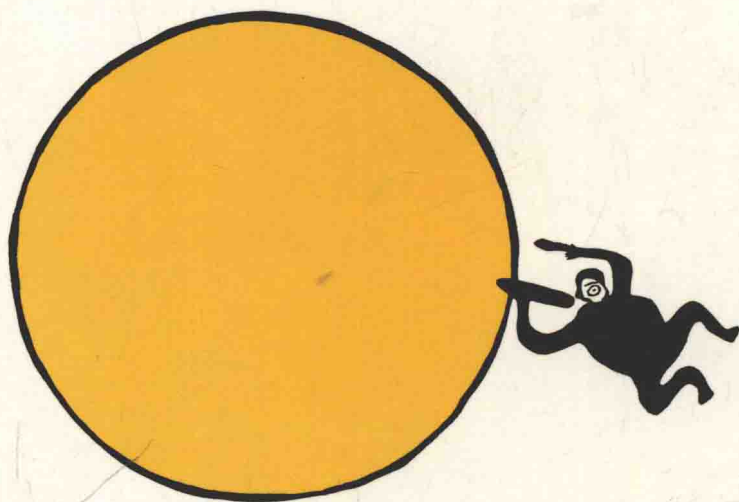


**Cross / Cultures 9**

# **Imagination and the Creative Impulse in the New Literatures in English**



**Edited by M.-T. Bindella and G.V. Davis**



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M.-T. Bindella and G.V. Davis

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# **Imagination and the Creative Impulse in the New Literatures in English**

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English

9

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**For Anna Rutherford**

# Contents

<i>Introduction</i> .....	1
George P. KAHARI	
New Literatures in Zimbabwe. A Key-Note Address .....	13
Gerhard STILZ	
Any Business of Ours? Some German Reflections on the Purposes and Priorities of Studying the New Literatures in English .....	25
Doireann MACDERMOTT	
What Comes After Post? Some Considerations of the Future of Post-Colonial Literature with special reference to India .....	33
Klaus H. BÖRNER	
Fact in Fiction: The Indian Army in the Novels of Manohar Malgonkar .....	41
Silvia ALBERTAZZI	
Passages: the "Indian Connection," from Sara Jeannette Duncan to Rohinton Mistry .....	57
Luigi SAMPIETRO	
Beating a four-stress line: Derek Walcott's "The Schooner <i>Flight</i> " .....	67
Gerald MOORE	
Reversing the Middle Passage: Modern Encounters between Africa and the Islands .....	79
Agostino LOMBARDO	
Wole Soyinka: the Artist and his Tradition .....	93
Peter O. STUMMER	
Achebe's Anthills: An Essay in Nigerian Intertextuality .....	99
Elmar LEHMANN	
Colonial to Post-Colonial South African-Style. The Plays of H.I.E. Dhlomo .....	109
André VIOLA	
Imitation or Creation? Uncanny Lacanisms in J.M. Coetzee or Magda's "Barbarous Frontier" .....	123

Erhard RECKWITZ	
Breyten Breytenbach's <i>Memory of Snow and of Dust</i>	
A Postmodern Story of Identiti(es) .....	137
Geoffrey V. DAVIS	
"Born out of flames":	
Matsemela Manaka's theatre for social reconstruction .....	149
Giovanni BONANNO	
<i>Barometer Rising</i>	
and the Birth of Post-colonial Canadian Consciousness .....	165
Alfredo RIZZARDI	
The Canadian identity of Al Purdy's poetry .....	173
Sergio PEROSA	
Michael Ondaatje's <i>In the Skin of a Lion</i> and the Building of Cities .....	181
Wolfgang KLOOSS	
(De-)constructing the 'Canadianness' of prairie literature,	
or writing from the 'periphery': Western Canadian literature	
in historical perspective .....	191
Norbert H. PLATZ	
Janet Frame's Novels and The Disconcert in the Reader's Mind .....	203
Giovanna COVI	
Keri Hulme's <i>The Bone People</i> : a Critique of Gender .....	219
Gordon COLLIER	
Getters and Spenders: Conserving and Expending Modes of	
Expression in Contemporary Poetry, with particular reference	
to New Zealand .....	233
Peter H. MARSDEN	
Imitators and innovators: formal experimentation in Australian	
and New Zealand verse .....	247
Dieter RIEMENSCHNEIDER	
Intercultural Exchange between Ethnic Minority and English	
Language Majority: The Writing of Jack Davis and Witi Ihimaera .....	271
Bernard HICKEY	
Breakthrough: White and Whitlam in the early 1970's .....	281
Contributors .....	291



# Introduction

To those invited to participate in the symposium whose proceedings are presented here, Trento must have seemed a rather odd venue for the first Italo-German meeting of scholars working in the field of the new literatures in English. And yet the choice was by no means inappropriate. Situated in the valley of the Adige astride one of the main routes between northern Europe and the Mediterranean South, Trento has for centuries been a port of call for German artists, writers and scholars. Dürer painted watercolours of the city and Goethe looked into the Church of Santa Maria Maggiore in 1796 to view a painting exhibited there of the event for which the city is perhaps best known, the Council of Trent. As Goethe discovered when hereabouts his German gave out on him and the Italian he knew only from study blossomed forth as the living language of everyday use, Trento lies at an intersection of languages, cultures and literatures, in some measure exemplifying in its own history and contemporary experience the kind of cross-cultural concerns with which readers of the new literatures are familiar.

In a very ancient city a new university has been created where a whole range of contacts with German universities has been brought to fruition. One manifestation of this has been that the English Department initiated what has proved a rewarding connection with Aachen: Maria-Teresa Bindella was able to attend the XIth conference on Commonwealth Literatures and Language Studies in German-speaking countries which took place in Aachen in 1988, while Geoffrey Davis was able to take up a short-term appointment at the University of Trento. Such contacts, we felt, might usefully be consolidated if, together, we were able to invite colleagues from other universities in our two countries to join us in a common venture. Such a meeting would serve to improve the flow of information between our two countries for, despite the impetus given to the cultivation of such exchanges by events such as EACLALS conferences – most recently in Lecce – we still know relatively little of each other's activities and the information we receive about them is at best sporadic. On the German side one was perhaps aware that Commonwealth literary studies had been pioneered in Venice as long ago as the early 1960s but what did we know, for instance, of Australian studies at Bologna and Torino or of the multifarious activities of Italian Canadianists? And how many of our Italian colleagues had been apprised of the recent founding in Germany of an Association for the Study of the New Literatures in English or of the establishment at Essen of a Centre of Southern African Studies?

The Trento symposium was – to our knowledge – the first occasion on which scholars working in the field of the post-colonial literatures in English in Italy and Germany came together as a group to exchange their ideas, the participants coming from nine German and ten Italian universities. As this volume documents, they were also joined by

colleagues from universities in France and Spain.

It was held at an auspicious time in the short history of our subject. The growing number of university courses, the wealth of publications and the plethora of conferences all testify to the fact that we no longer occupy the barren wastes on the fringes of English studies but now find ourselves in the midst of a burgeoning field. Our activities are gaining more widespread recognition; greater possibilities of developing our research seem to be opening up. We owe this partly to the vital literary creativity and thus to the growing stature of the writers with whom we deal as well as to the increasingly respectful reception accorded their work. We owe it perhaps also to our own efforts in revising the canon of English literature. As Elmar Lehmann put it at a recent conference in Mannheim, "we are in the business of subversion, are we not?" The writers whose works we study are moving centre-stage; the periphery is no longer quite as marginalized as it once seemed. Indeed anyone reviewing the list of recent literary prize-winners in Britain might well be forgiven for concluding that centre and periphery are in process of changing places.

The critics – and among them we may, of course, number our present contributors – are beginning in earnest to develop a theory of what we are about. The assumptions on which the study of English has long been based are being called more effectively into question. The privileging of the centre over the periphery is being more assiduously undermined.

Comparative studies of the literatures of the post-colonial world are emerging, evolved to cope with difference in equal, non-hegemonic terms, and more apposite to the multicultural societies we see around us today.

Such is the context within which the symposium was convened. Its theme "Imagination and the creative impulse in the new literatures in English," vague as it may seem, was purposely broadly defined to accommodate differing approaches to literature and a heterogeneous selection of topics. The appearance in it of the term "the new literatures" represents the usual compromise solution to the problem of naming our discipline; in Italy the preferred description is "*letterature dei paesi di lingua inglese*."

It was the convenors' wish that papers should address the manner in which writers are giving literary expression to the complexity of contemporary post-colonial and multicultural societies and direct our attention to questions of formal experimentation, linguistic innovation, socio-political commitment, textual theory and cross-culturality.

The papers collected in this volume display a very comprehensive response to this invitation. The contributions deal with writers from all the major regions which form part of our field of research, range over the main literary genres and employ a variety of critical methods. Some of them present the works of major writers such as Achebe, Soyinka and Walcott; others afford us the opportunity to discuss the work of writers about whom we normally tend to hear considerably less; MacLennan, Mistry, Jack Davis, Witi Ihimaera, Malgonkar and Dhlomo. Overall the papers offer fascinating

insight into how imagination and creativity have been understood by writers and critics alike.

The challenging keynote address on “New Literatures in Zimbabwe” by George Kahari (Harare) reveals very clearly how the development of Zimbabwean literature exemplifies that of so many of the new literatures. The literature of Zimbabwe is – to state the obvious – new: Kahari dates the first adventure stories written by English settlers to the turn of the century, the beginnings of written Shona and Ndebele literature to 1956, the first non-fictional works in English by black Zimbabweans to the 1950s and the first creative writing to the 1970s. It spans both the colonial and the post-colonial phases of Zimbabwean history and comprises writing in the vernacular languages (Shona and Ndebele) and in the adopted language of the white settlers (English). During the colonial period white cultural hegemony was maintained through the institution of the Southern Rhodesian Literature Bureau which not only sponsored, but also contrived to censor the new literature, and through the writings of white authors. Black literature thus necessarily constituted a challenge to colonial authority whether, like the early writing, from inside the country or, like later work conceived as a contribution to the liberation struggle, from exile. After independence literature in Zimbabwe continues to be written in the vernacular languages and in English, hitherto alien forms such as the novel having emerged as important factors in the development of a Zimbabwean national identity.

Many of the important themes which characterize the new literatures are expressed or implied here, and are taken up by other contributors: the developing relationship between the literature of a dependent territory and that of the mother country; the challenge posed to traditional authority (political, critical) by the transition from colonial to post-colonial; the role of literature in the liberation struggle; the expression of national identity in the literatures of new societies; modes of literary practice in multicultural societies; the relationship of the new literatures in English to that of the former metropolitan centre as well as to literatures in the vernacular languages; and the complex intertextuality of many texts produced in such societies.

Not the least discussed of the problems attendant upon the study of the new literatures in English is the fundamental question of what the discipline should be known as. No term comprehensive or precise enough to embrace both academic history and political reality satisfactorily has yet been found and even the currently fashionable “post-colonial” is by no means universally accepted. One writer who has cast doubt on its appropriateness is the Indian novelist Nayantara Sahgal. It is her provocative query “When is post-colonial supposed to end?” that provides Doireann MacDermott (Barcelona) with her starting point. For what, she asks, is the relevance of the British occupation and of the concept “post-colonialism” 50 years after independence in a society so ancient that the British presence appears but a short-lived phase? Sahgal’s work may span the colonial and the post-colonial phases of Indian history – but are not her real concerns the

adaptation of a caste system to democracy and of an age-old Hindu religious inheritance to modern industrial society? What significance, MacDermott inquires, does the concept “post-colonial” hold for V.S.Naipaul’s interviewees in *India: A Million Mutinees now*, absorbed as they necessarily are by more basic questions of nationalism, caste and survival? And how can we ever become fully aware of the real problems of Indian society through the small body of Indian English literature, which some critics do not hesitate to dismiss as unrepresentative, limited as we are by a lack of competence in Indian languages and an absence of translations?

An important aspect of the transition from the colonial to the post-colonial is, of course, the British imperial legacy – a theme whose treatment in the new literatures may be expected to differ quite radically from that found in English literature. Writers from communities which were the subjects, if not the victims, of imperial rule not unnaturally tend to hold strong – usually negative – views on the colonial phase of their country’s history. And yet one should not reduce the ideological complexity of this issue. From Indo-Anglian writing, Klaus Börner (Duisburg) presents us with the figure of the “historian-novelist” Manohar Malgonkar, whose work is largely concerned with the Indian Army. Börner reminds us that the British Empire was first and foremost a vast military enterprise established and maintained by an army staffed by an élite officer corps with its own values and codes, and that in India its traditions were largely retained post-independence, even after the army had become a career for the middle classes rather than, as traditionally, for an upper-class élite. He shows how in the work of one who was not himself in favour of the Raj, the mystique of fundamentally conservative military values was nevertheless kept alive and military professionalism romanticised, so much so that in addressing the conflict between the “honourable violence” of the soldier and Gandhian non-violence, Malgonkar did not hesitate to discredit the latter.

It is the transition from the colonial to the post-colonial which Elmar Lehmann (Essen) contends, lends the plays of one of the more important figures in the earlier history of black South African literature in English, H.I.E.Dhlomo, heightened significance in these dying days of the apartheid system. Dhlomo’s early history plays, he suggests, dramatise the impact of Christianity on Xhosa society, holding out hope of the dawning of an enlightened new era defined in Christian terms, while those written later seek to transcend the limitations of oppression by whites to evoke the future freedom of black South Africa.

A more recent example of how, in South Africa, young black writers are seeking to place their literary creativity at the service of their people in the struggle for liberation is provided in a detailed account of the theatrical career of the dramatist Matsemela Manaka by Geoffrey Davis (Aachen). Davis shows how Manaka’s characteristically exuberant experimentation and innovation have led him to evolve a “theatre for social reconstruction” using new forms of theatrical performance involving all the arts, committed both to reasserting African cultural identity and renewing African tradition

in a contemporary context.

From the European perspective at least, the new literatures in English deal with “new” countries where new immigrant populations have settled and new national identities have come into existence. The new literatures thus reflect *par excellence* the historical processes by which such societies have been created and the development of consciousness through which new lands have been inscribed in the collective imagination of emerging countries. Such questions of identity have traditionally been given considerable prominence in the literature of Canada – a fact borne out by four of the papers included here.

Sergio Perosa (Venezia) discusses two works by the Sri Lankan-Canadian writer Michael Ondaatje. He describes how, returning from his adopted country (Canada) to the land of his birth (Sri Lanka), Ondaatje seeks in *Running in the Family* to rewrite the island onto the literary map through a reconstruction of the history of his own family, to rediscover it both for himself and for his readers, which, as Perosa notes, he is able to do with all the consummate artistry of an exponent of postmodernist experimentation. If *Running in the Family* constitutes a record of the mental processes of reappropriation, Ondaatje’s later novel *In the Skin of a Lion* represents an attempt to address complex issues of nation building and identity formation in the context of the interrelationship between nature (here: the wilderness) and the building of cities (here: Toronto). Fascinated by Ondaatje’s fictional account of the setting down of a city, quite unlike anything seen before, in the midst of a northern wilderness, Perosa reads *In the Skin of a Lion* not least as a celebration of the essence of a new type of city, whose design, characterised by bridges, viaducts and tunnels, abandons the limitations of the European model to facilitate, rather than hinder, communication and interchange with a new world, the wilderness beyond.

Giovanni Bonanno (Messina) traces the search for and growth of an independent, post-colonial national consciousness to its origin in the relationship between the dependent colonial territory and the mother country. As an example of how these interrelated issues have been given literary expression he selects Hugh MacLennan’s historical novel *Barometer Rising* (1941). Writing during the Second World War, MacLennan uses an incident from the First – the explosion of a munitions ship in Halifax harbour – to depict Canadians’ rapidly polarising views of the link with Britain. The conflict between the major protagonists – Colonel Wain and Neil Macrae – Bonanno sees as exemplifying the relationship between Britain and Canada, while the younger man’s crisis of identity functions as an allegory of Canada’s similar crisis as it seeks to formulate a new, post-colonial national consciousness.

A similar concern with evolving notions of Canadian identity may be detected in the paper by Alfredo Rizzardi (Bologna). He locates the attainment of Canadian independence not in the sphere of politics but in that of literature, and specifically in the coming to prominence in the 1960s of a wave of new writers, all of whom showed a common

consciousness of their identity as Canadians. Rizzardi sees this exemplified in the character of the work they produced, particularly in that of the poet Al Purdy. Surveying his development as a poet in the light of his eventful biography, Rizzardi suggests that Purdy's importance – as well as the source of his influence on a later generation of poets – lies in his recognition of place, his celebration of the land, its prehistory and early inhabitants, and his ecological concerns.

Wolfgang Klooss (Trier) looks at how processes of identity are beginning to affect literary relations within Canada itself through an account of a recent upsurge of creativity in the literature of Western Canada. Focussing on the roles of multiculturalism, regionalism, ethnicity and the postmodern in fostering experimental modes of writing and new definitions of place, he argues that the literature of the West is challenging the traditional hegemony of the East, restructuring the relationship of the periphery to the centre within Canada and ultimately rendering necessary a revision of what has hitherto been regarded as constituting the "Canadianness of Canadian literature."

One of the more intriguing aspects of the new literatures is the way they have come to reflect a complex interplay of cultures. They are, as Dieter Riemenschneider (Frankfurt) suggests, essentially multicultural phenomena. Focussing on the intercultural character of ethnic minority writing, Riemenschneider shows from the short stories of the Australian Aboriginal writer Jack Davis and the New Zealand Maori Witi Ihimaera how both of them are rooted in one culture but have adopted the means of literary expression of another. He reveals how their stories – in the case of Ihimaera even the story-telling technique itself – mediates between the two cultures and thus contributes to intercultural communication.

The literature of Canada also provides an abundance of examples of multiculturalism. Having long since transcended its bicultural, francophone and anglophone origins, Canadian literature now forms a rich mosaic of work by writers from many immigrant communities, much of which reflects not only such writers' concern with their new "Canadian" identities, but also, naturally, with their countries of origin. These complex processes of cultural and literary interaction are illustrated in the account of the "Indian connection" in Canadian literature by Silvia Albertazzi (Bologna). For here we have an appraisal of how writers have sought to formulate their experience of India – by a Canadian (Sara Jeannette Duncan), by two Indians who have immigrated to Canada (Bharati Mukherjee and Rohinton Mistry), by a writer born in Australia who now lives in Canada (Janette Turner Hospital) and by a Sri Lankan-Canadian (Michael Ondaatje). Albertazzi analyses Duncan's outsider's inability to cope with the Indian society of the late nineteenth century, Mukherjee's disillusioned experience of the displacement caused by migration, Hospital's use of India as the context of self-realisation and Ondaatje's confrontation with his cultural origins. She concludes by suggesting that Rohinton Mistry's *Tales from Firozha Baag* is "the finest achievement yet attained by an immigrant writer, not only in the reinvention of a lost reality, but also in the making of

a new one – no less imaginary and, precisely for this reason, no less true.”

Gerald Moore (Trieste) offers another illuminating example of such literary encounters between different parts of the English-speaking world: that between West Africa and the West Indies. Moore's interest lies not in tracing once again the passage of those who crossed from Africa to the Caribbean as slaves, but in tracking down the experience of those who proceeded in the reverse direction. What, he asks, had been the reaction of West Indian poets Paul Nigam and Aimé Césaire on visiting colonial Africa in the 30s? What had been the effect of Ghanaian independence on the West Indian writers of the 50s? What role did Africa play in the divided ancestry of Derek Walcott? “The richest fruit borne to date by these reversals of the Middle Passage” Moore discovers, however, in the work of the Barbadian Edward Kamau Brathwaite – rich, he suggests, because of the way Brathwaite, who studied in Europe before going on to Ghana in the Nkrumah years, succeeds in *The Arrivants* in relating his personal pilgrimage to the historical experience of the people of the West Indies.

The difficulties of interpretation with which texts by post-colonial writers confront the reader often derive not from an unfamiliar political, social or historical background – but from their highly complex intertextuality. Aspects of intertextuality provided several contributors with their theme. Both Luigi Sampietro (Milano) and Agostino Lombardo (Roma) sought to demonstrate the workings of such processes within the relationship of the new literatures to those of Europe. The British system of education introduced in the colonies bequeathed to later post-colonial societies a knowledge of the English language and of English literature. The manner in which those societies then proceeded to assimilate such knowledge into their own cultures, thereby transforming them into something entirely new, is illustrated by the work of the eminent St. Lucian poet Derek Walcott, whose work unites the colonial Western and the Caribbean oral traditions and ranges freely between standard English and dialect – or rather, to use the term coined by Brathwaite, “nation language”. Through an analysis of Walcott's “The Schooner *Flight*” Sampietro lays bare the “haunting sonority” of Walcott's verse, which “seems to erode the standard rhythms of English from within.” In accounting for this effect he reveals Walcott's debt to *Piers Plowman* by the Middle-English poet Langland, a text with which Walcott's British education had made him familiar. Walcott, Sampietro suggests, thus speaks with an “Afro-Saxon accent.”

Confessing himself a non-specialist in the field of the new literatures, Agostino Lombardo recalls the experience of encountering “this unknown literary universe” for the first time. Speaking in terms of “freshness,” “novelty,” “exploration,” and “discovery,” he captures something of the initial enthusiasm many readers will have shared. There is, he suggests, much to discover: the maturity of African literature, the strength of the African tradition, the enrichment of both the English language and English literature when the African tradition is grafted onto them, and the importance of the oral tradition informing the written literature. Lombardo illustrates these processes through a discussion



of the drama of Wole Soyinka. He shows how Soyinka reads European writers such as Euripides and Shakespeare in the light of the African tradition and how, through a blending of the two, he is able himself to achieve universality of meaning.

If English literature has played a role of paramount importance in the formation of the new literatures, this is not to say that there have not also been other influences at work. The contribution by Peter Marsden (Aachen) illustrates the paradigms which have reoriented Australian and New Zealand verse away from the British and towards the American model. Marsden's view of the workings of the creative impulse focusses on formal experimentation and the tricky question of where imitation ends and innovation begins.

That theories of intertextuality may be profitably employed in the study of the new literatures is also illustrated by Peter Stummer (Munich). Distinguishing between a "transnational" intertextuality, which would view the early work of a writer like Chinua Achebe in terms of its relationship to such European authors as Cary and Conrad, and an "inner national" intertextuality, which would set them in the context of other works produced by Africans within the same country, Stummer sets out to read Achebe's most recent novel *Anthills of the Savannah* "against a national backdrop of African prose." By situating this novel within the wider context of Nigerian literature – which comprises what he terms "privileged interrelated texts" by such writers as Femi Osofisan and Arthur Nwankwo – Stummer is able to demonstrate not only that the narrative structure of *Anthills* is somewhat less original than thought hitherto, but also to show how the novel's concerns with the corruption of power, the rural-urban contrast and the nature of political violence reflect those evident in the texts of other Nigerian writers.

A theoretical approach to intertextuality is also taken by André Viola (Nice) in a complex analysis of the South African writer J.M. Coetzee's novel *In the Heart of the Country*. Coetzee is a writer whose work is at once deeply embedded in the South African literary tradition (journals of exploration, the farm novel, etc.) and much indebted to current literary theory, notably French poststructuralism. Viola elucidates how in a novel which takes the form of a monologue, Coetzee employs Jacques Lacan's theories to depict "the plight of the individual entangled in language," who finally lapses into a silence which may be equated with "radical freedom," while at the same time seeking to uncover what the novel tells us about the nature of South African society whose power structures Coetzee so skillfully deconstructs. Viola's interpretation suggests that Coetzee's narrative strategies should be seen not as an evasion of his country's political realities, but, on the contrary, as an attempt to relate the self to the wider social context.

The texts the various contributors to this volume read, hopefully enjoy and discuss, also form part of the corpus of the new literatures from which we choose the texts we actually teach in the classroom. Why, wonders Gordon Collier (Gießen), do we choose the texts we do? Is it because of their representativeness? Do we, as he wryly puts it, expect our chosen Caribbean and Australian authors to "give off the unmistakable



bouquet of the Caribbean or Australia?" And do we, at the same time, tend to neglect works which are more internationalist in their origins or less obviously rooted in the more conspicuous determinants of place? Are our choices perhaps conditioned by the poetic practices of the poets concerned? Ranging widely over the poetry of the new literatures, Collier sets up two categories of modes of expression – the “conserving” and the “expending” – the one economical, concentrated, often wellnigh hermetic, the other open, and explicit, apparently more concerned to establish the larger issues of national identity through a framework of geographical, historical and cultural reference. Collier uses an analysis of the poetry of New Zealanders Allen Curnow, Ian Wedde (the “expenders”) and Bill Manhire (the “conserver”) to reflect upon both the pleasures and the difficulties encountered when reading the new literatures. Curnow presents his readers with “a metonymic catalogue of Antipodean icons” which for all its allusiveness can nevertheless be deciphered; aspects of Wedde’s work seem almost inexplicable to the reader unfamiliar with the maritime geography of Wellington; while the cultural markers of Manhire’s verse may remain “extravagantly obscure” to those who do not have popular New Zealand culture in their blood.

That the appreciation of some of the major works of the new literatures may require a not inconsiderable mental effort from the reader is a point argued very strongly by Norbert Platz (Mannheim). He offers an absorbing account of his attempt to read three of the inordinately difficult novels of the New Zealand writer Janet Frame, demonstrating how their apparent defiance of logic, their indeterminacy and their infinite number of possible meanings defeat both heuristic and hermeneutic readings and ultimately induce a “disconcert” in the readers’s mind.

Many readers will have experienced similar feelings when tackling the work of another writer known for his delight in narrative experimentation, Breyten Breytenbach. In the persuasive interpretation of his *Memory of Snow and of Dust* offered by Erhard Reckwitz (Essen), the novel emerges as a complex attempt to demonstrate the inability of the human memory to produce a single reliable record of any human experience, in this case once again the authors’s own exile and imprisonment. Reckwitz elucidates how the creative impulse, here cast in the postmodern, deconstructionist mode, is directed to establishing a multiplicity, indeed a duplicity of meanings, to exposing literary conventions, to scrambling narrative voices and perspectives, which it then becomes the reader’s daunting task to unravel.

Some of the most imaginative work – primary or secondary – in the new literatures has been carried out by women writers and critics. One of the more successful works of fiction of recent years has been New Zealander Keri Hulme’s *The Bone People*, which won the Booker Prize in 1985, but which, curiously, has been the subject of little scholarly appreciation since. The interest of the appraisal of this novel by Giovanna Covi (Trento) lies not only in its critical analysis of a work she regards as “almost a textbook of postmodernist fictional strategies,” but also for the manner in which she demonstrates