Editorial: South African Writing at the Crossroads

‘Why does it matter where they are taking us?’ he asked. ‘There are only two places, up the line and down the line. That is the nature of trains’.
J.M. Coetzee, *Life and Times of Michael K*

The stranger’s words addressed to the hero in J.M. Coetzee’s *Life and Times of Michael K* bring home in a very concrete way the relentless binarism not only of the apartheid order (revealingly figured in its truth as the *disorder* of civil war), but also of many Western forms of life and thinking: a typically high-modern technology sums up an epistemology no less typical. The train abolishes the age-old institution of the crossroads, the three- or four-way junction which puts before the traveller two or more options besides the one of retracing his steps back along the way he came. Daredevils who ‘ride staff’ on township trains may be rebellious terms in a system, but terms of that system they remain. Yesterday’s staff rider on the train of progress is today’s builder of his own locomotive. This is the logic whereby we have seen in South Africa rival nationalisms arising out of the early transcultural flux of Empire and then, at length, imposing their different inflections of the modern project upon the rest of their compatriots. Those who keep alive an alternative logic of the tangent and the ternary are at best tolerated by those who are in, or aiming for, power. We give various names to the subcultures of those who, while not wishing to abolish the train, reserve the right to step off or not to get on at all. The most institutionalised and literate of these subcultures that refuse to equate the nature of trains with our nature as persons is the one we call ‘literature’. If South African literature were not in some sense *always* at the crossroads it would not deserve the name.

Being hypnotised by the gleaming straight lines of progress and power does not, however, exhaust the phenomenology of trains. Typically, they are also places where microcommunities are fortuitously thrown together, and such adventitious meetings on the move between the fixed points of settlement are the particular interest of literature. Literature cherishes privacies, interiorities, minorities of one. It is with such marginalities that some of the essays in this issue are in one way or another concerned.

Sue Kossew's 'Resistance, Complicity, and Post-colonial Politics' raises at a theoretical level the status of writing from the settler-descended minorities and takes issue with the apartheid-in-reverse which doubts its postcolonial authenticity. To brand all 'white' writers with complicity in oppression at worst – and at best as belonging to 'Europe' – is to miss the positional ambivalence which is as often as not thematised in the works themselves. She argues that writing of this kind 'can help to theorise the complexities and complicities of all literary resistance'.

The essays by Graham Pechey and Derek Attridge focus on single works by white writers a century apart, providing a frame for reflection on the whole turbulent interim. Attridge sets Coetzee's recent autobiography, *Boyhood: Scenes from Provincial Life*, in the context of the author's other writing (not noted for its overt self-revelation), the tradition of confessional writing in the West, and the hearings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which coincided with *Boyhood's* composition. Attridge's interest is primarily in the peculiarity of the narration: being written in the third person and the present tense, it is freed from 'structural interminability' and arbitrary closure. If it nonetheless comes across as confessional that is because it opens us to a deeper truth about the telling of truth as an effect of language itself, 'something that emerges in the telling, if it emerges at all'. Graham Pechey develops the theme of autobiography and how its relation to the challenging marginality of 'white writing' can help to illuminate the ethical force of all writing by adding another element to the mix: brevity. Sketching the context of Olive Schreiner's work in the late nineteenth century – that earlier phase of the expectation of a 'new' South Africa – he analyses the short story 'The Woman's Rose'. Pechey tentatively reads the 'competition and calculation' of the men who worship first the rival and then the narrator herself as an allegory of the national and international atmosphere then driving towards war both locally and in the imperial centre of Europe itself. The dynamic of *her* 'new South Africa' at once attracted and repelled Schreiner, and in the reflections this little narrative prompts upon the larger historical movements of its time, we can find standing-ground from which to evaluate those of our own.

Myrtle Hooper and Simon Lewis focus on Coetzee and Gordimer respectively within the context of the perilously poised South Africa of the 1990s. Hooper reads Coetzee through a literary-critical lens and, looping back, via John Donne and T.S. Eliot, she re-reads Coet-

zee's *Age of Iron* intertextually, as a recovery of Eliot, through Coetzee's own disquisition on 'What is a Classic?', and personally through the dedications to those members of his own family who died in the 1980s, which preface the novel and impact on his recent *The Master of Petersburg*. Hooper refutes the view that Coetzee is an 'ideological dilettante' and values the shift from private into public as a 'legitimate critical domain' in which Coetzee's fiction may be located. For Lewis, it is the 'postmodern melancholy' of post-apartheid South Africa that bespeaks the critical domain from which Gordimer's latest novel, *The House Gun*, may be read. In Foucauldian terms, the ubiquity of power and *souci de soir* (care of one's self) underpin his understanding of political obligation in Gordimer's post-apartheid novel. Lewis marks Gordimer's transition from 'intransitive knowledge' to 'intransitive quest' and argues that a post-modern condition does not necessarily negate resistance politics.

Roger Field's essay on Alex La Guma represents a departure from most considerations of this writer's work; it examines two relatively unexplored features of his creative output: his comics and his paintings. Drawing on interviews with La Guma's family and friends, as well as on critical tools which derive from the object relations school of psychoanalytic theory, Field provides a nuanced reading of La Guma's *Little Libby* comic strip, popular in South Africa in the 1950s, and explores the reasons why Bruegel's religious paintings should have had such an effect on the banned and exiled writer. His findings are carefully linked, once again, to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, whose hearings significantly – and given the manner of their composition understandably – underpin many of the essays in this issue.

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Guest Editors