

New Writing from Southern Africa: Authors Who Have Become Prominent since 1980*

edited by Emmanuel Ngara *London: James Currey, 1996*

Reviewed by Kgomotso Masemola

If, in our times, modesty remains a virtue, the charm of its simplicity is nowhere better evinced than in *New Writing from Southern Africa*. Elegantly dividing the essays into narrative and poetry sections, this volume eschews the problems of (de-)canonization in post-colonial literature. In his introduction to this collection, Emmanuel Ngara asserts the *situatedness* of new writing in the history of the Southern African region and its diverse cultural heritage, not in the conditions of becoming prominent for post-colonial writers, not even in the institutionalized critical bent that so often determines prominence. It seems the easiest thing to do to suggest a relationship of reconstitution between Southern African creative writing and critical activity. For, according to Ngara, '[the] essays contained in this volume give some indication of the wealth of the region' (ix). With the same primitive ease, some essays in the volume do not problematize the materialist reading that is concomitant with the essays' analyses of narrative. Except in the case of a few essays, there are obvious benefits to retaining a simple approach: this volume makes easy reading for both specialist and non-specialist readers.

Zhuwarara's chapter on Chanjerai Hove's *Bones* appraises the critical reception of this novel in order that he may bring to view the thematic ambiguity of the text. The textual re-embedding in the women's reaction against colonialism is abdicated in favour of "point of view" as held by Janifa, 'only one of the many voices in the novel' (31). Next follows a character study that allows Zhuwarara space to elucidate the relationship between characters across the social hierarchy as well as comment on the clash between the 'gospel of silence' (32) and the collective wisdom of the oral tradition. These clashes are important for charting the collaborative stance of the older generation of African males in the trajectory of Marita's problematic subjectivity. Without fail, Zhuwarara's simplicity is maintained when he is at his reductionist best: 'Hove allows the rhythms and thought patterns of a Shona speaker to register much more fully in writing' (43).

Anthony Chennells' departure from the simplicity that graces this volume rests on interesting but perfunctory theoretical moves as well as disturbing assumptions. Germanely appropriating post-colonial theory, and disallowing the binary structure of opposition between Shona culture and 'Englishness',

*To cite this article: Masemola, Kgomotso 1995. Critical Review of *New Writing from Southern Africa: Authors who have become prominent since 1980*, edited by Emmanuel Ngara, London: James Currey 1996, In *English Academy Review*,12:1, 201-204

effectively obviating the 'strong othering' thesis, Chennells somewhat surprisingly delivers an apology for Europe when he insists on the 'necessity to look critically at [Africa's] own institutions' (59). It is as if these institutions are not resident in a discursive field mediated by an unsustainable colonial edict that is paradoxically responsible for the social pathologies in relation to which post-colonial multiplicity and mimicry are underwritten. Truer to simplicity, it is difficult for Chennells to trace this argument in Paul Gilroy (by whose work he is apparently influenced) when he refers to the complex internal divisions in 'black particularity' of 'class, sexuality, gender, age, ethnicity, economics, and political consciousness' (59). These internal divisions, bearing testimony to difference, are radicalized as well as discernable in relation to colonial discourses. Perhaps Chennells should first understand that what he perceives as Africa's problems reflects the conditions of anomie which are not, as he rightly insists, located in Europe, but in the conditions of Africa's encounter with Europe. Thus the African pluralism that Chennells (following Kwame Antony Appiah) refers to should be seen as testimony to the differential histories of families within communities or, in the case of *Nervous Conditions*, of subjectivity within family institutions.

The divided subjectivity of Nyasha, the headmaster's daughter, cannot be accounted for solely in terms of the African institution of family, especially when her resistance to patriarchal control within the family is rooted in contingencies that are symptomatic of cultural displacement. It is therefore not enough for Chennells to sympathize with Tejumola Olaniyan's emphasis on the historical and locally contingent. He has to acknowledge that what he identifies as 'Nyasha's partial construction by colonialism' (69) allows space for mimicry, which undermines the authority of colonial representation, and is not just cause for self-flagellation, particularly because she has 'voyaged in' (Said's phrase) the English originary site of enunciation. Tambudzai's ambivalent self-fashioning is also contingent on 'voyaging' in a missionary education that doubly carries the prospects of her being 'othered' and 'selfed' when the nuns discriminate against her, reducing her into Sameness but positing the lack on which she acts qua mimicry. Finally, Chennells makes bold to say that '[the] Shona family in *Nervous Conditions* constitutes a discursive space productive of a single and authoritarian discourse that disciplines and locates women with singular precision' (67). This should put paid to the seriousness, if any, with which Chennells mobilizes Gilroy's work, such as when he earlier emphasizes the complex internal divisions in "black particularity' of class, gender, etcetera. Following Chennells' formulation, women in this discursive space seem no longer to be shifting 'selves' that suppress the impulse to rebellion at one time, and exemplify as much 'charivari' (in a Bakhtinian sense) as they reconfigure the subject of cultural discourse at another. Also, in a Shona situation of simultaneous colonization and decolonization the

representation of the discursive space of the family is so problematic as to render its inscribing *socius* amenable to the reinscription of identities rather than the disciplining and locating of them. Nonetheless, the chapter by Chennells carries the theoretical sophistication that meets the complex demands made, *inter alia*, by the psychologism by which *Nervous Conditions* is informed in its retrospective narrative.

Judith Coullie's essay on Breyten Breytenbach is no less sophisticated, although it remains accessible in its analytical treatment of textual subject construction and the writing processes in their ideological context. While this treatment clearly situates itself within profound post-modern debate, it does so without insisting on an ostentatious need to run the entire gamut of theoretical literature. Relying on Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida elsewhere, Coullie shows how *The True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist* problematizes the notion of an 'autobiographical' author, allowing the narrating T to be seen as one of the many unstable signifiers that constitute the text's sum of signifiers. What is surprising, and in many ways pleasing, is that Coullie does not go the obfuscating, philistine way of quoting dense passages from fashionable post-structuralist texts, so that anyone who reads her piece is assured that he or she will not find her stuck in a mode of quotation and constant deferral of analysis.

Godfrey Meintjies shares Coullie's virtue of remaining simple as he seriously engages the prose *oeuvre* of André Brink, ranging as it does from the earlier realism to a post-modernist mode. Given the status of Brink in literature today, Meintjies' precise structure offers a reliable and authoritative overview of Brink's writing.

Lokangaka Losambe's essay is one among the few which analyse Njabulo Ndebele's work beyond the mere description of the distinction between 'the ordinary' and 'the spectacular tradition'. Focusing on a positive recreation of the shattered historical and social consciousness of the Chaterston setting, Losambe draws on Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus*, whose theory asserts that states of things are neither unities nor totalities but multiplicities. The 'arborescent' and 'rhizomatic' dimensions of existence become useful in the definition of what Losambe, following Ndebele, calls 'that area of cultural autonomy' (78), particularly because multiplicities are *becomings* which, being distinct from unities, are distinct from the oppressive history of apartheid.

It is thus possible to see in 'The Prophetess', one of Ndebele's short stories, a being-multiple, not a being-one, in the Prophetess, who is using camphor like every grandmother in the neighbourhood. She is ordinary, wears a *doek*, and is somewhat sickly while she heals others. The multiplicity is in the rhizomic reference to being between the bamboo cane Christian cross and the mask, between the invocation of God's divine blessing and the quotidian existence of fish and water. The unity of the tree and its 'arborescent' existence in its binary

logic are being disaffirmed. Multiplicity is thus fashioned into what Losambe calls 'a journey into interiority', this being the strategy for reconstituting subjectivity (78).

If, according to Losambe, multiplicity leads to the journey to the 'self' (probably effaced by the Apartheid State), then we should think of that journey as a *becoming-self* which does not stop, as he suggests, when the oppressed are transformed into 'vibrant subjects' prepared for 'a greater exteriority' (78). The process of *becoming-self* does include focuses of unification such that there can be revolutionary potential in the rhizomic alliance or assemblage of what Deleuze and Guattari have elsewhere described as *molecular aggregates* that impugn and undermine the signification of the State's 'arborescent' *molar aggregates*. I suspect that Losambe is capable of having taken analysis to the point of molecular aggregates, but is reluctant to do so because he does not find it easy to speak convincingly of 'the revolutionary' in the same breath as 'the ordinary.' He prefers to speak of revival rather than revolution in 'Fools', where he finds Zani's analysis 'correct' about 'preparing the people first' (79). Losambe acknowledges the revolutionary potential of the Boy Scout movement in terms of group subjectivity or molecular aggregates of which Deleuze and Guattari write in *Kafka: for a Minority Literature* (1986). I also suspect that Losambe attempts, at the expense of a more forceful analysis, to be simple and accessible; and this is a consideration that Rosemary Moyana could do well to reverse in her essay.

The poetry section boasts essays that are a veritable triumph of simplicity, being largely an exercise in practical criticism. And the latter is quite apposite to the task of bringing forth the transmuting power of poetry in Southern Africa, from Chibombo to Mbuli. Solomon Mutsware traces the country /city divide in Musaemura Zimunya's poetry in a manner that powerfully reflects on Zimunya's pastoral mood. The experiences of the poet as well as his vision are brought to the centre of the rendition of poetry, particularly in Duncan Brown's essay on Mzwakhe and Alfred Qabula. As these poets emerge into prominence, they do so well within tradition. Brown should know that bringing oral poetry to written form, and vice versa, is not a new political experiment. Ingoapele Madingoane's performance is still fresh in our minds, not to mention the force of proemdra by the likes of Mothobi Mutloatse. And, in the 80s, Lesego Rampolokeng seems to be more palpable than Dikobe wa Mogale. While everything in the poetry section seems to fall neatly into place (in terms of analyses), the question as to the conditions of emergence into prominence begs to be asked.

And yet, for all its attractive modesty of approach, we cannot mistake this volume for anything less than a *tour de force*.