

Southern African Literatures

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by Michael Chapman

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The connotation 'South Africa Literature' is metonymical for the literatures of South Africa. If there are eleven languages as the South African Constitution states then one can expect that there would be at least eleven literatures—rather than the two literatures (Afrikaans and English) that have been empowered through colonialism and apartheid. The 1993 concise historical perspective of Bhekinkosi Ntuli and Chris Swanepoel, *Southern African Literature in African Languages*, lists nine written literatures, with modern productions in Xhosa, Southern Sotho, Northern Sotho, Zulu, Setswana and Tsonga. But white monolingual, even bilingual (Afrikaans, English), literary historians know nothing about these texts.

After reading Michael Chapman's *Southern African Literatures* one does not learn much more about these 'other' literatures. He does not use, or even mention, Ntuli and Swanepoel. In undertaking a history of literatures one should—it seems obvious—be able to read texts in these languages (although Albert Gérard apparently didn't?). There are, I suppose, very few, if any, persons with the necessary knowledge of the eleven languages, their literatures and literary theory in general, to be able to write a history of all this. A team of writers would probably only manage an encyclopaedic project, where no basic theory is necessary, only the facts about writers and their productions. This Chapman admits, but prefers his own 'particular view' (p. xx).

The matter of language is crucial. A fact which Chapman admits in more than one instance (cf. '... a challenge facing South Africa in the future is the resuscitation of African-language literature as an intelligent, adult activity' p. 216), yet he asks whether it is not inevitable that English becomes the 'metonymic master-code' (p. xx). This is no doubt true; but then one should guard against the imperialism which seems to be inevitable

among monolingual English speakers. One could, for instance, deconstruct the manner in which 'Southern African Literature' is being appropriated for English by this history. The book is published by 'Longman Literatures in English Series', and the Series List includes Pre-Renaissance English Literatures, English Poetry, English Drama, English Fiction, English Prose, American Literature; and among 'Other Literatures' (the old colonial us-them dichotomy): Irish Literature since 1800, Scottish Literature since 1700, Australian, Indian ... in English, African ... in English, Caribbean and Canadian ... in English. 'Southern African Literatures' do not have the qualification 'in English'. That could mean that they are, by implication, in English, or that the history of these literatures is now written in English; English being a lingua franca, and everyone accepting that any literature of any worth will eventually land up and be canonised in English. Or—and this could be the most reasonable assumption—that the language in which this history is written does not really matter.

Unfortunately Chapman's history does not imply that. His monologic use of the term 'South African Literature' is a case in point. Some examples: Thomas Pringle in SALit (p. 87); rewriting SA literary history (implying only English, p. 97); Blackburn and SA thinking (p. 141); SA literature from 1910 to 1970 (where only English is meant, p. 147); increased literariness in the SA literary scene within the context of William Plomer's work (p. 183); how Plomer 'impinges on the South African literary scene' (p. 185); Van der Post and SA fiction (p. 187); South African literature in university syllabuses (p. 224, while African and Afrikaans literatures have their own departments at universities); the significance of *Drum* in SA literatures (p. 241). And he says 'in 1978 I began studying South African literature by considering, specifically, the poetry of Douglas Livingstone' (p. 423).

Chapman says that his *Southern African Literatures* contains his own particular view 'of the several distinct but interrelated literatures of southern Africa'; that defining national literatures within such a context is problematic; that his method is comparative and the arrangement mostly chronological; that it is not an encyclopaedic survey (which would have to be undertaken by a team of scholars), and that the source material is taken mostly from English translations or commentaries, where the originals were not written in English.

In his summary at the end of the project—'should this study find itself the subject of literary, social or educational debate' (p. 430)—he gives what one could consider as the four main objectives of his contribution: '... the need to rehabilitate identities, practices and aesthetic possibilities in the context of a just idea'; '... to examine the potential of a common humanism'; where subjects have become marginalised it has become necessary

to recover an 'African' justification for the accessibility ... of communication as well as for the moral agency necessary to effect change;

and the pragmatic situation at hand has determined theory (p. 430).

The key concepts here are: national literatures, a comparative method, chronological, identities, a just idea and moral agency, a common humanism, the African, the situation at hand. In examining these concepts or ideas one would have to problematise some of the following: one-nationness, identity, Africanness, the comparative method, the view of history, the moral, and material conditions as determinate.

Can there be one nation without a common language? Although cultures in their widest sense may differ, as languages differ, one may have to rethink the political and social dream of one nation where there will always be major and minor languages; and where major and minor does not refer to the number of speakers, but to the language of power. In South Africa English is becoming that language; and if the speakers of all the other languages will become excluded from the discourse of power their literatures will remain minor, and only accessible through translation into English. Becoming appendages to English literature; until everything is written in English. The shift has already begun: André P. Brink is writing his novels in English and Afrikaans, but in future he might as well write only in English. Ellen Kuzwayo, Matselele Manaka, Mtutuzeli Matshoba, Zakes Mda, Es'kia Mphahlele, Mbulelo Mzamane, Njabulo Ndebele, Sipho Sepamla, Wally Serote, and Miriam Tlali, for instance, have been writing in English. Chapman cannot give enough information on writing in the 'indigenous languages', because only those who produce literature and read literatures in those languages have the knowledge, and we—the white theorists—have never learnt those languages and developed the theories to integrate the 'other' literatures into English. And should we, if the major African writers in our region have turned to English, and Afrikaans literature is still writing itself within its own and still powerful hegemony of publishers?

On the question of identity. What is a white African? 'To be a white African is, perhaps, to live and write if not exactly in contradiction, then in paradox' (p. 344) says Chapman with regard to Patrick Cullinan and Peter Horn. Is Fugard's *Boesman and Lena* South African or 'universal'? Are questions that he asks. Does a black African novel differ from that of a white African, because—as in the case of the Soweto novel—it is positive and hopeful, and the other often apocalyptic? And writers such as Breyten Breytenbach, a French and South African citizen? But he does not pursue the matter enough. He could still have asked about Elisabeth Eybers, a highly respected poet in Holland writing in Afrikaans. And Afrikaans? Is it Africanised, bastardised, Dutch?

The question about identity is obviously led by the ideal of the unified nation, where our identity would be 'South African'. But if one asks what a white African is, one has to first qualify what an African is. This is a matter of genealogy, of beginnings, and of establishing identity as a stable and immutable phenomenon. Can this be unambiguously determined? Then there is also the term literature, with its genre divisions of novel, written poetry, drama based on Greek concepts. This is surely Western?

The comparative method cannot succeed unless all literature written in all languages of the country are known. I can only illustrate the deficiencies of his method with reference to some comparisons with Afrikaans literature.

His major critical reference to that literature seems to be Jack Cope, an English writer and critic. The authoritative literary histories of J C Kannemeyer are hardly mentioned, and his work is not even listed under the 'Notes on biography, important works and criticism'. Chapman's 'Story of the Colony' (Chapter 4) does not mention Karel Schoeman, and *Another Country* is read within the criticism of J.M. Coetzee. He talks of Sophiatown becoming Triomf, but has not taken note of the significant modern novel of Marlene van Niekerk, *Triomf*. The importance of the short story in black and white (English) fiction is mentioned, but not its equal significance in Afrikaans writing, especially the post-modern, subversive, stories of Koos Prinsloo. There are many more examples, and numerous factual errors (translations of titles: 'Oom Gert Vertel', *Skryf* as 'Screech'; authors and books: *Pa maak vir my 'n vlieër pa* was written by Chris Barnard, not Bartho Smit, and Smit did not write 'Euro-absurd' plays; misreadings, such as Opperman's *Joernaal van Jorik* being 'a hotch-potch of unresolved ideas', etc.).

The comparative method also forces one to compare the space allocated to writers. For instance, imbalances such as: one paragraph on Samuel Mqhayi, the father of modern Xhosa literature; about one page on the poetry of Breyten Breytenbach (only referring to one volume, *Skryf*, because apparently it seems the most political); almost four pages on one book of short stories by Mtutuzeli Matshoba, and the same amount of attention to all the work of J.M. Coetzee! Almost all younger Afrikaans writers since the 1980s have been left out. But the ultimate one-sidedness is the space allocated to Elisabeth Eybers. Apart from the fact that her name is spelt incorrectly (p. 193), she is reduced to an end-note, with scurrilous remarks on her as one of the many

white middle-class women poets, for whom culture means the holiday cruise to the art museums of the Mediterranean and nature means the family household (p. 202, Afrikaans women, of course!).

Eybers is a very talented poet. If one talks of literature as a specific discourse, one has to take note of the aesthetic in poetry as well. He has not read one of her poems. His comment in this end-note on one of her poems transforming the Boer woman and the war is nonsense. Reading this kind of comment one has to conclude that Chapman did not write in the 'spirit of reconciliation' when holding the moral high ground as critic. Perhaps most of his book was written before South Africa became democratised?

The chronological approach does not differ much from the treatment of texts in history in conventional literary histories (the best example being that of Kannemeyer). That is the teleological view of history, with beginning and 'development' towards an 'end', or with an end or purpose in view. History is not seen as fault, disruption, discontinuity, with no definite genealogy; but broadly in historical materialist terms, rather than discursively. The text is determined to a great extent by experience and society, with the emphasis on societies that have been oppressed. The task of the critic then becomes moral, a search for the just, often manifested in the desire to re-write or rehabilitate texts. The ideal of one-nationness and of reconciliation would then guide the analyses and the choice of texts. Political ideologies which could be considered liberatory and just are actively chosen by Chapman, for instance the insistence on introducing Steve Biko's philosophy of Black Consciousness as a key to reading the new black poetry (p. 337). He is therefore cynical of post-structuralism for its 'endless deferral of moral consequence' (p. 389), which ignores material conditions; and the personal story of Coetzee's main character in *Age of Iron* does nothing towards a 'national metaphor', whereas the absolute belief in rebirth in the Soweto novels are to be admired. (Perhaps Chapman needs to read Aijaz Ahmad's critique on Fredric Jameson's 'national allegories'.) This kind of criticism on literary experimentation and concern with the text in itself comes close to a sophisticated, morally justified, kind of socialist realism.

The extent to which historical materialism is practised in this study is also illustrated by the chronological genealogy of 'Literature and Historical Cultural Events in Southern Africa' at the end. This is interesting to read regarding the silences of literary events compared to historical matters. For instance, the latter half of the seventeenth century and the beginning of the eighteenth was the time of massive land appropriation by the colonists. But no texts, yet this was the beginning of the 1913 Land Act. The Dutch texts of mercantilism which are not mentioned may give some clues.

Because of his orthodox methodology causing periodisations of authors and their work Chapman often chooses representative authors for periods and forms of literary expression. Thereby canonising writers, such as Mtutuzeli Matshoba, and de-canonising others, such as many Afrikaans writers (Eybers, for instance, and Ernst van Heerden, Opperman, Schoeman,

Anna M. Louw, Etienne van Heerden, Eben Venter, Lettie Viljoen). This is, of course, intentional in his endeavour to bring out the voices that have been silenced (and also admirable); but by silencing the heard voices the process of marginalisation is merely inverted and not deferred.

In his 'Author's Preface' Chapman says that he will tentatively suggest 'points of common reference'. He also quotes, with approval, from Isabel Hofmeyr that a history of South African literature should include

the modes and discourses of all South Africa, be that discourse oral, be it in newspapers, archives, magazines and pamphlets, in a comprehension of the text as embodying social relationships (p. 421).

But yet, although his study is teeming with pointers, he nowhere considers reading literary expressions as statements within Foucauldian discursive formations—as literatures being statements producing constructs; and using literature as a creative indicator to write a history of textual formations in South Africa. This approach may be a synthesis of the materialist and the post-structuralist approaches.

In a country of disruptions and contradictions a history of texts could be approached by identifying discursive formations, where discontinuity is highlighted rather than the continuity implied by a teleological history.

The most exciting part of Chapman's study to me has been identifying these discursive formations, the distribution of statements constituting them. An indication of some of them might point to where future studies in South African literature could look for the differences and similarities between texts that can narrate the story of this country. As literary historians the principle statement would obviously always be the literary, because, to refer with acquiescence to Phyllis Lewsen's view (repeated by Chapman): the effect of oppression come more forcibly from creative writing than from commentaries and social analysts.

The following discourses become apparent, where 'discourse' is not 'theme', because both content and surface of texts have to be taken into account throughout. In African literature and systems of thought the society seems to have preference over the individual. Or is that an invention? And what about modernism and postmodernism in (black) African literature? A popular discourse among modern cultural studies researchers is the travel text; and within it statements on Africa the wild world, and the wild man. Missionary discourse. African nationalism, which includes the genealogy of identity, Black Consciousness, belonging (to Africa or Europe). The ideal of the nation-state, one-nationness, a national literature. As a construct by politicians and literary theorists? The 'real life story' of millions in Africa: Jim comes to Joburg. The discourse on land and the *plaasroman*. Re-

energising past texts for the present generation: the philosophy of interpretation and re-interpretation. The veld, the city, the story of city life, the tradition and the modern. The short story as discursive formation: its socio-political uses, its aesthetic. Autobiography as discourse. The silent decade, the 1960s. bannings, extradictions. Yet the 'beginnings' of modernism in Afrikaans literature? Women's studies, gender. The wasteland, the apocalypse, especially in white English and white Afrikaans novels.

The doubts I have expressed about Chapman's history will not distract from its significance. It is the first, brave, contemporary attempt at documenting the impossible in one book, in one story; and therefore the most important statement in the discourse on south(ern) African Literature. It will also become a source book for researchers into this field in the future, as well as being the basis from which meaningful dialogue can advance. Apart from the possible discursive formations identified some other insights have to be noted. Such as: literature in southern Africa is mostly about urbanisation; one should attempt to give speech to silenced voices; the praise poem is southern Africa's 'most characteristic form of literary expression' (p. 55); early Afrikaans writers and the quest for a language that could find the essence of the veld (p. 122); although some black writers of the 1970s may have had very little literary training, their testimonies from experience (autobiographies) have 'shaped their voices into expressive forms' (p. 376). Some of his comments and analyses of the work of individual writers are most enlightening: Fugard, Gordimer (who could not write outside of European fictional conventions, p. 385), Elsa Joubert's *Poppie* (where he can read in translation), and André Brink as an exploiter of the political situation.

Finally, conclusions such as these bring the serious study of literature to the forefront:

To keep the text of the book in debate with the text of the world is to remind us of literature's potential as a rhetorical enterprise beyond the art genres of the poem, play and novel (p. 412)

And on the role of the critic:

not as stock-taker, but as contributor to the making of literary meaning and purpose in the movement of society (p. 331).

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