

# LITERATURE AND REALITY

**Momentum – On Recent South African Writing;**  
M.J. Daymond, J.U. Jacobs and Margaret Lenta  
(Eds); University of Natal Press, Pietermaritzburg,  
1984.

This book approaches its subject "Recent South African Writing" in ways that are partly traditional and partly new. Its centre is a collection of critical essays, mostly on specific writers or specific works – like Coetzee, Fugard, Roberts, Livingstone, Serote, **Burger's Daughter**, **The Long Journey of Poppie Nongena**. The essays are varied in style and stance, often original and provocative in conclusion, but together they form a solid and familiar critical ground. The rest of the book, however, consists of manifestos from writers themselves – some the subjects of the essays but very many others, resident in South Africa or exiled – describing their own attitudes and purposes; or, in the words of the editors, "how they experience and conceive of their activity". The editors' main intention here was to show "how writers are seen as responding (or not) to crises in South African affairs".

This introduces new dimensions. We are used to finding answers to questions of "What?" and "How?" in critical essays and articles. ("What are these plays or poems about?" "How do they express their meaning?") And **Momentum's** critical articles deal very adequately with these kinds of questions. But we aren't used to having a comprehensive set of other questions also being applied to literature: questions of "Who?" and "Why?" as well as "When?" and "Where?" And in considering all these questions **Momentum** brings literature firmly and fruitfully into the area of common everyday experience – and also, one might say, relevantly into the area of **Reality**.

The "crises in South African affairs" to which the writers' responses were requested were described in political terms. (Soweto 1976 was proposed as an obvious landmark.) In his manifesto Peter Wilhelm quotes Gramsci's sentence: "The old is dying and the new cannot be born: in this interregnum there arises a great diversity of morbid symptoms". The editors suggest that this expresses concisely the general feeling among all contributors about South African society.

The critical articles, varied as they are, all reveal the writers they discuss as describing, diagnosing, probing South Africa's political and social sicknesses. (Indeed, J.U. Jacobs suggests that "South African literature" is itself unnaturally forced apart, and its two streams, "indigenous literature" and "literature in exile", must flow together before it can be properly recognised and analysed.) The Black writers deal directly with political protest and resistance. Serote's novel **To Every Birth its Blood** is

about present struggle and future revolution. In her essay Dorian Barbour shows how the novel combines an assertion of the value of communal action with an expression of complex human sympathy for individuals. Black South African dramatists, however, create, rather than describe, communal action. Ian Steadman gives an account of "Alternative" Black theatre which exists through the participation of the audience, so that all performances are unique and their study is closer to archaeology than literary criticism.

Margaret Lenta sees **The Long Journey of Poppie Nongena** as giving utterance to a hitherto unheard voice – the voice of Black South African women; but a voice which records its own almost immediate silencing as its heroine is progressively defeated and rendered impotent by failure and despair. Nadine Gordimer's white heroine in **Burger's Daughter** is also, in M.J. Daymond's analysis, rendered impotent at the end of the novel – but not defeated or despairing; rather with a potential for heroism in abeyance, unable to find fulfilment in the political uncertainties (uncertain to her, to the author, to the reader) of South Africa after 1976. And Rob Amato shows that **Master Harold and the Boys** reveals how the consciousnesses of all South Africans, Black and White, are trapped inside the sado-masochistic apparatus of their society.;

The less specifically "political" writers are nevertheless shown to be commenting on or offering further insights into South Africa's diseased symptoms. Jack Kearney suggests that Sheila Roberts's short stories explore our general morbid propensity to "stereotype" people (into other categories as well as racial ones); Sheila Roberts herself indicates that the acute political insight of Dan Jacobson in his novel **The Confessions of Josef Baisz** can jolt South Africans out of familiarity with lies, spies and treachery. All three essays on J.M. Coetzee, by W.J.B. Wood, Peter Strauss and Joan Gilmour, view his novels as presenting a critique of Western Civilization, a diagnosis of the philosophical and spiritual plight of the West.

Douglas Livingstone's poem "Giovanni Jacopo Meditates: On an Alabaster Adamastor" deals introspectively with his activity as a poet – its nature, its justification, its temptations. The alabaster statue, as Audrey Cahill interprets the poem, taunts the poet with the absurdity and meaninglessness of his activity, since political factors in South Africa today render art impossible. The poet's spokesman,

expressing (to put it mildly) disagreement, smashes the statue's head with a poker; but this very violence indicates a fundamental unease.

The poem is in fact Douglas Livingstone's contribution as a writer to the other section of the book: the collection of writers' manifestos, 25 from "resident" South African writers and 15 from exiles or expatriates. Among these writers, Livingstone's unease, defensiveness and self-doubt are often echoed (but perhaps no significant writers anywhere are ever complacent). Brevity was obviously requested: about three pages is a common length, and although there are a few expansive pieces the general conciseness makes for a characteristically pithy sharpness of expression.

Alan Paton has "no intention that his writing may be the instrument of change", but another group of writers (sometimes responding to misgivings about their social relevance) indicate modest hopes for intervention in various ways. Essop and Kunene, for example, suggest the possibility of "authentic moral renewal" through the impact of creative writing; or an assault on the racist regime through ideas, "its worst enemies". Gwala believes that "all literature is propaganda but not all propaganda is literature" and that "we find ourselves having to speak about an experience if we have to change it". Gray says that "an act of memory in a society that has lost an internal dynamic of renewal can be an act of provocation".

"Bearing witness", which Joubert finds a personally "urgent and vital task", is seen by Mphahlele as socially necessary, but very different from action: "By the time a writer has done composing a play, a story, a poem as a vehicle of political agitation, the revolution is under way. Literature may record, replay, inspire an ongoing process".

Gordimer hopes to contribute to a future indigenous culture, a literature "that would bring together these two traditions, the one that was imported from Europe and the one that springs from the rich traditional culture". Another view of the writer in relation to the future is presented by MacLennan: "Poetry may have things to say that revolutionaries wish to suppress, because poetry can go on being revolutionary when the demagogues are already into the process of orthodoxy".

No writers appear to have thought it strange or unexpected to consider themselves in a context of politics (although

Fugard declares that 1976 is much too near: "We are still watching the consequences of the years 1899 — 1902"). Indeed several believe that to write at all implies, demands, a stance that is overtly political. "No genuine writer in South Africa can be a supporter of racial or any other forms of discrimination" (Rive). "Liberalism is the common disease that afflicts all writers of real ability" (Ebersohn). "Every serious writer in this country has some allegiance to a socialist vision of some sort" (Gwala).

Hardly any issue about art, literature and politics is not dealt with illuminatingly, provocatively, concisely, in one or other of the manifestos. Manifestos from exiles provide insights not only into the states of being a South African writer and being a South African writer-in-exile, but also into the state of exile itself: its griefs, vacancies and disturbances as well as its compensations. There is a degree of unanimity here from the writers on one subject — that, however long their absence, South Africa is "the soil of their imagination", containing for them "more than their origins". (For some, though, "to understand one's society one must leave it".) Strategies for dealing with nostalgia and alienation include Bessie Head's firm and forceful pegging down and developing new and different roots; but more characteristically a continual keeping in touch with South Africa — if possible with visits, or sometimes acting in the host country as informal ambassadors of the resistance, educating and informing. ("Expatriates" are careful to distinguish their problems from those of the real "exiles" here.)

For all this comprehensiveness, there are significant and notable lacks. As mentioned and lamented by the editors, political censorship and banning prevented the inclusion of available writings by and about Alex la Guma and Dennis Brutus. (Other unmentioned omissions are also a pity: a list of writers who were presumably approached and failed to respond — surely including at least Serote and Sepamla? — would have been significant from several points of view.)

The volume is dedicated to Raymond Sands, former Professor of English at the University of Natal, Durban, by members and ex-members of his department. Its enterprise and achievements are triumphant tributes to the liveliness of the group of colleagues which he gathered and led. □

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AMONG OUR CONTRIBUTORS

<b>Yussuf Bhamjee</b>	:	Research Worker in the Development Studies Research Group, University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg.
<b>Matthew Cobbett</b>	:	Training Specialist in the Agricultural and Technical Extension Services of Zimbabwe, based in Bulawayo 1983/1984.
<b>T.R.H. Davenport</b>	:	Professor of History, Rhodes University.
<b>Marie Dyer</b>	:	Lecturer in English, University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg.
<b>Robin Hallett</b>	:	British Journalist and Commentator on African Affairs.
<b>Dave Walwyn</b>	:	Field Worker for the Association for Rural Advancement.