

Interrogating the Interrogators: A Reply to Coullie and Gibbon

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I am glad to see that Coullie and Gibbon agree with me on certain fundamental principles: 'that South African universities' curricula should reflect (and reflect on) their South Africanness and Africanness' (p. 15), 'that "traditional EngLit" should be dethroned' (p. 19) from its position of supremacy in South African university English programmes—in other words, that university literature study in South Africa, as in other parts of Africa, should be decolonised. We seem to share at least one common ideological position: an insistence that further curricular reform is needed so that South African undergraduate and postgraduate students will gain greater access to their own national literary heritage. We all believe in destabilising the *status quo*.

However, Coullie and Gibbon do not like the instrument I devised for measuring the relative standing of writers and texts taught most frequently in South African university classrooms. They attempt to dismiss it as a 'popularity poll' (p. 15) or 'hit parade' (pp. 19,21) based on 'inaccurate data' (p. 16) or at least on 'very limited empirical data' (p. 18), 'incomplete data' (p. 21) that have been used in 'questionable ways' (p. 16) and subjected to a 'slanted interpretative process' (p. 21) in order to achieve goals of 'questionable motivation' (p. 21). They think that I am trying to impose 'an alternative "African canon"' (p. 17) on English departments, a canon to which all South African university English teachers would be expected to conform.

But what seems to bother them most is the fact that their own institution, the University of Durban-Westville, scored poorly in my survey, so they take pains to introduce new data that boost UDW's numbers, thereby giving the impression that their own English programme is more 'progressive' or 'radical' (p. 17) in its approach to curricular revision than those at many other South African universities, a claim in some ways belied by the very evidence they elect to cite.

Further, they manifest a severe allergic reaction to the term ‘canon’, leading them to endorse uncritically Toril Moi’s proposal ‘to abolish all canons’ because a ‘new canon would not be intrinsically less oppressive than the old’ (p. 17). In short, they want to go beyond British canon-busting to South African canon obliteration, a no-holds-barred approach to text selection for university English courses that gives teachers absolute freedom to prescribe whichever books they wish, for whatever reasons they deem appropriate, rather than be constrained in any way by the practices, policies or opinions of their peers who teach in the same field. To put it another way, they want to substitute the tyranny of the individual teacher for what they regard as the tyranny of a tradition of texts. Everybody else’s teaching preferences and educational priorities are to be, in a word (their favourite contestatory word), ‘interrogated’ (pp. 17, 18, 19), by which they seem to mean not just questioned but distrusted and disregarded. Only the solitary teacher’s unfettered choices, deriving from ‘a healthy non-conformity, a thoughtful selection of texts to fit specific course objectives and student needs’ (p. 21), have any legitimacy. All communal standards should be abandoned. The whole syllabus should always be up for grabs.

Coullie and Gibbon may be surprised to learn that on this last point I nearly agree with them, but not because I share their enthusiasm for a *laissez-faire*, anything-goes brand of pedagogy that puts students at the mercy of the whims, healthy or unhealthy, of non-conformist teachers. Rather, it is because I accept curricular change as a natural and inevitable process, at least over the long haul. Coullie and Gibbon are disturbed by my use of words such as ‘classics’ and ‘masterworks’ (p. 17) because they conceive of canonicity as something stable, fixed, rigid, immutable and therefore intrinsically conservative and coercive. But I believe just the opposite: namely, that any literary canon is inherently unstable, dynamic and ever-evolving, that over time every canon mutates, taking on new properties and shedding old ones which no longer retain any vitality or validity; that today’s classics may become tomorrow’s forgotten or remaindered books. Some contemporary masterworks will have staying power, others will not, so a teaching canon will always be undergoing revision and renewal. We do not read everything our grandparents used to study, and we cannot expect that our grandchildren will study everything we nowadays choose to read. Since each age will define its own set of valued texts, no literature curriculum stands a chance of becoming permanent. Today’s teachers will not be handing down to their successors a tablet of sacrosanct curricular commandments cut in stone. Times change, needs change, values change, people change, so the texts assigned in literature courses will also inexorably change. In that sense—the sense of eternal flux—the syllabus is always up for grabs.

But the grabbing, to have any authority, should be a collective activity,

not an idiosyncratic enterprise. If South African university English teachers are to be given the liberty to decide which South African texts are to be taught to South African students, all of them should have a say in what gets selected. I do not mean to suggest that each institution's English faculty ought to assemble annually and hash out their differences before nailing on the chairman's door a list of next year's required readings, even though this would be a commendably democratic manner of proceeding. Rather, since South African literature is a relatively new field, one in which many teachers will have little formal training, it may be useful for everyone concerned to examine what is being done on campuses other than their own before committing themselves and their students to readings that may be totally unrepresentative of what the majority of their professional colleagues who are already teaching in the field consider to be of sufficient merit or importance to be taught. After all, South African literature is not what you think it is or what I think it is; it is what South African teachers and critics in concert think it is. It is a communal set of discursive practices that defines a field.

Having discovered how the field is commonly defined, teachers may, of course, choose to disagree with the definition and go their own ways. The discovery process is only the beginning of their work; thereafter they must decide what to do with this new knowledge. If they wish to reject the practice of their peers and chart a different course entirely, they must at least be aware of what it is they are rejecting. They must question not only the curricular decisions of their colleagues but also their own.

A little humility here might help. If, for example, it happens that a large majority of South African English departments teach something by Athol Fugard, usually *Boesman and Lena*, does it make any sense that in 1992 the English faculties at Rhodes, Western Cape, Transkei, Durban-Westville and possibly Pietermaritzburg ignored his writings entirely? Is his work important in South Africa or is it not? Most South African English departments seems to think so. Perhaps Coullie and Gibbon could tell us why they and their colleagues at Durban-Westville think not.

I am not advocating consensus and conformity, only enlarged awareness and informal decision-making. Radical deviation from a widely accepted corpus of texts may be justifiable in certain circumstances but not necessarily in all circumstances. Nonconformity to a tradition of texts (a canon, if you like) may be at least as much a disservice to students as would be a mindless, unquestioning adherence to those same texts. There needs to be some room for innovation, some latitude for introducing new works, but if a syllabus is too quirky, too deliberately iconoclastic, or too highly flavoured with a teacher's personal or political concerns, students may get a very distorted notion of South Africa's literary history. Total flexibility in curricular design is no improvement over hyper-rigidity.

I hope it is now clear to Coullie and Gibbon that my aim in constructing a crude instrument for measuring the relative standing of local authors and their texts was not to impose or 'establish' a teaching canon but to discover the one that was already in place, albeit during a time of social, political and educational transition. I did this initially for my own benefit, but I thought I should pass along what I learnt to colleagues in South Africa, who like teachers everywhere else, are faced each year with the same vexing problem of determining none too arbitrarily who or what to teach to their students. Perhaps, if they could compare their own text selections with those of others, they would be better equipped to 'interrogate' their own textual practices and pedagogical practices. Perhaps, confronted with their own assumptions, they would be forced to think a little more deeply about their field, their department, even about themselves. And who knows? One day they might decide to take a giant leap and teach a book they had never previously considered teaching, much less reading. In the process, they might stand a chance of improving themselves professionally, for they might actually learn something new.

Coullie and Gibbon did not like what they learnt from my survey so they tried to discredit it, asserting that it had no validity because it relied on 'inaccurate' (p. 16), 'very limited' (p. 18), 'incomplete' (p. 21) data. They also tried to trivialise the exercise, calling it a 'popularity poll' (p. 15) and 'hit parade' (pp. 19,21) as if the serious decisions made by South African university English teachers in selecting texts for classroom use were as empty-headed as the whistles heard at beauty pageants or the pop music played by adolescents. One can understand their name-calling as a diversionary tactic—the sort resorted to in absence of a reasoned argument—but their outright blunders are more difficult to fathom. For instance, how can we credit their complaints about 'inaccuracy' when their own remarks are so riddled with misinformation and mathematical mistakes? One wonders if they truly comprehend the weight and significance derived from the cumulation of statistical data. I stated in my paper that my survey was 'not a complete inventory of all English courses in which texts by African authors were used' because I had not been supplied with comprehensive data from all campuses. I was aware of omissions from Potchefstroom, Pietermaritzburg and the Vista universities, but I was not aware that UDW had failed to furnish me with their honours course prescriptions, so I could not report that a portion of their data was missing. Let me make amends now: based on the new information that Coullie and Gibbon have brought forward, I herewith award UDW six more asterisks on my Table Four, giving their department due credit for teaching Gordimer, Coetzee, Paton, Head, Schreiner and Abrahams in their honours course.

I confess I am still a little puzzled why only three of the high canoni-

calls (Ngugi, Achebe, Serote) are taught at lower levels of their curriculum, but perhaps English teachers at UDW are so busy interrogating what others in South Africa value that they have little time or taste for home-grown literary works, preferring instead to stuff their students with British and American texts so that those few who may be fortunate enough to 'meet their peers at European or American universities' will have something in common to talk about. (One wonders, of course, what would happen if those European or American peers wanted to converse about Fugard, Soyinka or Mphahlele; would the UDW student, ignorant of these indigenous giants, desperately try to steer the discussion back to *Piers Plowman* or the *Leatherstocking Tales*? And what would happen if the UDW student chanced to meet peers at Ghanaian, Kenyan, Ugandan or other tropical African universities? Would he or she have anything interesting to say to them about their own anglophone literatures? Why are Coullie and Gibbon so intent on preparing all UDW undergraduates for a conversational encounter with the West? Why do they assume that their students will have no desire to enter into a meaningful dialogue with the rest of Africa?)

But I'm beginning to digress. Let's return to the less speculative domain of mathematics. Coullie and Gibbon believe that because I neglected to include reading lists from the UDW honours course in my survey, the results of that survey are altogether invalid. Yet if we absorb their new data into the scoring scheme, what is changed? As was mentioned earlier, UDW does earn a few more asterisks on Table Four, giving it a less embarrassing quotient of canonicals than before (nine out of twelve instead of three out of twelve). But are the other Tables affected significantly? No, they are not. Their triumvirate of Fugard, Gordimer and Coetzee are still on top in Table One. The same texts reign supreme in Table Two. The comparative columns in Table Three remain intact. There may be a few minor modulations here and there, but the UDW numbers do not alter the ultimate outcome. My conclusions thus still stand. To repeat what I originally asserted:

the sample, covering more than ninety percent of what was taught in English Departments in nearly one hundred percent of South African universities, is sufficiently large to permit gross generalisations to be made. A more comprehensive and more refined survey might change some of the final tabulations, resulting in slightly higher scores for some writers and slightly lower scores for others, but I believe the final results would remain more or less the same. What we have here then is a crude measuring instrument capable of producing nothing more than a few brute truths (Lindfors 1996:6f).

These brute truths, far from being 'inaccurate', 'limited', 'slanted' and 'skewed' are still brutally true.

Indeed, what Coullie and Gibbon deem 'brute falsehoods' and 'weird

distortions' (p. 20) in my survey appear to flow from their own wilful misconstruction of what I stated. They allege that 'Lindfors incorrectly asserts that UDW's English department "taught only black writers"' (p. 20), whereas it should have been clear from the context of my remarks on Table Four (dealing with institutional data) that I was referring here solely to the group of 'twelve writers deemed most important by South African university teachers' (Lindfors 1996:13). Of these twelve, the evidence I had in hand (which through no fault of my own did not include the honours course data) showed that UDW taught only Ngugi, Achebe and Serote. So my statement was true. Coullie and Gibbon's statement, on the other hand, was an equivocation, for two sentences later they admit to being aware that 'Lindfors includes only those authors who scored more than twenty points' (p. 20). (Even here they are inaccurate; they should have said 'more than twenty-seven points', for La Guma (p. 26), Plaatje (p. 26) and Ndebele (p. 24) were also omitted from Table Four, having scored a little too low to make it into the canonical top dozen).

Coullie and Gibbon also claim that I reached 'skewed—indeed, falsified—conclusions', because

[a]t UDW at undergraduate level alone (allowing, again, for the failure to consider the honours prescriptions) Dangarembga, Emecheta, Soyinka (his anthology of African poetry), Ousmane, Okot p'Bitek as well as Dikobe, Tlali, Moloï (who does not even warrant a mention by Lindfors) and Mtwa/Ngema/Simon are disregarded (p. 20).

This I deny. No one who had a book prescribed on an available South African university English course reading list was disregarded. Some of them simply scored so badly that they couldn't be counted as numerically significant. When quantifying data, what one looks for are the biggest numbers; the smaller ciphers don't merit close attention. Moreover, editors of anthologies—Soyinka in this case—earned no points at all. If Coullie and Gibbon expect UDW to be credited with an extra asterisk simply because someone in their department assigned an anthology with Soyinka's name on the cover, they are barking up the wrong empirical tree. If one adopted such a standard I imagine Michael Chapman would have to be ranked among South Africa's top dozen canonicals.

As for anthologised authors (as opposed to anthologising editors), I still see no compelling reason to include such marginal figures in my survey. Should a two-page story by Casey Motsisi or a three-line haiku by Dennis Brutus weigh as heavily in the final reckoning as, say, a play such as *Boesman and Lena*, or a novel such as *Waiting for the Barbarians* or *Petals of Blood*? If not, how can one define in numerical terms their relative importance? This would require deploying a nuanced algorithm well beyond

my computational abilities. However, if Coullie and Gibbon wish to attempt such refined comparative measurements, they are welcome to fritter away their wits devising their own foolproof canonical calibrational scheme, but I hope they won't expect the rest of the academic world to accept their arbitrary assignments of value as anything other than statistical nonsense. They would be substituting sheer subjectivity for honest objectivity.

Coullie and Gibbon believe that I want traditional English to be 'utterly ostracised' (p. 19) in South Africa. I don't know how they arrived at this conclusion, for I certainly said nothing of this sort in my paper. My primary concern was to show that while South African university English departments had made some progress in incorporating South African texts into their literature programmes, they had not as yet done much to introduce their students to the literatures of the rest of Africa. To do so, they would of course have to trim their offerings of British literature, but I never suggested a wholesale 'replacement [of that literature] with an alternative African canon' (p. 17). A substantial displacement, yes, but a complete expungement of British (and American) literature, no. I agree that it would be useful for South African students to know something about English language literatures produced outside Africa, but I feel that they don't need to know as much about them as they currently are required to learn. Indeed, it seems to me that their time would be better spent in learning more about their own literary heritage and about the vigorous literatures emerging in neighbouring African nations. It's a question of achieving a better balance in their literary diet.

Coullie and Gibbon defend the *status quo* by arguing that

many of our students who major in English intend to pursue teaching careers, and it would be extremely irresponsible of us not to equip them with *some* knowledge of British and American literature, examples of which they will undoubtedly be required to teach at secondary school level (p. 19).

Undoubtedly? Is the secondary school syllabus so impervious to change that African texts cannot be substituted for some of the foreign matter still clogging the pedagogical pipeline? Should curricular revision stop short of the high schools? If universities start requiring their students to read more African texts, isn't it likely that those very students will subsequently play a role in indigenising literature study at the level at which they wind up teaching? Why should university English departments perpetuate the past when they could be charting the future? Why not lead the way rather than follow?

Since Coullie and Gibbon are suspicious of my motives and doubtful of my morals, allow me to attempt to put their minds at ease by laying my cards face-up on the table. Here is an outline of what I would regard as an ideal literature curriculum for South Africa. Basically it would consist of three more or less equal parts:

1. South African literature.
2. Other African literatures.
3. Other anglophone literatures (including British, American, Caribbean, Indian, Australian, etc.).

First year students would concentrate primarily on South African literature, oral as well as written. In the second year, they would move into other African literatures while maintaining a focus on South African Literature, and in the third year they would be introduced to the literatures of the English-speaking world, particularly those produced in colonial and postcolonial conditions. The honours course would be an international smorgasbord organised thematically around related texts drawn from different anglophone traditions. The MA course would afford an opportunity for concentrating on aspects of a single national literary history.

Such a curriculum would put South Africa squarely at the centre of the literature programme, especially in the first year, when students would be immersed in their own national literary culture. From there they would move outwards to other parts of the anglophone world, not restricting their focus to the British Isles. It seems to me that this type of curriculum, by progressing from the indigenous to the foreign, from the known to the unknown, would be much more valuable and interesting to them than the old-fashioned, heavily British syllabus that most South African university English departments still slavishly follow.

What is fundamentally at issue here, is South Africa's cultural identity. Will South Africa continue to consider itself a distant outpost of the West or will it begin to see itself as an integral part of Africa? One expects it will wish to be allied with both worlds yet will seek to maintain its independence from each, preferring the kind of international integration that does not require surrendering its own unique national character. South African university English departments can assist in this crucial process of self-definition by putting South African literature first and setting other African literatures on an equal footing with Western literatures. A rainbow nation deserves a rainbow education.

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References

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