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History and Identity: a Perspective from some South African Literary Texts

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> *If you did not listen when the past was breathing,*
> *the present erases your name*
> (Mongane Wally Serote[2])

The history I was taught at school began in Africa, but we never considered Egypt to be close to home. The line of civilisation moved through the Greeks and Romans, through Europe, and came to the Cape of Good Hope in ships. This civilisation was considered sufficient justification for the appropriation of land by Europeans. History, as it was passed down to us, was designed to provide identity, pride, solidarity — and separateness — to white South Africans. Needless to say, it created problems for black students who received their education from the same source.

Now, even as we revalue our past, trying to gather the separate strands for a more inclusive history, a more inclusive sense of identity, we are conscious of history being made, of transformation, of risks, of the decisive impact of leadership at crucial junctures. We cannot tell yet how this history will be inscribed, transmitted, and received. This article will briefly examine a few of the ways in which South African literary texts have dealt with

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[1] University of Pretoria.

[2] From the poem Heat and Sweat, in Serote's *Behold Mama, Flowers* (Johannesburg: Ad Donker, 1978).

the writing and reception of history, and conclude with a discussion of Mike Nicol's novel, *This Day and Age*.

In the light of apartheid and censorship, writers in South Africa have been particularly concerned with the power wielded by those who control information, and those who get to write the text. There would often be an official version and an alternative version of events. Struggle literature was for many a historical imperative. Because of the ongoing drama and turmoil of the last years, some have simply borne testimony to their times.

This witnessing function goes beyond the struggle to the major South African political event of 1994. In *SA 27 April 1994*, compiled by André Brink, South African writers relate their experiences of the first democratic election. In Mike Nicol's contribution, he seeks out an old haunt, *The Camel Rock Cafe*, places it (the southernmost polling booth in the country) and carefully marks the day in relation to the past years (he is now 42, and for the first time is going to live under a regime that is "not the National Party"). From this setting he recounts the history of the apartheid years and the moment when he first realised they would end — again providing time and place: during the 1976 uprising, in Alexandra township, amidst burning, looting, and police shooting. "This, I suddenly realised, was history. History wasn't the past. It wasn't dates and places and events. History was now. It was the smell of burning rubber. It was the crack of the guns". This specificity is possible for history happening, in the present tense. And yet in the smoke the moment is already dreamlike: "Events seemed unconnected, spontaneous and violent."[3]

Written history is something altogether different from actual history, from the lost moment, as the narrator of Nicol's novel, *This Day and Age*, reminds us. For one, it begins after the event: "Afterwards is where stories begin."[4] "[T]his is afterwards, this is the new country."[5] The moment is past; the context has changed. And then history is not written in the singular, but in the plural; it consists of many stories: "afterwards, there are versions of events: the word of a drunken editor in an hotel bar, the talk of a cleaning woman, a vigil of prayers for what happened or what may have happened or what people heard happened. Afterwards there are the facts according to one, the truth according to another..."[6] For writ-

3 Mike Nicol, "Voting at the Camel Rock Cafe" *in* Andre Brink (compiler), *SA April 1994: an authors' diary* (Cape Town: Queillerie, 1994), 96, 97.

4 Mike Nicol, *This Day and Age* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1992), 3.

5 Ibid., 275.

6 Ibid., 275.

ers in South Africa, the "new country," the question of who will be believed, how and by whom our past and present history will be written, remains.

European settlers came to Africa with the word, a written word displacing an oral tradition. In Serote's *Song of Experience*, with its refrain, "Remember...", he recalls the cultural domination of "the word of a merciless civilisation."[7] Post-colonial African writers have borne testimony to the power of the written text. In Ngugi's *A Grain of Wheat*, the British administrator, John Thompson, envisages writing a colonial history entitled *Prospero in Africa*.[8] Ngugi uses a typical name and engages a familiar debate about *The Tempest* as colonial pre-text, as he "writes back," reversing the process by which the other is stereotyped. Chinua Achebe recreates a pre-colonial Nigerian civilisation in *Things Fall Apart*, and, in a shift in narrative point of view, has the District Commissioner plan the book he will write about his experiences, called The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger.[9] Written history, it is implied, is controlled by the ideology of the literate. Serote, in his *Song of Experience*, shows that the result for the others was erasure: adults, parents, became like children, and their children lost a chapter of their past:

> Don't we know that in the face of the day they lived they engraved with their fingers . . .
> and we came and found a blank space where we were to find the last words from them...[10]

It is not only the writing of history that confers power and that is shaped by ideology, but also the reception of texts. The white settlers in Africa interpreted their books according to their own lights. Alan Paton, writing *Too Late the Phalarope* in the years after 1948, when apartheid laws were being passed and amended, explores the social and spiritual forces behind the drive for separateness in terms of the Afrikaners' history, their trek away from the British government, through a country of "rock and stone," "grim and waterless plains," to come to a green and smiling country. "They had built their houses and their churches; and as God had chosen them for a people, so did they choose him for their God, cherishing their separateness that was now his will." [11] The identification with the exodus of the people of Israel is evident, the slip in the discourse being the conclusion that since God had enabled the people to survive, their separateness "was now his will." So the

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[7] Serote, *Behold Mama, Flowers*, 75.
[8] Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *A Grain of Wheat* (London: Heinemann, 1967, 1983), 48.
[9] Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1958, 1990,) 148.
[10] Song of Experience in *Behold Mama, Flowers*, 75.
[11] Alan Paton, *Too Late the Phalarope* (1955), (London : Penguin, 1971), 18.

Bible becomes a text of identity, the history of election and hardship adopted as their own: "The dominee often reminded us that our great book came from the Jews, and that we too were a people of Israel, who suffered and died to win the Holy Land."[12] Douglas Livingstone, too, in his poem "The Heritage," depicts the trekkers as "unworldly men", bringing with them a "black book to swat / in disarray the tribes aside."[13] Both writers point to the misappropriation of the Biblical text — yet it should perhaps be added that their texts, too, are constructions — and that another's ideology is more easily identified than one's own.

Ideological power over the text was also exercised, most evidently, in the form of control over information and publication, with the official version being privileged as the dominant interpretation of history. Peter Horn expostulates, in the persona of a coloured South African.

> This, Meddem, is the situation as I see it: We live in a black-out. I can't paint it white with words. But for ready cash there are dominees who tell applauding patriots: "The Lord is with us!" [14]

In a series of ironical inversions, Horn inverts Jesus' image of those who misappropriate the Word of God, the Pharisees, as "white-washed tombs," as well as our trust in what is written, what is "black on white." The control of the text is a "blackout" — enforced by Whites — that he is unable to "paint white" with words. The South African writer cannot sanction it, and is powerless to change it.

And across this divide, Black writers have increasingly, consciously, written their own history, and some have expressed their own nationalism in the face of white tribalism and cultural arrogance. The predominance of autobiography as a genre is one sign of the need to record and correct. The speaking "I" in these autobiographies, the author, self and subject, is often a collective self, "I-on-behalf-of." Bloke Modisane, choosing the title, *Blame Me on History*, depicts the powerless role of the black man in South Africa who, unable to shape his own history, is regarded not as the subject of history but its object, its consequence, a trespasser. Mattera, calling his autobiography *Memory is the Weapon*, reflects the consciousness that to recall and inscribe events is an instrument in the struggle for change. So, too, South Africa's notoriously strong tradition of prison writing bears tes-

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[12] Ibid., 24.

[13] Douglas Livingstone, *Selected Poems.* (Johannesburg: Ad Donker, 1984), 94.

[14] From S. Finn and R. Gray (eds.), *Broken Strings: The Politics of Poetry in South Africa* (Cape Town: Maskew Miller Longman, 1992), 67.

timony to the long struggle against apartheid. Barbara Schreiner has given voice to those least likely to get into print, illiterate woman prisoners, by publishing her interviews with them.[15]

Autobiography straddles the divide which was long perceived to exist between history and literature — a division which was premised on the singular facticity of history, as opposed to the multivalence of literary texts. The linear narrative is, however, increasingly viewed as a construction. McGann avers, for example, that every "so-called fact or event in history is imbedded in an indeterminate set of multiple and overlapping networks"[16] so that history is neither linear nor single, but "the same set of events is incommensurate with itself — because the same set of events is, appearances notwithstanding, not the same set of events, is not equal to itself but is multiple."[17]

This indeterminacy is demonstrated by Mike Nicol in *This Day and Age*, published in 1992. Discarding realism, a linear narrative and an authoritative narrative voice, he presents a fragmented tale with baffling shifts in time, place and perspective, told by many narrators, resisting a single conclusion or closure. The traditional historical sources are all represented: official bulletins, military dispatches, a diary, letters, press clippings, newspaper editorials and letters to the editor.[18] Such apparently reliable sources are often subverted, most clearly in the case of an official commission of enquiry, appointed by the State President, led by Justice Erasmus Francois de Blanc, which concludes that a massacre by armed troops of hundreds of people never occurred. Any "old" South African will recognise the diction, quoted in a press report:

> If the due process of law and the sanctity of the state were to be preserved then it was the good citizens' moral duty not to disseminate hearsay and rumours, which, as in this case, were always devoid of truth. When truth was subject to the vagaries of individual inclinations then all that was inimicable to stability, the dignity of human rights, and the rule of justice would "founder upon the rocks of mendacity and deception."

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15 Barbara Schreiner (ed.), *A Snake with Ice Water: Prison Writings by South African Women* (Johannesburg: COSAW, 1992).

16 Jerome McGann, "History, Herstory, Theirstory, Ourstory", *in* David Perkins (ed.), *Theoretical Issues in Literary History* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1991), 197.

17 Ibid., 198.

18 John Boje, in an unpublished article, "The Bulhoek Massacre in two South African novels," has shown that the editorial included on pp. 185, 186 of the novel, appeared in *The Daily Dispatch* of 13 December 1920, the letter on p. 93 appeared in *The Star* of 17 May 1921, and another letter quoted in the novel also appeared in a newspaper in 1921. The source used and acknowledged by Nicol is Robert Edgar, *Because they chose the plan of God: the story of the Bulhoek massacre* (Johannesburg: Ravan, 1988).

Nicol layers texts, as he does here, in post-modern self-reflection, and perhaps as a comment on the many-layered texts of historical inscription. Intermingled with the traditional sources is the stuff of magic realism, the stuff of oral history: stories and rumours, yarns and legends, myths and fairy-tales, visions and prophecies — the very sources denigrated as untruthful by the untruthful judge. The true events, afterwards, are inaccessible and indeterminable — and open to more than one interpretation. (Even Nicol's fondness for puns underlines the ambiguity of signification.)

After chapters like "His story" and "This story" a chapter entitled "Another story" finally tells the "true" story — but this is based on oral history, on stories told to children.

It is the fictional recreation of an actual event, the Bulhoek massacre of 1921, in which nearly 200 followers of a self-styled prophet, Enoch Mgijima, were killed by police and army troops because they refused to move from their settlement where they were awaiting the Second Coming. Not unlike Paton's Afrikaners, they called themselves the Israelites. Boje has compared Nicol's use of this event with that of Sarah Gertrude Millin in *The Coming of the Lord* (1928). Millin gives a realistic narrative account, from the point of view of the whites living in a nearby town: "What Millin could understand," Boje comments, "and what *The Coming of the Lord* so well conveys, is the affront posed to white sensibilities by black resistance." "'They must be got away, they must be got away, the people of Gideon cried, and now all South Africa was echoing their demand."[19] Clearly, "all South Africa" is not an inclusive concept, but that of a minority making up Millin's reading constituency, the small band of "Gideon" in its forefront — blind, in its appropriation of nationhood and sanction, to the exclusion and rejection of the others, who must be "got away" — who must, therefore, be trespassing. (Boje quotes the words of the judge before whom the remaining Israelites actually appeared, that they had held "the crazy notion that the day was coming when the black man would have his freedom.")[20]

Nicol dispenses with racial categories. Those who follow Enoch Mistas, who, like his namesake, has a Bible chained to his wrist, are simply the dispossessed. In a passing reference in a military dispatch we read that "due, in part . . . to the recently promulgated Native Lands Act, there is now an increase in vagrancy in the hinterland" (121). In a vision the President sees these "vagrants" as "tailors, shopkeepers, their wives and children,

19 Sarah Gertrude Millin, *The Coming of the Lord* (New York: Horace Livewright, 1928), 173.

20 John Boje, "The Bulhoek Massacre in two South African novels," unpublished article. Boje quotes from Robert Edgar, *Because they chose the plan of God*, 38.

brigands, bandits, murderers, thieves and rustlers,[21] easy girls, Khoi Greek Jew Xhosa Zulu Griqua Portuguese, chiefs, servants and slaves..." (189) The shift away from specificity is part of the forging of myth ; the story is out of time and largely out of place, though the place is recognisably South Africa. The "vagrants" are refugees, who are defined as trespassers by the promulgation of laws denying them land.

This Day and Age opens with three epigraphs,[22] quotations from D. F. Malan, the first nationalist Prime Minister of South Africa, Enoch Mgijima, leader of the Israelites, and Hannah Arendt. Malan posits nationhood as the gift and creation of God, but nationhood for him means "Afrikanerdom." Mgijima, similarly, claims divine sanction, but in his case it is not for power but for martyrdom. These two quotations set the scene for the clash to come, dramatised in the novel in the contest between the President and Enoch Mistas. Hannah Arendt posits a third force, one which the Greeks might have termed fate: "the force of history and historical necessity." Who, ultimately, is responsible when a tragedy such as that recreated in the novel occurs? P. T. George, the one character who tries to avert the inevitable, struggles with his conscience, with his own responsibility, as ordinary people have done in the face of relentless, conflicting forces. What will be the judgement of history?

In the novel, history judges in strange ways. The president dies in the prologue, to join his predecessors in a row of portraits in a hall. The official version of his death post-dates the event by a day. Enoch Mistas proves to be immortal — because Enoch Mistas lives in legend:

> Again Enoch Mistas raises his hands as if crucified, blood still seeping from the wounds: I won't die, infantryman. I shall never die. Already I am told to children.
> (273, 274)

This appears to be a vindication of a parallel history, an oral history — if our narrative is reliable, when it has proved itself to be constantly relative (in this case the point of view is that of a man going mad). Nevertheless, a deeply spiritual African tradition is evoked.[23]

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21 An echo of President Paul Kruger's address to the "uitlanders" (foreigners) whom he regarded as a threat to law and order, and to his republic.

22 See addendum.

23 Boje (13) quotes a statement by Professor Z. K. Matthews on the Bulhoek massacre, that "it is talked about to children . as an incident that has passed into what we might call the political history of the people."

Even as Nicol employs oral narratives, he reminds his readers of a part of our history of which few records remain, save a few transcribed songs and some paintings. Typically, he does so in a vision wrapped in a prophecy told to an editor by a fortune-teller. It is the story of the original, truly indigenous population of South Africa, "wizened men fitting arrows to their bows" (215). They appear as spirits of the earth, their presence felt by a dying man in the desert. The Bushmen were displaced and destroyed by those with spears and those with guns. Their presence in "this day and age" serves as a reminder that the struggle for land has always been one between usurping peoples. In the face of this unwritten history, all South Africans have reason to be humble. The questions left unanswered about the massacre of a community pertain equally to the extinction of a people.

Our literature, then, reflects our divided history, a struggle for land, for freedom, for identity. For our collected history to be truly representative, we need the mosaic vision of the dragonflies that hover over Enoch Mistas in Nicol's novel, elusive signs of immortality. As present time passes, the moment is scattered; an openness to multiple interpretations creates space for the many stories embodying many identities in our country.