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## The experimental line in fiction

MICHAEL GREEN

This chapter will consider what J. M. Coetzee has called 'the experimental line' within the works of black and white writers in English and Afrikaans, showing how, during the apartheid years, its playfulness and experimentalism was often passed over in critical accounts intent on identifying a literature of witness and solidarity. It will also trace the continuing 'line' of experimentation in post-apartheid literature.

'What value does the experimental line in modern Western literature hold for Africa?', asks Coetzee in 'Alex La Guma and the Responsibilities of the South African Writer' (p. 117), an essay first published in 1971. The question is prompted by Lewis Nkosi's 1966 essay, 'Fiction by Black South Africans', in which he argues that, 'With the best will in the world it is impossible to detect in the fiction of black South Africans any significant and complex talent which responds with both the vigour of the imagination and sufficient technical resources to the problems posed by conditions in South Africa.' 'If black South African writers have read modern works of literature', Nkosi states, name-checking Dostoevsky, Burroughs, Kafka and Joyce, 'they seem to be totally unaware of its most compelling innovations'. 'What we get most frequently,' he argues, 'is the journalistic fact parading outrageously as imaginative literature' (p. 246).

Coetzee's response presents a prescient sketch of the main issues that have congregated around the kind of fiction he would go on to write. Setting aside any prescriptivism as to what kind of fiction Africans 'ought' to write, Coetzee frames the question of experimentalism and responsibility within related questions concerning the literary and the social ('does not the Western experimental line assume *and perpetuate* a rift between the writer and society at large which is a fact of life in the West but need not become a fact of life in Africa?'); the assumption that innovations in aesthetic form are necessarily progressive in terms of both literary expression and ideological allegiance

MICHAEL GREEN

(‘does homage to Western experimentalism not involve a rather simple-minded view of an absolute “technique” which, as in the myth of our science, can only progress, never regress . . .?’); and the political and ethical dimensions of electing to work in a particular fictional mode in a specific context (‘are we not entitled to ask . . . whether there might not be a whole spectrum of valid literatures open to Africa, and to suggest that the writer should not, so to speak, choose his tradition at random, but rather choose it with some sense of the social implications of his choice?’ [p. 117]).

Working through these questions as they apply to La Guma’s fiction, Coetzee shows that La Guma’s work, whilst clearly not related to the strategies of high modernism Nkosi finds absent as an influence on black South African writing, moves well beyond the limits of naturalism into the European traditions of critical or social realism. Even though Coetzee closes his response to Nkosi by keeping the whole question of form and responsibility open (there can be no “correct” mode’ for a society ‘in search of an identity it may never find’ [p. 124]), the conclusions he reaches concerning La Guma still feed into the tropes governing the reception of apartheid-period black South African writing: that its predominant method is that of documenting the atrocities of colonialism and apartheid through the realist mode.

The argument that La Guma’s work can be read productively in relation to a specifically European line of realism is something of an anomaly in the critical consensus of the time – so much so that Coetzee sees La Guma’s socially progressive critical realism as a form of experimentalism that avoids the conservatism into which Nkosi’s argument lapses. Significantly, the more ‘naive’ versions of local realism criticised by both Coetzee and Nkosi from their different perspectives in this exchange were, within a few years, to take on the status of a principled choice and an ethical imperative. Various ascribed to the deprivation and isolation of black South African writers, the influence of popular fiction or the impact of a vigorous period of local journalism in the 1950s, the kind of writing that, in Es’kia Mphahlele’s words, ‘extracts experience from raw life and does little to impose an aesthetic on the material’ (cited in Bethlehem, *Skin Tight*, p. 3) was, as the brutality of apartheid suppression and the militancy of opposition escalated, soon to become practically a mandatory mode for progressive writing. The realist ideal of capturing the human subject as embedded in a full political, social and economic context, which emerged in relation to the rise of nineteenth-century industrial capitalism, has lent itself to a number of ideological programmes, from György Lukács’s views on the socialist realist novel to the British liberal literary tradition. Adopted by and adapted to the South African context, the claims made

### The experimental line in fiction

for the moral authority of realism as the primary mode of bearing witness to the truth of South Africa infused the cultural activism of the late 1970s and 1980s, as is clear in Mothobi Mutloatse's ringing assertion in an interview of 1981: 'We need a writing that records exactly the situation we live in, and any writing which ignores the urgency of political events will be irrelevant' (cited in Bethlehem, *Skin Tight*, p. 2).

Mutloatse's assertion was echoed in any number of pronouncements by the Congress of South African Writers and the cultural desks of the African National Congress, the United Democratic Front and the Congress of South African Trade Unions. This 'rhetoric of urgency' (Bethlehem, *Skin Tight*, p. 3) is indeed dominant, although with less consistency than one would expect, in the poetry, theatre, novels and short stories written by black writers of the period. Nadine Gordimer, the most prominent of white literary activists, would go so far in a 1973 essay as to reject outright the formal literary experimentation of the European kind Nkosi criticises African writers for ignoring. Whilst Gordimer defined her own sophisticated exploration of the realist novelistic tradition to some degree against the more direct representational modes she believed appropriate for black writers, her opposition to the 'hyper-introspective' (Bethlehem, *Skin Tight*, p. 7) experimental text as a suitable mode for engaging with the heightened political context of South Africa would be extended to all South African writers, a prime target being the fiction of J. M. Coetzee (see 'The Idea of Gardening', p. 6). The fiction Coetzee began writing within a few years of setting out the 'responsibilities of the South African writer' appears to fly in the face of each of the points he raises in his response to Nkosi. Certainly a good number of his critics have chosen to use criteria implicitly related to these or related points against Coetzee's work. A few representative examples must suffice: that Coetzee's work perpetuates a rift between the writer and society is central to Vaughan's comment that 'Coetzee's language can say next to nothing, and certainly nothing reliable, about experiences outside the modality of its own racial-historical dialectic' ('Literature and Politics', p. 128). That the novels overemphasise 'technique' is registered in Chapman's charge that both Coetzee and the critics who espouse his work 'confirm the suspicions of many black writers that literary pursuit in white South Africa has rather more to do with the gratifications of libidinal language than the fulfilments of fighting political injustice' ('Writing of Politics', p. 338), whilst Coetzee's experimentalism is denied any 'progressive' merit in JanMohamed's assertion that it 'epitomizes the dehistoricizing, desocializing tendency of colonialist fiction' ('Economy of Manichean Allegory', p. 73) in a postcolonial context. And that Coetzee has disregarded the social

MICHAEL GREEN

constraints upon a writer's choice of 'tradition' is evident for Rich, who holds that Coetzee's novels demonstrate precisely how 'literary postmodernism in a postcolonial context as South Africa . . . is a moral dead end' ('Apartheid and the Decline of the Civilization Idea', p. 389).

### Modernism and its posts

Comparatively early in his career Coetzee's work would find an audience that recognised a different kind of responsibility and engagement, one predicated on interrogating just such discursive horizons in the South African critical and creative landscape. In the first full-length study of Coetzee's work, *The Novels of J. M. Coetzee: Lacanian Allegories* (1988), Teresa Dovey argued that the novels were a form of 'criticism-as-fiction, or fiction-as-criticism' (p. 9) that pre-empted naive readings on essentially referential terms. David Attwell, in his *J. M. Coetzee: South Africa and the Politics of Writing*, attempted to cut through the 'considerably oversimplified polarization' between the claims of political resistance and poststructuralist sophistication in a reading of the novels as 'a form of situational metafiction' that takes into account both 'reflexivity and historicity' (pp. 2–3).

More recently, Derek Attridge has challenged the compulsion to define the 'postmodern' paradigm in terms of either reactionary aestheticism or radical innovation by reinvesting the discursive strategies of modernism with an ethical dimension particularly appropriate to the postcolonial context. Attridge allies the self-reflexiveness of modernist writing with 'a new apprehension of the claims of otherness, of that which cannot be expressed in the discourse available' (*J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*, p. 4). For him, Coetzee's self-reflective, allusive, metafictional strategies are not so much postmodern as late or neomodern (p. 2), in that his 'handling of formal properties is bound up with the capacity of his work to engage with – to stage, confront, apprehend, explore – otherness' (p. 6). Combining a consistent denial of 'any ethical guidance from an authoritative voice or valorizing metalanguage' with narrating figures insistently presented as 'selves mediated by a language which has not forgotten its mediating role' (p. 7), Coetzee's novels produce a 'continued, strenuous enterprise in acknowledging alterity' (p. 12).

The Vietnamese and native South Africans linked through the violence of the imperial and colonial projects paralleled in the two novellas making up Coetzee's first novel, *Dusklands* (1974); the farm servants of *In the Heart of the Country's* (1977) obsessive, hallucinatory, antipastoral interrogation of

## The experimental line in fiction

the tradition of the farm novel; the barbarians in the no time/no place of *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), where the moral and political basis for the liberal-humanist attempt at distancing itself from the coloniser–colonised relationship is interrogated in its most intimate confessional form; the atopian figure of the protagonist in *Life & Times of Michael K* (1983) whose distilled minimalism disrupts dystopian and utopian projections alike at a moment of historical impasse; Friday, whose silence/silencing both generates and undercuts *Foe's* (1986) intertextual engagement with a founding work in a canon the novel subverts and extends; the impenetrable figure of Vercueil in *Age of Iron* (1990), to whom the dying Mrs Curren entrusts the passing on of the letter to her daughter in which she has attempts to put down the truth of how she has lived in a time of acute civil unrest; the absent son – absent beyond the fact of his death – at the heart of *The Master of Petersburg's* (1994) historic-biographical play around Dostoevsky during the genesis of *The Possessed*; the author himself as the oblique subject of the third-person, present-tensed 'autobiographies', *Boyhood: Scenes from Provincial Life* (1997), *Youth: Scenes from Provincial Life* (vol. II, 2002), and the resistance the figure of the author presents to his biographer's efforts in *Summertime* (2009); Lucy as the daughter whose surrender to the violent displacement of the new the father fails to understand, even in the midst of his own acts of abasement in *Disgrace* (1999); the lessons making up *Elizabeth Costello* (2003) which the writer as protagonist can never master; each of these 'figures of alterity' – figures who continue to recur in Coetzee's ongoing fictional output – convey a resistance, says Attridge (in terms not necessarily related to those presented here), to 'the discourses of the ruling culture': 'the culture, that is, which has conditioned the author, the kind of readers which the novels are likely to find, and the genre of the novel itself' (p. 13).

The evident achievements of these novels rapidly took Coetzee from the marginality Edward Said suggests is the natural place of the 'public intellectual' (the descriptor most recently revived as a way of positioning Coetzee) to one of the most highly recognised and rewarded of South African writers. The 'experimental line', then, has clearly not been 'passed over' in the reception of South African fiction for some time ('It is difficult to be a so-called successful writer and to occupy a marginal position at the same time, even in our day and age', responds Coetzee to Jane Poyner's attempts to manoeuvre him back into such a position ['J. M. Coetzee in Conversation', p. 23]), but it is important to note at this point that the figure of the line, in Coetzee's sense of both a specific approach to or type of writing and a continuous, interconnected series, cannot be left in the singular.

MICHAEL GREEN

### Writing white/writing black

In *J. M. Coetzee: South Africa and the Politics of Writing*, David Attwell made a major contribution to the case for seeing Coetzee as an exemplary figure in the history of experimental 'white writing' in South Africa; his more recent study, *Rewriting Modernity: Studies in Black South African Literary History*, is implicitly complementary in its analysis of South African black writing. In the final chapter, Attwell mounts a specific rebuttal of Nkosi's insistence 'that in South Africa there exists an unhealed . . . split between black and white writing, between on the one side an urgent need to document and bear witness and on the other side the capacity to go on furlough, to loiter, and to experiment' ('Postmodernism and Black Writing in South Africa', p. 75). Entitled, in an overt invocation of the early Coetzee, 'The Experimental Turn', it opens up a rich field for critical consideration when, by way of clearing the ground for his analysis of 'experimentalism in contemporary fiction', Attwell sets out a number of examples illustrating that 'black writing is indeed replete with instances of aesthetic self-consciousness, not excluding the very kinds of experimentalism that we associate with modernism' (p. 172).

Attwell cites Njabulo Ndebele's experimenting with Joycean internal monologues in isiZulu while a student; the spirit of the modernist manifesto in Muthobi Mutloatse's introduction to the collection of Black Consciousness-inspired short fiction, *Forced Landing* (1980); the overtly experimental 'Interludes' in Esk'ia Mphahlele's autobiography, *Down Second Avenue* (1959); the informing voices of Albert Camus and Richard Wright in Nkosi's own *Mating Birds* (1979); Dugmore Boetie's *Familiarity is the Kingdom of the Lost* (1969), in which the distinction between the artist and con man is blurred; and the narrative mode of Part One of Mongane Serote's *To Every Birth its Blood* (1981), modelled as it is on the compositional and performance techniques of jazz.

He then moves on to a thorough and detailed reading of the implicit experimental dimensions in Ndebele's *Fools and other Stories* (1983) and the more overt display of this in Zakes Mda's *Ways of Dying* (1995) and *The Heart of Redness* (2000). In something of a reprisal of Coetzee's analysis of La Guma, Attwell argues that in *Fools*, Ndebele 'redeploys realism's resources in an experimental intervention' (p. 192). In 'drawing on the symbolic goods of realism long after the effects of modernism have been widely felt' (p. 182), Ndebele makes of realism an experimental mode that recovers, in the intense and fraught context of 1980s South Africa, 'some of the epistemological freshness that once adhered to realism itself' (p. 183) in the nineteenth century.

## The experimental line in fiction

Ndebele's later fiction expands into the radically hybrid form of *The Cry of Winnie Mandela* (2003), a two-part work in which fiction, essay and biography merge within overtly metafictional structures. In the first part the separate stories of four southern African women separated from their husbands – 'Penelope's descendants' – by circumstances common during the apartheid period are told. In the second part the women share their stories and then decide to address them to the Mother of the Nation, Winnie Mandela, the archetypal South African figure of a woman who spent much of her life waiting for her husband to return. Winnie herself responds in a variety of voices overtly mediated by the narrator-as-author, meditating on the public nature of her separation, her failure to live up to the ideal of the patient wife, and her refusal to be turned into a symbolic figure of post-apartheid national reconciliation. Woven around journeys through an evocatively rendered South African landscape, the novel ends with Winnie joining the four women coming into their respective identities as they drive to the coast for a holiday. En route they pick up a hitch-hiker who turns out to be Penelope; she gives her blessing to the women's 'pilgrimage to eternal companionship' (p. 121).

Mda's fiction is smoother in its development within the experimental line. There is an almost palpable sense of relief in Attwell's claim that the intertextuality Mda sets up between his early fiction and that of Coetzee is evidence of a 'movement of modernist practice across the racial divide of authorship in South Africa' (p. 194). Certainly by the time Mda – best known through the struggle years as a playwright – turned to the novel form in the 1990s, a critical climate had been created in which the fictional modes he adopted were welcomed largely on grounds won in earlier debates concerning primarily white writers in the 'experimental line'. *Ways of Dying* (1995), written in the transitional period of the early 1990s, tells the story of Toloki, a self-appointed professional mourner who creates in his improvised funerary performances a dynamic relationship between traditional forms and uneven urban modernities that points towards the symbolic shifts necessary for anything like a new South Africa. Dual narratives in *The Heart of Redness* (2000) reposition the past in relation to the present, with the split allegiances of the traumatic 1856–7 Cattle-Killing movement in the Eastern Cape resounding in the choices facing a community at the time of the first democratic South African election in 1994. In the process the struggle years lose their obsessive centrality in South African writing, becoming simply 'the middle generations' in an ongoing negotiation between tradition and modernity. This somewhat controversial deprivileging of the anti-apartheid period carries through into Mda's embracing of the new stylistic freedoms available in the post-apartheid context



MICHAEL GREEN

evident in *The Madonna of Excelsior* (2002), where the narrative mode through which an historical interracial sex scandal of the 1970s is depicted draws upon the expressionist work of a European-born local painter-priest. In *The Whale Caller* (2005) it is Mda's choice of subject – 'a relationship of loving biosociality between a human being and a whale' (Woodward, 'Whales, Clones', p. 334) – as much as style that displays its break with the dominant modes and themes of post-apartheid literature. In the overt metafictionality of *Cion* (2007) Toloki, the lead character in *Ways of Dying*, returns to join his creator in an exploration of his writing in relation to a wide repertoire of storytelling traditions, a vital resource which he is also concerned should never inhibit imaginative creativity. 'The degree of self-reflexivity in Mda's novels,' conclude David Bell and J. U. Jacobs, 'positions them in the same category as the metafictional discourses of J. M. Coetzee, just as their imaginative inventiveness is matched perhaps only in the fictional works of Ivan Vladislavić or Etienne van Heerden' ('Introduction', *Ways of Writing*, p. 1).

The significance of this claim takes on its full force if we consider an apparently truncated example of a text by a black writer about which similar claims could have been made in an earlier, more fraught, period. 'When *To Every Birth its Blood* appeared in 1981,' writes Nick Visser, 'it seemed to resolve a long-standing dilemma in South African literary studies . . . Here at last . . . was a novel by a black South African which . . . could stand alongside the work of Nadine Gordimer and of J. M. Coetzee' ('Fictional Projects and the Irruptions of History', p. 67). The experimental form employed in *To Every Birth its Blood* motivated this view, but the alienated, fragmented, individual perspective that dominates the first part of the two-part work gives way to more conventional multiple perspectives in Part Two. In Visser's opinion, this stylistic shift was the result of an 'irruption of history'. Serote, he says, 'apparently started out to write . . . a novel fully immersed in modernist and existentialist narrative practices', but 'the events and aftermath of June 1976 . . . compelled him to abandon not just one fictional project for another but one kind of novel for another, and one kind of politics for another' (p. 72). Run into a single narrative, the chaotic narrative perspective of the first person in Part One, the reflex of the protagonist's existential collapse, is ordered into an orchestrated pattern in the third person, realist mode – the embodiment of the People's Culture campaign of the mid 1980s with its emphasis on concrete, documentary form – of Part Two by the democratisation of narrative perspective and its accompanying recuperation of the individual self within a communal subject. The neatness of this argument hides a hint of frustration, a frustration not easily admitted to in the early 1980s by a critic of a pronounced historical-materialist

### The experimental line in fiction

bent and realist affiliations. One cannot help but sense something of Visser's own response to the novel behind the thinly veiled generalisation buried in his endnotes: 'Some may feel that the change in fictional projects involved losses as well as gains: the shift to radical political fiction in the second fictional project cost us one of our first modernist novels by a black South African writer' (p. 76).

### Experimentalism and modernity

If Mda is held to represent this guilty secret of even Leftist desire coming to fruition, we should not let this erase ways of reading that allow us to see in much earlier black writing expressions of an experimentalism as defined by Attwell, following Charles Taylor: 'self-consciously aesthetic practices . . . that try to initiate an epistemological renewal in response to conditions we associate with modernity' (*Rewriting Modernity*, p. 175). Temporally such practices are, in western literary histories, associated with the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and the period conventionally identified by the term 'modernist', but imposing either the conventional attributes of modernism or its periodisation directly on South African writing produces serious distortions in our understanding of the literary cultures of the region.

It is in any event a truism of southern African literary history that no sustained modernist tradition was produced here in chronological relation with the metropolitan modernist period. The trio of writers who collaborated as the editors and principal contributors to the overtly modernist *Voorslag* literary journal in the mid 1920s – Roy Campbell, Laurens van der Post and William Plomer – were largely self-marginalised through a deliberately elitist and romantically isolated posturing; this is perhaps more true of Campbell and van der Post than Plomer, but all three would in any event leave South Africa by 1926 and return only sporadically. Campbell's notable early attempts at infusing his colonial background into metropolitan experimentalism trailed off into modernism's tendencies towards a fascist rejection of liberalism and democracy, while van der Post made a career out of merging psychoanalytic theory with African primitivism to create a somewhat suspect mystical, ethno-mythographic, humanism. Plomer's novel *Turbott Wolfe* (1926), written when he was just 19, is perhaps the strongest legacy of this explicitly modernist moment in South Africa. The hallucinatory mode Plomer uses (the fevered narrator is on his deathbed) provides the novel's exploration of racialised sexuality with a self-referential, parodic frame for its own socially indecisive aestheticism. In this, it is the nearest thing to a precursor for the explicitly

MICHAEL GREEN

modernist narrative forms Coetzee is usually credited with introducing to South African fiction.

Another South African text produced during the period usually identified as modernist but rarely associated with the kinds of experimentalism practised at the time can extend usefully our sense of the 'experimental line'. Written between 1919 and 1920 but published only in 1930, Solomon Tshekisho Plaatje's *Mhudi* took on a renewed significance for South African cultural life in the 1970s when the emergence of the social history movement, which impacted strongly on southern African literary studies, swept figures like Plaatje back to prominence. Committed in particular to bringing the excluded perspective of black experience into the writing of history, the literary scholars who aligned themselves with this form of historiographical revisionism were guided to some degree by social historians' interest in the lived effects of the dehumanising structures of segregation and apartheid. In both content and form, social history reinforced literary realism's interests in what Bethlehem calls 'representational literalism' (*Skin Tight*, p. 7), a focus that has tended to isolate *Mhudi* from a serious consideration of its modernist qualities.

*Mhudi* is a flagrantly hybrid work, a *mélange* of not only 'western' literary forms ranging across the romance, epic and historical novel, but also 'indigenous' oral modes, including the folk-tale, proverbs, praise poems and prophecy, at times only awkwardly held together by Edwardian prose. The social historical interests that gave *Mhudi* its renewed attention tended to emphasise certain of its stylistic features, particularly those, such as its use of oral modes, that gave it an 'indigenous' representational authenticity. If, however, we read *Mhudi* into Robert Pippin's definition of modernism as a 'dawning sense of a failure in the social promise of modernisation' (*Modernism as a Philosophical Problem*, p. 36), then the novel's central concerns – its ambivalent attitude to the modernisation that the colonising technology embodies, the clear sense of all the cultures it represents being appropriated into the progressive march of 'History', the overpowering awareness of the entrance of southern Africa into 'national time' simultaneously with the failure of the region to achieve the 'confidence of community' that Benedict Anderson (*Imagined Communities*, p. 40) perceives as essential to the nation – all mark the work, beyond any purely formal concerns or essentialist genre identifications, as a very immediate expression of the defining features of modernist literary expression. Its complex formal strategies, then, may be considered as 'experimental' in the strong sense of being materially located in relation to an historically situated literary category.

## The experimental line in fiction

### ‘Magical realism’

The intimate relation between varying forms of experimentalism and their specific material contexts is an important consideration to keep in mind as we return to more contemporary works and their relation to the experimental lines we are tracing. A common term often associated with experimental fiction, particularly in postcolonial contexts, is ‘magical realism’. Notoriously loose as a descriptor – Brenda Cooper asks if it is ‘a mode, a genre, a style, a politics?’ (*Magical Realism in West African Fiction*, p. 15) – the term has carried over from Latin America precisely on the basis of what Gerald Gaylard calls ‘vaguely congruent “post-colonial” antinomies’ (*Meditations on Magical Realism*, p. 93). In the process, however, it requires constant reconsideration in relation to the texts and contexts to which it is applied.

In his study of magical realism in the works of Zakes Mda, Christopher Warnes defines the term as ‘a mode of narration that naturalises the supernatural, representing real and non-real in a state of equivalence and refusing either greater claim to truth’ (*Chronicles of Belief and Unbelief*, p. 74), adding that it is commonly identified as emerging out of contexts in which preindustrial and postindustrial modes, the ‘traditional’ and the ‘modern’, coexist. Such a relation of a formal definition to a material context, even if not reductively applied, presents problems for South Africa however; as Warnes notes, there is little literary expression of this sort in the country despite its being marked more than most by just such uneven development. Indeed, Zakes Mda’s comparatively recent plays and the novels referred to above have been credited with virtually single-handedly introducing the mode into South African literature.

In a move common amongst African writers, Mda distances himself from any direct relation to the term. He stresses that his use of expressive features identified as magical realist were drawn initially from the African tale-telling traditions with which he was familiar rather than consciously modelled on a style associated with origins further afield. Although Mda says he later aimed at a more conscious understanding of the mode (*Ways of Writing*, p. 9), Warnes illustrates just how few examples of overt magical realism there are to be found in Mda’s early novels, and how the defining supernatural element is often ironically deployed.

The term shifts significantly from anything like the definition given by Warnes above when it is extended – as it regularly is – to writers such as Mike Nicol, Ivan Vladislavić and, to a certain extent, J. M. Coetzee. Shaken free of its serious invocation of and deep investment in forms of cultural

MICHAEL GREEN

otherness, it is difficult to know what precise lines may be drawn between magical realism and a wide range of playful, self-conscious texts. One could argue that there is little of the overtly fabulous or fantastical in Coetzee (*In the Heart of the Country* comes closest to displaying some of these features), and, while Vladislavić is widely celebrated for the fantastic transmutations the historical and the ordinary undergo in his fiction, this is a result of the release of the full multivalency of their modes of representation rather than the playing off of various cultural systems against each other.

André Brink sees Mike Nicol's first novel, *The Powers That Be* (1989) – which he describes as 'an exorbitant imaginative recapturing of apartheid as a school of Jarryesque violence, intrigue, and corruption' (*Writing South Africa*, p. 27) – as 'a rediscovery of African magical realism' (p. 26). Critics strained to find a suitable category for Nicol's next novel, *This Day and Age* (1991), using terms ranging from allegory to fable to parable or folk-tale to identify the mode of its interwoven story lines, metafictional conceits and multiple, layered genres. Nicol's third novel, *Horseman* (1994), a reimagining of the Book of Revelation in a postcolonial context, joins its predecessors in exhibiting, as Warne has it, 'a tendency to use [magical realism] for playful, self-conscious, critical purposes', with nothing of the 'investment in cultural otherness' that is to be found in the 'faith-based magical realism' of a writer like Ben Okri ('Chronicles of Belief and Unbelief', p. 89).

Derek Alan Barker expands Warnes's sense of the 'irreverent magical realism' ('Chronicles of Belief and Unbelief', p. 89) he identifies in Vladislavić and Nicol to include, as the original German coinage of *Magischer Realismus* attempted to do in finding a position between expressionism and realism, 'a felt need in the South African context for a mode of art which moves away from ingenuous realism but stops short of the existential flight of overly abstract modes of art' ('Escaping the Tyranny of Magic Realism?', p. 5).

In Nicol's work, this tendency is emphasised in his conscious shift away from magical realism in *The Ibis Tapestry* (1998). Written in a high post-modern mode, the narrator's quest to reconstruct the death of an apartheid arms dealer finds an intertextual mirror in the death of Renaissance playwright Christopher Marlowe and quickly becomes, in the words of Ken Barris, 'a referential maze more closely resembling hypertext search than that most sequential of genres, the thriller' ('Hunting the Snark', p. 8). Possibly in response to the relative critical neglect of his overtly experimental work, Nicol has in more recent novels like *Payback* (2008) moved towards popular crime fiction and the conventional realism associated with this genre.

## The experimental line in fiction

We may note a distantly related shift in the more recent work of Vladislavić. In his earlier work, particularly the short-story collections *Missing Persons* (1989) and *Propaganda by Monuments* (1996), the style is overtly postmodern, foregrounding the representation of the domestic, the political and the historical signifiers of South African life by opening them up to radical acts of fantastical re-representation. This is true too of the more sustained allegorical mode of *The Folly* (1993), where a vacant patch of veld is taken over by a mysterious figure who constructs an imaginary house that takes on a contested reality, and peaks in the *The Restless Supermarket* (2001), where English as a South African mode of communication, caught between a fading Euro café society and an emerging Afro-chic, becomes less representation than a materialisation of its own etymology. In later works like *The Exploded View* (2004), the slippage of the real away from its signifiers at moments of extreme disorientation links the protagonists of each of the four parts of the novel, but the overall effect depends upon our first having a sense of what constitutes their reality, conveyed through a strongly realistic mode of representation. *Portrait with Keys* (2006) verges on the hyperrealistic in its exploration of the ways in which various pedestrian trajectories through a city create both a meaningful 'portrait' of a place and bring out its paradoxes and contradictions.

What the various forms of neorealism emerging in South Africa illustrate is, as we saw in Coetzee's analysis of La Guma and Attwell's reading of Ndebele, that modes considered 'conservative' in one context may take on 'experimental' dimensions when deployed in circumstances other than those with which they are normally associated. This is particularly true of conventionalised subgenres – like the detective and crime thriller forms currently being used not only by Mike Nicol but also other South African authors like Deon Meyer, Angela Makholwa and Margie Orford – currently being adopted by South African authors. These forms are able to sit quite comfortably, in post-1994 South African literature, alongside a novel like Anne Landsman's debut, *The Devil's Chimney* (1997), which is widely celebrated for using 'magical realism' to open up the South African national narrative to a fluid, many layered, ambiguous array of voices. André Brink hails the novel, which centres on a multiply signifying cave in which the past interpenetrates the present through the novel's alcoholic, creatively unreliable narrator, as belonging 'exuberantly within a burgeoning new kind of writing which has begun to displace the novel of realism and commitment that marked the dark years of political oppression in South Africa' ('Real and Magical *Devil*'). At the same time, he challenges Coetzee's assertion on its cover that this is 'the first time' South Africa is seen 'through the lens of magic realism'. For Brink, the term refers 'to an already

MICHAEL GREEN

well established genre characteristic of a young society in a stage of transition and in search of a new identity'. South Africa, he says, is 'fortunate in being able to draw on at least two indigenous traditions of magic realism . . . the rich oral narratives of the indigenous peoples; but also an old tradition of Afrikaner narrative' ('Real and Magical *Devil*').

### Afrikaans experimentalism

Tracing the Afrikaner tradition of narrative through C. Louis Leipoldt, C. J. Langenhoven and Herman Charles Bosman to 'the taken-for-granted interaction between the living and the dead in Etienne van Heerden's *Toorberg*' (1986), Brink could well have gone on to include a number of contemporary writers in Afrikaans, pre-eminently Marlene van Niekerk's widely praised *Triomf* (1994) and *Agaat* (2004; translated outside South Africa as *The Way of the Women*). Brink is himself, of course, a significant figure in a broader 'experimental line' in Afrikaans fiction, for which Etienne Leroux's highly patterned, fantastical *Sewe dae by die Silbersteins* (1962; translated as *Seven Days at the Silbersteins*) could be considered seminal. Leroux would, like the young Brink, associate himself with the Sestigters (literally Sixtiesers), the literary movement generally considered to have introduced a spirit of 'renewal' into writing in Afrikaans (see Chapter 21 above). The majority of its most productive writers – who also included Breyten Breytenbach, Jan Rabie and Bartho Smit – brought their formative experiences as students and sojourners in France back to a South Africa in which they became increasingly politicised and opposed to the Nationalist establishment. For Ampie Coetzee, the period these writers spent in the 'decolonized space' of France liberated their writing 'from the essentially realist and esthetic tradition that had developed in Afrikaans literature. They came into contact with Surrealism, the absurd, protest literature, and a completely different literary landscape'. Coetzee sees in this a direct link between the aesthetic and the political: 'Not only did they introduce different techniques, styles, and metaphors in prose and poetry, but they contested the hegemony into which they had been born' ('Literature in Afrikaans', p. 414).

Brink's *Kennis van die Aand* (1973; translated into English as *Looking on Darkness*, 1974) would become the first Afrikaans work to be found 'undesirable' under the Publications and Entertainment Act introduced in 1963. A powerful series of politically engaged novels would follow, although Derek Attridge who, as we have seen, is quite ready to acknowledge the effectiveness of the 'reworking of modernism's methods' in contexts like those of South Africa, feels that Brink's 'use of modernist (or postmodern) techniques contributes

## The experimental line in fiction

much less to the success of his fiction than the essentially realist storytelling they sometimes mediate'. Novels like *A Chain of Voices* (1982), in which multiple perspectives on an historical event are presented without 'a totalizing and adjudicating central voice', and *States of Emergency* (1988), a narrative generated by the self-reflexivity of a novelist attempting to write a love story in a time of political crisis, have, says Attridge, 'a slight air of modernism-by-numbers' (*J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*, pp. 4–5).

Although Breyten Breytenbach's work was never banned, he served seven years of a nine-year prison sentence after illegally re-entering South Africa from his exile in France on a botched clandestine mission. Two books came directly out of experience, *The True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist* (1985) and *Mouiroir: Mirrornotes of a Novel* (published in 1983 in South Africa partly in English but mainly in Afrikaans, and entirely in English in 1984), both of which run counter to the realist mode of most South African prison writing (see Chapter 26). *True Confessions* is written from a comparatively conventional single, retrospective vantage point, although it does foreground the act of writing and the fraught nature of confession. *Mouiroir*, however, takes its highly experimental form from the material circumstances of its composition. Barred from painting, Breytenbach was allowed to write in prison, although anything he wrote was taken from his cell to be examined by the authorities as soon as it was written. Returned to him after his release, it is this writing that makes up the thirty-eight discrete sections of *Mouiroir*, which range from surreal to hyperrealistic fragments, impressions and stories about his experiences in prison. Their dense, allusive and elliptical style perhaps owes as much to Breytenbach's frustrating the prison officials' attempts at finding incriminating evidence as to the surrealist prose poetry it resembles.

More recent Afrikaans fiction in the experimental line consciously participates in the magical realism praised by Brink. Etienne van Heerden, for example, regularly referred to as a 'South African Marquez', weaves the fantastical with the everyday in *Die Swye van Mario Salviati* (2000; translated as *The Long Silence of Mario Salviati*, 2002). Here, as in most of his novels, a remote rural community is disrupted by the arrival of an outsider who exposes a hidden history the community has jealously guarded. In this case, a young arts administrator, Ingi Friedländer, who has come to buy a sculpture for the new Houses of Parliament, is taken up by the feuding Pistorius and Bergh families. They draw her into a welter of stories which add mysterious layers to the historical record; as in van Heerden's *Toorberg* (1986; translated into English as *Ancestral Voices*, 1989), the dead interact with the living or comment on their actions, and in *The Long Silence* two hundred years of history swirl



MICHAEL GREEN

around the transition to a post-apartheid society. The story of Salviati himself, the deaf, dumb and now blind Italian stonecutter brought to South Africa as a prisoner of war, is just one of the stories Ingi is told, but it serves to focus the novel on the nature of art, which the bureaucrat has to learn anew before returning to Cape Town.

### Experimentalism and essentialism

A tendency to essentialise form in relation to social historical circumstance has held strong sway within the history of South African literary reception. Chapman has been far from alone in tending, as he does in *Southern African Literatures*, towards the view that it is only a writer like ‘the “unschooled” Matshoba’ who ‘can quite unselfconsciously be less than an artist with his testimony claiming authenticity as the representation of his life condition’. White novelists, in any language, seem fated by the privileges of ‘race, education, income, and reputation’ to feel ‘the need to be enormously self-conscious about the truth of their fiction’ (*Southern African Literatures*, p. 386).

Michael Cawood Green’s *Sinking: A Verse Novella* (1997) exemplifies this self-consciousness in its representation of a 1960s mining disaster as an event – something approximating Benjamin’s ‘Messianic time’, ‘a simultaneity of past and future in an instantaneous present’ (*Illuminations*, p. 265) – rather than an unfolding narrative. Treated as a multidimensional image, the sinkhole that opens up beneath an Afrikaans mining family’s home is presented through a chorus of voices (the family, their servant, neighbours, workers on the mine, a semi-omniscient authorial voice mediating reportage, historical discourse and a web of intertextual references) that swirl around it. In the case of *For the Sake of Silence* (2008), a heavily researched account of a group of monks from a strictly contemplative community who come from Europe to South Africa in the 1880s only to be expelled from their order after giving in to the temptation to engage in the mission work forbidden to them, Cawood Green uses the high realism of the nineteenth-century novel as something of an experiment in itself, in which the form is ultimately resisted by the material it tries to contain (see Green’s *Novel Histories*).

In 1991 Njabulo Ndebele warned that the essentialised black identity of 1970s and 1980s liberationist writing should not replicate the reductive binaries of white hegemony (see *South African Literature and Culture*, 1991). One particular codification of identity produced by South African sociopolitical discourse provides a tempting place from which to subvert the racialised classifications

## The experimental line in fiction

informing Ndebele's concern, even as it is in many ways the victim of them. Coloured authors write out of a fluid, contingent and indeterminate process of racial identity formation which, when brought into the related critiques of gender to be found in the work of writers like Zoë Wicomb, presents a powerful challenge to essentialism in general – as long as one reads this, of course, as the result of a particular cultural and historical positioning, rather than a siting between or outside 'purer' categorisations.

Wicomb's *You Can't get Lost in Cape Town* (1987) gave renewed prominence to the short-story cycle as an important form in contemporary South African fiction. Linked though the stories are through a common narrator/focaliser, a young coloured woman attempting to define her identity in relation to friends, lover and family, the coherence of the stories – along with the narrator's fragmented coming of age – is undermined by the gaps between them. In the novel that followed, *David's Story* (2002), the tension between the search for a coloured identity based upon a common history and an identity defined by difference and discontinuity is expressed in a more overtly metafictional text, one in which any number of stories collide with and collapse into each other, and meaning – individual and historical – is provisional and unreliable. The form of the novel itself actively resists any hope of a cohesive cultural identity, much as the radical fragmentation of the narrative voice in Yvette Christiansë's *Unconfessed* (2006) refuses to respond to the lack of direct, first-person slave narratives of the Cape Colony by providing 'a complete, consoling recuperation of the colonial record' (Christiansë, 'About this Book').

Wicomb specifically acknowledges Bessie Head as a precursor, and in doing so emphasises the relation between experimental form and identity as a socially fraught construct. Born in a mental hospital to a white woman with a history of mental illness who was reinstitutionalised when her parents found that she was pregnant with the child of a black man, a series of personal and political pressures resulted in Head becoming a political refugee in Botswana. *When Rain Clouds Gather* (1968), the novel she wrote about the newly independent country in which she was so precariously placed, gave glimpses of the innovative techniques that would set her apart from other African writers being published at that time, but it is the overtly autobiographical *A Question of Power* (1973) that places Head most clearly in an 'experimental line'.

Written during a period in which she had suffered a number of mental breakdowns, the novel follows roughly the course of her own life. At the point where the protagonist begins to suffer attacks of mental illness, the narrative shifts back and forth, without any overt correlation, between

MICHAEL GREEN

the horrors of her inner torment and the details of daily life in a small rural village. Hallucinatory sequences clearly drawing on her experience as a rejected mixed race child coming of age in an intensely racist context slowly give way to her involvement in the communal gardening which forms the central focus of the world she inhabits. This humble, caring, communal activity provides the basis for novel's concluding affirmative vision – an ending that would elude Head herself; after a period of heavy drinking and ill health, she died in a coma in 1986. This begs the question of the relationship between literary form and lived experience, particularly when the broken life behind the fractured form can be read back so directly into a specific sociopolitical context. The line between experimentalism and breakdown in the much debated 'special case' of South Africa, emblematic on a global scale for its formalisation of ruptures and disjunctures, can be especially tenuous, but it is a suitable reminder of how hard-won have been the achievements of the experimental line in South African writing.

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