The Politics of Identity: South Africa, Story-telling, and Literary History

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Summary

The publication of Michael Chapman's *Southern African Literatures* (1996) occasioned lively debate. In South Africa responses involved matters of identity: whose language, culture, or story would retain purchase in a new South Africa? In North America and Europe related questions were cast – less emotively – as enquiries into the possibility of writing literary history at a time of postmodernist "discontinuity". Using such responses as a starting point, the paper considers the value of literary history's retention, amid discontinuity, of an ethics of narrative.

Opsomming

'n Lewendige debat het gevolg op die publikasie van Michael Chapman se *Southern African Literatures* (1996). In Suid-Afrika was die meeste reaksies gerig op vraagstellings oor identiteit: wie se taal, kultuur en storie sou stand hou in 'n nuwe Suid-Afrika? In Noord-Amerika en Europa is soortgelyke sake geopper – met minder emosie – as ondersoeksvrae na die moontlikheid daarvan om 'n literatuurgeskiedenis te skryf in 'n tyd van postmodernistiese "diskontinuïteit". Met soortgelyke reaksies as 'n vertrekpunt, word daar in hierdie artikel besin oor die waarde van die literatuurgeskiedenis se behoud van 'n narratiewe etiek te midde van diskontinuïteit.

My study *Southern African Literatures*[1] has since its publication in May 1996 occasioned heated responses in South Africa. Briefly, arguments involve the matter of identity politics: whose language, culture, or story can be said to have authority in South Africa when the end of apartheid has raised challenging questions as to what it is to be a South African, what it is to live in a new South Africa, whether South Africa is a nation, and, if so, what its mythos is, what requires to be forgotten and what remembered as we scour the past in order to understand the present and seek a path forward into an unknown future. What is our story when story-telling in its most harrowing form occupied the attention of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission with families and friends recollecting those who were bludgeoned to death by the forces of the racist state?

A single-authored literary history, *Southern African Literatures*, covers work

from the expression of stone-age Bushmen to that of writers such as Gordimer, Brink, Breytenbach, and Coetzee. In considering the questions of what constitutes a usable past, what value may be assigned to traditional, elite, and popular forms, generally how after apartheid one might understand the linguistic and cultural complexity of the southern African region, the study inherited a literary culture that had been constructed upon assumptions of linguistic-racial exclusivities. I use the term "assumptions" rather than "principles": although a few critics have consistently called for "integrative study", the practice – a practice very short on theory – has favoured surveys, anthologies, and histories delineated according to the several languages and races of the region. There are in consequence separate studies of Afrikaans literature, South African English literature, Zulu literature, Xhosa literature, Sotho literature, a few on white writing, and a few on black writing.[2] *Southern African Literatures,* in contrast, presents a single though multivocal narrative based on principles of comparison and translation. In crossing language and race barriers it asks questions such as: would Xhosa expression have developed the way it did had it not encountered a British settler presence on its ancient land? Conversely, would South African English literature have taken its particular course had it not encountered indigenous people around its early settlements? The aim – "after apartheid" – is to retain respect for the epistemological autonomy of the cultures between which interchange is taking place while seeking to make the insights of one culture accessible to the other. A reviewer in the United States has seen in the approach a valuable "multicul- turalism" which – we are told – Americans espouse but seldom practise (Nemoianu 1997: 182). If multiculturalism suggests synthesis, my real concern is iniquities of power, and the study deliberately adopts the tendentious view that "in dangerous times throughout the South African story, many people who in other circumstances would have been less than artists have had to become more than artists. Without the protection of ambiguity, irony or even the expensive package of the literary book, they have had to find words to speak out boldly against injustice" (Chapman 1996: 428-429). Literary utterance emerges less as formalism, more as rhetoric; the artist less as the crafter of artifacts, more the citizen of public account. The emphasis seems appropriate to a conflictual history, in which the texts of politics have wanted to over- whelm the texts of art.

My intention, however, is not to dwell on *Southern African Literatures* – the book must make its own way in the world – but to consider the issue of story- telling in literary history as an attempt to capture, reorder, and even reinvent a sense of the self in society. The issue clearly has pertinence to South Africa, where questions as to whose story is being told, or as to what constitutes a South African story, reflect the concerns about – some might say crises of – identity that have accompanied massive changes since the unbannings of the

liberation movements in 1990 and the ongoing transition from an apartheid state to a constitutional democracy. The issue, I shall suggest, also has applicability to a world which since 1989 has seen dramatic rearrangements of relationships between West and East, and – more directly to my concern – between the West and Africa, or to use post-Cold War terminology, between the rich North and the poor South. Although one hears of the 1990s as a time in which economics superseded ideology, I intend to pursue the view of two analysts of the Cold War, Huntington and Brzezinski, that explanations of the global neighbourhood will be primarily neither ideological nor economic, but cultural. When Huntington (1993: 51-60) and Brzezinski (1993/1994: 22-49) suggest that fundamental differences among societies can be grasped only by our interpreting the stories people tell about themselves and others, they remind us of Anderson's insights in *Imagined Communities* (1983) that the power holding individuals together in the community of the nation is at bottom narrative: that the story is the most intense and comprehensive expression of the culture, or the site where sensibility is both mirrored and actively shaped. My argument seeks to justify "the story" as important not only to identity-making in the nation or the society, but to the interpretation of the culture in literary history.

With identities as the summarising trope, we have a situation, in the global context, in which with unprecedented scale and variety peripheries have displaced centres and nothing is certain. Or so intellectual analysis has it (cf Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin 1989; Holquist 1996: 103-114). From the rim, empires write back: questions of belonging and nonbelonging, or migration and exile, have creolised speech and experience, and provoked Rushdie's response to Steiner who complained that literary energy was being generated not in the metropolis but on the far rim: "What does it matter ...? What is this flat earth on which the good professor lives, with jaded Romans at the centre and frightfully gifted Hottentots at the edges?"(Rushdie 1996: 1). Such issues of displacement are usually grouped together as postcolonial, and a question crucial to identity on the periphery is whether postcolonialism is a phenomenon of specified localities or simply a new form of an old global habit: the West seeking a counterpoint on the far rim for its own history, which has increasingly felt centre/periphery oscillations within its unitary state borders. Once secure national identities and nations – homogeneous in language, religion, and culture – have now among their permanent citizenry the black Briton, the German Turk, and the Chicano American. A striking manifestation of identities seeking at once homogeneity and heterogeneity is the multicultural furore in the United States where Bloom's "Western Civilization" (1987) faces the "peripheral" challenge of Native Americans, African Americans, gays, and, despite their numerical superiority, women. Looking on from South Africa it is difficult to believe that Western heartlands are not pretty secure

where it matters, and to suspect that postcolonialism – as far as Africa is concerned – has too often been another form of import rhetoric. If post-colonialism means a kind of postmodern clearing gesture – cross-cultural identities, relative values – then Africa, as Appiah has observed, though shaped by colonialism, is not in any significant sense postcolonial (Appiah 1992). If postcolonial means *as a consequence of* colonialism – Shakespeare's *The Tempest* is postcolonial because it could not have been written "pre" Renais-sance voyages of discovery – then Africa has been postcolonial for over three hundred years. Indeed hybridism, cross-culturalism, the wink, the nervous condition, have been features in South Africa since the Dutch landings in 1652. As he records in his *Daghregister* (1652-1662) (Van Riebeeck 1952-1958), Van Riebeeck became increasingly frustrated in dealing with a trickster Hottentot who would not respect European laws of boundaries and controls. In consolation the Dutch commander at the Cape gazed inland, dreaming of riches in the mythical hinterland in anticipation, perhaps, of Sol Kerzner's hotel extravaganza, The Lost City, which exists in postmodernist splendour amid the poverty of one of apartheid's old dumping grounds. In short, Africa should not be about the simulacrum before it is about suffering.

What these examples of centre/periphery shifts from the West and Africa have in common is the collapse of the old binaries. Whereas the decade of the 1980s was characterised by unitary systems, we now have diverse modalities and rapid mobilities. Is South Africa, Africa? Certainly its shacklands are common to the Third world; its high-tech sector, however, has closer links to that of Brazil, or even the United States, than to that of Zambia or Namibia. To complicate the concept of the West, Europe seeks its identity in the past, the United States in the present, while Japan from the East is a major Western power embracing a future consciousness that is simultaneously a traditional consciousness: Western technology is experienced not as the decisive modern factor splitting science from religion, but as a contextual extension of spirit, a means of solving practical problems in an integration of the spiritual and pragmatic that is closer to traditional African belief systems than to Western Protestantism. In invoking the "modern", therefore, we should not continue automatically to invoke Cartesian dualities and the narrative of the Enlighten-ment. The severity or surprise of the juxtapositions demands comparative investigation while confirming what Holquist identifies as our anxiety about the possibility of comparison itself (Holquist 1996: 11). As he argues, comparative studies, which have always been connected to matters of identity in the nation, are currently experiencing a third successive shift from the hierarchical and vertical model of the Enlightenment – two European nations, two national languages, two great art works – to the nonhierarchical cultural mapping which began after the break-up of the empires and monarchies that had defined space before the Treaty of Versailles, through the decolonisation

process – the redrawing of boundaries after the Second World War – to the shattering of the Soviet empire in our time. The crisis has its challenges, of course, as well as its confusions: an opportunity to reshape stories – to reshape selves, communities, and societies – when all categories of sense-making are open to redefinition. The difficulty is to know not just what to compare, but what purpose might be served by the comparison. What kind of stories do we wish to tell?

The dilemma – at least, as far as South Africa is concerned – is captured in two fairly recent publications on "identities": *Transgressing Boundaries* (Cooper & Steyn 1996) and *Postcolonial Identities in Africa* (Werbner & Ranger 1996). Both books are selections of conference papers on the subject of identities. The latter makes the point that since the unbanning of the African National Congress (ANC) and other liberation movements in 1990, identities of white and black South Africans have been assaulted by an array of new local and global discourses, programmes, modes of thought, accents, and subjectivities. Under apartheid whites were given a political-racial identity which – coterminous with superiority – utilised to its advantage either its Western European inheritance or its long African rootedness. Within this political-racial identity, Afrikanerdom saw itself as culturally distinct from English-speaking South Africans, who were regarded as derivative of the British and, since they had rapidly become townspeople, having little connection to the South African soil. Thus there were also "urban" and "rural" identities, but conveniently when the Afrikaners and the English ganged up on blacks, the common white identity tended to be regarded amorphously as Western and middle class. Under apartheid, black people were ethnicised by the State into Zulus, Xhosas, Sothos, and so forth. While Indians and mixed-race "Coloureds" fell somewhere between whites and Africans, the State decreed a rural identity for all Africans: the journey to the city was by government permit. The reality of urbanisation, however, created in African communities both urbans and rurals so that while the majority ideal today might be post-apartheid nationals, many rural Africans cannot be sure where the power of the government – styled as nonracial and democratic – ends and where the power of the chief – local and ethnic – begins. When things do not go its way, the government has not been averse to stepping out of its nonracial role and calling the Africanist race card.

The latest attempts at a national narrative – to apply the metaphor of story-telling to the South African Constitution – reflects tensions between key categories of definition. The Western – now called Universal – principles of liberty and equality coexist with several localisms: language equality in the numerous languages of the country; the lingering possibility of cultural self-determination for groups; and a grudging recognition of traditional African authority. The issue of identities is obviously problematic. It is difficult to

delineate with any clarity, though, what might constitute the array of new local and global discourses that, according to the papers in *Transgressing Boundaries*, is supposed to have assaulted South Africans. Possibly the authors were too eager to imagine South Africans in the daily round living out the aspirations and dreams of popular media culture where, indeed, we have witnessed some spectacular Western/African cross-dressing. The Dali Tambo show, *People of the South*, on South African Television (SATV), provides a good example: Tambo, son of ANC stalwart Oliver Tambo, plays the suave internationalist (he was educated abroad) while, almost simultaneously, he anchors himself as a long-displaced son of Soweto. In designer Africanist chic he camps it up in interviews with assorted personalities, ranging from Mandela himself to stage stars in transit, all paying lip service to the miracle of the rainbow nation. It has become a truism in fashionable circles that since the collapse of apartheid's dictates, South Africans have become postmodernists in swift reinventions of themselves. While this is somewhat fanciful, it makes for good reportage.

The second book, *Postcolonial Identities in Africa*, is sceptical of what together with Appiah's *In my Father's House* (1992: 221-258) it regards as Westernised clearing gestures that either undermine or ignore local knowledges. A recurrent theme, which begins to ring of guilt, is that the West created tribalism and ethnicity, and that – as I suggested earlier – postcolonialism mistakenly identifies the end of an epoch by placing a break between "colonial" and something else, when in Africa no break really occurred. Although it is emphasised that there are no essential communities, several contributors hint at the existence of a better Africa before the imposition of colonial institutions. Both books have difficulty in accounting for South Africa as part of either Africa or the West, and it is interesting that in *Postcolonial Identities* the only contributor to focus on South Africa – Robert Thornton – upsets categories central to the entire debate on identities and nations by declaring that, while there is a vast literature on nations, nation-states, the state, ethnicity, and identity, most African countries today are countries, not nations, states, or ethnic groups (Thornton 1996: 136-161). By countries, Thornton means named areas of land demarcated by international boundaries but not necessarily possessing comprehensive state apparatuses, or – more to the point – coherent self-identities. South African identities crosscut one another in multiple contexts, for example, not in the hype of the Dali Tambo show, but in daily matters of expediency, recruitment, and mobilisation, or even in the various sets of company we keep. The distinctive feature of South Africa's layers of difference is that identities have always been either too fragmented or too solid to have permitted utterly bipolar conflict. Put baldly, no two sides – there have always been more than two – have ever emerged with sufficient followings to effect revolutionary change. Our transformation is a paradox:

despite division, difference, sectional loyalties, and so on, integration of the economy, even of culture, proceeds through the failure of alliances and allegiances to be anything but multiple, relatively inconsistent, and finally impotent. Currently, therefore, we live in willing suspensions of disbelief somewhere between the mimetic entity and the postmodern simulacrum. An exhaustion with strife demands attempts at civil co-operations. The Springbok rugby team – once the epitome of Afrikaner masculinity – is translated, accordingly, into the amaBokke-bokke. With Mandela sporting a rugby jersey, we all applauded our World Cup victory as a national triumph, while asking the victims of apartheid – those who felt the police fist – to temper their demands for justice with provision for the perpetrators' amnesty. We have limited means of achieving equity in any tangible way between those – the millions – who suffered apartheid's daily degradations and those who benefited from its racially biased privileges. But only we know, or should know, the fragility of our fictions. For the sake of reconciliation rather than vengeance our fictions have to be truer than the truth. In spite of the myths of nation, we are all urged, prosaically, to pay our taxes and help make our institutions work.

If South Africa is simply a country, common allegiance could perhaps be to the land; even here, however, allegiance is shot through with questions as to who owns the land. To return to the shaping power of narrative, we have available in our literary culture stories of several communities:[3] Afrikanerdom in the early 1900s created its nationalism in dedicated literacy and literary projects; Herman Charles Bosman in his tales of the Marico Afrikaner community, in contrast, debunked the myths of nationalism in its Voortrekker inheritance of sectional possession and destiny. On the Eastern frontier of the Cape colony in the 1820s, British, Boer, and Xhosa had intertwined stories of allegiances and betrayals, in which the Xhosa were divided among themselves between Christianised supporters of Ntsikana and African-millenarian supporters of Makana. There is a further overlapping and contentious story: were the missionaries who sought to convert the so-called heathen to the Christian way the vanguard of Xhosa destruction or, in their vast literacy project, the harbinger of Xhosa modernisation? In *Southern African Literatures* I suggest that the frontier in the 1820s represents a key literary moment that can be understood only through a comparative method, in which translation should have a central role. Instead of perpetuating the practice of separating literary texts – and, by implication, stories – along linguistic-ethnic lines, we are reminded that the Xhosa bard, the settler journalist, and the Dutch trekker, though divided by language, race, literacy, and usually sentiment, were all part of the same complicated, even messy, story. When British settler attacked British settler in the polemics of the frontier press – editor Godlonton's "perfidious" Xhosa versus emancipationist Philip's "noble Hottentot", or Khoi

– what legacy of English liberalism should we value today? Even the Afrikaner story has no seamless narrative. While Afrikaner nationalism found its mythos in the trek – Retief led Boers from the Anglophone colony to the hinterland – the eccentric Trigardt who would be inscribed as a hero of Afrikaner myth-making actually journeyed in search of trade rather than an exodus. Governor Stockenström, who was also of Dutch descent though in service to the British, asked in turn how people of different races, cultures, and languages might arrive at some modus operandi about coexistence. His writings encourage us to consider the trek not as the master narrative of Afrikaner destiny, but as a retreat from the complexities of social exchange.

Even though several younger Afrikaans critics have called for an end to the laagers, or barricades, of the past, my venture in *Southern African Literatures* into Afrikaans literary territory led to angry retorts as to how dare I presume to have the linguistic facility and cultural knowledge to pass comment on Afrikaans literature.[4] An African-language critic attacked me for giving too little attention to African-language expression, and a white English-speaking critic suggested that not only do I display bad judgement in praising certain black writers who (he knows) are poor craftsmen but that, perversely, I expect white writers to write like black writers and black writers to write like white writers.[5] I hoped I had complicated the dualities of "Western individualism" and "African communalism" and, according to the comparative method, pushed a previously ethnic narrative, or previously ethnic narratives, towards points of common reference. Such a shift from discrete stories to a continuous story, however, did not satisfy those who interpreted my having constructed a "grand narrative", a national liberation narrative, which in culminating in the destruction of apartheid had erased the contours of our many "differences", our many different stories, to end – in Fukuyama-style, as it were – at the end of history (cf Green quoted by Meyer 1996: 157; De Kock 1997: 193-197). If indeed this is what I had done, I had done it at a time when whites in South Africa, at least, were uncertain as to whether they wanted a national narrative: a narrative that was unlikely to lend privilege to their particular interests. Our legacy of enclosures is in danger of becoming a justificatory myth in times of rapid and often puzzling change. What I suggested, in fact, was that the South African story has been and should continue to be a massive translation project. Without ignoring the realities of dissension, the approach attempts to counter the divide-and-rule legacy of apartheid. The larger point, however, concerns the relationship between poststructural suspicions of the homogenising drive and the need for archetypal or allegorical explanation. It is a point that cannot be considered outside of particular contexts.

The Western poststructuralist, as Pechey reminds us, operates in a context of institutional hegemony and, in reaction or rebellion, may wish to split identities; the black South Africa, who has known the worst of particularisms

in apartheid's ethnic engineering, may be ready in contradistinction to risk whatever dangers are supposed to accompany the "plot" of universal humanism (Pechey 1993: 151-171). In seeking a South African story, the difficulty is to know not only what to remember, but what to forget. The nation – as Anderson (1983) argues – must get its history wrong in that the community, if it is to cohere, has to see itself as the product of a past that has conduced ineluctably to its present constitution: it must wilfully exercise a certain collective amnesia in forgetting the contingencies of the actual while favouring a more compelling and unitary teleological tale (Anderson 1983). Conversely, the dangers of amnesia are manifest in a society seeking to emerge from the tyranny of its past. As Marcuse puts it, to forget is also to forgive what should not be forgiven if freedom and justice are to prevail (Marcuse 1962: 162). In any South Africa story, then, detail should not be erased; neither, however, should detail be permitted to overwhelm the possibilities of reconstitution, or forsake the desire for trajectory. As should be evident from the argument so far, a tension – both problematic and necessary – characterises my conception of identity formation and, by extension, the writing of literary history after both apartheid and the Cold War. There is, at the one pole, a need for a hermeneutics of suspicion: a rereading of authorities, a questioning of positions, reputations, traditions, influences, as texts are set in contexts of controversy, in which terms such as major/minor, functional/ aesthetic, the West/Africa are held up for discursive investigation. At the other pole, there is a need in societies of sharp inequalities for a humanism of reconstruction, in which damaged identities are reassembled, silenced voices given speech, and causes rooted close to home in the priorities of the local scene examining itself as it examines its relations to any international counterpart. It is an approach, however, that could seem inconsistent with current (Western poststructuralist) approaches to knowledge.

Whereas *Southern African Literatures* leans towards – rather, yearns after – a theory and practice of reconstruction, the tendency in Western literary history is towards the deconstructive mode. *A New History of French Literature*, for example, turns from the continuous story of Gustave Lanson's *Histoire de la littérature francaise* (1895) to a multiauthored "anti-history" – a history that declines to be a story – and which, to quote Hollier, the editor, "has been written from both sides of as many borders as possible" (Hollier 1989: xxv). Similarly Bercovitch, the editor of the multiauthored, multivolume *Cambridge History of American Literature* (1994) saw it as the task of his writing team to switch from earlier "consensual" histories and make the best of what he calls a period of "dissensus": "what we have is a Babel of contending approaches" (pp. 631-652). What I wished to achieve was not a Babel of contending approaches, but an understanding of the linguistic, racial, cultural, and political babel that is southern Africa. While I hope to have

written from both sides of as many borders as possible, I have also felt compelled to shape the material into a narrative design governed broadly by democratic activities, principles, and values. The study measures African priorities against colonial practices, however, not to effect easy endorsements or dismissals of works, but as a means of arriving at greater human understanding in the functioning of society. I would deny the charge that the consequence of the approach is a grand liberation narrative. I can live with the comment – from an Afrikaans critic – that in decentring some Afrikaner icons I have written – the term is used pejoratively – a "moral" narrative (Coetzee 1996: 235). I should add that the point of the moral is that the southern African situation is too complex – the West and Africa, for example, have been involved in each other's history for over three hundred years – to permit choices of either/or. Finally, I take some justification in the fact that Hollier's *French Literature* ends up being more like the earlier Lansen "story" than one might have been led to expect (for all the formal discontinuity, a certain homogeneity is provided by the shared values of most of the contributors) and Bercovitch, despite wishing to make a value of "dissensus", concedes that in the writing of history, ideology cannot operate solely as negative critique, but must direct the search for a new coherence (Berkovitch 1994: 641). The interpreter of the culture is committed, accordingly, to exploring what Foucault calls "comparisons of order", in which the arrangement of differences reveals the general pattern, and vice versa (Foucault 1970: 51). The principle remains valid whether the narrative of the frontier gathers into its overall dimension its several local tales or whether the tale of the single life finds meaning in a national narrative. Whereas *Southern African Literatures* proceeds by the former method, Charles van Onselen's massive study of a sharecropper's life, *The Seed is Mine*, proceeds by the latter: Kas Maine's story cannot be understood – Van Onselen does not pretend it can – outside its national dimension (Van Onselen 1996: 51).

The principle applies also, by analogy, to the matter of identity; and, in illustration, I wish to end with a story. (The paper as a whole has the style of story-telling.) Whether it is a white or a black story, an Afrikaans or English story, a Zulu, Xhosa, Sotho, Tswana, or Venda story, an Indian or a "Coloured" South African story, a South African story or one of many South African stories, an African, a Western, or a universal story, is best left to individual interpretation. The tale concerns the young hero who, like all young people, must venture beyond the enclosure of the village. In his or her journeyings, innocence yields to experience. The story ends with either the hero's return to the village or the hero's immersion in the new environment. We are all familiar with the story. But because in South Africa we lack a shared heritage we are under an obligation – as the West no longer thinks it is – to retrieve our ancient folk traditions. In reminding ourselves of the humanity

233

colonialism and apartheid consistently denied the indigenous people, we are reminded that the stories of the earliest people on the subcontinent – Bushmen and Bantu-speaking Africans – are stories of human sense-making that deserve consideration along with any of the great mythologies of the world. We should not, however, erase the local peculiarities, and, accordingly, I offer two comparisons that might be instructive: first, the book used by missionaries in nineteenth-century South Africa to bridge the gap between the local inhabitant and Christian salvation, Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1965); second, Mandela's autobiography, *Long Walk to Freedom* (1994).

Just as we recognise Bunyan's debt to vernacular tradition, we recognise the "modern" conscience that sends Pilgrim on the road of trials and tribulations towards reward or punishment in the life hereafter. The African folktale, in contrast, has the pilgrim return, after trials and tribulations, to the family-centred village. For the traditional African religious view is closely tied to earthly matters: the protagonist is not judged by the Supreme God, but by fellow human beings according to norms of social behaviour. Whether this is an essentially African view or one likely to be found in any premodern tale is a point worth pursuing. A tenet of *Southern African Literatures*, after all, is to qualify the various categories routinely employed to separate Africa from the West. What happened in South Africa was that as early as the 1650s the indigenous people had to confront a colonial enterprise characterised by a modernising drive of messianic hope and apocalyptic vision. It is no surprise, therefore, that the folktale of innocence and experience has remained the founding text of many later stories, including Paton's *Cry, the Beloved Country* (1948), in which the symbolic journey from the village to the city is propelled by a sociological story that, since it continues to affect so many, may be identified easily as "the South African story", or at least the modern South African story. It is the story of urbanisation. Paton's country priest, Rev. Stephen Kumalo, returned to the village having realised sadly and wisely that the future lay in Johannesburg. In one of the first novels to step beyond the Manichean psychodynamic of apartheid, Zakes Mda's *Ways of Dying* (1995) follows in magical realist style Toloki's odyssey from the village to the shabby, vibrant squatter camp on the outskirts of a contemporary South African city where, in learning that our ways of dying have to be reassessed in the context of new ways of living, Toloki begins the task of healing the past. In his autobiography, *Long Walk to Freedom*, Mandela – another Jim who came to Joburg – tells how he remained in the city to become involved in political activity and to figure prominently in the narrative of oppression and liberation: the story that is bound to influence the teleology of any post-apartheid South African nation and to which Mda's Toloki owes his newfound "civil imaginary".

The story is neither singular, however, nor is it an entirely African story. The

ANC has had to transform itself rapidly from a liberation movement espousing revolutionary socialism to a political party defending a culture of human rights, and Mandela reveals his indebtedness to several not always compatible discourses that in both South Africa and the world opposed apartheid: liberalism, Marxism, Africanism, and, as a reminder that the young Gandhi forged his philosophy of soul power in the hurly-burly of resistance politics in South Africa, satyagraha, the strategy behind the ANC-led Defiance Campaign of the 1950s and the ideal – if not always the practice – of nonviolent solutions to apparently intractable problems (cf Brown & Prozesky 1996). After a struggle with his own early African nationalism, Mandela acknowledges that Marx helped him see things other than through the prism of race, even as his vaguely liberal education at the University of Fort Hare returned him to the age of Reason in his commitment to modern constitutionalism. But where Western liberal thought moves from the individual to the society, Mandela in a key Africanist revision moves from the society to the individual. To make further distinctions, the concept of the society is not the socialist one of a collection of individuals, but the communal one of unity at the centre of people's beings. With the family as the model of community, Mandela states unabashedly about solitary confinement that "nothing is more dehumanising than the absence of human companionship" (Mandela 1994: 321) and that his son's death while he was in prison "left a hole in [his] heart that can never be filled" (p. 431). Our determination – the "warrior" ethic in times of struggle – is qualified by our *ubuntu*: our capacity for sharing, understanding, and empathy.

The *ubuntu* is not nativist, ethnic, or millenarian, but entirely rational as it takes from Senghor's Negritude not the rhetoric of intuition and rhythm, but an analytical modification of Western capitalist-labour theory: a recognition that the crucial economic problem of the South is not to eliminate classes by class war within the nation, but to bridge the gap between developed and underdeveloped countries. The Africanism is social, not socialist, in that the character of the person changes in relations with others (Robben Island was a community of prisoners), and it is generational in that as we grow older in relational understanding we become more fully persons, more ourselves. The greater the sharing of humanity the greater our *isithunzi*, or *seriti*: our aura or prestige. Thus the dichotomy of the individual and the society is rendered invalid in the formulation that involvement in community with others permits one's self-actualisation as a distinctive person. With *ubuntu* recognised as a principle of conduct, we are forced to reconsider the concepts of Africa and the West. When the British government and IRA seek to resolve their impasse by referring to a "South African solution", Africa despite its material disadvantages has been granted a kind of moral advantage. Whether it can utilise Africanism as modern leverage remains to be seen, but in the story I have told – is it a traditional or modern story, a local, national, or international story? –

Africa and the West should not be set in contrast, but in comparison. Antithesis is sufficiently bold to anticipate synthesis, and the synthesis will have to engage in a fresh – post-apartheid, probably post-Cold War – dialectic of the local and the universal.

The story refutes what is still an image of Africa lodged in the Western imagination: an image characterised by irrationality, exoticism, ethnicity, and naive causality. Instead, the story seeks identity in cultural interchange: it understands that for longer than it can easily remember it has been marked by both Westernism and Africanism. If this complicates the myth of the nation – originary and unitary in memory – it acknowledges the complexity and diversity of the society. As we in South Africa try to define, or redefine, ourselves while rejoining the rest of the world, we might regard as an explanatory trope the protracted negotiations that in 1990 avoided the apocalypse. Several stories of wasted landscapes by Schoeman, Gordimer, Coetzee, and others[6] – have proved to be inaccurate predictors of the transition. Instead, black and white South Africans – from whatever linguistic-ethnic enclave – confounded the cultural stereotypes in displaying an intelligence shaped by either an inheritance of Western constitutionalism or an inheritance of African *indaba*. Or, perhaps Gandhi was hovering above the negotiation table. As I have argued, however, identity-making requires that we consider not only either/or, but also both/and. In illuminating our cultural differences, the comparative method should be equally alert to our challenging commonalities. At least, that is the lesson of this particular story. It is the lesson, too, of *Southern African Literatures*.

Notes

1. *Southern African Literatures* will be republished in 2003 with a revised Preface.

2. Shortly before the publication of *Southern African Literatures*, a project under the general editorship of Charles Malan (then at the national research-funding organisation, the Human Sciences Research Council) had planned a series of literary surveys devoted to the literatures in the several languages of South Africa. The length of each survey was to be determined by principles which were never enunciated and which would have had 80 000 words devoted to Afrikaans literature, 70 000 to South African English literature, and about 40 000 each to Zulu, Xhosa, and Sotho literature and, at the end, Venda literature with 5 000 words of coverage. The project did not achieve its original objectives and resulted in three modest surveys in English: Kannemeyer 1993; Ntuli & Swanepoel 1993; Van Wyk Smith 1990. See General Bibliographies (descriptive thematic, critical theoretical surveys (Chapman 1996: 423-427) for a comprehensive list of surveys on South African literature. For arguments in favour of

"integrative study" see Gérard 1981; Gray 1986; Hofmeyr 1979.

3. To pursue the several references to South African literature mentioned in this paper, see my *Southern African Literatures* (1996).

4. This was the tenor of a session devoted to "Writing Literary History" at the conference "Literary Studies at the Crossroads", University of South Africa, Pretoria, 20-21 February 1997. See also Coetzee 1996: 231-237.

5. S.M. Serudu at the conference mentioned in Note 4, and Crehan 1996: 16-17.

6. Almost a genre in South African literature, the novel of apocalypse predicted the end of white rule by violent revolution. See, as characteristic, Schoeman 1972; 1978; Gordimer 1981; Coetzee 1983.

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