

## RECENT CHANGES IN SOUTH AFRICAN LITERARY HISTORIOGRAPHY: THEORY AND PRACTICE

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### I

This paper is an attempt to indicate problematic areas in the writing of literary history in South Africa. In response to vast socio-political changes, critical practice (specifically when dealing with categories such as race, language and group boundaries), is in a state of flux and 'theory needy'.

Originally I intended to offer in this paper an analysis of criticism dealing with 'Literature on Robben Island' as a 'case study', illustrating how recent research indicates change in the nature of writing, followed by a shift in the focus of S.A. literary historiography. Critics such as J.U. Jacobs have been writing extensively on prison literature and the 'discourses of detention', Piniel Shava in a recent history on black South African writing in the twentieth century (1989) derives part of a chapter heading, ('From Sophiatown to Robben Island'), from this cluster of texts, and an MA student at the University of Natal, Cynthia Hassan, recently completed a thesis on 'Robben Island as symbol of the South African political prison, with specific reference to Frank Anthony's collection of poetry *Robbeneiland my kruis my huis* (1983)'. Access to many of these texts has only become possible during the last few years, with the lifting of censorship.

It became increasingly clear from the growing literature on the Robben Island experience, that South African history is being rewritten in a body of work characterised by its testimonial nature. Memoirs, letters, poetry, docu-novels, autobiography by political prisoners held for many years on Robben Island - all have a strong factual nature and socio-political critique in common. Patrick Lekota's *Prison Letters to a Daughter* was read by Hassan not as letters, but as a historical text, narrating South African history from a black perspective, which focuses on resistance. The rewriting of South African history in evidence here, is the result of a new socio-historical situation, with a radical shift in power relations. Autobiographical writing (e.g. diary, journal, memoirs) has gradually become the dominant model in South African prison literature.

Shava equates Robben Island with 'a microcosm of the oppressive macrocosm', the 'representation of the prison as a replica of South Africa itself'. (1989:39). Constituting a more or less coherent subsystem of works (comparable to Holocaust literature), these texts are written mainly in English but (remarkably enough) also in Afrikaans, often perceived as the language of the oppressor.

The next step would have been to illustrate how these writings and the criticism on it, indicate changes in the broader South African literary context. But at this point uneasiness set in as I started questioning the concepts contained in my title.

## II

What constitutes **South African literature**? Is it a self-evident concept? How can one then talk of **South African** literary historiography? Can the cluster of works on the experiences of political prisoners on Robben Island scientifically be described as a subsystem or subcanon? What do we define as literature in the South African context? Govan Mbeki's political essays, *Learning from Robben Island* (1991), belongs to this subsystem, and is of historical significance, but is it literature? Clearly these works are the products of a specific community, and of central importance to an identifiable community, but what about the problem of language? Is race to be a distinguishing literary characteristic when trying to describe these works? Each of these concepts is problematic and needs to be looked at separately.

At the beginning of the century literary historians seemed to have fewer problems in identifying a unified body of work carrying the epithet 'South African', as is clear from Manfred Nathan's *South African Literature: A General Survey* (1925). He defines his topic as 'that which is **in or of South Africa**' and the 'tests for admission to the ranks of African literature are either **birth and residence**; or **domicile** for a certain period'. (1925:13). Ironically he uses 'African' and 'South African' as synonymous, although he deals only with English and Afrikaans literature. 'South African' to him means **white**, and by implication members of this community use either English or Afrikaans as their medium.

What we have here in Nathan's literary history is the 'silencing and marginalizing' of the other voices 'by the imperial centre', as Ashcroft (et al) describes it in *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*. (1989:83). This 'silencing and marginalizing' is seen as an intratextual characteristic of what the authors rather inaccurately

call 'post-colonial' literature. Their definition reads as follows: "'Post-colonial" here refers to all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day. This is because there is a continuity of preoccupations throughout the historical process initiated by European imperial aggression'. But this silencing is equally remarkable in Nathan's early literary history of South Africa.

Nine years earlier Besselaar's *Zuid-Afrika in de Letterkunde* (South Africa in Literature) (1914) had fared only marginally better. He included - along with extensive overviews of English and Dutch literature (and language), also 'travel descriptions' by Portuguese, French, Germans and Swedes, as well as a short chapter entitled 'Aandeel der Inboorlingen' ('Participation of the natives'- 1914:183-191). Besselaar points to the existence of the oral tradition, but seems to credit the indigenous peoples mainly with their 'rich imagination', a fertile source for the colonists' literature.

### III

After Besselaar and Nathan's early attempts at inclusivity, South African literary study and historiography became increasingly compartmentalized, according to the languages used by the different communities. This development, institutionalised at universities by different departments of Afrikaans, English, Zulu, Xhosa etc., coincides roughly with the socio-political development in the country: one of 'separate development'. A new impetus to South African literary studies started developing in the late seventies, arising out of 'social pressures, located outside the university'. (Hofmeyr, 1979:41). It developed, according to Hofmeyr, out of rejection of the existing liberal tradition with its selective exclusion of working class literature, African, Afrikaans and popular literature. Hofmeyr states:

"This "tradition", which claims to represent South African literature ... ignores the culture and literary endeavours of the majority of people in this country (...) it is not simply a matter of fact - what South African literature is there? - but is more fundamentally a matter of theory - what is literature?" (1979:39-40).

In her argument for more inclusive South African literary studies Hofmeyr is objecting to a tradition which sees literature as: 'a) written b) in books c) "good" d) (which) approximates as closely as possible Anglo-American models'. (1979:44). In short: the established canon of 'high literature' taught in most English departments at the time, often derivative of British or American models, and studied in the framework of the autonomous work of art to which a

New Critical 'close reading' was applied. Her plea is for a radical new approach to literature and to what constitutes 'the history of South African literature'. She sees it as 'not a tale of the literary endeavour of a small fraction of its people. It should include the modes and discourses of all South Africans, be that discourse oral, be it in newspapers, archives, magazines and pamphlets'. (1979:44. My emphasis). Her stance indicates a shift in perception of what South African literary studies should focus on, the object of study is redefined.

Also in 1979 Stephen Gray's *South African Literature: An Introduction* appeared. In a review of this book I.E. Glenn points out that the 'crucial problem is whether we have one, two, three, or four literatures: oral literature and writing in the various African languages; Afrikaans literature; English literature (White/unbanned); English literature (Black/banned/in exile)'. He suggests that 'one society produces one literature, whether it likes it or not'. (1979:58-9). Albert Gérard in 'Prospects for a national history of South African literature' (1983) underlines the difficulty for the literary historian in uniting the cultural and literary diversity, but points to the organic unity of the society: '(d)espite (the) fundamental ethnic, cultural and linguistic diversity, the various communities which make up the populations of South Africa have been living in close interaction, and have common historical experiences, even though the relationships may have been characterised by varying degrees of mutual hostility'. (1983:41). His 'prospects' are qualified in such a way that it is not really persuasive.

In 1982 Michael Vaughan pointed to the need for 'identifying the configuration of literary forms and forces that is specific to the Southern African context, rather than simply assuming the relevance of a Western-type literary landscape'. (1982:43). Like Hofmeyr he follows a historical-materialist approach; accentuating the 'socially significant developments' of what he calls 'black township literature' and seeing it as a priority to engage with this 'developing literature'. (1982:62). Studies of black popular theatre, the forms evident in oral tradition, and the exploitation of local language resources are seen as projects which should receive attention.

In 'The Praxis of Comparative Theory: On Writing the History of Southern African Literature' Gray referred categorically and rather cosily to 'our common literary system' (my emphasis) which is 'not divided, but is about division'. (1986:76). In describing the praxis of putting together *The Penguin Book of Southern African Stories*, he points to 'the existing canons of the various sub-literatures' (i.e. English, Afrikaans, Zulu etc.), and how he selected

stories reflecting 'cross-lingual, cross-subgroup encounters', because that seemed to him the 'main concern of all writers within the system'. (1986:77). Here he argues for one South African literature based on **thematic** or **semantic** ground. Glenn's argument (one society, one literature) can be described as **organic**, whereas Hofmeyr's arguments have a **historical-materialist** basis. Joining the debate in 1986, Chris Swanepoel states that 'a comparative history of Southern African literature presents itself as a logical "must"', and he suggests a methodology based on Even-Zohar's **polysystem theory**: '(f)irstly, a concise though thorough description of individual systems, and secondly and consequently, the much desired comparative history of Southern African literature'. (1986:85).

This is more or less where the debate about the nature of South African literature as a whole, as well as a possible comparative South African literary history, petered out in the late eighties. As a result of this debate and the change in direction it brought about in various scholars' research, the curricula in literature departments, notably in English departments, started changing slowly, incorporating more black writing in English and even Afrikaans literature in translation. These changes in university curricula are indicative of changes in what is perceived as the canon of South African literature study. The signs of change in the canon are, however, not reflected in the curricula of most Afrikaans departments. This probably has to do with how the field of study is perceived as clearly demarcated into firstly Afrikaans language and literature, and secondly Dutch language and literature. The comparative impulse and the incorporation of Afrikaans texts in translation by English departments, seem to indicate a sense of a stronger, less threatened position. Both Afrikaans literature and 'black township literature' (Vaughan's term), provide the more dominant English system with models for appropriation.

#### IV

I will now attempt to give an overview of the rather fragmented field of South African literary historiography in recent times.

Even-Zohar points out that 'in a pluralistic society, what has been, is, or should be canonical for those who represent power has not been, is not, and cannot be representative of marginal communities'. (1990:11). Afrikaans literature, privileged since 1948 through access to political power, is in the singular position, compared to the other South African literatures, of having various full-length literary histories written about it. (Cf. Dekker,

Antonissen, Kannemeyer). Between the sixties and the eighties most important literary critics published volume upon volume of literary criticism on authors central to the canon, such as Opperman and Van Wyk Louw. The high point of this canonization process was probably reached with Kannemeyer's two volume *Geskiedenis van die Afrikaanse Literatuur*, in 1 100 pages, published in 1978 and 1983, followed by a popularised version in 1988.

The heated debate between Cloete on the one side and Kannemeyer, Olivier and Jansen on the other, which ensued between 1980 and 1982 about what constitutes a literary history, centred on a rejection by Cloete of the nature of Kannemeyer's encyclopedic, strongly bibliographical work, described by Olivier as 'the culmination of traditional historiography in Afrikaans'. (1981:41). This led to an article by Olivier, 'Literary history: Ideal or reality?', in which he stated that 'Cloete's objections against this book ... can be maintained only if one also rejects the whole tradition of literary historiography in Afrikaans'. (1982:193). Although the thrust of the article was polemical, dealing with the divergent positions of Kannemeyer's published book and Cloete's hypothesised ideal, this discussion reopened the debate in Afrikaans literary circles on what constitutes literary history.

The historical-materialist model put forward in Ampie Coetzee's *Letterkunde & Krisis. 'n Honderd Jaar Afrikaanse Letterkunde en Afrikaner Nasionalisme/Literature & Crisis. A Hundred Years Afrikaans Literature and Afrikaner Nationalism* (1990), although sketchy (62 pages) and flawed by an inclination to dismiss the writers constituting the existing canon (rather than to reread them from a new socio-historical context - for a more comprehensive discussion see Van Vuuren, 1991), can be seen as indicating a paradigm switch in the approach to Afrikaans literature and literary historiography. He suggested a possible scheme for periodization based on historical and political events such as the advent of Afrikaner Nationalism, the mine strikes of 1922, and the happenings at Sharpeville in 1961 and Soweto in 1976 (1. 1875-1922; 2. 1922-1948; 3. 1948-1961; 4. 1961-1976; 5. after 1976). This differs radically from the orientation around genres, 'period codes' such as romanticism or realism, or the use of decade names such as 'Dertig' and 'Sestig' to indicate a specific group of writers, which Kannemeyer used as ordering principles.

Most relevant however to this discussion, is Coetzee's consciousness of the lack of integration of Afrikaans literature in the 'master narrative of S.A. history' and how the reading of Afrikaans literary texts in isolation, separate from other literatures and cultures in S.A., has led to what he calls a resultant inbreeding ('intoeit'). He stresses the need for

incorporation of Afrikaans into the broader context of a diversified S.A. literature. (1990:56). Siegfried Huigen has pointed out that Coetzee wants to put literary historiography to use in serving the aim of one South African unitary state. (1992:50). Maybe this is overstressing the agenda set out in the introduction of 'striving for a united, non-racial, democratic South Africa' in rewriting the history of Afrikaans. However it is clear from this suggested model for a rereading, and from 'work in progress', that serious work is also being done in Afrikaans historiography from a comparative South African vantage point. His *Letterkunde & Krisis*, although possibly overstating the case politically, alerts literary historians and critics to the necessity of placing their work within a historical context. Too much Afrikaans scholarship is still ahistorical.

In her seminal work on Breytenbach as public figure (*Breytenbach as Openbare Figuur*, 1990), Francis Galloway suggests that disillusionment developed in 'leftist' Afrikaans literary circles during the mid eighties with the imported theory of deconstruction, as it could not offer an answer to the problem of the literary text in its relationship to South African 'reality', and because increasingly it was felt necessary to recognize the social and political codes in the individual text. This radical break with Afrikaans tradition of previous decades is characterized, according to Galloway, by Marxist, sociological and ideological-critical approaches to literature. (1990:307). The dissatisfaction with literary practice in traditional Afrikaans circles and the stronger accentuation of the inescapable political nature of all literary production in a society in a state of crisis, led to a joint meeting in Zimbabwe in July 1989 of ANC members involved in formulating cultural policy, and representatives from these 'leftist' Afrikaans circles. On this occasion the call for 'a more inclusive and hegemonic national literature' (Cronin, 1990:180) surfaced again. In a lengthy discussion of a 'South African literature' (recorded in Coetzee and Polley's *Crossing Borders*, 1990:176-203), Cronin introduced a new perspective by rejecting the earlier tendency to produce 'white, English language (so-called) South-African anthologies', and the later striving '... to establish a national literature under the hegemony of a white, liberal, English project'. According to him this has been a project that presents the white English community as privileged, with a special cultural 'roeping' ('calling': HvV) - bestowed upon it by virtue of its language. ('a window on the world'), and by virtue of its alleged social position ("between the two warring

parties of Afrikaans and African nationalism'). Needless to say, this attempt to establish some kind of special claim for fence-sitting has not really led anywhere - whether in literature or politics'. (1990:180).

The alternative use of the qualificatory 'national' as synonym for 'South African' refers us back to Gérard's project in the early eighties, but has not caught on, probably because of the unintentional association with the now pejoratively regarded concept of 'nationalism'. Degenaar pointed out that a concept such as 'national culture' in a 'sharply divided society' is 'likely to mean little more than the political and cultural predisposition of the particular commentator or organisation'. (In Chapman, 1992:156).

Cronin's tirade against the white English literary community and their perceived tendency to usurp and appropriate literary fields of study from what is seen as a privileged social position, is an acute observation, and underlines the position of power which the English language has in relation to the politically stigmatised Afrikaans. Implicitly Cronin also introduces the role of race into this discussion, as his tirade seems to be aimed at the 'whiteness' of the English literary community to which he refers.

Malvern van Wyk Smith's recent publication, *Grounds of Contest. A Survey of South African English Literature* (1990) sets out ostensibly to 'note the quintessentially South African landmarks in our writing'. His use of 'our' seems to suggest that he writes from the centre of the South African white English community, but his choice of material includes black writing in English. This black writing in English is what Ngugi wa Thiong'o in his latest book, *Moving the Centre. The Struggle for Cultural Freedoms*, dismissively calls 'the tragedy of the Europhone tradition which has come to wear the mask of African literature'. (1993:20). The boundaries of Van Wyk Smith's project are defined by the English language, just as the boundaries of Coetzee's *White Writing* are defined by race. Of Afrikaans writers, Smith only has fleeting references to Breytenbach, Brink and Elsa Joubert, indicating where translation has facilitated access and probable appropriation into what is seen as the highly selective canon of 'South African English Literature'.

One is struck by the extraordinary fragmentation and polarisation of the South African literary scene when looking at the way race is used in descriptions of literary histories. In 1985 the University of the Western Cape published *Swart Afrikaanse skrywers (Black Afrikaans Writers)*, signalling the consciousness of an alternative grouping with a group identity separate from mainstream Afrikaans literature. In this collection Jakes Gerwel



identified four elements in the work of Afrikaans writers situated geographically in the Cape: exile literature (De Wette and February), political struggle poetry (Willemsen and Anthony), poetry of the 'private ache' (Oliphant), and poetry emanating from the Cape Flats, using the sociolect of the working class (Snyders). These poets, like their African counterparts, the Soweto poets, is seen by Gerwel as representing Black Consciousness. They were motivated to overcome the alienation from Afrikaans as medium which followed the political hegemonic rule by white Afrikaners. (1985:15-16).

A divergent development from the literary historiography of the (white) Afrikaans canon is the rediscovery of a so-called alternative Afrikaans literature, a process with which Hein Willemsen is occupied. In a recent lecture he stated his aim: "Afrikaans" and the "Afrikaans literature" are elitist, white-centred, cultural constructs, and essentially univocal institutions. To fathom the extent of the suppression, necessitates the establishment of the presence of the **other** in the history of Afrikaans literature. Who were the oppositional voices? Perspectives and attitudes of black Afrikaans speakers have been excluded from the central canon up to now'. (Conference of the Afrikaans Literature Society, Stellenbosch, 1992:1). Willemsen has thus far succeeded in salvaging for his 'alternative' canon the almost forgotten novelist, Arthur Fula, as well as the cultural commentator and journalist, Piet Uithalder.

In 1987 a collection of essays, *Race and Literature/ Ras en literatuur*, by writers representing a wide spectrum of ideologies and viewpoints, revealed an attempt to bring clarity to the confusion. In reality this project only functioned to underline the segmentation of South African literature and literary studies. Confirmation is to be found in the continuing appearance of anthologies and literary histories using race as a qualifying epithet, in spite of Henry Gates's remark that 'when we attempt to appropriate ... "race" as a term for an essence - as did the négritude movement ... we yield too much: **the basis of a shared humanity**'. (1985:13). However, South African literary historians seem unable to avoid racial distinctions when dealing with literature, which seems to indicate the overwhelming presence of socio-political realities, and the problem of ideology in dealing with South African literature. In 1988 J.M. Coetzee published *White Writing*, dealing with Afrikaans and English literature until 1948, but with the misleadingly, all-encompassing subtitle, 'On the Culture of Letters in South Africa', yet focussing only on Afrikaans and English literature.

In Andries Oliphant's recent contribution to the encyclopedic *Literêre terme en teorieë* (edited by Cloete, 1992) under the title 'Swart literatuur in Suid-Afrika' ('Black literature in

South Africa'), he no longer distinguishes between writing by black authors in language divisions: black writers in Afrikaans and in English are dealt with simultaneously, indicating a shift in perception. This contribution implies that language boundaries can be set aside, and that he perceives coherence in the literary production of the black South African community. Oliphant also stresses that '(t)his literature is not a separate entity and can be compared productively with the literature of whites. Such a comparative study will illustrate how the themes which occur in black literature are intertwined with similar themes in white English and Afrikaans writing. Seen together, this dialogic relationship forms the basis of the underlying unity of South African literature. This overview should be seen as the first step in the direction of an inclusive approach'. (1992:524. My translation). So in spite of the continuing practice of dealing with fragmented sections of SA literature defined by the race of the authors, Oliphant underlines belief, at least on a theoretical level, in an 'underlying unity'.

A seminal contribution to the problem of race in SA literary historiography, is the review in *Staffrider* (1991:59-71) by Mbulelo Mzamane of Shava's *A People's Voice. Black South African Writing in the Twentieth Century* (1989). He accuses Shava of reductionism in 'categorising all African literature in SA as protest' (1991:60), and in a strange parallel to the Cloete-Kannemeyer debate, points to the 'secondary and tertiary source flavour' of his literary history, hampered by Shava's linguistic limitations in not knowing Zulu, when dealing with R.R.R. Dhlomo's work. Like Cloete, Mzamane has unrealistic expectations of the literary historian in wanting first-hand interpretations of all texts dealt with, rather than recognizing his task on a meta-level as also dealing with the reception history of works. He also criticises Shava's theoretical underpinning: '(a) gesture here towards formalist textual criticism and a gesture there towards Marxist contextual interpretation, it ends up doing neither efficiently'. (1991:7). However, the important contribution Mzamane makes in this long review essay, is his identification of salient characteristics and changes in the body of literature under review. He stresses the 'symbiotic relationship between politics and literature in South Africa' (1991:61), and points to the 'collective ethic' that marks the new form of the African novel in South Africa as an emergent literary form attempting to 'respond adequately to the evolving political situation in South Africa'. (1991:65). In alerting

the reader to Shava's neglect of women writers, Mzamane states that autobiography was 'revitalised' in the eighties (in the writing of amongst others Kuzwayo, Makeba, Makhoele and Magona).

Recent literary historiography has seen a growing consciousness of, and steady increase in research publications, on the oral tradition, as in the work of Jeff Opland (see *Xhosa Oral Poetry. Aspects of a Black South African Tradition*, 1983). Knowledge of this indigenous tradition can radically influence our rereading of the existing canonized works, as becomes clear for instance when one realises that Opperman's poems, 'Heilige beeste' and 'Shaka', are actually examples of cultural syncretism. These poems utilize parallelism and repetition, characteristic techniques of oral tradition, and are also examples of transcultural appropriation in their use of 'Denkschemata' and imagery based on traditional pastoral Zulu culture.

Several anthologies published recently focus on women's writing. Recent publications in this field include Lockett's *Breaking the Silence: A Century of South African Women's Poetry*, 1990, Van Niekerk's *Raising the Blinds. A Century of South African Women's Stories*, 1990, and Clayton's *Women and Writing in South Africa. A Critical Anthology*, 1989. An emergent feminist literary history also 'inevitably challenges the boundaries and major preconceptions of existing canons and orthodoxies' as Hofmeyr pointed out in a rather negative review of the theoretical basis of these anthologies, which tend to be ahistorical and to 'indigenize' metropolitan theories, rather than trying to define a South African literary tradition 'with which an indigenizing debate may engage'. (1992:90).

## V

This overview of what constitutes South African literature and the writing of its history, is an attempt to illustrate the complexity and hybridized nature of the phenomenon. A comparative literary history of the totality of South African literature is clearly an ideal which is far from being realized, while we still struggle with the problematic concepts of race, language and gender, the relationship between aesthetic text and urgent political reality, and how to define our various literatures.

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