An Extract from the Article ‘A Veld of Difference : Southern Africa’s Necessary Realism’

By Robert Christgau.

... Nadine Gordimer contributes an excerpt from A Sport of Nature to From South Africa; Coetzee has an interview, and Sheila Roberts, the only writer besides Gordimer represented in all three anthologies, offers one of her withering glimpses of ordinary South African whites. But pride of place – the opening story, and later the first essay – goes to a man few Americans have heard of, Njabulo S. Ndebele. A Cambridge M.A. and University of Denver Ph.D. who teaches literature at the University College of Roma in Lesotho, Ndebele is a formidable presence – perhaps even, as Kelwyn Sole claims in From South Africa “the most influential figure in South African literary studies at the moment”. I surmise this partly via the written equivalent of hearsay – his ideas keep getting cited in otherwise unrelated discussions of South African culture. But the most convincing proof is Fools and Other Stories, first published by Johannesburg’s brave Ravan Press in 1983, although not until 1986 did Readers International bring it to the U.S. and U.K.

It’s only a collection and one of its five parts is disappointing. Yet for formal elegance and originality Fools and Other Stories surpass anything else I’ve encountered in South African fiction, such excellent works as Burger’s Daughter and Life and Times of Michael K included. As with Lessing’s “Out of the Fountain”, its intersection of the oral and the written is more like a merge or a roundabout. Without surrendering the ease and immediacy of tales told face-to-face, it invites analysis and re-examination of a sort only possible when the reader can look back and jump forward at will – its parts gain resonance divorced from the flow of the whole. In short, it has literary merit, a concept Ndebele finds problematic and won’t give up on. Properly, he disavows any “easy preoccupation with demonstrating the obvious existence of oppression. It exists. The task is to explore how and why people can survive under such harsh conditions.” But that task – especially the “why” part – is one literature has always assigned itself, and in certain respects Ndebele claims the prerogatives of a typical literateur. In a more militant mode, however he cites Mothobi Motloatse’s much rougher statement of purpose: “We are going to pee, spit and shit on literary convention before we are through; we are going to … experiment and probe and not give a damn what the critics have to say. Because we are in search of our true selves – undergoing self-discovery as a people.”

An example of what can happen when a writer chooses exploration to the exclusion of peeing, spitting, and shitting is Zoe Wicomb’s story sequence You Can’t Get Lost in Cape Town, which according to its glowing Times review exemplifies Ndebele’s dictum against documenting the obvious. Her autobiographical protagonist, an Afrikaans speaking “coloured” who masters English, rejects apartheid’s attempt to suborn her into a buffer caste by consciously identifying with her own blackness; she escapes apartheid by emigrating to England, only to return a decade later. Wicomb’s leftism is thematic, and so are her misgivings about the language she works in, but her solidarity is tinged with doubt and contradiction a combination of bad faith and spiritual aspiration reflected in both the attenuated delicacy of her prose and the compulsive understatement of her resolutions. She’s capable of no-nonsense sentences like: “He would like to fuck me without my noticing.” But more often she errs in the direction of an airy grace pursued for its own sake: “a huge radio out of
which the music winds mercurial through the rise and fall of distant voices,” or (of an English speaking white lover) “I have drunk deeply of Michael swallowed his voice as I drank from his tongue.” You don’t write like that without a real expenditure of effort and skill, but the voice it buys is one of those enervating luxuries the privileged learn to discard. Having mastered the English language, Wicomb is entrapped by its literature; her awareness that England’s green and pleasant land is mostly a lie and altogether not for her can’t eradicate her attraction to it. And so she’s stuck with the ingrained irony of her acquired linguistic tradition. You Can’t Get Lost in Cape Town has plenty of political consciousness and not political resolve, Wicomb’s plight is summed up by a question from the protagonist’s mother, which closes the book with a fingers-crossed hope that the plight can be left behind: “But with something to do here at home perhaps you won’t need to make up those terrible stories hey?”

Like Wicomb, who focuses on small, private incidents rather than recreating momentous or richly figurative events, Ndebele betrays a European sense of scale – three of the five stories in Fools recall personal minutiae. And as with most European and almost all black South African fiction writers, his first great subject is his own coming of age. The difference is one of weight. Though he’s never obvious (much less pretentious), Ndebele is nonetheless proud to put his meanings out there. The scale is personal, the focus minute, but these stories don’t yield mere apercus like Wicomb’s, nor seem mere episodes in an autobiography, either. When the protagonist takes up two bigger boy’s challenge and runs long and hard through a chilling rain (“The Test”), or soothes his mother’s aching feet with the tap water he’s secretly substituted for the holy water he’s spilled (“The Prophetess”), there’s an immediately available literal significance that suggests bildungsroman rather than autobiography, and then a formal significance that surfaces when you think about Ndebele’s narrative method – his shifts in voice and point of view, what gets left out of these stories and what connects them.

The first three – “The Test”, “The Prophetess,” and “Uncle,” this last a novella about the protagonist’s initiation into black consciousness by his mother’s trumpet-playing younger brother – assume the point of view of a boy in Charterston, the location 33 miles from Johannesburg where Ndebele grew up. Though they work as local color, opening up not only Charterston’s folkways but its modes of consciousness, their hopeful mood is very bildungsroman, and they’re almost “universal” in their rendering of a child’s crises of growth. Even in the third person Ndebele goes for a gawky grace that suits his subject, a wide-eyed lucidity of tone – “Then he saw two horses that were nibbling at the grass that loved to grow along the fence that surrounded the church” – that gets even simpler in the first person “Uncle.” By comparison, the clipped, adolescent “The Music of the Violin” – set in Soweto, it transforms the beloved mother into a grotesquely materialistic and white-identified caricature – seems brittle. Then the title story lays out the political context that impelled Ndebele to create such a mean portrait.

The protagonist has a different name in each of the first four stories, but the same background – mother a nurse, father a schoolteacher. In “Fools,” a novella twice as long as “Uncle,” a similar character has come of age, only now he’s a shebeen keeper’s son – an idealistic, ambitious, intensely gifted, cruelly repulsed would-be freedom fighter – and he’s not the protagonist. Instead, Ndebele stakes out a bitter first-person voice for the schoolteacher father, describes his obsession with his young opposite number, and gains a critical measure of objectivity. “Fools” isn’t flawless – it bogs down occasionally, and a key sexual passage is murky. But it’s deep, full, harsh. For the first and only
time in the book, a white character is seen – a fat, hairy, grease-stained Afrikaner in an old Ford who physically humiliates the schoolteacher, the freedom fighter, and the collaborationist principal who’s thwarted them both. By recounting this single instance of oppression, Ndebele makes clear why the black South Africans in all these stories “survive” rather than freely live, why the maturity that eventually takes the bloom off every artist-as-a-young-man hits so hard and so early here. He appropriates the schoolteacher’s grim, twisted voice because the young idealist, for all his political commitment, can’t comprehend the grim, twisted predicament they share. Yet, amazingly, “Fools” stands as an attack on the hopelessness of that predicament on what the young man calls “the sound of victims laughing at victims, feeding on their victimness, until it becomes an obscene virtue.” The schoolteacher holds that after “a great fire” consumes South Africa, “the people of the north will come down and settle the land again, as they have done for thousands of years.” Yet in the end his will to redeem his own powers from their decline belies his fatalism just as the young man’s will to continue belies his defeat.

If I’ve made this denouement seem par, rest assured that it’s anything but. A brief summary can’t do justice to its complexity and, that’s right, ambiguity. In fact, the reflective scrutiny it demands typifies the literary prerogatives claimed by an aesthetic elitist in the Marcian mold. See, for example, Ndebele’s Tri-Quarterly essay, where he’s scathing about the servile corporate English that South African meliorists foist off on blacks, but accepts the notion that “literature and the world of learning” aren’t “tied to any manipulative interest” as if Terry Eagleton had never been to Cambridge. Ndebele’s old-fashioned ideas have not gone unnoticed; he’s accused. Bunn and Taylor report, of favouring “an unproblematic theory of ‘character’ and subjectivity which stands in sharp contrast to his own provocative comments about process and ideology in the literary text.” To which an agnostic can only respond: “What sharp contrast? Why must one oppose the other?” If Ndebele’s subjectivist assumptions dismay the white academic left adventurists who believe themselves eager to take his lead, you have to wonder how less theoretically sophisticated black South African realism fits into their critical worldview.

In a sentence too confusing to deal with its entirety, Bunn and Taylor blame the putative contradiction on the emergence which they claim “renders fixed a certain theory of representation.” Only under fascism, apparently, can representation correspond in some literal sense to the “real world” and move actors within it. But there’s a less sensational explanation. Wicomb’s escapism (and Ndebele’s elitism) notwithstanding, literary realism/subjectivism retains its power and usefulness in cultures that have never had the opportunity to enjoy it – or exhaust it. Freighted with ideology though it may be, it manifests considerable freedom from manipulative interest as ought to be obvious to anyone who sees through the culture-bound superstition that equates the formally effective with the formally “progressive.” Bunn and Taylor’s experimentalists have indeed “been influenced by European post-structuralism,” especially its feminist wing, and that’s one reason they hit so much harder than their counterparts in A Land Apart. But insofar as the testing the ‘daily difference” is at all appropriate the political utility of such refinement is largely theoretical. The black realists only hold up on their own terms, they have the potential of edifying (and in their instructively painful way, delighting) many more of the middle-class whites whose acquiescence one way or the other makes such a difference in South Africa – not to mention compromised middle-class blacks. With all due enthusiasm for workers’ drama and poetry, the politics of literature are still a predominantly middle-class affair, and realist narrative is what the middle-class read is most likely to pick up – and finish.
Ndebele’s fictional contribution to From South Africa doesn’t have the sweep or complexity of “Fools” – because it’s shorter, because nobody writes masterwork every time out, but also because Ndebele is in the process of making political resolve a literary priority. “Death of a Son” doesn’t bother proving oppression exists, but it does describe a police murder and its aftermath the politicization of two middle-class black parents and, perhaps, the renewal of the marriage. Though the story is by no means didactic, its activism will probably disappoint anyone who’s placed hope in what Ndebele portends for fiction in general. There’s something reassuring to the Euro-American reader in the fatalism of “Fools” belied though it may be – it jibes with ingrained truisms about the human condition permitting Ndebele to demand (and then bless him, yield to) our reflective scrutiny. But Ndebele can’t waste time renewing European form and trusting history to deem his people. He has work to do.

Pursuers of formal frisson may well reject this decision. As someone who retains attraction to the English literary tradition even as he devotes his life to the crude and effective, I regret it a little myself. But deplore it would be more than wasteful and would be dead wrong. Euro-American purists had better be antipuritanical; in fact, damn near their political mission. But American oppression demands discipline. Apartheid destroys all refuges, all innocent pleasures – Christmas shopping, getting drunk on Saturday night, and literature too. For a moment of crisis that could last decades even, unthinkable though it is, generally Ndebele has work to do. And within far narrow parameters, Gray has the same work to do. So do all the others. More and more the literary merit that pertains in New York and London is a luxury they’ll be forced to put aside.