

## BOOK REVIEWS

Graham Pechey, *In a Province: Studies in the Writing of South Africa*. Liverpool University Press, 2022, 256 pp.

Most readers in the postcolonial field will know of Graham Pechey from his introduction to Njabulo Ndebele's *South African Literature and Culture: Rediscovery of the Ordinary* (1994), but Pechey's own writing on South African literature began a decade earlier with a pathbreaking 1983 essay on Olive Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm*. Shedding the colonial habits of South African textual criticism, it focused on the discontinuities of an iconic colonial text as a way of fathoming its historical resonance and relevance. I remember reading it at the time and finding it inspiring because, apart from its sheer energy and verve, it modeled a formal criticism that reversed the standard polarities between literature and history, finding in the former an authority that both disrupted and revealed the inner dynamics of the latter. Both Pechey's introduction to the Ndebele volume and his essay on Schreiner are included in this highly valuable collection of his writings on South Africa. Dense and demanding as well as engaging, it is a volume filled with insights and perspectives that will repay the kind of attention that clearly went into them.

Pechey, who died in 2016, was something of an anomaly. He never completed his doctorate, yet read both broadly and deeply, liable to insert himself into the intricacies of Dante as much as he does into a miniaturist story of Schreiner's, where he finds surprisingly large-scale resonances. Himself a colonial product who studied at the University of Natal, Pechey proceeded by way of liberalism to the radical Congress of Democrats, followed by a move to the United Kingdom in 1965. By the mid-1990s, as his daughter Laura Pechey informs us, he had found faith and was confirmed as an Anglican. Were these his own discontinuities, or were there deeper currents underlying them? The volume goes some way to answering the question through his recurrent themes and persistent view that literature has the capacity to deliver the numinous in the everyday, a representational excess that is at one and the same time radical, elusive, and potentially redemptive in both social and (in the broadest sense) spiritual modalities.

The book is divided into three parts: "South African Literature in Transition (1990–1998)," "South African Literature Before and After Apartheid," and "The Languages of South African Poetry." Each section has its own constituent essays, and through them all one can see Pechey's abiding preoccupations. At the core of them is something he finds in the work of Ndebele: "nothing less than the (re) composition of the whole social text of South Africa" (142). That idea of the "whole social text" is key because for Pechey South Africa itself is a kind of writing, a living and historicized discourse in response to which literature has an

intrinsic yet differential relationship. Literature is itself a rewriting of the social text with implications for other relations: between the modern, the postmodern and the postcolonial; the center and the periphery; the scripted and the improvisational; the high and the low; the contained and the surplus; the placed and the displaced. South African writing, in this account, is hugely important not only in its own setting but also in its implications for the colonial histories from which it derives and the dispersed postcolonial condition it illuminates; it becomes (to use another of Pechey's phrases) "the context for its context" (159). Pechey's literary touchstones are Schreiner, Ndebele, and Coetzee, and for theory he draws preeminently on Bakhtin (on whom he wrote a book) for manifestations of carnival, the grotesque, and the dialogic—the dialectic that registers difference but postpones resolution.

All this produces insights on virtually every page, too numerous to mention in a short review, but there are many moments that resonate: for instance, that both *The Story of an African Farm* and Sol T. Plaatje's *Mhudi* present themselves as "radiant fissures in the continuous text of our history, priceless resources in our own 'moment of danger'" (45). Or the way that in its fictional mode, autobiography is "an act of renunciation—a refusal of the privilege of epic omniscience" (160). In Ndebele Pechey finds a set of localized and indigenous cultural resources that will forever escape the logics of orthodoxy and containment. In Coetzee and a lineage from which he derives, there is a sense of Africa as neither infernal nor Edenic but rather (the reference is to Dante) purgatorial, a testing ground that also offers the prospect of grace. There will be objections: Must Africa always be a psychic proving ground, even for the postcolonizing white African? Elsewhere, Pechey is remarkably tolerant in glossing over the fact that Roy Campbell, whose aesthetics he can dissect to the point of an almost parodic close reading, was also a supporter of the fascist Franco. But nonetheless, this is a volume to read with great reward, a fitting tribute to one of South Africa's most original, idiosyncratic, and provocative critical minds.

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Rochona Majumdar, *Art Cinema and India's Forgotten Futures: Film and History in the Postcolony*. Columbia University Press, 2021, 320 pp.

Politically, art cinema is often seen as a failed project. For its fierce opposition to escapist entertainment, for its sophisticated formal experimentation, and for the cerebral quality of its content, art cinema has been long regarded as a domain reserved to a small elite, quixotic in its aspirations to educate the masses but inconsequential in its political outreach. Majumdar's book offers a long-overdue reevaluation of this view by undertaking a radical shift in the