



Johannes A. Smit, Johan van Wyk, and Jean-Phillipe Wade, eds. *Re-thinking South African Literary History*. Durban, South Africa: Y Press, 1996. Pp. 250. US \$35.00.

This collection of essays comes out of a colloquium held in May 1995. It was a gathering of what the organisers call "experts," whom they had invited to discuss the "enormous theoretical and practical problems" (Wade 3) entailed in producing a South African literary history. ("Experts" is dangerous, given the brutal elitism of the recent past and the democratic aspirations of the present.) The contributors all take up the declared and the hidden assumptions in their proceedings: nation, difference, region, language/languages, power, literature, history, as well as the sometimes difficult relations between these concepts in our place and time. As with any conference proceedings, the quality of the essays is uneven. As a whole, the publication seems to be an opportunity for considered debate that has been lost—as they speak here, many of the contributors are talking past each other and show no response to the challenges posed to them by the arguments of other contributors. It is a pity that the editors seem not to have invited reflection before going into print, and, incidentally, that they did not do a better job of copyediting—for instance, in one paragraph on page 35 there are four errors which should have been picked up. It is also a pity that they did not delay the colloquium so that Michael Chapman's historical study, *Southern African Literatures* (1996), could have provided a measure for their deliberations. An element of haste is forced on all academics by the increasing demand for what looks like productivity, but the rush to print here suggests that South African intellectuals have grown comfortable in the habits of opposition. Criticism was, too easily, a pointing to the evils of apartheid; now it has become, too much, a pointing to the complexity of literary (and social) matters and an issuing of warnings to the adventurous.

One point on which the 17 contributors agree (sometimes by implication) is that the only workable dispensation in South Africa is one which respects difference while promoting synergy. As Nelson Mandela said in May 1994, the task is to build a "nation that is unified in its diversity" (qtd. by Coetzee 10). The contributors are also all agreed that if "nation" were to mean "nation state," then difference would be merely divisive rather than "the playful encounter of *divergent* meanings" (Wade 1).

Just how literature and its history in South Africa should be conceived so as to contribute to this building of unity in diversity is the question the essayists face. The prior question of whether literary and historical studies can actively shape a society is not really broached. The approaches taken are practical and theoretical, and sometimes a blend of the two. The central problem is how inclusivity can be

achieved and how, on this principle, justice can be done to all aspects of our cultures, oral and written. The difficulty is that, given the privileged position held by English and Afrikaans and a concentration on written texts, many cultural practices and products have been more or less hidden from the majority of South African scholars and have, as C. F. Swanepoel argues, yet to be widely understood in their own right. He proposes an initial focus on individual cultures before they are merged into a comprehensive history, but the danger is that this might serve to perpetuate the ethnographic divisions on which the racist hierarchy of apartheid was based. It would also not shed any light on how these cultures can be seen in relation to each other. On the question of literary relatedness, the contributors are distinctly at odds and could usefully have been asked to reconsider: Malvern van Wyk Smith argues that there is no significant intertextuality in the country's literatures whereas Johan van Wyk cites Eugene Marais's *Dwaalstories*, which were "appropriated [from] oral stories and songs" (32) and Helize van Vuuren, in tackling the problems of origins and where to begin a chronology, looks at ways in which written literature's heritage from Bushmen narratives might be recognized but not appropriated.

The approaches of the contributors can be grouped under four headings: first, those who supply information (relatively untheorized) about aspects of oral/written production in South Africa. C. T. Msimang gives some fascinating examples of the kind of protest found in Zulu poetry; Maje S. Serudu describes the search of writers in Northern Sotho for prose forms which would adequately convey their experience of their changing world; Jeff Opland describes the earliest Xhosa writing—it was published in newspapers in the nineteenth century in the eastern Cape.

Second, those who go beyond describing the need to establish a more complete picture to analyze the issues involved in bringing all elements together in an historical sweep. Annemarie van Niekerk tackles the way in which the neglect of women writers of short stories in Afrikaans has "contributed to the distortion of the history we have inherited" (144). Through this example, she argues that "the parameters of a new literary history" (145) can best be redefined by scholars working "microscopically" (144) and starting not from the established centre but from the hitherto marginalized aspects of our literatures.

Third, those who posit ways in which a comprehensive history which resists the divisions of apartheid but conveys the cultural diversity of the whole might be achieved. There is a fair degree of agreement that the region's peoples have been "part of the same story" and that, as Michael Chapman puts it, "points of common reference such as the shared experience of colonialism . . . the influence of European languages and racial theories . . . the transition from traditional to modern loyalties in . . . industrialising societies" (41) can be sought and used as organizing principles (see also, Johan van Wyk). The question

begged here is whether only those texts which reflect the "key events [which] may begin to act as period markers" (Chapman 46) should be included in a new history; such a focus would necessarily be on the representation of public issues on a perceivedly national scale and this gives the enterprise a distinctly masculinist agenda. Against this synthesizing principle, Leon de Kock argues, like van Niekerk, that the distortions which "make up our cumulative knowledge of the past" are best unmade and re-examined through "discontinuous local histories" (87). Another note of warning is sounded by Sikhumbuzo Mngadi, but he does so in language which is at times almost impenetrably abstract. His point is, however, an important one: much protest theatre of the 1980s is not profoundly resistant to the forms of power which it professes to oppose—it could be said to be working for a transfer of power rather than a change in the oppressive structures of the society.

And fourth, those who write theorized or historicized enquiries into the nature of the enterprise. Rory Ryan gives a useful account of cultural studies in Britain and their "politically and class-based concern to put a halt to the indoctrination implicit in 'high culture' English courses" (156). He then moves on to cultural ethnography, which seeks to be a knowledge in and of the world (157), but hardly attempts to show how this touches sides with his South African context. Similarly, Johannes A. Smit, in a summary of the views of history held by several European thinkers, makes only one passing reference to South Africa's past. On the other hand, Shane Moran, in a deceptively mild-mannered piece, reminds scholars here that they are in danger of forgetting the history of their own ideas: their "[c]alls for 'a revindicated humanism,' 'an enlightened universalism' in South African literary studies have a history. A history bound up with the emergence of civil society and the turning of Africa into a warren for the hunting of black skins" (191).

Of this group of essays, one of the most challenging and useful is that by Michael Green. In a closely and rapidly argued piece, he is in quest of "a critical practice that will allow the objects of our study adequately to resist the appropriations of totalizing concepts like nation, literature and history, yet, at the same time, recognize the ways in which these concepts construct those objects of study" (231). This will, he suggests, lead to self-reflection in the inevitable drive to wholeness of an historical project, and thence will permit an appropriate tension between totality and the local and/or the different. What he seeks is an awareness of the rhetorical strategies of the contextualized object and of the act of study. This is preeminently a literary critic's concern and therefore doubly appropriate in the construction of a literary history of South Africa.

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WORK CITED

Chapman, Michael. *Southern African Literatures*. London: Longmans, 1966.