

Introduction: Special Issue

Aspects of South African Literary Studies

Part 2

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This is the second double-volume special issue devoted to Aspects of South African Literary Studies. It consists of nine articles by scholars working in this field. While the first volume opened with an attempt to delineate the field of South African literary studies and brought together a variety of essays concerned with post-apartheid literary institutions and forms of knowledge as embedded in literary texts and practices shaped by colonial and postcolonial exigencies, this volume is broadly concerned with issues of identity and ethics. These concerns, like those published in Part 1, emerged without any preconceptualisation, planning or directives to contributors. The publication of the essays in separate editions is no more than a practical clustering of research currently produced by scholars.

Part 2 thus opens with “Fabrications and the Question of a South African National Literature” which interrogates claims made by scholars in the recent past with regard to the existence of South African national literature. It seeks to provide a theoretical basis for present and future discussions on the phenomenon of a national literature against a discursive tradition in which the concept has been enlisted in arbitrary, and frequently imprecise, fashions. It considers the construction of national identities through literature and language by tracing the adventures of the term “nation” from ancient Greece to the rise of modern nationalism to account for how nations are constructed. In the light of this, it concluded that South Africa is a sovereign state consisting of a diversity of peoples, cultures and literatures. It cannot be said to either constitute a nation in possession of a national culture or a national literature.

The essentialist and constructivist tropes which are called upon to account for nations, are of course also pertinent to other more specific and localised identity discourses. This is evident in Pamela Ryan’s essay “‘College Girls Don’t Faint’: The Legacy of Elsewhere”. By means of archival retrievals and memory, the essay traces the inscriptions of Victorian codes of gender, religion, culture and militarism in the construction of identities in colonial agenda in two private schools which valorised “the fiction of Englishness” in the one instance and “Christianity” in the other, over local and indige-

nous identities and identifications to produce self-regulating young women with subjectivities and body cultures subject to the imperatives of a normative culture located elsewhere and reproduced locally by means of education to construct specific gendered identities congruent with those favoured by imperial culture.

With regard to subjectivity and personal conduct, the concept of “dignity” in the guise of bearing, deportment, demeanour and whatever approximates it is explicit in the regimes of gender socialisation of the two private schools which Ryan’s essay investigates, is raised by David Medalie’s essay “‘What Dignity is There in That?’: The Crisis of Dignity in Selected Late-Twentieth-Century Novels”. He explains that dignity is related to identity as well as to interpersonal conduct. In a reading of two novels dealing with the relationships between masters and servants, he reveals how in Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Remains of the Day* and in Nadine Gordimer’s *July’s People*, this concept of dignity is not treated as a transhistorical human virtue but as an ethical value embedded in social relations fraught with the inequalities of hierarchical societies.

Ralph Goodman’s essay “De-scribing the Centre: Satiric and Postcolonial Strategies in *The Madonna of Excelsior*” provides, through a reading of Zakes Mda’s novel, a reading of two forms of satire, that is, critical modes, which deal with the kinds of identities colonialism and nationalism, as two competing forms of hegemonic power, are questioned and disrupted. He contrasts satire in general with satire in postcolonial discourse with regard to their praxis and ethics. He finds that satire in general, for all its critical import, is characterised by ironic detachment while its deployment in postcolonialism is inscribed with ethical concerns with regard to identity constructions centred on colonialism. While Medalie’s essay explores the barriers to equality in hierarchical societies and Goodman identifies the “ethical” as the distinctive features of postcolonial discourse and writing practices, Marianne de Jong’s essay asks the question “Is the Writer Ethical?” with reference to J.M. Coetzee’s first five novels. The essay moves away from an entrenched conception of ethics as concern with morality to investigate it from an intentionalist perspective. Conscious of the New Critical censure of deferring authorial intention in the interpretation of literary texts, the essay focuses on writing as a self-aware and purposive activity involving choices. It is, therefore, not concerned with the evaluation of literary works in consequential terms, that is, whether the work is on the side of what is considered ethically “good” or “bad”. Nor is it concerned with aesthetics, that is, whether the work is formally “good” or “bad”. Important as these matters are, the essay steers clear of these evaluative coordinates around debates on Coetzee’s work, and for that matter much of the discourse on literary value in South Africa.

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If ethics, in literary terms, as De Jong, argues, is the personal and purposive act of writing, then investigations not only into the fiction of writers but also into the accounts writers give of themselves both as persons and as writers, would be a rich site for ethical investigations along these lines. Helize van Vuuren's "'Kuns en Argief' in die Suid-Afrikaanse skrywers-outobiografie: Karel Schoeman en J.M. Coetzee", reads two writers with regard to identity in terms of a primordial relationship with the "mother" and the struggle for individuation effected by "education" through language and reading in families in which identities were linguistically and culturally hybridised along Dutch, Afrikaans and English lines. While Schoeman's account covers his entire life in detailed Proustian mode, Coetzee focuses on his boyhood in a cryptic Beckettian style. Both biographies register the subject's awareness of the fact that it is engaged in writing as a means, if not of self-definition, then at least as accounts of the self as recollected and written, that is, retrospectively invented.

This writerly, or constructed, aspect of self-narratives is also confirmed in Louise Viljoen's account of Karel Schoeman's autobiography. The article deals with the writer's awareness of the hybrid nature of autobiography as genre. Like all biographical writing, Schoeman's text is a fabric of personal memory, fiction and history. If Viljoen's essay, based on an attentive reading of Schoeman's text, bears out the hybrid, that is, the assembled, nature of autobiography, this insight is equally applicable to historical writing concerned with the construction of collective identities. As such, and in the case of Schoeman, the construction of Afrikaner identity is seen as a historical phenomenon wrought in the complex processes of the local and global events of twentieth-century history. In signalling the end of Afrikaans, he does not as might be misconstrued, announce the end of a language. Rather, he signals the end of a specific, ethno-nationalist identity discourse associated with Afrikaans since the early 19th century until the demise of apartheid. In this sense, Schoeman's writing is a canny anticipation of the fate of all identity discourses based on cultural or "racial" purity to justify exclusive power in the face of diversity. It is both a critique of genre purity and identity purity. In this, as Viljoen points out, Schoeman's autobiography opens the way for critical studies of autobiographical writing across the literatures of South Africa, past and future and the hybridities which govern both the narratives and the ontologies of self-representation.

This is perhaps what Dirk Klopper's preliminary outline for a study on Arthur Nortje sets out to do. It probes the conventional ideas relating to collective identities in relation to assertions regarding Nortje's social disaffection and alienation as the result of social and political conditions in South Africa during his early life in South Africa and his subsequent exile. Instead of viewing Nortje as a victim, Klopper starts out from a position which

views identity as “a function of division and displacement”. He argues that Nortje’s personal experiences accentuated his awareness of loss as a constitutive aspect of identity. Klopper reads this in two poems at two crucial junctures in the life of the poet. Klopper’s thesis, Lacanian in theory, strikes at notions of a unitary self as an enclosed identity sufficient to itself as well as at the idea of individual identity as the expression of and continuous with community or other forms of collective affiliation.

This process of identification extended to two disparate historical situations in two South African plays, one by Reza de Wet and the other by Janet Suzman, which adapt, transpose and translate Chekhov’s *Three Sisters* and the *Cherry Orchard*, from crisis-stricken pre-revolutionary Russia to post-colonial South Africa. Marisa Keuris shows how De Wet, across two different cultures, but remaining close to the tone and style of Chekhov, obliquely identifies the fate of the main characters with the experiences of the main characters in post-revolutionary Russia with the trauma, confusion and loss of identity of the former ruling communities in post-apartheid South Africa in her play *Drie susters twee*. De Wet is cited in an interview where she makes this identification explicit by saying that she understands the Chekhovian characters in so far as “they are just like me ... and [t]oday the Afrikaner is living Chekhov”. While De Wet’s transcultural aesthetics seemingly follows the practices, discourses and representations in which bonds of identification are forged across cultures, Suzman, in *The Free State*, appropriates Chekhov’s *Cherry Orchard* as a vehicle for an explicit identification with the liberation of South Africa, across the same distances, for the purposes of a counterpractice of forging forms of identification across cultures with revolution.

Thus the disparate essays collected here all deal with matters perennial and pertinent to South African Literary Studies in the past and in its transition from one cultural order to another as well as to its postcolonial preoccupations. Whether concerned with ethics, identity, self-presentation, genre questions or literary tropes, they are all inscribed with a sense of a social, cultural and literary formation in the throes of change in which past practices, values and identities are being re-examined by way of clearing space for new identities to emerge under critical scrutiny informed by history.