

# Tales of transition

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## Abstract

### Tales of transition

*In this article the rationale of this special issue is provided and the different contributions are introduced. The assumption is that there are strong similarities between the recent political and social transitions in South Africa and Germany and the reactions, both emotional and literary, of the people involved. Broadly, the transitions are described as a movement from external (or violent) to internal (or ideological) social control, though this must be modified by the various constructions the contributors put on the transition. The main themes and questions of the transitions are synthesized, highlighting the marked similarities the different contributions reveal. The most important of these are the relation to the past, problems of identity, projections of the new and the internal contradictions of nationalist discourse (which informs the process of transition). In conclusion, the similarities and differences between the two transitions indicated by this special issue, are discussed. The assumption of strong similarities between the two seems to hold, it is argued, but much more research into the matter is needed.*

## 1. The rationale of this special issue

... official history is a production, but also an erasure of an alternative history (Horn, p. 28).

The state can never admit that the ideological operations which it produces in order to maintain its sovereignty can be wrong (Horn, p. 38).

The word "possible" excludes all the possibilities which according to the (falsified) record of the past have been judged "impossible" (Horn, p. 33).

Literature will not cease to write about the things which happened before 1990, neither in Germany nor in South Africa (Horn, p. 38).

In the nineties South-Africa and Germany have both been undergoing peaceful revolutions: periods of profound (relatively bloodless) change and transformation. The assumption behind this collection of essays is that there are strong parallels between these two transitions and the ways in which they were dealt with in the literature and other writings of the two countries. Of course there are differences and contrasts, too, and perhaps more glaring than the similarities. To recall but one: the differences between a European and an African country.

The democratisation process in both East Germany and South Africa can broadly and reductively be described as a shift from relying for political control primarily on the repressive state apparatus (the police, the judicial and penal system and the army) towards relying mainly on ideological state apparatuses (schools, universities, churches, commissions, the media, literature, art) (Althusser, 1969: 54-55) – a shift from an external locus of control towards an internal locus of control. To put it crudely: a shift from a police state towards the rule of law.

The transformations are parallel in that institutions have changed radically; different cultures have to be integrated; radical new ways of thinking have to be learnt; old certainties have disappeared; and new (and frightening) challenges or problems have to be overcome. Profound changes in the framing conditions of personal and cultural life are occurring – changing from a secure (though repressive) situation into a hard-edged, competitive and often unfriendly freedom.

In such uncertain times people turn back to the familiar, as Monika Maron writes in *Animal triste* (see Van Luxemburg, p. 138). That partly explains why the stories of these post-totalitarian cultures are dominated by debates about the past and the rhetorics of memory, mourning, and nostalgia. Perhaps the most important question of all is: What is to become of the past?

There are a lot of other important questions: What is the nature of such transitions? How do the different authors and critics describe or construct the transition? How are these transitions reflected or represented in literature and culture? How is language itself affected by the transition? And culture? Can traces of change be found in value systems and social and literary norms and models? Can literature bridge the gulf of separation between people and open up new possibilities that would heal and reconcile?

Another central concern is that of identity and the role that images of the self and the other play in constructing an identity. In the construction of identity the influence of literature and the media is crucial. Self-image is also closely linked to one's image of one's own country and of other countries. This is particularly topical in an African context. How is Africa constructed? As a hard, arid wilderness, a Biblical desert or a place where one can feel at home?

Questions like these are (partly) answered in this special edition of *Literator*. It is special, not only in the sense that it concentrates on the special topic of transitional literature, but also because authors from South Africa, Germany and the Netherlands contributed to this first ‘international’ issue with a wide range of essays. The critics tell and respond to a kaleidoscope of stories against backdrops that vary from townships to metropolises. They are stories of people caught between changing political spheres, between the old and the new, and their reactions to these: alienation, uncertainty, fear; their fate clearly demonstrating the intertwining of the political and the private.

Danto’s definition of narrative as “an explanatory account of changing, coherent past events” (cf. Steenberg, p. 93) can serve as a guideline for drawing together the diverse contributions to this special issue. Together they form multiple narratives of the two transitions in question. At least four different ways of writing such explanatory accounts can be discerned: fictional narratives, historical narratives, narratives in the media and, of course, narratives by the critics and academics themselves. The poems by Peter Horn concluding this issue capture much of the hope and uncertainty of transition.

## **2. Peter Horn – “Parallels and contrasts – *Wendezeit* in South African and German literature”**

Peter Horn’s thoughtful and densely argued contribution articulates important differences between historical and fictional accounts of events. He takes up a number of the *Leitmotifs* of transitional literature, especially the central question of how to deal with the past. Horn argues that the past is much deeper than official history allows and that the truth that is forgotten – or rather, repressed – by official history, forcefully keeps emerging in our language, stories, dreams and actions (p. 26). Historical documents and official history are therefore full of gaps and lacunae.

In the transition a new official history emerges, memory becomes selective, the misdeeds of the past are ignored or forgotten. People get tired of hearing the litany of the past. However, the ghosts of the past cannot be laid to rest so easily. As Brink’s *On the contrary* demonstrates for Horn, official history is “a production but also an erasure of alternative history” (p. 28). Authentic witness is rewritten according to what is officially acceptable. Historians are limited to the possible, Horn argues, to what can be proven by authentic documents, but because literature lacks this authority of history, it can transcend the boundaries of the possible, that what is excluded from language, and enter the realm of possibility – the realm of the ‘might have been’. That is why Horn writes that “fiction deals with the possibilities which are excluded from official documents”

(p. 28). What is possible excludes all the possibilities which have been officially judged impossible.

This does not relieve the writer of the burden to write about the horrors in the cellars of society, Horn writes, citing as examples J.M. Coetzee's *The Master of Petersburg* and Christa Wolf's *Medea*. In both novels the characters discover, as it were, the dark hidden secrets, the dark counter-images of societies that portray themselves as light and glittering and consider themselves happy, believing the lie they secretly wish to believe. Both novels can be images of the new Germany and the new South Africa, but are also more than that.

Knowing the dark secrets of the past is a heavy burden, a kind of guilt. Writing the past, as Coetzee's novel illustrates, is therefore a kind of necromancy – the art of raising the dead. Horn believes that the truth that emerges through processes of reconciliation like the TRC will be the truth we can bear, since memories of the holocaust or of apartheid are like the memories of another person – big transitions also leave “fissures in our own biography” (p. 26), making us different persons. The unconscious truth can emerge only in literature and art. It will emerge, in the striking image from Horn's poem “From the brink of disaster”, like “a sobbing cry in the hollow of a flute” or keep echoing “in the dark wells of death” like the song of the Diederik cuckoo.

Yet here is a danger, too – the danger that art will be so taken up with nostalgia that it loses touch with reality and becomes repugnant. It is already customary for writers to deny that they are making art. For South Africa this means the end of an “aesthetics of conviction” that includes writing about the injustices of the past. Here Horn reminds us that reading or writing about torture is not innocent, but implicates the reader-spectator as a voyeur in the act of torture, suggesting that violence is intimate, personal. This yet again illustrates how deeply the political impinges on the private.

Horn finds a further unbearable question in Coetzee's novel: Is it at all possible to tell the truth about yourself? This question calls the very possibility of truth in question, suggesting that the most relentless confession might be but “a desire of the self to construct its own truth”, to construct “a self-serving fiction”, as Horn quotes from Coetzee's essay on confession (p. 35).

In desiring to tell the truth the writer becomes a voyeur, a spy, transgressing the very idea of privacy. As Coetzee's character abundantly discovers, spying is part of the art of writing. That is the reason why “writing necessarily transgresses the boundaries of what is permissible” (p. 36).

The close connection between telling and desire means for Horn that both telling the truth and violence is intimately connected to the very desire for a unified

nation. The dream of the rainbow nation will absorb all differences, we think. Yet, on the other hand, racist abuse and hatred of foreigners are spreading. These considerations lead Horn to a critique of nationalism and the nation state. “The state lives inside you”, he quotes Breyten Breytenbach. To maintain the nation state one has to create a unified subject by constructing it in opposition to others, non-members of such a unity. This is a phantasmagoric (and empty) subjectivity, since it is constructed against an imaginary other. Nationalist discourse in this way defines the state as the true self and its opponents as others, he writes.

The histories of both the GDR and South Africa illustrate for Horn that when the coercive power of nationalist discourse fails, the state has no option but violence. It cannot admit to the failure of its own ideological apparatus, and therefore has to blame the failure on the individual who doesn't conform. The atrocities of the security police illustrate the horrific power of this discourse of the self and the other. The example of Jürgen Fuchs among others leads Horn to strongly reaffirming the freedom and autonomy of literature – for all the reasons he has cited, but in particular for the complicity of desire, self image and telling.

Horn's dark construction of art, memory, nostalgia, telling, the past and desire serves as a relativising framework for hanging some of the other, lighter essays on, as we will indicate. The dialectic of the unconscious shows repressed truths emerging in the essays by Van Wyk and Gabler – interestingly enough in a context of laughter and carnival, where the conscious controls are slackening. Horn's essay also warns us against construing the transitions as point zero – the new beginning as Gaylard sees it – as this tends to make us forget the past; it induces amnesia.

### **3. Ampie Coetzee – “Oorgangsliteratuurgeskiedenis: die illusie van 'n nasionale Suid-Afrikaanse letterkunde”**

Coetzee's article focuses on the possibilities and paradoxes of a South African national literature (and the writing of its history). The idea of a national literature is a part of the striving for unity in the new South Africa (and one of its symbols), but Coetzee is a bit uneasy about nationalist discourse. Rightly so, if we keep Horn's views in mind. Coetzee's emphasis on discourse and discursive constructions reminds us that, like writing the nation (the discourse of a unified nation), this special issue is a writing of the transition – a discursive construction of different sets of historical events. We should be mindful, then, about how we construct the transition and the ways in which this special issue might contribute towards its construction. In presenting here a variety of discourses on the transition we are (at least partly) true to Coetzee's ideal of a discursive literary history.

Coetzee shows up the lack of fit between culture and language in South Africa and the paradoxical way in which Western discursive constructions (like *literature*) fit and does not fit South African conditions. The paradigm of one nation, one language, one state, one culture hardly holds for South Africa, despite the fact that English is becoming “a metonymic master code” (p. 47). The debates about language, for Coetzee, mean that language is a discourse, that is, a coercive, hegemonic factor. South African literature as a unifying national literature is thus a problematic construction. Even an important work like Chapman’s *South African Literatures* fails, in Coetzee’s opinion, to construct it properly, since it gets stuck in moralism and is skewed by a pseudo comparative method and a lack of real knowledge of other languages than English.

For Coetzee this indicates that we should move beyond the usual methods and categories. He therefore proposes that the teleological model of (literary) history be abandoned for the discontinuous genealogical one of Foucault. The new units in that system are discontinuous discursive formations, in which e.g. writing the land would include the farm novel, but also the discourse of land transactions, laws on land ownership, rules for the expropriation of land, etc. This would include the modes and discourses of all South Africa – from newspapers to oral texts and the literary. The challenge, as Coetzee sees it, is to make the marginalised voices in other languages audible without simply reversing the marginalisation.

An alternative literary history would arrange such discursive formations into new interrelations or constellations as part of the debate of a country (and not in aesthetic isolation). This implies that the verbal artifacts of South Africa (aesthetic or not) would have to be constructed differently in order to “keep the text of the book in debate with the text of the world” as he quotes Chapman (p. 54).

Coetzee seems to construct the transition as the emergence of a new hegemonic discourse of the nation. He, however, also points out that South African literature has already shown a consciousness of political crisis, of living in an interregnum, since the 70’s and that the transition cannot be limited to the period since 1994. This indicates that our constructions of language, South African literature, identity, the past, of Africa itself (important themes that other contributors also take up) are bound to be relative and exclusive in their own way.

4. Helize van Vuuren – “‘Op die limiete’: Karel Schoeman se *Verkenning* (1996)”

A meaningless sign encrypted in alien languages  
lost in a flat and endless landscape  
(Horn, p. 223).

The discursive construction of the past, but also of South Africa, Africa and identity, are central concerns in Karel Schoeman's new novel, *Verkenning* (Reconnaissance). Yet, one may strongly doubt that it is a transitional novel at all, since it is (in a literal sense) an exploration of the Cape Colony during the Batavian Period (1803-1806) and appears to have little to say about the transition of the 1990's. Van Vuuren, however, shows that the narrator is extremely conscious of the distance between now and then; of the difficulty, even the inability of fully understanding the past, as the recurring image of pushing open the heavy door suggests. It is a metafictional novel, fully conscious of the provisional and tentative nature of its discursive construction of the past; its intermingling of “fact” and “fiction”. The narrator makes it very clear that his representation of the facts is a construction that in some places conflicts with known historical facts – calling into question the possibility of distinguishing between historical “facts” and “fiction” at all.

To reread and rewrite history, to reinterpret it, may be likened to turning back to the familiar that is characteristic of periods of transition. It is a kind of nostalgia. But rewriting history is also a defamiliarisation of known history; reading it with a modern sensibility that foregrounds burning concerns of our own time, such as giving voice to marginalised and voiceless groups like the slaves and the San. A modern sensibility also enacts the way in which European voices and constructions of Africa as an empty and arid wilderness (see the motto of this section) lose their relevance at the outer limits of the colony and are replaced by African voices and an African sense of being at home. In these ways the novel echoes present-day concerns, concerns of the transition.

The novel is a rich polyphony of voices, a veritable collage of intertexts, ranging *inter alia* from Lichtenstein to Herder and Flavius Josephus. In reaching back to the past, the roots of present-day South African society, the novel also carries in its intertexts, as Van Vuuren points out, a very strong consciousness of transition and especially of the coming of the new. As collage, in the numerous fragments of different voices and texts it presents us, in its reflection of different forms of language, of discourse, the novel is almost Foucauldian in method: the discontinuous fragment is dominant. In other words, it exemplifies the method Ampie Coetzee is propounding.

It is as if the novel is suggesting that periods of transition are predominantly extremely chaotic and polyphonic: a plethora of contradictory voices vying for attention, reflecting (for the present-day reader) ironically on the continuity of racist attitudes and practices. By exposing different constructions to dialogue with other voices, through its heteroglossic structure (Bakhtin, 1989) the novel is constantly relativising pretensions of absolute truth. The surfacing of historically repressed voices in this novel is a reminder of our complicity in history and of the relativity of our own constructions of the past and of the present, too, specifically of the transition itself, in Horn's terms: of what official history excludes.

## **5. Johan van Wyk – “Catastrophe and beauty: *Ways of dying*, Zakes Mda's novel of the transition”**

The return of the repressed is a basic Freudian tenet. The fact that Johan van Wyk construes transition and transitional literature in Freudian terms, specifically using Freud's essay on “Group psychology”, also illustrates the relativity of our constructions.

Van Wyk situates the novel in the period of negotiations between 1990 and 1994 in which the state has lost control and legitimacy. As the repressive power of the state wanes, there is a resurgence of repressed instincts. The reality principle is lost, making room for dreams and mysticism. The masses feel omnipotent. Amidst violent death, birth, sexuality, morbid symptoms, the new is born. The transition is therefore characterised by the inversion of power, evoking carnivalesque elements. As Van Wyk points out, it is significant that the novel ends with New Year's celebrations that also symbolically celebrate the imminent freedom. The death of the old also means rebirth.

Van Wyk demonstrates the importance of oedipal factors and dreams in the novel. He cites different examples of condensation. Toloki's father e.g. is both his ideal and his opponent, whose death he desires. His desire for Noria, the woman who inspired his father and whom he fears, is shameful as it is akin to a desire to sleep with his mother.

Van Wyk also makes a case for viewing the transition as the terrible carnival of Halloween, *inter alia* because it links arbitrary killing and laughter. From the examples van Wyk cites, it is clear that the reality principle has become weakened and that people cannot distinguish between their fantasies (ideologies) and reality. That is why children, supposedly innocent, become instruments of death.

Transition means alienation, loss of identity and security, the loosening of restrictions and chaos. It is a nightmare and it also means death. But through



chaos creativity is restored and the new can be born, as the novel suggests: Toloki starts drawing again under the influence of Nora's singing and the seemingly useless figurines his father made, resurface as objects of art. For Van Wyk "they represent the material manifestation of the past speaking silently as objects to the present" (p. 83), but their meaning remains ambiguous. Do they signify a return to wholeness by creativity or the revalidation of the tribal life and art of the past? Whatever the case may be, they embody the powerful theme of the presence of the past in transitional literature.

Van Wyk praises the author for also "exploring the oedipal dynamics of the family and the broader society" (p. 90) and thinks that this enables him to deconstruct both the past and the future. Van Wyk interprets the aftermath of the meeting with the leaders of the freedom movement as a demand for "silence, repression, complete unity" (p. 82), criticising the idea of unity and nation building. This is one instance where Mda's work deconstructs the future: the future is likely to continue the repressions of the past.

## **6. D.H. Steenberg – "Flitse van sosiale verandering in enkele postmodernistiese Afrikaanse romans"**

D.H. Steenberg also highlights the theme of the restorative power of art. Going against the popular notion that Postmodernism has nothing to say about reality, Steenberg argues in this article that a number of recent postmodernist Afrikaans novels do indeed give us glimpses of a new social order beyond apartheid and its divisions, because art can propose constructions that project new possibilities, new life. History, after all, is a construction.

In André Letoit's novel, *Suidpunt-jazz* (Southern tip jazz), Steenberg already finds a pioneering positive identification with Africa and an optimistic construction of Africa as continent of promise. Letoit actively popularised his fiction and shifted characters and events across traditional boundaries between people, thereby, Steenberg reasons, preparing social change.

In a number of other novels Steenberg also sees glimpses of such new, restorative constructions. Berta Smit's novel, *Juffrou Sophia vlug vorentoe* (Miss Sophie flees ahead), suggests to him that hate and estrangement can be reconciled through empathy, understanding and forgiveness. In *Foxtrot van die vleiseters* (Fox-trot of the meat-eaters) by Eben Venter another such a glimpse is the complex relationship between the young white narrator and a black girl. Trying to cross the lines of social injustice, he silently pleads for the girl's forgiveness. The crisis in their relationship is a scene of youthful play in a swimming-pool under the stern eyes of his mother and father that he feels watch them from the clouds. The situation is too complex, however, to allow a sexual relationship;

rather, the social boundaries are reaffirmed. Steenberg's rather optimistic reading of these novels seems to lack a sense of the interference of the political and the personal which plays such an important role in all these novels.

In *Die stoetmeester* (The master stud farmer), black and white meet each other on an equal footing, as professionals. This constitutes for Steenberg the basis for a rapprochement between black and white. In his opinion the (rather melodramatic) scene at the end of the book where the two strong women of the book take each other's hands in the river, gives hope for the future.

This novel does not accentuate violence; it is rather a balancing act between darkness (death of the siener) and light (understanding and readiness to forgive). That some of the characters are open for interaction with all the other peoples is here another glimpse of the breaking down and crossing of boundaries and socioeconomic differences between people; explorations of a new social order. The stress on development suggests that Steenberg constructs the transition as a slow and gradual evolution of society in which art and literature play a path-breaking role.

## **7. Rob Gaylard – “*Crossing over*: Stories of the transition, or ‘history from the inside’”**

Crossing boundaries is a central metaphor of the review article by Rob Gaylard of the collection of South African transition stories, *Crossing over*. This collection is unique as it was published in Afrikaans, too (under the title *Keerpunt, Rode & Gerwel*, 1995), and collects responses to the transition by mainly younger writers for younger readers.

Gaylard shows that the prominent themes of transitional literature also occur in this collection. Some stories are concerned with the continuing presence of the past. Others underline the big differences between the life worlds of suburb and informal settlement, differences in the material circumstances of life. Most of them demonstrate the intersection of the political and the personal.

Most interesting for our purpose is the way in which some of the stories commemorate the 1994 elections as a new beginning. Gaylard points out a new fluidity and a willingness of people to reinvent themselves and a renewed awareness of self and others that is undoing racism and stereotyping in the stories. By enacting the inclusion of the white outsider in the making of the new nation, one of the stories contribute to the making of an inclusive nation and to lifting the burden of past guilt. Another one demonstrates how voiceless people get a voice (a vote) for the first time. Yet Gaylard is also aware that celebrating

the new does not solve the concrete problems of poverty, inequality and homelessness that is revealed in the gaps and silences of the stories.

Gaylard reads one of the stories as cautioning “against simplistic or naive assumptions of transformation and acceptance” (p. 114). He is well aware of the danger that the discourse of nation-building can create new insiders and outsiders. His essay, however, makes explicit another element of transitional literature, namely the rhetorics of the new beginning. For him, the 1994 elections marks a turning point in literary history, too, since he argues (against Coetzee’s view) that the literature of the interregnum (like Gordimer’s *July’s People*, which could imagine the future only in apocalyptic terms) has made way for an imaginative record, a witness, of the transition that was unimaginable a few years ago. To record history as people personally lived and experienced it, to build on shared experience that can lead to a feeling of common citizenship, was one of the aims of the compilers of this anthology. In Gaylard’s opinion these stories illustrate a “rediscovery of the ordinary” (Ndebele, 1991:50), writing about a common subjectivity.

Gaylard admits, though, that the collection’s celebration of the new is “already tinged with nostalgia” in the light of the realities (like a high crime rate) of the new South Africa.

## **8. A.M. Rauch – “Die geistig-kulturelle Lage im wiedervereinigten Deutschland”**

On this note we can turn to the German transition, since nostalgia was an important reaction to the event that forms Rauch’s point of departure for considering the mental and cultural situation in the reunified Germany. This event is an exhibition, held in Berlin in 1993, that depicted the stations of life, important life events like baptism, communion, marriage, entrance in professional life, retirement, etc., in Germany from 1900-1993. Nearly half of the exhibition depicted the difference in the development of the life histories of people in East and West Germany. From the wall that separated the two sections the visitor could look down upon the two Germanies and compare the effects of different political, economical and educational systems upon private life histories. On the GDR side the design was linear with clear divisions and marked transitions according to a fixed plan, expressing a strongly organised life history from birth to old-age. The BRG side was a labyrinth with multiple entrances and exits and flowing transitions, which suggested that the *Bildungszeit* in the West was open, subject to change.

Most revealing about the exhibition were the guest-books in which the visitors could express their opinions about each other and about their experience of the

time since the *Wende* and the possibilities of the future: “Und heute – 1993?” The guest-books reveal that for people from the West the exhibition served the purpose of getting to know and understand each other, whereas people from the East regarded it as a mirror in which they saw their own life history reflected. Rauch finds it remarkable that there was very little evidence that people from the East regarded reunification as a liberation or could see the new possibilities for self-realisation in the new Germany. In comments by visitors from the East the predominant feelings were nostalgia, feelings of betrayal by history, feelings of having been victim to two consecutive totalitarian systems: National Socialism followed by the GDR Regime.

On both sides a feeling existed that people were not prepared for the problems of reunification. The initial feelings of euphoria were quickly replaced by a consciousness of how far people have grown apart from each other – a mental alienation that Rauch believes would not easily be overcome by the mass media or by portraying a unified Germany as it can still be detected by sociological studies.

*Vergangenheitsbewältigung* on the Eastern side not only has to do with the feelings of betrayal by history, but very much also with the disruption of the own life story. For many Osis the *Wende* means loss of security, identity and career prospects; loss of a predictable and clear vision of the future; loss of the past. Rauch believes the new future overtaxes them, leading to resignation and passivity. These feelings are very similar, we think, to the feelings of many white South Africans, particularly Afrikaners, today: they are showing the same reactions to their country’s profound transition.

In contrast to the reorientation that people from the East are concerned with, in the West the confrontation with the past takes another turn: that of a new confrontation with the Nazi past, as Rauch illustrates with the example of U. Woelk’s novel *Rückspiel*. This novel indicates for him firstly, the influence of irrational emotions on history and politics: turning points in life are influenced more by women than by politics (a theme also explored by Van Luxemburg). Secondly, it illustrates that a life history can be told and interpreted in multiple ways: every telling means a new life. This postmodern notion has already been illustrated by *Verkenning* and by the historiographic metafiction Steenberg mentions.

For Rauch it is evident that there remain deep existential and philosophical differences between East and West. The wall still seems to exist in the minds of people. There is political unity, but no mental-cultural unity. In the East there is a lack of identification with Germany and with the European integration process, since the West European world is unknown there.

On the other hand Rauch regards language, culture and history as strong unifying forces. Another unifying force is a common search for meaning and value. One of the most interesting indications of this trend is the surging popularity of value-orientated literature like *Märchen*. Significant in this regard is that Saint-Exupéry's *The Little Prince* has become a best-seller in both East and West – more than 10 million copies have been sold in the last few years. The popularity of *The Little Prince* indicates for Rauch that people are realising again that life needs meaning and purpose; that there are certain really important (if invisible) things in life.

The shared realisation that democratic values must be kept in place and that totalitarianism should never again be allowed to replace it, is also a strong unifying element, but in Rauch's opinion it is the Germans' shared longing for meaning and purpose that affords the strongest hope for unity and a common identity in future.

## 9. Jan van Luxemburg – “Monika Maron: Love and writing in a political climate”

The way in which people have grown apart during the separation, is one of the things that illustrates the interwovenness of love story and official history, of personal history and politics. This interwovenness is the theme of Jan van Luxemburg's discussion of *Animal triste*, the novel by Monika Maron that has been hailed as the most impressive novel of the transition (*Wenderoman*) yet.

Van Luxemburg outlines the mixed reception of the book: on the one hand it has received high praise for its “intense and poetic description of physical desire”; on the other hand it has been condemned as kitsch. The author's intention was indeed to write a love story that subordinates politics to love. Or rather, a love story that shows the intricate interactions between politics and love.

This move is significant against the background that Van Luxemburg sketches of the problematic relations between private love and public affairs in Maron's earlier novels. Here love stories serve as background to political actions or concerns and are often related with irony and distance. *Stille Zeile Sechs*, for example, was described as “an epic settlement with communism”. It is mainly a political novel with two stories of absolute love in the background.

As the title suggests, absolute love is the theme of *Animal triste*. This is also articulated in one important phrase, “Man kann im Leben nichts versäumen als die Liebe” (What can one miss in life besides love?). But politics, the *Wende* in particular, is no mere background, but in fact the precondition for this love: the

narrator often believes that the Wall was destroyed simply so that she could meet Franz. He was, after all, one of the Wessis sent to reorganise East Germany.

The novel documents various effects of the transition: people lost all certainty, everything familiar changed. In reaction, people clung to what they knew (especially in personal relations) or fell back on trusted aspects of life. This is repeated by the narrator in looking back at her love affair shortly after the *Wende*, recounted or remembered 40 odd years later. Timelessness, signified by the important image of the brachiosaurus, serves as a counterpoint to the transitoriness of political regimes, human life and love. Love cannot be protected from the effects of place and time, nor of memory, belying the idea that love is timeless: it is in fact, Van Luxemburg feels, intimately connected to the time of the *Wende*.

Hadrian's wall, which separated civilization from barbarism, symbolises in this novel how far East and West have grown apart during 40 years of separation. This emerges in an important incident in the novel. The narrator and Franz like to sing together, but due to her communist upbringing, she knows no religious songs. One night she sings a Stalinist version of a hymn, but realises that it was a mistake – a double treason: of God and of herself – and that Franz finds it shocking and blasphemous. For Van Luxemburg this is another example of how politics has permeated even the most intimate relation between people: that of love.

However, Van Luxemburg argues that her kneeled singing of the hymn can be read as a canonisation of the narrator's love. She sings a hymn of love, he thinks, "hallowing love into a true eternity through the derision of the timeless pretenses of the communist period" (p. 139). Her love is restricted to a specific time and place, permeated by a specific political system, yet a belief in the eternity of love overcomes this temporalness. Ironically, this eternal love is empty, since she loses Franz.

## **10. Wolfgang Gabler – "Die Wende als Witz; komische Darstellungen eines historischen Umbruchs"**

The longing for an empty lost object is a central hypothesis in Gabler's view of the transition as joke or wit. His contribution focuses on recent texts that present the political transition in East Germany as a comical event. Like Van Wyk Gabler utilises Freudian insights, but, compared to Van Wyk, he underestimates the importance of Bakhtin's (1984:18 ff.) ideas about the carnivalesque inversion and the grotesque body in the novels he discusses.

In Freud's theory, as Gabler explains it, jokes are understood as acts of social communication between a subject (narrator), an object (narrative) and an

addressee. The comical effect results from the reduced or isolated observation of a complex object. The psychological explanation of the necessity of an addressee – in contrast to humour and comedy – is to be found in the nature of wit itself. Freud observed that the subject himself does not laugh at his witty thought(s), but at the same time needs a ‘third person’ with whom he can share the joke. From this he concludes that the joke entails a transgression of a taboo, and that the narrator then needs to ward off the ensuing feelings of guilt by letting the addressee, through his laughter, share in the transgression, thereby covering it up and excusing it.

Stemming from the realm of the unconscious, wit can bring ostracised thoughts/taboo to the surface of consciousness, thereby overcoming the hindrances of shame and guilt. But wit can only become *Gestalt* if the third person has the same repressions as the wit-teller.

If – in analogy to Freud’s interpretation of the dream as the *via regia* to knowledge of the individual unconscious – jokes are the expressions of collective repressions, then, Gabler argues, analysing them should reveal insights into the realm of the collective unconscious. But the essence of jokes is the laughter of the first and the third person, who share the same codes of values, experiences, taboos, fears, anxieties. Their laughter is a way of dealing collectively with fears and threats. The greatest threat is death, but the expression of this fear through jokes is at the same time compensated for by the laughter which dispels its menace (Schiller’s “Abschreckung des Schreckens”). Jokes thus also constitute a degree of liberation.

Gabler exemplifies this hypothesis by analysing the wit in two recent (and extremely popular) novels, Thomas Brussig’s *Helden wie wir* and Jens Sparschuh’s *Der Zimmerspringbrunnen*. In the tradition of the picaresque the “heroes” of both novels act as “antiheroes”, as fools, as products of the realities of life in the GDR, thereby denying the ideology of humaneness, social togetherness, collectivity, order, duty and commitment the GDR itself propagated. In an adverse reaction to these utterly meaningless clichés, both characters resort to irrational, ridiculous acts of perversion and subversion with grotesque effects. By making taboos public these acts liberate both the actors and their audiences. These acts of wit transform the extreme negative traits (perverse, evil, infantile) of their subjects into the positive attributes of liberators and redeemers, but at the same time expose their own dialectic nature: emancipation, but with the loss of love; democracy, but with the death of Mother GDR. The structure of wit therefore can be seen as repressed or isolated feelings of mourning and nostalgia for an empty lost object. In both novels the heroes become tragic characters.

## 11. Hans Ester – “Sprachliche Entfremdung als Phänomen des Umbruchs in der früheren GDR”

a field  
sown with skulls  
covered by the webs  
of the spider of forgetting  
(Horn, p. 229).  
 (“After the blaze”)

Nostalgia as symptom of mourning is also the theme of Ester’s essay. He echoes many of the issues already raised by Rauch and Gabler, but also accentuates the role of language in the estrangement between Osis and Wesis. The fall of the Wall did not end this estrangement, but rather has made the separation visible to an extent that has turned the initial euphoria into lamentation over the loss of the familiar (and therefore reliable) reality.

The hypothesis that the struggle against the oppression of the GDR-regime is over and thus that the memories about the GDR must be erased, does not accord with the human need to remember, Ester writes. This view is similar to Peter Horn’s, who reminds us of Hegel’s distinction between remembrance, which subjects itself to the demands of the consciousness, and memory, which transports from unconsciousness to consciousness those events and facts against which consciousness creates boundaries (Horn, p. 32).

Hans Ester argues that it is of the utmost importance for the entire new Federal Republic of Germany to understand that many citizens of the former GDR cannot and do not subscribe to the amnesia which is expected of them, because that would rob them of their (private) inner life, of their (private) past, of their (private) language which was not the (official) language of the state; in short, of their identity. The dilemma of their own privateness, the impingement of the state security apparatus (the Stasi) on private life, is evident, not only in the case of well-known authors like Christa Wolf (mentioned by Peter Horn) and Monika Maron (mentioned by Van Luxemburg), but also in less known cases like that of Reverend Friedrich Schlorlemmer, who discovered only after the dismantling of the Stasi that his congregation had been full of informers. Despite his aversion to its political system, he can still mourn the passing away of what was valuable in the GDR.

Schlorlemmer pleads that East and West should not forget their past and regrets that there had been no time for a proper self-confrontation and self-purification, for a dialogue between the people, that would have enabled them to adjust mentally and emotionally to the *Wende*. Valuable in the GDR has been for him truth and solidarity – the truth created by censorship. Declaring the heritage of



40 years null and void in an instant, leads to skepticism and amorality, he believes. This might be one explanation of the longing for meaning and purpose that Rauch observes in Germany today.

Reconciliation is only possible if communication is restored through learning each other's language, Ester argues. It is the same German language indeed, but with a wide range of lexical variations which relate to different interpretations and therefore often causes a break-down of communication between East and West. In the East many words were filled with an ideological content which distorted their original denotation, while the preference for abbreviations created a kind of secret language. Words from communism and the international workers' movement were taken over from Russian. Religious words were filled with a pseudo-religious content.

The divergence of East and West German is not a matter of vocabulary only, but, as Ester points out, it affected core areas of thinking, feeling and believing, as we saw portrayed in *Animal triste*. Hans Ester identifies these obstacles of communication as the root of the still existing alienation between East and West and sees the reciprocal reading of literary and other texts from the two Germanies of the years after 1945 as essential for working through the past and as an instrument of reconciliation.

This need to grapple with the past, to work through it in order to reach reconciliation, is essentially what the Truth and Reconciliation Commission is trying to do in South Africa. One of its paradoxical effects is that it is encouraging amnesia among Afrikaners, who cannot bear to hear of more horrors committed by fellow-Afrikaners. Horn's image in the motto of this section is terribly apposite here. A similar denial of Afrikaner past is taking place. Their very language is being denied and replaced by English.

Ester's plea for the mutual reading of each other's books and documents seems just as valid for South Africans – for both black and white, as Nadine Gordimer reminds us. The big archive of South Africa's recent past is now opening for the first time, enabling us to recover the missing context and experience of fellow South Africans, she writes (1995:13), citing the famous words of Milan Kundera's that "the struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting". In her opinion (*ibid.*), "[t]he archive of the time rests in Security Police files"; much has been shredded in the meantime, perhaps lost for ever.

Is there in South Africa a comparable nostalgia for the past? It seems probable, but we do not really know; the reaction of South Africans to the transition would have to be researched. A recent prediction by the Afrikaans author, Elsa Joubert,

does indicate such a nostalgia. Speaking at a colloquium on “Afrikaans writers in a changing context” in Stellenbosch, Joubert said that Afrikaans readers no longer find the horrors of the past gripping, but now rather want to read books about the good old days when they felt safe and secure (Anon. 1997:7).

## 12. Stefan Fröhlich – “Images of America in unified Germany”

In this article Fröhlich puts forward another perspective on the roots of the alienation between East and West, namely the development of different images of America since the Second World War. He regards images of America in Europe mostly as stereotypes – but then as stereotypes that serve as a huge screen on which European fantasies can be projected.

The exposure of West Germans to American culture since 1945 and the development of a mostly positive *Amerikabild* merged into an understanding of American culture as not foreign, but rather as similar to the (West) German *Selbstbild*. It was not the New World that was foreign to West Germany, but rather Eastern Europe. This was the case until the collapse of the East Block – something which also put an end to many a *Fremdbild*. But the *Wende*, the reunification of Germany, also meant an end to traditional *Freundbilder* and the “natural” relationship to America. A new German *Selbstbild* and new internal *Feindbilder* emerged, which have a profound influence on German society, as can be seen in manifestations like *Ausländerfeindlichkeit*.

Fröhlich points out that the different *Selbstbilder* of Wessis and Osis are products of post-war history and that their consequent *Fremdbilder* are an important source of alienation from each other – a phenomenon which is also reflected in the texts of authors like Stefan Heym, F.C. Delius and, most of all, Günter Grass. The reason for this is that the Osis are rather more reserved and critical of American culture; rather ambivalent towards American mass culture.

Fröhlich does not mention Grass’ most recent work, *Ein weites Feld* (1995, translated as *A far field*), but it could be included here, since it deals extensively with the reunification of Germany. Before reunification Grass vehemently defended his political conviction that history made the growing together of West and East impossible and that a confederation would therefore be more appropriate than a united Germany. The same conviction underlies his depiction of the “far fields” of German history in the 19th and 20th century, which render the historical continuity after the *Wende* not only impossible, but also fatal.

Fröhlich believes though, that Americanisation could in time become one of the common grounds between East and West and, like art, music, and mass culture, ease the transformation.

Reading this article one is struck by strong similarities between the South African and German images of America. We find the same stereotyping here – America is the land of opportunity, a country without culture, etc. South Africa has become one of the most Americanised societies today (if one can believe press reports), and if one can take the wearing of base-ball caps as an index of that, it seems to be true. It seems reasonable to suppose that America has, in the same way as in Germany, become part of the South African self-image. There is probably a parallel in the development of self-image and images of enemies and foreigners, too. After 1994 South Africa has no enemies left in the world. That South Africans no longer regard each other as enemies, is probably too optimistic a view. But there is an internal enemy image developing, as press reports of increasing intolerance of foreigners from Africa attest. The construction of an other in order to unify the nation, is taking its toll.

In any case, Fröhlich reaffirms the importance of literature and the media in creating self-image and identity. The influence of media in this regard, is a theme that Maria von Harpe also addresses in her article.

### **13. Maria von Harpe – “East German media in transition after reunification”**

That the media could also help to build common ground between East and West, is one of Von Harpe’s arguments. She thinks the biggest challenge for the media in the next decade is to help the Germans overcome the idea of the Berlin Wall, agreeing with Rauch that big differences between East and West Germans still remain.

In the GDR, as Von Harpe explains, the central government absolutely controlled the media – not only newspapers, radio and television, but also the training of journalists and the language used by the media. The only “window to the West” East Germans had, was West German TV and radio stations. This situation ended soon after reunification, as East German journalists saw in the privatisation of the media a way to overcome state control. The media were sold and Wessis moved into leading media positions, which estranged the Ossis, causing the failure of a lot of ventures. As a consequence, ownership of the media is becoming concentrated in the hands of only a few. Such monopolies are a problem, since they tend to steer the media into infotainment for the sake of revenue, providing very little solid information.

Von Harpe thinks it necessary that civil society should be rebuilt. For that the public needs both information and entertainment and freedom of communication. She therefore advocates a good balance between private ownership and public regulation. In her opinion reunification has created favourable conditions for

precisely such a transition in East Germany: from state control “to consumer-oriented media with private ownership within certain public guidelines” (p. 196). She is, in Froneman’s terms, propagating a mix of the social responsibility and the democratic participatory model.

Von Harpe’s observation that the East German reader prefers a different type of newspaper and magazine to his West German counterpart, is hardly surprising in the light of Rauch’s views on the big differences in life orientation between East and West. It also ties in with Fröhlich’s opinion that “fresh looks through East German eyes” (p. 182) could bring about new or revised images of the West, of the other but also of the self. This again underlines the role of the media in the constructing of identity.

#### **14. J.D. Froneman – “Mediatransformasie dek die tafel vir ’n nuwe joernalistiek”**

Like Von Harpe’s depiction of the German media scene, Froneman also describes and tries to understand the transformation of the South African media since the transition. He argues that this process can be understood as the effect of three interacting theoretical models of the media that determine news values and preferences.

The developmental model, with its preference for positive news and for nation building as Froneman describes it, has been normative in transforming the SABC from a state-dominated mouth-piece of apartheid into an instrument of nation building. Emphasis on different cultural identities and Christian national values have made way for an Africa-centred multiculturalism (and virtual mono-lingualism). The cultural identities the different stations had in the past, have been effaced. This transformation has estranged many of the Corporation’s listeners and advertisers and caused it financial difficulties. Lack of money means a loss of local programmes of cultural quality and the promotion of cheap superficial American sitcoms. As Froneman remarks, these are two essential (but unintended) effects of transformation.

The democratic-participatory model emphasises the right of access to the media, diversity and decentralisation. The effect of this model is most evident in the opening-up of the airways for community radio stations and the rise of independent broadcasters. Diversity (not only of content, but also of ownership), freedom of expression and needs at grass-roots level are important here. These stations also provide the listener with the (cultural) security he has lost through the transformation of the SABC.

The social responsibility model emphasises professionalism and objectivity and the responsible independence of the media. This has been the guiding idea behind especially the English press, formerly mostly controlled by English mining houses. The Afrikaans press has for decades exclusively promoted Afrikaner interests. The process of transformation, as Froneman expounds it has, generally speaking, led to a greater diversity in ownership, the empowerment of black groups and a greater sensitivity for the interests of black readers. But the challenge for editors is to win over more black readers without estranging their traditionally white (and more conservative) readers.

In cultural reporting some editors are talking about a cultural revolution away from the domination by politics in the past. The new ownership that Froneman outlines is likely going to lead to less attention to “white” affairs and cultural concerns in favour of “black” concerns. But it is also possible that the cultural pages could serve a unifying purpose by bringing together the different languages and cultures of the rainbow people. This could, in his opinion, have an enriching effect on literature and cultural life in general.

Looking at the broad picture, Froneman finds it probable that the future will be determined by the question whether ideology (as provided for by the developmental model) will dominate market principles (as embodied in the social responsibility model), or vice versa. The first scenario could lead to an authoritarian or even Marxist model, which would inhibit reporting and impoverish the intellectual climate. In the second scenario the social responsibility model probably would, in his opinion, acquire more characteristics of the democratic participatory model, which could lead to a maximum of freedom of expression and diversity in which art, literature and culture could flourish.

Comparing the situations in Germany and in South Africa, it is clear that different degrees of authoritarianism were prevalent in the two countries. A striking resemblance, though, is that the media in both countries were mainly controlled by having the “right” people in editorial positions. Whereas the struggle for democracy seems to have been decisively won in Germany, in South Africa the struggle continues and the emergence of a new authoritarianism cannot be ruled out, especially since the policy of affirmative action is again putting the “right” people in leading positions. Nation building carries the germ of totalitarianism within itself. A striking difference is that in the GDR West German TV and radio played an important role in creating an awareness of the different standards of living in the two Germanies, bringing about change, whereas in South Africa the former SABC was strongly inhibited by government control and came close to being a government propaganda machine. Some would say it is again the case today.

The diversification of media ownership and content in both countries underlines the fact that people need media that fit their own interests and identity.

## 15. Conclusions

I am going to write it all down anyway  
(Horn, p. 226).

Looking at this special issue as a whole, the assumption that there would be similarities between the two transitions seems justified. Very similar emotional reactions to the transitions have been indicated. Feelings of estrangement and loss of identity seem to be central to the people's reactions to both situations. Similarly, there still exists a gulf between the different groups in the new South Africa that has to be overcome. It is difficult to say whether South Africans have a comparable common longing for meaning and purpose in life that could bridge this gap.

Whether the orientations to the past are also similar, whether we find the same kind of nostalgia in South Africa than in East Germany, is not very clear. A similar process of repressing and forgetting the past is going on in South Africa. Few people in South Africa seem to long for the apartheid past, but the loss of security, personal history and a sense of predictability and control, is probably just as severe for many Afrikaners (and many whites, too). In any case, different groups probably experience the transition differently. Nostalgia among the black population cannot be ruled out and could be strong among the coloured people. Whether these suppositions really hold would have to be researched.

There seems to be differences in the nature of the transition. In Germany it took place quickly, nearly overnight, whereas in South Africa it was a long drawn out process through a long interregnum full of morbid symptoms. There does not seem to be the same sense of a clear-cut transition in South Africa; it is more of a process. That we lack a name for the transition in South Africa indicates this.

In South Africa the sense of newness and the celebration of the new seems to be stronger, perhaps because the transition has been such a long and painful process. Of course, not everybody is celebrating the new South Africa. This sense of the new, of celebrating the transition as point zero, is probably going to mean that we would have to rewrite literary history, too; that the social and political transition would bring about a literary transition in its wake. It seems as if the literature of the interregnum – marked by the spectacular, protest, war, struggle, violence, bloodshed – is making way for a literature of the transition – more human-like, focusing on the ordinary lives and concerns of ordinary people.

This special issue really raises more questions than it answers. If anything, it underlines the need for more comparative literary, political, media and sociological studies of these two periods of transition, and people's reactions to them. Perhaps, on the most abstract level, what we are witnessing in the two transitions is a clash between a postmodern and a modernist (modernising) *Zeitgeist*, as the exhibition of German stations of life suggests. We should remember, however, that the results of official research are going to be full of lies. As Peter Horn stressed, the suppressed truth of the past would only resurface in art and literature.

Horn's poem, "The song of the Diederik Cuckoo" (p. 227), ends with a complex image that sums up our conflicting experiences of transition. Rising from pain and horror, the song of the cuckoo combines feelings of sweetness and light, hope, overcoming the "bitter root" of murder. Light and beauty, as symbolised by the cuckoo's song and the wing of a butterfly, form essential parts of the self-image with which the poems ends: "my face in the mirror of marble". This is a highly ambiguous phrase. One reading is that the speaker confronts his own death and his own guilt in the shining marble of a tombstone: he is guilty of complicity in the horrors of the past, but also of experiencing (and dreaming of) saving beauty in the midst of death. Another reading is that he sees, in an imaginary mirror, his face turning into stone for the same reasons. The past speaks in his innermost experience of himself.

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