Zoë Wicomb Interviewed on *Writing and Nation*

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Writing and Living in Empire

S: Modernity is intimately connected to certain notions of empire, the novel, history, truth, and race we would like to discuss. You live in Scotland, what is sometimes called the first English colony. Your writing, however, centres on another "outpost of the British empire". So, could we begin by rephrasing a rather threadbare question in more general terms: given the significance of absence, repression, and longing firstly for language as a system of reference and secondly for the creative imagination, how would you describe the impact of being away from the places you write about?

Z: It's a problem – Mphahlele, I think, called it the tyranny of place. I can't write about Britain, and writing about South Africa is arguably a way of coping with absence and longing and a need to belong. (It's not possible for me to belong in Scotland: one couldn't in a place where one's difference is so salient.)

In Europe, exile has always been a romantic notion, a glamorous condition we were told, sought by the greats like Joyce and Beckett to achieve that necessary distance and objectivity – those were the litcrit keywords of my undergraduate days. Of course, the fact that they were colonials was overlooked. Nowadays, in the times of "postcoloniality", we have a different take on place and displacement, and we know that objectivity is a luxury enjoyed in the northern hemisphere where sense of self or self-worth is a given.

You know, I didn't choose to live in Europe, it's an accident of history, and the consequences, such as producing a family here, keep me here. Exile is after all not a state of being frozen in time, where a short thaw is all that stands between you and comfortable insertion back into the homeland. I would prefer to live in South Africa – or so I believe – and it will be possible to do so in two to three years' time. I certainly couldn't write if I did not spend extended periods there, because it's not

possible to go on mining memory. I often wonder about writers like Salman Rushdie. His earlier novels, including *The Satanic Verses*, are absolutely stunning, but the later ones I find, well, disappointing. Is it because he's writing about a culture and a country in which he hasn't lived for some time and nevertheless feels compelled to write about? So then, even for the great writers who are accepted in the Western centres, the problem persists: the problem of writing about home that has for some time not been home. And that subject matter, which is in a crucial sense about absence, comes so often to be articulated through history.

As for the stuff about absence feeding the imagination, or distance providing a better perspective, well, it may be true, it must be true for the genre of fantasy, but to me it sounds like a cliché. I couldn't have written *David's Story* if I hadn't lived in Cape Town between 1990 and 1994. It would have been something else, a novel about the Griquas, but being there, with the issues of the contemporary strand of *David's Story* all around me, the extraordinary parallels between the two periods insisted on a revision of my original idea.

S: Many postcolonial authors live in the former "mother countries", close to the heart of darkness, so to speak. What is the significance then of your living and teaching in Britain for your writing?

Z: Let's look on the bright side: living in Scotland is possibly what keeps me on my toes. As a black foreigner you have to work that much harder in order to prove yourself; you can't afford to slip up – even in academia. Given how hard it is to write, how little time there is to write once the business of teaching and the daily immersion in bureaucracy is over, I sometimes wonder if it's the desire to prove myself in a hostile culture that makes me write at all. But writing also is a means of saying that which you can't utter: it compensates for the fear of speaking. In Scotland I am often congratulated by strangers on my "good English". And what I have to say so often turns out not to be what's expected, so it would seem that I haven't integrated, that at some level I refuse. Being middle class gives me that choice (unlike, for instance, the wretched situation of so many refugees). Anyway, quite apart from my affiliation with South Africa then, it's impossible for me to write out of this culture. And when I try, it's a winge.

But I've always been terrified of speaking, of unscripted speech, even at home in South Africa. Perhaps because I overvalue verbal expression, because I am despicably self-conscious, but as a foreigner it's worse, and now being a woman of a certain age I am also conscious of being inaudible. Writing seems the obvious solution. Kristeva says about the

foreigner's speech that foreigners compensate for not being heard by being excessively formal, rhetorical, baroque in their expression. I find in that a comforting explanation for my own overwritten prose, a hope that I can now consciously address the problem of "foreigner's style".

The Novel

S: Both *You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town* and *David's Story* flirt with the novel and auto/biography, both of them are genres closely associated with modernity. Yet there are also significant differences between the two books. Could you say something about the theoretical and aesthetic concerns, for example, on narrative and the subject that occupied you in the period between the two books, the shifts in your views, and how these impact on your fiction?

Z: I wrote very little in the period between except for a few short stories. I started with Le Fleur's history a long time ago, shortly after *You Can't Get Lost* was published, but gave up. It just wouldn't work; I couldn't find a comfortable narrative voice. Also, I felt somewhat paralysed after *You Can't Get Lost*, a little put out by its reception as autobiography and the excessive praise because by the time I saw it in print, I knew it to be stylistically flawed, a rather overwritten book.

As for the different theoretical assumptions of the two books: in the intervening period I produced my own homespun brand of critical writing and review articles for *The Southern African Review of Books*, belatedly taken by poststructuralism and theory's turn to the linguistic. But the fiction is not consciously conceived with a theoretical model in mind. Also, it may be hard to believe, but I honestly did not know that *You Can't Get Lost* was crucially about coloured identity, not until a critic pointed it out – nobody after all was talking about coloureds in the 80s, the very label had been rejected in the period of resistance. No, a cocktail of nostalgia and outrage dictated the subject matter of that book – I was active in the Anti-Apartheid Movement which demanded of me things that I still find abhorrent. If I could stand with a placard and do rabble-rousing talks (scripted, of course), then I could overcome my fear of writing. And if a concern with language, the hegemony of English, is central in *You Can't Get Lost*, that's because it simply is a problem for so many South Africans. The short story is a well-known apprentice's medium; its shortness is useful for the beginner lacking confidence (although a writer is a beginner with every new work) – you achieve something in a short space of time; its limitedness means that you don't

need a large table covered in notes. Material conditions dictated the form for me: with a small child and no room of my own (let alone the so many guineas per year) the short story was the obvious choice. Only after completing the first two stories did I think in terms of an extended work with the same central character. Then I grew interested in the gaps between the stories, the negative semantic space that is my protagonist's life in England. And yes, I flirted with autobiography because that is what black women write, in a sense claiming the pejorative label for myself. That a work in which a character is dead and then reappears many years later could be called autobiography nevertheless came as a shock.

T: There is a general parallel in writing in South Africa in general. The popularity of the short story in the 1950s, the ease of a shorter text, the intensity of it, the appeal of it in journals or magazines, followed by a process in which the novel begins to assert itself.

Z: The shortness of the short story was appealing. As a form it's always been hospitable to the exploration of identity, subjectivity, but once I'd done that I wanted the new challenge of an extended work. If the shift from short story to novel corresponds with a trend in South African writing, that's not so surprising, since people writing out of the same social and political situation necessarily have common concerns and adopt common forms of expression. But *David's Story* is not about a shift in theoretical perspective. It simply was a response to the subject matter, coping with the problem of representing two stories set in different historical periods. Publishers didn't like it. Too "postmodern", they said, stick with the voice of Frieda Shenton; too complex, let David tell his own story in the first person. If it's theory-driven (the worst criticism for a writer!) then I'm not sure what the theory is. For me it was simply a struggle, not only with the aesthetics of combining two stories, but also the ethics of representing the ambiguities of the situations. I dealt with that problem as best I could through a fragmented, indeterminate narrative, and a narrator whose voice is arch, ironic, unsympathetic. Hardly radical – it is after all a generic condition of prose fiction (as Bakhtin pointed out) to be multivoiced; in this case I draw attention to the different voices.

T: *David's Story* is poised between the historical, the reclaiming of history or the reconstructing of the history, and the contemporary. Is the novel a history or is it a biography, perhaps a collaborative autobiography?

Z: Is it not fiction? And is it not the case that all fiction ultimately finds its source in the real world? And since novels have central characters and represent the passage of time, they are also always histories, biographies or autobiographies – as witnessed in so many titles of early novels.

In this case, as you say, also collaborative autobiography, but with the focus on the process of producing the text, and questioning the business of collaborative autobiography. What becomes clear is that the project is impossible: the amanuensis has too little to go by and resorts to invention. What is also inferrable from the preface is that she has in the end decided for herself what to omit or include, or how to arrange her material – in accordance with her own aesthetic project. Also because speech is not writing, so that this information has to be translated into that medium. So I hope the novel questions the practice of writing someone else's story and foregrounds the practical and ethical problems inherent in collaborative autobiography.

S: To come back to the shift from the short stories to the novel: it seems to me that there are two opposing forces at work. Whilst *You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town* is made up of whole, fully crafted short stories that flow into each other to loosely evoke the form of the novel, with *David's Story* you've got something which, from the outside, looks more clearly like a novel but internally is much more fractured and the scenes are much shorter. Thus they resist the inclusiveness of the novel more strongly than the short story form. What do you see as the constraints and possibilities of the novel form?

Z: Constraints or possibilities – I couldn't say; these kinds of things you come up against in the process of writing. One works with and within established forms but also against them as you struggle with the specificities of your own project. You don't invent from scratch, you work with conventions and mould existing forms so that in theory the possibilities are infinite, the form being infinitely malleable. I think the debates about representing the Holocaust are instructive. There have been discussions about the limits of representation, the problems of realism, the parallels with the *Bilderverbot* of Mosaic law, the unsuitability of certain genres like comedy or the pastoral, but note how some artists, writers, filmmakers have successfully found ways around conventions and existing forms to give credible representations of the horror of the Holocaust.

As for *David's Story*, it's fractured, yes, and the fragments are not short stories – they lack the classic lack-quest-resolution structure, and taken together, they resist coherence. There isn't a central authoritative

voice. My conceit of David fathering the story from a distance tries to capture the interrelatedness of the political and aesthetic concerns. The inchoate story, which for political reasons can't be told, threatens to fall apart; only the reader can hold together some sense of the events.

T: Resistant then?

Z: Yes, to telling THE story; there isn't, there can't be a definitive story. And certainly resistant to the liberal-humanist take on the events in our troubled history.

Literary History and Canon-Building

S: One of the features of modern literary history is canon-building. How would you place *You Can't get Lost in Cape Town* and *David's Story* in the South African literary tradition by way of saying what you see as some of the main issues in "the canon", and your position regarding these issues?

Z: Now that would be indecent, wouldn't it, to place oneself within a canon. Surely no one sits down to write with the tradition, the canon, in mind; rather, you write in spite of the canon; you have to block out the "greats" in order to summon the courage to write. As for the canon: it's obviously a critical construct, what the dominant culture chooses to value because such works coincide with its interests. That choice is also always about exclusion, so it is intrinsically discriminatory, conservative. In the past, women and blacks were routinely excluded. But canon-making also always produces resistance in the culture it purports to serve, then there comes a revision that leads once more to sedimentation and so the merry-go-round continues. Revisions are always lovely – like turning the rubbished George Eliot into one of the greats, or in South Africa resurrecting Sol Plaatje as the father of black writing. Nowadays at least we talk about the process of canonisation and actively resist the grown-ups' take on writing. The most liberating line I've read in the last century was Eagleton's comment on the transitivity of "value". "Good for whom?" he asked. In South Africa, of course, we had an apartheid canon, and the business of revision started well before the demise of apartheid – it was part and parcel of the resistance movement.

I suppose in terms of how I'm received, there are two categories. I'll necessarily be placed as a "coloured writer", and so I'll be read in relation to Abrahams, La Guma, Rive and Head. And as a minor writer,

like all the other contemporary coloured writers, I'll be unfavourably compared to them – and not only because they're dead! What we have in common are concerns such as identity, subjectivity, the problem of writing itself, born out of our common social and political conditions. The second category: writing in the period immediately after 1994. A change in conditions introduces new concerns that take centre stage such as history and memory in the postapartheid period. The second category: writing in the period immediately after 1994. But that is the not-so-mysterious business of *Zeitgeist*, an assessment of writing that can only be made in retrospect. Ag, I don't know how to answer your question.

T: Perhaps we could make this part of the question. What would you see as the South African canon or tradition?

Z: We do, of course, in accordance with apartheid, and also with our different histories and languages, have separate traditions. And the canon will presumably continue to reflect that for some time to come. Now it's obvious that the three major writers, Coetzee, Gordimer, Brink, for different reasons, and whether they like it or not, constitute the new anti-apartheid canon. What do *you* think?

T: I don't know, to me it's a double-edged sword of a question which certainly when I was at university was hardly ever put out there. I went through eight years of university in South Africa without ever once "doing" South African literature. The one course on South African literature in my honours year was "discontinued" because, apart from myself, there was no one else who signed up to do it. This was at Wits University too! Perhaps a better way of approaching it is coming to terms with the idea of what would be the South African tradition. Maybe not canon so much as tradition, but what would one point to?

Z: This is always going to be a problem in a country like South Africa because we've not had canon bound up with a single nation, like, for instance, the English canon. And then, that example is salutary: there may be a hegemonic English canon with the power to appropriate Joyce or Stevenson but there can be no such thing as a British canon. The Irish or Scots are in the business of producing their own canons. Your experience is precisely that of Scottish students; Scottish universities still have departments of English literature where little or no Scottish literature is taught. Or if it is, it's ghettoised into Scotlit departments. And in South Africa, you've got the different projects of writing in Afrikaans and in English and hopefully now also in indigenous

languages, although since English is the language of multinational capital (and standard English "the dialect with an army and a navy") it will always be the top dog.

What would be the South African tradition? It would, like in any culture, be a mixed bag, with little to hold it together other than geography, precisely because no "nation" is cohesive, and affiliations of gender, race and class will always woof across such national traditions. If it were not for its serious ideological function, it would be foolish to take the canon seriously ....

S: The point of my question about canonisation was to lead to another one, about ways of resisting canonisation or ways of being conscious of the canon.

Z: There's absolutely nothing you can do about the reception of your work – no point in even thinking about it. But institutions can and do play a powerful role in undermining the canon. Never before have teachers produced such defiant syllabuses, or have such outré works been studied at universities. Not only a question of resisting the canon, but of teaching young people to think for themselves what they consider to be good and why they do so.

S: Maybe canon is the wrong word. I was thinking more about themes, because although canon may be connected with all sorts of issues, it is also about recurring themes and modes of representation. I was thinking of things such as the land and identity, for example. This runs right through Afrikaans and English literature, in the *plaasroman*, and all the replies to that. To some extent in *David's Story* identity is being constructed through a relationship to land too.

Z: Agreed, the land is important; it's always been a political issue in South Africa**.** And yes, identity is not only about contemplation of being; it is bound up with the body and the ways in which we experience the ground beneath our feet, and rest our eyes on a familiar landscape. But then different groups in South Africa experience these differently, and representations have ranged from a concern with legitimating the occupation of the land to the likes of Sipho Sepamla who takes ownership for granted, claiming that there is no need for his poem to sing of the land. In other words, even recurring themes were inflected according to race, and this presumably will continue for some time. No doubt the new redistribution of land will also produce a new take on the topic. And it is interesting how so many writers are currently looking at

history. Like narrative itself, trying to make sense of the uncertainty of the present, looking for patterns, I suppose. Or take Nadine Gordimer's new novel which goes beyond the borders of South Africa, of Africa, into a wider world. Who knows whether that will become a trend in our writing, whether we are capable of escaping from the narrowness of national boundaries.

Representation and Race

S: You have described your own writing as a writing back, which has also become a hallmark of postcolonial writing. In your academic work you have provided succinct critiques of the representation of coloureds in South African writing from Mikro to Millin, Matshoba and Gordimer. The title *David's Story* even calls to mind Gordimer's *My Son's Story*. Could you comment on the ways in which you extend this theoretical critique of the representation of coloureds in the form of a novel?

Z: Yes, the postcolonial writer's echolalic condition – but like all repetition, echolalia too repeats with difference. If I felt a compulsion to rewrite Millin's *God's Stepchildren*, I made do with a playful pretence of re-writing it, a pretence of substituting Flood with Le Fleur; it became no more than a tinny echo in my story. I don't think the novel does extend my critique. It is as much concerned with the ways in which coloureds or Griquas have been represented as it is with self-representation, with absurd self-identification as witnessed, for instance, in the epithet of "pure Griqua". I still have no truck with the identity mania, but perhaps the novel also explores reasons for the retreat into colouredness.

S: In *David's Story* you deal with the difficulties concerning representation around the male protagonist David by way of problematising the relationship between him and his amanuensis. These problems of re-presentation seem even greater though when connected to the female character Dulcie. Could you expand on the genderedness of the difficulties pertaining to representation arising from the shame some people associate with miscegenation?

Z: Dulcie's story is not so much about the perceived shame of miscegena-tion; rather it's about betrayal, about a faction in the Movement no longer requiring powerful coloured women. And the problem of representing her is twofold: first, she is in a sense the necessary silence in the text; she can't be fleshed out precisely because of her shameful

treatment which those committed to the Movement would rather not talk about, and her gender is not unconnected with this treatment. Secondly, as a figure who is pure body, a body that is tortured, she stands in contrast to my playfully echolalic treatment of steatopygia as a motif in the novel. (How else does one treat the missionaries' foolish fixation on black women's bottoms?) And having supernatural qualities, she also echoes Le Fleur himself. But Dulcie surprises herself by thinking of herself for the first time, under new conditions, as coloured.

S: How do you see the present trend in what you once described as "an exorbitance of identity currently expressed in the construction of coloured nationhood"? (Wicomb 1998: 105).

Z: Did I? Well, I suppose the furore about the return of Saartjie Baartman's remains says it all. Dozens of groups are staking their claim, including the Griquas. Another version of the fashionable scramble for alterity – and with no regard to the further outrage to her memory. But that's the kind of thing nations rely on; icons, and let's face it, we're rather short on those. It's unbelievable that people don't thank their lucky stars that they need not concern themselves with roots, ancestors, tradition – all those musty things that the "old world" (humorous epithet, that!) fusses about. And more importantly, in a world of vulgar obsession with race, we happily escape having to identify ourselves in those tired old black/white terms. We have families, communities, there is no need to angst about identity, to hang on to old apartheid lessons in racial identity. Or to search for ancestors, symbolic ones because Baartman can't of course be everyone's biological ancestor. So she has to be fictionalised, like the steatopygia in my novel! And such appropriation of an icon of brutalisation and oppression as Baartman undoubtedly is, does it not smack horribly of staking a claim on suffering? A pathetic and distasteful cry of "We have suffered as much as blacks"? Or: "We are as indigenous as blacks". Which is to deny the fact that she is already of mixed race.

History and Nation-Building

S: One of the many themes in *David's Story* is the relationship between narrative (e.g. myth, history, fiction) and the nation and nation-building, another modern concern. How do you see *David's Story* in this context? Is all history myth and all nation-building as problematic as implied?

Z: I'd rather not talk about the novel. As for history, yes, it *is* discourse, but there are also undoubtedly events, things that happen in the world regardless of whether they are represented or not, which in the process of telling are mythologised, usually in the interest of some belief or ideology such as nation-building. And I don't want to be too negative about nationhood because it's also a necessity produced by colonialism. You need a strategic nationalism to mobilise people against oppression. It certainly worked in South Africa, didn't it? So there are positive and necessary aspects to it. But once the immediate goal is achieved, what do you then do with the unwieldy monster? Its toxic energy is a problem because it's not possible for people to just click into rejection mode once nationalism becomes redundant. Then it spirals into the ill-health of exclusion, intolerance of others, xenophobia, meanings that have always been contained within it, but have been happily overshadowed by the common purpose of liberation.

Nation-building must have some kind of mythical aspect in order for it to take, to germinate. And narrative has much to do with the process. I find Benedict Anderson persuasive on the role of the novel in representing the kind of imagined community that is the nation. That the events that take place simultaneously in a novel – spinning a web between characters who are not necessarily aware of each other – is an analogy for the idea of nation. So I was interested in the stories related to the nationhood of the Griquas, the apocryphal facts that developed around figures like Le Fleur ....

T: These epics, sagas ....

Z: Yes, the need to found a nation generates stories and the retelling of stories. But that doesn't make all history myth. Narration, after all, requires events in the world that spark the telling, or around which the telling is constructed, and the process of telling is itself generative, procreative, so it's not so surprising that Le Fleur comes out as an almost unreal figure.

T: The lineages, with the hint of magic realism, was one aspect which captivated me. Would you like to say something more about this?

Z: I didn't know that I was going to use it in that way, but I suppose representation of genealogy has always been bound up with identity construction, with producing a literary identity for a region or a group and with founding myths. Besides, the actual stories that circulate in the real world about Le Fleur, the apocryphal stories, lent themselves to

magic realism. I could then elaborate on those, develop the story into the immaculate conception of a fictional love child which connects David biologically to Le Fleur, and so hopefully invite the reader to make other connections between them, between the historical periods.

T: In historicising or reclaiming histories in the form of a novel, is there not the "danger" of falling between the beams, as they say? On the one hand, does the history not lose impact by being "fictionalised", and on the other, does the fiction not run the risk of being overwhelmed by the history? What led to the use of the novel form rather than a history? Or biography?

Z: Perhaps the work does fall between the beams, perhaps that's why people find it difficult to read. But I'm not a historian, so that was not a possibility. And biography? I'm not interested in an impossible project of telling the "truth" about Le Fleur because that would involve a rationality that would wipe out the mytho-poetic aspects of his life. And David, as a fictional character, precludes biography. The novel is capacious enough to contain the stories of both main characters, to tell a number of stories; it requires invented truths.

S: You have commented that "our postmodern effacement of history stretches back to the very memory of our origins" (Wicomb 1998: 99). *David's Story* gives us another way in which postmodernism and history are at odds, namely in Le Fleur's tinkering with genealogy. How much history do we need, and how compatible are postmodernism and history?

Z: No idea how much history we need, but I like that: a dosage of history – for the well-being of the body politic?

Is the argument about postmodernism and history not by now exhausted? My view is that Hayden White's reformulation of his postmodern ideas about history in response to the revisionist histories of the Holocaust, shows that it is a false argument. Take also Toni Morrison's comment on African-Americans having been postmodern from the outset, which does not wipe out the history of slavery but rather comments on the ontological condition of slaves at the time, the kinds of problems they had to confront.

S: In the afterword to the US edition of *David's Story*, Dorothy Driver raises the very incisive question, "What kind of world do we live in where truth cannot coexist with nuance? How can we be postapartheid (in the metaphysical sense) if truth is still 'black and white'?" (Wicomb

2001: 251). The way you describe what you are doing sometimes seems closer to suggesting that we jettison the notion of truth (rather than just problematising it) which would be a common postmodern move. But what you may actually be doing is what Driver is suggesting, namely that you are working out nuances of truth. How do you see the differences between a postmodern disposal of truth on the one hand, and the working out of nuance on the other?

Z: It's narrative fiction itself that lends itself to questioning the notion of *the* truth, and has the capacity for showing truth as a complex, many-sided, contingent thing. My contemporary story about the suspension of certain values and beliefs during the period of struggle, about the topsy-turviness of that world, means that the "truth" about that period has to be problematised. Indeterminacy in narrative makes for equivocacy, which is surely not the same thing as jettisoning the notion of truth. For me, it's what makes the difficult business of representing that period possible – the inevitable slippage from idealism to corruption – precisely because a liberation movement, driven to taking up arms, necessarily adopts the tactics of the enemy. My novel does assert that abominable things happen in the name of freedom – take the torturing of Dulcie – but it also at the same time casts her in mythological terms, hopefully to open up the idea of truth, to wrest it from the pieties of liberal humanism, and to assert a measure of unknowableness about that past. Nuances of truth, yes, and if it is possible to utter the words "postmodernism disposes of truth" I wouldn't know how to represent such a notion in fiction. I'm beginning to wonder whether it's not a tabloid reading of the issue: that the postmodern foregrounding of textuality necessarily amounts to a denial of history and of truth?

Postmodernity and Postcolonialism

S: You have expressed some scepticism about "the metropolitan articulations of postmodernity" (Wicomb 1998: 101-102) – especially Homi Bhaba's reading of the situation of South African coloureds. What would distinguish a non-metropolitan postmodernism from a metropolitan one? And how do you respond to the widespread view that postmodernism is disarming in the South African context, whereas postcolonialism is emancipating?

Z: These umbrella terms are always problematic, always contested, but at the same time it seems naive to expect a single word to encapsulate a set

of meanings that could hold across cultures. And the theories that adhere around such terms are not always what necessarily holds in practice. Of course, if postmodernism simply means giving up on the project of enlightenment then it is inappropriate for a culture that believes in an emancipatory politics. (Which culture doesn't at least claim to do so?) But it is also interesting to consider the relationship between theory and practice, between postmodernism and postmodernity. Writers can surely use the aesthetic strategies of postmodernism without buying into the nihilistic aspects of the theory. And we may well ask whether the emancipating tenets of postcoloniality produced a culture in South Africa that in practice eschews the consumerism or materialistic values of postmodernity. Clearly not. On the other hand, it is not strictly true to say that the metropole, for instance, has given up on emancipation when groups that protest against the injustices of the dominant culture continue to mushroom and to have an impact on that culture. And is scepticism really the prerogative of the postmodern metropolis? Let's not define emancipation too narrowly or allow our culture to simply react against the West, that is to be reactionary. And if scepticism includes being sceptical about God the Father, then for godsake let's embrace it in the interest of emancipation. It is as foolish to overemphasise difference from the metropolis as it is to deny it.

I suppose the crucial difference between metropolitan and non-metropolitan is not how we theorise our conditions, but rather one of economics and security. Richard Rorty has a brilliant explanation for prejudice. Not irrationality, but deprivation. Metropolitan conditions, he says, are risk-free enough to make a difference to others of no consequence to self-respect, whereas those deprived of security and sympathy are more likely to be threatened by difference.

And why, we should be asking, is it the case that the narrative strategies of postcolonialism have so much in common with postmodern writing strategies. I suppose *David's Story* is called postmodern?

S: I see it as a very postmodern novel which raises the question of the various forms of postmodernism and postmodernism in a postcolonial context. I fully agree with you that postmodernism brings that highly self-reflective and very necessary sceptical requirement with it. But how does one bring this together with an emancipatory politics?

Z: It's not a problem. Writing strategies are not inherently conservative or emancipatory; they can only be put to such uses. Why should scepticism not serve an emancipatory goal? Remember the old struggle-literature tabu on irony – an unbelievable misunderstanding of the mechanisms of

irony, as if the inferential pool from which we get the oppositional meaning can come out of anything other than the sociopolitical domain. So yes, it is the case that postmodernism and postcoloniality have writing strategies in common – intertextuality, self-reflexivity, irony, to name a few – that are inflected according to the situation. How then do you label Coetzee or Rushdie? Which begs another question: why should you label them? If you're interested in writing, how do you avoid other influences? Why should you? The writer has always had a magpie mentality and creativity has less to do with the individual's so-called originality than we like to think. We all appropriate, turn writing strategies to our own use, and I don't for one moment accept that the traffic of influence goes in one direction only.

S: If I read Michael Chapman's *Southern African Literatures* correctly he distinguishes a self-reflective kind of writing on the one hand, which is typically postmodern (which I see very much in *David's Story*) from a realist tradition which is closer to the novel as a modern phenomenon. He questions the efficacy of the postmodern texts in terms of a moral-political nation-building project. For that, he prefers the realist authors. How do you see this?

Z: Well, for me it raises questions. Is the realist tradition in fact closer to the novel as a modern phenomenon? Is the moral-political nation-building project attainable or even at this stage desirable? To modify the word nation with moral-political does not take away the problematic aspects of nation-building. And does a writer have to accept these labels, commit oneself to being a realist or a postmodernist? No they're not questions. I simply disagree. Surely one writes out of available resources, writes in a manner appropriate to your project. I wouldn't put it past me to write a realist novel, but never to promote some notion of nation. Does the goal of promoting a tolerant society, tolerant of strangers, of difference, not seem politically and morally preferable?

S: Underlying Chapman's distinction is a view of language. The naming word of the realist novel refers to the real world where the problems are, whereas the self-reflective novel that is caught within the domain of the literary does not touch on the political.

Z: It's a misconception – to think of language as a system of nomenclature. Language is not an Adamic naming of things; it's about discourse in all the senses of the word. The realist novel, like an Adamic language, does indeed claim to reflect things in the world, disguising the fact that it too

is in the domain of the literary. But what's the point of reflecting the world; it simply leads to the tautologies of struggle-writing in which the writer rehearsed the already-known evils of apartheid. Let's also remember that self-reflexivity has after all been used by feminist and black writing for political purposes (Margaret Atwood &Toni Morrison, for instance); it's a writing strategy that cannot be inherently conservative or progressive. My other problem with the real world school is that it is patronising. It assumes that people have limited reading skills, that they cannot infer or interpret. Reading should be challenging. It is supposed to make you rethink your real world, not confirm what you already know. I suppose the crucial question is *how* different kinds of works "touch on the political". *Beloved*, for instance, requires an aesthetic and intellectual engagement on the part of the reader that makes her rethink the very politics of representing the real world.

The Future of Writing in South Africa

T: That said, your novel has been widely recognised (even before its publication) as a significant step in the creative production of South Africa. How do you see the future of writing (the novel, other creative writing) in South Africa? What trends can be expected, and what will influence the writing of tomorrow? What about your own writing from here?

Z: Let's not be naive about publishers' blurb; these people have to sell books. As for the future: it's foolish to predict what people will write about, or to pontificate on what people ought to write about. At the moment history seems to exercise a number of writers: Zakes Mda, André Brink, Ann Harries, Elleke Boehmer and so on, but who knows what's next. As for my own writing, I'm not at all sure that I could carry off another work. One has to earn a living, although I do have the M-Net prize money that enables me, along with a sabbatical, to spend some months in South Africa in which to read and write. But I wouldn't dream of telling you what I think my next work will be about. It's a matter of superstition.

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