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Crossing Frontiers, Changing Trajectories

Donald Moerdijk

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**TEN YEARS OF
DEMOCRATIC
SOUTH AFRICA
TRANSITION
ACCOMPLISHED?**

BY

AURELIA WA KABWE-SEGATTI,

NICOLAS PEJOUT

AND PHILIPPE GUILLAUME

Les Nouveaux Cahiers de l'IFAS / IFAS Working Paper Series is a series of occasional working papers, dedicated to disseminating research in the social and human sciences on Southern Africa.

Under the supervision of appointed editors, each issue covers a specific theme; papers originate from researchers, experts or post-graduate students from France, Europe or Southern Africa with an interest in the region.

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SUMMARY

For the past ten years, South Africa has been progressively coming out of the apartheid system. Although all ties with the former regime have been severed completely, managing the heavy structural legacy has made the transition a difficult as well as an ambivalent process - difficult because the expectations of the population contrast with the complexity of the stakes which have to be dealt with; and ambivalent because the transition is based on innovations as well as continuities.

The contributions gathered in this book will try to clarify the trajectory of that transition. Offered analyses share a critical look, without complacency nor contempt, on the transformations at work. Crossing disciplines and dealing with South Africa as an ordinary and standardised country that can no longer be qualified as being a “miracle” or an “exception”, gives us an opportunity to address themes that are essential to understanding post-apartheid society: land reforms, immigration policies, educational reforms, AIDS...

This issue of IFAS Working Papers is the translation of a book published with Karthala publishers to celebrate 10 years of the Research section of the French Institute of South Africa (IFAS) and to highlight its major contribution to constructing francophone knowledge on Southern Africa.

RÉSUMÉ

Depuis dix ans, l'Afrique du Sud sort progressivement du système d'apartheid : si les ruptures avec l'ancien régime sont nettes, la gestion d'un héritage structurel lourd rend cette transition à la fois difficile et ambivalente. Difficile car les attentes de la population contrastent avec la complexité des enjeux à traiter. Ambivalente car cette transition est faite d'innovations et de continuités.

C'est cette trajectoire que les contributions réunies ici tentent d'éclairer. Les analyses proposées partagent un regard critique sans complaisance ni mépris sur les transformations à l'œuvre. Le croisement des disciplines et le traitement de l'Afrique du Sud comme un pays ordinaire, normalisé, sorti des paradigmes du « miracle » ou de l'« exception », donnent l'occasion d'aborder des thèmes essentiels à la compréhension de la société post-apartheid : réforme agraire, politique d'immigration, réformes éducatives, sida...

Ces Cahiers sont la traduction d'un ouvrage paru chez Karthala en 2004 à l'occasion des dix ans d'existence du pôle recherche de l'Institut Français d'Afrique du Sud (IFAS) afin de souligner sa contribution majeure à la construction des savoirs francophones sur l'Afrique australe.

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chapter six

crossing frontiers, changing trajectories

renewal of literature in post-apartheid south africa

donald moerdijk

ABSTRACT

Post-Apartheid literary creation might be the dawn of a “universal consciousness” that would be able to reach boundaries and outgrow them. After 1994, signs of a new literature emerged showing the convergence of “white” and “black” literatures into a long-awaited African literature of the South. Through the examples of J.M.Coetzee, Marlene van Niekerk, Ivan Vladislavic and Zakes Mda, the author disentangles the dynamics of frontier crossing, voices and genres transformation. Writers now seem to observe a pause in their endeavour to explore the future. Is this revealing of a kind of “désenchantement” with the new socio-political dispensation or is it rather announcing a new form of “africanness”?

RÉSUMÉ

La création littéraire post-apartheid pourrait être l'aube d'une « conscience universelle » qui pourrait dépasser les limites. Après 1994, les signes d'émergence d'une nouvelle littérature ont semblé indiquer une convergence, longtemps attendue, des littératures « blanche » et « noire » vers une littérature africaine du Sud. A travers les exemples de J.M. Coetzee, Marlene van Niekerk, Ivan Vladislavic et Zakes Mda, l'auteur identifie les dynamiques du franchissement de frontières, et les voix et genres de la transformation. Les écrivains semblent observer aujourd'hui un temps d'arrêt dans cet effort d'exploration du futur. Ceci est-il révélateur d'un certain 'désenchantement' vis-à-vis de la nouvelle situation socio-politique ou cela annonce-t-il plutôt une nouvelle « africanité » ?

“Upon the coasts of Africa [...] converged all the principal frontiers which came from the global expansion and fusion of human society, and it was the Cape of Good Hope specifically that symbolized for many centuries the two great formative barriers of the modern world: the physical one of the oceanic barrier to the east, and its concomitant one of the mind, global consciousness. [...] the frontier between black and white that arose at the eastern limits of the Cape Colony was [...] the product of two of the greatest human odysseys and endeavours, the terrestrial one of Africa and the maritime one of Europe. It was an encounter moulded by the many interwoven frontiers which affected Europeans and Africans as they came to that historical rendezvous [...] The human collision at the Cape's frontier became [...] a particular frontier of the enlarged global consciousness that sprang from the Enlightenment and from the intensified thrust of the aggressive expansion heralded by Adam Smith in 1776.”

Noel Mostert, *Frontiers*¹

¹ Noel Mostert, *Frontiers, The Epic of South Africa's Creation and the Tragedy of the Xhosa People*, London, Jonathan Cape, 1992 ; Pimlico, 1993, “Preface”, p xv-xvi.

Is there such a thing as a geography of universal consciousness, as Noel Mostert seems to suggest? By this we mean an awareness that everybody, everywhere can accede to? A notion of this sort, though obviously fraught with all sorts of difficulties which we cannot go into here², is nonetheless an ideal to which all cultures aspire, and which with the advent of globalisation has taken on a special pertinence. If there such a thing, has South Africa played a part in its development — South Africa, one of the far-off corners of the earth?

The possibility is perhaps not as far-fetched as it may have seemed a decade or two ago. South Africa has always occupied a strategic position in the world-wide network which came into being at the same time as modernity and has gradually come to be identified with the latter. So that today the problems of modernity are linked first and foremost to this world dimension that is proving so difficult to think out for minds trained to think in languages and terms devised in and regulated by Nation-States that have almost succeeded in having themselves, their internal compartments and their external frontiers, accepted as the natural state of things. Is it at the “far end” of Africa that the drama of expanding consciousness is at present being played out, reaching new frontiers and groping beyond them? Or, to put this another way, will the country that went furthest into separation, explicitly legalising it in the apartheid system, turn out to be the first to find a way out of what now seems to have always been a global trend, and one that is increasingly marked at present (Richmond, 1994)?

This is the hypothesis that I would like to examine briefly in this article, an attempt to see awareness in South Africa as part of a global culture, and to examine it in one of its fields, literature.

Mostert argues that this universal consciousness came to South Africa in the 19th Century³, and first began to expand when the missionaries took up the struggle against the dispossession, oppression and enslavement of indigenous peoples. Stemming from English liberalism, utilitarian and subsequently positivistic, this movement brought to the Cape “a system of electoral democratisation that, when it arrived mid-century, was in principle far in advance of anything practically everywhere else”⁴. This development was interrupted by massive investment of capital after the discovery of diamonds and gold, putting the country under intense imperial pressure. Since then, the liberationist tradition has often taken on the prophetic and messianic features that characterise South African questionings of modernity.

² Not the least of these is ethnocentricity – not to speak of the “europthallocentricity” about which Jacques Derrida has written.

³ This consciousness would seem in fact to have arrived with the advent of the Batavian Republic, but without becoming effectual.

⁴ *Op. cit.*, xvii. Mostert continues: « ... given that it was presented to a society whose indigenous mainly pre-literate peoples overwhelmingly outnumbered white colonists. The prospect of such an instrument in the hands of the masses was still remote in Europe, and would remain so until the end of the century.”

Despite the political regression, literature managed to remain on course, at least for some time. Writers such as Olive Schreiner, William Plomer and Roy Campbell (all well-known in Britain) pursued in one way or another development of a universal consciousness, as did others (less known outside the country) such as Eugene Marais, Louis Leipoldt and Sol Plaatje. But soon "White" writing in Afrikaans was drawn into the struggle of the Afrikaner people for national recognition, while that in English halted its development, hesitating between entertainment, which sold well on the London market, and modernism (as seen from the Deep South of the planet), aping the latter with colonial obsequiousness. After World War II, literature resumed its combat, but using imported arms; its denunciation of apartheid proceeded essentially, in both form and content, from Victorian liberalism in colonial garb (Alan Paton is the name that springs to mind).

The year of change, 1994, was to send deep reverberations throughout South African culture, giving birth to a literature that was new, and not merely updated. "White" writing at last began to assert its independence and to converge with the "Black", forming a literature that became increasingly African. It set out for the new horizon that had been revealed by the political epiphany. Soon, however, as the year of change receded into the past, it seemed once again to hesitate, pausing to peer into what lay beyond... Without trying to reach or explore it? Had the epiphany been a delusion, the triumph evanescent, like a victory in sport? That is the question we will try to answer here.

During the dark years, South African literature was characterised by its militancy. Militant action was necessary, but it was also limiting⁵. Today the militancy has broadened and deepened: the front is not merely political, but cultural. For the supposedly universal "civilisation" which motivated all policies applied in South Africa, that of segregation and its opposites, has been revealed today (in its two alternative versions: positivist, forward-looking, and nationalist, backward-looking) as merely a culture amongst others, with nothing special about it.

We will try to grasp this three-dimensional expansion by briefly examining, firstly, the development of a theme (the frontier), next, that of a narrative technique (the narrative voice and its relation to the author), and lastly the destabilisation and transmutation of dramatic genres. J.M. Coetzee has without doubt pioneered in all these fields. The baton has now been passed on to a new generation of remarkable writers, represented in this study by Marlene van Niekerk, Ivan Vladislavic' and Zakes Mda.

⁵ With obvious exceptions, however, in cases such as those of J.M. Coetzee, Doris Lessing, or Karel Schoeman, none of whom can be said to have been limited by their critical approach.

■ CROSSING FRONTIERS

The new literature is marked by a new awareness of frontiers, different from that of the apartheid period: not merely ethnic and political frontiers, but the frontiers between the known and the unknown, between what is understood, misunderstood, and what is ignored, between the Same and the Other: the cultural frontiers of the West and its modernity. These shifting borders and no-man's-lands, partly hidden by political confrontations, have been surveyed and marked out by J.M. Coetzee since 1974, the year in which he published *Dusklands*, the emblem of this new awareness.

In *Disgrace*, this otherness (a major theme throughout Coetzee's work, especially since *Waiting for the Barbarians*) remains impenetrable. Can the writer not understand it, or does he not want to do so? What is going on there on the other side can hardly, or only barely (this sort of nuance is characteristic of his work) be discerned. One reaches a frontier and stops at it, faced with something undecipherable. When one does succeed in making something out, one looks on in fear, trembling, and often horror (*Disgrace*) into an abyss, uncertain as to whether anyone could possibly venture into it⁶. Though he cites Dante often, Coetzee does not imitate him. He is not a believer, but a sceptic; it is not so much faith that he lacks as confidence. He has no trust. He is modern in this respect, and even "post-modern"; he does not spread the good news of modernity, but rather examines with perplexity the steps that have led him to it.

The subtle and rigorous Coetzee is aware of his cultural blinkers. He deals with them explicitly in his latest novel, *Elizabeth Costello*. He looks at the otherness of animals and women. It is through the "lives of animals" (the title of a previous book) that he takes up his central theme. He does not enter into these lives, however⁷; rather, he speculates on the animal "condition". His approach is literary, poetic, and exposes itself to philosophical criticism, which Coetzee unflinchingly confronts, but which he frames, in a rather old-fashioned, Anglo-American way, in a theory of law instead of a theory of culture, which would have been more germane to his subject.

The central character in several of his novels (*In the Heart of the Country*, *The Age of Iron* and *Elizabeth Costello*) is a woman. In each case, however, the novelist studies not so much

⁶ Coetzee does not seem ever to have envisaged a documentary novel on the "nether world", such as Elsa Joubert's remarkable *Die Sweefjare van Poppie Nongena* (1978).

⁷ This is somewhat surprising for a South African writer, heir to a fairly extensive literature on the subject, ranging from the work of Eugene Marais, a pioneer in animal ethology to popular works such as Jock of the Bushveld, often, though by no means always sentimental.

a woman as an individual. In the chapter entitled “Eros” in the third of these works, however, he takes up yet another form of otherness: that of the gods. The narrative is situated in a modern world, flat, prosaic and homogeneous, in which a few pockets of archaic difference nonetheless subsist (the nuns, the old crucifix carver... [Coetzee 1999b, p. 191]). Gods are different from men in a unique way: though they have the same bodies and the same minds, they are radically different: they are immortal. Otherness implies a certain similarity (only the God of Mahomet insists on being completely different; even than that of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob sometimes tolerates an anthropomorphic metaphor), and this opens up a possibility of understanding. On the basis of such similarity, the otherness of gods can be grasped by means of concepts. Imagining it, however, is quite another matter. Unless it is idealised (as in a Fra Angelico Annunciation), the result can only be nightmarish. Coetzee recoils from this, a Calvinistic iconoclast. Imagining otherness seems illegitimate: a sort of metaphysical voyeurism.

There are places to which we should not go, and which we should not describe: such would seem to be the principle maintained in the chapter entitled “Evil”. Significantly Coetzee, usually a scrupulous secretary of the debates held in his heart of hearts, in this case records no counter-argument.

In *Disgrace*, Coetzee advances towards the frontiers of this *other* South Africa, halts and, after a painful and painstaking survey of the scene, retreats into himself, seeking in his own past the keys to the unknown: in his *Boyhood* and *Youth*, his two subsequent novels. After this he emigrated to Australia. Could this have been to lead “an antipodean life, removed from the worst of history”(ibid. p. 215)? Already in 1991 he saw his whole youth as an effort to “find a capsule in which he [could] live, a capsule in which he need not breathe the air of the world”(Coetzee 1992, p. 393). The collection of articles and interviews just cited is entitled *Doubling the Point*, and the subsequent one, published in 1999, *Stranger Shores*; he seems to see himself as a navigator who, like the Portuguese, on reaching the end of Africa and of the known world, suddenly hesitated... To call it Good Hope and sail on, something more was no doubt needed. Could it have been grace? We will come back to this later. Meanwhile, it is clear that Coetzee sees his condition, ours perhaps, and certainly that of South Africa as one of *disgrace*.

He thus finds himself stopped “at the gate” (the title of a chapter in *Elizabeth Costello*). To be allowed through it, into the other world, an anonymous committee, invested with power but bereft of moral authority, just as in the Old South Africa, demands a “profession of beliefs”. Beliefs...? The traveller speculates, perplexed. He has beliefs, obviously, like everyone else; the problem is that, civilised and sceptical, he doesn’t really “believe in them”, each belief no doubt consisting in a series of assertions and objections that neutralise one another.

Not having imitated Dante, Coetzee also avoids imitating Pascal: he does not make the leap of faith into the uncertain. All that is left for him to do is to ponder upon the increasingly shaky apologia, now no more convincing than a blurb, for Western Civilisation, and pussyfooting, like Pascal before the leap, between scepticism and stoicism. Such would seem in the end to be his conception of our present condition.

In *Triomf*, her novel —perhaps the most important to have been published in South Africa since the transition — Marlene van Niekerk tells a story - in many ways *the* story - of the run-up to 1994. She sets out to liberate Afrikaner culture from the mind-set in which it has been stuck by forty years of obligatory segregation and more than a century of separatist particularism. Her book is structured by metaphors of closure. Closure, in the first place, of the body, both physiological and political, subject to alternating bouts of constipation and logorrhoea. The Benade family, farmers who have lost their land, just as the African herders had lost theirs before them, are struggling along in the city, at first in protected (and harshly exploited) jobs, and then in *Triomf*, a sanctuary for White losers like themselves. The racist regime has established this suburb by razing Sohpiatown: one of the few “mixed” urban spaces in the country and birthplace of a fresh culture, an enclave of open-mindedness, producing the music and literature of freedom. In the course of the story the names become sharply emblematic: *Triomf*, triumphant intolerance and sub-urbanity; *Sohpiatown*, city of wisdom. Disintegration and integration; the suburban and the urbane.

There are also other types of closure, not only in politics, but also in society and in families (inbreeding and incest, literal and figurative), which doom to failure everything the Benades undertake (flower-selling in the street, refrigerator repairs in the back yard). No matter what they do, the Segregation that protects and imprisons them triumphs over the Wisdom that could give another meaning to their life. Yet, perpetually broke, surviving literally on the smell of an oil-rag, surrounded by hostile neighbours marginally better-off than themselves, poorly protected from their petrifying stares by a crumbling jerry-built house and a ramshackle prefabricated wall, they do not succumb to depression. Why?

“Ah, how everyday life is...” mused Laforgue sadly in the high old times of spleen. Europe has still not emerged from them. The fires of revolution have died down and, despite a few rebellions by desultory avant-gardes, everyday ordinariness has spread and solidified, dispelling dreams and extinguishing energy. The Benades, however, remain full of pep, bubbling with inventiveness. The world of Louis-Ferdinand Céline springs to mind, but without its sordidness: that logic of exclusion that leads to racism and fascism. With their consumption reduced to zero, like that of the underclass in Céline, a different logic takes them the opposite way, towards a catastrophically salutary explosion of *vis comica*. *Triomf* tells the

story of a generalised eruption, a vast politico-cosmic belch (paradoxically accomplished on an entirely empty stomach), proceeding uniquely from a system of which the downtrodden heroes are *gatvol*. In this country riddled with immovable barriers cast in concrete, everything has now become volcanic. Mouths gape, sphincters let go. Everything bursts, cuts loose, lets rip, transgressing limits and established definitions. Everything in existence finds its voice, vociferates: the dropouts of modernity, the idiots, the dumb; animals, things, from the tiniest to the most enormous, from the creaking board to the thunder and lightning of the Rand. It all burbles, yells, farts, drums, in onomatopoeia and in words so gross that the dictionary can hardly contain them.

This universal orality, however, is brought to us in written form. Marlene van Niekerk dissolves subjects by loosening the reference of pronouns; she de-conceptualises language by blurring definitions; she “un-schools” it (rather like the Beat poets) by dislocating syntax; she “re-creolises” Afrikaans, freeing it from the purist straight-jacket in which an uptight elite had fastened and nationalised it, treating it as something sacred. Her writing undoes the articulations of a world of oppression by capturing expression before it can polarise into *res cogitans* and *res extensa* and crystallise into subject and object. The result is a tale told by a foursome of idiots, full of sound and fury... and signifying nothing? Not exactly: rather, signifying something that had not been really thinkable before.

In this definitive collapse, the Benades discover something that they had never dreamed that they would ever see. They discover that they belong, not to a mystified chosen people, tormented by their sacrosanct difference, but to a jubilant humanity, one and indivisible, and that at last they can be free, equal and fraternal, like everyone else. They discover that nationality⁸ is a scam. That identity can quite comfortably be dispensed with: one is what one is without constantly having to try to be it. That their language is their home, and belongs to them, and not to school elite; messy and crumbling, perhaps, like the house they live in, it is nonetheless perfectly inhabitable; they can use it as they please, without worrying about its respectability. They can also do without the Holy Writ, Church, State, and all other capitalised and capitalisable entities. For Reason has at last thundered in its crater. The Benades are living in 1994, the Year of Change, in which universality is not a concept but an experience, a revelation (admittedly difficult to conceptualise: once dehydrated it can never be restored to its original form): literally, the Year of Grace.

⁸ A distinction should no doubt be drawn here between the political nation (that of the French Revolution, at least in its initial stages, open to all those who wished to take part in its project of building a community based on the principles of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity) and the closed, ethnic conception of the nation which, no doubt inevitably, subsequently (and consequently) developed in Germany and elsewhere, spreading throughout the world and reaching South Africa towards the end of the 19th century.

The year will pass, as will the grace. The revelation will fade; everyday life will resume its humdrum course and take over once again, but not exactly as before. Because people will have seen universality and will have believed in it. "Afrikaners", Nelson Mandela was to say, "have given us a lot of suffering, a lot of pain; they have been insensitive beyond words. It is difficult to imagine that human beings can do what Afrikaners have done to blacks in this country... But when an Afrikaner changes, he changes completely. He becomes a real friend."⁹

Like Marlene van Niekerk, Ivan Vladislavic is a novelist of the city, of Johannesburg: now the symbol of a country that had for half a century rejected the culture and the logic of urbanity. His typical hero is a new kind of literary *flâneur*, both strolling and patrolling through Johannesburg, his "beat" (as we shall see, maintaining law and order is one of his prime concerns). He paces it out soliloquising in the tradition, realist and whimsical, of Sterne, for example, or the Parisian surrealists. The city is also seen as an environment, increasingly saturated with language, mainly frozen in the take-away-throw-away form of clichés: posters, garish commercial signs, insistent advertisements coming on top of a host of other pollutions, the flotsam and jetsam of modernity. The actual body of the city, the materialisation of urbanity, has more and more difficulty in attracting our attention; with the lifeblood of meaning draining out of it, architecture is desperately trying to recapture our gaze by cutting hyperbolical capers, or else simply withdrawing into the glacial geometry of corporate office-buildings which mirror back at the intimidated passer-by his own trembling image. In Johannesburg, on top of this incessant commotion has come a vast social upheaval. In a remarkable novel, *The Folly*, and a collection of stories, *Propaganda by Monuments*, Vladislavic describes the urban condition.

A third book, *The Restless Supermarket*, deals with the 'quake of 1994. Like *Triomf*, it is a tour de force. An experimental novel, it describes an implosion of the language that structures the urban experience: The city crumbles as the grammar and syntax of Western urbanity frays. The hero tries to reverse this entropy. A corrector (or reader) of proofs, he wants to restore coherence by acting directly on the system of signs, and in particular on — the telephone directory, which in the post-modern "communicational society" has replaced the Civil Code of yore, that is, of modern times. For society, which used to be thought of as something built, is now something linked: no longer a building or a city, but an increasingly immaterial network.

⁹ Nelson Mandela, First Bram Fischer Memorial Lecture (videocassette, June 9, 1995), quoted by Frankel, G, 2001, p. 334. See Mda 2000, p. 81-82: a symbol of the sessions of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission?

The task is urgent. What is collapsing is nothing less than nature itself, that second nature that has replaced the first without our noticing the change: the entire set of systems used in carrying out the technological, commercial and political manipulations that constitute our everyday environment. These systems of meaning criss-cross one another, piling up and telescoping as each follows its own logic, like the articles that pile up, each with its own sell-by date, on supermarket shelves. This complex culture functions “naturally”, like nature was supposed to function in former times. Common sense has adapted to this new hotchpotch, adding the incompatible constraints of new chaotic grammar and those of the old.

Confusion has led to implosion. Vladislavic’ notes, however, that this catastrophe, though experienced as a nightmare and tirelessly denounced, is giving rise to a curious euphoria. The Schadenfreude is one of liberation. Beneath the anxious irony of the narrator the author detects a secret jubilation, an obscure sense of promise. Disorder, Bergson used to explain, is an illusion: what is perceived as disorder is simply a different order, based on principles of which we are unaware. But in this loss of bearings there is something more: an acceptance of a complexity that escapes the grasp of our ideas. As though Vladislavic’ were kissing simplicity goodbye — and good riddance. Defeated in his attempt to restore an intelligible order, his Don Quixote unwittingly grasps at and gives us a glimpse of something better than that: the richness and the freedom of a world that cannot yet be clearly understood.

Zakes Mda traces these same developments among the black population of the country. The action of *Ways of Dying* takes place in a south-eastern port (East London?) where a former peasant sets up an innovative business on the borderline between life and death, inventing a new profession: that of “official mourner” at funerals, an expanding market in his troubled times.

This vision darkens still further in subsequent books. As the structures of power crumble, Mda notes not so much an eruption of new vitality as the deliquescence of the old, followed by re-composition rather than change. Gradually a new structure emerges with its own hierarchy, barely preferable to the previous one. *The Heart of Redness* is a sardonic analysis of the changing stakes in the conflict between modernity and tradition in the Transkei. A smouldering conflict dating back to the mid-19th century flares up as the 20th draws to a close. As in the time of Nonqawuse, Believers clash with Unbelievers, but reformatted successively as traditionalists opposing progressives, then as ecologists fighting productivists, and finally as post-modern anti-globalists competing with paleo-modern conservatives for investment. Each of the two parties is transformed into its opposite, the *verkrampte* becoming *verligte* and vice versa. The traditionalist dream of a return to the land of yore is transformed into a neo-modern

development project, and promoters of old-fashioned 1960-style modernisation join hands with the impersonal forces of the global market to promote the sort of retrograde, downgraded development that the old apartheid authorities tried to impose. Completely integrated into local society, the white trader actively supports both sides through thick and thin. The final result is that neither of the rival projects benefits the local population, each being tailored to meet the needs of Johannesburg, Europe, America...

In *The Madonna of Excelsior*, Mda takes this type of analysis still further. He describes the relationships – both sexual and otherwise, whether banned or recommended – between social categories and classes in a small Free State mining town before, during and after “transition”. Under the bad old regime, the old racial frontier does not seem to have been much of a problem: the bans apparently had the effect of encouraging surreptitious crossing, so that the old, fragmented society was constantly reunited, as if by magic... in order to break up again, but each time according to different rules. Disorder bears within it another order, which emerges sooner than one expects. So soon, in fact, that it can hardly even be narrated, narrative being too time-bound a form; Mda (who is also a painter) seems to prefer whirls of colour – metaphors of admixture and plasticity.

More clearly than any of the other authors dealt with in this article, Mda belongs to the prophetic tradition of South African literature. He is not a prophet who rejects what is new, calling back the people to their traditions, but one who discerns the new order, understands it and seeks to set up a new balance (involving tolerance, cross-breeding, cultural creolisation, syncretism...), though without necessarily thinking of this as a “progress”. Living among what could be termed the “underfolk”, he observes untroubled the rise, decline and fall of each component of South African society in an incessant process of transfiguration and transmogrification. Dealing familiarly with all population groups, treating all with the same cheerful and ironical benevolence, he notes promises and perils – each of which is promptly transformed into the other.

How should we deal with otherness? Modernisation merely reduces it, erasing differences so as to leave a single standard homo oeconomicus. For Mda, it might have saved itself the trouble. Otherness abolishes itself all on its own, without outside assistance or constraint—but only to reinvent itself endlessly, each time under a new species. What matters is less the being or essence (of a social class or category) than the process of its transformation.

In a world in constant fusion, only by creating can we really survive. In *Ways of Dying*, his first novel, Mda has composed luminous pages on the township shack as a work of art (Mda 1995, pp. 67-68). To perceive the shack as art, all that one has to do is to refrain from *identifying*

the bric-a-brac it is made of (pieces of cardboard and corrugated iron, sheets of plastic, and so forth), and look only at form and colour. It suffices to abstain from delimiting, to avoid definition. Concepts, in defining things by, e.g. their function, and subsequently reducing them to this, bring about their disappearance as real, material things: their disappearance, i.e. the removal of their material apparition, of their presence. We are left with a world of non-things: of absences and immateriality, of signs and simulacra. To put this another way: when we re-cognise something (and this is what we use concepts to do), we no longer “cognise” it: the natural link between us, the world and all the things in it — the fact that we have been born with them into it (our “co-naturality”) — is broken, our solidarity with it abolished. The image, on the other hand, that stuff of dreams, does just the opposite. Far from defining the shack, delimiting it, it fills it out, furnishing it — with dreams. Improvisation and creativeness raise it above the stifling properties of, well, property –and propriety. This is the symbolism of the shack, of the squatter, of the camp. These emblems open up the possibility of new roles for those whom boundaries have excluded from our midst.

■ VOICE BREAKS

Mda’s narrative voice is omniscient — but with a difference. In 19th century literature, it is the author who is omniscient; in Mda’s case the voice does not have the powers of an author; it is authentic, but without authority. It has other powers. It is choral, the voice of the village, of the community; if it is omniscient, it is because “in a village everything is known.” There is nothing mysterious about this omniscience. It is a voice both multiple and one, both social and natural, like that of Qukezwa the enchantress: “Many voices come from her mouth. Deep sounds that echo like the night. Flaming sounds that crackle like a veld fire. Light sounds that float like snow on top of the Amathole Mountains. Hollow sounds like laughing mountains. Coming out all at once. As if a whole choir lives in her mouth.”(Mda 2000, p. 175).

With Valdislavic’, in *The Restless Supermarket*, the narrator is both naively ingenious and learnedly ignorant. His voice is that of the satirist who, seeing everywhere the folly of other people, is oblivious of his own, but senses nonetheless his own fragility, and seeks blindly to shore up his self-confidence. This position gives the narrative a quavering tone that underscores the instability of the city he is describing.

In *Triomf*, the narrative voice is a collective one, as in the case of Mda; but it is a family quartet, and not a choir. It does, however, represent more than a particular family; in it we hear the Afrikaner proletariat, its language stripped of cant, fresh and vigorous. The quartet

is both harmonious and dissonant. There is a strong family resemblance; but voices (and vices) complement one another: the mother's, naïve and wily, as obstinate as nature itself; the ageing father's frustrated, refuted and denied, yet striving to smooth things over; his younger brother's brilliant, diabolical, the voice of the argumentative intellectual, the proletarian poet and orator, both prolix and constrained; and that of the idiot son, the violent, dreamy Caliban, the only voice that does not calculate and assess. Each of these voices, however, carries yet others, usually inaudible: voices of animals, of things, of Africa.

Coetzee's narrative voice is complex and varied, remaining nonetheless firmly within the European tradition. The narrator's and the author's voices sometimes draw so close together that they merge; at other times they separate, almost to the point of rupture, without the beak ever being fully accomplished. Superimposed, criss-crossing, enfolding and unfolding, they give the text a sumptuously ruffled texture.

■ THE DYNAMICS OF GENRE

In *Disgrace*, Coetzee takes up the subject of Eros, which will be developed in subsequent work. A disheartened and disillusioned lecturer, in disgrace for having seduced one of his students, tries to understand what has happened to him. In what sense is he responsible for what, in the puritanical society in which he lives, is seen as his infamy? Obviously it is he who is to blame... and yet in a way it is not. For he has acted in passion, that modern avatar of the gods of yore, who are now making a discreet comeback. A god possessed him, making him mad. *He whom the gods wish to destroy, they first drive mad*, as all lecturers know. But what does this saying mean, exactly? Eros bears the final responsibility; Coetzee's hero nonetheless claims as his own this act that was not really his; like Oedipus, he asserts himself as the free agent which in fact he was not and, by doing so, he becomes free.

In a theatrical (rather too theatrical) gesture, the master humbles himself before the puritanical family of the disciple he seduced. This ritual accomplished, he recovers some serenity. But does he return to grace? Not really: do people ever pardon effectively? Probably not; they are only too happy to see the fall of one of their fellows, and little can influence this. Then, too, does the culprit really repent? Does he really believe he has done something wrong? This too is uncertain. Disgrace could be a stage on the path to Grace... but what if this grace turned out to be merely pro forma, the formal grace of the grand finale in comedy? Redemption is no doubt possible, but does it actually take place? Not having really descended into hell, the hero (no more a Dante than his author is) never actually emerges from it.

We find here the hesitant beginnings of an evolution, conscientiously recorded by Coetzee: the tragic in the course of transformation into tragedy, that rite which in extremis opens up on to a dawn of peace and reconciliation, the pale and uncertain promise of a smile. A smile... or is it a grimace? At the end of the book, the hero dreams, imagining Byron's abandoned mistress in her villa at Ravenna; she is old, now, and sings her sorrowful lament to the mocking accompaniment of a trashy banjo. Defeat, bungling failure, disenchantment: Coetzee looks on this common lot of mortals with a sort of smile, nervous and twitching no doubt, but a smile nonetheless. Irony, but bereft of its comic effect? The Calvinistic irony which treats *vis comica* rather as *vitium*, less a force than a vice? This new universe is comic, but without the confidence that makes comedy a fete.

With Vladislavic', on the other hand, the comic quality develops into full-blown comedy, though a also without any real confidence. Brilliant but brittle, perfect in form, but apprehensive, it is comedy shot through with a sense of threat. Opening up to a laughing god who guarantees the innocuousness of the world, Vladislavic' remains sceptical, his faith shaky. Discourse, for him, is merely rhetoric. Rhetoric accepted and approved, taken perfectly seriously by consensus, but rhetoric nonetheless: conjuring tricks performed by means of language, tricks which the conjuror himself sometimes falls for. Appearance, in the end, would seem to be the one and only reality.

But what if, in this world of appearances, there were, after all, something else, behind all these appearances, these veils which, rent asunder, reveal only other veils (and unfolded, other folds)? Something impossible to circumscribe, describe or (language having been disqualified) define? A threat, revealed by fear? And if this threat could not really be known, in the usual sense of this word, but only sensed? In that case fear would be invaluable, a sense as vital as that of pain or heat or cold. And what if *that* were the contemporary condition (modern, post-modern, etc.)? Fear as the only means, not of knowing (for we know in the full sense only by means of language), but of establishing a trustworthy link between ourselves and that Other that is the world? Fear of everything and, in everything, of death? A death that cannot really even be named, on which language has no hold whatever? The only thing of which we can be absolutely certain, which we can therefore trust? But if that is so, what does "trust" mean? To have faith? In this insurmountable scepticism there is clearly a sense of threat, but there is also a sort of confidence: a confidence that in the final resort is comic. Desperate, no doubt, but in the meantime, as we wait for the ultimate showdown, the show goes on: the unlimitedly chaotic party to end all parties that also ends the book.

Marlene van Niekerk perceives – or would like to perceive – something else in the tragic world of apartheid. This threatening world, she seems to feel, is simply too stupid and too

boring to be true (for that which is, as Hegel said, cannot be true). She constructs a comic device to show things in a different light. Each of her four narrators, though remaining (far too) close to the other three (it is not always easy to distinguish between them) shows up the others' limits, and goes beyond them. The retarded son and his brilliant uncle demolish, each in his own way, the conventional constructions of the mother and father; but the parents do the same for them, and incidentally to each other. Each reconstructs a discourse on the ruins of that of the adversary, a discourse that is ruined in its turn. These clashing and crossing demolitions, however, do not result in nothing but ruin.

Basically, each accepts the others' assertions, but more as self-assertions than as assertions of fact. At the same time, each tries to outdo, or at least outbid them, both in argument and in action. In this lies the spring (both source and driving force) of the comic: in the assertion, at one and the same time, of both normative reason (Apollo) and its opposite, disruptive vitality (Dionysus), each obliging the other to go beyond itself or to give up. As long as both keep developing, the comic element will thrive, growing from strength to strength; but as soon as one weakens, the dreary seriousness of the ordinary returns.

Each of these thrusts can surpass itself only by opening itself up to something more than itself: rigour of reasoning on the one hand, vital creativity on the other. This opening-up is faith: faith in reason on the one hand, and in the laughing god on the other. This "something more", however, does not have to be thought of as some transcendent being; a more apposite term for it would seem to be an endless process, a process which can be defined only once it has stopped, and which, while in motion, can only be experienced from within, and not conceptualised from outside. One can, nonetheless, press analysis a little further. The "more" cannot be simply more of the same, a mere quantitative increase, inapplicable to a quality; it must therefore be something different. This means that each drive opens up to something *other* than itself, that is, to its opposite, that other which it carries, latent, and progressively discovers within itself. This destabilisation of genre (a term, it should be recalled, not entirely distinct from gender) gives Marlene van Niekerk's writing a liberating impact that goes well beyond the traditional bounds of literature, impinging on major issues in contemporary philosophy.

In *Ways of Dying*, Zakes Mda sketches a world of peace and reconciliation. Dying is never a very good thing, but life has to go on all the same; one can live with death, Mda seems to say, on condition that the mourning is carried out in the proper way. Does life go on "all the same" in the sense that it *stays* the same? No: if it is to go on, it has to change. One can only live with death if one avoids closing up (or down) and deluding oneself; one must, rather trust one's own creativity and one's solidarity with others; if one does so, one can always get by and live

well. Happily? No, her we must make distinctions. Happiness “[...] is an illusion. That is why our people are now dying of starvation. All in pursuit of happiness”, says one of the Xhosa elders in *The Heart of Redness* (Mda 2000, p. 209). Happiness is a project, a “white” project (the greatest possible happiness for the greatest possible number) which earnest Utilitarians brought to the Cape. Living well is more like joy: a momentary state, a transformation, an epiphany. Joy is African.

Life after death? Life after death: what on earth for? might one ask. Another Western obsession: “That is a mad idea if ever I heard one [...] How would you attain happiness after death if you failed to attain it when you were still living? Even the ancestors would kick you out of their ranks if you came to them as a failure like that.”(*ibid.*) The past (“the ancestors”) is part of a reality which is never abolished and which one must take into account; this is not the case with the future. The future is taken care of by a genius (or ingenuity) that transcends the vicissitudes in which we live and links our present to our past.

Still, one has to believe in this. Here we come up once more against the problem raised by Coetzee: faith. What is faith? What is belief? For Mda, the two would seem to be closely linked, and to consist in putting one’s trust in something, opening oneself up to it. Believing in something implies not believing in something else. Belief and unbelief are aspects or moments of a single act of the mind. When the mind opens, both moments are open: one trusts an ampler and more vital form of one’s belief, or in a more radical principle justifying disbelief. However, if one no longer entrusts oneself in this way, each moment loses momentum, congealing into a static attitude: a posture — and imposture. This is the subject of *The Heart of Redness*. Mda re-stages the historic opposition between Believers and Unbelievers as a contest between two parties in the Xhosa polity. The former believe in the prophets who announce the restoration of the world to what it was before the catastrophic irruption of the Whites; the latter favour collaboration with the Whites, with a view to adopting “civilisation”, i.e. modernisation, with its Positivistic promise of happiness. Both belief and disbelief, however, lose momentum and armour themselves with defensive dogma, prizing constancy and rigidity; unconditional fidelity puts and end to hopes of renewal. Closing up leads to closing down: no more questions, no quest: the dialectic of vitalist confidence and reasoned doubt declines and perishes. All that remains is a repetitive polemic between two immovable, entrenched positions. Belief and unbelief become phases in a process no longer of expansion, but of contraction.

The whole process of closure becomes clear: the instant is converted into a project, an ambiguous but no doubt unavoidable practice that is transformed into a blueprint, that bad habit of the West (Higgins, 1991). The instant withers away, leaving only a repetitive contest between rival schemes, each transforming itself into its opposite in the course of (very little)

time. Mda sees this at work everywhere in the new South Africa, where a new elite hurriedly comes to terms with the old as soon as it is unable simply to step into its shoes. Progressives adopt the strange ritual of sadness, that almost shamanistic trance of remembrance: confidence has failed because happiness (like the world of the ancestors, now thought of simply as the “good old days”) has failed to materialise?¹⁰

Mda describes a comic confidence that is becoming a posture, and belief that is becoming a mere pretext. Peace and reconciliation have become hypocritical, a front to hide interests that cannot be disclosed. The comic has become comedy: a closed world that preserves the impression of being protected by ignoring the threats that loom over it (while nervously sweeping them under the carpet).

Does Zakes Mda sum up the awareness of South Africa today? From the epic of resistance to tragedy, then to satire, to the comic, it has finally come to comedy, with its brittle gaiety and sense of foreboding? An awareness that has constantly expanded? Coetzee has apparently stopped at scepticism: he no longer believes in his beliefs — and, so to speak, in nothing else either. The new generation has tried to go further. Is it succeeding? Has it reached a new metaphysical frontier, at which thought comes to a halt facing a barely thinkable force: what the Ancients called the divine, benevolent, malevolent...? The anger of the gods, or their ambiguous smile, indulgent but remote?

Has South African culture returned, after the promises and disappointments of modernity, to an “African-ness” that the disenchantment of the world has not yet been able to destroy? Is this “cool” messianism the new shape of the prophetic dimension of South African culture? Is a universal consciousness at last emerging from the impasses of its “Western” phase to enter more fully into the “African” period inaugurated in the visual arts a century ago, and which has been developing in music ever since?

¹⁰ See Mda 2000, p. 81-82: a symbol of the sessions of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission?

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