

dominated territory. Even in the novel form, few family sagas have been written by women, with Undset's *Kristin Lavransdatter* as the towering exception, imaging as it does the swirl of several generations surrounding the eponymous heroine as she grows from baby to girl to young wife to matron to ancient widow in the turbulence of the fourteenth century. But in a postmodern age the whole approach to the genre may well have to be rethought: male historiography (though not that of Herodotus!) tends to take genealogy both as its starting point and its justification. A reimagining of South African history in this changed and still changing context may well depart quite radically from this to present its flow as being of another kind altogether – determined not by who-begat-whom but by more subliminal rhythms and contingencies. Such an approach would address two silences simultaneously: that created by the marginalization of women, and that effected by a (white-dominated) master-narrative of history.

In both respects (as in the examples of Coetzee and Nicol referred to above) the crucial new dimension is not the presentation of new historical 'evidence', however important that in itself may be, but the leap of the imagination towards grasping the larger implications of our silences. Ever since 1979, in an essay included in *Mapmakers*, I have been pleading for the need to *imagine the real*. In the new South Africa this would seem to me even more necessary than before.

It has a direct bearing on what is actually happening in the country. Much of the present movement away from the inhibiting mentalities of apartheid and towards a realization of the larger possibilities of democracy is geared to the functioning of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. This is based on the assumption that societies, like individuals, cannot grow and mature unless they come to terms with the dark places – the silences – in themselves. This process will affect everybody in the country, as comparable experiments have affected post-war Germany, post-unification Germany, or the Argentine in the wake of its military rule. If not handled with great circumspection (and it is almost inevitable that mistakes must be made in traversing such a moral minefield), great explosions may occur; there is so much that can go wrong. And yet the problem has to be addressed. Silence would be intolerable.

I am wary of suggesting that in any given situation writers may have a defined 'function' to perform. (This does not deny that writers do fulfil functions, ranging from the aesthetic to the moral and the political, but

this arises from the contexts within which they find themselves, and not from the imposition of any obligation from outside.) But if, as an accompaniment to the processes of such a commission, a new generation of writers would be prepared to confront the *imaginative* challenges of such a situation, some very stimulating texts may come from the experience. I certainly am convinced that without the attempt to grasp, with the creative imagination, the past and its silences, South African society as a whole may get bogged down in mere materialities, sterile rationalizations, and the narrow mechanics of retribution or amnesty.

## VI

There is another dimension to the present experience of transition which may inform the new literature in South Africa, and that is the discovery of Africa. Many times in the past Africa has been conquered; its true discovery – certainly in white literature – is still awaiting its moment. This may of course assume innumerable forms; but I am particularly fascinated by what one might cautiously term its magic. Cautiously, because it is such an abused term by now; and if I use it, it has nothing at all to do with the 'heart of darkness', or with 'black magic', with the romantic lure the Haggards and like-minded imperial invaders brought to colonization. It is a magic which can only be set free once the mind has become, in Ngugi's sense of the word, decolonized.

The magic I am referring to has already been demonstrated in the writings of Amos Tutuola; more recently by Ben Okri. But it lurks even around the more 'realistic' passages in Achebe, Soyinka, even Ngugi himself (and not only in *Maitigari*, but in some hallucinatory moments of his novels with a more overt sociopolitical commitment). This magic involves an acknowledgement of a more holistic way of approaching the world, an awareness of more things in heaven and earth than have been dreamt of in our philosophy, a free interaction between the worlds of the living and the dead, a rich oneiric stratum; also of ancestral – historical – commitment of the kind one encounters in the poetry of Mazisi Kunene. It is informed by the thinking Kunene once illuminated for me when he explained why, in taking his leave from someone, he would never use the singular form *Sala fahle* ('Stay well') but always the plural, *Salani gahle*. Because no-one is ever alone,' he said. 'You are always accompanied by all your spirits.' I am a multitude, said Whitman; and the concept is expanded by the well-known African proverb, *I am a person through other*

The easy intercourse between the living and the dead forms an integral part of African oral traditions in languages like Zulu, Xhosa, and Sotho; and from there it has spilled over into Afrikaans literature, much more than the writing of English-speaking white South Africans – although there are hints of it in some passages of Olive Schreiner's *Story of an African Farm* (for example, the pivotal story of the man who goes in search of the white bird, Truth); and in Herman Charles Bosman. Behind the deft satirical touch in the realism with which Bosman evokes the small racist farming community of the remote Northern Transvaal, there often lurks a sense of the surreal and the inexplicable, an awareness of an altogether different, African, dimension that casts its shadow – or its light – across stories like 'In the Withaak's Shade', in which a magic leopard appears to the narrator in what may, or may not, be a hallucination or a dream; or 'Funeral Earth', in which a band of Boers are confronted with the darker mysteries of Africa in an encounter with a group of women bearing gifts, including transubstantial black earth; or 'Veld Maiden', in which an ordinary love triangle acquires a supernatural allure. In more specifically postmodernist writing this 'magic' has been captured in masterly fashion by the Afrikaans novelist Etienne van Heerden in the novel *Toorberg* (1986; translated in 1989 as *Ancestral Voices*), with its deceptive interweaving of the living and the dead, of past and present.

It is perhaps a pity that the concept of 'magic realism' has become identified almost exclusively, in so many minds, with South America (even though, of course, the term had its firm origins in Europe), for I believe that Africa has a brand of magic realism, peculiarly its own, to offer the world. In black orature in Southern Africa it already has a venerable tradition. In Afrikaans literature, too, it goes back to oral beginnings, *inter alia* in many of the ghost stories first told by trekkers or itinerant traders at the camp fire, before electricity put an end to visitations from other worlds. In written form the way has been paved by short stories (by Eugène Marais, Louis Leipoldt, and others) at the turn of the century; with a startling new impetus in the novels of a writer like C. J. Langenhoven: as early as the twenties he wrote, in deadpan, naturalistic fashion, about a visitor, Loeloeraai, from Venus; and about journeys undertaken in a caravan pulled by an elephant. The outrageous, the wholly unexpected, the truly miraculous, informed much of his fiction. And with the inevitable return to roots which political events and the *fin de siècle* have prompted in South African writing across the cultural spectrum, one may well expect a rediscovery of African magic realism.

Certainly some of the best recent fiction already addresses this long-dormant silence. There is Mike Nicol's *The Powers That Be* (1989), an abundant imaginative recapturing of apartheid as a school of baroque violence, intrigue, and corruption, rendered even more explosive through its burst of humour. (It is present also, but in a more courtly and precious manner, in his latest novel *Horseman* (1994), in which an apocalyptic figure from the European Middle Ages gallops across history and geography to reap his grim dark harvest in Africa.) There are the novels of the Zimbabwean John Eppel, most recently *The Song of Man* (1994) with its mordant satire of white colonial traditions struggling to survive in black Africa, where a dark magic is revealed to adhere in the everyday. There is also Ivan Vladislavic, who turns recorded history on its head in the short stories in *Missing Persons* (1989), and takes the leap from the ordinary to the fantastic in the construction – and eventual destruction – of a wholly imaginary edifice in *The Folly* (1991).

In the same context, a number of black writers have convincingly reached far beyond all conventions of 'struggle literature' or different strains of realism. Dambudzo Marechera from Zimbabwe (who died at the age of thirty-five in 1987) produced a *tour de force* in *Black Sunlight* (1986), with its exuberant black surrealism and its unsettling allegories released by the confrontation of European and African narrative traditions. In a different vein, but also imbued with the fantastic, Joël Matlou turns 'ordinary' experiences like living on a farm, or working on the mines, or courting a girl, into an extraordinary vision of hell in *Life at Home* (1991).

In these manifestations of what Steiner calls the 'licentious genius of language' (*Real Presences*, 59) I recognize the regenerative powers of South African literature: not simply to escape from the inhibitions of apartheid but to construct and deconstruct new possibilities; to activate the imagination in its exploration of those silences previously inaccessible; to play with the future on that needlepoint where it meets past and present; and to be willing to risk everything in the leaping flame of the word as it turns into world.

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