

## Introduction

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## Introduction



In his article about “Writing As a Cultural Weapon,” Mafika Gwala attempts to describe the task black South African writers faced under apartheid. He writes:

In a society where politics determine most aspects of our social consciousness through separate toilets, segregated transport, pass and curfew laws, the Immorality Act, unequal education – in short unequal rights based on skin colour – our speech and written language forms cannot but be highly politicized.

We cannot write outside our experience in a society where social deprivation is taken for granted. Though “all literature is propaganda but not all propaganda is literature,” we find ourselves having to speak about our experience if we have to change it. (47)

Such an analysis is representative of the challenges faced by writers in the postcolonial world, where the pressure of the political context is particularly strong. Committed writers abound in former British colonies, and the relationships between literature and politics have raised many complex issues in the postcolonial world. Among the typically postcolonial aspects of commitment, the debate over languages raised by Ngũgĩ’s choice to reject English comes to mind, but also the ideological implications of writing or rewriting history, evident in Salman Rushdie’s celebrated novels, not to mention the involvement of writers in the forging of new national identities, or, writers such as Rudy Wiebe in defending the cultures of specific local communities in the Canadian Prairies.

But this diversity immediately raises the question of context: is literature committed to a local culture or context, or does it point to universal values? How can one articulate local or specific commitment with generic commitment? The diverse forms of commitment (to a language, to a nation, to a people, to history *etc.*) also raise the question of the definition of commitment. Does commitment necessarily imply a form of commitment to non-literary purposes? Benoît Denis, in a study of French “literature engagée,” in which commitment is “understood simply as a form of political involvement” (Reynier and Ganteau 10), explains that commitment seems to mean inscribing literature within a process which goes beyond it, and using it for purposes other than itself (Denis 20). From this point of view, commitment seems to be the opposite of autonomy.

Reynier and Ganteau, however, argue that neither commitment nor autonomy can be envisaged independently from each other, but rather, that “they might be seen as two poles separated by a spectrum of possibilities, of collaborations and associations” (13). The various factors determining how a literary work can be situated between these two poles are, in particular, the author, the local context and the literary genre to which this work can be assigned. Often, a “committed” writer does not limit himself or herself to a single genre and chooses to multiply the forms of writing. Such “polygraphy” (Denis 78) enables the writer to vary his or her interventions, modulating them according to the resources offered by the various media s/he uses. These genres constitute the various facets of her or his literary production, and provide different ways of exploring the same issue(s) by approaching them from different, complementary perspectives (Denis 78). Salman Rushdie is a case in point as an example of how polygraphy is used as a way of committing literature to a diversity of causes: he commits literature to both history

and literature itself in his novels, to cultural identities in his essays, and to politics and to his own identity in his fictional autobiography *Joseph Anton*.

In spite of the tendency to write different types of committed texts, many writers favour one specific literary genre, and, most of the time, it is the novel. The main reason might be that the realist novel is both mimetic and didactic (Suleiman 19), even if what Suleiman calls the “ideological novel” is always characterised by a tension between two contradictory tendencies: the simplifying and schematizing tendency of ideology and the complexifying and pluralising tendency of novel writing (Suleiman 241), which illustrates another of the oscillations between autonomy and commitment.

That is not to say, however, that other genres do not lend themselves to committed acts of writing. The vibrant South African stage, for instance, has clearly demonstrated this, whether at the time of the apartheid regime to contest its foundations, or after the end of apartheid, as if to answer the call of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) for writers to contribute to healing the wounds inherited from the past (*Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa Report*, Vol. 1 112-3). The audience’s “willing suspension of disbelief” (Coleridge n. p.) need not even always be interrupted by direct references to a specific context outside of, or beyond the stage, although this type of Brechtian theatre has been favoured by many playwrights, in the wake of the works of Zakes Mda who advocates a “theatre by the people” in addition (50). The very concepts of recognition and pathos that Aristotle identified in theatre may allow for a form of catharsis. More generally the type of mimesis found in theatre may allow playwrights to explore alternative plots and scenarios which may, in turn, help to tackle political issues on stage.

The South African literary scene provides similar examples which might easily contradict the assumption that poetry stands as a more aloof, ethereal genre of writing, with poets necessarily taking some distance from social or political concerns: Mafika Gwala, with whom we opened this introduction, is one of those figures whose lines could be easily committed to memory and passed on to a vast number of people, even if, because of high levels of illiteracy and the limited availability of printed material, like the audience in the theatres they could not always read such texts. It is thus no wonder, for instance, as recently shown by Raphael d’Abdon and Lorenzo Mari in their comparative study of the work of contemporary poets with that of earlier collections like *Black Mamba Rising*, that “protest poetry” should have been revived following the events at Marikana. Even the poetic pen can be mightier than the sword, or the automatic rifle.

But commitment cannot be fully understood without looking at its opposite, autonomy, at the other “pole” of the “spectrum” identified by Reynier and Ganteau, and the various ways in which postcolonial writers have refused certain forms of commitment also deserves consideration. J. M. Coetzee’s famous refusal to abide by “the discourse of history,” (Coetzee 3) as well as how his preferred allegiance to the discourse of the novel paradoxically helps to define the issues concerning the idea of commitment in apartheid South Africa, may still be useful today as a prism through which politically-committed texts in the new dispensation can be examined. Some writers’ theoretical stands might be read in the light of, and in contrast to their literary production, bearing in mind Wole Soyinka’s warning: “A tiger does not proclaim his *tigrityde*, he pounces” (qtd. in Jahn 265-6).

The various articles collected in this issue of *Commonwealth, Essays and Studies*, fruit of the annual SAES conference held in Toulon in June 2015, and further enhanced by other contributions covering a broad spectrum of literary genres as well as aesthetic and ethical forms of commitment, reveal its multifaceted dimension.

The first contributions by Nigel Foxcroft and Manon-Lili Morand focus respectively on *Foe* by J. M. Coetzee and on Janet Frame's novels, in particular her posthumous *Towards Another Summer*. Both highlight the two novelists' commitment to language and to fiction. Foxcroft's reading of Coetzee's novel puts the emphasis on other forms of expression which find their way – and a paradoxical voice – in Coetzee's and Susan Barton's narrative, as the figure of the Other, embodied by Friday, is given the option *not* to speak. Instead he expresses himself through “music, dance and ritual,” borrowing from forms of expression used by former slaves in Brazil and the West Indies, as well as from North- and West-African traditions. It is thus Friday who has the last word, or last sound, at the end of the novel, showing how Coetzee's paradoxical non-committal stance actually and effectively helps to make other, non-verbal forms of communication be heard. In a rather similar vein, Morand demonstrates that Frame's refusal to serve a national or political cause and instead commit herself to the world of writing, enabled her and her characters to explore both the world of language and an inner world which ultimately opens onto a boundlessness and freedom that might be more welcoming to the outcasts, and to the creative, poetic imagination.

Julie Beluau's contribution explores an altogether different genre, that of anthologies, as she compares and contrasts the implicit, and at times more explicit, positions which can be read into the selection and choices of Arvind Krishna Mehrotra in his *Oxford India Anthology of Twelve Modern Indian Poets* (1992), Salman Rushdie and Elizabeth West's *Vintage Book of Indian Writing, 1947-1997* (1997), and Amit Chaudhuri's *Picador Book of Modern Indian Literature* (2001). Spanning over a decade, her essay also makes use of previous works to put those anthologies into greater perspective, as she takes into account the commitment of the anthologists, who are also authors in their own right, in and to their own work of fiction. Taking up the issue of a writer's commitment to writing and to texts as such, Beluau shows that it can ultimately take on a diversity of forms and shapes, and that the genre of the anthology, which itself may include quite a few genres and modes of writing, would certainly not be placed at the less committed pole of Reynier and Ganteau's spectrum.

The singular context of India, with its literatures in English and in various vernaculars, no doubt accounts for the high stakes in putting together an anthology that would, even partially, represent the nation's literary scene. Even though Ben Okri has for his part always been reluctant to define himself as an African writer, such issues certainly play a role in the reception of his writing. As Kathie Birat rightly points out, he has never eschewed political issues, and has spoken out when necessary, but welcomes the advent, for writers of his generation, of what he sees as “a literature on its own, literature as literature” (Okri n. p.). Birat's study focuses more especially on two of his collections of poems, *An African Elegy* (1992) and *Wild* (2012), and her close reading of several poems sheds a new, “oblique,” and illuminating light on Okri's aesthetic distance as well as on the links this form of artistic commitment creates between Okri's poetic work and more human, worldly concerns, in a way not so dissimilar from that of W. B. Yeats.

We move on to Ireland with Fiona McCann's analysis of prison writing by Irish Republican women whose production is more obviously "situated," in Sartrian parlance, than Okri's poems are. Most, though not all, of the texts McCann scrutinises are poems, and she takes pains to give them the aesthetic and stylistic consideration they deserve as poetic works. In this respect, given the little attention such writing has yet received, hers can indeed be said to be an aesthetically and politically committed analysis, and one that opens new paths for further research.

The issues of gender and women also feature in David Bousquet's essay which focuses on two reggae musicians and singers, Clinton Fearon and Protoje. Both revive a form of "conscious" reggae that goes back to the principles of Rastafarianism, and opposes the "slackness" of most other productions in current Jamaican popular music. Whereas the latter tend to revel in sexual explicitness, Clinton Fearon's and Protoje's performances are akin to rituals that emphasise the way reggae bonds singer and audience together in search of a better ethos – even though commercial considerations can never be fully ignored.

Rituals are also conjured up in the last two essays of this collection, Pascal Zinck's study of Sunjeev Sahota's *Ours Are the Streets* (2011), and Francesca Mussi's analysis of two South African plays that engage with the TRC and the legacy of the South African past – albeit in quite opposing ways. Sahota's description of how the inculcation of a radical vision of Islam transforms a jobless youth into a fanatic young man planning terrorist attacks when he comes back to England certainly cuts very close to the bone. Besides analysing how the novel details the process through which distorted readings of texts and situations can lead to somebody's commitment to a violent cause, Zinck underlines how the monologic narrative mode chosen by the novelist, that of a first-person confession in the form of a diary, should also alert the readers as to their own role in decoding the version of the truth offered by the narrator, and possible faults in his motivation and reasoning. To conclude on a more positive note, Mussi's essay suggests that the theatre may offer instead a possibility for dialogic interactions between the characters on stage, as well as between the play and its context, and the audience watching the performance. Within this enclosed, somewhat protected space, the ritual of reconciliation set up by the TRC may both be questioned and put to the test, and, possibly, re-enacted, making possible what Yvette Hutchison calls a "social dialogue" (53). Marcia Blumberg and Dennis Walder, in turn, consider this dialogue as the condition of possibility for the form of commitment or "intervention" allowed in drama: "this theatre may be said to intervene in the sense that it raises questions, refuses solutions, and insists on spectatorial confrontation with a disturbing range of fictional and historical events from the past and present" (Blumberg and Walder 13).

As is the case in many, if not all, of the essays in this issue, this statement ultimately points to the role the readers or the audience have to play to determine the degree, mode and nature of commitment of any writing and decode them adequately. In Gérard Genette's words, "any written text may or may not be literary, depending on whether it is received (rather) as a spectacle or (rather) as a message."<sup>1</sup> It may in the end be up to the readers to interpret literature as "committed," and not only depend on the

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1. "Tout texte écrit a le potentiel d'être ou n'être pas littéraire, selon qu'il est reçu (plutôt) comme spectacle ou (plutôt) comme message" (Genette 146, our translation).

writers' decision to "commit" their books. It may be in this spirit that readers are invited in turn to read the essays in this issue.

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