Writing Home

Lewis Nkosi on South African Writing

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12. See the previous essay in this volume, 'Fiction by Black South Africans'.
13. William Walsh, *V S Naipaul* (1973).
14. John Goldblatt, 'Review of *Robben Island*', *Index on Censorship* 3 (1974).

Postmodernism and Black Writing in South Africa

from *Writing in South Africa: Literature, Apartheid, and Democracy, 1970–1995*, edited by Derek Attridge and Rosemary Jolly (1998)

1

I am concerned not with the validity or propriety of postmodernist theory and practice with regard to South African literature taken in its aggregate. That debate has been going on for some time now within the country and in my opinion remains inconclusive. My purpose is to insist that in South Africa there exists an unhealed – I will not say incurable – split between black and white writing, between on the one side an urgent need to document and to bear witness and on the other the capacity to go on furlough, to loiter and to experiment. This split, apart from the linguistic medium, will find no ready analogy in the difference between, say, Afrikaans and English literatures, a division which is only comparable to the difference between regional literatures in the United States, especially between southern and northern, and between rural and urban writing, a difference which is largely a matter of a constellation of certain themes and preoccupations.

Though often treated as natural, sometimes as a positive sign of our cultural diversity and richness, and as such a reason for celebration rather than regret, this difference between black and white writing can also be read as a sign of social disparity and technological discrepancy. In a post-apartheid South Africa it is clearly a cause for embarrassment. It exists on the one side as a reminder of historical neglect and the

impoverishment of black writing and on the other of cultural privilege and opportunity in the case of white writing. While black writing can be said to benefit by being able to draw on its rootedness in the variegated life of the majority, it is also largely impervious for the most part to cultural movements which have exercised great influence in the development of white writing. This discrepancy is particularly noticeable in the domain of theory.

My argument, then, relates first to the colonial status of black writing in South Africa. In the second part I deal with what appears to me to be two entirely separate issues. The first of these is the argument that postmodernist theory and practice, as offshoots of poststructuralist thought, have very little to offer oppositional black writers still deeply preoccupied with nationalist agendas and questions of agency. This is an argument which has sometimes been offered by a few black writers sufficiently versed in postmodernist theory to discuss it. On the face of it, this is a straightforward issue of political representation, using a fictional mode. Recent and not so recent criticism of postmodernism, from critics as diverse as Christopher Norris (*What's Wrong*), Aijaz Ahmad (*In Theory*) and Charles Altieri ('What is Living'),[1] can be presumed to lend some support, however limited, to black South African critics who, one imagines, would enthusiastically endorse Norris's attack on postmodernism as tending to sponsor a 'radicalism' which

> has now passed over into a species of disguised apologetics for the socio-political status quo, a persuasion that 'reality' is constituted through and through by the meanings, values or discourses that presently compose it, so that nothing could count as effective counter-argument, much less a critique of existing institutions on valid theoretical grounds.[2]

My own ongoing reservations about black South Africans' indifference or impromptu dismissal of postmodernism is that it does not seem to have been accomplished with the necessary theoretical or critical labour, for it is rarely a question of critics who have worked through

these theoretical positions and come out on the other side convinced of their hopeless inadequacy or bankruptcy. Quite the contrary; and yet even the most disaffected critics of postmodernism tend to agree that it is not a single monolithic practice. There are at least two distinguishable modes of its operation, one clearly conservative and the other drawing on what Norris describes as a 'continuing critical impulse – the enlightened or emancipatory interest'.[3] Finally, is there not a disguised paternalism in the suggestion by some white South African critics that black writers do not 'need' postmodernism, or that it is not 'suitable' for them?

The other question I wish to discuss refers to indigenous African language or vernacular literatures, never even mentioned in most discussions of postmodernism, where I pause to ask whether postmodernism has any contribution to make, and if so, what form both modernism and postmodernism can take in promoting the process of modernisation and technical innovation. The reasons for treating this as a somewhat different issue from the first, more technical than merely political, is my conviction that vernacular literatures, through their use of non-European languages, are rooted in or affiliated to other traditions, with different structures and modes of operation. BW Vilakazi's doomed experimentations with European prosody in the writing of Zulu poetry early this century provide a cautionary tale, as I shall demonstrate.

2

However, let me turn first to what I have referred to as the colonial status of black writing in South Africa. I wish to argue that its formal insufficiencies, its disappointing breadline asceticism and prim disapproval of irony and its well-known predilection for what Lukács called 'petty realism, the trivially detailed painting of local colour': all these naïvely uncouth disfigurements of which many critics, including myself, have sometimes complained, can be seen to be a result, in part, of a claustrophobia related to this internal colonialism from which, it is hoped, a post-apartheid condition will set it free. Time and again, in

its gasps and stutters, in its nightmares and premonitions of a past to be endlessly repeated, black writing shows clearly its relation to this colonial history; the manner, for example, in which it discloses, at the most unexpected moments, its memory of the sjambok.

If my analysis is correct, it will surprise no one that black South African writers have shown no particular enthusiasm for postmodernism. Thus, although as another outgrowth of poststructuralist thought and practice, postmodernism appears to have taken some hold in South African literature, it is a movement wholly occupied, managed and dominated by white writers, with black writers seeming either to ignore it or not even to have heard of it. In the first instance, I wish to argue that the reasons why black South Africans should know so little about these contemporary cultural movements are easy enough to explain. Much black writing, it has always seemed to me, operates in an autonomous region entirely untouched by contemporary cultural theory. In fact, what is so astonishing about Mothobi Mutloatse's introduction to the anthology *Forced Landing* (1980) is a quality of an almost defiant insouciance, an impatient refusal to countenance any discussion of theory as such beyond a succession of normative assertions.[4]

What needs to be emphasised, however, is that for many black writers this seeming indifference to matters of theory is by no means deliberate; neither is the appearance of innocence a matter of prideful or willed ignorance. Furthermore, what needs to be explained is the wide discrepancy between contemporary theory and black writing as such; but so far much of recent commentary has merely dwelled on what Graham Pechey has correctly diagnosed as a 'bifurcation' between black and white writing without bothering to explain the material conditions which can account for that bifurcation.[5] Thus, in what at first appears to be an irreproachably nuanced description of 'South African literature', seen in process as developing in relation to the various stages of political resistance, comprising different temporalities while held together by the need to provide simultaneous anchoring to cultural identities and communities living out 'diverse times', Pechey also advances the idea of a South African writing practice which 'has never been anything

other than postmodern (as a whole practice, as an institution), though not always (technically, in the sense of its internal textual relations) postmodern*ist*'. There is an aporia here in the proposition that parts which have nothing in common with the postmodern somehow begin to share this fate as soon as they are combined into an institutionalised whole. If nothing else, this formulation serves more as a final confirmation of the triumphant rhetoric of postmodernist discourse, rather than offering a convincing argument about an existing state of affairs. Even more suspect is the assertion that South African writing is 'the place where marginalities of *all* kinds can meet and be positively valued'. After all, it is black writing which is so obviously marginalised and occupies, in fact, a minority status.

However, putting aside for the moment the obfuscating language, or even the question of how to read Olive Schreiner's 1883 novel, *The Story of an African Farm*, as a postmodernist text, what we are offered here is the consolation of a black writing which may be 'postmodern' without being 'postmodernist'. Equally, we are left to wonder at the characterisation of black writing as having been 'wakened out of its state-inflicted amnesia' which seems to apportion the blame equally to black writing and state persecution. But what was it that black writing was forced to forget? This is never spelled out. In fact, Pechey's text is riddled with many similar equivocations and evasions which function only to paper over fissures in his line of argument. The general thrust of Pechey's 'Post-apartheid Narratives' is to misrecognise the limitations imposed upon black writing by its colonial situation, in which case it is regarded merely as a reflection of the 'rich diversity' of South African writing.

In that now notorious and much-criticised global treatment of 'third-world' texts, Fredric Jameson argued that 'a popular or socially realistic third-world novel tends to come before us, not immediately, but as though already-read'.[6] This 'already-read' quality of much black fiction in South Africa, its tedious quality of inevitability and its inability to surprise the reader, is surely undeniable; but it is important to trace much of the backwardness of black writing to its state of internal

isolation and surveillance under the apartheid regime and some of its disabilities to wounds inflicted by cultural deprivation and social neglect. In South Africa the gap between black writing practice and contemporary theory is simply too large to ignore, requiring attention in a concerted fashion and in terms of remedial action.

Conventional wisdom has it that, until Bantu education was imposed on an unwilling black population, missionary and provincial schools produced a 'black elite' largely divorced from the social concerns of a black proletariat. Armed with Marx and Gramsci, and writing from the comfortable chairs of 'Whites Only' university departments, these white cultural critics have sometimes managed to produce a profile of a 'black elite' which is hardly recognisable to its supposed members. But even if the charge of 'elitism' could be made to stick, it may be useful to point out here that elsewhere 'elitism' has sometimes been coupled with experimentalism and avant-gardism that have vitalised literatures in Asia and South America; the absence, by and large, of this experimentalism from black writing in South Africa has other roots and remains to be adequately explained. This cannot be done by critics who see Mtutuzeli Matshoba's *Call Me Not a Man* (1979) as an example of groundbreaking innovation.

One result of this kind of critical analysis has been to authorise a view of black writing as willfully *sui generis* and naturally resistant to any attempts to bring it into fruitful contact with other contemporary movements in world literatures. This kind of analysis assigns a mode of writing to a racial category, then uses this essentialism simultaneously to explain and justify the limits of black realism. Such an approach overlooks the fact that black writers, apart from their isolation from the outside world and, more importantly, their isolation from the development of writing elsewhere on the African continent, until well into the seventies had no ready access to institutions of higher education where matters concerning literary theory, even in its rudimentary bourgeois form, came under discussion.

If we take the so-called *Drum* writers as representative of the fifties generation, it is surprising how few of them had any university

education. When I went to work on *Drum* only Can Themba was the product of a university education; Es'kia Mphahlele was then studying for his BA by correspondence. Needless to say, writers inside and outside South Africa have produced excellent work without the benefit of a university education. There is also the added question, much in need of theoretical elaboration, whether one could be a 'postmodernist' without knowing it. In any event, where theory counts for so much – as seems to be the case with current artistic movements – it cannot be an accident that most works that are tuned into contemporary aesthetic movements are by white rather than black writers. Above all, what the black community must reject is the insultingly patronising attitude of some left-wing critics who, in their eagerness to privilege text that offers them a slice of black life of which they are ignorant, attempt to foist upon us something like Modikwe Dikobe's *The Marabi Dance* (1973). Graham Pechey asks: 'Does post-apartheid writing, then, bifurcate into a modernist or postmodernist *white* writing on the one hand and a neo-realist *black* writing on the other?' (my emphasis added).[7] The question that Pechey is too embarrassed even to pose is why this bifurcation has taken place at all; instead, he prefers to treat South African writing as 'a rich polyphony of (its) forms and modes' which has 'tended to negotiate the heightening militancy of the struggle; either, on the black side, to thematise "fighting" in cathartic stories of recent struggles and in "battle hymns"; or, on the white side, to let violence have its effects in the formal dislocation of its texts and in its vivid imaging of a chaotic apocalypse'. Since we are here in the domain of literary production and creative skills and not, except metaphorically, in a zone of combat, given a choice on the one side of 'cathartic stories' and on the other the 'formal dislocation of texts' and 'vivid imaging', we know precisely which texts on the sides of that bifurcation will seem to yield greater aesthetic rewards; for, again to adapt Jameson to the South African situation, certain black South African texts can be read only 'for the freshness of information and a social interest that we cannot share'.

3

I wish to turn now to the two other issues I raised with regard to postmodernism in South Africa, at least in so far as black writing is concerned. The first concerns the argument often made elsewhere against postmodernism, that it has the effect of 'disempowering' those struggling to dismantle imperialist discourses: the view so powerfully advanced by Nancy Hartsock five years ago that 'postmodernism represents a dangerous approach for any marginalised group to adopt'.[8] From the point of view of many women and minorities, the case against postmodernism is invariably presented as a critique of an epistemological scepticism so extreme that it is seen as politically immobilising; for it has been argued by many critics, Annamaria Carusi among others, that 'undecidability, multiple and endless possibilities of meaning . . . have no place in the context of real political urgency, where there is a need not for endless self-reflexivity, but for definite decisions to be made';[9] and in Kumkum Sangari's assertion about postmodernism that 'the writing that emerges from this position, however critical it may be of colonial discourses, gloomily disempowers the "nation" as an enabling idea and relocates the impulses for change as everywhere and nowhere'.[10]

In my own private discussions with black writers and critics I found them not only hostile to movements like postmodernism; also, they seemed to banish from consideration any form of representation which departs even slightly from their favoured paradigms, including 'magic realism', perhaps because of what Linda Hutcheon calls its 'challenges to the conventions of realism'.[11] For critics who consider literary realism as simply exhausted and who tend to treat *all* realistic representations as necessarily backward, even reactionary, not to have heard of postmodernism signals a species of underdevelopment or worse.

In my study of African literature under the title *Tasks and Masks*, a book completed in the 1970s before the present spate of postcolonial theories, and unashamedly using traditional tools of criticism, I made the observation concerning the fiction of Chinua Achebe that in the light of the history of European denigration of African societies, in the

light of the widespread assumption that African societies functioned without family, law or philosophical thought, the first generation of novelists in post-independence Africa felt it to be their responsibility to re-assemble, re-constitute, and re-present a simulacrum of a precolonial 'Africa'. To the question 'What did Africa look or feel like before the arrival of Europeans?' one could simply pull out *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and *Arrow of God* (1964) as an adequate reply.

I keep in abeyance, of course, the possible objections to the essentialist turn of such an argument, even the objection to using Achebe's texts in the same way Yoruba cosmogony in Wole Soyinka's plays has sometimes been employed: as essential representations of an African universe. It must also be pointed out that Achebe himself has never authorised that kind of use for his texts. In any case, Achebe's realist procedures would tend to preclude the use of his texts in an allegorical way about African social thought as such: Achebe confines himself rigorously within the Igbo frame. I am also aware that, strictly speaking, the past as such is not wholly recuperable; but where Africa has been essentialised as Europe's other, Achebe's texts have functioned rightly as paradigms of African social thought and organisation.

In that chapter, 'In Search of African Modernism', I make the further point that in trying to 're-create' the past, surprisingly a simple realism 'usually suffices'. Benita Parry misrepresents my argument when she portrays me as 'cool' on African modernism, describing me as 'censoring its linguistic and narrative innovations'.[12] What is in question in all these arguments is the role of realism in the representation of the historical process; underpinning Parry's critical writing on South African literature is the notion that realism has run its course and is now politically retardative. She is not alone in holding such a view; in consequence, in spite of its emancipatory gesture, the fiction of writers like Njabulo S Ndebele or Alex La Guma is thought to be essentially backward looking. For example, for Parry, La Guma's fiction is nothing more than a 'recycling of stale and purple language, of received narrative practices and exhausted modes of address [which] normalise the fiction's ex-centric material and defuse a confrontational stance'. One

suspects that a certain kind of mechanical, philosophic rhetoric is at work here, a poverty of response which has taken over where a critical sensibility should operate, when a critic can dismiss *A Walk in the Night* as 'a recycling of stale or purple language'. One can even sympathise with Arun P Mukherjee's impatience with 'the postmodernist tendency to valorise antirealist fiction':

> When critics like Catherine Belsey and Linda Hutcheon suggest that antirealist fiction 'denaturalizes' what we had taken to be real and thus warns us against being sucked into the illusionist trap set by realist representation by constantly drawing attention to its process, I feel like telling them that, after a while, the metafictions of postmodernism stop having that effect because of our increasing familiarity with their stylistic manoeuvres.[13]

My own quarrel with 'black' realist fiction in South Africa was never premised on the idea that realism as such was outmoded; rather, that it was incompetent, 'technically brittle', to use Emily Apter's descriptive phrase about 'colonial realism', in fact, quite uncannily, my argument was couched in terms nearly identical with those used by Apter in her criticism of French 'colonial realism' when she suggests that such fiction is in competition with the evidentiary claims of the photographic image; and if one extends this argument to South Africa, this suggests – ironically – that black 'protest fiction' might even be said to serve as the underside of colonial realism:

> Colonial realism's narrative strategies are more technically brittle in their conventional stylizations. Coming apart at the seams, they reveal their fierce competitiveness with the power of the mechanically produced image, given mass appeal by the turn of the century as a result, in part, of the explosion of photographic tourism, ethnography, commercially distributed pornography, national festivals, and world exhibitionism.[14]

The irony of a politically minded protest fiction in collusion with 'commercially distributed pornography' is too rich not to linger on a little longer; nevertheless, attacks on realism *tout court* cannot ignore the issues raised by Raymond Williams in his essay 'When Was Modernism?', in which he poses the question whether nineteenth-century realism as such is necessarily beyond the modernist pale.[15] Williams makes the interesting point that the intensities in some texts of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century realism – and he would include the canonical texts of high realism by novelists such as Charles Dickens and Gustave Flaubert – show these texts as already constituting instances of, or earlier moments of, modernism. Then the argument to be made with regard to black literature in South Africa or other parts of the non-European world is that black writers there have no obligation to follow every new trend emanating from Europe; they need not dispense with realism altogether until, to their own satisfaction, they feel they have exhausted all the resources which realism was supposed to provide in the first place; and if this argument holds true for the practitioners of realism as a general style, it must also hold for the modernist writer who feels no compulsion to join what Houston Baker would have called 'the postmodernist collective'.[16]

At the risk of being accused of supporting some version of a linear history of development, I think we ought seriously to entertain the idea that black South African writers may not in fact become postmodernists before they have brought to completion their modernist agenda. In what I presume to have been a moment of bad temper, Houston Baker reminded us, if we needed any reminding, that an African-American modernism differed essentially from an Anglo-American version:

> Afro-American scholars, intellectuals, and activists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were faced with a task substantially different from that of their Anglo-American, British and Irish counterparts. Rather than bashing the bourgeoisie, such spokespersons were attempting to create one. Far from being rebellious dissenters against existent Afro-American expressive

> forms, they sought to enhance these forms and bring them before a sophisticated public. And far from repudiating the emergent age as 'an old bitch gone in the teeth', Afro-American spokespersons welcomed a new century as a time when shackles of slavery and impoverishment would fall decisively away.

Without trying to imply that black writers and intellectuals in South Africa are necessarily striving for identical goals, it is clear that the same historical conditions and divisions which plagued a white-dominated society in America are also at work in South Africa.

4

The final question I wish to ask is what possible reading of indigenous African-language literature can pass unmolested through the grid of the current postmodernisms? Though my intention is not to argue that postmodernism is somehow inappropriate for indigenous-language literatures, here I wish to pose the question as to what kind of postmodernism would elicit a response from these literatures: what blending of styles, what quotations and citations, what temporalities would enable these literatures to go beyond their own project of modernisation to join the ranks of a postmodern one? Lastly, a more interesting question I wish to ask is whether it is possible to be postmodernist at all without even knowing? Here I have in mind Amos Tutuola's *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* (1952), which I characterised some years ago as having been a modernist work *avant la lettre*, although on my present reading it may even be said to be more post- than modernist.

The work of a 'houseboy' and blacksmith with only a primary school education, Tutuola's text is an amalgam of styles and genres, neither strictly a novel nor a traditional narrative, but a heterogeneous blending: of folk tale, heroic adventure and dilemma tale, moral fable, quest, romance, discourses on law, finance and commerce, a perplexing pot-pourri of symbolic codes and languages cutting across any strict generic boundaries and cultures, in which the material signs of a modern market economy do not so much replace or displace the traditional

barter system, the cowries for the British pound, as merely coexist with it in an unstable heterogeneity. So, too, is a passion for computation a signal of an emergent capitalist formation resembling its manifestation in Defoe's texts three centuries before. In *Drinkard*'s world even 'Fear' and 'Death' are only commodities to be bought and sold:

> Now by that time and before we entered inside the white tree, we had 'sold our death' to somebody at the door for the sum of £70.18.6d and 'lent our fear' to somebody at the door as well on an interest of £3.10.0d per month, so we did not care about death and we did not fear again. When we entered inside the white tree, there we found ourselves inside a big house which was in the centre of a big and beautiful town . . . So we met the old woman sat on a chair in a big parlour which was decorated with costly things. She took us to the largest dancing hall which was in the centre of that house, and there we saw that over 300 people were dancing all together. The hall was decorated with about one million pounds (£) and there were many images and our own too were in the centre of the hall.

What, then, is *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*? A postmodernist text that does not even know its own name? It would be preposterous, of course, to suggest that Tutuola is consciously participating in some postmodernist manoeuvre designed to waylay an unsuspecting contemporary critic; in one of those familiar referential slippages Tutuola explained what he thought he was doing: merely writing a story to 'tell of my ancestors and how they lived in their day'. Michael Thelwell wrote in the introduction to the 1984 edition of this text, first published in 1952:

> I shall not speculate – intriguing though that prospect be – on precisely which chords of modern literary sensibility are set resonating under the stimulus of *Drinkard*'s unique vision. Certainly one can see where certain Jungian and Freudian critics could, with barely compatible assumptions, find much to engage them in its world. So too can surrealists and devotees of magical realism find within it hospitable territory on which to plant their respective standards.[17]

Are we likely ever to encounter in vernacular literature of South Africa a work of such intense hybridity which might be said to resemble *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*? But then, however idiosyncratic his use of it, Tutuola was writing in English, a European language which would make it more than likely that we would read him in ways consonant with our awareness of symbolist and surrealist paradigms. This way of presenting my case allows me to lay further emphasis on the differences between black and white writing in South Africa, this time by way of contrasting European-based and indigenous African languages as media of expression.

Most South African critics eager to participate in the new discursivities made available by the postcolonial condition are equally eager to establish for the two European-based languages, 'South African English', and perhaps with some justification Afrikaans, an *African* identity, though the status of the latter as an 'African' language rather than the creolisation of a European one is still in dispute. As in the case of Canadian and Australian cultural critics, this readiness by white South African writers and critics to see themselves as among Europe's 'others' rather than continuers of European traditions in other parts of the globe is surely justifiable on pragmatic political grounds; but it is also probably true, as Fredric Jameson also stated the matter with regard to European radicals like Walter Benjamin, that, like the children of the European bourgeoisie, 'maimed as well as privileged', the children of the colonial settlers in South Africa 'have an interest in lifting the burdens of exploitation [they], too, necessarily suffer'; and that they wish to 'secede' from these colonial settler regimes and 'to enjoy an imaginary identification' with the oppressed majorities or minorities, whatever the case may be.[18]

What is indisputable is that writers in English and Afrikaans, of whatever ethnic background or race, have a ready access through these languages to European forms of experimentation – I have already mentioned symbolist and surrealist innovations – because these languages, through an accumulation of tradition, through a historical connection with European literatures, are already hooked into European

systems of aesthetic forms in a way not readily available to indigenous African language literatures.

'Available' is perhaps not the right word to use here, since the missionaries tried their best to exercise an influence on the development of local literary traditions which can now legitimately claim John Buchan and Shakespeare as among their 'ancestral fathers'. Nevertheless, most works of African literature written in the native languages are linked to indigenous traditions in the most obvious ways. They come out of those traditions, confirming their ways of looking at the world and their ways of talking about the world. It would be instructive, for example, to examine how a novel or poem written in Zulu might break with the linguistic habits of Zulu classical poetry which comes to us through the oral tradition. What might a genuinely committed postmodernist Zulu novel look like? We know what a good Zulu poet like BW Vilakazi produced in the forties when, in what critics have since considered a misguided experiment, he attempted to modernise the tradition of Zulu poetry in accordance with European norms, first by writing it down where before it had been spoken or chanted and then by trying to apply the techniques of English prosody to Zulu. According to the Zulu scholar CLS Nyembezi, Vilakazi, in the collection called *Inkondlo kaZulu* [Zulu Songs, 1935], was responsible for developing poetry whose form departed from the traditional *izibongo* (or praise). Instead of adopting the style and pattern of the *izibongo*, he experimented with European forms. He divided his poems into regular stanzas. He also experimented with rhyme (see the introduction to Vilakazi, *Zulu Horizons*).[19] This experiment and its lamentable failure indicated all too clearly that vernacular literatures have prior claims upon them born of different linguistic systems and the oral and narrative traditions from which they partly derive. As one of the scholars and critics [Dexter Taylor] pointed out at the time:

> He attempts rhyme, but with limited success, as Zulu syllables, invariably, ending in vowels, do not present the variety of sound and tone that makes successful rhyming possible. Even the forms of

> English rhythm that he uses do not supply a perfect medium, for Zulu accents and stresses refuse to be bent into conformity with the beat of the music.[20]

A lively question, therefore, is in what form could vernacular works ever insert themselves into the various currents of postmodernist practice which, after all, erupt from specific disenchantments with various projects of the Enlightenment, culminating in the now discarded or largely absorbed modernist experiments? As separate from the problem of internal textual relations, it is obvious that certain forms of traditional discourse would have no problem of alignment with the split or decentred Lacanian subject, as the Nongqawuse episode would tend to show;[21] the art produced under possession is already 'subjectless' and what passes for the 'subject of discourse' is speaking from many places at once. One way of reading the Nongqawuse episode, as indeed Bessie Head's *A Question of Power*, is by recourse to Shoshana Felman's *Writing and Madness* (1985) and Michel Foucault's *Madness and Civilization* (1967), in which all normative values and standards regarding the place of madness in society, indeed within the history of Western philosophy and the sovereignty of Reason within it, are put in question. It is possible, for example, to suggest a link between certain 'mental disorders' in these texts with the movement of desire in the speaking subject, especially in a struggle against the curtailment of this movement by patriarchal domination. In Mtutuzeli Matshoba's fictional version (in *Call Me Not a Man*), Nongqawuse is presented as a heroine instead of a source of error under pressure of colonial oppression, as Jeff Peires has described the episode in *The Dead Will Arise*. Of interest to psychoanalytical thought is Nongqawuse's 'narcissism', her specular self-identification when she peers into a pool of water and thinks she can hear voices of the ancestral spirits speaking to her. Was claiming to have seen visions and to have heard voices of the ancestral spirits not perhaps Nongqawuse's attempt – not fully conscious to be sure – to clear space for herself in which as a woman, traditionally forbidden to participate in political discourse, she could then speak with some authority and be listened to? What would a

postmodernist feminist discourse do with the *hlonipha* tradition, which disallows women from uttering certain locutions in the presence of men? If a certain postmodernism is indeed disabling, it is equally true that some form of postmodernism can have potentially subversive and discomposing effects not only on the hegemonic discourses of the imperial centre but on those created by traditions to underpin hierarchical structures of age and patriarchy.

Notes

This chapter is an expanded version of a paper delivered at the 1995 African Literature Association Conference in Ohio, United States of America.

1. Christopher Norris, *What's Wrong with Postmodernism: Critical Theory and the Ends of Philosophy* (1990); Aijaz Ahmad, *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures* (1992); Charles Altieri, 'What is Living and What is Dead in American Postmodernism', *Critical Inquiry* 22 (1996).
2. Norris, *What's Wrong*.
3. Norris, *What's Wrong*.
4. This impatience is reflected in the modest programme which is however presented in a highly emotive language: 'We are going to pee, spit and shit on literary convention before we are through; we are going to kick and pull and push and drag literature into the form we prefer.' [*LN*]
5. Graham Pechey, 'Post-apartheid Narratives', in *Colonial Discourse/Postcolonial Theory*, eds Francis Barker, Peter Hulme and Margaret Iversen (1994).
6. Fredric Jameson, 'Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism', *Social Text* 15 (1986).
7. Pechey, 'Post-apartheid Narratives'.
8. Nancy Hartsock, 'Rethinking Modernism: Minority vs Majority Theories', in *The Nature and Context of Minority Discourse*, eds Abdul R JanMohamed and David Lloyd (1990).
9. Annamaria Carusi, 'Post, Post and Post. Or, Where is South African Literature in All This?', in *Past the Last Post: Theorising Post-Colonialism and Post-Modernism*, eds Ian Adam and Helen Tiffin (1990).
10. Kumkum Sangari, 'The Politics of the Possible', *Cultural Critique* 7 (1987).
11. Linda Hutcheon, 'Beginning to Theorize Postmodernism', in *A Postmodernist Reader*, eds Joseph Natoli and Linda Hutcheon (1993).
12. Benita Parry, 'Culture Clash', *Transition* 55 (1992).

13. Arun P Mukherjee, 'Whose Post-Colonialism and Whose Postmodernism?', *World Literature Written in English* 30.2 (1990).
14. Emily Apter, 'Ethnographic Travesties: Colonial Realism, French Feminism, and the Case of Elissa Rhais', in *After Colonialism*, ed. Gyan Prakash (1995).
15. Raymond Williams, 'When Was Modernism?', in *The Politics of Modernism*, ed. Tony Pinkney (1989).
16. Baker refers to the 'myths of non-self', which he says are the products of rhetoricians who are privileged, and goes on to make the point: 'One can, however, always refuse to be part of a deconstructive collective.' [*LN*] Houston Baker Jr, *Afro-American Poetics: Revisions of Harlem and the Black Aesthetic* (1988).
17. Michael Thelwell, 'Introduction' to Amos Tutuola's *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* (1984).
18. Fredric Jameson, 'Review of *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin, 1910–1940*', *London Review of Books* (3 August 1995).
19. BW Vilakazi, *Zulu Horizons* (1961).
20. J. Dexter Taylor, '*Inkondlo kaZulu*: An Appreciation', *Bantu Studies* 9 (1935).
21. There are many accounts, from the tradition and from historical narratives, the most recent being JB Peires's *The Dead Will Arise*, of how in the middle of the nineteenth century a young Xhosa woman named Nongqawuse, claiming to have held conversations with ancestral spirits, induced the Xhosa people to slaughter their cattle and burn corn: 'Nongqawuse said that she had met with "new people" from over the sea, who were the ancestors of the living Xhosa. They told her that the dead were preparing to rise again, and wonderful new cattle too, but first the people must kill their cattle and destroy their corn which were contaminated and impure.' The result was major catastrophe for the Xhosa, many of whom died of starvation. [*LN*] JB Peires, *The Dead Will Arise: Nongqawuse and the Great Xhosa Cattle Killing Movement of 1856–7* (1989).

The Republic of Letters after the Mandela Republic

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On 19 April 2001, Njabulo S Ndebele, the new vice-chancellor of the University of Cape Town and a writer himself (noted especially for his short-story collection, *Fools and Other Stories*), invited over fifteen writers and critics to consider the state of letters in South Africa after the fall of apartheid. To commence: three writers, the Nigerian-born Kole Omotoso, Brenda Cooper and myself, were to make a brief presentation, each lasting fifteen minutes; two discussants, the poet and teacher Jeremy Cronin and Ian Glenn, critic and professor at the University of Cape Town, were to respond. An undercurrent running through the discussions that evening was, broadly speaking, the relation of the present to the past, both in the politically constituted republic, which came into being with the inauguration of Nelson Mandela as the first president of a freely elected democratic government on the one side, and the republic of letters on the other, which exists, presumably, parallel to the political republic, one interacting with the other.

Inevitably, much discussion in South Africa at the moment centres on notions of nation-building. Two novels to which I shall refer on occasion, Zoë Wicomb's *David's Story* and Zakes Mda's *The Heart of Redness*, both published in 2000, are much preoccupied with the projects of nation-building and the relation of the past to the present: both take up the question of how to make the transition from the past to the present; both reflect on what is continuous and what is discontinuous