

# Introduction: Postmodernism and Reading Literature

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## 1 Introduction

In this second special issue on postmodernism the emphasis is on the reading of literature. Hence, all contributions focus on literary texts: either to make explicit poststructuralist perspectives in some "older" literary works or else to trace the play of elusive signifiers in postmodernist texts. These different readings imply that there is a distinction between a poststructuralist reading of a literary text on the one hand, and the reading of a postmodernist text on the other hand. Such distinctions are covered in this issue by readings of literary texts ranging from an eighteenth century French novel to a Wordsworthian ode to Anglo-American postmodernist novels, to Afrikaans meta-fictional texts, thereby suggesting a wide literary scope. It would appear that these essays intend to advocate the value of European and Anglo-American theoretical frameworks for the study of literature, thereby attempting to alert South-African literary critics to the merits of new methodologies. In this regard André Brink and Ivan Rabinowitz, for instance, both choose to attempt rereadings of 18th century texts in order to demonstrate the advantage of a deconstructive strategy of reading over more conservative formalist or New Critical approaches to a text. However, the contributions are in a sense also specifically South African, in that they may be construed as implicitly defending the value of studying postmodernist literature in the South Africa of today, even though the relevance of such postmodernist texts as J.M. Coetzee's *Foe* or Koos Prinsloo's *Die hemel help ons* is being seriously questioned in the ongoing debate on politics and literature. It is a debate which is, amongst other things, being triggered by the increasing awareness of the difference between white and black writing in this country; a debate where the European heritage of white English and Afrikaans writing is often perceived as detrimental to the ideal of effectively addressing the situation of Africa itself.<sup>1</sup>

A superficial scrutiny of the contributions in this issue may initially create the impression that there is not really any significant indication of the above-mentioned "debate" in critical discourse, since many authors, in their meticulous scrutiny of postmodernist texts, would appear to be blissfully unaware of the increasing impatience with postmodernist writing being experienced by some writers and critics in this country. It is an impatience that especially concerns the perception by Marxian orientated literary theorists of the so-called frivolous self-reflexivity apparently being flaunted in postmodernist texts as a means to sidestep relevant (political) issues.<sup>2</sup> Although the critics who contributed to this issue seldom explicitly address the criticism levelled at postmodernism from a materialist point of view, it would be a misapprehen-

sion to think that they are not aware of the divergent opinions held in critical discourse; perhaps they are just more cautious about attempting politically to contextualise literary works in which the artifice of writing may very well serve to reveal the very artificiality of reality. In fact, in my opinion the real value of these readings should be sought in their disclosure of the problematical relationship between signifier and signified, so that, even in those instances where the choice of text (like Breytenbach's *Mouiroir* written while he was serving sentence for treason in a South African prison) would seem to suggest a direct relation between text and reality, the reading of this text nevertheless shows that it would amount to a distortion of its meaning not to heed its deliberate play of signifiers before trying to interpret it in terms of its relevance for a particular political or social cause. To concede that a proper consideration of the play of signifiers is essential for a proper understanding of a postmodernist text, does not, however, amount to saying that such a reading would exclude any assessment of the work's relation to a specific historical or political context. In fact, in Michael Marais's essay the question of politics and literature is channelled through the elusive signifier, in that the author seeks to disclose "the political potential of postmodernist strategies".

The contributions are also specifically South African in that three Afrikaans metafictional texts are amongst those selected for analysis in this issue. Because they originate from a South African context, one would perhaps expect the question of their relevance within a particular social and political context to be explicitly addressed in the analyses offered by Elize Botha, Hein Viljoen and Salomi Louw on texts by Breytenbach, Roodt and Phillips respectively. Although this question is not directly addressed by any of the critics, the analyses of postmodernist strategies in all three texts, do point, be it sometimes only implicitly, to the problematical relationship between postmodernist literary signifier and South African social and political signified. The elucidation of the postmodernist signifier is also addressed in more general terms in the essays by Michael du Plessis and Jean Lombard on two Anglo-American postmodernist texts.

It should be clear from the above remarks that the essays in this special issue take seriously the question of the reading of postmodernist literature. It remains for me to try and do justice to the way in which the question of reading is dealt with in each contribution.

## **2 Poststructuralist strategies of reading and a reassessment of eighteenth century texts**

As an example of a rereading of an older text in terms of a poststructuralist framework, Brink's scrutiny of Diderot's eighteenth century novel *Jacques le Fataliste et son maître* highlights the deconstructive stance of the novel in pointing to strategies such as a systematic undermining of the concept of the Author, the reversal of so-called substantial and marginal matters so that everything becomes supplementary, and a fragmentation of the story content so that only traces of the protagonist's love life may be glimpsed amidst the various textual interruptions prevalent in the novel. In what can only be

termed an adventurous rereading of Diderot's masterpiece the author first of all proceeds to indicate that certain typical postmodernist features may be discerned in this eighteenth century text: specifically in terms of "the obliteration of borders between text and extra-text, the situation of a story in a context, the exploration of the text as a process in which the reader becomes the accomplice of the narrator, and the ludic function of the narrator who replaces the logocentric notion of an Auctor". Besides discovering postmodernist narrative strategies in an eighteenth century novel, Brink also stresses the inevitable interdependence of poststructuralism (particularly deconstruction) and postmodernism. Hence, he takes issue with those South African literary critics who, whilst trying to belittle deconstructive thought, nevertheless do not hesitate to embrace postmodernist fiction, thereby apparently failing to see beyond the postmodernist novel's treacherous facility into its essentially poststructuralist conceptual framework. Although Brink primarily refers to literary critics who have apparently not (yet) matured to poststructuralism, his aside also implicitly involves those critics who reject poststructuralist theory for its apparent frivolity and lack of commitment and who consequently prefer a neo-Marxian or materialist framework for assessing the relevance of literary works in what would appear to be a crisis torn South Africa.

Brink subsequently argues that only in the 18th century one is confronted with a comparable situation in which the novel is supposedly a popular form not to be taken seriously but simply to be enjoyed. In his choice of a text, Brink considers two 18th century novels, namely Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* in which the act of *writing* is foregrounded, and Diderot's *Jacques*, which takes an *oral* narrative act as its point of departure. His choice of the French over the English text may at first strike the reader as a rather strange strategy, since Brink explicitly announces his intention to read within a deconstructive context, yet at the same time his choice of *Jacques* would appear to favour *speech*, thereby apparently negating the Derridean deconstruction of the Saussurian hierarchy inherent in the speech-writing dichotomy. However, it is exactly at this point that Brink seeks to introduce his thesis: beyond the apparent oral surface of the text, there lurks the encompassing phenomenon of *écriture*, through which Diderot, in a thoroughly poststructuralist manner, re-canalizes all speech.

Through his exploration of an 18th century novel, then, Brink seeks to explain how poststructuralist strategies of reading (in this instance what could be characterized as a deconstructive technique) may re-open a familiar text in an exciting reading adventure. Since postmodernist texts, in the author's opinion, are apparently acceptable to current South African critics, his deconstructive reading of an 18th century novel implicitly aims at extending the insights of poststructuralist thought to the study of all fictional texts, irrespective of their explicit postmodernist label. One could see Brink's reading of Diderot's *Jacques*, then, as an attempt to argue for an extension of the "suitability" of deconstruction as a "desirable" framework for the reading of literature. It is also, however, a comment on the notion of "postmodernism", which, according to the author, "should not be linked too exclusively with

historicity, as that would obscure important parallels between this form and its early predecessors”.

Like Brink, Ivan Rabinowitz also rereads an “older” text, namely Wordsworth’s celebrated “Immortality Ode” in terms of deconstructive perspectives, thereby not only making explicit the deferral inherent in the poem’s language in its insistence on the repetition of “endless imitations”, but also surprisingly pointing to the “Romantic irony inherent in contemporary theory”. Contrary to Brink’s choice of text however, which displays such remarkable postmodern narrative strategies as to practically cry out for the type of reading Brink has subjected it to, Rabinowitz attempts a deconstruction of a well-beloved Wordsworthian ode that would appear (at least from a typical New Critical point of view) to have very little affinity with such familiar postmodernist strategies as relativism and fragmentation. Nevertheless, Rabinowitz’s reading of the “Immortality Ode” gradually discloses the very “disruptive solipsistic procedures of the poem” and, accordingly, it has to take issue with New Criticism’s onesided obsession with Wordsworth’s so-called childhood “experience” of visionary plenitude. Contrary to well-established New Critical practice, then, Rabinowitz convincingly argues for a reading that would “seek to reveal the elisions and distortions inherent in the notion of ‘experience’ itself”. Such a reading would, in the opinion of the author, not be at “enmity with joy”, in that it would be Wordsworthian “in a subjective meditative and reflective sense”. Ingenuous as this reading may appear, Rabinowitz is, however, not merely concerned with disclosing unexpected angles in a Wordsworthian poem viewed through poststructuralist spectacles. Rather, he is also subtly twisting New Critical vocabulary so as to reveal its underlying postmodernist overtones. Hence, he does not dispute the beloved New Critical paradoxes to be discerned in the poem, but he shows that New Criticism has failed to detect their essentially postmodernist character: “. . . these paradoxes are subservient to a series of larger paradoxes, and . . . this series, in turn, has its origins in Wordsworth’s self-reflexive understanding of the acquisition of language”. Like Brink, then, Rabinowitz implicitly also takes literary critics of a “conservative” mould to task – only in this case the comments are directed to the teaching of English literature whereas Brink’s remarks were aimed at his fellow Afrikaans critics.

### 3 Reading Afrikaans metafictional texts

Although Brink and Rabinowitz have different points of departure in their scrutiny of older texts, both critics argue that a poststructuralist framework is essential for a proper understanding of those typically disruptive features by which literary texts seemingly attempt to undermine reader expectations or to question critical observations regarding both the nature of language and the notion of representation in literature. If these readings by Brink and Rabinowitz convincingly bear witness to the fact that so-called postmodernist strategies are by no means restricted to what would appear to be the latest trend in fiction, but that they may indeed also be discerned in such 18th century or

Romantic texts as a novel by Diderot or an ode by Wordsworth respectively, the analyses offered by Elize Botha, Hein Viljoen and Salomi Louw of recent Afrikaans metafictional texts clearly show how, according to the categorization outlined by Hutcheon (1980), metafictional strategies are either explicitly thematized or else implicitly actualized in postmodernist texts.

However, if Elize Botha's careful disclosure of the self-conscious writing exemplified by Breyten Breytenbach's *Mouir* seems to confirm Hutcheon's (1980) observation of the reader's greater responsibility as a co-producer of meaning in those texts where metafictional strategies are actualized rather than thematized, this is due more to Botha's exceptional talent as a creative reader, than to her allegiance to poststructuralist thought or even her consciousness of postmodernist strategies. Indeed, this perceptive reading of a metafictional text by a critic who has never made any secret of her "conservative" allegiance to what to her still presents itself as the "sound" discipline of close reading, almost seems in its turn to offer an ironic commentary on the "exposure" of the alleged ignorance of so-called "traditionalists" exemplified by the deconstruction of (the readings of) eighteenth century texts attempted by Brink and Rabinowitz. Instead of a poststructuralist perspective on an older text, then, one is apparently confronted in Botha's study by a "conservative" reading of a postmodernist text.

Elize Botha chooses a particularly challenging text by the internationally acclaimed Afrikaans poet Breyten Breytenbach in which the self-conscious activity of artistic creation is already apparent from the drawings done by the author on both the front and back covers of the Afrikaans paperback edition, whilst preoccupation with the writing act is explicitly stated in the subtitle as "... mirrornotes on a novel". Reader expectations are immediately aroused by such a choice, since this particular text by Breytenbach is interesting for a number of reasons. Firstly, Breytenbach is renowned for his poetry rather than his prose. Secondly, he apparently wrote this text while serving part of his sentence of nine years in a South African prison for alleged acts of treason and terrorism (Botha notes that the dates of 1975 to 1982 given at the end of the text correspond to the actual time Breyten spent in prison). Thirdly, according to Botha, this particular text subverts the "tradition" of Afrikaans writing. One might perhaps deduce that both poststructuralist and political principles would have shaped Breytenbach's text: on the one hand, his writing in prose instead of poetry, as well as his illustrations on the front and back covers of the book, might be an indication of the fuzziness of the borders between (literary) texts; on the other hand, his composition of the text whilst being a prisoner of the system might be construed as an attempt at a political statement. Given the ongoing debate on politics and literature in recent South African critical discourse with regard to the relevance of predominantly white postmodernist writing in a revolutionary torn South Africa, one would perhaps expect a critic to situate Breytenbach's text within its political and historical space. However, in spite of her awareness of the circumstances surrounding the writing up of the 39 fragments making up Breytenbach's text, Elize Botha is not the kind of critic to be pressurized into any kind of premature ideological "statement" – at least not before having painstakingly

gone about the business of reporting her perceptions of the text as an extremely adept reader.

In observing that Breytenbach's *Mouir* (1983) – with its underlying connotations of “place in which to die”, “mirror” and “recollections” – may be construed as “... a literary event within the tradition of the Afrikaans novel”, Botha quotes Eliot on tradition in terms of a historical sense that “... involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence ...”. Viewed against the background of Afrikaans literature since its inception, Botha's “historical” situating of the text is, then, mainly concerned with its subversion of novelistic conventions and hence with its “postmodernistic” character. Put another way, one could say that Botha's reading of the text shows that the very subversion of older texts often thematized in self-conscious fiction should be analysed as a historical phenomenon. Hence, it is necessary first to give a reconstruction of what could be termed “the Afrikaans novel, circa 1983, at the publication of Breytenbach's *Mouir*”. In tracing the novel's development in Afrikaans, the author singles out the stages of romantic, realist and so-called neo-realist fiction. Especially the latter merits attention, since in the postromantic era a new kind of realism, the so-called intermingling of fact in fiction sometimes called “faction” produces writings in which the grimness of a South Africa tormented by unrest is reported in “documents” rather than stories. It is against such a backdrop that the publication of Breytenbach's *Mouir* in 1983 is foregrounded by its apparent subversion of realist and neo-realist forms of writing in Afrikaans literature.

In her subsequent “close” scrutiny of the text (the choice of Eliot as an authoritative source may be construed as deliberate in this regard) the author is primarily concerned with analysing typical postmodernist strategies which seem to subvert the “tradition” of the Afrikaans novel – for example, the illustrations on both front and back covers, the choice of sub-title, the motto, the use of both Afrikaans and English in the text, the fragmentation caused by the 39 titles in the contents apparently pertaining to loose fragments rather than a coherent story, the a-linear presentation of faceless “figures” rather than fully-fledged characters throughout the text. The perceptive analysis of subverting elements in each of these components bears witness to Botha's creative enacting of the function of co-producer of meaning demanded from the reader of a postmodernist text. In her ingenious “reading” of the author's drawings, for instance, she demonstrates her creative-critical ability by elucidating the possible meaning connotations of these drawings and their implications for the reader's understanding of the written text. She alerts one to the contrast between an “outside” and an “inside” suggested by the (prison)bars behind which the head of a horse and the head of a man may be discerned on the front and back covers respectively. It would have been only too easy to interpret these pictures in terms of imprisonment alone, thereby conforming to the demand for situating the text politically within its South African context. However, Botha's consciousness of the responsibility of the reader to assign meaning to the text becomes evident when she refuses to succumb to an “easy” political interpretation at this stage of her reading of Breytenbach's

text, focusing instead on the fact that the headless figures against the colourless wall on the "inside" are "eyeless" and subsequently offering the ingenious suggestion that the only eyes in this picture are the eyes of the reader who has the (privileged) task of being able to look beyond the headless figures into the unrestricted space only partially to be glimpsed through the barred window.

This consciousness of the importance of the visual aspect suggested by the strange, definitely "unrealistic" drawings, enables Botha to discern two possible decodings of the subtitle. Whereas Breytenbach opts for "mirrornotes of the novel" in the English version, a closer translation of the Afrikaans "bespieëlende notas van 'n roman" would have been "speculative notes towards (or pertaining to) a novel". However, according to Botha, both meanings are prevalent in the Afrikaans sub-title, thereby suggesting two possibilities – either these notes presuppose or predict a novel in the process of production, or else there would appear to be a novel "behind" these notes – in the latter case (although Botha admittedly does not say so explicitly) probably linking up with the promise of a larger world to be glimpsed through a barred window. This amounts to saying that Botha shows how the subtitle to *Mouiroir* could either be construed as reflection on a novel or else be perceived as itself a reflection, be it in fragments only, of a larger unity. Although the author does not capitalize on these shrewd observations, the first possibility would, of course, bear witness to the text's typically postmodernist preoccupation with the means of its production, whereas the second could be construed as an indication of a typically deconstructive notion that only "traces" of a so-called "larger unity" could ever be represented.

Be that as it may, in her subsequent systematic scrutiny of aspects of the text, Botha consistently tries to recapture the impressions the text would, at the time of its publication in 1983, have made on a "probable" informed reader of Afrikaans literature such as herself. She points out that a process of defamiliarization not only concerns the (frustrated) expectations of the reader but that it also involves the very foundations of the Afrikaans novel. In this regard, one of the most prominent subversive strategies employed in the text seems to be the collection of 39 apparent "independent" texts seemingly haphazardly combined in a series devoid of any chronological or logical principles, thereby deliberately undermining the basic requirements for a coherent story. Perhaps this is why, contrary to the expectations of the illustrations in the "prelude" to the text, Botha is able to draw attention to the fact that less than half of these texts deal with themes that are related to imprisonment, desolation, death, torture and suffering. Instead, imaginative or remembered landscapes in which a variety of figures move about in a process of continuous shifting and change, predominate. Botha points out that these texts, according to the "story" *dinsdag*, are in fact presented as projections and products of the imagination and should therefore be read as essays "on the use of poetry".

With this statement Botha not only makes explicit the text's metafictional character, but she implicitly also defends her particular reading of the text – not as a clearcut political statement (the "history" of its conception notwith-

standing) but rather as “mirror images” in which a few reflections on the art of writing may be imperfectly glimpsed. The subversion of the neo-realist tradition in Afrikaans, which was prompted by the intention to “report” on an ugly reality, thus prevents the reader of Breytenbach’s text from perceiving his text as a direct statement on reality. Rather, it seems, by its own fragmented nature, to implicitly “mirror” the fractured or “splintered” state of the “outside” world itself. This “unrealistic” effect is, of course, enhanced by the strange figures moving through the imagined landscapes – figures with strange names, often faceless (like the drawings on the front page) and denied any perceptible “identity” by the complete lack of development of “character” and their continuous changing of names and roles. Botha observes that the author seems reluctant to “commit” himself fully and that the name Breytenbach itself appears no less than four times in the texts, each time spelt in a different way, probably to suggest different pronunciations. These shrewd observations on the “persona” in Breytenbach’s text point to the notion of a splintered subject prevalent in poststructuralist thought. It also preempts both Hein Viljoen’s discussion of the metamorphoses of Fellatio in Dan Roodt’s *Sonneskyn en Chrevolet* and Salomi Louw’s analysis of the transformations of the clown in Fransi Phillip’s *77 stories*.

As should be evident from the foregoing remarks, Elize Botha has continuously viewed the subversive aspects of Breytenbach’s text against the “tradition” of the Afrikaans novel, thereby stressing its unique position within the canon of Afrikaans romantic, realist and neo-realist novels. In my opinion she has also achieved a convincing explication of the text’s self-conscious foregrounding of reflection on its production, without trying to situate her reading within a poststructuralist framework (like André Brink and Ivan Rabinowitz have done) and, in fact, even without giving much indication of being familiar at all with theoretical studies on the strategies employed in metafictional texts. It would appear that Elize Botha, through her own creative reading, is able to arrive at an understanding of what André Brink would probably have labelled the “deconstructive” overtones of the text, but without thereby having committed herself to the philosophy of deconstruction. Witness, in this regard, her concluding observations on Breytenbach’s writing: “. . . this is a poetry of metamorphosis, of movement – though no linear movements, but rather a kind of flowing; a poetry of possibilities, of ever changing relationships; it is . . . poetry of the labyrinth”.<sup>3</sup>

The fragmentary structure of the Breytenbach text could, in Hutcheon’s (1980) categorization, probably be distinguished as an actualization of the metafictional character of the text; and through her perceptive tracing of the “labyrinth”-structuring of the text, Elize Botha has convincingly assigned meaning to the text’s actualization of self-reflexivity. However, Botha alerts us to the fact that the production of the text is also explicitly *thematized* in that the meaning of the subtitle is evoked throughout the 39 fragmentary imaginative “documents” – writing is to be construed as “mirroring” or reflection; but the traditional relation between reality and reflection is reversed in that reality emerges as a reflection of the mirror image; which suggests that reality is a product of writing, or, that its representation is



necessarily channelled through its "reporting" in imaginative writing.

If Elize Botha's reading seems to intuitively arrive at an elucidation of postmodernist features in a metafictional text, Hein Viljoen's essay not only offers a shrewd reading of Dan Roodt's text *Sonneskyn en Chevrolet* (1980), but it also indulges in a selfconscious exploitation of postmodernist notions in an attempt to come to terms with his own subjectivity. In fact, the title to his essay not only repeats the metaphor of *mirror* because it is one of the central concepts of postmodernism, but it also deliberately evokes Botha's title in order for the writer to suggest a "parasitical" relationship with Botha's exploitation of the mirror image in Breytenbach's text. However, Viljoen's situating of the mirror image within the notion of representation in postmodernism may be seen as complementary to, rather than parasitical on, Botha's observations. The author indicates that divergent notions on the nature of literature are captured in the concept of the text as a "mirror". Whereas the realist notion would emphasize a neutral reflection of reality in art, the postmodernist notion not only stresses the narcissistic element inherent in a contemplation of the image of the "self" in a mirror, but it also draws attention to the effects of duplication and multiplication that may result from a repetition of reflections in a number of mirrors. Viljoen correctly notes that it is the postmodernist notion of narcissism that gives rise to criticisms of its being meaningless, because it is purely self-referential, because it indulges in reflections on the writing act itself, and because it inevitably falls prey to solipsism. Without directly referring to the recent questioning of the ability of postmodernist writing to arrive at relevant statements on reality, Viljoen isolates three problem areas in this regard: (i) the nature of the process of reproduction; (ii) the truth (cognitive content) of the reproduction, its so-called correspondence to the facts; and (iii) the function of the sender and receiver of the reproduction.

In order to address the problem of representation in postmodernist literature, Viljoen uses the mirror image to trace the views on the relation between nature and art from Plato to Gombrich. Various roles are enacted in typical dominant representational frames in Western culture, such as that of hunter, prey and spectator (later photographer), which could be translated into male, female, voyeur, or also into critic, text and reader. However, in the modern technological world "nature" has turned into "social reality", especially in the form of a hyper-reality filled with artificial reproductions (like Disneyland for instance). Translated into literary terms the problem of representation becomes the tricky relationship between language/narration and experience, a relation which is magnified in postmodernist literature in that the deliberate foregrounding of the artifice of writing stresses the fact that literature can offer no more than representations of representations, thereby problematizing any discernible relation of the text to "experience" or reality.

Elize Botha has demonstrated this problematical relationship between art and reality in her scrutiny of Breytenbach's text, in that she characterized most of the fragmentary "documents" as being imaginary in character and therefore not directly dealing with the author's real experiences, even though the text was composed during the actual time Breytenbach spent in prison.

Viljoen observes that the postmodernist preoccupation with the artificial production of texts intensifies the view that art is unable to present reality in a truthful manner. He himself would like to believe that literature is worthwhile, that some (mostly covert) significance and goal may be discovered in it and that it possesses a cognitive value.

However, to maintain that literature is a representation of reality in this sense entails much more than a mere truthful production or reflection. In his view literature captures something of the meaning, of the typical, even of the "truth" of life. Whether this is still true of postmodernist texts is a question he then proceeds to investigate with reference to Dan Roodt's *Sonneskyn en Chevrolet* (1980) – a book that has since been banned in South Africa, apparently because it was offensive to the religious, moral and political norms of a section of the population. Although Viljoen does not mention this, the very fact that the book has been banned of course points to a particular effect it must have had on the "reality" of its readers. Surprisingly, the question of banned postmodernist texts has not yet been addressed in the debate on politics and literature – a question that becomes especially poignant in the light of the international outcry over Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses*. In this regard, it strikes one as strange that Eliza Botha ignores the Roodt "novel" in her historical situating of Breytenbach's "documents of the imagination". Since Roodt's text, which was published three years before Breytenbach's, should have prepared a reader familiar with Afrikaans literature (as Botha defines her position as an informed reader) for the kind of subversion of neo-realist effects prevalent in Breytenbach's *Mouir*, one wonders whether Botha's "silence" is merely an oversight, or whether the fact that *Sonneskyn en Chevrolet* was banned could have influenced its "absence" in her contribution.<sup>4</sup>

According to Viljoen, Roodt's text displays almost a manual of postmodernist techniques. The reader is confronted with an absurd midget-world on the "absurd" side of colour laws. There is no story thread but rather an incomplete assimilation of various fragments of stories hardly relating to one another. The main character is a dwarf called Fellatio, who is sometimes shot dead, at other times killed with a hammer, then again bundled into prison, at another time killed in an explosion (possibly brought about by his own yelling, or perhaps caused by two German tourists/terrorists), just to be taken to a circus by the narrator after all of this. Viljoen cites this example to point to the lack of any logical development in the story; it also illustrates the author's power to do anything with his characters, thereby at the same time stressing the very artificiality of the writing process.

The illogical stringing together of fragments is, however, functional in that various stories, like the banal story of Fellatio, or the master stories of Marxism and science, create a series of shifting contexts in which the fragments are continuously relativized, ironized or commented on in terms of one another. In a typically deconstructive manner the borders between fact and fiction, author and character or between different narrative levels are transgressed. Self-evidently, the author thereby deliberately problematizes the relation between text and reality. Nevertheless, Viljoen shrewdly observes

that all situations in the book may be reduced to a series of variations and permutations of (violent) sexual relations – the representation of the rugby match as a collective sexual act being a particularly clear case in point. The linking of sex and violence moreover affirms the so-called typical Western representational frame of hunter-prey-spectator which is translated into various permutations in which the reader is, however, always present, be it sometimes as a real voyeur in the deliberate pornographic representations of the male-female-spectator triad in Roodt's text.

The importance of representations and the often banal and deliberately offensive ironization of, amongst other things, the writing act, are questioned by Viljoen in the concluding paragraph of his essay. Taking a leaf from postmodernist writing, he reflects on his own essay by asking:

What function does this essay have in the production of my own subjectivity?  
Do I have to constitute myself as subject by subjecting something, even if it be only a text?

He concludes by maintaining that the phantasmagorical representations in Roodt's text may be construed as, on the one hand, giving rise to a criticism of the above-mentioned notion of subjectivity and, on the other hand, suggesting a rejection of man's unbridled representational ability. With that, Viljoen remarks, the work "says" a lot.

Not unlike the reading by Elize Botha, Hein Viljoen convincingly fulfills the role of creative co-producer of meanings in his brilliant analysis of a text where postmodernist techniques are actualized rather than explicitly thematized. However, Viljoen goes beyond perceptive revelation of the text's meaning to a questioning of the representational excesses flaunted in postmodernist writing. This is an attempt to account for the relevance of postmodernist writing in subjective rather than general socio-political terms. As such it "says" a lot about the interaction between artificial text and creative reader.

In a sense Salomi Louw's reading of *sewe & sewentig stories oor 'n clown* (1985) by Fransi Phillips affirms and complements the readings of both Elize Botha and Hein Viljoen. Perhaps this comes about as a result of the central functioning of the imaginary (Breytenbach), the phantasmagorical (Roodt) and the fantastic (Phillips) in all three works selected for analysis. Indeed, what these specimens of Afrikaans metafictional texts have in common appears to be the desire to defamiliarize the representation of reality, thereby perhaps forcing the reader to rethink his notion of "the world outside", the free space that was only visible through the slits between the prison bars in Breytenbach's drawing on the covers of his book. In this regard, the representation of this so-called "real" world seems to become increasingly more "unreal" in the three texts – from glimpses of a remembered reality, to an absurd construction of present and past events, to a truly fantastic zigzagging between "true" references and incredible transmutations. Like Botha and Viljoen, Louw points to the difficulty of distinguishing between the "real" and the "unreal" in Fransi Phillips's text. However, idiosyncratic to Louw's reading of the fantastic if compared to Botha's and Viljoen's analyses of the

imaginary or the phantasmagorical, is the fact that fantastic literature is more explicitly dealt with in terms of subversion as understood within a deconstructive frame of reference. As such, Louw's reading approximates that of André Brink in its conscious utilization of a "deconstructive technique" in order to come to terms with an otherwise "difficult" text. Louw states in this regard that what initially appeared to be an unintelligible text, "opened up" when read in conjunction with deconstructive principles, such as transformation and transmutation, dissemination, absences, hierarchical oppositions, the subversion of logical principles in the representation of time and space, the importance of rhetoric, etc.

In her analysis of deconstructive features Louw seems to be so intent on enumerating instances to substantiate her Derridean vocabulary that she hardly allows herself the time to elucidate their function or meaning in the fantasy world created in the 77 stories of the clown. As such, her contribution again differs from those of Botha and Viljoen in that she does not seem to try and come to terms with the postmodernist demand that the reader be co-producer of the text; rather, she seems to be more concerned with demonstrating the relevance of a deconstructive framework for discovering the subversive structuring of fantasy. The phenomenon of transformation and/or transmutation, for instance, is shown to manifest itself primarily in the representation of the main "character" in the 77 "stories" making up the textual fantasy. Not unlike the metamorphoses of Fellatio in Roodt's text, the clown in Fransi Phillips's stories is not only impossible to kill, but Louw argues that he is also subject to numerous transformations and transmutations, which means that he may change into another form or even into another species, or in fact into anything at all (like a duster, for instance) at will. Measured against logical norms in reality, it is of course impossible to accept that a dead clown who had been devoured or buried could continue to walk the streets. However, in these stories the typical fairy tale convention of "anything goes" has to be accepted by the reader in order to make any sense at all from this text. Louw explains the innumerable transformations/transmutations of the clown as an instance of actantial multiplication, thereby indicating how a structuralist narrative principle is transgressed in the fragmentary structuring of one "text" containing no less than 77 stories. Because he can be anything or anybody, this clown is not a "character", since character is an "ideological concept"; rather, for Louw he conforms to Rosemary Jackson's (1981) definition of metamorphosis in fantastic literature, where "... the idea of multiplicity is no longer a metaphor, but is literally realized, self transforms into selves".

The metafictional nature of the stories is also explained in deconstructive terms, in that Louw remarks that the text should be seen as an *ergon* consisting of 77 stories that are grafted onto one another, thereby creating metatextual structures full of instances of self-reference and self-explanation. The "signature", where Fransi Phillips is mentioned in two stories and even approximates herself to Breytenbach in one instance, is an example of self-reference and also of invagination, where the outside (of the author-subject's reality) is folded onto the textual inside of the stories. Louw points to the

obliteration of the borders between reality and text brought about by this technique in asking herself the question of who the author-subject Fransi Phillips is and where she is situated with regard to the textual world – inside, outside or perhaps on the paragon or border of the text?

In a similar way Louw proceeds to show how the self-referentiality of the *récit* may be explained in terms of the grafting of stories onto one another, where iteration results in a dissemination of traces and the continuous deferral of meaning in that signifiers refer to other signifiers instead of being related to a particular signified. Yet another Derridean term is evoked to define the lack of individual characterization in the text as an instance of absence, since no clown is ever described physically or emotionally. Without using deconstructive terminology, both Botha and Viljoen have commented on the same phenomenon in their remarks on (respectively) the faceless figures populating the “world” of *Mouiroir* and the diversification of the actantial functions of Fellatio at the cost of individualization in *Sonneskyn en Chevrolet*.

Perhaps what Louw’s study is implicitly showing is that postmodernist strategies may be accounted for in deconstructive terms; a notion that would be in accordance with André Brink’s emphasis on the interdependence of poststructuralism and postmodernism. What all the disclosures of deconstructive notions in Fransi Phillips’s text seem to point to – besides the aspects mentioned above, Louw also examines time, space, rhetoric and namegiving in a similar manner – is the ultimate “discovery” by the author that the only “rules” that may be gleaned from the text are those of the fairy tale. One may well wonder whether a simple structuralist analysis could not have yielded the same observation. However, Louw quotes Rosemary Jackson in this regard, emphasizing the subversion of marvellous as well as mimetic elements, thereby suggesting that there are no clear-cut distinctions between the “fantastic” and the “real”.

It is clear that the problematic relation between text and reality is foregrounded in the imaginative, phantasmagorical and fantastic portrayal of mimetic and marvellous worlds in the three Afrikaans metafictional texts scrutinized in the readings of Elize Botha, Hein Viljoen and Salomi Louw.

#### 4 The politics of repetition in Anglo-American self-reflexive texts

The problematic relation between postmodernist text and reality is specifically addressed in Michael du Plessis’s scrutiny of the postmodern object in Donald Barthelme’s writing. In this sense his essay could be read alongside that of Viljoen on the problem of representation in postmodernist literature. Du Plessis starts by evoking the Barthesian notion of the direct relation between fictional object and referent, that is to say, without the apparent mediacy of a signified – the word “barometer”, according to Barthes, directly *names* the thing in the world outside language. If objects really appeared so stable to a critic like Barthes, Du Plessis argues that it is then perhaps not surprising that sociologists of literature have so often turned to realist fiction. To literary sociologists like Lucien Goldmann, for instance, it would appar-

ently not be "... too difficult to reinstate the most enigmatic fictional object in an extra-discursive reality. Apparently, no description, no matter how farfetched, can avoid becoming the index of a social world; when it deals with objects, language ineluctably *represents*".

In contrast to realist fiction, the relation between text and reality emerges as highly problematical in the work of a postmodern writer like Donald Barthelme. Du Plessis wonders whether the "things" in his writing "... still give way to an immediate reality on the other side of words ..." and whether they "... still encapsulate the structures of the society that has produced them ...". After enumerating a list of objects which lack context and use, like a new machine for printing underground poles, for instance, he shows that supposedly stable objects are subject to the same kind of metamorphosis noted with respect to the so-called "main characters" in the Afrikaans texts analysed by Viljoen and Louw. Even food, supposedly evident of "universal" human need, is affected by the transmutations of objects, "... so that it becomes extremely desirable and nauseatingly inedible, simultaneously". As a result of the decontextualization and transmutation of objects, the distinctions between "abstract" and "concrete" are suspended, as may be seen in Barthelme's use of similes in which abstract and concrete elements are "forcibly connected". As to the question of whether the objects depicted by Barthelme still "encapsulate" the society from which they sprung, Du Plessis observes that: "Each phantasmic 'thing' lights up in isolation: it does not signify a larger social entity as did possessions and objects in the classic realist text". There can be then no question of a direct relation to object-signifier and real referent without the mediacy of a signified; instead, the linking together of unlikely signifiers problematizes even the relation between signifier and signified. What seems to be at stake here, is Viljoen's second area of consideration in the relation between text and reality, namely "... the truth (cognitive content) of the reproduction, its so-called correspondence to the facts". Du Plessis shrewdly discusses this problem in terms of Barthelme's use of language. Contrary to realist fiction, where in Barthes's view, words are treated "as labels stuck on phenomena that are real", Barthelme's deliberate construction of non-existent artefacts not only questions language's ability to "name" pre-existent things, but "... language produces its own purely semiotic world, and the gap between things and words becomes ever wider". Instead of the fragmented objects in Barthelme's text functioning as metonymies of a larger context, they seem stubbornly to refer only to themselves.

It should be clear from the above that the play of elusive signifiers in Barthelme's writing is emphasized to such an extent as to make any reference to reality highly problematical, if not entirely impossible. Yet Du Plessis draws one's attention to the fact that the "non-existent artefacts" in Barthelme's texts are invariably also "... fantastic commodities", which become fetishes as an indication of "... the postmodern perversion *par excellence*". The obsession with continuously replaceable and disposable objects in Barthelme's endless lists of commodified fetishes, is compared with Jameson's observation on the function of technology in capitalism and late capitalism – whereas in the former it was concerned with production, in the latter it

became mere reproduction, as exemplified by the Xerox-machine, for example. Since reproduction and dissemination define postmodernism and its commodity fetishes, there seems to be a link between postmodernist writing and the reality of late capitalism after all. That this link or reference is interpreted negatively as a criticism of capitalism in a Jamesian manner, shows that Du Plessis, although not explicitly taking part in the debate on the relevance of self-reflexive texts, is aware of the political potential of postmodernist writing.

The fact that the postmodern object is treated as if it could be indefinitely reproduced, leads Du Plessis to the logical conclusion that "... the postmodern fetish is a copy, or more precisely a *simulacrum* ...", which could in Jamesian terms be defined as an "... identical copy for which no original has ever existed". In this regard, Du Plessis also refers to Baudrillard's observations on the self-referentiality of repeated and repeatable objects in an endless series, which results in the kind of duplication that "destroys meaning" – as shown by Andy Warhol, the minute replicas of Marilyn's face are there as an indication of both "... the death of the original and the end of representation".

At this stage, Du Plessis argues that repetition does not only characterize postmodern art, but that the simulacrum indeed also becomes "... the sign of postmodern political economy". He therefore explicitly addresses the problem of an appropriation of postmodern art and late capitalist society, thus contributing to the discussion on politics and literature. After a digression on Marx's notions on exchange, he cites Baudrillard's explanation of high capitalism and late capitalism in semiological terms. In the former the commodity and its price have a function similar to that of the sign, which signals a referent. However, in the latter, "... the signifier becomes its own referent and the use value of the sign disappears to the benefit of its commutation and exchange value alone". Du Plessis remarks that this amounts to suggesting that the political economy of postmodernism is best understood in semiological terms. Directing the discussion back to Barthelme's writing, Du Plessis shows how the political question is textualized by the self-referential function of the postmodern signifier, in that postmodernism *parodies* capitalism "... by pushing it to such an excess that capitalism is voided of meaning". Even in a text where capitalism is thematized in the title as "The Rise of Capitalism", Du Plessis convincingly refutes the sociological argument that many of Barthelme's formulations could be traced back to some mimetic referent. Rather, the problematized relationship between sign and referent is re-emphasized:

The opposite of this is true, for both Barthelme and the political economy of postmodernism do away with referents, whether verbal or economic. Late capitalism reifies value as something to be exchanged, not used, and postmodernism makes an absent object a fetish, a simulacrum, which can only be exchanged and disseminated.

For Du Plessis, then, the objects in Barthelme's writing do not represent – not even as distortions of everyday commodities – a particular political economy.

This is due to the similarity between words and things in Barthelme's writing, in that words are viewed as being "... as much fetish objects as the commodities which they present ...", and the discourses are consequently "... as widely exchanged as any commodity". Repetition of the postmodern object and reiteration of the object-word invariably result in an "emptying" of their value, so that the actual content or meaning of statements becomes irrelevant in the continuous playful exchange of signifiers. Du Plessis shrewdly observes that if the empty but exchangeable signifier is the foundation on which all transactions are predicated (as both Baudrillard and Durand argue), it entails a reversal of the conventional Marxist stress "... on the economic base as an ultimately determining instance of which writing could never be more than a reflection". Instead, language and "reality" are seen to be inextricably intertwined, in that "postmodernism refuses to discriminate between signifier and commodity."

It should be clear from Du Plessis's sophisticated scrutiny of the relation between sign and referent that cognizance of the reiterated signifier necessarily precedes any assessment of a (non)-reference to a political reality. Despite the apparent obsessional indulgence in the endless play of already copied signifiers, Du Plessis stresses the fact that word and object have become adjacent, in that "neither term enjoys priority over the other as political economy and textuality become indistinguishable". This evokes the Foucauldian concept of *similitude* rather than resemblance, which means that the utterance does not *represent* the commodity. Rather, the postmodern condition is discernible in both the reiteration of art and the recycling of used objects.

The contributions by Viljoen and Du Plessis show that repetition and reproduction essentially determine the nature of representation in postmodernist literature. Whether one chooses to approach the problematized relation between signifier and signified through reflection as actualized in the mirror image, or whether one prefers to discuss the intricate approximation of artistic repetition and economic reproduction with reference to the postmodern object, it remains clear that the relation between literature and reality emerges as highly problematical. It is to Michael du Plessis's credit that he has dealt with this problem in a sophisticated manner.

Repetition, in this instance the postmodernist narrative convention of multiple endings, is also dealt with in Jean Lombard's essay as a means to investigate the relation between fiction and reality. In this regard, she quotes Patricia Waugh's (1984) observation that the self-conscious preoccupation of metafictional texts with their own artificiality goes beyond an examination of the fundamental structures of narrative fiction to an exploration of the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text. In her scrutiny of the convention of multiple endings in postmodernist literature, Lombard accordingly intends investigating the relation between literary and social (including historical, cultural and ideological) conventions.

Transgression of novelistic conventions is discussed against the "norm" of either closed or open endings in realist fiction. Lombard reminds us that the former concerns, for example, the solution to a central problem, the comple-



tion of an antithesis, a parallel pattern of closure, a moral end in which a moral lesson is stressed, or a "natural" end with either marriage or death as the most familiar "solutions". Open endings, as opposed to the convention of closure, involve such phenomena as circular, incomplete or continuous (as in the linking of serials) endings. Against such conventions, the multiple endings of postmodernist writing emerge as transgressions, not only of novelistic, but also of realist norms and values. Lombard quotes David Lodge (1977) to indicate that the closed ending of the traditional novel, with its explanation of mystery and its settling of fortunes, as well as the open ending of the modernist novel have been replaced by the postmodernist multiple, false, mock or parody ending. She subsequently proceeds by commenting on the deliberate destruction of the illusion of a truthful representation of reality in the postmodernist transgression of conventional closed or open endings. In this regard two possibilities are considered: either the phenomenon of multiple endings constitutes an intensification of the foregrounding of the artifice of writing; or it attempts a representation of the chaotic and arbitrary nature of reality.

These options are discussed with reference to two Anglo-American and two South African texts – Bernard Malamud's *The Tenants* (1971), John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969), Koos Prinsloo's *Die hemel help ons* (1987) and André Letoit's *Somer 11* (1984). The multiple endings in all these texts are seen to disclose four different relations between fiction and reality: they are incompatible; fiction presents a different reality; they are equal; and fictional reality is made absolute. Especially in the second and third of these relations, respectively dealt with in Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* and Prinsloo's *Die hemel help ons* Lombard finds that the value of metafictionality, namely the ability to suggest direct relationships between literary and social-cultural conventions, becomes evident.

Because of the above-mentioned possible relations between fictional and real worlds, Lombard finds that a distinction between the two questions she originally set out to answer would constitute a false opposition. The very fact that the illusion of reality is done away with by the "illogical" phenomenon of multiple endings suggests a particular view of reality and literature, namely the realisation that the borders between reality and fiction are conventional and should be continually transgressed. This is borne out by the manner in which especially the "endings" in Prinsloo's *Die hemel help ons* and Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* show that instead of neat "conclusions", what seems to be at stake is rather a call for fantasy and imagination in order to transgress both literary and social fictionalizations.

Both Du Plessis's investigation into the repeatability of the postmodern object in an essentially reproductive society and Lombard's observations on the transgression of literary as well as social conventions, already implicitly point to the potential of postmodernist writing to jolt the reader into a reassessment of the world in which he happens to find himself. As such, both essays contribute to the debate on the (political) relevance of postmodernist writing – in fact, in retrospect it becomes clear that most of the foregoing essays elucidate some or other aspect of the problematical relationship be-

tween the textual signifier and its referent in the world "out there". However, if this relationship in most instances had to be construed from the foregoing essays, Michael Marais explicitly addresses the "political potential" of postmodernist writing in his essay on D.M. Thomas's *Ararat*.

Refuting the widespread assumption that postmodernist writing is divorced from social and political concerns, Marais argues instead that the narrative strategies encountered in metafictional texts "... are not simply examples of formalist game-playing but are actually deployed to engage with political history". Despite the fact that self-reflexive narrative strategies result in the rejection of mimetic representation in postmodernist fiction, Marais holds that such strategies "... do not necessarily lead to self-preening textual onanism, but can actually provide the basis for an incisive exploration of political realities". This assumption is subsequently substantiated by a reading of Thomas's *Ararat* in which an identification of postmodernist techniques in the novel is followed by a discussion of the way in which such self-reflexive strategies are incorporated into a broader social and political perspective.

In the first part of his essay Marais discusses such postmodernist narrative strategies as metamorphoses of the main character, questioning of authorial authority, skilful blending of fiction and history, foregrounding of the act of writing, stressing of the reality of the reading situation and textual repetition of similar (embedded) versions of the same situation or story. He contends that the widespread nature of textual repetition, together with the infinite regress of narrative levels in the *mise-en-abyme* structuring of stories, problematizes and relativizes a logocentric search for a unified source of the novel, thereby positing "... an inflexible process of intertextual repetition without change".

Besides reflecting on the novel's own processes of production, the broader social and political relevance of postmodernist narrative strategies is revealed when it becomes clear that the principle of intertextual repetition applies equally to life, thereby suggesting that "reality" is a "text". In this regard Marais refers to a particularly telling example from the novel where the character Finn claims to have been present at and responsible for most of the killing fields of this century. He shrewdly remarks that the political atrocities catalogued by the character "... are as interchangeable as the versions of *Egyptian Nights*, that is, they are repetitions of the same political text". To Marais it seems clear that such a metafictional strategy as the principle of repetition operating on various levels shows that the novel not only mirrors its own processes of production but also reflects that of the historical text. Metafictional narrative strategies are therefore not "... instances of frivolous game-playing", but rather "... used to potent effect in a critique of the discourse of history". Marais may therefore confidently conclude that Thomas's novel demonstrates "... the political potential of postmodernist narrative strategies".

## 5 Conclusion

It is clear that the contributions in this issue may all directly or indirectly be related to the recent debate in South African literary circles concerning the question of the relevance, and even to a certain extent the desirability, of the proliferation of self-reflexive literature produced by white English or Afrikaans authors at a time when it is felt that fictional writing should rather address the social and political problems of the country in an unequivocal and direct manner. Perhaps the perceptive readings of postmodernist texts have attempted nothing more than drawing attention to the problematical relationship between self-reflexive metafictional strategies and the broader social or political context. Not all detractors of postmodernism may be convinced of the value of postmodernist literature – however, no serious reader can afford to ignore the manner in which self-reflexive commentary on the artifice of writing seems to dictate an awareness of the artificiality of reality.

## Notes

1. In this regard, see Chapman's review essay on Dovey's (1988) poststructuralist reading of Coetzee's novels in *Journal of Literary Studies* 4(3): 327–341; also see the responses to this review in the section entitled *Discussion/Bespreking* in this issue.
2. The apparent onesidedness of this issue will be rectified at the next SAVAL-conference on "Marxism and literature" to be held at Potchefstroom University in April 1989.
3. My translation – I was tempted to put "poetics" for Botha's Afrikaans "poësie" in order to stress her awareness of the self-reflexive nature of Breytenbach's writing. However, such a translation would not have done justice to her perception of the text as "poetic prose".
4. This omission seems even more strange if one takes into consideration the fact that both texts were published by Taurus, an "anti-establishment" publisher who is singled out for comment by Elize Botha in her observations on the illustrated back cover, where, according to her, the reader's eye is arrested by the prominence given to the publisher's name which appears in block letters above the drawing.

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