

Re-viewing the Past: Notes on the Rereading of Canonized Literary Texts

Godfrey Meintjes

I began with a desire to speak with the dead (Greenblatt 1988:1).

1 Introduction

Canonized, traditional Afrikaans literary texts are not only a product of the socio-political power emanating from a colonial hegemony, but the very canonization of the literature itself is a product of a particular ideological network. The aim of this investigation is to *revisit* examples of texts written prior to the so-called *Renewal of Sixty* and which traditionally were *revered* and more recently have been *reviled* by critics.

2 Reading and Rereading

The traditionally acceptable and therefore institutionalized readings of canonized Afrikaans literary texts can inhibit the process whereby meanings are generated in texts. Roland Barthes (1974:10) stresses the co-authorship of the reader in the following way: 'The more plural the text, the less it is written before I read it, ...'. However, the canonized and canonizing readings of texts tend to lock the text into a specific system. Andre Lefevere (1986:3) formulated the problem regarding the institutionalized interpretation of texts as follows:

What further contributes to the increasing irrelevance of literary studies in our time, is the dogged persistence with which corporate critics beholden to a certain set of values, epitomised by a certain canon tend to insist on ... the 'right' or 'acceptable' interpretation of that canon.

The history of literary theory in the Western world reflects the gradual but consistent decentring of the author and the foregrounding of the reader. Jefferson (1988:97-98) describes reader-centred criticism as follows:

For Barthes criticism consists in actively constructing a meaning for a text and not in passively deciphering the meaning, for in the structuralist view there is no single meaning in literary works.

Van Zyl (1982:77) describes the reader involvement in the generating of meanings in texts in the following way:

... the reader is not viewed as passive and will because of art's capacity to model reality, project into the work not only the structures of his artistic experience, but the structures of his life experience as well.

Kermode (1983:44) explains the textual openness to new interpretations as follows:

It seems that on a just view of the matter, the books we call classics possess intrinsic qualities that endure, but possess also openness to accommodation which keeps them alive under endlessly varying dispositions.

Roland Barthes (1974:16) proposed the following reading strategy in order to escape the tyranny of institutionalized readings: '... rereading is here suggested at the outset for it alone saves the text from repetition ...'.

Rereading might assist the text in relating historical events to contemporary discourses. With regard to a semiotic interpretation of texts, Robert Scholes (1982:30) has the following to say:

... we can't bring just any meanings to the texts, but we can bring all the meanings we can link to the text by means of an interpretive code. And, above all, we can generate meaning by situating the text among the actual and possible texts to which it can be related.

The act of rereading by definition confronts the reader with what Montrose (1989:20) calls the 'historicity of texts and the textuality of history'. This paper will confine itself to the historical implication of texts, but the literary theoretician finds it interesting that modern historiography finds itself confronted by the notion that history, in the words of Collingwood (1946:242) is viewed as a 'web of imaginative construction' rather than, in the words of Von Ranke (Ricoeur 1988:154) a presentation of the past 'as it actually happened' (*Wie es eigentlich gewesen*).

While 'the unimpeded sequence of raw empirical realities' as de-

scribed by Krieger (1974:339) may appear to be knowable, historiography involves '... critically examining and analysing the records and survivals of the past' (Krieger 1974:339) and it has to take cognisance of the possibility of what Foucault (1977:143) calls the 'ancient proliferation of errors'. Degenaar (1986:69-70) reminds his readers that historical facts are presented in terms of metaphors, icons and images. Hutcheon (1989:67) believes that historiography itself is influenced by phenomena such as interpretation involving subordination. It can therefore not be assumed that history necessarily would be free from forgetfulness, concealment and misunderstanding as listed by Derrida (Derrida in Bernet 1989:144).

As a 'vehicle for historical truth' (McHale 1987:96) historiographic metafiction in the words of Marshall (1992:150) 'refuses the possibility of looking to and writing about the past 'as it really was''. Rather s/he takes on an active role and 'does the past', participates, questions, and interrogates.

In opposition to this fragmented view of history, marxists like Jameson (1983:19) prefer to view history as 'a single great collective story' containing a 'single fundamental theme ... the collective struggle to wrest a realm of Freedom from a realm of Necessity'.

The advent of the practice of *the new historicism* as outlined by Stephen Greenblatt (1989:1) in the early 1980s goes some way towards incorporating some of the important features of both postmodernism and marxism. While reading the text from a historical perspective as would a marxist, the new historicist also remains aware of the open endedness of texts and of *differance* (Derrida 1973:136). In line with poststructural thinking, new historicism as indicated by Abrams (1993:249) also takes cognisance of Foucault's view that

power relations at any given era in society contribute the concepts, oppositions and hierarchies of its discourse and in this way determine what will be counted knowledge and truth.

New historicism further accepts Bakhtin's (1981:273) view that literary texts tend to be dialogic and this feature of conflicting and contradictory elements merge in new historicist practice with the post-modernist notion that texts tend to deconstruct themselves.

Abrams (1993:249) succinctly describes the approach of the new historicism:

This historical mode is grounded on the concepts that history itself is not a set of fixed, objective facts, but like the literature with which it interacts, a text which needs to be interpreted: that a text whether literary or historical is a discourse which although it may seem to present or reflect an external reality, in fact

consists of what are called representations—that is verbal formations which are the ‘ideological products or constructs of a particular era ...’

In this way the new historicism, in the words of Ruthven (1984:221) writing about feminist criticism, becomes a ‘scanning device’ in the sense that ‘it operates in the service of new knowledge which is contributed by rendering visible the hitherto invisible’.

Greenblatt (1989: 1-14) favours the term *cultural poetics* for his new historicist textual practice while marxists like Dollimore and Sinfield (1985:foreword) prefer the term *cultural materialism* for their brand of new historicism. In essence a new historicist reading is political in nature. Abrams (1993:252) describes a political reading of texts as follows:

The primary aim of a political reader of a literary text is to undo the ideological disguises and suppressions in order to uncover the historical and political conflicts and oppressions which are the text’s true, although covert or unmentioned, subject matter.

We shall use three traditional texts from Afrikaans literature in order to demonstrate how a political reading of a text can uncover ‘covert or unmentioned, subject matter’ (Abrams 1993:252).

3 *Hans die Skipper* (1928) by D.F. Malherbe.

The publication of D.F. Malherbe’s novel *Hans die Skipper* coincided with the PACT coalition government between the Nationalist party and the Labour party which governed the Union of South Africa from 1924 to 1929. The fact that the author received the coveted Hertzog prize for the novel in 1930 is proof of the literary (and political) status of a text which over many years was revered as a classic in the Afrikaans canon. Kannemeyer (1978:164) in his monumental Afrikaans literary history calls this text Malherbe’s ‘suiwerste’ (purest) work and refers to the conflict between father and son in the text. Traditional institutionalized readings of the text tended to emphasize this very generation conflict as well as the notion that the text was a novel in praise of labour. Fifty five years after it’s first date of publication the text was—for the very first time ever!—read from a historical perspective by Gerwel (1983). In 1991 however, Bertelsmann subjected the text to an incisive rereading from a historical perspective.

In stead of decoding a hymn to labour *per se* or a mere generation conflict between father and son, Bertelsmann traces the ideological project of a text which, according to him, sets out to encourage the likely reader

(poor platteland Afrikaners, locked into a rural economy) to enter into a 'Volkskapitalisme' in the cities in line with the so-called 'civilized labour policy' of the PACT government. This ideological project, according to Bertelsmann, was disguised by the fact that Johan, the son of Hans die Skipper in the text, does not leave the family farm but the small scale fishing life style for the industrializing town where, incidentally, he becomes involved in wagon building with its obviously acceptable symbolic connotations. While Johan becomes very successful in town, the text, Bertelsmann (1991:12) points out, describes his father Hans' dependence on the seasons and nature in general.

With reference to Macherey (Coetzee 1984:15-23) Bertelsmann (1992:12) indicates that certain *silences* reveal the ideological project of the text. One such *silence* is in connection with the history of Johan's so-called 'coloured' counterpart Willem. Willem and his wife display the very characteristics which the text propagates: they were of sober habits, hard-working, decent living etc. However, Bertelsmann points out that because the portrayal of a successful 'coloured' man in town or in a city would undermine the ideological project of the text, this figure had to be dropped from the narration altogether.

Gerwel (1983:141) is of the opinion that this novel reflects attitudes in the social environment from which the texts emanates. Bertelsmann (1992: 13) takes issue with Gerwel and states that the very ideological project of this text is not to portray the extra textual *status quo*, but to attempt to change the very socio-political situation by encouraging a new economic dispensation. Similarly, when Gerwel (1983:143-144) sees the portrayal of 'coloureds' in the text as a group of people with inherent defects, Bertelsmann (13) is of the opinion that the very opposite is true in this novel. The very economic system propagated by the text would inevitably lead to the demise of the feudal social order and for this very reason the text envelops the future of the so-called 'coloured' in textual silence.

The following general description by Abrams (1993:250) is directly applicable to the very process at work in Malherbe's *Hans die Skipper*:

Furthermore, what may seem to be the artistic resolution of a literary plot yielding pleasure to the reader, is in fact deceptive, for it is an effect which serves to cover over the unresolved conflicts of power, class, gender, and social groups, that make up the real tensions that underlie the surface meanings of a literary text.

4 *Somer* (1935) by C.M. van den Heever

Somer (1935) is a typical Afrikaans farm novel which, in the words of J.M. Coetzee (1988:82), 'celebrated the memory of the old rural values or pro-

claimed their desirability and elaborated schemes for their preservation'. The setting for the novel is a Free State farm at the time of the harvest.

Traditionally the text was read as a story dealing with problems affecting farmers such as natural disasters, and problems related to ownership rights. At a different level it was read as a love story involving Linda and Wynand registering notions regarding the futility of love against the background of the eternal movement of the seasons.

This is another text central to the traditional Afrikaans canon and originally revered by establishment critics. Kannemeyer (1978:304) in the seventies still described this text as one of van den Heever's best: '... een van Van den Heever se suiwerste werke'.

Gerwel (1978:97) in sharp contrast to Kannemeyer's reverential attitude towards the novel, representing a revisionist reading, decodes a different text. Gerwel (1978:97) states that this novel is one of the 'most reactionary' texts *vis a vis* the portrayal of so-called 'coloured' people in the texts under discussion in his essay. He says that the 'coloured' figures are described in the most banal of terms and they remain mere aspects of the background and are portrayed as obedient serfs of their white masters.

Mackenzie (1994:1) rereads *Somer* from what she calls a 'sexual political' perspective and decodes patterns of patriarchal domination represented in the text. Mackenzie's reading of a text which, according to a traditionalist reading like that by Kannemeyer (1978:304) was regarded as a romantic and idyllic treatment of abstract, so-called, universal problems, have much in common with Dollimore and Sinfield's (1985:foreword) 'commitment to the transformation of a social order which exploits people on the grounds of race, gender and class'.

This kind of reading achieves the very opposite of the traditional Kannemeyer (1978:304) kind of reading which tends to

naturalise the text ... that is interpret its culture-specific and time-bound representations as though they were features of universal and permanent human experience (Abrams 1993:251).

5 *Boplaas* (1938) by Boerneef

The short prose texts in Boerneef's *Boplaas* (1938) provide typical examples of Afrikaans prose from the pre 1948 period. The texts in this volume in which a white narrator relates experiences on a Bokkeveld farm from his childhood, deal with the day-to-day activities on a Karoo farm and encode blatant racism as part and parcel of a specific view of life. While some critics revere these texts as respectable first class literature belonging

to the canon, the texts also fall into the very category which are reviled by revisionists.

The canonized readings of these texts traditionally established and entrenched certain meanings comfortable to the hegemony. In the late sixties F.I.J. Van Rensburg (1968:11) described what in effect represents a description of a feudal order in the *Boplaas* texts as a 'natural hierarchy' and Merwe Scholtz (1979:4) in the late seventies still regarded the *Boplaas* texts as images of a kind of farm idyll.

Mphahlele's (1974:50) reading of Afrikaans literature as a whole, epitomizes a reading strategy which reviles Afrikaans literature on the grounds of its surface structure:

Were it not that it glorifies white supremacy, and were it not for the unutterable evil this literature breathes, one would simply dismiss it as inane, a crushing bore.

Gerwel (1987:92) in a report of a revisionist reading of the older Afrikaans prose, says that many of these texts (the *Boplaas* texts by Boerneef, although not specifically mentioned in his essay, fit into this ethos) tend to affirm attitudes which might contribute to colour and race discrimination.

Here we have typical examples of a dilemma: Gerwel and Mphahlele decode devastating racism in these (kinds of) texts and Scholtz and Van Rensburg report the reading of an idyll.

In addition to the two approaches outlined above, Aucamp (1988) suggests that some of the older Afrikaans texts represent the Afrikaans writer's own demythologization of a feudal and presumed paradisiacal world.

It is however, not merely a matter of decoding blatant racism on the one hand, or assuming an idyll on the other hand. The primary aim, in the words of Abrams (1993:252), of a political reader of a literary text is

to undo these ideological disguises and suppressions in order to uncover the historical and political conflicts and oppressions which are the text's true, although covert or unmentioned subject matter.

Read in this way the *Boplaas* texts become discursive sights representing historical power structures.

A historical rereading of this text indeed portrays a feudal racist social order. The paradox in these texts is that the very uncensored portrayal of the social order to which Mphahlele refers, unmasks a system which could, as indicated by Scholtz's reading be mistaken for a peaceful farm idyll. The text indicates a narrative process within which the narrator employs the narrative elements, *figures, events, space and time* in order to generate a *Boplaas* code. This code indicates paternalism, racism and feudalism as major aspects of an ethos and read in this way the text demythologizes the notion of a farm

idyll. The text also, as the result of its capacity to represent aspects of history, does not only question Mphahlele's (1974:50) negative view of Afrikaans literature in general, but it can even meet Mphahlele's own social criteria for literature which demands that 'it should order our experiences and responses and help resolve conflicts inside ourselves ...' (Gerwel 1987:92).

This kind of reading strategy enables the decoder of the text to trace the representations of the past and in the process, to use the words of Abrams (1993:252), the 'voices of the oppressed, the marginalised and the dispossessed' can be decoded.

Conclusion

The rereading of texts traditionally revered and currently reviled, might assist the reader, in the words of Kumar d'Souza (1989:26) taken from a different context 'to move into another space, another time recapturing submerged knowledge, generating new spaces'. Fiction is indeed a kind of history as Doctorow (1977:217) asserted. Whether history is a kind of fiction as he also postulated, is the subject of another investigation.

Department of Afrikaans and Nederlands
Rhodes University

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