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Entry: Modernism in South Africa

What can be called manifestations of Modernism in South Africa bear Western influences along with local ones, and so emerge with hybrid features. These features are discernible in black writing, in English, and in Afrikaans. If Western Modernism made a point of reacting against Romantic and realist aesthetics, so fast and furious was the current of modernisation in South Africa that such a considered reaction was not possible, and was perhaps not even intellectually tenable in a conservative, colonial society. Local Modernism was certainly informed, however, by the crises associated with modernisation – industrialisation, expansionism, the desacralisation of the world – and this led to violent systemic juxtapositions: linguistic, economic, and racial. While there is a perception that black writing is based on a type of documentary realism, evidence exists to show that it juxtaposes elements of Western literary experimentalism with, say, traditional African ones. In certain white writing, such as that of J.M. Coetzee and the Afrikaans group, Die Sestigers, modernist literary techniques are explicitly present, and they lead to a sense of textual estrangement on the part of the reader, in keeping with the dislocation, alienation, and disempowerment apparent in the subject matter. While the same features are certainly evident in black writing, the latter tends to be characterised by a belief in the community, and a sense of hope for the future. South African Modernism, then, is characterised by the juxtaposition of a variety of systems, is prone to experimentation, to strategies of estrangement, is certainly aware of alienation and dislocation, but responds in various ways to these facts of modern existence, based largely on class and race (often the same thing in South Africa, where the majority of the working class is black).

Although Modernism as a topic is barely evident in the field of South African literary studies, modernist elements can certainly be traced. Significant local discussions of Modernism include the relation of Adorno to the South African socio-political situation as it was in the 1970s and 1980s, literary experimentalism in black writers such as Lewis Nkosi, Njabulo Ndebele and Zakes Mda, the deliberate exposure of the textual nature of fiction in J.M. Coetzee, and the extreme juxtapositions and syncretism evident in a wide range of South African writing.

South African encounters with modernisation lead to juxtapositions that involve race, the economy, language, and religion. Examples of such juxtapositions are: the hymns of a Xhosa convert named Ntsikana, which stem from the early nineteenth-century; Olive Schreiner’s conflation of dream allegories and arguments for female enfranchisement; and Sol Plaatje’s simultaneous use of Shakespearean romance and traditional prophecy (Chapman 2006: 1, 7). Further examples from the later twentieth-century would include Peter Abrahams’s Mine Boy (1946), which, inspired by black American writing, exposes the hardships of existence in the big city; and Alan Paton’s Cry, the Beloved Country (1948), which overlays its narrative of neighbourly reconciliation with fraught socio-historical material. Also of central concern for Paton is dislocation, and the complexities involved in the bridging of tradition and the new, or the differences between races. The Afrikaans writers, DieSestigers, adapt the form of the nouveau roman to undermine the apartheid state. J.M. Coetzee, pitting himself against the deterministic claims of history, argues for the conceptual and imaginative independence of his own fiction. In Soweto, the black poets of the 1970s conflate elements of Frantz Fanon, Steve Biko, the Harlem Renaissance, Beat poetry, and traditional praise poetry in order to convey their largely politicised world-view. Characteristics of such writing are abrupt changes of register, colloquialisms, and mixed traditional and modern references.

If we turn to white writing from an earlier period, Roy Campbell, especially active in the 1920s and 1930s, was inspired by the type of Modernism espoused by his friend Wyndham Lewis; the epic poem which brought him immediate international recognition, The Flaming Terrapin (1924), though largely a neo-Romantic, symbolist work, contains Vorticist elements, with its emphasis on raw energy and the rejuvenation of an exhausted world by a cyborg creature, the half-machine terrapin itself. Campbell also wrote one of the first reviews in praise of The Waste Land. It appeared in the journal Voorslag, edited by Campbell, William Plomer and Laurens van der Post (1926). A writer in exile, who opposed both consumer capitalism and the communist displacement of tradition, the twin sources of the evils of modernisation in his view, Campbell in the 1930s earned the opprobrium of most fellow artists and intellectuals, as his oppositional stance led to his siding with the Nationalists during the Spanish Civil War. His very relation to the world was, from this point of view, exemplary of psychological and social dislocation.

Looking at other white writers from the same period, Pauline Smith, albeit in fairly conservative terms, is, in her novel, The Beadle (1934), experimental within an autonomous narrative (this world had not been broached in such a way before in English) which is topographically, psychologically and linguistically constrained. Her experimentalism is evident in the way she creates an impression of the Afrikaans language as opposed to a linguistically accurate counterpart of it; she thereby conveys the unique presence of a distinct culture in a far corner of the world, with its archaic, almost biblical mode of speech matching her idealised vision of this world. The Afrikaans poet, N.P. Van Wyk Louw, like Roy Campbell, was an anti-materialist who was attracted by European symbolism and the aesthetic views of Nietzsche, both of which sources surface in his poetry. Another major Afrikaans poet, D.J. Opperman, in works such as Komasuit’n Bamboestok(*Comas from a Bamboo Stick*), was critical of the status quo in a manner Adorno would have understood; that is, his poetry is obliquely subversive of the assumptions of Afrikaner nationalism, which saw people as commodities (as in the case of the doctrine of apartheid).

Later white poets of note include Guy Butler, who explored in his poetry his own dislocation, his sense of being neither African nor European. Sydney Clouts, Douglas Livingstone, and Ruth Miller are also important voices. Again, as in Adorno’s conception of Modernist strategy, implicit oppositional potential is to be found in the intricate warp and weft of a number of Miller’s poems. Clouts, too, though on the face of it an apolitical poet, nevertheless crafted intricate work, which in its own way makes a stand against the crasser aspects of contemporaneity. Invoking parallels between human and animal spheres, Douglas Livingstone creates complex metaphors that focus on a type of individual integrity centred in a worldly aesthetics. Afrikaans poet, Breyten Breytenbach, uses surrealistic techniques of free association and fantasy, conflated with records based on actual experience. Stephen Watson has been criticised by certain critics for his stand against politicisation in art, but we can appreciate that Watson’s emphasis on the social and psychological revitalisation inherent in aesthetic quality is intrinsically Modernist.

If the period of high Modernism is most closely associated with a disruption of linguistic and experiential certitude, then, it has been argued, J.M. Coetzee’s fiction is of this type (Attridge 655). Form and content complement each other in such works. Coetzee’s techniques of textual estrangement (bogus ‘autobiographical’ elements, impossible narratives, inconsistent narratives, parodic sentimentalisation, negations of what went before, mechanical sequencing of paragraphs) are consonant with, exemplary of, indeed, late Modernism. The reader is thus challenged by being both immersed in and suspended from the story; expectations and preconceptions are disturbed, defamiliarisation occurs, and the text emerges as something unique and inventive, in its own terms, not as political or social commentary, or escapist romance. This is not to deny the specifically South African nature of Coetzee’s subject-matter, but it is to extend his area of resonance, spatially and temporally, beyond the parochial.

An Adornian view of the value of Modernism has been transferred to the South African context by the critic Neil Lazarus. Adorno looks at writing in extremity in relation to his wide understanding of world history, and, in a way specific to the 1980s in South Africa, reveals the dilemma facing white intellectuals such as Gordimer, Coetzee, Brink, and Breytenbach. They are opposed to the status quo, and in being so must forfeit their futures and their potential readership: their futures because of political change, their readership because of the apparently irrelevant nature of their work in the face of this general, large-scale political change. For Adorno the inevitable path of history has led to the failure of socialism, premised on the side-lining of both individual subjectivity and intellectualism in society, which have been supplanted by the mob-thinking of fascism and total administration, what he calls the reification of the world, which reduces it to an agglomerate of objects or commodities (Lazarus 137). There is no alternative to this impasse in Adorno’s conception of historical process. However – setting against Adorno’sultimately pessimistic view the fact that in the mid-1980s there was a socialist upsurge of oppositional energy in South Africa brought about by a far from compromised proletariat, as well as by writers whose difficult, subversive texts exhibit an Adornian aesthetic of resistance – we can perceive a strong element of independence from historical determinism in local Modernism, and a sense of hope in the future. The hopefulness is qualified by the sacrifice at the time of white writers who perceive they will have no role to play in the future of their country, a fact in part corroborated by Coetzee’s move to Australia in 2002.

Regarding black writing, the 1950s stories in Drum magazine emphasise black community, and catch the impressions of the moment; stories by such writers as Can Themba, Bloke Modisane, and Lewis Nkosi express a Modernist moment in their energy, their emphasis on the city, their American-inspired argot. But black Modernism in South Africa is particularly noticeable in the area of ‘literary experimentalism’, which is essentially modernist in nature (Attwell 26). Lewis Nkosi feels that black experimentalism can not be equated with Western practice, but, while the two exhibit manifest differences, there is also a continuity. Instances occur in Njabulo Ndebele’s experiments with ‘Joycean internal monologues in isiZulu’, Muthobi Muloatse’s modernist-type manifesto, with its declaration, ‘“we are going to kick and pull and push and drag literature into the form we prefer”’, Esk’ia Mphahlele’s ‘fusion’ of different consciousnesses in Down Second Avenue, along with his ‘imagined black (diasporic) argot’, and Nkosi’s Mating Birds, with its ‘self-ironising introspection’ (Attwell, 173-74). When it comes to how ‘modernist’ certain aspects of tradition actually are, caution is necessary. While in the traditional view aspects of the rational self are indeed subverted, such as in the process of becoming a traditional healer, it is necessary to ask if this subversion takes its cue from the forces of modernity. Gabriel Josipovici follows a compelling line of argument in What Ever Happened to Modernism?, to point out that Modernism is not merely a set of practices or rules, it is a state of mind informed by the existential crises which have their roots in the Reformation and its consequences, and its products are related to this (2010: *passim*). Thus, if traditional elements are found alongside western ones in trade union praise poems, say, they owe their existence to the colonial crisis, an aspect of modernisation, and so, in their syncretism, tie in with a conception of Modernism. The same is not true of healer initiation and practice or ancestor worship.

South African literature during the period of High Modernism was largely unaware of the philosophical questioning following the Darwinian, Nietzschean and Freudian revolutions (Campbell, Van Wyk Louw, and Marais tended to be exceptions), which led to such metropolitan aesthetic responses as Futurism, Dadaism, Expressionism, Surrealism, and Existentialism. The Modernist approaches in South African literature as discussed above and in the associated entries were premised upon material conditions in the country, and the socio-political consequences of those material conditions. It must be borne in mind, however, that these conditions and their consequences had their basis in the crises instigated by the expansion of Western modernisation, acutely felt in Africa as a whole. From this point of view they were informed by similar forces to those that informed the various approaches of Western Modernism.

**References and further reading**

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Giliomee, Hermann. (2003) *The Afrikaners: Biography of a People*, Cape Town: Tafelberg; Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press. (General history with sections on Afrikaner writers.)

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Lazarus, N. (1986-87) ‘Modernism and Modernity: T.W. Adorno and Contemporary White South African Literature’, *Cultural Critique* 5: 131-55. (An acute application of Adorno to the South African situation during the 1980s.)

Scanlon, P. (ed.) (2000) *Dictionary of Literary Biography volume 225: South African Writers*, Detroit: Gale. (Contains longer, much more detailed essays and bibliographies than *The Columbia Guide*, but does not cover as many authors.)

Titlestad, M. (2004) *Making the Changes: Jazz in South African Literature and Reportage*, Pretoria and Leiden: University of South Africa Press and Koninklijke Brill NV. (An examination of how black modernity was instilled in various ways through the jazz discourse apparent in black journalism.)