

INTRODUCTION

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This is the first issue of *ALTERNATION*, the journal of the Centre for the Study of Southern African Literature and Languages (CSSALL). The Centre was established at the beginning of 1994 at the University of Durban-Westville with the purpose of promoting an interdisciplinary study of the great variety of southern African literatures and languages. Besides being a research centre, the CSSALL offers a course-work Masters degree which provides a systematic knowledge of the literary history and languages of the region. The Centre is also committed to hosting a biennial conference on southern African literary and language studies.

As Helize van Vuuren demonstrates in her paper included in this volume, the discourses of colonialism and apartheid have led to the radical 'segmentation of South African literature and literary studies'. In the first historical surveys written in a period marked by the construction of an inclusive settler nationalism, the focus is on what J.M. Coetzee has called 'white writing', with the consequent exclusion (Nathan) or marginalization (Besselaar) of black writings. A developing segregationist logic institutionalized the separation of the various languages and literatures of the region, dissolving that earlier rapprochement between Afrikaner and English and reinforcing the marginalization of the literatures and languages of the black majority. Within the privileged white universities, the dominant ethnic discourses of Afrikaner nationalism and an Anglo-colonial liberalism functioned to reproduce this literary apartheid, and it is therefore unsurprising that from the later 1970s onwards an emergent radical intelligentsia launched a political critique of these hegemonic ideologies, which in the case of English Studies led to a sudden intensification of interest in South African writing (both white and black), and, in the case of Afrikaans, to a radical 'paradigm switch in the approach to Afrikaans literature and literary historiography' (Van Vuuren). These challenges have led in recent years to a growing interest in black writing, oral traditions and women's writing, but it is nevertheless remarkable that well into the last decade of the twentieth century an inclusive literary history of southern Africa has yet to be published. Now that the critical demolition of oppressive literary paradigms has been largely accomplished and

previously excluded voices have begun to be listened to, we need to move 'beyond the fragments' to attempt such an embracing survey. The CSSALL sees this as its first major research task, but what Van Vuuren's essay also points to is the sheer impossibility of doing so from the angle of a single discipline.

The danger, identified by Jeremy Cronin (quoted in Van Vuuren's paper), is the establishment of a 'national literature under the hegemony of a white, liberal, English project', a likelihood encouraged by the emergence of English as the *de facto* national language of a postcolonial South Africa. It is for this reason that the CSSALL is determined to approach the study of southern African literatures in a rigorously **interdisciplinary** manner: the Centre has been established by the Arts Faculty rather than a particular department, and academic staff have been drawn from the fields of Anthropology, English, Afrikaans, Zulu, History, Linguistics, French and Education. Moreover, there is scarcely a discipline at the university which has not participated in the CSSALL's weekly seminar programme. However, Roland Barthes has pointed out the radical consequences of such an approach:

Interdisciplinary activity, valued today as an important aspect of research, cannot be accomplished by simple confrontations between various specialized branches of knowledge. Interdisciplinary work is not a peaceful operation: it begins **effectively** when the solidarity of the old disciplines breaks down - a process made more violent, perhaps, by the jolts of fashion - to the benefit of a new object and a new language, neither of which is the domain of those branches of knowledge that one calmly sought to confront. (1973:79).

If the CSSALL desires to construct a 'new object and a new language', then how do we challenge 'the solidarity of the old disciplines', many of them constructed to reproduce political and cultural segregationism? It is in part a practical question about 'subjects' taught in schools and universities: will the literature of the region be continued to be taught within the disciplinary specificities of English, Afrikaans, Zulu, Xhosa, Anthropology (orature), History (non-fictional writings), etc., and, if so, how can we even begin to speak of a 'national' literature? My own view is that this acute problem can only be resolved by the introduction at schools and universities of something called 'South(ern) African Cultural Studies', which will not only be focused on the mass media (although it must surely and importantly include this), but on the great diversity of *semiotic* practices from 'Bushmen' rock paintings to the *avant-garde* stories of Ivan Vladislavic, from history texts to television serials, from the Zulu *izibongo* to the poetry of Breyten Breytenbach. It is this disciplinary

transformation which can overcome the disabling exclusionary oppositions - high/popular; literacy/orality; fiction/non-fiction, etc. - around which literary studies have been traditionally constructed. Such a new departure is suggested in Johan van Wyk's essay in this volume, which reads early southern African cultural processes such as burials and rock paintings as semiotic practices explicable in terms of Kristeva's notion of a pre-Oedipal semiotic kinesis and Freudian dream theory.

Indeed, one of the important consequences of the theoretical explosion of the last three decades has been to push the hegemonic paradigm of literary studies into crisis: after the onslaughts of ideology-critique, textuality, semiotics, *écriture*, subaltern studies, etc. it has become clear that this discursive formation can only continue *sous rature*: we are obliged to perform the empty rituals of an institutional formation whose gods are no longer with us. Within South Africa the apartheid system has itself contributed to the retardation of disciplinary transformations, as the example of English Studies makes clear. As a literary critical movement, 'liberal humanism' (Leavis, *New Critics*) died decades ago elsewhere in the world, and yet it has ironically been preserved in South Africa by the apartheid regime, which kept liberalism in place in the (white) universities as the appropriate non-radical ethnic ideology of the white English-speaking community. While many within this discourse imagined themselves to be participating in a radical de-colonization of English Studies by paying serious academic interest to South African writings, what they seemed entirely unaware of was the extent to which such intellectually vacuous incorporationist readings simply reinforced the colonizing ambitions of an Anglo-liberalism. A proper transformation is not only a matter of *what* (content) we read, but more importantly, *how* (theory) we read.

On the other hand, Johan van Wyk's essay in part takes issue with a certain orthodox Marxism through a questioning of Volisninov's separation of 'the domain of semiotics ... from physical phenomena, instruments of production and consumer goods'. He concludes:

Production and consumption, the metabolism between man and nature, imply essential processes for cultural life. To transform a stone into a hammer indicates a metaphoric and poetic perception of the world. It is only through centuries of use that the poetic impact of the discovery of a particular implement becomes repressed into the unconscious.

What is being challenged here is a certain 'realist' Marxism which, in the architectonics of the base/superstructure model, articulates the division of (a determining) materiality and (a determined and supplementary) culture. If the traditional criticism has been that such an

account denigrates the palpable effectivity of culture (as discursive formations producing subjects), then Van Wyk interestingly points out how it also depends upon a reified concept of the material which has lost sight of Marx's emphasis upon the creativity of human labour. His view leads to similar conclusions to that of Michael Ryan who, in *Politics and Culture*, a text working at the intersection of post-structuralism and Marxism, argues the following:

In the post-structuralist perspective, culture inhabits materiality as the forms of social life, from the family to the workday to our very psychological dispositions. The forms and representational patterns of culture are not simply added onto an already constituted substance of social existence. The supplement of cultural form is that without which no sociality could be possible; decultured sociality would be a diffusion of formless and boundless energy and matter. (1989:12).

What we now need, as South Africa emerges into postcoloniality, is not the perpetuation of literary-critical orthodoxies of either Left (Marxism) or Right (Afrikaner Nationalism, Liberalism), and least of all some romantic-organicist construction of an 'essential' national identity, but a vibrant theoretical experimentalism impatient with all dogmatisms. I am reminded of the liberating moment of early twentieth century Left Modernism in post-revolutionary Russia - the *avant-garde* theatre, film, poetry, painting and cultural theory which set out to 'shock' all traditions out of their deadening familiarity in the name of a to-be-constructed future. In the language of Russian Formalism, we similarly need to 'defamiliarize' traditional automated perceptions of our literary past to construct a 'shocking', renewed, unrecognizable cultural history. To do so is to align literary critical practice with the more radical potentialities of the larger democratic transformations occurring in the present, which Chantal Mouffe describes thus:

In this respect the fundamental characteristic of modernity is undoubtedly the advent of the democratic revolution. As Claude Lefort has shown (...) modern democratic society is constituted as "a society in which power, law and knowledge are exposed to a radical indeterminacy, a society that has become the theatre of an uncontrollable adventure, so that what is instituted never becomes established, the known remains undetermined by the unknown, the present proves to be undefinable." The absence of power embodied in the person of the prince and tied to a transcendental authority preempts the existence of a final guarantee or source of legitimation; society can no longer be defined as a substance having an organic identity. What remains is a society without clearly defined outlines, a social structure that is impossible to describe from the perspective of a single, or universal, point of view. (1988: 33-34).

Such a post-absolutist radical democratic practice, affirming indeterminacy and difference, becomes in the project of constructing a national literary history among other things a

theoretical interest in the concepts of intertextuality (Kristeva), heteroglossia (Bakhtin), discursive formations (Foucault) and différance (Derrida), of texts as unstable entities traversed by a multiplicity of (cultural, political, literary, etc.) codes which are themselves without origin or *telos*. As Roland Barthes explained it in *S/Z*:

the one text is not an (inductive) access to a Model, but entrance into a network with a thousand entrances; to take this entrance is to aim, ultimately, not at a legal structure of norms and departures, a narrative or poetic Law, but at a perspective (of fragments, of voices from other texts, other codes), whose vanishing point is nonetheless ceaselessly pushed back, mysteriously opened: each (single) text is the very theory (and not the mere example) of this vanishing, of this difference which indefinitely returns, insubmissive. (1974:12).

Such readings of the South African literary past it seems to me enable an avoidance of the twin pitfalls (they are both complicit antagonists in a closed binary logic) of an organicist national discourse which reduces difference to a fundamentalist Same, and a fetishization of difference (a perpetuation of apartheid axiomatics) which precludes intertextual interaction (however conflictual). Such a postcolonial reading is found in Sikumbuzo Mngadi's essay in this volume on Credo Mutwa's play, *uNosilimela*, which symptomatically reveals the dubious metaphysics and reactionary exclusions of Mutwa's conservative nationalism, and instead endorses a politics of cultural hybridity and a Derridean working 'within the claims made by the dominant about its dominance in order to undermine its authority'.

If the work of the Centre is rigorously interdisciplinary and working broadly within the non-dogmatic intersection of post-structuralist, Marxist and post-colonial theories, then the essays here not only question the boundaries separating disciplines (Julie Pridmore's interrogation of the history/fiction opposition; Helize van Vuuren's critique of South Africa's linguistic apartheid), but also offer critiques of the dominant assumptions within those disciplines. Jaco Alant's essay registers its dissatisfaction with both 'anthropological' and 'literary' definitions of orality: if the former sees it in 'negative' terms as non-literacy, then the latter imperiously fails to recognize orality's irreducible difference. Alant therefore attempts to account for the specificity of orality by offering a linguistic definition which, drawing on the work of Walter Ong and Jousse, is located in the somatic materiality of sound and consciousness. Alan Thorold is similarly suspicious of 'literary' interpretations of orality, but is even more concerned that the turn towards orality is not only in danger of succumbing to a romanticism of the 'noble savage', but is also based upon what he describes as the 'oral

fallacy ... that writing is an extension of speech'. Such a phonocentric prejudice fails to recognize the prevalence of non-alphabetic African writing systems such as the pictographic one he encountered in Malawi.

Julie Pridmore's analysis of the *Diary of Henry Francis Fynn*, written (supposedly) by a pioneer of colonial Natal, is in part a critique of the *Diary's* reliability as a historical document about the Shakan period: the *Diary* is contextualized within contemporary colonial discourses in order to reveal its ideological project. However, Pridmore then takes her analysis further, reading the text as a fictional production intertextually modelled on Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. In the process, the categories of 'history', 'myth' and 'fiction' are all shaken from their certainties, and her essay, working within the undecidability of the history/fiction opposition, therefore becomes an exemplary model of how the Centre can pursue the reading of 'non-fictional' historical texts. Such readings would follow Foucault's description of the changing function of the historical 'document':

The document, then, is no longer for history an inert material through which it tries to reconstitute what men have done or said, the events of which only the trace remains; history is now trying to define within the documentary material itself unities, totalities, series, relations... in our time, history is that which transforms documents into monuments. (1972:7).

All the essays gathered here were originally presented as papers to the weekly CSSALL seminar programme last year. They were not written specifically for publication, but the editorial board felt they should be published in order to begin that great debate about how we should begin to re-read the literatures of the region. Although *ALTERNATION* was established to publish research material emanating from the CSSALL, it welcomes contributions from scholars beyond the University of Durban-Westville, just as the Centre hopes to attract visiting scholars from the rest of southern Africa and abroad. It is, incidentally, more than a happy coincidence that the first centre to undertake research into the national lineaments of southern African literature, and from a broadly 'postmodernist' perspective, should be established at the University of Durban-Westville. As a 'historically black university' which has decisively liberated itself from its apartheid management structures, it is also free of the tribal dogmatisms that continue to characterize the hegemonic discourses of the privileged 'white' universities and whose entrenchment is retarding their own transformations.

The title of this journal - *ALTERNATION* - is of course open to a variety of interpretations and contains many theoretical echoes. I will conclude by drawing attention to two signifieds: the other nation - our democratic, non-racial and non-sexist postcoloniality - positions our readings of this region's literary history; but we also need to be alive to the limits of such a discourse of nationalism, of what is 'other' to the nation, of the irreducible heterogeneity of our common humanity. The alternation between these two meanings provides something of a direction and a warning to future studies.

References

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