TOWARDS AN ANTHROPOLOGY OF WRITING IN SOUTHERN AFRICA

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Introduction

My suggestions about what I think anthropology can bring to the study of South African literature can be summarised in two propositions. The one is that priority should be given to that which is written and to the technical aspects of writing. The other is that the study of texts should not be tied to the study of social contexts. I will expand and try to justify these propositions, but I should say at the outset that my intention here is not polemical but merely that of trying to caution against tendencies in southern African literary studies that seem to me misguided and which stem partly from the influence of misrepresentations of anthropology.

1. Writing and Literature

> *The physical basis of writing is clearly the same as drawing, engraving and painting - the so-called graphic arts.*
>
> Jack Goody

Anthropology is often represented as the study of non-literate societies - the lack of writing being one of the many characteristic lacks that define the tribal societies which are the object of anthropology in the popular imagination. So you might expect that anthropology will be able to furnish you with theories and methods for recording and interpreting oral traditions of various sorts. You might also expect that the accumulated ethnography of southern African society will contain transcriptions and interpretations of oral traditions, and indeed many ethnographic accounts do contain such transcriptions. The real question here though is not whether anthropologists have been interested in the songs, myths, stories, riddles, oratory and other oral performances of the people of southern Africa, but whether the study of literature should direct itself to this. The use of the term 'oral literature' implies that there is a continuity between oral and written forms and that they should be treated in much the same way. There does not seem to have been much serious debate about the status of oral forms

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in South-African literary studies. Rather it appears that it is just taken for granted that if one is going to look for a pre-colonial or indigenous equivalent to the literature of the settlers then it must be towards oral traditions [1]. Furthermore there is now a tendency in South-African universities to over-compensate for their Eurocentric past and shift the focus of literary studies to oral forms. This elevation of the oral is of course not unique to South Africa although the political considerations involved here are a little different to those elsewhere. Jack Goody (1987:293) suggests that there might be a general tendency at work in this:

> A perpetual trend of complex, written cultures is the search for, and to some extent identification with, the simpler cultures of the past. One has only to recall the attraction of 'savage' cultures for the eighteenth-century Rousseau, the lure of the medieval period for the nineteenth-century Carlyle and the whole Gothic revival, the continuing opposition in European thought between the tribal, Germanic versus the urban, Roman traditions and its association with the growth of nationalism, an opposition that at the same time represents the vernacular versus the Latin, and the oral versus the written. A modern version of the same theme lies behind the search for the natural, the untouched, the oral, influencing the growth of oral history, the interest in the oral tradition (especially folksong), and the attraction of anthropology, and representing in some of its guises the apotheosis of the oral and the renunciation of the written as the real source of truth.

Goody is a bit dismissive here but the serious point is that there are some very questionable assumptions which underpin the growth of oral studies and which have been imported into the study of South-African literature. A recent example of this is a book by Landeg White and Leroy Vail called *Power and the Praise Poem* (1991). It seems to me that this book perpetuates what might best be described as the oral fallacy. Their main concern in the book is to erase the distinction between the oral and the written in southern African literature and to demonstrate that there is a continuity and a unifying aesthetic in the poetry of the region: '(c)entral to this aesthetic is the concept of poetic licence, the convention that poetic expression is privileged expression, the performer being free to express opinions that would otherwise be in breach of other social conventions'. (1991:319). They claim that their approach has many advantages over previous ones: 'It makes redundant the distinction between text and context, between formalist analyses of literary devices and social analyses

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of content, in short between poetics and history, by offering us a corpus of poetry whose content is legitimised by its forms. Finally, it enables us to recognise important lines of continuity between oral and written poetry in southern Africa'. (Ibid.: 320).

There is much to recommend this book - especially the detailed studies of the transformation of oral forms in the region - but it seems to me that the conclusion of their argument does nothing to undermine the great divide between the written and the oral which they set out to eradicate. Leaving aside the fact that their own evidence contradicts their assertion of a continuity of 'poetic licence' - the one writer of poetry (Jack Mapanje) whose work they examine was detained without trial for several years by the Malawi regime - the real problem with their position is that it never questions the premiss that pre-colonial society in southern Africa had no writing. Their procedure is to elevate oral forms to a position of equivalence with a written tradition but in so doing they simply perpetuate the idea that the people of this region lacked writing. The oral fallacy - which is a lot older than Vail and White's book - consists of two related parts. The one is that there is a continuity between oral performance and literature and the other is that writing is an extension of speech. The first of these misconceptions derives from the second, and the flaws in both are quickly exposed if one looks outside alphabetic systems of writing. As Roy Harris puts it: 'Once one sees the fallacy of equating writing with alphabetic writing, the whole question of the extent to which and the sense in which writing is a representation of speech at all becomes more debatable than Aristotle, or modern Aristotelians, would acknowledge'. (1986:27). Much of what has been written by linguists and historians about writing is based on the study of alphabetic scripts and has at its foundation the idea that writing is linked to speech. In this view writing is a sort of secondary system of representation in which the letters of a script represent the sounds of speech which in turn refer to an idea or thing. The most elaborate critique of this approach is of course that of Derrida (1976) who suggests that this 'logocentrism' - or privileging of speech - is mistaken, since all systems of signs including language are in some sense secondary systems of representation.

The important point here is that although alphabetic systems of writing are now quite widespread they are not the earliest and are certainly not the most durable of writing systems. (Coulmas, 1989). There are very successful writing systems - such as the Chinese one - which have only a tenuous connection with speech. Taking a broad view of the different sorts of writing which have developed in various times and places it is clear that they are connected

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not by their relationship to sound but rather by the way that they are produced. Writing consists of durable inscriptions on some kind of surface, and it makes more sense to see it as an extension of drawing than of speech. As Goody puts it: '(w)riting, then, has its roots in the graphic arts, in significant design'. (1987:4). Pictographic systems of writing, many of which are still in use today, are obviously much closer to the decorative arts than they are to other systems of representation and in some cases it is not easy to determine whether an inscription should be described as drawing or as writing. To a certain extent these exist on a continuum and the boundaries between writing and other sorts of design are not at all clearly defined. Indeed, it is possible - and I would suggest that this has frequently been the case - to fail to recognise writing as such and to dismiss it as decoration or primitive art.

This brings us back to the question of writing and the history of literature in southern Africa. I became aware of the existence of indigenous systems of writing in this region while doing fieldwork in southern Malawi. There is a system of pictographs in this area which is still in use and which certainly owes nothing in its derivation to the scripts introduced by Muslim and Christian missionaries. It then occurred to me that there might be other writing systems in the region, and I came across the pioneering work of the Austrian anthropologist Gerhard Kubik who has documented the existence of a large variety of graphic systems from all over southern Africa. He summarises his findings as follows: '(o)ne of the most tenacious stereotypes about Africa is rooted in the notion of so-called non-literate or pre-literate societies. Such notions have been upheld despite abundant evidence to the contrary. Various graphical systems designed to express and transmit ideas or to convey messages were known in Africa south of the Sahara in pre-colonial times, from phonological systems ... to mnemotechnical, ideographic and pictographic systems'. (Kubik, 1984:72). He points out that much of what has been described as ornamentation or decoration from this region actually turns out to be pictographic systems when properly analysed.

There is clearly a great deal more research to be done on the whole topic of the development and uses of writing in pre-colonial southern Africa and it seems to me that if one is to rethink the history of literature then it might be fruitful to begin by looking at writing and graphics rather than just at songs and dances. After all, there are graphics from Namibia which have been dated to around 27 000 years ago.

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2. Text and Context

So that attempts to swallow up the intention that lies in or behind a book of mine - let's assume for the moment that there is an intention there - into something wider or more all-embracing, more swallowing, notion of social intention - I have to resist them because frankly my allegiances lie with the discourse of the novels and not with the discourse of politics.

J M Coetzee

It may seem curious for an anthropologist to suggest that the study of literary texts be detached from a concern with social contexts since in an important sense anthropology is all about contexts. The dominant mode of explanation in anthropology from Boas and Malinowski onwards has been to locate beliefs, practices and institutions in their appropriate cultural context. Nevertheless it seems to me that there is something in the nature of writing - any sort of writing and not just 'literature' - which should make us cautious about looking for its meaning in the social conditions of its production.

One of the defining features of writing is that it is durable - it leaves a trace. It can therefore travel across time and space in a way that speech and other non-graphic systems of representation cannot. By its very nature writing is able to convey meaning away from the context of its production, and it can do so repeatedly and with precision. One could go so far as to say that it is part of the meaning of any writing that it is detachable from its context - that it seeks to move beyond the purposes of its producer and link itself to other inscriptions in other times and places. It might be better then to stick with the more conventional mode of literary studies and locate the significance of a text in a world of texts rather than trying to root it in the social formations of its origin. It is surely more fruitful to look for the influences and resonances of southern African literature in a global literature than in a particular historical context. It makes more sense to situate recent South African novels in relation to styles and models associated with global literary movements, such as naturalism and modernism and maybe even the Japanese autobiographical novel, than to try and relate them to the local political economy.

To look for social causes or effects of literature is almost always a misleading process. It involves either an inflation or a diminishing of the significance of writing. On the one hand it ascribes to books a power to interact with society which in fact they very seldom possess and on the other hand it reduces them to a peripheral status in an arena where other

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discourses are dominant. What I am saying here is that perhaps we need to accept literature as marginal - but not secondary - to the fundamental forces at work in society. This would at least allow us to take literature seriously in itself instead of trying to link it to discourses in which it inevitably comes off second best. Writing is important, but I think we would be deluding ourselves if we think that it has a fundamental place in the struggles and transformations of contemporary South-Africa. Literature projects itself to a world beyond the concerns of its immediate social environment. The very act of reading (or writing) is one of detachment and there is a real sense in which writing can be regarded as an anti-social activity. The context of writing is not society but other writing.

Notes

1. The difficulty in finding a suitable term - oral tradition/literature/folklore etc - is symptomatic of the general theoretical haziness in dealing with this material. It is in any case probably a mistake to lump together a whole range of oral forms which are regarded as being very different in their function and significance by the people who perform them.

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