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Is *The Covenant* an American or a South African novel?

Barbara Helly

The aim of this article is to discuss the origin of an American best-seller based on the history of South Africa. Various aspects, including the intellectual, national or literary backgrounds of *The Covenant* will be analysed. The United States and South Africa exerted mutual influences during the writing process and it created an original trend for this novel.

On the flyleaf of the book it is printed that *The Covenant* was written by James A. Michener and was published in 1980¹. The paperback edition, in its English original version and in any other paperback version, tends to indicate that the work was a bestseller in libraries and that it was aimed at a broad audience. Such was actually the case since it sold up to one million copies even before it was launched. Published by Fawcett Crest, a branch of the American publishing company Random House, the novel comprises 1,235 pages of tight typewriting and therefore is not an easy book to read.

The title of the book is ambiguous since the word *covenant* remains mysterious, except perhaps for an audience aware of religious matters. The ambiguity is even more pronounced in the languages in which there is no lexical distinction between *covenant* and *alliance*, as in French for example². Readers influenced by the biblical or Calvinist traditions will certainly recognize an allusion to the communion with their God. But from this point of view, both the American and South African histories -or mythologies rather?- could pride themselves on having a messianic origin.

However, the next pages of the book are helpful in clarifying the topic of the novel as well as the general setting of the plot. First there are five pages of thanks to people of South

¹ James A. Michener. *The Covenant*. New York: Random House (Fawcett Books), 1980.

² James A. Michener. *L'Alliance*. Paris: Seuil, 1982.

African origin: most of them were citizens of the country, a few were exiles or émigrés³. But there are also maps which delineate the outline of Southern Africa, great cities of South Africa and the routes of some of the novel's characters.

The narrative as a whole subsequently comes to confirm that the core of the novel truly is the history of South Africa, its development as an autonomous country and as a contemporary nation whose home policy problems were at the forefront of global news when the book was published in 1980. The reader who is not familiar with that country is introduced to the San, the Khoi, and the African populations, all three of them situated in that southern region of Africa. Then s/he is introduced to the African and Asian slaves, the Dutch, French, German and British settlers; and throughout the centuries, their relationships, their distance and their hostilities, their dependence and their will for emancipation serve as the background to the plot. The Great Trek and Apartheid, Shaka and the Zulus, the Mfecane and the Anglo-Boer War, and finally the struggle against the British occupying forces are all milestones of South African history and more particularly of its Afrikaner component.

Other external elements to the novel can also confirm the South African anchorage of the book. The novelist's archives in the first place, which have been established in Colorado where Michener started his career as a university professor and where he expressed the wish, before he died in 1997, to be able to leave all of his personal documents⁴. By that time, Michener had developed, throughout his fifty years of work as an author, a real passion for the history and memory of things. Consequently, almost nothing of what he did is forgotten, everything can be checked, particularly as regards to his novel on South Africa. In fact, the archives hold his writing and travel notebooks, his different drafts, the various phases of the typescript, the letters related to his work during research, and the editing and publishing process of the book. Some of the most interesting and stimulating documents are the folders

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 11-16.

⁴ Library 's Special Collection, University of Northern Colorado, Greeley.

containing the specialists' points of view, requested by Michener for each one of his chapters. Philip Tobias and Christopher Saunders are probably the best known figures present in these folders. Philip Tobias gave his opinion on a chapter which was ultimately dropped in the final version and which will be discussed later in this article. Christopher Saunders expressed himself on the beginning of the XIXth century and on the *Black Circuit* episode. He deplored the historical inaccuracies and did not wish to appear as a scientific authority for the work because he was questioning what was, in his opinion, the too obvious imbalance between fiction and history⁵.

Meanwhile, Philip Bateman was working in close relation with Michener in order to find the sources necessary to the factual building of the novel. Bateman, a South African citizen who defined himself as a freelance journalist, was in charge of introducing the author to people known for their competence on several subjects which the novel would be involved with. He also did research on particular fields such as the first printed bibles which were brought into the country or on the first inhabitants of the Cape area⁶.

Indeed, Bateman played an important role in helping Michener avoid focusing too much on objective, intellectual or even conceptual knowledge when he took him on a three-week tour of the country in the summer of 1978 and when he arranged meetings with all kinds of people for him⁷. Together, they covered thousands of kilometers, from Cape Town to what is today Zimbabwe and Michener hoped that this trip might give him the opportunity to get an idea for the South African atmosphere and the opinions of several sectors of the population. He thought it might subsequently help him to depict the landscapes as well as the physical and

⁵ Errol Lincoln Uys's personal archives: letter by C. Saunders on May 19th, 1979.

⁶ Bateman's *Memorandum*, October 9th, 1978.

⁷ The trip continues to go much better than anyone could have anticipated. Bateman did a fine job of organizing it, and by chance we have met with several groups who have proved exceptionally informative, including an elderly Afrikaner lady who was in the prison camps in 1900. Mind as clear as a bell and very angry with her son-in-law who kept interrupting to say, 'what she means is...' She knew what she meant. (Letter written from South Africa, August 8th, 1978).

psychological portraits of the country. It was not the first time that Michener had gone to that region as he had already been to the neighboring countries in 1971 and had thought about writing a novel on this southern part of Africa ever since⁸.

The result of these efforts came to the realization that Michener wanted the reader to imagine a fictitious hypothesis of the history of South Africa. Thus Michener could sketch in a realistic manner a whole array of characters, some of them being taken from historical reality -Van Riebeeck, Buller, Smuts- and others drawn directly from the novelist's pantheon of fiction. But even when they belong to fiction, characters must have some kind of credibility and consistency with the history of the country so that the story and the plot may remain homogeneous. This is why the real South African citizens that Michener met were so important: they brought the authentic flavor required for the book to be potentially said and thought by South Africans. The author's notes during his trip show to what extent he had sometimes been shaken by some of the conversations heard there and it is also why confrontation situations between British and Afrikaners ring truer than others in the book. This confrontation being unique in the world, it was all the more interesting to picture it in a novel and, to do so, placing it in its historical evolution.

Thus, apart from the title which does not give a clue to what the story is about, nothing which could make the local color of the novel credible is forgotten. There are even peculiarities of vocabulary and linguistic or culinary explanations and they foster a state of mind of didactical discoveries for the reader who is this time travelling to the South African land with no doubts.

Of course, if all those elements work towards giving South African colors to the novel, the initiative came nevertheless from the United States. This is also what the archives in

⁸ *In 1971, I had the opportunity to travel in the Republic itself, and all that I saw excited me[...] I came home all steamed up about writing a novel on the South African experience.*

Greeley prove because they reveal the first letters exchanged between the principals and the executants⁹. Tony Oursler, a Reader's Digest editor for whom Michener had already worked, suggested the overall topic of the novel. As Michener was under contract with Random House, these two American editing houses came to an agreement on the project. The change which allowed the writer to develop the ideas that had been germinating in his mind since the beginning of the seventies, was the arrival of Errol Lincoln Uys.

Uys had recently emigrated to the United States (so recently that he still did not have a permanent resident card), coming from South Africa where he thought the political crisis had reached too serious a point. He had been at the head of the Reader's Digest in his country and it was as an employee of this institution, although he himself had started to write the synopsis of his own South African novel, that he was introduced to Michener. During their two years of close collaboration, American money financed the entire project since Errol Uys was lent on a full time basis by the Reader's Digest. Errol's employer was paying his salary and in return Random House would return to it part of the future profits from the sales. Michener and, to a certain extent, Uys and Bateman, spent some of their own money on the book as well.

But there are few editing houses in the world which can afford to spend so much money for such a long period of time on a book. As a result, they took great care in the commercial preparation of the book, and at that point the writers were no longer in control. A first version was released solely for the South African market. It was a way of testing the reception of the book but they decided to issue an abridged version in which the last chapter on apartheid did not appear¹⁰. Quite explicitly, this first edition was entitled *Keepers of The*

From James A. Michener, *A Message to the Members of The Literary Guild*, december 1980.

⁹ After a quick beer, Tony [Oursler] surprised me by saying that he and the *Digest* had two experts, one in New York and one in Johannesburg, who were eager to help me if I wanted to try my hand at a large South Africa novel.

Special Collection, Greeley, Colorado.

¹⁰ Tanis Erdmann's letter (volume editor). Special Collection.

Covenant, and the title clearly shows that it was specifically aimed at the Afrikaner audience. It is not certain whether this was an orchestrated operation or not, but this sanitized version was banned for a month before being ultimately authorized. The American press wrote about the story and this event contributed to fuel the political promotion of the book when it was released two months later. Michener's publishers had an international strategy for the book but *The Covenant* had other wide range applications and they can not mislead anyone over the national origin of its authors.

The book covers nothing less than several centuries of history, it puts on stage dozens of characters who must all be able to cross paths or explain their presence with respect to each other over several generations. They go from one continent to another, from one colonial era to another as easily as the reader goes from one chapter to the next. If it wants to bear witness to the peculiar history of South Africa, the novel sets the plot in a corpus without any boundaries and on a global scale. The fact that the characters are placed in the much broader context of the whole history of humanity, where people have always been travelling and where their movements gave birth, when accumulated or confronted, to outstanding social and political creations, gives much strength to the story. This globalized version of historical events, experienced by generations of characters and at the same time explained by the narrator, is inseparable from the time when Michener permanently moulded his political ideas. It is the time after the second World War, a time when America was the victor of the conflict and when it had extended its domination to numerous countries. Michener participated in this military epic, he gave his backing to it and discovered an entirely new world during those years of duty in the navy and in the intelligence services: a world of fascinating novelties for him in the Pacific area and a world in which men are transformed by the uniform they wear¹¹. These biographical elements make Michener identifiable to America

¹¹ James A. Michener. *The World Is my Home: A Memoir*. New York: Random House, 1992.

and make *The Covenant* a product of the American era of good conscience, and of political and moral domination. None of the South African characters holds the key to the whole of the plot, first of all because the story is conceived as a social process bringing into play collective forces which go beyond each one of the characters, but also because the outcome of the novel is thought to be one and the same as the political outcome of apartheid. It is not surprising that the hypotheses made about South Africa's future are pronounced by an American engineer. He has at the same time technical proficiency in the most vital field of the country's economy, diamond mining, attractive qualities since he is in love with a girl from polite society, and political authority since he is in charge of writing a report about the possible evolutions that could be surmised from the contradiction of apartheid. He is the right man in the right place and his nationality leaves no doubt as to who really possesses power to change things in South Africa¹²...

From America's dominant position and the privileged promontory it provided the writer, Michener tried an historical synthesis with *The Covenant*. Much could be said in comparing it with André Brink's book, *Looking on Darkness*, but the way bits of history are reconstructed through the irony of the Colored narrator who has missed all the major dates of the Afrikaner's calendar, shows that South African writers can not see their country as outsiders: most of them chose a line entrenched in one of the opposite sides of their conflicting society.

What permitted the literary synthesis and what are the characteristics of this novel which was born in the hollow of a South African womb but which was dominated by the American contribution?

¹² I have already given some thought to Oursler's idea that an American enter the final scene, and now I see that Uys had the same idea. There may be some value in this: a fresh figure, a new view, a premonition of the 1990's. Special Collection.

First, the synthesis was partly realized through Michener's commitment, as soon as he began his writing career, to working for a literature which would communicate *the great positive values of humanism*¹³. It was consciously thought of as an ideological synthesis. Michener's founding text in that respect is called *The Conscience of the Contemporary Novel* and it clearly expounds the philosophical objectives that the novel should have if it wants to reach millions of readers and to provide those who think about the way societies are run and where they come from with a competing opinion from that expounded by communism. Over more than 1,200 pages in *The Covenant*, the communist perspective, despite the strong support for it in South Africa, is swept away in a single -and unconvincing- line¹⁴, but even the perspective of social change does not appear clearly in the dialogues of the Zulu or Xhosa characters who are fighting against the regime. The most radical opinion on the matter only refers to a possible system close to universal suffrage¹⁵.

The novel does not put forward any criticism of the harshness of the exploitation of the workforce, except for a few balanced descriptions where the South African workers are said to be better off than those coming from other African bordering states, which is also a way of drawing a rather positive conclusion about the South African regime. Besides, this regime did not seem too shocking for Michener to boycott its main supporters and organizers. The archives show that during his summer trip in 1978, Michener got the opportunity to meet several leaders of the De Beers company, including the Oppenheimers. It is even possible to find the trace of a thank-you letter for a gorgeous diamond that Mrs Michener was wearing at her best according to her husband¹⁶. And the most intriguing is the flying visit he made just a few weeks before the first release of the South African version of the book, to the

¹³ James A. Michener. *The Conscience of the Contemporary Novel*, *The Arts in Renewal*. 1951, University of Pennsylvania press, p. 118.

¹⁴ James A. Michener. *The Covenant*, op. cit., p. 1, 000.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 1, 219.

¹⁶ See Mrs Orapchuck's papers (Michener's secretary) and thank-you letters written in October 1978.

Grahamstown festival dedicated to British settlement¹⁷. What could better prove his allegiance than this type of public demonstration? This last trip was not mentioned by the American press, although it had access to the information since the South African newspapers had published some paragraphs about it.

Despite its weaknesses, *The Covenant* provides a great deal of information, it gives food for thought and it probably allows the average reader that we all are when confronted by things s/he is not familiar with, to delve deeper into the debate over Apartheid because it gives a historical perspective to it. The book provides explanations which, in the final analysis, fall within the province of nationalism and religion and this is debatable. But the novel does not stop there; it goes through cultural and economical peculiarities, and striking political trends. The reader can thus always question the sense of the proportion given to each of them throughout the plot.

The most important drawbacks are the absence of material on the urban popular classes' life. Afrikaners, South Africans of British origin and the Black auxiliaries of each one of them all benefit from a real literary personality in their rural or town's life. But this is not the case in the last chapter on apartheid and the short passage on mine work. It is probably a logical consequence of the conservative morale of the book because it sets up the provincial petit bourgeoisie as the axis of the fundamental values that are to be defended: the author draws from there his main support for the apartheid regime but also the Christian criticisms on equality to all men. One has to remember that *The Covenant* was a commissioned book and it had to match Random House's editorial policy, that is to say, in Michener's case, to what his editor was ready to accept. The archives reveal that the two of them had a trustworthy relationship which enabled them to exchange opinions on intellectual matters such as the origin of the formation of certain languages for example¹⁸. But Michener also writes that in

¹⁷ *Port Elizabeth Evening Post*, September 5th, 1980 and *Star*, September 6th, 1980.

¹⁸ An exchange of letters between Michener and Albert Erskine in March 1980 about Frisian shows this.

case of a conflict, he would ultimately leave the decision up to the editor. This is how the last chapter on apartheid was reduced by half of its examples and how the novel lost its first two chapters.

The existence of these two chapters is testified to by all three sources available: the special collection in Greeley, Uys' personal archives and Bateman's own documents. They required intense research and efforts from all the protagonists of the project. These two chapters referred to the peculiar geological creation of South Africa and to early men¹⁹. Of an obvious evolutionist inspiration, they did not seem to please Erskine who curiously claimed a *personal* reason to suppress them²⁰, but they are nevertheless necessary to a comprehensive understanding of the book. First of all they demonstrate once more the didactic will of the author: Michener was writing for other reasons than mere commercial success and he was always eager to renew his stimulating encounter with the general public. In fact, Michener has always claimed his intention to write for the people and to popularize knowledge. Rather than as a writer or a novelist he liked to define himself as a *fireside narrator*²¹, someone who can, with a few novelistic talents, spur on and enrich his audience. He wanted contemporary literature to be philosophically solid, to satisfy the readers' appetites and he wanted readers to be nourished when they finished his novels²².

The other reason why these two chapters were necessary to the cohesion of the entire novel is that alluding to geological formation allowed Michener to introduce a diamantiferous vein and to follow it all along the book till the arrival of the American prospector who ultimately fails in his attempt to discover the precious stones of the country, a symbol of a

Special Collection.

¹⁹ The typescript of those chapters can be read in Greeley.

²⁰ *I had trouble with this [chapter] from the outset, and for reasons I'll admit might to others appear to be too personal and therefore disqualify me as a judge.* Albert Erskine, March 31, 1980.

Special collection.

²¹ James A. Michener. *The World Is My Home*. op. cit., p.373.

²² The comparison between literature and cooking is Michener's and it can be read in the text previously mentioned: *The Conscience of the Contemporary Novel*.

provisional failure caused by the political dead end of the regime. The romanticized introduction to anthropology could reassert the pre-eminence of the Black continent in the history of human evolution and to replace the history of mankind with that of the living world. Philip Tobias, one of South Africa's finest anthropologists who had worked with Raymond Dart on his discovery of the Taung's child and who was working on the famous Sterkfontein site, wrote that he liked the story told in the first chapter²³. Although scientific accuracy could be challenged, he felt that it was a vivid adaptation of what could have happened a few million years ago. The archives show that Uys and Bateman who had worked so much on these chapters disagreed with the reducing of the book, but Michener accepted his editor's opinion on the main ground that the book would otherwise be too long.

Taking into account all these characteristics and hesitations, it is possible to say that *The Covenant* started as an attempt at comprehensive literature and it ended up as a product remodelled by the American book industry. It would then be better to talk of a globalized literature and this would synthesize the national specificities brought to the book by Michener, Uys and Bateman. It is one of the few examples in literature of a book which does not attempt to recognize official geographical boundaries, neither in the plot, nor in the creation process. It has an international flavor but remains quite restrictive when talking about social or ideological boundaries. One could dare say that *The Covenant* is one of the first attempt at world literature and it is quite original in the sense that contemporary literature has been exploring many other fields than historical and dialectical developments of societies.

²³ *May I add that I was thrilled to read the chapter: familiar as I might be with the scientific aspects of the story, I was entranced with the drama you spun around the lake. Thank you for allowing me the privilege of reading the first draft chapter.* Philip Tobias, January 31st, 1979.

