

Running on

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I believe that Njabulo Ndebele's first book represents the kind of beginning in fiction that will prove to have altered the contours of our literature much as the arrival of a Bosman, a Gordimer or a Serote has. "Fools & other stories" consists of five tales, of which three might have been constructed as classic short stories, excluding all matter that did not contribute to the effectiveness of the denouement. But instead of compressing them into 3 or 4 thousand words, he has allowed them several times that space to unfold in. His preoccupation with the full complexity of the world he is describing and his appetite for ideas, as well as his creative confidence, lifts him above a dependence on the security and magic that reside in the short story form. He escapes the dangers that attend an elastic capaciousness of form with, inevitably, a leisurely pace of development, because he has an instinct for the essential art of story-telling and a rich mind.

His is perhaps less an art of power than of meaning. It involves the reader by virtue of persuasion about the reality and significance of the characters and their situations, by virtue of the evident warmth of his attachment to the world of memory – much of it childhood memory – that he draws upon, by virtue of the sheer interest due to the subtlety and freshness of his enquiry. His storytelling full-fledged and energetic: there are beautifully paced passages of dramatic confrontation where the tension and the complexity and depth of the exploration bring Dostoevsky or Knut Hamsun to mind. His great distinction is that he brings a vivacious, informed and original intellect to his tales. No romantic or imagistic inhibition prevents him from enriching his narratives with explanations, judgements, reflections, distillations of wisdom, attributed to narrators (in two cases they are reflective children) or other characters, who may be popular figures (gossips in a bus, say) or may be people of intellect themselves – teachers, would-be reformers, artists, guides, a community prophetess.

These remarks may create an impression of oppressively dominant intellectuality, but that would be an entirely wrong idea. The virility and frankness of thought are there – not forced, but embodied naturally in the texture of the realism – but the main effect of the accumulating strikes of narrative, description, dialogue and reflection is not that of polemic or even philosophical speculation, but that of immersion in a very specific and lovingly remembered piece of the world. The characters, moreover, even while bending to the intellectual tasks required of them by their thoroughly conscious and purposive author, live the fluid, complex, substantive lives of persons it is possible to believe in, feel for, identify with, instead of being lay figures, representative social elements, mere functionaries of the idea.

Their setting, Charterston location, is clearly serving as a microcosm of black South Africa, and as a fictional home for stories that palpably include invented elements. But is a real place, attached to Nigel, Transvaal, and it is bodied-forth with a full feeling of intimacy, attachment, and care. There is no spectacular descriptive force, no attempt to overwhelm us with a sense of the place. What grows in us is a certain familiarity and understanding and affection for this rather characterless setting whose significance does not lie in the atmosphere of its physical aspects whether stark or

picturesque – but in its being stained with associations through the experience of the characters who live out their stories in its streets, houses and schools.

Perhaps this points to one of Ndebele's distinguishing characteristics: he does not force things upon his readers – neither the atmosphere of his setting nor emotions, nor a point of view, a case, a "line". His reflections may contain precepts, judgements, advice, but essentially they are exploratory rather than prescriptive or admonitory – they invite us to reflect as well, instead of demanding our assent. His ideas always grow organically out of the full-bodied and specific life of the tale he is giving us, and he always respects the individuality and complexity of the piece-of-world he is looking at.

"Nearly always" would be more accurate. An exception occurs in the story called "The Music of the Violin". An educated couple force the study of the violin onto their young son. His misery under this discipline arises in part from his susceptibility to the appeal of African Music. In these terms Ndebele legitimately addresses a cultural crisis in his community. But something it seems to me, goes awry. For, in a scene in which the parents entertain visitors they are eager to impress with the boy's accomplishments, there is an uncharacteristic surrender of subtlety: the four adults are rendered in a broad caricature satirising their bourgeois pretentiousness and materialism. For me, conviction vanished at the point and I found myself back where I seem to have been a score of times before in black fiction. When I questioned this lapse at the launching of the book, the author suggested that the problem arose for me because, on ideological grounds, I was in disagreement with the point of the story – presumably the implication that Western culture is of less than universal validity. It did not feel that way to me, and I was left suspecting that this – as I experienced it – unsuccessful passage represented an unresolved element in Ndebele's thinking (possibly arising from the potentiality for paradox that lies in his own literary virtuosity). Why else would it stand out as anomalous, a flaw in his achievement?

Or perhaps the answer is that Ndebele is less inspired by themes of obstruction, cramping and distortion than by themes of expansion, discovery, love and growth, the latter predominate in the richest and most engaging of his stories, the long take called "Uncle" which must stand among the finest and meatiest treatments of the magic that can live in the avuncular relationship. There is certainly nothing comparable in South African Literature.

I find his achievement very remarkable. The difficulties and dangers he confronts, the contradictions he bestrides and reconciles, make it as moving to behold as a great act of courage. But it is also of thrilling significance in the context of our time and place. Everything that "South Africa" is in the mid-twentieth century consciousness is implicit and immanent in all that he writes. Though for the purposes of art and scholarship he has physically distanced himself from the setting he writes about and even from the whole country of which Charterston is a microcosm (he lives in Lesotho), he is patently profoundly and passionately involved with the fibre and heart of this country. I would guess (from some of the preoccupations reflected, particularly in the very long title story, for example, questions touching the relationship between talent and intellect on the one side and service on the other) that his choice of a vantage point outside of the borders of his native land is dictated by the need for relative detachment in the accomplishment of the intellectual and cultural mission which he finds that his destiny has laid upon him.

Part of his task is to endow black life in our literature with a new reality, a new density and delicacy for the literate imagination – like wax instead of water – capable of carrying the impresses of

meaning and intimate experience. Thus, indeed, some of his most arresting reflections are deeply original engagements of the issues at the level of the minutiae of possible action and choice. If he is a theorist, he is a theorist of the immediate and the palpable, of the practicable alternatives for the life-enmeshed individual. (Life-enmeshed but not, it is true, at that critical front-line of desperation or numb resignation where masses of the disadvantaged find themselves: but this is no evasion on his part – it represents his humility and honesty in pretending to address none but the probable readers of his work. And again there is courage in this resistance to the demands of expectation.)

But though Ndebele writes with awareness, realism and responsibility, indeed with passion, over the disadvantaged state of his people, his achievement includes the liberation of his fellow writers from the imperative of protest. His sensibility is too subtle, too full, too true to accommodate the simplifications, selections and distortions that protest requires. Does this condemn him to futility in the region of his deepest implicit concerns? Not at all. The seriousness, the awareness of complexity, the respect with which he renders the living and individuality of his characters in their predicaments, fulfilments, relationships and developments makes for an indubitable reality and an undeniable richness of humanity – and at the same time, paradoxically perhaps, it makes them representative figures. They do not exist in order to prove something: they are not the corpus delicti of racial insult. Nor does a case have to be pleaded on their behalf. By right of the validity their author's creative energy has bestowed on them, they enter the imagination and make, on behalf of Charterston and the macrocosm it epitomises, a very powerful human case.