certain of the papers, *infuse* and certainly invigorate—literary and language studies. It is hoped that all readers, of whatever leanings, will find the array of approaches represented in this collection relevant and challenging.

One of the dangers of interdisciplinarity—and it is one which the scholars whose work is reproduced in this volume seem to me to have avoided—is that the desire to draw on, and draw in, varied approaches to the constitution of knowledge can result in a lack of clarity of conceptual focus. Whether we share Parr's sentiments or not, his concerns should serve to remind us that as academics, of whatever discipline, we need at least to be constantly aware of the perils of trying to do too much and of positioning ourselves as experts in a range of disparate disciplines. Perhaps it is a sign of the times that there is evidence in this collection of a turning of the tide towards a more modest scholarly reach, a more carefully substantiated, more circumscribed analysis.

We also see evidence in several of these essays of what appears to be a rather widespread movement—something of an apparent retreat in the Humanities from 'Grand Theory'. This trend away from grand abstractions and generalisations is to be welcomed to the extent that it entails a move away from what—in much academic writing in the 'eighties and 'nineties—manifested itself as a kind of intellectual 'groupie-ism' in which the writer would seek to score 'brownie-points' by aligning her/himself, by means of mantra-like references, to some or other academic celebrity. Analytical rigour in such writing was sacrificed to rhetorical genuflection before the latest, hottest theorist. Generally, the essays in this issue seem to have eschewed that kind of lapse in scholarship which is manifested in arguments which are shored up by shrewd name-dropping. Parr (1996:75) had something to say about this too:

I have lost count of the times I have encountered ... a referenced comment about the colonial encounter or the origins of subjecthood ... and obediently traced number to note hoping to find some supporting evidence, only to read instead something like 'here I am using Spivak's/Bhabha's/Foucault's notion of ...'. This reveals very little besides a dependence on the new counter-canon of cultural prophets

Parr is right, of course, in arguing that an almost religious reverence for the ideas—or, in some instances, what are only dimly understood to be the ideas—of intellectual hotshots should be avoided. So, too, should any kind of complacent sense

that we have now emerged into a conceptual world beyond theory. There is no such world, and to try to find or create it is misguided. One of the ideas that theorists have persuaded even conservatives to recognise is that all conceptual systems, whether monological or pluralistic, are informed by (explicit or implicit) theories. If I may be forgiven for referring to a 'Big Name', it is as well to heed Foucault's warning that 'everything is dangerous' (quoted in Sawicki 1988:189); no political or theoretical models (even those which are eclectic and iconoclastic; even those which apparently eschew theory) are free from possible abuse.

The 'best' theories do not constitute a very effective protection against disastrous political choices I do not conclude from this that one may say just anything within the order of theory, but, on the contrary, that a demanding, prudent, 'experimental' attitude is necessary; at every moment, step by step, one must confront what one is thinking with what one is doing, with what one is (Foucault 1984:374).

It is with this warning in mind that I am especially pleased to have been able to include the essays of Gerrie Snyman, Sinthi Qono and Wilhelm Verwoerd. They are likely to provoke debate because they address issues which are crucial to the continued attempt to achieve the fulfillment of the project of democratisation, namely, non-racialism, non-sexism and a more equitable distribution of wealth which climaxed—but was not completed—in the installation of South Africa's first democratically elected government in 1994 and the subsequent adoption of the new constitution. For instance, however fervent and widespread the desire to move on from race-obsession may be in post-apartheid South Africa, and however strongly emphasised is the desire to shun gender-based discrimination, few would contend that resolution has been achieved or that popular rhetoric addresses the issues adequately. Realities of life in South Africa today belie the arguments that the gap between rich and poor is narrowing or that racism can be combated by a studied oblivion to race, or that sexism has disappeared because legislation prohibits it. Rhetoric and idealism fail to stand up to scrutiny or experience. In his analysis of post-apartheid literary production, Jabulani Mkhize recognises these perpetuated differences, as does Sarah Penny in her memoirs, *The Whiteness of Bones*. Writing about her experiences in post-independence Zimbabwe, Penny recounts how she discovers that her fear of rape is mixed with her own previously unacknowledged racism and that the liberal slogans denouncing all prejudices have little validity. But she realizes, also, that even if she can eradicate her own unconscious prejudices, the problem will not go away. When she is mocked and groped by Zimbabwean men, she can no longer deny that it is her race as much as her gender which marks her as a target:

This black/white thing, this man/woman thing—I wanted these divisions to be myths only, but they would not become myths. I am mocked because I am white, I am molested because I am a girl. If I pretend not to see the divisions, they will still exist and others will insist on them. Africa is a continent of polarisations.

To the black mass I am the enemy.

For the first time in my life, I was essentially aware of myself not as a young woman, but as a young white woman.

A member of the white race (Penny 1997:118).

I would argue that only a minority of South Africans (black or white, female or male) experience persistent divisions in such extreme terms. Nevertheless, Penny's reluctant admission that race and gender are still significant markers of difference is instructive.

In 1956, after the destruction of the black freehold suburb of Sophiatown, Dr. H.F. Verwoerd, the architect of apartheid, declared triumphantly: 'apartheid is relevant in every sphere of life' (quoted by Lewsen 1996:154). Many of the essays in this issue point to the fact that that statement, and its corollary—that colonialism's legacy lives on—are not yet untrue. The essays written by Dr. H.F. Verwoerd's grandson, Wilhelm Verwoerd, Snyman and Qono, in particular, bring to our attention the momentous questions which still need to be asked in order to ensure that this fledgling nation, still struggling to imagine into being the 'new South Africa', can embrace all its people, regardless of race, ethnicity or gender.

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