

## HISTORY AS ARTEFACT AND SOUTH AFRICAN HISTORIANS AS JUGGLERS OF FICTIONS, PURVEYORS OF SNAKE-OIL, AND OTHER 'SUSPECT NARRATIVES'

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**M**y two year stint as editor of *New Contree* has come to an end and I am off on sabbatical. I will pick up the reins once more when I return in July 1999.

Much will change under the interim editor Tim Clynick. Quite simply journals must be able to fund themselves in the New South Africa. As universities retrench staff in a desperate bid to survive, and essential services everywhere grind to a halt, it is obvious that there will be little or no money for 'luxuries' like journals. The existing subscription is insufficient to fund even one of the bi-annual issues of this journal. The past two years have been an attempt to prove our worth and encourage readers, departments and institutions to pay higher subscription rates when we ran out of funds. I hope we have succeeded.

It is difficult to define a pattern amidst the tumult that is post-apartheid South Africa. Perhaps the nadir of the last two years was attending the 'Future of the Past' conference at the University of the Western Cape in 1996. Despite Carolyn Hamilton's attempts to find some virtue in this 'rockface' debate, many historians were left pondering what they had achieved as educators. In this forum, pseudo-Marxists and 1960s-type activists mouthing racial and ethnic stereotypes were considered by some to be challenging "the history producing establishment."<sup>1</sup>

Hoary old Marxist clichés, attacks on Hermann Giliomee for daring to criticise the government, immediate affirmative action based solely upon proportional representation, and demands for a halt to a 'global European conspiracy' were the limits of this brave new vision. I venture to suggest any industrial shop steward would have made a more convincing case for change along these lines.

What was especially chilling was the Pol Pot ambience of the conference. If these 'visionaries' succeed, South African historians will be state functionaries wearing party uniforms and proving their *ultra vires* by tending gardens on Robben Island or serving on some or other discredited and inordinately extravagant government commission.

Should a post-modernist complain? If history is merely artefact, the product of a specific era or time 'frame', surely post-modernists would be wrong to expect any empathy or commitment to a 'distinguished craft' from fellow historians? It would perhaps be more salutary to consider whether this intra-disciplinary sympathy has ever existed, or was it not the case that apartheid-era historians, like Milner's settlers, 'never bore a good name'?<sup>2</sup> Tearing down societal barriers leaves one vulnerable to the consequences. A second aspect of this discipline that deserves attention is the role of overseas

<sup>1</sup> Carolyn Hamilton, "The Future of the Past: New Trajectories", *South African Historical Journal*, 35 (1996).

<sup>2</sup> Rykie van Reenen (ed.) *Emily Hobhouse: Boer War Letters* (1984), p. 248.

intermediaries/interlocutors in New South African history. During the apartheid years, many historians, but especially the revisionists who dominated this era, worked in that vacuum created by international condemnation. Theirs was the moral high ground and this 'moral superiority' was mercilessly used in categorizing, codifying and emasculating locals who did not conform to their ideological vision, whilst procuring 'jobs for the boys'. Attacks on the Nationalist/Broederbond establishment for its 'baantjies vir boeties' approach were sheer dishonesty in the face of similar practices.

Always 'you get someone coming in, a foreigner at that, trying to tell us to rename our mountains'.<sup>3</sup> Is it not time that South African historians began writing their own history without recourse to overseas 'experts'? Is it not demeaning that much of our history during the past thirty years has been dictated by foreigners? The fall of the Berlin Wall not only freed oppressed Europeans from Marxism, but South Africans were also freed from those 'eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase' as Eliot put it in *Prufrock*. E. E. Cummings was more direct when he wrote:

Russia, I felt, was more deadly than war; when nationalists hate, they hate by merely killing and maiming human beings; when internationalists hate, they hate by categorizing and pigeon-holing human beings.<sup>4</sup>

In a few months numerous revisionist mandarins will descend on Pretoria for a conference celebrating the Anglo-Boer War centenary. Theirs is not 'an idea whose time has come' - but rather an ideological world that has fled. As Conrad wrote: beliefs shift like mists on the shore: thoughts vanish; words, once pronounced, die: and the memory of yesterday is as shadowy as the hope of tomorrow - only the string of my platitudes seems to have no end. As peasants say: 'pray, brother, forgive me for the love of God!' And we don't know what forgiveness is, nor what is love, nor where God is.<sup>5</sup>

Am I the only one who is overjoyed to be freed from the 'poisonous air of then'?<sup>6</sup>

The rest of this editorial will consider the efforts of *New Contree* to advance cultural and linguistic diversity as a crucial element in identity formation, racial and ethnic integration, and the advance of that global paradigmatic shift that is postmodernism.

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<sup>3</sup> Bob Stone, *Melbourne Sun*, 27 March 1989. See also my paper 'The Burghers of the Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek: 'Proto-capitalists' - or the typical warriors of an Early Modern Conquest State', presented at the Bi-annual History Conference, Pretoria, 1997. The disparaging attitude of the public towards historians and their failure to provide leadership during the apartheid years may be gathered from such newspaper articles as Dries van Heerden's, 'First there is history - then come the facts', *Sunday Times*, 8 July 1990 and Louis du Buisson, 'Enough of the Bunk', *Sunday Star*, 16 August 1992. See also Hermann Giliomee, 'Dwasedanse en Dwaalspore in Suid-Afrika se geskiedenis', *Rapport*, 5 May 1996.

<sup>4</sup> E. E. Cummings, *The Enormous Room* (1922), p. 8.

<sup>5</sup> C. T. Watts (ed.), *Joseph Conrad, Letters to R. B. Cunningham Graham* (1969), p. 12.

<sup>6</sup> Doris Lessing, *Under My Skin, Volume One of My Autobiography, to 1949* (1995), p. 16.

### Architects of a new tower of Babylon?

In recent correspondence, Donald H. Akenson commented on the activities of *New Contree*:

As I read it, the word that kept coming to mind, along with its associated image, was "Maelstrom". Multiple ones.

What I mean is that I have a great deal of respect, but no envy, for those of you who are trying to keep the world in order, just at the time the world historical community is losing its own compass. I suspect you must know directly how the architects of the tower of Babel felt.<sup>7</sup>

Donald Akenson's comment is valid. There is a sense in which this journal can be accused of helping to construct a tower of Babel. What is missing from this reflection, however, is that sense of menace that is the New South Africa. Few South Africans are in any doubt that language is the consummate weapon of both racial and ethnic mobilizers and that 'no battle is more surely lost than that not fought'.

At its simplest, the contested terrain lies in that tension between an endoglossic (one national language) or heteroglossic (linguistically diverse) language policy. Many people do not see the new ANC constitution adequately safeguarding racial and ethnic diversity, especially in the face of the growing divergence between official policy and behaviour.

Whilst many in the ANC have made their zero-sum, 'winner takes all' attitude clear; the *New Contree* has argued that the future of this land depends upon whether the New South African elite is committed to a punitive 'peace' such as was imposed at Versailles, or 'whether they have taken to heart the historical lesson of the allies at the end of the Second World War, when they assisted with the reinstatement of the vanquished'.<sup>8</sup> This point was recently reinforced when Joseph Joffe argued that American generosity towards a defeated Germany had been an astute investment. Joffe wrote:

Germany was one of the most hated nations on earth. It had launched a war that would claim 55 million dead. It had invented industrial genocide. To slay the Nazi monster, the entire planet had to be mobilized for a fight to the death. Afterwards, Germans understandably thought that theirs was an indefinite future of punishment and prostration - Versailles cubed, as it were. But a remake of the cruel peace of 1919 was not to be... This (peace) was the setting in which West Germany's "economic miracle" could flourish, where democracy was associated not with misery and imposition, but with prosperity and respectability... For never has altruism been so profitable for a great power as was America's "proactive" commitment to Western Europe in the late 1940s.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Letter dated 24 June 1997. Donald H. Akenson is the author of *God's peoples, covenant and land in South Africa, Israel and Ulster* (1991).

<sup>8</sup> John Bottomley, "Seeking the Zeitgeist: Multiculturalism, conformity and conflict - or peaceful coexistence in the New South Africa", *New Contree*, 40 (1996).

<sup>9</sup> Joseph Joffe, "Doing well by doing good", *Time*, 25 May 1998.

The South African government should ignore the voice of retribution - and the popular vote this encompasses. As it is, however, the predominating fear of ethnocide and questions of language, culture and identity constitute the very essence of the relationship of the South African minority to the majority in whose name the ANC exercises power. The government continues to portray any thoughts of ethnodevelopment, cultural pluralism, internal self-determination, territorialism and regional sustainability, as obstacles to modernization (and its hold on power).

It is increasingly acknowledged that there are no categorical imperatives which, if applied, will ensure the successful administration of racial and ethnic diversity. This can be seen in the microcosmic issue of language that lies at the very heart of the development debate. One of the most recent works on this topic concluded:

We have no theory of language planning; there is no evidence of significant cross-disciplinary work, no criteria for evaluation, no greater insight into the process... The frequent failure of language planning (would suggest that) a classificatory study of such failures, with an attempt to identify causal factors, might be very useful toward the development of a theory of language planning; at present, failure is mostly ignored.<sup>10</sup>

The same degree of ignorance attends most elements of South Africa's 'politics of identity' and projects for managing national diversity. Thus, ethnicity remains an elusive concept at best, whilst the fundamentals of racial co-existence are equally absent from the main contours of contemporary thought.

There are numerous other fiercely contested elements of identity, from language to culture, about which we are equally blind. There are no hard and fast rules. In the end all that is left are official statements of intent and the cognizance that a successful African renaissance depends upon establishing a common, equitable and peaceful social structure in South Africa:

It is important that the development process should take due account of minority rights and threatened identities... for only if people and groups are incorporated within the process on equitable terms will the development of society operate at a reasonable political level. Otherwise it is the tyranny of the powerful masquerading as progress and social change.<sup>11</sup>

### Postmodernism and New South African History

After modernism all discourse is suspect.<sup>12</sup>

We select, we construct, we compose our pasts and hence make fictional characters of ourselves as it seems we must to remain sane.

William H. Gass<sup>13</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Denis Dwyer and David Drakakis-Smith (eds.), *Ethnicity and Development. Geographical perspectives* (1996), p. 82.

<sup>11</sup> Dwyer and Drakakis-Smith, *Ethnicity and Development*, p. 82.

<sup>12</sup> Dennis Brown, *The Modernist self in twentieth century English literature* (1989), p. 10.

<sup>13</sup> William H. Gass, *Fiction and the Figures of Life* (1970), p. 128.

The text becomes a site for understanding history, and criticism helps us to recognise our present conditions and act to change it. That is, by showing the historical embeddedness of a text we are better able to see it as the product of a certain shaping situation, part of a continuing 'dynamic, unstable and reciprocal relationship between the discursive and material domains', as Louis Montrose says.<sup>14</sup>

As Althusser, Gramsci and Lukacs point out in different ways, Marxism too is 'a form moving in time', a transitional value calling for assessment, itself as open to tragic and exploitative misapplications as the religions and other oppressive ideologies it criticises.<sup>15</sup>

The case of being trapped inside an outworn literary tradition may be taken as a special system of feeling that we are all trapped in our systems for measuring and understanding the world: that in fact there is no 'reality' except our systems of measuring.<sup>16</sup>

I have come to believe that the whole world is an enigma, a harmless enigma that is made terrible by our own mad attempt to interpret it as though it had an underlying truth.<sup>17</sup>

Literary modernism, we might say, was the major intellectual discourse to take on board the final implications of the 'death of God'. If human consciousness is all - arbiter not only of values and beliefs but also of the nature of reason and reality itself - then the possibility of human deception puts all in doubt. And again, since human language is not divinely guaranteed, and can be shown as inadequate to express what is beyond it, quite what can be said to be the case about anything? As Nietzsche noted, we have scarcely abolished God if we still believe in grammar.<sup>18</sup>

The concept of reality as a fiction has been theoretically formulated within many disciplines and from many political and philosophical positions... 'Reality' is not something that is simply given. 'Reality' is manufactured. It is produced by the interrelationship of apparently 'objective faculties' in the world with social convention and personal or interpersonal vision. These social forms operate within particular historical structures of power and frameworks of knowledge. Continual shifts in the structures of

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<sup>14</sup> Louis Montrose, "Renaissance Literary Studies and the Subject of History" in *English Literary Renaissance*, 16 (1986), p. 8, quoted in Patrick Grant, *Literature and personal values* (1992), p. 181.

<sup>15</sup> Grant, *Literature and personal values*, p. 220.

<sup>16</sup> V. Forest-Thompson, "Necessary Artifice" in *Language and Style* 6, 1 (1973).

<sup>17</sup> Umberto Eco, *Foucault's pendulum*, quoted in Andrew Vincent, *Modern political ideologies*, (1995), Preface.

<sup>18</sup> Brown, *Modernist Self*, pp. 108-109.

knowledge and power produce continual re-syntheses of the reality model.<sup>19</sup>

A sculptor named Giacometti once claimed that his pieces were justified by the shadows they made possible. Thus the value of a sculpture, which is a material and tangible thing, is reduced to something immaterial, intangible, arbitrarily variable, in an optical transaction where the rate of exchange depends on the fall of the light.<sup>20</sup>

The chamber around him transformed to that altered plain of perception. Simple objects unveiled themselves in complexity, the weavings of ... history revealed. The pile of the carpet showed its humble beginnings as wool on the backs of jostling sheep; then shadowed in overlay, each dye in its colouring, brewed from plantstuffs and crushed insects and urine; and underlying the weave like the tap of ghost fingers, the thump of the looms dragging warp threads through weft in the hands of chattering craftswomen. The pale shafts of candles bespoke honeyed summer days and the bustling industry of bees. Mere flecks of dust adrift on the air gained the lordly, bright splendour of stars. Metal for latches, and the bronze of wrought ornament whispered of dark beginnings in the earth, then shrilled to the bright heat of smelting.<sup>21</sup>

History is natural selection. Mutant versions of the past struggle for dominance; new species of fact arise, and old saurian truths go to the wall, blindfolded and smoking last cigarettes. Only the mutations of the strong survive. The weak, the anonymous, the defeated leave few marks... history loves only those who dominate her: it is a relationship of mutual enslavement.

Salmon Rushdie<sup>22</sup>

I will ... let my theorists speak for themselves, as much as possible, with the inevitable drawback that my text will be a minefield of quotations. There is much to say for the art of graceful summary, but I'd rather convey an impression of the different voices that have contributed to the debate.<sup>23</sup>

Thirty years ago, when revisionism surfaced in South Africa, many historians were sceptical and believed, despite much evidence to the contrary, that this paradigmatic approach would fail. Similarly, a decade or so ago, the majority of historians at a RAU conference concluded that history departments would do well to ignore computers which would turn into expensive white elephants.

<sup>19</sup> Patricia Waugh, *Metafiction. The theory and practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* (1984), p. 51.

<sup>20</sup> L. J. K. Setright, "Art for art's sake", *Car*, June 1992, p. 82.

<sup>21</sup> Janny Wurts, *Fugitive Prince: Alliance of Light. Book One* (1997) pp. 11-12.

<sup>22</sup> Salmon Rushdie, *Shame* (1984), p. 124.

<sup>23</sup> Etienne van Heerden, *Postmodernisme en prosa, vertelstrategieën in vyf verhale van Abraham H. de Vries* (1997), p. 18, quoting Hans Bertens, *The idea of the postmodern: A history* (1995).

In the 1990s, the postmodern aesthetic is viewed by many in equally dismissive terms, as a passing fad, or fashion.<sup>24</sup> When Dennis Brown wrote 'I accept that the concept of the postmodern is now well established' and pointed to the 'widespread assimilation of the postmodern thesis' - he was not referring to the colonial periphery, where many people still live in fear of the 'arcane terminology' of this mode of representation.<sup>25</sup>

The barbarians are no longer at the gates, however, and amongst the first Southern African works to pay homage to postmodernism is *Postcolonial Identities in Africa* (1996) edited by Richard Werbner and Terence Ranger. A brief glance at the table of contents leaves one in little doubt about its postmodern core:

The colonial, the *post* and the palimpsest  
 Postcoloniality and diasporic literary critics  
 The state of the postcolony  
 Shifting identities, plural arenas  
 Post-apartheid, postmodern, postcolonial  
 The reappropriation of the state, reciprocal assimilation and political hybridity  
 Identity degradation, stereotypes, occult imaginarity

As was the case with revisionism, some historians will attempt to ignore this new model of the social realm. The danger is that one's historical 'frame of reference' thereby becomes irrelevant.

In her book review 'Once one has seen God, what is the remedy' in this journal, Carla Luijks provides a graphic example of the failure of a historian to find an appropriate interpretative vehicle for his material. It was Sir Herbert Butterfield who concluded, 'ultimately our interpretation of the whole human drama depends on an intimately personal decision concerning the part we mean to play in it'.<sup>26</sup>

Let us look for a point of purchase on the postmodern aesthetic. Postmodernism in Britain began to crystallize in literary studies during the mid-1970s and particularly after the translation of Jean-Francois Lyotard's book, *The Postmodern Condition* (1986). This intellectual ferment increased with the works of Jean Baudrillard *Selected Writings* (1988) and *Fatal Strategies* (1990). Thereafter, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault and Roland Barthes deconstructed those Marxist narratives that had for so long "entranced the Left Bank."<sup>27</sup>

The essential point of this emerging epistemological doubt was a pervasive insecurity about the relationship of reality to fiction, or more simply, fact to fiction. What is at issue is how human beings reflect, construct and mediate their experience of the world; where and indeed whether truth/objectivity exist - in a Platonic parallel universe with truth being the distillate of a carefully nurtured craft, in certain forms of discourse/ primary

<sup>24</sup> Norman Etherington, "Postmodernism and South African history", *New Contree*, 40 (1996).

<sup>25</sup> Dennis Brown, *The poetry of Postmodernity* (1994), p. 1 and p. 134.

<sup>26</sup> David F. Ford, *The modern theologians. An introduction to Christian theology in the twentieth century*, Vol. 2 (1989), pp. 145-156.

<sup>27</sup> Brown, *Poetry of Postmodernity*, pp. 5-8.

material, in ourselves as omnipresent authors, in our societies, or in some degree of interaction between all of these elements? This debate goes all the way back to the classical period of history and the conflict between Sophism and Platonism.

On one level this new iconoclastic environment was the understandable result of Marxist opposition to existing social structures and institutions, which generated hostility and alienation. Another important dimension of this linguistic watershed, however, arose from the work of the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913).

It was De Saussure who established the distinction between *langue* and *parole* - signifier and signified which is at the heart of the existing hermeneutical instability in the humanities. In his classic work *Cours De Linguistique Generale* (1915), De Saussure described any language system as a 'series of differences of sound combined with a series of differences of ideas'... Each sign in language is a union of signifier - (a sound image or its graphic equivalent) and signified (the referent, the concept referred to).

The association of signifier and signified, de Saussure concluded, is the product of linguistic (social) convention and not of any natural link. The relation between the whole sign and what it refers to is arbitrary (the product of a particular environment). Each sign in a linguistic system possesses a 'meaning' by virtue of the fact that it is different from any other sign rather than because of any linguistic reason why this should be so.

As a result of De Saussure's work, language is now viewed as a social construct devoid of any degree of truth/authenticity/objectivity. The obvious extrapolation is that all written communication is socially conditioned/ contaminated/dominated, whether the author is aware of this or not.

The manner in which de Saussure's ideas were utilized can be seen in the work of Jacques Derrida (1930 - ). Derrida, the earliest deconstructionist, advanced the word *différance* - to defer, postpone, delay. Following de Saussure's theory that 'signs' in any language are arbitrary and differential, Derrida argued that all meaning is continuously deferred since each word leads us on to yet another word in any system of signification. Derrida thus sees text as an endless sequence of signifiers and interpretative postponements which can have no ultimate or determinate meaning. Communication is always in the process of becoming/emerging/transforming.

The significance of Derrida's deconstruction was satirized (and simplified) by David Lodge in his novel *Nice work* (1990):

There is no such thing as the "self"... that is to say, a finite, unique soul or essence that constitutes a person's identity; there is only a subject position in an infinite web of discourse and - the discourses of power, sex, family, science, religion, poetry, etc. And by the same token, there is no such thing as an author, that is to say, one who originates a work of fiction *ab nihil*. Every text is the product of intertextuality, a tissue of allusions to and citations of other texts; and in the famous words of Jacques Derrida..."il n'y pas de hors - texte", there is nothing outside the text. There are no origins, there is only production and we produce our "selves" in language. Not "you are what you eat" but "you are what you



“speak” or, rather “you are what speaks you”.<sup>28</sup>

Roland Barthes' work *Elements of Semiology* (1967) was to provide an adjunct to Derrida's arguments, by concluding that the sign system of any culture was indeed capable of explanation. Such an explanation, however, necessitated a theory of meaning/explanation. This gave rise to the idea of a 'metalanguage' - i.e., a second-order language which is used to describe/explain/interpret/situate the first.

Patricia Waugh has shown why this somewhat esoteric linguistic discourse is of vital importance to the humanities as a whole:

The present increased awareness of 'meta-levels' of discourse and experience is partly a consequence of an increased social and cultural self-consciousness. Beyond this, however, it also reflects a greater awareness within contemporary culture of the function of language in constructing and maintaining our sense of everyday 'reality'. The simple notion that language passively reflects a coherent, meaningful and 'objective' world is no longer tenable. Language is an independent, self-contained system which generates its own 'meanings'. Its relationship to the phenomenal world is highly complex, problematic and regulated by convention.<sup>29</sup>

Waugh points out that all forms of communication, representation, 'truth' and evidence are now exposed to claims of interpretation/subjectivity.

To buttress her point still further, Waugh refers to Heisenberger's uncertainty principle:

For the smallest building blocks of matter, every process of observation causes a major disturbance, and that it is impossible to describe an objective world because the observer always changes the observed.<sup>30</sup>

The mere act of observing is enough to transform subject matter.

The danger must also be acknowledged of treating words as if they refer to exact things. Emile Benveniste points to the capacity of words to live a life of their own and betray the intentions of even the most exacting authors:

It is literally true that the basis of subjectivity is in the exercise of language. If one really thinks about it, one will see that there is no objective testimony to the identity of the subject except that which he himself thus gives about himself.<sup>31</sup>

As a result of a cynical postmodernism there is no longer any guaranteed or essential meaning. Just as the linguistic universe is seen to be a mere fabrication, a construct, historical absolutes are now also viewed as being merely the subjective products of some author's imagination:

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<sup>28</sup> David Lodge, *Nice work* (1990), pp. 21-22.

<sup>29</sup> Waugh, *Metafiction*, p. 2.

<sup>30</sup> Werner Heisenberg, 'the representation of Nature and Contemporary Physics' in Sally Sears and Georgiana W. Lord (eds.), *This Discontinuous Universe* (1972).

<sup>31</sup> Brown, *Modernist Self*, p. 7, quoting Emile Benveniste, *Problems in General Linguistics*.

The implications are that any form of traditional literary criticism which employs the practical tools of comparison and analysis patiently and attentively to elucidate meaning is a self-defeating practice since the rhetoric of both the literary text under analysis and literary criticism (or historical practice) is inherently unstable.<sup>32</sup>

Any belief in a commonly experienced, objectively existing historical world has collapsed.

Growing confusion about notions of personal identity and vexing questions about the autonomy of moral agents (and thus the legitimacy of omnipresent authors) have also become important elements of that literary offensive that is postmodernism.

Patrick Grant points to the work of Derek Parfit who rejects the notion of a unitary self by suggesting that the self only exists as community. Parfit argues that there is no more to any person than their psychological and physical interconnectedness, and like nations, people are subject to changing boundaries. Consequently it is reasonable, Parfit suggests, to propose that we can be different persons at different times in our lives.<sup>33</sup>

If Parfit is correct we must acknowledge that there are no such things as autonomous, omnipresent moral agents, and that all authors are historically situated:

We enter into consciousness through a language and history where standards and obligations already exist as shaping forces of that same consciousness. Thus, although individual receptivities remain intricately unique, persons are not just private individuals rather personal identity is established through others, and however highly one values human autonomy, it is less than personal if it fails to recognize itself as formed in relation to a human culture and as part of a material world, both of which make claims on us.<sup>34</sup>

You are, in a basic sense, the company that you keep.

Questions of historical and societal situatedness have also begun to shape a new milieu in theology. Liberation theology with its emphasis on marginalised societies, Black and feminist theology was one initiator of theological transformation. Another creative force was a movement at Yale in the late 1970s, when theologians advanced the iconoclastic assumption that faith, like history, was a human act - and could not rely on any absolute religious text for authority.

David Kelsey was one of those influential theologians who argued that the justification/authority of scripture lay in the way a community chose to use it, and not in some absolute/objective Platonic essence of the scriptural texts themselves:

To call a set of texts "scripture", he has written, 'is, in part, to say that they

<sup>32</sup> Waugh, *Metafiction*, pp. 7-9.

<sup>33</sup> Derek Parfit, *Reasons and persons* (1984) in Grant, *Literature and personal values*, p. 2.

<sup>34</sup> Grant, *Literature and personal values*, p. 2.

ought to be used in the common life of the church as to nurture and preserve her self-identity.' Thus, Scripture is not the starting point for theology. Indeed, a theological system does not consist of 'one overarching argument' resting on any starting point, whether, religious experience or scriptural text, but rather 'is a set of several different families of argument' which 'taken as a whole might be looked at in a quasi-aesthetic way as a solicitation of mind and imagination to look at Christianity in a certain way'.<sup>35</sup>

As was the case with a Von Rankean dependence upon primary material, the theological/fundamentalist school that insists upon the absolute authority of the Bible has received a grievous blow.

The essential point of departure of the postmodernist movement then, is the self-referential nature of all discourse, and the fact, as Todorov has pointed out, that 'literary discourse cannot be true or false, it can only be valid in relation to its own premises'.<sup>36</sup>

Another hermeneutical dilemma that has been underscored by postmodernism is the recognition of the fragmentary realities of selfhood; the 'self' is now being viewed as an interpretative battlefield, and there is a growing awareness of the 'alien' inside us all. This was one of the far-reaching effects of a traumatising First World War. It is interesting to note that psychiatric casualties were relatively uncommon prior to the twentieth century. This innocence came to an end as a result of the brutality of this war. As Dennis Brown has pointed out:

If exceptional writers like Conrad, Eliot and Joyce were beginning to 'dissolve' Western selfhood from the turn of the century onwards, it was the 1914-18 War which precipitated many less hypersensitive individuals into the existential realm of self-fragmentation.<sup>37</sup>

The emergence of a fragmentary model of selfhood brought any notion of a unitary self to an end, and obviously threatens the discipline of history with its reliance upon an omnipresent/omniscient author.

From a political perspective, the progenitors of the postmodern condition must be sought elsewhere. The move away from a rigidly empiricist approach in politics was similarly related to confusion surrounding the existence of a neutral/objective 'truth' and the value of 'ideology'. The extent of this confusion was obvious from as early as 1929 in Mannheim's paradox, which questioned the epistemological status of discourse when all discourse was ideological:

It is hardly possible to avoid this general formulation of the total conception of ideology, according to which the thought of all parties in all epochs is of an ideological character. There is scarcely a single intellectual position, and Marxism furnishes no exception to this rule, which has not changed through history... It should not be too difficult for

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<sup>35</sup> Ford, *Modern theologians*, pp. 136-137 quoting David H. Kelsey, *The uses of scripture in recent theology* (1979).

<sup>36</sup> Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A structural approach to a Literary Genre* (1973).

<sup>37</sup> Brown, *Modernist Self*, p. 39.

a Marxist to recognize their social basis.<sup>38</sup>

Any observation involves the imposition of a paradigm whether conscious or not.

The ultimate extrapolation of the Marxist position was perhaps that of Gramsci who simply conjoined 'truth' and 'ideology':

...domination under capitalism is not simply achieved by coercion, but subtly through the hegemony of ideas. The ideology of the ruling class becomes vulgarized into the common sense of the average citizen. Power is not just crude legal or physical coercion but domination of language, morality, culture and common sense. The masses are quelled and coopted by their internalization of ideational domination. The hegemonic ideas become, in fact, the actual experiences of the subordinate masses. Bourgeois hegemony moulds the personal convictions, norms and aspirations of the proletariat.<sup>39</sup>

In political science, ideology increasingly came to denote a totalitarian mentality which prevented all political discussion other than on its own terms. Ideologically unfree, totalitarian and closed societies were seen to be distinct from pluralist, tolerant, rational and open societies in which politics took place.

By the 1950s, ideology had become equated with superstition in much of the humanities. This 'end of ideology' also coincided with a 'heroic age' and a neo-positivist impulse in sociology. Sociology offered a 'science' of society, in place of superstition. This was a sociology attempting to rigidly delineate facts and fiction, and a discipline claiming an objective, non-ideological and external foundation of scientific knowledge. This age of sociological certainty was to collapse for many reasons but one of the most important was work in the philosophy of science which destroyed any idea of a verifiable/objective hermeneutics. As a result of increasing research into scientific methodology, it became obvious that both the meaning and fruitfulness of scientific research was measured, not by any external and verifiable reality, but by its internal coherence and the acceptance of such endeavours by the scientific community and society as a whole.

### **The collapse of those 'citadels of integrity' in history, and the looming men in black**

The role of history in the New South Africa is intimately connected with the hermeneutic nature of this discipline; including perceptions of its past and the value of history to the new social construct.

The former nationalist government employed historians as propagandists in support of the *status quo*. Not surprisingly, the White community feels betrayed by these political and intellectual mobilizers. The canon regarding the alarming decline in numbers of White students taking history at university, is that this crisis is the pragmatic response

<sup>38</sup> Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia* (1929), p. 69.

<sup>39</sup> Andrew Vincent, *Modern political ideologies*, pp. 5-7.

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of a community to the end of service sector occupations, and the fact that jobs will only be available in commerce and industry.

There has been little debate about the disgust felt by many in the White community with what they perceive as academic betrayal:

But I'll never be constrained  
By another man's ideas now  
I spent too long on this road...  
What do you do  
When democracy fails you...  
But times running out pal  
Cause they're giving up in numbers  
What do you do  
When democracy's all through  
What do you do  
When minority means you?<sup>40</sup>

It seems plausible to suggest that white students are no longer taking history because they equate the subject with propaganda and see no value in the lessons it teaches. If this is indeed so, then South African historians have failed themselves and their discipline.

The future of history depends upon its societal and hermeneutical value; postmodernism, however, compromises both elements by denying objectivity (and thus the ability of historians to distinguish their work from propaganda) and by denying those methodological aspects that historians have emphasized as being essential features of their 'craft'.

If history is merely a question of juggling different fictions, what is wrong with the government employing men in black and insisting that these civil servants provide the necessary propaganda to buttress the official position? What is wrong with replacing White nationalist ideologues with Black nationalist ideologues?

I hope that these issues will be addressed in future issues of *New Contree* and that honest practitioners of the discipline will find their intellectual curiosity aroused instead of their ire being provoked by the frankness of the debate.

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<sup>40</sup> The Proclaimers, "What do you do", Sunshine on Leith (1988).