

# Literary Prospects in 'Post-Apartheid' South Africa<sup>1</sup>

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In his 'Jerusalem Prize Acceptance Speech' of 1987 J.M. Coetzee (1992:99) lamented:

South African literature is a literature in bondage, as it reveals itself in even its highest moments shot through as they are with feelings of homelessness and yearnings for a nameless liberation. It is a less than fully human literature, unnaturally preoccupied with power and torsions of power unable to move from elementary relations of contestation, domination, and subjugation to the vast and complex human world that lies beyond them. It is exactly the kind of literature you would expect people to write from a prison.

Coetzee's contention here seems to have been the extent to which apartheid determined (in the sense of putting limitations to) South African cultural production resulting in a literature that was not just apparently oblivious to this country as part of a global community but was also, in some instances, a literature of binary oppositions, a kind of literature that Njabulo Ndebele has called 'the spectacular'. This position was in line with Coetzee's interest in the '(post) colonial condition' of the South African situation as exemplified in his works as well as in his extra-fictional statement: 'I'm suspicious of lines of division between a European context and a South African context, because I think our experience remains largely colonial' (Coetzee 1978:23). Whether this line of division will continue to exist in post-apartheid writing remains to be seen.

J.M. Coetzee was, of course, not the only commentator critical of South African writing in the last years of apartheid. Lewis Nkosi's scepticism of South

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<sup>1</sup> The focus of this paper is on South African literature written in English. I wish to thank my colleagues, Sikhumbuzo Mngadi, Thengani Ngwenya and Shane Moran for their encouraging comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

African writing, albeit with a somewhat different emphasis from Coetzee's criticism, is well known. Writing in 1965 Nkosi wondered 'whether it might not be prudent' for Black South African writers 'to "renounce" literature "temporarily" ... and solve the political problem first' (1979:222). He was objecting to what he saw as a lack of experimentation on the part of these writers whose techniques, he argued, were closer to journalism than creative writing<sup>2</sup>. Nkosi went on to advocate the experimental line of modernism as a remedy that would rescue black fiction from the straightforward documentary realist narrative. The argument was reiterated in 1985 ('Black Writing in South Africa') and again in 1987, but this time it was extended to include white writers. 'White literature' like 'black literature', Nkosi pointed out, was faced with a 'crisis of representation'. Although he commended most white writers for their 'experimentation with technique' he accused some of them of being too 'keen to tell us what it is like to be oppressed rather than what it is like to do the oppressing!' (Nkosi 1987:51). In the case of black writers the problem was pretty much the same: not only were they still harping on a 'single epic theme' of apartheid but they were also faced with 'a crisis of how to forge new instruments of representation out of tired and old realistic forms' (49). For Nkosi (as well as Coetzee), then, the political conditions in South Africa adversely affected not only the content of local literature but also, in some cases, its form. The question that arises for a contemporary student of literature, however, is whether the eradication of apartheid, which began with the 1994 elections, will free South African literature from 'bondage'.

Or, to put it differently, now that 'the political problem' Nkosi was referring to has been 'solved', which direction is South African literature likely to take? Are South African black writers likely to turn away from the realist tradition and become more 'experimental', embracing (post)modernist strategies to interrogate and problematize the new South African reality or is the social realist mode likely to retain its dominance albeit for the purposes of offering different discourses from those that counter-discourses to apartheid 'demanded'? Now that the politics of oppositionality have been displaced by 'the rainbow nation' how are writers who have seen themselves (and have indeed been regarded) as representatives of the 'masses' likely to deal with the predicament of the role which has been constructed for them? These are some of the issues that this paper attempts to address. As can be expected, this paper is speculative, taking into account the fact that one cannot predict with certainty the trend that 'post-apartheid' literature will follow in the remote future. The speculation will, nevertheless, be based on some recently

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<sup>2</sup> Herein lies the difference between Nkosi and Ndebele's arguments, for Ndebele does not seem to look beyond the realist tradition in his postulation of writing that has a transformative impact on the reader's consciousness. Nkosi's later publication of a post-realist novel, *Mating Birds*, is thus not surprising.

published literature as exemplary of possible future trends. If the focus of this paper is mainly on black South African writing it is because the question: what will writers write about after apartheid? has, as Ndebele points out, always been 'thrown at black writing' (Ndebele 1992:25). The focus on black writing does not, however, preclude my reference to white writers.

Now, it might be asked how anyone writing at this particular juncture in the history of the country could still use such (outdated and discredited) racial categories as 'black South African writing' or 'white writing'. The fact of the matter is that while the construction of an ideal South African nationhood, which is currently in process, enables us to talk of a South African literature, we are still confronted with the problem of what Ndebele has called 'the impossibility of arriving at a timeless tradition of South African literature' (25). The question then, is whether the attainment of political freedom necessarily resolves this problem. The term 'post-apartheid' itself does not seem to provide any answers. For the 'post-apartheid' of the title does not really imply a complete break with the past but is somewhat suggestive of a convergence of the 'residual' and the 'emergent'<sup>3</sup>. Graham Pechey's conception of the term, although it pre-dates the 1994 elections, seems pertinent in this regard. According to him post-apartheid is,

a condition that has contradictorily always existed and yet is impossible of realisation: always existed, because apartheid, as a politics of permanent and institutionalised crisis has from the beginning been shadowed by its own transgression or supersession; impossible of realisation, because the proliferating binaries of apartheid discourse will long outlive any mere winning of freedom (Pechey 1994:153).

As can be inferred, there is no question here of conflating the 'post-apartheid condition' with what Ndebele has identified as 'South Africanism as a hoped for national attribute' (1994:24). Instead, there is in Pechey's definition an acknowledgement that 'the 'post' in 'post-apartheid' will remain problematic'

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<sup>3</sup> I am using these terms in the sense in which they are used by Raymond Williams: 'The 'residual', by definition, has been effectively formed in the cultural process, not only and often not at all as an element of the past, but as an effective element of the present. Thus certain experiences, meanings, and values which cannot be expressed or substantially verified in terms of the dominant culture, are nevertheless lived and practiced on the basis of the residue – cultural as well as social – of some previous social and cultural institution and formation .... By emergent, I mean ... that new meaning and values, new practices, new relationships and kinds of relationship are continually being created' (1977:122f).

(Degenaar 1992:12)—the key statement here is Pechey's: 'the proliferating binaries of apartheid discourse will long outlive any mere winning of freedom'. The use of these terms of reference ('white writing' and 'black writing') here is, therefore, informed by this recognition rather than any (mischievous) attempt to undermine South Africa's 'imagined community' which goes by the term 'Rainbow Nation'.

Furthermore, the fact that for political as well as aesthetic reasons black writers and white writers in this country have adopted different formal traditions in their works (with the former steeped in realism and quite a number of the latter experimenting with form by adopting modernist strategies of dealing with 'reality') cannot be wished away. The result was that the terms 'white writing' and 'black writing' have, over the years, had another connotation other than the division of literature into racial categories according to its producers. For this reason Ndebele's contention that, 'With the "Other" having attained their freedom, "white writing" ... like apartheid, may become exhausted' (1992:25) needs more rigorous attention. With the end of apartheid 'white writing' might, of course, lose the moral high ground bestowed on it by apartheid discourse as well as the 'cross-border readers'<sup>4</sup> but this does not necessarily denote its exhaustion. For example, one could argue that, with the new government in place, white writers have other options: they could, for instance, shun politics in their writing or produce works which valorise the 'Rainbow Nation' because of its accommodation of (white) minority interests or, alternatively, take the lead in writing a literature of disillusionment if the present government falls short of their expectations. The possibilities are too numerous to mention. The point at issue, however, is that regardless of what they write about, their experimentation with form might still distinguish their writing from that of black writers. For this reason it is perhaps pertinent to ask with Pechey a crucial question with regard to post-apartheid writing: 'Does post-apartheid writing, then, bifurcate into a modernist or post modernist white writing on the one hand and a neo-realist black writing on the other?' (1992:165).

Judging by the literature that has been produced thus far, as well as the comments of some South African writers recently, one is inclined to answer this question in the affirmative. Firstly, it is an open secret that white writers such as Breyten Breytenbach, J.M. Coetzee, Andre Brink and Menan du Plessis have, in the past, embraced modernist or post-modernist techniques in their works. Even Nadine Gordimer, conventionally regarded as a realist in the Lukacsian sense, has been shown to have made a shift, especially in her latest works which endorse self-reflexivity and postmodernism<sup>5</sup>. Ivan Vladislavic, a relatively new voice in South African fiction and, arguably, a leading writer in post-apartheid 'white writing',

<sup>4</sup> The term is borrowed from Lewis Nkosi. For more clarification see Nkosi (1993).

<sup>5</sup> See Dominic Head (1994), especially chapters 5 and 7.

provides a good indication that this trend is likely to continue in the near future. In a recent interview with Shaun de Waal, Vladislavic makes clear his commitment to the 'power of the imagination' and 'invention' and his scepticism towards the realist mode:

It's possible to engage deeply with your social reality without producing realism.... I think there's a case to be made for the work of fiction as a highly designed imaginative structure, with a more complicated relationship to its context than realism usually allows... Something has always puzzled me, though I understood where it came from, was the stress locally that the best stories were out there, that writers just had to put themselves in the right position and they'd find them.... But looked at in another way writing is precisely about invention.... That's what fiction is about (de Waal 1996:3).

Such a commitment in theory is, interestingly, compatible with his practice; read, if you like, his latest collection of short stories, *Propaganda by Monuments* (1996), especially the metafictional 'Kidnapped', where one gets a clear sense of fiction-writing as fabrication.

In a provocative essay Kenneth Parker bemoans the way English South African writing has tended to avoid 'engagement with narrative techniques aimed at disrupting our habitual perception of our world whereby we might see that world from a different perspective and in a different light' (1994:3). In a similar vein, Benita Parry (as if in a rejoinder to Parker) identifies some of the strategies that could serve this purpose in her critique of resistance literature:

The fantastic and the fabulous, the grotesque and the disorderly, the parodic reiteration or inversion of dominant codes, the deformation of master tropes, the estrangement of received usage, the fracture of authorised syntax: these are amongst the many textual procedures that can act as oppositional and subversive, and without directly illuminating the struggle or ostensibly articulating dissent and protest (Boehmer 1993:15).

Whether one refers back to Vladislavic's earlier story (1999), 'The Prime Minister is Dead'; or, in the latest collection, to 'Alphabets for Surplus People'; or, perhaps even more significantly, the title story, 'Propaganda by Monuments', where he exploits the carnivalesque genre of 'menippea' (Bakhtin 1984:114) in the unfolding drama of Boniface Khumalo's pursuit of his dream of importing a statue of Lenin for the purposes of 'tourist attraction' (Vladislavic 1996:37) to his Atteridgeville's V.I. Lenin Bar and Grill, there is no doubt that Vladislavic makes effective use of these strategies of subversion to disrupt our sense of reality. As de Waal correctly observes

in relation to the 1996 anthology: 'Here are ... meta-narratives that glory in their own fictionality, delighting in playing with plot or language, but which also cast an oblique gaze on our polity' (1996:3).

What is the situation with regard to Black writers? As can be expected, there has been (since 1990) a proliferation of interest amongst writers and critics alike on the prospects for post-apartheid writing. Although the critical essays that have been published so far are not necessarily confined to black writing they shed some light on what some commentators think about the possibilities for the future of literature in this country. For example, A.E. Voss, writing in 1992, argues for 'the continued vitality of prose fiction (perhaps even simply the realist novel) within the whole range of the writing of texts' (Voss 1992:1-2). In a rejoinder, John Degenaar, concedes that 'there will be examples of realist novels in the post-apartheid era' although he is sceptical of realist narratives in so far as they serve as 'legitimations of nationalism' (Degenaar 1992:12). For him, nationalism is a myth that has to be debunked. In a 1991 paper appropriately entitled 'The Renewal of South African Literature', Andries Oliphant argues for the freedom of writers to explore a wide range of themes in which various dimensions of human experience are accommodated. He then goes on to discuss a wide range of possibilities for post-apartheid writing—ranging from ecologically sensitive to gender conscious literature, as well as carnivalised forms of literature, amongst others (Oliphant 1991:32—34). The question of gender also forms the central thrust of Kenneth Parker's 1994 paper, 'In the "New South Africa": W(h)ither literature?': '...one prediction about the future of literature in the "new South Africa" is clear: that to write the nation there is the need to en-gender the languages' (1994:6).

Recently the National English Literary Museum has published a collection of interviews with selected black writers entitled *Reflections: Perspectives on writing in Post-apartheid South Africa* (Solberg & Hecksley 1996). The significance of these interviews lies in the extent to which they render visible the divergent views that these writers have, not only on some of the themes that warrant attention in post-apartheid South Africa but also, in their conception of their (new) responsibilities as writers. To provide but a few examples, Sindiwe Magona in *Reflections* emphatically argues that if the new government does not deliver, there will still be room for 'protest' writing (Solberg & Hecksley 1996:99). This view contrasts very sharply with Mongane Serote's plea for writers to attempt to bridge the gulf between the expectations and perceptions of ordinary people, on the one hand, and the reality of the processes of decision-making in government, on the other, by assessing the situation objectively (65 - 67)—a subject position that could (justifiably) be construed as symptomatic of his present status as a member of parliament. Nonetheless, it is arguably Mbulelo Mzamane, in his role as a literary historian, who

provides a more perceptive response to the crucial question: 'What do you see by way of new trends in black South African literature' (80).

Mzamane's illuminating response deserves much closer attention in so far as it provides some predictions which I also share on the possibilities of black South African writing. Drawing on 'post-colonial' African literature, Mzamane identifies a number of possible trends that this literature could follow. The first one is what he calls, 'honeymoon literature', a literature of celebration that is underpinned by a feeling of euphoria. This type of literature is best exemplified, according to Mzamane, in the theme of reconciliation that has been prominent at the Grahamstown Arts Festival in the past few years. Indeed, it could be argued that not only drama but also fiction could serve as fertile ground for textual production that attempts to promote this theme. The best example in the case of fiction is Sipho Sepamla's latest fictional work, *Rainbow Journey* (1996), which picks up the theme of reconciliation without necessarily resorting to the political. Sepamla's protagonist, Beauty, and her new lover, Karabo, vow to build a 'monument of reconciliation' (173) and 'forgiveness' as a way of burying the past which involved Beauty's love affair with Karabo's father culminating in the latter's death. One could also get poems which celebrate the 'miraculous' emergence of a new South Africa by valorising the 'Rainbow Nation'. Mzamane is nevertheless quick to point out that 'honeymoon literature' in South Africa, like in other African countries, will not survive for long but will lose momentum in a few years (Solberg and Hecksley 1996). What Mzamane does not say, however, though it is a prominent feature of 'post-colonial' African literature which he uses as his model, is that 'honeymoon literature' could, depending on the performance of the government, soon be superseded by a literature of disillusionment. As a matter of fact, there are already pointers to this direction in Kaizer Nyatumba's narrative of the future, 'The Night the Rain Fell', where the protagonist, Skilpad, a former freedom-fighter-turned-beggar, who has lost faith in the 'new' South Africa, laments:

A mere five years after they formed the new government, and they have already forgotten those who fought and won the war for them. They live in big houses, drive their big cars and want people like me hidden from the public eye (Nyatumba 1995:31).

Fred Khumalo's poem, 'My revolutionary friend', critically examines the role of the emergent class that is now in government:

Hmmm! My revolutionary friend has changed  
... and you know what?  
He who once inspired us the masses  
to drink from the chalice of brotherhood

has turned his back on the neighbourhood  
now shares wine and caviar with the upper class...

See him cruising by in his German vehicle  
a real uppity Untouchable  
Remember when he favoured liberation before enlightenment and  
education?

... Of reconciliation he now preaches  
the Rainbow Nation dream he embraces  
yet daily we watch with growing envy  
as he swims in the aromatic gravy.

... He chants 'Uhuru! We've won our Uhuru!'  
We can only marvel at our fat Bhululu  
He pays no heed to intimations of a new revolution.  
After all he is the ultimate epitome of revolution (Khumalo 1996:125).

One only hopes that it will not come to a point when one can agree with the reading of the South African situation provided by Farida Karodia's narrator in *Against An African Sky* (1995):

The whites have returned to their complacency, secure in the knowledge that they are still a dominant group. Now that the election is over, life has ostensibly returned to normal .... The rules have changed, but the game goes on as before. The election was merely a hiccup. (3)

For, if anything, such a reading clearly implies that one is dealing here with a neo-apartheid situation rather than a post-apartheid condition<sup>6</sup>. Should the government be

<sup>6</sup> In a 1996 essay Mzamane raises similar concerns. The passage is worth quoting at length: 'There is in South Africa an unspoken, uninterrogated assumption that we have entered a new "post-apartheid" era .... With the best will in the world, it is difficult to see in South Africa today a post-apartheid society. We must admit that it is too early yet to speak meaningfully of a post-apartheid South Africa. On the contrary, the many faces of neo-apartheid South Africa stare at us everywhere we go. The faces of the new parliamentarians defending their six-figure salaries with the same zeal with which they once condemned the apartheid gravy train: the face of the new provincial MEC (Member of the Executive Council) arriving at a funeral, not in a chauffeur driven Mercedes but on a helicopter .... South Africa is at the crossroads towards a neo-apartheid or a post-apartheid dispensation. There can be no foregone conclusions yet' (Mzamane 1996:17f).

seen as failing to rise to the occasion in terms of meeting people's expectations, however, this kind of literature is likely to flourish.

Mzamane also hints at the possibility of a resurgence of previously untold stories from the apartheid past. Although Mzamane does not elaborate on this aspect of his argument it would appear that his recent collection, *The Children of the Diaspora and other stories of Exile* (1996a), as well as some of the stories in Gomolemo Mokae's *Short, Not Tall Stories* (1996), belong to this category. Some of these 'untold stories' might also be presented in the confessional mode of autobiography or new journalism. One also hopes that the predominance of the truth and reconciliation theme in the country in the period of transition would prompt some writers to produce works that revisit the struggle for liberation even if for the purposes of demystifying it in the same way that Pepetela (his pen name) does with the Angolan struggle in *Mayombe* (1983).

Mzamane's third claim, namely, that there is likely to be a shift from a literature of the spectacular to a more introspective literature in which issues that have, hitherto, been glossed over will be examined, is also pertinent. This immediately brings to mind most of Kaizer Nyatumba's stories in his latest collection, *In Love with a Stranger and Other Stories* (1995), especially the story, 'In Happiness and in Sorrow' in which the previously unexplored theme of homosexuality in the black community is examined from the perspective of a woman who loses her gay husband to another man. In this text, marked by an effective employment of strategies of 'narrative seduction', one gets a clear insight into the woman's feelings as her suspicions that her husband is gay are confirmed, and this leads to the break-down of the marriage.

No-one, however, provides a good example of this shift more than Mandla Langa, who, unlike Serote, his fellow writer and comrade in the ANC, 'has chosen to make the writer rather than the politician his primary identity' (Gevisser 1996:16). While Langa's novel, *A Rainbow on the Paper Sky* (1989), has all the ingredients of the tradition of 'spectacle', his post-struggle narratives in the collection *The Naked Song and Other Stories* (1996) are firmly grounded on the aesthetics of the 'ordinary' advocated by Ndebele. Where *A Rainbow on the Paper Sky* was characterised by partisanship and the certainties of the narrative voice, the stories in *The Naked Song* are remarkable for their introspection, the maintenance of a critical distance and a cautionary voice. Without really 'casting stories at the fragile glass of democracy', Langa's text cautions on a number of issues, including 'the tendency in many convocations of the good and the great to inculcate a state of amnesia in the name of reconciliation' (Langa 1996:68,76). As Gevisser (1996:16) correctly observes:

Langa is the first South African writer to give literary voice to the trauma accompanying the return from exile and the transition from 'struggle'

consciousness into that void where your own beliefs and desires, rather than those of the movement define you.

The significance of Langa's stories in *The Naked Song*, then, lies in the extent to which they are indicative of the fact that the shift from the spectacular to 'a literature of interiority' is not just the result of cultural interventions of people such as Ndebele and Albie Sachs, amongst others, but is also an inevitable product of the changed political realities which demand, *inter alia*, the satisfaction of a readership with different expectations from that of the apartheid era.

As can be seen, Mzamane's predictions are quite convincing. However, as I read Mzamane's response to the question posed I could not help noticing that, apart from the point he makes about the shift from the literature of spectacle to 'a literature of interiority' or a literature informed by the aesthetics of 'the ordinary' (to use Ndebele's term), Mzamane is silent on the possibilities of whether one might see any other changes in literary form. In fact, the discussion of form in all the interviews is conspicuous by its absence. Could it be that this conspiracy of silence on the question of form is premised on a tacit approval, on the part of these writers, of modes of representation that are underpinned by mimetic assumptions of transparency which have thus far dominated South African literature written by blacks? Whether this is indeed the case remains unclear<sup>7</sup>. What is clear, however, is that what we are getting at the moment and what we might continue getting (if Mzamane's predictions are accurate) are 'writings which put in a different content in recycled containers' (Parry 1993:12). Mzamane's own narratives of exile, Sepamla's *Rainbow Journey* and Chris van Wyk's first novel, *The Year of the Tapeworm* (1996) which seems to bring back the consummate skills associated with the entertaining fiction of writers of the 'Drum generation' of the 1950s, are but a few examples of the continued predominance of the realist tradition in black writing. Even Nyatumba and Langa's texts, grounded as they are on the aesthetics of the 'ordinary', do not really move beyond the confines of realism despite their obvious commitment to interiority in character portrayal<sup>8</sup>. For as de Waal points out, 'the "rediscovery of the ordinary" can only really happen in a realist text, a text in which the writer has assumed the task of transmitting the world

<sup>7</sup> Curiously, the only interviewee who touches on the question of form, Ari Sitas, admits to having 'a stylistic problem with a lot of South African realists at this moment' (Solberg & Hecksley 1996:39).

<sup>8</sup> The same could be said of Langa's latest novel, *A Memory of Stones* (2000), as well as Mongane Serote's latest work, *Gods of Our Time* (1999), which reads like a sequel to part two of his first novel, *To Every Birth Its Blood* (1980). Rather than picking up the modernist experiment that part one of the latter novel would seem to be a product of, it represents a deindividuation of the heroic function.

to itself' (1996:3). Indeed it would seem that even in 'post-apartheid' South Africa, black writing has not escaped the tyranny of 'narrativity'.

This raises another question, the question of why black writers have preferred the realist mode of writing and have not turned to modernist strategies of dealing with reality. Undoubtedly, realism's tendency to 'minimize the relative boundaries between literature and "ordinary" social discourse' (Eysteinnsson 1992:195) has a great deal to do with it. Narrativity has, therefore, been the basis on which the assumption that literature should be accessible to the 'masses', whose ideological assent these writers attempted to gain, has been based. Logically, modernism has been rejected precisely because 'its proclivities ... seem bound to go against the notion of narrativity, narrative progression, or storytelling in any traditional sense' (187). Simply stated then, literary modernism's rejection of narrativity has been perceived by black South African writers as a strategy bent on mystifying information—modernist techniques of writing are, according to this argument, élitist, a luxury that black writers who had a political responsibility to the masses could not afford<sup>9</sup>. The rejection of modernism by these writers can thus be seen as a denunciation of the very 'difficulty and complexity with which modernist texts confront their readers, denying them the relative straightforwardness of plot and exposition' (Stevenson 1992:216). Hayden White (1987:14) has convincingly argued that narrativity, be it in fictional storytelling or factual writing, is indissolubly linked to 'the impulse to moralize reality'. In the case of South African writing this compelling desire 'not only to narrate but to give events an aspect of narrativity' (4) was underpinned by a necessity for the articulation of a political morality against apartheid. It was thus not surprising to find an abundance of constructions of 'fictional worlds that are thoroughly conditioned by the politics and the values of their authors' (Stevenson 1992:217) in order to gain ideological assent.

Now that the political situation has changed one wonders why black writers do not produce texts that bestow on the readers the freedom to produce meanings rather than to become mere consumers. But to pose such a question is to tip the scales in favour of modernist techniques of writing and, by implication, to suggest that realist texts have served their purpose and are, therefore, no longer worthwhile in post-apartheid South Africa. Moreover, this argument carries with it the assumption that all readers are critical readers who are prepared to engage with the challenges that (post) modernist texts provide. The reality is that not all readers are trained to deal with the intellectual demands of such texts. As Jon Thiem points out, in post modernist texts there is, apart from the 'popular code', 'a whole range of

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<sup>9</sup> This recalls, albeit with different implications, Brecht's association of 'realism' with the concept of the 'popular' in the well-known politics vis à vis aesthetics debate of the 1930's.

experimental techniques and postmodern philosophical issues [which are] less popular and adapted to serious readers [and] other writers [so] there is always the fear that the mass public will apprehend only the popular code and therefore read the work in a distortive and reductive way' (Zamora & Faris 1995:244). To say this is not to underrate the potential of the 'masses' who have been claimed by these writers as their 'virtual' readers. The truth, however, is that a large proportion of the so-called 'masses' in South Africa is a 'non-reading population' (Vaughan 1990:197). To write in a second language is to alienate this constituency even further. The problem would be further compounded when the 'masses' not only have to grapple with the problem of language but are also expected to contend with anti-realist games in a text.

Furthermore, to produce such texts authors themselves have to be readers of these texts in order to be able to master the technical skills involved in using (post) modernist strategies of writing<sup>10</sup>. Although there are writers who are well qualified to do this, it is apparent that there is some unpronounced resistance to this direction<sup>11</sup>. This resistance on the part of the writers should not, however, come as a surprise, for it could be argued that the South African socio-economic situation does not as yet warrant an abandonment of the enlightenment project. For one thing, while South Africa has, as it were, 'jumped' (or was it pushed?) onto the bandwagon of 'globalization', in this country (unlike other 'postcolonial' countries elsewhere), 'the hegemonic narrative of the nation has [not yet] been unseated' (Pease 1997:1) but is still an ideal everyone is striving towards. In this regard, one is inclined to concur with Nkosi's argument that it is perhaps premature to expect black South African writers to 'become post-modernists before they have brought to completion their modernist agenda' (Nkosi in Attridge & Jolly 1998:85). For these reasons it is clear that realist texts are likely to retain their value in South African literature. The transformative power of the reader's consciousness, however, does not seem to reside in modes of narration that accept uncritically the transparency between the signifier and the signified. This is not to suggest that it can be found only in modernist ('writerly') texts in which, according to Parry, the reader is 'resituated as interrogator rather than recipient ...' (Parry in Boehmer et al. 1993:17). It has also been shown

<sup>10</sup> Vladislavic, for example, recalls that when he started writing in the 1970s he was reading a lot of post-modernists such as Donald Barthelme and Kurt Vonnegut, Etienne Leroux, Breyten Breytenbach and John Miles.

<sup>11</sup> I have in mind here, amongst others, writers such as Nkosi, Mzamane, Ndebele, Zoë Wicomb and Oliphant, who are not only writers but are also academics well-versed in literary theory. Of these writers, Wicomb and Nkosi (in *Mating Birds*) seem to be the only ones moving towards this direction. See Kenneth Parker (1991) for more on this point.

that magical realist texts have a potential to textualize the reader by transporting him/her into their extraordinary fictional worlds, and, in this way, transform his/her consciousness<sup>12</sup>.

At the Zabalaza Festival in London in 1990, in a session entitled 'Towards Post-apartheid Culture' Andries Oliphant suggested that writers should 'reinvent traditional forms of literature' by incorporating 'the aesthetics of orality' in writing (1993:137). In a similar vein, Mandla Langa talked of the need for writers to exploit the folklore, myths and legends of South Africa as part of the creation of a new aesthetic. Citing 'the whole of Africa as a source of inspiration', and using Gabriel Okara of Nigeria as an example, he suggested: 'Black writers have to create a space for themselves where they appropriate skills and [are able to] be as daring as possible' (142). One writer who has done precisely that and, in my view, very successfully, is Zakes Mda in his novel, *Ways of Dying* (1995). Mda's approach is likely to appeal to other black writers who are no longer satisfied with mimetic modes of representation which rely solely on verisimilitude. Instead of confining his text to 'the ordinary', Mda moves to the extraordinary by gesturing towards magic realism by giving us a text which straddles the world of the living and the world of the dead, thereby blurring boundaries between fact and fiction. There is in this text a juxtaposition of the fantastic and realism as exemplified in historical incidents such as the so-called 'black on black' violence and 'moments of inventions' in Noria's interaction with the spirits as well as the 'resurrection' of her son, Vutha. Perhaps more significantly, the text employs the oral tradition of story-telling methods by using a communal narrative voice:

We know everything about everybody. We even know things that happen when we are not there; things that happen behind people's closed doors deep in the middle of the night. We are the all-seeing eye of the village gossip. When in our nature the storyteller begins the story 'They say it once happened ...', we are the 'they'. No individual owns any story. The community is the owner of the story, and it can tell it the way it deems it fit. We would not be needing to justify the communal voice that tells this story if you had not wondered how we became so omniscient in the affairs of Toloki and Noria (Mda 1995:8).

Ross Chambers argues that 'one of the important powers of fiction is its power to theorise the act of storytelling in and through the act of storytelling' (1984:23), a point that seems apt here. Briefly, this 'metacommentary' or foregrounding of narrators, it could be argued, gives Mda's work a metafictional dimension that

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<sup>12</sup> See John Thiem (Zamora & Faris 1995:235-247).

provides this magical realist text some room 'in the postmodern house of fiction' (Faris in Zamora & Faris 1995:175). By tapping into the oral tradition in order to produce a magical realist text, Mda seems to be following the direction of Ben Okri's *Famished Road* (1992)—a path which some black writers in this country might take instead of the modernist options. Mda may not have escaped from the tyranny of narrativity; however, by gesturing towards magical realism, *Ways of Dying* could be read as 'clearing space' for black post-apartheid writing<sup>13</sup>.

To come back to the initial question, I hope to have amply demonstrated that the eradication of apartheid has offered and (will continue to offer) new possibilities—both in terms of content and form—especially for black writers whose writing, Ndebele argued, was hitherto locked in the rhetoric of protest. The bifurcation between white modernist or post-modernist and black neo-realist writing, as has been shown, is, nevertheless, likely to continue unabated for quite some time in post-apartheid South Africa. If there ever will be an encounter between black writing and the postmodern, however, it might well be through magical realism<sup>14</sup>. Whether there will ultimately be a convergence between black and white South Africa writing in the immediate future remains to be seen. In the meantime, it will continue to be the subject of debate among critics and cultural workers alike whether this 'diversity' should inevitably be regarded as constituting the very essence of post-apartheid South African literature.

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<sup>13</sup> Mda continues this trend not only in *She Plays with Darkness* (1995) but also in his novella, *Melville 67* (1997), as well as in his latest publication, *Heart of Redness* (2000), a novel which has parallels with Jordan's *Wrath of the Ancestors* (1980), not just in thematic terms but also in its use of the oral tradition method of storytelling. In this latest novel, Mda employs historiography to create a fictionalised version of the story of Nongqause in juxtaposition to a contemporary (post-apartheid) situation. Another writer who seems to be following this trend is Achmat Dangor in his latest work, *Kafka's Curse and Other Stories* (1997), especially in the novella that gives the title to the collection where the oral tradition of storytelling is blended with a dialogism that gives a voice to the women to speak, thereby resulting in a production of a truly polyphonic work in Bakhtinian terms.

<sup>14</sup> However, the fact that Mike Nicol's *This Day and Age* (1992) seems to be a precursor to magical realism in South African writing in English would seem to suggest that a possible point of convergence between white writing and black writing might well be through this form of writing.

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