THE LANGUAGE THAT DISCONNECTS

By Ioan Davies

JUNCTURES

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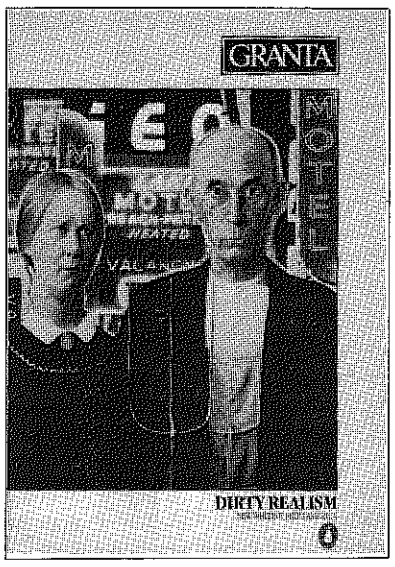

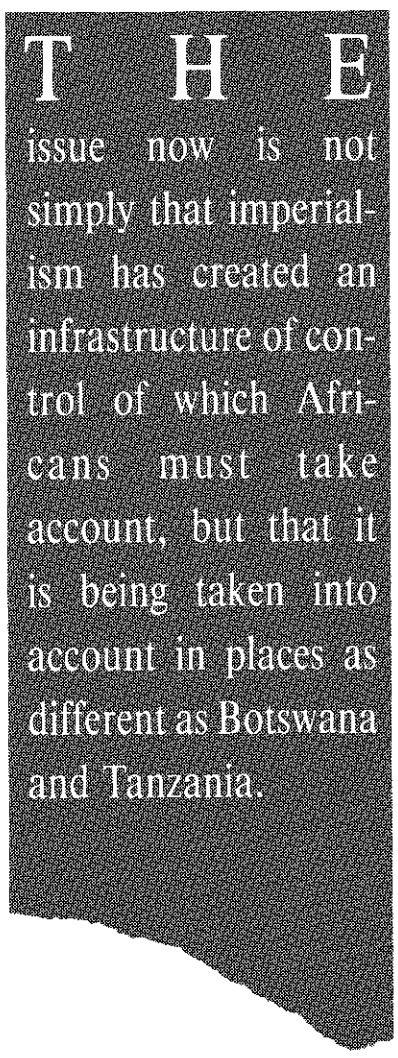

Now that English is no longer the preserve of one country but is in a sense the *lingua franca* of the world, it is entirely appropriate that the British should produce a magazine dedicated to writing in English everywhere, including writing in translation. It is also appropriate that out of South Africa should come a journal which looks at third world (largely African) media, writing and performance and which displays an anguish that the *lingua franca* only connects slightly with the vast number of people in Africa. At $9.95 per copy it is unlikely that *Granta* reaches more than the professoriat and the middle-class intelligentsia. *Granta* is the creative writing parallel to the *New York Review of Books* syndrome and, now that it has "established" itself after being an undergraduate magazine from Cambridge for as long as any of us can remember, one suspects that its contents are dictated not by the editors but by the literary agents who peddle the wares of the various authors. It has become the centre for those who write in the margins of imperialism — Milan Kundera, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Josef Skvorecky, Salman Rushdie, John Berger, Edward Said, Mario Vargas Llosa, Reinaldo Arenas, Michael Ignatieff — preprinting or reprinting pieces which are available elsewhere, either in the authors' own collections or in other journals or magazines.

It is worth contrasting *Granta* with *New Writing* which Penguin also published, but in the 1930s and 1940s, under the editorship of John Lehmann. *New Writing* also had an international spectrum — in its pages appeared Rilke, Kafka, Brecht, Lorca, Pound, Koestler, T.S. Eliot — but it also had a focus on encouraging young British authors, had a sense of movement (as something which grew out of the Spanish Civil War was bound to have) and, because of its existence throughout the Second World War, it necessarily became a vehicle for keeping in touch with those who were dispersed.

In contrast, *Granta* represents something like an Amnesty International view of literature but also a magazine that is a sucker for old Nobel Prize winners or with its eye firmly trained on the next Prize, in spite of the occasional issue which thematically tries to collect the "Best" of this or that form of British or American writing. In this way it carefully avoids any of the schools of literary or cultural criticism or any of the committed work which is related to these schools. It is also totally devoid of poetry or drama, sexual or peace analysis, but very strong on photography and action journalism. It is therefore in many ways a direct successor of the "God that Failed" version of anti-Marxism that emerged after the Second World War, and plays on European "civilization" (celebrated in its strange way by Milan Kundera's bitter but nostalgic "A Kidnapped West or A Culture Bows Out" —*Granta 11*) or the cultural liberalism of the fading bourgeoisie of Paris, London, Lima, Santiago, Cape Town, New York. That the language from which all of this derives has different connections is studiously avoided. The connections made in *Granta* are only too evident in the *Globe and Mail*, the *New York Times*, the *Manchester Guardian*, *The Austrialian*. *Granta* is the bourgeois intelligentsia's *Reader's Digest*.

That other connections are possible and necessary can be demonstrated by examining *Critical Arts*, which comes from a society where liberal culture really is under seige. It comes out of the Critical Arts study group at the Universities of Rhodes and Witwatersrand and, unlike *Granta*, it is not glossy. It is printed off a typewriter with some photographs and graphics. The quality of the individual issues is erratic (but *Critical Arts* does not try to produce the "Best" of anything: it is about culture in motion and about culture in the third world where everything is self-consciously in flux). *Critical Arts* is not celebratory, like *Granta*, but tries to act "as a cue for creating alternative dimensions to the stereotyped view of the media dictated by ideology". Its issues deal with cinema, visual anthropology, performance, English studies in transition, popular culture and performance, the press and broadcasting. If it is more "academic" than *Granta* it is an academism which is concerned with pedagogy and political action. Consequently it draws on those traditions that *Granta* ignores: Raymond Williams, the Birmingham School, structural anthropology, semiotics, American conflict theory, symbolic interaction, *Screen*. *Critical Arts*' nervousness about what stance would be appropriate to coming to terms with culture in Africa seems to be perfectly in tune with anyone's nervousness with coming to terms with Africa. As Wole Soyinka has remarked, the black nationalism and militarism of Nigeria is the twin brother of South Africa's apartheid, with the corollory that the task of creating a critical black consciousness in South Africa requires more than simply having a black South African nationalism. The role of the media — and hence media literacy — in Africa has to be thought through. Paradoxically, South Africa, living through the hiatus of white domination and the ultimate revolution, may be just the place for that thinking to take place. Not many people are doing that thinking and *Critical Arts* represents most of it. The issue now is not simply that imperialism has created an infrastructure of control of which Africans must take account, but that it is being taken into account in places as different as Botswana and Tanzania, and that that accounting is necessarily based on the languages of the new media as well as the languages of other practices and senses of connection. In *Critical Arts*, vol.3, no.1 ("Popular Culture and Performance in Africa"), there are attempts to come to terms with mime, proverbs, dance, literature in English, colonial history, radio drama, primarily in order to debate what is "popular", what is "folk" and what is "elite" at the present stage of African cultural development. How does one form translate into the other?

Two case studies give an indication of the problem. Take proverbs and dramatic performance (and it is comforting to read a piece on the subject which does *not* refer to Brecht). The discourse surrounding proverbs varies from society to society:

> In some societies, the nearest term for proverb denotes not only the better known, short, quotable expression, but also longer forms. Among the Zande and Jabo, the term for proverb refers also to parables and short animal tales. In Hebrew, the term "mashal" refers to both proverb and parable. Among the Fulani, the term "mallol", the nearest to the proverb, refers to allusion in general. Similarly, among the Akan, "ebe" does not only refer to the short, crisp, quotable forms, but also to allusive anecdotes, or parables that may be used to demonstrate a point in discourse. In these longer forms, there is a greater opportunity and more room for the creation of innovative discourse, as in other forms of folklore.

The dramatic potentialities of proverb discourse are wider in some societies, more restricted in others. In all cases there is a prior discourse which informs the use of proverb in drama or dance which in turn structures the subsequent discourse. Every discourse has its context: before we appreciate the possibilities of innovation we have to learn the rules of a given discourse.

The same point is made, in a somewhat different way, in a discussion of "'Poppie Nongena' in New York". The play, which has also been seen in Toronto, Chicago, London and Edinburgh was first produced in Afrikaans at The Market in Johannesburg, based on the novel *The Long Journey of Poppie Nongena* by Elsie Jourbert. In its translation to Europe and North America, with an all-South African black and white exiled cast, it added songs and accompanying music, which made it more political than it had been in South Africa. The cast and producer-director are in permanent exile. What now exists, because of its various translations, is a work which is not only dramatically effective but politically powerful anywhere. Why not in South Africa? (The production I saw in Toronto had a large number of South Africans, mainly black, in the audience.) A proverb, a metaphor can be sharpened by cross-cultural influence to become a vehicle of political radicalism. "Poppie Nongena" is not performed in South Africa now because Piet Botha's regime knows its radical potential. But its time will come.

If *Granta* is content to rest on the laurels of other people's guilt complexes, *Critical Arts* is concerned with generating critical, political Art. Thus, *Granta* provides a rather biased connection of existing art; *Critical Arts* the pattern of that which is to come.

Ioan Davies