The Republic of Letters after the Mandela Republic[1]

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Summary

Closely linked to the emergence of modernity, the nation has functioned for literature (and for the novel in particular) as a virtual space, a discursive formation and a mental structure in relation to individual histories and narratives. Thus the nation has served as a reservoir that writers can draw on to fashion stories of the nation. The essay examines the failure of South Africa to function as a unitary nation through specific moments in its literary development, arguing that literature in South Africa has been held hostage by apartheid – both in the historical context of settler oppression and more recently in the "Rainbow Nation" (the period following the election of Nelson Mandela as president in 1994). It remains a presence, a shadow of unpunished wickedness and inequality ignored. The essay ends by drawing analogies to other modern "literatures of the abyss" in which the nation, inasmuch as it does emerge, is narrated with a whimper.

Opsomming

Die nasie het – nou verbonde aan die verskyning van moderniteit – vir die letterkunde (en in besonder die roman) as 'n virtuele spasie, 'n diskursiewe formasie en 'n geestelike struktuur in verhouding tot individuele geskiedenisse en narratiewe gefunksioneer. Dus het die nasie gedien as opgaarplek waaruit skrywers kon put om stories van die nasie voort te bring. Hierdie artikel ondersoek Suid-Afrika se mislukking om te funksioneer as 'n nasie deur spesifieke momente in sy literêre ontwikkeling, deur aan te voer dat literatuur in Suid-Afrika gyselaar gehou is deur apartheid – in die historiese konteks van setlaaronderdrukking sowel as in die meer onlangse "Reën-boognasie" (die periode na die verkiesing van Nelson Mandela as president in 1994). Dit bly steeds 'n werklikheid, 'n skaduwee van ongestrafte boosheid en ongelykheid wat ignoreer is. Die artikel sluit af deur analogieë te trek tussen ander moderne literature van die afgrond ["literatures of the abyss"] waarin die nasie in sover dit wel te voorskyn kom, met 'n huilstem verhaal word.

On April 19, 2001 Njabulo Ndebele, the new Vice-Chancellor of the University of Cape Town, and a writer himself (noted especially for his short-story collection *Fools and Other Stories*) invited over fifteen writers and critics to consider the state of letters in South Africa after the fall of apartheid. To commence: three writers, the Nigerian-born Kole Omotoso, Brenda Cooper

and myself, were to make a brief presentation each lasting fifteen minutes; two discussants, the poet and teacher Jeremy Cronin and Ian Glenn, critic and professor at the University of Cape Town, were to respond. An undercurrent running through the discussions that evening was, broadly speaking, the relation of the present to the past, both in the politically constituted republic which came into being with the inauguration of Mandela as the first president of a freely elected democratic government on the one side and the republic of letters on the other which exists, presumably, parallel to the political republic, one interacting with the other.

Inevitably, much discussion in South Africa at the moment centres around notions of nation-building. Two novels to which I shall refer on occasion, Zoë Wicomb's *David's Story* and Zakes Mda's *The Heart of Redness*, both published in 2000, are much preoccupied with the projects of nation-building and the relation of the past to the present; both take up the question of how to make the transition from the past to the present; both reflect to what is continuous and what is discontinuous between the past and the present. Before I comment on these texts I wish to dwell at some length on the theme of national identity in order to indicate why the idea of the "nation" and nation-building weighs so heavily on the minds of black and white South Africans, and why the lack of what Pericles Lewis calls "the shared assumptions of national culture" has been responsible not, as some like to think, for a richly heterogeneous but a monotonously rent and schizoid literature[2]. In *The Postcolonial Studies Reader* Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin introduce the essays on nationalism by stating that

> [o]ne of the strongest foci for resistance to imperial control in colonial societies has been the idea of "nation" ... which has enabled postcolonial societies to invent a self-image through which they could act to liberate themselves from imperialist oppression.
>
> (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin 1995: 151)

The three editors also warn against the "pitfalls of nationalism", how it "frequently takes over the hegemonic control of the imperial power replicating the conditions it rises to combat" but also they point out that "settler colony cultures have never been able to construct simple concepts of the nation, such as those based on linguistic communality or racial or religious homogeneity" (Ashcroft et al. 1995: 151). This is particularly true of South Africa.

It is a peculiar feeling to have lived for more than half a century without living, properly speaking, within the bounds of a cultural space which may be described as a "nation". If, as so many cultural theorists have insisted in recent years, the nation or its emergence is the condition for the coming into being of certain narratives; if it is true, as one critic has ascribed to it, that the nation is

"a gestative political structure which the Third-World artist is very often building or suffering the lack of" (Brennan 1989: 4); and if it is true for yet another critic that "the national spirit, nation or nationhood, has been the bedrock for the emergence and shaping of the national literatures and cultural traditions as we know them today" (Zach 1996: xiii): if all this is held to be true, then the South African writer has these long years been operating in a manmade cultural desert which often blights all imaginative efforts by the errant anchorless subject.

Much has been written about the conceptual and aesthetic problems relating to how we think the "nation": the nation as virtual space, as a discursive formation, as a mental structure which can organise and give shape to individual histories; the nation as the very reservoir of native traits, customs and social practices that make up national traditions, which finally provides writers with the natural resources from which to fashion stories of the nation. Among some of the most recent and timely publications are the papers presented at the 1993 Triennial Conference of the European Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies in Graz, Austria, which, though not exactly revelatory, have much to say by recapitulation what is provocative and relevant concerning the intertwined problems of the national versus international perspectives in postcolonial representations. Most of the essays analyse the ways we *imaginatively* construct the nation through literary creation, especially through the novel. A useful supplement to these careful anatomies of narrative fiction, and how it comes to constitute the nation, is Doris Sommer's investigations of foundation narratives of South America in the book of the same title, in which she traces the connection between "ethical politics and erotic passion, the connection between Eros and Polis, between epic nationalism and intimate sensibility" (Sommer 1991: 24). In her deftly argued thesis, Sommer concludes that "[r]eaders of Latin America's canon of national novels have in fact been assuming what amounts to an allegorical relationship between personal and political narratives" (p. 24). While European models existed in the form of heroic or individual romances of Scott, Chateubriand, Rousseau or Stendhal, it was only when they were rewritten in such a way as to serve as allegories for the founding of the new nations of the Americas that they achieved their pre-eminent distinction: "To marry national destiny to personal passion was precisely what made their books peculiarly American" (p. 24).

The thesis is, of course, not new. As Kwame Appiah observes,

> it is a familiar idea that modernity makes national identity central to an individual identity. It is a slightly less familiar thought, that the identity of this nation (United States) is tied up with the stories of individuals – Representative Men and Women, in Emerson's formula – whose stories, in helping to fashion a

> national narrative, serve also, indirectly, to shape the individual narratives of other patriotic – nationally identified – citizens.
>
> (Appiah quoted in Riel & Suchoff 1996: 10)

But even more pertinent to our immediate task in South Africa are the analyses of David Lloyd and Seamus Deane, two of the most trenchant cultural critics writing on the discourses of nationalism, literature and the postcolonial state. Especially compelling for the South African critic are the parallels their work suggest between the Irish and the South African national projects of decolonisation and recuperation as well as the itinerary that they map out of that complicated transition from nationalism to the modern bourgeois state, which now seeks to "educe a moment of identity out of the disparate populations and individuals that constitute the people" (Lloyd 1993: 147).

South Africa is, of course, the best illustration of the principle that the state is not commensurate with the "nation". Max Weber made the point that a collection of individual subjects does not constitute a nation simply by belonging to a given polity (Weber 1994: 22). E.J. Hobsbawm's argument that "nations do not make states and nationalisms but the other way around" (Hobsbawm 1990: 10) is, to say the least, problematical; as he himself declares in the very next paragraph, one of the ways in which "nations" manifest their existence is in the very aspiration to establish the "territorial state". How then can the "nation" be the expression of that which it seeks to establish? The argument becomes even more untenable when applied to South Africa, which has been a modern state since 1910, with clearly defined legal borders enclosing its various communities, without ever developing a national identity or national character. Indeed, under the last regime, white South Africa seemed to have been always ready to back away from the idea of a single nation, with shared symbols of nationhood and cultural identity; away from anything resembling the project of Irish nationalism which, as David Lloyd has described it, was "the integration of a highly differentiated population into the modern nation state, a project which has always sought to transcend antagonisms, contradictions and social differences for the sake of a unified conception of political subjectivity" (Lloyd 1993: 5).

In terms of a personal history it was always possible of course in the South African *Bildungsroman* for a young Zulu, growing up within a web of interacting indigenous cultures, to live happily and without purpose up to a certain age, purpose being a state which is marked by awareness of the future; possible then up to a point to live in a sort of "tribal imaginary" before being inserted willy-nilly into a ghoulish symbolic order where true horror tales are told, where myths are encoded into legal systems, and racial fictions are fashioned out to calm or exacerbate a nervous condition; but in any case a system which could finally offer no support for the errant anchorless subject. At the level of

the symbolic order, the nation was only a rumour, requiring an extraordinary effort of the imagination to conjure it textually; but far from providing a place of sublimation and transcendence, the symbolic order in our literature was a secret place where curses were uttered with great ferocity against foreign invaders, where maledictory themes were plentifully there for the asking, and creative life was haunted by fear and loathing.

In the absence of a single national identity, South Africa's "house of fiction" has so far served merely as a "War Room" in which stories that are told within offer, as someone has put it, "a vision of nations thriving on conflict and an antagonistic conception of inter-ethnic relationships". The very anxieties of the liberal humanist novel are already a reflection of our general malaise, for inscribed in this novel, whether written by whites (Schreiner, Brink, Gordimer) or by blacks (Plaatje, Abrahams) is an ideology which, with very good intentions but very little support, attempts to will into existence the "nation" – an attempt therefore to fill the empty category of the "nation" with subjectivities which have yet to come into being. Similarly, in their embarrassment at the lack of a shared sense of nationhood, critics of liberal persuasion work hard to discover one. In discussing three early novels, Olive Schreiner's *Trooper Peter Halket of Mashonaland*, Douglas Blackburn's *Richard Hartley, Prospector*, and Sol Plaatje's *Mhudi*, Elmar Lehmann begins by asserting that his discussion

> will revolve, directly and obliquely, around the idea of a South African literature or, at least, around the idea of a history of the South African novel. Although I am fully aware of the problematical nature of the idea I do side with Ampie Coetzee and will look for traces of a distinct South African voice in the novels under discussion.
>
> (Lehmann 1996: 239)

Later, he admits that Schreiner's novel does not even accommodate an African voice in its narrative: "Despite all the indignation at the treatment of the blacks, however, the South African voice in Schreiner's novel is exclusively white" (Lehmann 1996: 241).

As everyone liked to prognosticate after the collapse of the apartheid regime, the election of the Mandela Republic was likely to create entirely new conditions for literary production in South Africa. In the collection of essays edited by Homi Bhabha, the coupling of the two terms "nation" and "narration" has importantly continued to frame discussions of postcolonial literature, especially the novel which seems to occupy pride of place in discourses of nationality and nationalism. Because of its unique powers of representation acknowledged by nearly all theorists of narrative, my remarks below have centred around the novel. If, as so many theorists have insisted, the "nation"

is the ground on which certain aesthetic forms of expression are enabled, the incubator of totemic narratives bearing the signature of a national consciousness; if in a kind of dialectical process national consciousness is in turn the soil in which such narratives find their true existence and justification, then though not exactly parentless, the South African novel has always been homeless, depending for its conception, shape, and readerly sustenance on foreign powers. It has been said that dynasties and monarchies have their epics, traditional communities have their legends and myths of origin, and new colonial societies have their romantic allegories of conquests and domestication of the wilderness, which is but another name for the exercise of colonial authority over colonised people; but until now, the principal expression of our South African literary culture has been a novel of refusal and resistance, apartheid its particular cross and its affliction. In the introduction to a collection of essays, *Black and White Writing*, Pauline Fletcher writes:

> South African literature has been held hostage by apartheid. That noxious system has given writers a subject of great power and moral urgency, while at the same time denying them the luxury of certain choices if they want to be taken seriously.
>
> (Fletcher 1993: 12)

The new South African polity represents literally "an unexamined life" but after it has been exhaustively analysed and narrated will that life be worth living? Following Fanon's account of how artists engaged in an anti-colonial struggle will create relevant structures of literary representation to suit the various stages of political development, we may conclude that what will now be superseded in South Africa is the era of the so-called "literature of combat" (Fanon 1990: 193); but, after the "literature of combat", can "better" narratives of the national Self emerge from the degraded past in order to inhabit this new republic which came into being so unexpectedly; and can a "new longing for nationhood" generate not only new narratives but also create a new public for story-tellers, the kind whom Fanon described as "formerly scattered" but who have now become "compact"? Do we even want our reading public to be "compact"? Or at least, to be *that* compact?

In Beckett's *Unnamable*, a text which provides us with some key metaphors regarding the process of narration, his extremely loquacious narrator speaks irritably of "ever murmuring my old stories, my old story, as if it were the first time" (Beckett: 1959: 305). The Unnamable then asks rhetorically: "is there really nothing new to try?" (p. 305).[3] His project is not only the discovery of new epistemologies, but a new ontological self which can shelter the speaking voice, for narratives can only issue from real historical subjects with real physical bodies, an assertion that may strike us as comic if not paradoxical

coming from a fictional narrator who simultaneously labours to find for his voice some physical embodiment which always seems to be beyond his access. "It is as well to establish the position of the body from the outset, before passing on to more important matters" (p. 306), he tells us as he settles down into a more comfortable position which will enable him to speak. This disembodied voice belongs to a nameless speaker adrift in a sea of modernist anonymity beyond the call of national duty, but the novel as nationalist discourse belongs to a collective that is the "nation" or Benedict Anderson's famously named "imagined communities", and, despite its pretensions to the contrary, such a novel has other priorities than the eternal quest for individual originality. Even a superficial reading of "Third-World" texts soon reveals one incontestable fact: the thematics of the master-narratives of colonial displacement and uprootedness rarely change over time, only the mode of the telling does. Indeed, the story seems to repeat itself endlessly in different places of the colonised world and at each location the story reads to local inhabitants as if it were being told for the very "first time". Moreover, despite the variegated nature of the world's cultures, what such reading soon discloses is the fact that the founding mothers and fathers of all colonised nations seem to bear an uncanny resemblance to one another. They "murmur" the same stories of national misfortune, they idealise the past, and they recite for their offspring stories of past heroic deeds never to be forgotten, as if they were being told for the very "first time".

The "first time" of South African literature is unfortunately so problematical that when, during a brief address to the 1990 Oxford Conference of South African literature, I dared to question the very existence of the object we were discussing, when I wondered whether in our political circumstance it was legitimate to refer to a South African national literature, my remarks provoked an outraged reaction from delegates determined to defend at all costs the existence of at least *something*. For the sake of convenience then, since texts written by South Africans have also to be classified and located somewhere in the Library of the World, we may refer to something called South African literature which sometimes resembles a national literature but surely is nothing of the kind, so long as we can hold on to the proposition that in order to qualify as such, this literature must – to borrow Simon During's formulation – "function as signifier for a national identity or heritage". Whether or not it is desirable for literary texts to be asked to fulfil such a programme, our literature has never performed this function. On the contrary, thus far South African literature has operated under the sign of a division so profound that only a complete overhaul of the social infrastructure could clear the ground for the emergence of a truly national literature. This may soon change of course. We can already see this beginning to happen in the sphere of sporting activities, perhaps because as an instrument of cultural expression the body seems

capable of instantaneous adaptation to new conditions; but in the domain of thought and creative imagination, new discursive regimes must come into being in order to cause to emerge anything like a national literature.

Typically that which passes for founding historical narrative in the literature of South Africa is always accompanied by its oppositional shadow, its double; white settler narratives are shadowed by native counternarratives; characteristically, the wound inflicted at Blood River becomes a double trauma: in a kind of ineluctable chain, the massacre of Piet Retief's men at Mgungundlovu only prepares the ground for a Boer victory which will turn the Boer massacre into a Zulu trauma when inevitable defeat follows. And just as liberal politics was an attempt to effect a compromise between the conqueror and the conquered, the major struggles of the liberal South African novel have always centred around the task of closing the ever-opening gap between two narratives. It has engaged in a tireless effort to bring together two radically opposed strands into a single yarn of resistance in which the descendents of white settlers unite with the descendents of the dispossessed in a common struggle against apartheid, and resistance to apartheid is then transformed into a resistance against all discourses of the imperial centre. Victory over apartheid, it was hoped, would create conditions for new narratives to emerge in which a unified subject of South African history will come into being bearing a new national identity. Which is why the South African liberal novel has always set such great store by the final outcome of the struggle against apartheid, even though it was always assumed that the outcome would be appallingly bloody and chaotic, as the late Arthur Nortje, one of our best black poets, once imagined it in his poem "Questions and Answers":

> I am no guerrilla
> I will fall from the sky as the Ministers gape from their front porches
> and in broad daylight perpetrate atrocities
> on the daughters of the boss:
> ravish like Attila
> and so acquire more scars myself
> laughing as I infest the vulnerable liberals
> with the lice inherited from their gold-mine fathers....
>
> (Nortje 2000: 374)

As we now know, the outcome was nothing like as Nortje's poem had tried to prefigure it or as the South African novel had imagined it in texts like *Time of the Butcherbird, July's People* and *A Sport of Nature*. The guerrilla "dropping from the sky" did not perpetrate any atrocities on the boss's daughter, and though it is now acknowledged that there was a "hidden hand" in the violence which broke out just before the election of the first democratic republic, it is

still a fact that this was a "black-on-black" violence which ironically left the white population untouched and immune. Nor did Nadine Gordimer's heroine, the Hillela of *A Sport of Nature*, manage to entrap Mandela into marriage, who instead married the widow of an ex-guerrilla and late president of a neighbouring state, thus defying the novel's expectations, surely a minor detail in a fictionalised history. All in all, the final outcome of this history of resistance has defied what has long been the teleology of South African fiction. I had once suggested in a review of Gordimer's *July's People*, that the climax to this Herculean struggle, lasting more than three centuries, might not in fact turn out to be a general outbreak of horrendous revolutionary violence but instead could conclude with a rather banal muted whimper, a finale in which the fundamental economic structures of society would remain largely uncontested. Ambushed by history, deprived of the moral and material support of the socialist camp by the fall of the Soviet Union and its satellite states, a negotiated peace between a lame government and weary liberation movements was probably the next best thing, but the South African novel of unbridled apocalyptic desire was equally thwarted in its secret longing for a cataclysmic, cathartic climax. The negotiated peace enacted what Doris Sommer, writing about South America, described as "a premature end of history".

Jonathan Steinwand writes that "[n]ations make use of nostalgia in the construction of national identity" (Steinwand 1997: 10). "The nation, like the individual", says Renan, "is the culmination of a long past of endeavours, sacrifice and devotion" (Renan 1996: 44). These statements underline by implication the importance of *nostalgia* for nationalist discourse. Writing of the attempts to reclaim or renovate Irish tradition, Seamus Deane states: "Nostalgia was the dynamic that impelled the search for the future" (Deane 1999: 146), confirming in a sense Hobsbawm's argument that the "nation" as conceived by nationalism, can only be recognised prospectively. What is so striking then about modern writing in South Africa is the relative, at times astonishing, absence of *nostalgia*. The nearest we get to expressions of nostalgia in black South African fiction is to be found in the novels written in the indigenous languages which attempt to reconstruct a past which is then experienced as irrecoverable loss.

In Mda's novel there are moments of ***nostalgia,*** certainly, but here even the nostalgia is experienced only as a borrowed emotion. There is an amusing passage in the novel in which the elders living in a postapartheid Xhosa community attempt to recreate the past as a moment of intense suffering under colonial occupation; as the narrator puts it, they wish to "linger in the years when their forebears were hungry" (Mda 2000: 83). However, in order to do so they have to stage some kind of psychodrama of a dance ritual borrowed from the traditions of the abaThwa (the San) of the interior. To re-enter the world of the ancestors they therefore organise a performance during which

they go into a trance and "induce death through their dance", a manipulation of faked emotion which is then portrayed by the author as both decadent and inauthentic. "The elders seem to induce death through their dance. When they are dead they visit the world of the ancestors. When the trance is over they rejoin the world of the living. Only the elders do not die to the Otherworld but to the world of the past. Xholiswa's father was one of those who were sent to the hinterland to borrow the dances and trances of the abaThwa that take one to the world of the ancestors" (p. 82). As one irate traditionalist later taunts his enemies: "Your rituals are not even your own. You stole them from abaThwa". Nostalgia is perhaps always inauthentic, an onanistic daydream.

As I have been at pains to show that nostalgia in South Africa, or attempts at what would pass off as nostalgia, is usually linked to the memory of pain. What is unusual about Mda's elders – except, of course, from a psychoanalytical standpoint – is that they should *consciously* seek to mobilise all their psychic resources in order to revisit the scene of the trauma. Though the past is usually the launching-pad of "nationalist discourse", so far as I remember, no one has ever wished to relive it. One is tempted to assert, perhaps too hastily, that pain can never be used as a source of nostalgia until one remembers the pleasure that generations of American slaves and their descendants have derived from blues music which is fashioned out of the memory of suffering. Surely, this is the moment, as Pickering and Kehde argue below, when "unpresentable loss is transformed by nostalgic recollection into a beautiful form".

With regard to the theme of nostalgia as a special ingredient in the creation of nationalist subjectivities, I found the essays edited by Jean Pickering and Suzanne Kehde to contain many valuable insights of special relevance, if only by contrast, to the South African situation, for the feelings of nostalgia they seek to divulge in the discourses of nationalism are notable largely for their absence from our literature. To generalise even further, I would say South African literature shows a certain incapacity for generating nostalgia for the past, a *pastness* which can be recreated regrettably as the moment of loss or state of vanished happiness:

> The unpresentable loss, painful as it may be, is thus transformed by nostalgic recollection into a beautiful form. The fiction so loosened from the historical constraints of its original space and time offers a consolation allowing the master-project of modernity to stay its progressive course by orienting itself in relation to the nostalgic image it offers as the compensation for the forgetfulness and alienation of its guilt-ridden conscience.
>
> (Pickering & Kehde 1997: 10)

Pertinent too, is the observation by Elizabeth Taylor that

> [l]iberal whites, such as the poet Guy Butler and the novelist Alan Paton, could celebrate the pastoral, but Can Themba and his black journalist friends were working out of their experience of police brutality, crime and tsotsi gangs on the streets, discrimination, drunkenness, and despair at home.
>
> (Taylor 1993: 101)

These writers, she says, found little time "in their conversations ... for recalling a romantic past" (Taylor 1993: 101). Since I am one of these writers, I can only confirm the truth of her observation. For very obvious reasons, from the artesium of black writers it is a rare production which comes to us not already scarred by the memory of tragic waste, cruelty and injustice. But for white writers too, nostalgia is a nearly empty category, without much content, even if one takes into account the idyllic constructs of the *plaasroman* (pastoral novel) which is now reworked, mocked or parodied by younger writers as a form of decadent pretence. One ought to point out that this absence of nostalgia for what elsewhere passes for an inconsolable sorrow at the loss of paradise has special implications for our literature. Instead of being eternally bathed in a pleasant glow of nostalgia, the past in South Africa is remembered mainly as a bad nightmare fomented by wars of conquests and resistance. Even for Afrikaner nationalism, which will later seek to dominate all other emergent nationalisms, the past leads not to some Eden idyll of boundless bliss and well-being but to great enmity and misery, to continual attempts to elude Compagnie (Dutch East India Company) rule at the Cape and evade later British administrations in the Colony, only to re-encounter them in a particularly brutal form in the Boer Wars. In South Africa, it was not the past but the future which was said to hold promises of happiness, just as soon as all scores were settled and the debts properly paid; but the promise of such a future, always haunted by the spectre of revolutionary wars, widespread violence and mayhem, did not hold much appeal either.

"Is there really nothing new to try?" Beckett's chatty narrator rhetorically asks himself. For South African writers this is all too pertinent a question, now that we are "free at last". Pauline Fletcher's answer is that "[i]t is too soon for post-apartheid literature to have emerged. Indeed, it is premature to talk about the death of apartheid, even though the laws that enforced racial segregation have been repealed" (Fletcher 1993: 13). That having been acknowledged as a general truth there are some indications of a fresh beginning, often merely in the themes chosen but sometimes also in the forms of representations. Regarding the thematics that emerge from the sudden collapse of apartheid, one which hardly merits much consideration since it was already so predictable that some writers were already producing novels in anticipation of such a move, is of course the shift of emphasis from *race* to *class* and the predictable emergence of a voracious black bourgeoisie hastily attempting to accumulate

as much wealth, as quickly as their white counterparts had done, a process inevitably accompanied by much corruption. Simultaneously, for the less well-off among the white citizens, the removal of the safety net of white privilege (such as job reservation laws) and its replacement by open competition for jobs, goods and services in the marketplace, means that many will sink below their customary standard of living into the common pool of the unemployed, pauperised underclass. For the first time in living memory, I saw in Durban a white woman sitting on the pavement, begging for alms.

Jean Franco says that in South America "the link between national formation and the novel was not fortuitous" (Franco 1989: 204). Through the novel, the intelligentsia would "work out imaginary solutions to the intractable problems of racial heterogeneity, social inequality, urban versus rural society" (p. 205). Not surprisingly, after the defeat of apartheid the "intractable problems" mentioned by Franco now constitute the emergent themes of the new South African novel of which John Coetzee's *Disgrace*, Zoë Wicomb's *David's Story* and Zakes Mda's *The Heart of Redness* are notable examples. Franco also points out that "the novel made visible that absence of any signified that could correspond to the nation" (p. 205). As I have already indicated, in South Africa the absence of any signified that could correspond to the idea of the nation is our almost generic condition, our particular affliction, bequeathed to us by an *insolite* history of racial division and racial oppression. Making a virtue of necessity, some left intellectuals have taken to celebrating this very lack as positive, the High Noon of a South African postmodernism, primly and piously resolved against all manifestations of nationalism as corrupting, totalising when not tantalising us. Wicomb is especially adept at diagnosing and then demonstrating the hollowness at the heart of the nation-building projects exemplified in her novel by Adam Kok and his descendants: insular, parochial, xenophobic. But as Regis Debray once put it, nations have a "zero point", the point of their origin. "This zero point or starting point is what allows ritual repetition, the ritualisation of memory, celebration, commemoration – in short, all those forms of magical behaviour signifying defeat of the irreversibility of time" (Brennan: 51). The narrator of *David's Story* explains:

> Oom Paulse was in a fighting mood. He started, as usual, at the beginning, where any Griqua would start. There was no other place from which to speak, he said, than from the beginning, when God spoke to His servant, Chief Fleur, and showed him the lost mules so that the people could be led out of the wilderness and turned into the proud Griquas they were today. Not a cobbled together, raggle-taggle group of coloureds who do not know where they belong, but real folk, a nation who had no need to claim kin with either whites or blacks.
>
> (Wicomb 2000: 130)

This narrow conception of the "nation", a display of an exclusive nationalism that is alternately cosy and corseted, at once sullen and reclusive, the manifestation of a supreme paradox of a *mestiso* people advocating a policy based on "blood purity", is of course exquisitely vulnerable to Wicomb's wakeful deconstructive wit. When David, a former guerrilla, fondly remembers the taste of *pokkenko* (his father called it Hotnos food) that he ate as a child in Namaqualand, his wife Sally is disgusted by the nostalgia in his voice (p. 26). "Do you remember how it's made?" she asks. Herself an ex-cadre of the liberation movement, she will have nothing to do with all that nonsense about roots and ancestors, "dressing up in leopard skin and feathers and bearing your tits for the nation". She screams at him:

> "Rubbish, it's all rubbish. Next thing you"ll be off overseas to check out your roots in the rubbish dumps of Europe, but no, I forget, it's the African roots that count. What do you expect to find? Ours are all mixed up and tangled; no chance of us being uprooted, because they're all in a neglected knot, stuck. And that I"d have thought is the beauty of being coloured, that we need not worry about roots at all, that it's altogether a good thing to start afresh."
>
> (Wicomb 2000: 27-28)

But like all attempts at deconstructing national myths, *David's Story* is haunted by the words of the putative Huguenot-Griqua ancestor, Madame la Fleur who in an earlier century had posed herself the question: "[w]ho was she to set herself against the making of history and tradition?" All efforts to shake up the ethnic ingredients that would constitute a South African nation are held up to severe scrutiny in *David's Story* and then smartly deconstructed in true postmodernist fashion. However, the problem will not go away. In the discourses of national formation the problems of national identity are also tied up with questions of the self. As David says: "We don't know what we are; the point is that in a place where everything gets distorted, no one knows who he is" (Wicomb 2000: 29).

After years of writing fiction that was firmly rooted in the present, responding to the daily offences of government policy under apartheid, black writers seem suddenly fascinated by something more distant: the history of colonialism, attempting to discover for each ethnic group the moment of its deepest trauma and the modes of its transformation into present relations. By comparison, we may refer to a review of John McGahern's novel *By the Lake* by Hilary Mantel; she describes the relation of the novel to the country of Ireland and concludes: "The dead are under the feet of the living, and it is their presence – the repressed, repressing generations – that makes people whisper. Yet the tenor of the book is profoundly anti-nostalgic" (Mantel 2002). More than any others that I can think of, Mantel's concluding words describe exactly

the feeling generated by two South African novels I have mentioned in the course of this paper: in Zoë Wicomb's novel the sense of something "repressed", of something left out of the account in our wounded attempts at self-creation, impels David to undertake an inquiry into the meaning of those "whispered words of the dying (that) lie in scattered syllables on the surface" of the battleground of recent conflicts; and in Mda's novel the sense, the weight, of all those "repressing generations" whose tortured history presses so heavily upon the minds of the living; and of course both novels are "profoundly anti-nostalgic". This applies to Wicomb more than Mda, whose alter-ego Camagu is careful to reject nothing from the past which can sustain his people in their struggle to live in the present. Rewriting Conrad's story of Marlow's journey to the "heart of darkness", the overeducated Camagu voyages to the "heart of redness" in Xhosaland; and if, in Conrad's novel, Marlow's journey reaches its destination under the horrific shadow of Kurtz, Mda's Camagu discovers at the end of all his travelling that the little girl prophet Nongqawuse is the concealed wound in the history of Xhosa resistance to settler rule.

Finally, it is important to note that because of our racial inheritance, even in this new era of a postapartheid society, black and white writers reflect different preoccupations in their choice of theme. While black writers remain somewhat stunned by this sudden change, seeming for the most part without a subject, a few like Mda and Wicomb have begun the necessary process of examining the ways in which our recent and distant past have shaped, and continue to exert their pressure, on the present. On their side, white writers seem divided between those who wish to explore their own sense of guilt about the years of racial oppression carried out in their name (a writer like Anjie Krog is quite explicit about this) and those others, suddenly quite numerous, who see the end of apartheid as the occasion for inventing black villains whose function is to serve as pawns in a game in which roles are suddenly, conveniently, reversed. Former white exploiters are transformed suddenly, and for the occasion, into "victims", and former black victims become, again conveniently, one suspects, the new "exploiters", never mind the fact that, as Pauline Fletcher tried to argue, many social and economic structures remain much the same even after the repeal of apartheid laws. Perhaps Susan Ritchie should be given the last word on this:

> Apartheid may be legally dismantled, but its form lives on. For the postmodern impulse to simultaneously deny subjectivity and yet freely articulate a position of power has done a great deal to keep power in familiar places within the postcolonial world.
>
> (Ritchie 1996: 151-152)

If it is too soon to speak of a postapartheid literature, I hope it is not too soon to begin to organise the "discursive space" in which narrating the new nation will be made possible. South Africa has achieved its liberation at a critical moment in world history when globalisation of economic institutions effectively means the taking away of some initiatives from national governments and local communities. Already South Africa seems to be serving as the dumping-ground of cheap (or expensive) pharmaceutical products from the so-called "First World", while providing an easy market for junk art and other forms of popular entertainment. With regard to cultural institutions, art schools, museums, galleries, publication and distribution of artworks, there is very little likelihood that funding these can be met out of government pocket. In the face of these challenges, both internal and external, the prospect of maintaining an aesthetic independence for artists seems at times severely and dauntingly limited. As for literature, we know what challenges it has had to meet during the long march to 1994, and with what meagre resources. We know its achievements against great odds, as well as its lapses, its theoretical failures and its near-misses. Tony Bennett, the British critic, probably had in mind cultural institutions closer to home when he called for a fresh examination of the whole "existing field of literary practices, institutions and discourses", but his analyses offer some useful hints for South Africans on how to think a future connection between literature and politics. According to Bennett

> [t]here is no ready-made theoretical position outside aesthetic discourse which can simply be taken up and occupied. Such a space requires a degree of fashioning; it must be organized and, above all, won – won from the preponderant cultural weight of aesthetic conceptions of the literary. And won not just for its own sake. The prospect must also be entertained that such a position, when properly fashioned, would significantly modify our understanding as to precisely how literary discourses and practices function as instruments for the formation of subjectivities.
>
> (Bennett 1990: 6)

In view of the turbulent history of race politics in South Africa, both the nation and its artists must have legitimate interest in such an inquiry: how literary discourses come to function as one of the tools in the fashioning of subjectivities and the shaping of identities. The fact that, to be truly effective, the operations of such discourses are never mechanical but must always remain concealed from the subject which invests them with strange hypnotic force and power and lends cogency to the literary activity and its critical practice in the process of shaping a new nation. What is all too clear in any reading of the discourses of nationalism is the continual disalignment between the nation and

the state. About Ireland both Deane and Lloyd remark, not surprisingly given the nature of its function, on the homogenising impulses of the nation state, which Seamus Deane characterises as a totalising ambition "[t]hat ambition was quite simply to provide a narrative predicated on the notion of recovery and redemption from ruin and oppression" (Deane 1999: 146). While nationalism finds fulfilment in the state, later, they claim, there will be rupture between the state and nationalism, when "the state rejects nationalism as an ideology that constrains it within provincialism and that also – importantly – refuses to concede to it the monopoly of violence" (Deane 1999: 192-193). Lloyd refers to the same tendency of the nationalist state in the wish to produce modern subjects who will participate in a linear narrative of progress

> where the individual subject, within the narrative which to function must be universally the same, is to be integrated first within the nation and then with "humanity" (the family of nations), so each individual nation state must be developed into increasing integration in the global capitalist market.
>
> (Lloyd 1993: 54)

In the postcolonial state of South Africa, two elements demand our attention: the politics of instant, enforced reconciliation, of which the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) is a notable example, and the continuing and vexed land question which seems unresolvable through the ministrations of the bourgeois nationalist state. Land reform and reconciliation politics seem for once in direct conflict, as I predicted at the Nation Writers" Conference in Johannesburg in 1991. Both the TRC and President Mandela's attempt to knock together the heads of the white farmers and the land-hungry peasants is an attempt to reconstruct the country in accordance with a new narrative of national transcendence in which "[n]ationalism, the idea of the nation, finds itself rebuked by the state which was its goal" (Deane 1999: 192). As we have seen, after much testimony, after the denials, the falsehoods, and the simple refusal to even testify by a former head of state, the TRC has come up with some bizarre "facts", but hardly anything we did not already know or suspect. At the end of the day, there was a "crime" but no "punishment". The truth of recent South African history can only be told in novels of the abyss worthy of the name of Kafka, Dostoevsky or Primo Levi.

Notes

1. This is a slightly amended paper first presented at a seminar at the University of Cape Town in 2001 under the title "Writers without a Nation".

2. In his book on the nation and the novel, Pericles Lewis refers to what he describes as "the crisis of nationalism" in the European states: "[t]he idea of the sovereign nation, whose individual members all shared common interests and cultural assumptions, underlay much of the actual working of liberal political systems. To the extent that some inhabitants of a given territory did not share, or were not seen to share, these common national interests and assumptions, liberalism increasingly came to seem incapable of reconciling their needs and interests with those of the national majority" (Lewis 2000: 9).

3. Hugh Kenner made the same point when he wrote "[w]hoever can give his people better stories than the ones they live in is like the priest in whose hands common bread and wine become capable of feeding the very soul, and he may think of forging in some invisible smithy the uncreated conscience of his race" (Kenner 1972: 39).

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