

And, as a natural consequence, the old skilful theatre of their historical storytelling has been uprooted and transformed. Yet, while the social history of twentieth-century South Africa has seen women's cultural craft also change markedly, unlike men, women have been more adept at carrying bits of oral history and historical myth in a more active and influencing way.

What Isabel Hofmeyr's *We Spend Our Years as a Tale That is Told* provides, cumulatively, is a meditative reflection upon the uses of literary and historical methods, here bounded together fruitfully. With this book it is possible to appreciate historical process in terms of the notations of orality and narrative. It is, of course, a specific kind of "discourse" approach to understanding the South African past, but one remarkably close to the humanist materialism of a historian such as E. P. Thompson. Like Thompson in his seminal 1978 *The Poverty of Theory*, Hofmeyr's engagement is with arduously contested levels of articulacy, hierarchies of expressive need, and with the ways in which affective and moral consciousness discloses itself within real historical contexts. Remarkably thoughtful, consistently fascinating, this is a book built on superb and dedicated scholarship. Not least as a tribute to the cultural resilience of a rural black community, it cannot be too highly recommended.

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Njabulo S. Ndebele. *South African Literature and Culture: Rediscovery of the Ordinary*. Introduction by Graham Pechey. Manchester: Manchester UP, 1994. Pp. ix, 161. US \$59.95; \$19.95 pb.

This collection of essays, written between 1984 and 1991, articulates Njabulo Ndebele's thinking about cultural imperatives in the shaping of a democratic South Africa. "The greatest challenge of the South African revolution," he writes, "is in the search for ways of thinking, ways of perception, that will help to break down the closed epistemological structures of South African oppression, structures which can severely compromise resistance by dominating thinking itself. The challenge is to free the entire social imagination of the oppressed from the laws of perception that have characterised apartheid society" (66-67). In these essays, Ndebele develops a critical analysis of the ideological effectivity of cultural institutions, maintaining a rigorous suspicion of both liberal institutions and solidarity work and the different ways in which each can "compromise resistance by dominating thinking itself." Historically Ndebele is poised at the point of epistemological rupture, looking backward to explore and explain the development of certain cultural ideologies, looking forward to signs of a democratic culture.

Ndebele's most sustained argument about the building of progressive culture is developed in relation to fiction, particularly in the first

three essays, "Turkish Tales and Some Thoughts on South African Fiction," "The Rediscovery of the Ordinary: Some New Writings in South Africa," and "Redefining Relevance." Intervening in the ongoing debate about the relationship between literature and political struggle, he seeks to negotiate a relatively autonomous space for literature (and, by extension, culture) "beyond protest." He assumes commitment to the struggle as a given, but redefines relevance by historicizing the aesthetic of protest, critiquing its evolution into a form of solidarity sloganeering, and arguing for a literature rooted in the lives of the people. To this end he establishes a cultural dialectic between the categories of the *spectacular*—protest literature congealed into the repetitive spectacle of confrontation between oppressed and oppressor—and the *ordinary*—newly emerging writing focused on the "ordinary daily lives of people" (57), which awakens writers and readers both to a new social creativity.

Ndebele's political standpoint in this argument is illustrated symbolically in a scene near the end of one of his own stories, "Fools." (Through his own writing, perhaps, he ensures the epistemological rupture.) Late in the afternoon of 16 December 1966 (the national holiday celebrating the Afrikaners' Covenant with God), Zamani, schoolteacher and first-person narrator, confronts the (stereotypic) Boer-with-a-whip in an act that is both passive and active. In the only encounter of this kind in the story, Zamani, initially on the sidelines of an altercation between Boer and Africans, finds himself in the path of the angry Boer, but refuses to run when the Boer lashes out at him. It is a moment of passive resistance, of inner exultation and personal redemption, and finally, of cognitive triumph. The welling up of Zamani's laughter—"the kind of laughter that seemed to explain everything"—reduces the Boer to weeping: "The blows stopped; and I knew I had crushed him. I had crushed him with the sheer force of my presence. I was there, and would be there to the end of time: a perpetual symbol of his failure to have a world without me. And he walked away to his car, a man without a shadow" (276).

Out of context, this passage might be read as exemplifying the black South African tradition of protest literature which Ndebele critiques. For Ndebele, the protest writing of the 1950s had historical efficacy in documenting and indicting oppression, but its vitality grew out of this particular moment in the struggle (1948-61). The subsequent codification of a rhetoric of protest, the repetition of the spectacle of oppression, compromises resistance; it reinforces the psychology of victimization and powerlessness; it is pathological, a barrier to political knowledge and action. To counter this, Ndebele argues that the South African writer must "[work] towards a radical displacement of the white oppressor as an active, dominant player in the imagination of the oppressed" and "consolidate the sense of a viable, psychologically self-sufficient community among the oppressed" (73). In Zamani's

stand against the Boer Ndebele rewrites the spectacle from the standpoint of the ordinary. It marks a fictional point of origin, a redemptive rebirth, a symbolic epistemological break in the imagination of the oppressed.

In the cultural dialectic that Ndebele invokes, the ordinary becomes a vehicle to revolutionary consciousness and is offered as a method of analysis and critique. What his insistence on the ordinary seems to imply for literary writing is social realism, with a strong emphasis on character and cognitive analysis. Again, his own stories demonstrate his theory. In "Fools," for example, Zamani, the morally corrupted schoolteacher, critically explores his own past through his encounters with Zani, the militant student just returned from Swaziland. In a process of doubling, recognition, and identification, the story turns on Zamani's atonement and redemption for the struggle. Tellingly, it is the mature schoolteacher, not the militant youth, who breaks with the psychology of the oppressed. The story of Zamani's internal struggle is an edifying demonstration of the growth of critical consciousness and the epistemology of in/sight. For Ndebele, narrative, whether popular storytelling or written literature, is a privileged site of democratic pedagogy. "Real fiction," he writes in his essay "Actors and Interpreters," is "creative discussion of real social issues" (94), while reading is "an important extension of the democratic process itself" (126). In the dialectical relationship between writing and reading, Ndebele repeatedly invokes the "deepening of insight" and the "advancement of knowledge" (126).

A number of critics have queried the ideological underpinnings of the literature of the ordinary (Morphet, Sole, Vaughan), but Ndebele's insistence on the method of the ordinary as process and exploration, while weighted towards realism in practice, also leaves room for aesthetic developments "beyond realism." The ordinary is, I would argue, less a rigorous theoretical category than a politically strategic metaphor for the cultural work to be done in building a democratic culture. On the one hand, the emphasis on the ordinary is prescriptive in identifying work necessary to free the social imagination; for example, Ndebele somewhat didactically enumerates the writer's larger social responsibilities to the community of the oppressed (94), as well as listing specific areas for exploration in fiction, such as the world of the oppressed in relation to science, politics, the family, sport and fashion, and rural life (71-72). On the other hand, the ordinary affirms individual and social creativity as an open—and by implication, democratic—process. As a critical intervention the ordinary lays claim metaphorically to the possibility of the future in the present.

Ndebele's work is attracting increasing critical attention, a sign of his importance as a cultural critic and activist (he is co-chair of the Congress of South African Writers). His work and the readings of his work raise interesting questions about critical paradigms and audi-

ences within postcolonial studies. The essays were originally addressed to different audiences, some within South Africa, some without, and always within the context of the political struggle against apartheid. Graham Pechey's introduction to this volume of essays, in conjunction with Anthony O'Brien's article "Literature in Another South Africa," richly contextualizes Ndebele's work for a Western audience. Pechey describes Ndebele as "a prophet of the post-apartheid condition" (1). He argues that "Ndebele's intervention is not directly in 'theory' or philosophy but in the praxis of a particular transformation" (7), and should be read as "a regional post-colonial variant of that move in late-modern thought which . . . seeks to rescue whatever was emancipatory in the project of modernity by fashioning a new 'communicative' or intersubjective rationality friendly to our everyday life-world" (8). O'Brien, in contrast, positions Ndebele as a cultural theorist emerging from the Black Consciousness Movement, but then, in an extraordinarily creative move via Bessie Head, he claims Ndebele's theorizing of the ordinary as "a tacit form of feminism" (78).

The awkward construction of this argument points to a larger critical anxiety about feminism-in-postcolonialism. O'Brien notes the affinity between Bessie Head's writing of the ordinary and Ndebele's; he suggests Head is Ndebele's precursor, but then he goes on to claim Ndebele's ordinary as "tacit feminism" because it encodes the principle that "the personal is political." Unfortunately, in claiming Ndebele for feminism (or the reverse), O'Brien makes relatively familiar conceptual "mistakes." For O'Brien "tacit feminism" is, in this instance, "feminism (without the name)" (78). But in his discussion it is also, glaringly, "feminism (without the women)" and without a conception of gender politics as relations of power and as including the male gender as well as women. Ndebele's ordinary and a feminist understanding of "the personal is political" do intersect, but they are not identical.

It is interesting to note that Ndebele's work has drawn the sustained attention of male critics, but in print, at least, not that of women. It would be improper to essentialize reading practices by gender (of course), but there does seem to be a gendered divide in the response to Ndebele. Rather than trying to "fit" Ndebele into a feminist mould, it might be more productive to examine the ways in which he writes the ordinary and the male intellectual, the ways in which he explicitly and implicitly evokes male intellectual traditions in both his critical writings and his stories, and the ways in which he writes gender relations in the context of the national project of achieving democracy.

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Marlene van Niekerk. *Triomf*. Cape Town: Queillerie, 1994. Pp. 455. R59.95.

Afrikaans literature has been conducting its own truth commission in the past years with texts like Jeanne Goosen's *Ons is nie almal so nie* (1990), John Miles's *Kroniek uit die doofpot* (1991), Mark Behr's *Die reuk van appels* (1993) and Pierre de Vos's *Slegs Blankes/Whites Only* (1993). These texts chart and expose events during the apartheid years, writing the history of the Afrikaner psyche in the process. Marlene van Niekerk's novel *Triomf* (winner of both the M-Net and CNA Literary Prizes in 1995) can be read as another addition to this new tradition in Afrikaans literature because it focusses uncompromisingly on a dark underside of South African society. Published in June 1994, *Triomf* was one of the first Afrikaans novels to be published after the first democratic election in South Africa that took place on the 27 April 1994 and one of the first to incorporate references to the election in the narrative. The novel recounts the monotonous daily lives of a family of poor white Afrikaners, showing how apartheid failed even those it was ideologically designed to benefit. They live in the Johannesburg suburb ironically called Triomf (Afrikaans for triumph), built on the ruins of the black township Sophiatown that was demolished in the 1950s by the social engineers of apartheid to create a suburb for the white working class. Their suburban yard can almost be called an "archaeological site" from which they dig up all sorts of remnants from the past, reminding them of the forced removals of blacks from Sophiatown which they witnessed from a safe distance as future inhabitants of the area.

The novel gradually reveals that the Benade family living in Triomf is a gross caricature of the nuclear family and all the values it embodies: the "husband" Pop, his "wife" Mol and their "relative" Treppie are actually siblings, while the epileptic Lambert is their son. (It is not clear whether Pop or Treppie fathered him.) Treppie's scheme to establish a refrigerator repair business having failed and Lambert not being able to finish school or hold down a job, they depend on welfare