



Narrating the past: Reflections on recent Black Afrikaans writing

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Abstract

A return to the past has been a dominant feature of recent Afrikaans writing. This is evident in the many novels re-visiting the Anglo-Boer War or recounting incidents from the apartheid past. The approaches include the debunking of myths and a nostalgic longing for the good old days. Whether this is true of the small body of Black Afrikaans writing, given its ambivalent relationship to the canon, needs to be investigated. A number of texts that was published recently either had a clear autobiographical background or emanated from the desire and imperative “to tell our own stories from our communities”. A feature of the texts is also the way it engages with the past and makes use of diverse narrative strategies to recount circumstances and experiences and portray an image of how characters lived through the historical events during the apartheid years. The paper draws on David Scott’s distinction between romance and tragedy as two distinct narrative forms in which the past can be represented and narrated. Scott’s typology is applied to a critically reading of selected texts by inter alia Fatima Osman, Simon Bruinders, Ronelda Kamfer and Valda Jansen. In the case of the texts by the first mentioned authors the narrative is about survival, determination and the triumph of the human spirit in the face of a dehumanising system like apartheid. In the latter texts one finds elements of dystopia and disillusionment with the past as an ydill. It also gives an unsentimental view of the state of mind and events playing out in communities in the present. The texts furthermore grapples with textual strategies to represent history and the inability at times to comprehend the past.

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Studies on the South African literary landscape after the transition to democracy in 1994 emphasised the turn to history as a dominant feature. André P. Brink for instance finds in his contribution titled “Interrogating silence: new possibilities faced by South African literature” that “History provides one of the most fertile silences to be revisited by South African writers; not because no voices have traversed it before [...] but because the dominant discourse of white historiography [...] has inevitably silenced [...] so many other possibilities” (Brink “Silence” 22). (See also the contributions to the *Litnet* online seminar “Poolshoogte” in 2015, and in particular Burger, Viljoen and Willemsse (“Oor sosiale betrokkenheid”) for other views on recent developments in Afrikaans literature).

As a writer who in novels such as *An Instant in the Wind*, *A Chain of Voices* and his last one *Philida* undertook a critical revisit of the past, it is no surprise that Brink would find history to be fertile ground to turn the myths of apartheid and its false histories on its head.

Little more than a decade later Brink concludes in his lecture “Ground Zero: The South African literary landscape after Apartheid” that “one finds traces of the past in the midst of the new South African literature in the continued re-visits to the

In the same vein these words can be relevant in the present in which the narrator is intensely aware of the socio-political role of the writer and the need to write about societal issues: “Watter soort tyd is dit waarin ons leef dat ‘n gesprek oor bome eintlik ‘n misdaad is omdat dit beteken dat ons oor soveel ander dinge swyg.” (94) (In which times do we live that a conversation about trees is really a crime because we remain silent about so many other things).

This makes the novel not just another love story or elegy about lost love, but a reflection on the role of literature in times of crisis and the impossibility to escape the past even though you wear the scars of that past.

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Narrating the past from an insider’s view will for some time be a preoccupation in writing emanating from particular communities. For Black Afrikaans writing this is clear from the number of work that is self published or produced by little known publishers (see the debut anthologies of Paulse and Rhode). Against the backdrop of a society in which dystopia plays out on a national level this writing brims with a pride in local communities and its histories, customs and language and is produced with a distinct utopian desire to restore the humanity of its subjects after apartheid. The poet, play wright and academic Adam Small evinced this sentiment in the first column of the series “Counterpoint” which he wrote for the *Cape Times* newspaper after his return to public life and resuming his role as public intellectual and writer after more than a decade of silence: “One’s writing is probably better for not being a tepid post-script to people’s being, but designed to bring tribute to their humanity.” (Small 2015)

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