

Reading History as Cultural Text¹

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Abstract

This article takes issue with a moderately strong trend in the politics of South African cultural debate in terms of which variants of 'Post' criticism are typified as textual radicalism, and then condemned as ethically and politically irresponsible. The essay questions the generalised straw-man version of 'post-everything' concocted by critics who draw their validation from an assumed position of engaging in what they call 'practical politics'. The article sees such arguments as damaging both to the theoretical integrity of materialist criticism and to the particular inflections of 'Post' critique which derive from specific South African conditions and histories. Finally, an example of particularist critique is offered. The reader is invited to judge whether such work is indeed an example of 'import rhetoric', or whether it asks worthy questions whose import is not limited to a spurious textual ephemerality.

1 'Import rhetoric' or indigenous practice?

If one were to believe some influential commentators on the state of cultural-historical analysis in southern Africa, then it would seem that the challenges posed by various 'Posts' are little more than vainglorious babblings by enthusiastic scholars *manqué*. In the *Southern African Review of Books*, for example, columnist Maki Saki (1993:24) heaps scorn on what s/he calls 'our new wave of dotty campus evangelisers', attributing to them statements such as 'the textualising of indigenous capacity' and 'the signifying appropriations of silenced marginality'. Maki Saki's parody seeks to bind you in a nontheoretical or an anti-jargon compact that says: we're level-headed, sane, and objective; we use plain language that confuses no one. S/he then proceeds to poke fun at a Cape Town conference, concluding with this apparently devastating observation:

But leading spokespersons should be applauded for keeping our minds on 'interstices', 'textuality', 'signifiers', and 'mediations', during a period when so many institutions are worried by the practical challenges of change on the African continent. With our cutting edge intelligentsia keeping most delegates blissfully free of tiresome economic and political concerns, there should be no shortage of nominations for Maki Saki Madumbis (Maki Saki 1993:24).

We are invited to conclude that what Maki Saki later characterises as 'post-modernist-post-colonial-post-structuralist navel-gazing' (Maki Saki 1993:24), is the root cause of a deeply irresponsible escape from the 'practical challenges' of change on the African continent.

On at least two counts, this binary trap—virtuous 'practical politics' vs. irresponsible textuality—is quite breathtaking. First, how does a Maki Saki escape its own vice of judgment? Does s/he engage in 'practical' politics

1. This is a revised version of a paper delivered at the *Journal of Southern African Studies* 20th Anniversary Conference, 'Paradigms Lost, Paradigms Regained? Southern African Studies in the 1990s', in York, September 1994.

which is untainted by signifiers? Second, the parameters of judgment invite the reader to confirm as basic common sense a strange duality by which some 'worries' (presumably resident in scholarly language) are 'practical', while others are of the 'navel-gazing' variety. Without delving into the unstated theoretical assumptions about language and reference here, let us simply note that all the variants of 'Post' critique are judged as *ethically* irresponsible, and that 'Post' criticism is seen as inherently unworldly, or lacking in a dimension of materiality. In a tradition of southern African scholarship which has been strongly influenced by Marxism, there can be few shortcomings more egregious than this.

Maki Saki is not a lone voice. In the *Southern African Review of Books*, Nicholas Visser (1993:19) offers a more challenging criticism of what he calls the 'enthusiastic reception colonial discourse analysis and postcolonial theory have been accorded in certain academic circles in South Africa'. He says:

'Postness' carries with it a strong sense of intellectual superiority, a sort of *post hoc ergo melior quam hoc* What it in fact provides is an avant-gardist and purely gestural politics 'Theory' provides its adherents with the remarkable capacity to be simultaneously in the vanguard (since discourse is the real site of politics) and safely on the sidelines (since no messy and hazardous involvement with political activity is required).

He then argues that such positions lend a 'spurious radical aura to what is often no more than an unreconstructed liberal posture'. Significantly, he adds:

[I]t substitutes textual for practical political endeavour; and it is tacitly and sometimes not so tacitly used by its advocates to legitimate retrospectively their own *political uninvolvedness* during the years of massive state repression of the 1980s (Visser 1993:19 - e.a.).

Visser's arguments are compelling, yet they set up a value system in which better scholars are practically involved in politics, while less admirable scholars languish in the deceiving utopia of textuality.² As in Maki Saki's case, these criticisms seem to assert an ethical hierarchy that sets off 'real' political involvement against 'purely gestural politics'. Since both writers seem primarily to be engaged in *speaking* and *writing* as occupational activities, one remains puzzled about what distinguishes *their* writing as nondiscursive ('practical'), and what makes *their* signifying activities more 'practical' than those of 'Post' critics. Visser's position leads one to speculate

2. It should not be inferred, however, that my argument implies a consensus of similar opinion either within the literary or the historical fields, or that such an antagonism is generally valid. I especially wish to avoid the notion that historians are 'objectivist' while literary-cultural scholars are 'postmodernist'. There are gradations of opinion in both fields, and in others besides. Among historians, one finds positions which are deeply sensitive to textuality and postmodernism (see, for example, Aletta Norval (1993), Paul Maylam (1993), Clifton C Crais (1992), Patrick Harries (1994). A large number of cultural scholars also adopt 'Post' positions unexceptionably. The argument with the view which seeks to characterise 'postness' as ethically irresponsible is thus not meant to *represent* a more general configuration, but simply to take issue with *one* moderately prominent strain of thought which can be found across the disciplines.

that legitimation, for South Africanist scholars, must be found in extra-disciplinary political activities. But if that is the case—and it does seem to be a necessary implication of his statements—then one must ask: of what order, and who is to evaluate the appropriateness of one's 'practical' politics?

In my view, such a paradigm for the adequacy of scholarly positions is highly problematic. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s critics such as Visser and many others took great pains to convince their Leavisite-humanist colleagues in literature departments that everything was political—representation, textuality, the canons of universalist literature and criticism, theory, hostility to theory, everything. Now we are asked to believe that the politics of post-this and post-that are *purely gestural*. As opposed to *purely practical*?

It may be worth pausing for a moment to consider this shift from a more to a less finely calibrated formulation of worldliness³ in the politics of cultural debates. When historical materialists in cultural studies engaged in disputes with those they were wont to characterise as 'idealists' in the 1970s and 1980s, the argument was often framed as one in which proponents of 'the text itself' as an autonomous—in the best cases, a 'universal'—artefact, were challenged by the 'materialists': those who insisted that the *materiality* of class relations and forces of production were determining (or at least influential) factors, even in the spheres of writing and culture. In doing this, they were making what still seems a necessary and valid point about the manner in which cultural objects are produced. Faced with the pervading Romantic notion of individual 'genius' and a fetishisation of the textual artwork as fully sufficient in itself, historical materialists were quick to point to the implicit class-interest of such positions—bourgeois critics disguising bourgeois values as 'universal'. In South Africa, where the theory of the ineffable artist has taken a long time to die—indeed, it remains a hoary spectre in many unreconstructed corners of English departments—the advocacy of art-for-art's-sake has been seen as particularly meretricious. For historical materialists, literature and textuality were indeed necessary spheres of social struggle, and it was to such broader streams of 'struggle' that many of us who argued for historical materialism saw ourselves as contributing.

Such a position depended on assumptions about textual 'materialism': each text was ideologically constructed and it derived from a discernible nexus of class relations as well as worldly interests. The job of the materialist critic was to analyse the dialectics of text and world, to attend to historical specificities, and to disclose the ideological camouflage by which some texts sought to present themselves as non-partisan or as artistically universal. In short, it was argued that representation was never innocent. Language and literature were never 'purely gestural' or merely 'discursive' and therefore 'outside' politics. That was when the antagonist was perhaps what Visser calls the 'unreconstructed liberal' before the cosmetic modification offered by what Visser conflates into a unitary category which he labels 'postness'.

This may be the source of Visser's umbrage. A new class of depoliticised aesthetes have perhaps discovered that the often Baroque

3. On 'worldliness' in relation to textuality, see Edward W Said (1984).

terminology of poststructuralism, postmodernism, or postcolonialism offers a revitalised haven of textuality in the shallow sense: a place of refuge from political and contextual constraints in criticism. Similarly, Maki Saki may be using satirical exaggeration to point to the terminological excesses (or 'jargon') which are undeniably evident in much writing by 'Post' critics. But if this is the case, the cause of 'political' criticism has also been dealt a blow by the axiomatic assumption that 'practical' concerns are somehow antithetical to textual ones. The historian Paul Landau (1994:6) confirms this trend in a letter to a subsequent issue of the *Southern African Review of Books* in which he warmly congratulates Visser for his stance against 'textual radicalism' (see also Sole 1994). Frantz Fanon, says Landau, would have been pleased to see that 'scholars are now depicting the discursive construction of ... "the native"'; Landau then adds this rider: 'But another, seemingly apposite trend would not have pleased him: that there is no other person except that textual construction, and that the colonised African cannot therefore be written as anything *but* the native' (Landau 1994:6).

This is an intriguing charge. Landau's letter is brief and does not allow for much elaboration, so one must make certain assumptions. Earlier in his letter, he talks of the 'unmasking of the new privileging of textual, gestural politics, as being metropole-ism' which needs to be heard by 'historians of Africa'. He commends as fascinating Visser's appreciation of Aijaz Ahmed's critique of the 'discourse of colonialism' and of the 'misprision that it creates the "colonial subject"' (Landau 1994:6). This nutshell-critique is most valuable because it offers a succinct definition of what has come to be perceived about pretentiously new-fangled post-isms which are seen as more or less the same thing: postmodernism in alliance with postcolonialism in alliance with appropriating 'metropolitan' jargon.⁴ Although many writers from within 'Post' positions have indeed committed excesses to justify such claims, and although there is a distinct danger of postmodernist neo-universalism,⁵ which is sometimes seen as the re-appropriation of the margins by newly-empowered émigré superstars (Said, Spivak, Bhabha, and others, or the 'Bombay Mafia'), this does not mean that we should accept uncritically the massive connotations inherent in what one may call the straw-man version of post-everything (which may conveniently be abbreviated as PET). The straw-man version seeks to hold anyone who adopts 'Post' positions to the 'strong' postmodernist attitude that textuality necessarily comprises an internal system of differential relations with no 'real' relation to the outside world.⁶ From here it proceeds to formulate claims about the ethical irresponsibility of 'misprisioning' the colonised subject in textual confinement

4. For another critique in the same periodical with a similar objection against 'metropolitan' appropriations of southern African cultural-historical capital, see Isabel Hofmeyr (1993).

5. See for example, Henry Louis Gates (1989), Kumkum Sangari (1987), Aijaz Ahmad (1992), to name only a few.

6. Such 'strong' postmodernism is articulated by, for example, American-based South Africanist historian Elizabeth Elbourne (1993:340) as 'the dilemma of the apolitical self-referentiality of deconstruction'. See also Andrew Foley (1992).

and disallowing the 'native' any proper existence in the actual world where such a subject may wish to disagree with any or all representations of his or her subjectivity. The final step is to conclude that the motives of PET critics are suspect because they are removed from sites of struggle in a way that struggling people are not. PET practitioners are middle-class, ensconced in warm academic departments, and they presume to fix the 'natives' of the world in textual representations which, by their infinitely discursive nature, are almost immune to criticism.

The problem one faces in trying to resist such parodic representations is that one may unwillingly find oneself 'defending' one term in an either-or construct with which one disagrees in the first place. The textual radicalism/practical politics opposition is hard to counter, because one does not wish to support the notion that the terms do always oppose each other in this way. However, the arguments which pit 'practical' against 'textual' do not allow very much space for dispute except by reversing the hierarchy of value which their binarities inscribe. Similarly, I feel uncomfortable with the idea of 'defending' postcolonialism as though it were a uniform entity which needs or deserves defending in the first place. I have argued at length elsewhere for the provisionality of the term 'postcolonial' (De Kock 1993a), and it would be belated to repeat such arguments now. The important point is that 'postcolonialism' exists as a singular entity *only* in the straw-man concoctions of critics who place themselves in an adversarial relation to the 'it' they describe. At best, one could argue that there are similarities in so-called postcolonial approaches to cultural-historical analysis, such as an affinity with postmodernist scepticism, and the inclination towards the decentering of humanist categories of knowledge, insofar as such categories have been integral to imperial-colonial constructions of identity and knowledge which non-Western peoples have been compelled to negotiate. I believe one is free to take from 'Post' theories as much as one needs to 'liquefy' (Connor 1993:35) oppressive representational procedures, and redeploy them in a decidedly *political* context of counter-narrative.⁷

The real question seems to be whether anything 'Post' implies a denegation of reference to a world which is palpably real, and one in which values still matter. If 'Post' means radical indeterminacy in the matters of both value and reference, then Visser, Maki Saki, Landau and the other lampooners of PET-positions are indeed fully justified in the charges they make. PET adversaries assume that such indeterminacy is necessarily axiomatic in 'Post' criticism. From my point of view, nothing could be less true. In my view of what one may call cultural-historical criticism from within 'postcolonial' space, the most urgent subjects are those *about* value, *about* reference. It is less a question of *rejecting* the possibility of value and reference as it is a *revision* of how one understands such terms, and a critical view of how earlier forms of such understanding affected the making of a colonial history which comes to us mainly in textual traces.

Indeed, the notion of reading 'history' as 'cultural text' is derived

7. On 'counter-narrative' see Richard Terdiman (1985).

precisely from the sense that the narratives, or 'accounts', in historical documents are often themselves heavily constructed, that *they* make implicit claims about reference which have been prejudicial to the 'natives' who have found their identities inscribed in peculiar, and discomfiting, ways in public representation. In the nineteenth century, missionaries and other colonial figures under whose teaching or administrative fiat many colonial subjects were compelled to seek social mobility, were wont to present their utterances under the implicit guise of a theory of unproblematic reference (language= reality). It did not need poststructuralism for sceptical readers to feel uneasy with the colonising word, but poststructuralism provided a compelling theoretical context for questioning the representational procedures inherent in colonising discourse. It enabled one to adopt the notion of 'discourse', to *relativise* as constructions implicated in power plies the representations found in colonising discourse. In this *historical* context, one may indeed engage with 'Post' theories in order to question, not the ability of language to refer at all, but to refer *adequately*.

This is a crucial point. PET-haters accuse the domesticated PET-variants of *themselves* constructing the 'native' in an imprisoning textuality which allows no external reality to intervene, or in a manner which is so over-generalised as to deny 'native' subjects historical specificity. But a primary discrimination is needed here in order to distinguish between different historical moments of representation, between the imperialist construction of the so-called 'native' in the first place, and what it means to unmake this earlier construction. In very bald terms, the imperialist objectification of the indigene (as Other, as Infidel, as Oriental etc.) is held by poststructuralist-derived critique to be a deceptive linguistic construct masquerading as reality within a positivist conception of language as capable of bearing truth unproblematically. This is not the same thing as saying language does not refer at all. Philosophers in widely divergent traditions have long held that an independent world is undeniably there, but that it is not available to human comprehension outside of representational and conceptual modes. It does not come to us in brute, essential form, as itself. The world is apprehended via sense and conceptual scheme apparatuses. The charge against 'post-everything' of 'misprisoning' the indigenous subject in language should therefore be laid at the door of the philosophical enterprise itself, for removing the concept of reality from unmediated availability, for subordinating the 'practical' or the 'real' to theoretical-discursive constraints.

It is one thing to analyse the ways in which subjects have been conceived in modes of apprehension, and textually represented in various tropes or emplotments (see White 1973) and quite another to deny that subject's existence or to hold that the text is the only place where subjects may be found. The very point of doing discourse analysis, or 'deconstructing' representations, is surely to say that there is a gap between text and world, not that there is no reality. It is to say that not all texts are equal, and that some texts exhibit greater foreclosure than others. It is, ultimately, to set up discriminations of value about the way in which subjects are imprisoned in

texts in the first place, and to bring alive the antagonisms that must exist in the agonistic spaces between representation and self-apprehension. Arguing for a 'weak form of postmodernism', Judith Squires (1993:11) maintains that humans are both 'embodied and embedded' but that their identities are '*constructed* narratively' (emphasis added). She adds:

... whilst we may give up all use of foundational, essentialist, teleological and transcendental concepts, we still need a notion of the self. And this theory of the self should not ... be one which insists on the self as simply a 'position in language' (Derrida) or an effect of discourse (Foucault). The self is not simply fictive, it is social, differentiated, embodied and historical (Squires 1993:11f).

For Squires, the lessons of postmodernism remain important, but they need to be resituated within contexts in which notions of value and justice are retrieved from the spectre, often associated with the 'Posts', of absolute relativity:

The postmodern engagements in, and preference for, fragmentation and differentiation have a quite serious, even normative purpose: they serve to disrupt and erode the power of normalising discourses, they clear the space for the more disorderly and particular discourses of difference. But if these discourses of difference are to be articulated within a framework of justice, we must acknowledge that a postmodern politics must be concerned with concrete structures of power and normative expressions of value (Squires 1993:13).

Another theorist dealing with what he calls the 'necessity of value', Steven Connor identifies in post-colonial critical theory (among others) an 'ethical-evaluative impulse' which is to be found

in a practice of *negative interpretation*, in the impulse to liquefy certain violent or oppressive coagulations of value (the mistaking of white, or male culture for culture in general ... the centring of history around narrowly reductive categories and subjects, and so on), which leads to a suspicion of value and evaluation in general ... (Connor 1993:35).

However, Connor argues strongly that such a suspicion of value in general cannot amount to a *negation* of value, because 'value, like the unconscious, tolerates no negativity, since every negative evaluation, even of the practice of evaluation itself, must always constitute a kind of evaluation on its own terms, even if it implies or states no positive alternative value' (Connor 1993:36). In terms of such a reconstructed view of what we may or may not wish to call 'postcolonial' modes of thinking, I believe one may move beyond the 'problem' of indulging in 'textual politics' with little reference to 'practical' concerns. Indeed, one may affirm that, since what we think of as 'history' is available to us largely in textual form, and since such textual forms embody the politics of representation which have left deep marks on real people in real contexts, it is an ethical-evaluative task to decentre, discriminate between, and locate orders of value in, the texts of history. Despite the argument that 'history' is discourse and not event, one should not subscribe to a hopelessly relativistic position of absolute indeterminacy. The very relation between 'reality' and 'discourse' is such that while reality is

'dumb' (it contains no stories of its own making, it is inchoate), it also only exists as such (as the *concept* of 'reality') in relation to the ceaseless human activity of interpretation. When one talks history, one talks in a discursively constituted linguistic order of interpretation whose traces are partially evident in prior discursive events ('evidence' generally consists in verbal accounts, earlier interpretations). For Tony Bennett, 'the past as traces already in discourse (the historic past) acts as the referent for the historian *as if it were* pre-discursive' (in Jenkins 1992:12), and within this qualified sense, certain rules of reliability and credibility serve to enhance a historical narrative's purchase on extra-discursive reality. Clearly, there is always *some* purchase on a real past in a historical document, even if that connection is no more than a recognition that a certain story has been told in a certain way about an ascertainable event. It is surely inaccurate to say that critiques derived from 'Post' theories necessarily lead one to deny subjects, or an 'objective' world, any existence outside the text. Rather, it is in the conjunctions of ascertainable events (by sensory evidence, by multiple perception, by significantly concurring accounts) and their appropriations in verbal discourse that the 'textual turn' in history should make itself felt.

2 The turn of the text

The unpleasant turns of textual representations, and the ensuing sense of difference between, on the one hand, publicly stated but contestable attributions of selfhood, and, on the other, privately held senses of identity, are evident in the record itself. One does not need to construe textual politics as an afterthought or in pursuance of a PET-theory. Textual politics, ambivalence, slippage and play can be discerned as *historically* evident in the profusion of written accounts which constitute the textual archive.⁸

One example can be taken from the record of missionary imperialism relating to Lovedale, on which I have conducted some research (see De Kock 1993b). The example concerns a controversial accusation made in the Lovedale mouthpiece, *The Christian Express*, in 1885, that the teaching of classics to Africans at Lovedale 'ha[d] been found to do no special good but to produce positive evil' (in *Imvo Zabantsundu* 4 May 1885). John Tengo Jabavu, founder-editor of *Imvo*, replied, in the same issue:

We shall be extremely sorry to say anything which may appear to charge the Editor of the *Christian Express* with hostility and unfairness to Natives. With all due respect to the worthy and esteemed Principal of Lovedale Institution, we ask, what

8. On the question of whether postmodernist conditions or processes can be seen as historically evident, it is interesting to note what the American author Toni Morrison has said, in an interview, about the experience of slavery: '... black women had to deal with "post-modern" problems in the nineteenth century and earlier. These things had to be addressed by black people a long time ago. Certain kinds of dissolution, the loss of and the need to reconstruct certain kinds of stability. Certain kinds of madness, deliberately going mad in order, as one of the characters says in the book, "in order not to lose your mind"' (in Gilroy 1993:6f). However, Morrison interprets postmodernism as treated by 'white literati' as 'abolishing history' (in Gilroy 1993:7). Clearly, 'white literati' need to dissociate themselves vigorously from such a perception of their use of postmodernism.

positive evil have classics produced to Natives trained at Lovedale? We desire information and light on this subject. The native lads are complaining loudly to their parents and guardians that they do not enjoy the advantages now in the Lovedale classes that the European lads enjoy. This difference has been made quite recently. They cannot understand why the difference is being made. Among students of the same class, who have reached the same standard in examinations by their teachers and Government Inspectors of Schools, a difference is made. The Europeans are given other subjects to study, but Natives are prohibited, even when they express a desire to study those subjects. These are classical studies. The parents know nothing of Latin and Greek, but would like to be informed as to why the difference is made. The *Express* has partially told us the reason for this. It does not arise from unwillingness to see natives enjoying the same advantages as the white race, but in the native mind classics produce positive evil!

Jabavu, always deferential to the protocols of respectable public address and compositional form, nevertheless seeks in such writing to draw attention to alarming slippages in signification, which were perhaps all the more disturbing because meaning in the Victorian era was taken to be reasonably stable. The urgent question, 'what positive evil have classics produced to Natives trained at Lovedale', is an attempt to stabilise the trajectory of that ultimate legitimating signifier, 'civilisation'. 'Civilisation' in its millenarian guise (see Bosch 1991:313; Elbourne 1993:340)—one of the foundational premises of early missionary teaching—had been understood to promise a 'golden age' in which undifferentiated equality would be guaranteed. Yet Jabavu was compelled to perceive, in the writings of his own missionary alma mater, a redeployment of 'civilisation' rhetoric in which the transcendental value of complete equality was displaced. Suddenly, he was given to understand, Latin and Greek corrupted the minds of 'natives', but remained good for European pupils. How could such a deeply unsettling differentiation—a perfidious deferral of the once pure promise of civilised equality—suddenly be slipped in? Jabavu resorted to what firm ground he could muster. He challenged Lovedale on facts. He wanted a 'list of African young men educated at Lovedale, who had a classical education while there, but who are now a disgrace to Lovedale and a failure', and a list of African scholars who 'have been educated at Lovedale and have never reached classical studies while there, who are now a credit to the Institution and a success in the country' (*Imvo* 4 May 1885). Jabavu was confident that he could proffer a rebuttal. In both cases, he asserted, it would be possible to provide the opposite: names of scholars who never read classics and who had become a disgrace and a failure, and names of former pupils who did read classics and who were now a credit to the institution as well as a success outside it.

This example of textual struggle is overt and explicit, in that the issues were raised into public debate, by the figures involved, in newspaper columns. More frequently in 'Post' theories, notions of text and discourse tend to suggest that conceptions of selfhood and otherness are 'textual' or 'discursive' in the broader, *implicit* sense of discourse as a selectively constituted range of preconceptions rendered in and through the mechanisms of representation. However, the overt nature of Jabavu and Lovedale's tussle over what amounted to a more just conception of the 'native' and his/her

mental abilities, is suggestive because it brings to the surface precisely the discriminations of value which would normally be submerged or coded in pious talk about 'upliftment'.

The *Christian Express's* remark that, far from educating Africans, a study of classics produced 'positive evil', struck a very raw nerve among Africans who had themselves been educated in classics at Lovedale. Shortly after Jabavu's comments were published, a correspondent, 'Lovedalian' of Kimberley, wrote a detailed polemic in which he mentioned by name many Africans educated in classics who now occupied high positions. 'Lovedalian' struck out with Latin phraseology at Dr James Stewart, then principal of the flourishing institution:

With all respect to Dr Stewart, who holds a very honourable position in this country, I submit that this statement is not only unjust but very incorrect. Yes, I go further and say it is a *suppressio veri et suggestio falsi*. I am saying this advisedly, believing that I shall be able to prove by positive and indisputable facts that, all things being equal, classics instead of producing positive evil have produced positive good ... (*Imvo* 17 June 1885).

'Lovedalian' expressed the concern that the 'positive evil' statement was not only unwarranted by facts, but also fatal to present and future students who might study at Lovedale, 'that at the strength of it they are prevented from competing in the Cape University examinations'. 'Lovedalian' then sought redress by bringing 'the real facts of this important question before the public'. He proceeded to provide an impressive list of leading African clergymen, translators, schoolmasters and others who had taken classics at Lovedale. After naming each group, he repeated the question: what positive evil and failure was produced in the case of these people? 'Lovedalian' concluded by calling upon the principle of 'permissive will or man's free agency', and charging that the prevention of students from studying classics was an interference with the principle of free will.

'Lovedalian's' letter was an exemplary product of a young, well-educated person. It threw a whole faceful of good Lovedale learning right back at the institution, from Latin to moral philosophy. But instead of pleasing Lovedale, this mimicry of good learning was utterly repugnant to the mission institution. Lovedale's reply, a letter from the Rev John Knox Bokwe (at the time, Stewart's personal assistant at Lovedale) to *Imvo*, brimmed with resentment at the 'impudence' of the Kimberley correspondent. Bokwe said he could not bring himself to repeat 'Lovedalian's' slur of *suggestio falsi et suppressio veri* against Stewart in plain English, and added: 'If this is the effect of the classical education Lovedalian received at Lovedale, the manner of his letter—if not the matter itself—has proved beyond doubt that to gentlemen of common sense "too much attention to Classics" in his case at least "has produced positive evil"' (*Imvo* 1 July 1885).

A week later, Jabavu responded to the debate by asserting that 'Lovedalian's' facts were unanswerable and that it was 'exceedingly preposterous' to speak of classical education 'as having been a failure among the Natives as a mass' (*Imvo* 8 July 1885). Jabavu's earlier plea for a factual

verification, and 'Lovedalian's' challenge on the basis of ascertainable information, were alike ignored by *The Christian Express* and by Lovedale spokesmen. This was clearly an argument in which facts had little purchase on the *desire* to configure Africans within stereotypical conceptions of relative human worth within a scale of values influenced by Social Darwinism. However, such configurations meant that deep ambivalences had to be entertained between competing notions of 'progress'. Earlier missionary discourse of the millenarian kind, in which someone like Jabavu was sure to have been schooled, now had to be adjusted so that the same language might express a new turn, a foreshortening in which meaning was subject to deferral.

Evidence of such a process became palpable when *The Christian Express* itself entered the debate with an editorial entitled 'A Suggestion to the *Imvo Zabantsundu*' in which it claimed that '[w]e should be sorry to put the slightest obstacle in the way of any native acquiring any language living or dead, if he himself chooses to take the trouble of learning it, and paying the cost of teaching'. It continued:

But we may, in taking leave of this subject, be *allowed to make a single suggestion to the Imvo Zabantsundu*, which is the great champion of classical education for natives, and also of higher education, as it understands that question. It has the ear of that not very large portion of the native people who read. What should it tell them, if it really desires their welfare, if it loves them both wisely and well? *Tell them this—that the life and death question of the native people in this country now, is not classics or even politics—but industry*; that the foothold the natives will be able to maintain in this country depends almost entirely on the habit of steady conscientious work; and that it is of more consequence for them to understand this, than to be able to read all the lore of the ancients (*The Christian Express* 1 August 1885).

Jabavu could not leave matters here. *The Christian Express* was telling it that all the great vistas of elevated life, both on earth and afterwards, had suddenly veered away from the glorious promises of a golden age, and were now foreshortened into suspicions about the indolence of the native! Jabavu harnessed all his aplomb in his answer, in which he combined courtesy and challenge in the same register:

It [*The Christian Express's* editorial] is so good, and we look at it as a compliment to ourselves. It is not with the object of detracting from it that we propose to offer an observation or two on it, but rather to point out some errors into which the writer, unintentionally, to be sure, would seem to have fallen, so as, if possible, to improve it. To begin with, our mentor starts with the idea that this paper is 'the great champion of classical education for natives, and also of higher education'. It does not follow because we are thorough believers in the doctrine that, as a rule, the more a man is educated the better fitted he is for whatever post it may please God to call him, we are therefore 'champions of classical education for natives', and so forth. In connection with the educational controversy, in which some have been engaged in these columns, we have taken our stand against those who were understood to imply, if not to suggest that 'conscience has a colour and quality of work a hue' and who were for the equipping of the Native for the future in such a manner as to lead one to believe that the contrary were the fact. So minded then, we have merely claimed for our people a fair field and no favour' in the matter of classical or higher education (*Imvo* 19 August 1885).

Again, one detects in this extract a sensitivity to unsettling loops of signification which occur in each successive displacement of the argument. Jabavu observes how the enunciation of an ideal in which one seeks the greatest possible level of education, is taken as a newly deferred meaning: that *Imvo* is a 'champion of classical education for natives', which itself then points to yet another meaning: a yearning for bombastic or 'inappropriate' learning. Jabavu seems very consciously to want to undercut this chain of deferral, by resorting to epigrammatic restatements of the original ideal ('conscience has no colour' and 'a fair field and no favour'). Yet the evidence suggests that no sooner had he uttered these anchoring statements than they were again misheard, and that, in addition, he seemed to be aware of such slippage in the marshes of meaning and reference.

In historical perspective, it appears that the principle of absolute equality before God and equal teaching for all pupils was being distorted by the colonial context, particularly by the labour needs of an expanding economy, in which these values had to be enacted. What Lovedale's educators in the high imperial era saw were not the idealistic, comedic possibilities of equality in civil society, but the satirical, cynical prospect of 'educated idlers'⁹—buffoonish fops—trapped between the 'heaven of civilisation and the hell of savagism'.¹⁰ What Bhabha (1985:74) calls the 'ambivalent, deferred address of colonialist governance'—a doubling of signifiers from the context of British constitutionality into that of colonial fiat—meant that educated Africans were potentially trapped within the parameters of a crude conceptual calculus. On the one hand, Africans had been taught the doctrine of free will at Lovedale, while at the same time they had to endure the effects of stereotypical metaphoric configurations—and their debased forms of expression—consequent upon the colonial doubling of nineteenth-century humanitarianism. The only way to begin escaping such crude representations of the self was through the assertion of counter-narrative.

Imvo's struggles for truthful representation were thus founded upon a sense of ambivalence, which is incidentally also an important concern in colonial discourse theory. There is a telling indication of Jabavu's possible awareness of the discursive slippage inherent in such ambivalence in the final words of his reply to *The Christian Express's* 'suggestion' to *Imvo*, when he wrote:

Our friend, it will be observed, winds up the valuable advice, for which we are grateful, with the significant statement that 'If it [*Imvo Zabantsundu*] has any doubt of the soundness of these views *because of the source whence they come*, let it make inquiry at all true friends of the Native people, or for proof, abide the teachings of experience.' We confess we cannot account for the expression we have taken the liberty to italicise; for we have been trained to give great deference to the opinions of the Editor of the *Christian Express*, even when we had the

9. On the notions of comedic and satirical tropes in colonising discourse, see De Kock (1993b:117-122).

10. These words were uttered by Langham Dale, Superintendent-General of Education in the Cape, and quoted in *Imvo* 24 November 1884.

misfortune to differ from them. Of course, there is in this world, what the sacred bard called the 'searchings of the heart', and it is not for us to enter into that mystic field. With these prefatory remarks, however, we have great pleasure in reproducing 'A Suggestion to the *Imvo Zabantsundu*' ... (*Imvo* 19 August 1885).

With this deeply subversive act of mimicry, Jabavu both reproduced *The Christian Express's* editorial in full, and placed discursive markers around it which deconstructed its overt meaning. Jabavu recognised a crack in the civil mask of the editor of *The Christian Express* (James Stewart) in the editor's remark that should the soundness of his views be regarded as compromised by their source, then confirmation should be sought elsewhere. Jabavu's enigmatic suggestion of 'searchings of the heart' implied that only the editor's own ambivalence could have led to the thought that his Lovedale base should be capable of suspicion, because its graduates had been taught to show great deference to the institution, its personages and organs. If it were so convinced of the legitimacy of its truth-claims, why be perturbed by a deviant statement in the mouth of one of its former pupils?

At the same time, however, Jabavu's phrase 'even when we had the misfortune to differ', seems to contradict the assertion of willing conformity in the assertion that 'we had been trained to give great deference to the opinions of [Stewart]'. Jabavu seems here to have allowed his own civil facade to drop by revealing an awareness of two levels of discourse: the public voice of *apparent* conformity and obedience to orthodox Lovedale civility, and the secondary awareness of ambivalence. By allowing this secondary awareness to become apparent while ostensibly showing obeisance to proper form and the highest standards of civility, Jabavu reproduced *The Christian Express's* piece under the counter-suggestion of its ambivalence. Here indeed is an example of 'sly civility' in which the 'look of surveillance returns as the displacing gaze of the observed' (Bhabha 1984:29). The 'suggestion to the *Imvo Zabantsundu*', thus reproduced in *Imvo*, was now made to read as a testimonial to the instability and vulnerability of missionary representations.

In my view, then, *Imvo's* struggle for adequate representation was no naive hankering after the lost utopian ideals of the brotherhood of man enshrined in early missionary teaching,¹¹ but a carefully considered manipulation of the legitimating potential of the *enunciation* of those ideals within the distorted 'civil' context of the 1880s. This is not to suggest that someone like Jabavu did not believe in the ideals represented by nineteenth-century philanthropic humanism or that he was cynical. On the contrary, his only power was to use the comedic master-narrative of 'civilisation', passionately, against those who had colonised in its name and who would now distort it into a satiric parody.

In conclusion, I have tried to show how, in Jabavu's case, a deep frustration with the ambivalence of orthodox missionary discourse and with its displacing repetitions, led him to conduct a subversive textual redeployment of such discourse in order to reveal the colonial doubling of humanitarian values. In such terms, 'textual politics' are hardly the 'purely

11. This view is evident in Chanaiwa (1980), Roux (1964) and Ngcongco (1974).

gestural' domain of dotty academics, but the space in which historical struggles have been, and continue to be, articulated.

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