BOOKS & THE ARTS

Optimistic Tragedies

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The flaming sky on the cover is lit by a sun which may be rising or sinking; the ambiguity seems important. That opening conundrum of a South African dusk-dawn permits two views of the present era. It alludes, in the process, to the two prevailing impulses in TriQuarterly's splendid anthology of contemporary South African culture: the corrosive satirizing of a social order destined to decline and the complementary impulse—principally though not solely black—toward embattled affirmation.

Among the many merits of this collection is its determination to look beyond established reputations. Apart from Nadine Gordimer, J.M. Coetzee and Dennis Brutus, scarcely any of the forty-two writers, ten artists and photographers, or the three who work both word and image, have enjoyed prior exposure in the United States. Edited by two lecturers at the University of the Western Cape, David Bunn and Jane Taylor, the collection is braced by a commitment to art and writing that, although well known or beginning to be well known in South Africa, has been disregarded by publishers elsewhere.

The contributions range from the apocalyptic severity of Keorapetse Kgositsile's poetry ("When you have come from tomorrow/We shall know each other by our bloodstain") to Ivan Vladislavić's semi-autobiographical story about a white kid who inadvertently finds himself carting an assassinated prime minister to his grave; from Paul Weinberg's photographic essay on Zimbabwe to fiction and poetry (Adamc Dangor, Donald Parnearne) about co-opted blacks who "desert to a freedom" of provisional privilege; from essays on the politics of language to John Muafangejo's utterly visionary incursions around the themes of Archbishop Tutu's enthronement and the decapitation of a Namibian leader.

There are also instances of the astute eclecticism of the anthology that successfully conveys many of the new developments in contemporary South African culture. Until now, no single volume had even attempted that much. Two of the more striking shifts have occurred around the tenacious issues of exile and censorship. During the 1960s and early 1970s, the nation's literary energy was largely generated by young talents who had been driven abroad. But they were robbed of an audience: most of their work was banned at home and, with the exception of the poet Brutus and the novelist Alex La Guma, their abilities withered in exile. As this anthology testifies, however, the literary impulse has shifted and is currently overwhelmingly internal.

Arthur Nortje, one of the most brilliant of those exiled talents, wrote many years ago: "Some of us must storm the castles./some define the happening." That distribution of labor no longer appears so clear-cut: as an image of the committed writer, the scribe on the side seems anachronistic. Significantly, well over half the writers, artists and photographers gathered in this anthology are affiliated with one or another of the country's leading opposition organizations—notably the African National Congress, the United Democratic Front, the Congress of South African Trade Unions and the End Conscription Campaign—supplementing their imaginative endeavors with earthen collective labor. Several contributors have been jailed, but seldom specifically because of their writing or art.

If those active in the cultural resistance have reached a sober assessment of the threat posed by any one voice, regardless of how eloquent, so too has the regime. That much is evident in the altered focus of censorship. As Bunn and Taylor observe in their fine introduction, "state censorship . . . is being massively concentrated on organized internal dissent. Today's novelists, playwrights, and poets, unlike writers of previous generations, are only really seen as dangerous when they align themselves with political organizations." Frequent targets include what the Minister of Home Affairs recently dubbed "the unconventional revolution-supportive press" (e.g., New Nation, The Weekly Mail and South) and theater groups with ties to unions and township communities.

From South Africa is crowded with the figures of children: maimed, tortured, detained, "disappeared" and dead children, as well as children brandishing stones, children governing the streets. The land is, after all, a place where the routine brutalization of the young has exacted a psychic toll on the future; yet it is also a place where youth has sometimes shamed its more circumspect elders by refining sophisticated styles of defiance. This sense of vulnerable, precious strength suffuses Dumile Feni's drawings and sculptures, Hein Willemse's Afrikaans poetry and the Afrapix photographic collective's "The Front Line: A Portrait of Civil War." A similar mood pervades Ingrid Fiske's "All What Kind Is" ("All That Is Child"), a poem sparked by a remark after a police raid: "They took all that was child in the house." Fiske's "Our Sharpeville," told from the viewpoint of a white girl, provides a harsh counterpoint: It says more in forty lines about the violent innocence of sensible-shoed suburbia than whole novels given over to that subject.

Afrikaans—the language of Botha, the police sergeant, the bantustan bureaucrat—is not normally associated with resistance. Yet the poet Breyten Breytenbach, Afrikanerdom's blue-eyed pariah (loved for enriching the language, reviled for his attacks on racism), once seemed as distinguishable between "Apartheid," the idiom of apartheid, and Afrikaans, one of Africa's many tongues. The case for that split becomes dramatically strengthened when one considers the lot of the black Afrikaans writer Hein Willemse, a leading figure in South Africa's cultural renaissance, has contributed an affecting autobiographical essay on Afrikaans as a language of insurrection. He recalls the placards brandished by Sowetan pupils during the revolt of 1976—"A way with Afrikaans," "Afrikaans stinks"—but he remembers, too, the black Afrikaans-speaking children killed by police in the same uprising. For a poet committed to working at a grass-roots level, the choice of language will inevitably determine his or her constituency. And in Willemse's Western Cape, Afrikaans remains the primary language of the black working...
class and rural poor, with English the lingua franca of upward mobility.

Njabulo Ndebele’s essay on the English language and social change complements Willemse’s brilliantly. Ndebele is an accomplished writer of fiction, as illustrated by his other contribution, “Death of a Son,” which relates attempts by two parents to buy back the corpse of their child from the police. His creative gifts are also apparent in his analytical writing; the essay included here inquires meticulously into the institutional and ideological premises of English in South Africa without becoming mired in a quaggy sociological idiom. The piece was originally delivered as an address to the English Academy of Southern Africa, a body that prides itself on being an apolitical custodian of the English language. Ndebele’s perfect ear for the cadences of white liberal common sense enables him to go for the jugular with devastating civility. He dissects liberal reform’s indigenous platitudes (e.g., that “thought, like money, has no colour”) as well as its imported American variants, notably, entrepreneurial cries for fresh “management principles.”

His remarks sometimes ring with an uncanny relevance to American debates over excellence: “In promoting English in a multilingual society . . . where the dominant culture feels more inherently valuable than the dominated cultures, it may at some point become increasingly and dangerously difficult for us to make a distinction between English and education” Ndebele is not excited by suggestions that white institutions open their doors to blacks; rather, close the doors, he urges, and erect new institutions not founded on “the unquestioned, nonnegotiable primacy of western civilization and its spectrum of values embodied in what has been called free enterprise and the special kind of democracy based on it.”

In recent years, the most vital cultural challenges to the old nonnegotiables have often emanated from theatrical and performance-poetry groups To Bunn and Taylor’s credit, they have included a generous sample from the anthology of worker poetry, Black Mamba Rising, despite the difficulty of translating the poems not only out of Zulu and Xhosa but also out of performance and into print. The art of Alfred Temba Qabula, Mi S’dumo Hlatshwayo and Nise Malange, the three figures represented, has developed symbiotically with the Durban Workers’ Cultural Local and is remarkable for its success at reworking images and styles of oratory traditionally associated with rural Zulu and Xhosa praise-poets, inflecting them with the exhortatory ambitions of the trade union movement. These performance poets participate in precisely the kind of broadly based cultural movement that the regime finds most perturbing.

The photography book in From South Africa ranges from writing tinged with a liberal distaste for apartheid to the openly revolutionary. Not all the contributions are as politically direct as the workers’ praise-poetry or Badsha’s images; oddities abound. What, for instance, is one to make of Wayne As-sam’s teasing meditation on prejudice, staged, somewhat in the manner of Bor-ges, as a colloquy with a sage? Then there is the unforeseeable rapprochement between a self-conscious French feminism and Afrikaans prose startlingly apparent in Ingrid Scholtz’s “From the Experiences of an Afrikaner Housewife in the Bosom of a Nuclear Family.” Scholtz’s fiction enters the tattered mind of a woman who refuses to “crawl back into the Free State of the past” yet can only stumble toward “political correctness,” distraught at her failure “to take up the new like a bed.”

The editors’ adventurousness and their intimate sense of the South African social context should ensure their anthology a place in many African studies and political science courses as well as, more obviously, in literary ones. Most important, From South Africa breaks emphatically with a sterile publishing tradition that has tended to focus on a handful of internationally oriented white novelists, lending insufficient support to black writing and moreover to the visual arts. For the first time, Americans have been given the chance to engage the formidable range of cultural responses to what Zakes Mda has called the people’s “optimistic tragedies.”