

Teaching Colonial Discourse in South Africa/South African Literature as Colonial Discourse¹

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'Empire and Response' is probably the most popular formula for the teaching of postcolonial literatures in the undergraduate curriculum in tertiary education anywhere in the English-speaking world. Its seductive clarity cannot easily be dismissed, since any number of writers—as the well-marketed manuals amply demonstrate—have made productive use of the archive of colonial textuality in shaping their work, both in writing back from a relatively autonomous vantage point and in parodic re-writings of colonial texts whose authority as the point of reference is not entirely questioned. The result is the plethora of courses in which *Heart of Darkness* is paired with *Things Fall Apart*, *Jane Eyre* with *Wide Sargasso Sea*, *Robinson Crusoe* with *Foe*, *Othello* with *Season of Migration to the North*, *The Tempest* with any number of possibilities, and so on².

But these courses and some of the surveys which service them embody the deficiencies of much postcolonial work to which Karin Barber (1995:3) and others have objected, namely that they block 'a properly historical, localised understanding of any scene of colonial and post-Independence literary production in Africa', by selecting and overemphasising

one sliver of literary and cultural production—written literature in the English language—and [by treating] this as all there is, representative of a whole culture or even a whole global 'colonial experience'.

Barber is particularly concerned about the effacement of indigenous-language writing in this paradigm, and the notions of the postcolonial with which it is often associated,

¹ This essay was originally written for a panel on the teaching of African literatures at the annual conference of the African Literature Association, 'Migrating Worlds and Words: Pan-Africanism Revisted', held at the State University of New York at Stony Brook, in March 1996.

² In this essay I do not address the hubris of trying to teach postcolonial theory to undergraduates. I am assuming most readers would share my sense of the absurdity of such an undertaking.

for it entails a series of dichotomies—traditional/modern, oral/written, past-oriented/contemporary, local/international, and so forth—from which whole areas of expressive culture are made to disappear. The disappeared include the ongoing reinvention of oral traditions in the light of modern experience, or as Barber (1995:12) puts it, that

huge domain of semi-oral, semi-written contemporary popular culture, in which materials migrate through print, speech, and electronic media in a network of allusions which brings a wide range of 'literary' expression within the reach of the semi-literate school-leavers who make up the majority of the contemporary urban African masses.

The essay goes on to address this misgiving in an absorbing examination of the work of several contemporary writers of Yoruba fiction whose theme is the anomie of urban poverty in Nigeria.

Barber's timely critique, however, brings the potential for over-emphasis in the other direction. For instance, in his endorsement of her article in the editorial preface to the issue of *Research in African Literatures* in which it appears, Abiola Irele (1995:2) says Barber's refined sense of context enables her

to provide a demonstration of an *autonomous* realm of imaginative expression, driven essentially by pressures internal to the society from which it *emanates* (e.a.).

It would seem logical to affirm the antithesis to the myopia of superficial globalism in this way, that is, to affirm, as the alternative to what Barber (1995:4) calls postcolonialism's 'theoretical lock-out' of indigenous-language expression, the epistemological privilege of the local. But this is really a false opposition. Despite her rhetorical claims, for example, Barber's own discussion of Yoruba-language writing reveal that it would be quite wrong to assert an unqualified notion of autonomy. Fagunwa, she tells us, was

a cultural broker par excellence, a Christian convert, a cultural nationalist, who celebrated Yoruba culture in the name of the 'African race', while purveying 'enlightenment' to the Yoruba readers to whom he addresses his books (Barber 1995:10).

She also tells us that post-Independence literary competitions for indigenous-language writing continue a tradition started by the Church Missionary Society (Barber 1995:15); that Yoruba writers

respected great works of English literature, as transmitted through the schools system, [and] read imported popular literature from America such as detective stories and romances (Barber 1995:16);

and that Okediji's *Atótó Arére*, which she discusses as an exemplary text, makes use of 'cinematic cuts, stream of consciousness, and a feverish, dreamlike, at times almost surreal imagination'—a narrative mode Barber (1995:17) herself describes as 'modernist'. It is clear that whilst Barber (1995:16) claims to affirm autonomy—'specific internal agendas defined and expressed in local terms'—her actual analysis constructs Yoruba-language writing as a complex mode of cultural translation, in which the literary resources of disparate cultures are transformed in the formation of a new expressive culture.

One of the explicit treatments of cultural translation in recent years is, of course, Mary Louise Pratt's (1992) *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*. Pratt (1992:4) writes about 'contact zones' as 'spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination'. The notion of 'contact' foregrounds

the interactive, improvisational dimensions of colonial encounters so easily ignored or suppressed by diffusionist accounts of conquest and domination. A contact perspective emphasizes how subjects are constituted in and by their relations to each other. It treats [colonial] relations ... not in terms of separateness or apartheid, but in terms of copresence, interaction, interlocking understandings and practices ... (Pratt 1992:7).

The reference to apartheid here is not altogether satisfactory, unless Pratt is alluding to the fact that apartheid was indeed an attempt to manage such closeness by throwing into reverse the history of urbanisation and deracination that modernity had brought in train. Cultural translation is a function of contact, and if, as Barber unwittingly shows, the term is applicable to the development of Yoruba-language fiction, how much more relevant it must be to South African literatures which are the product of a long history of various struggles over the means of representation amongst indigene and settler, settler and colonist, and settler and settler—a history not altogether shared by Nigeria. Indeed, so decisive has this history been in South Africa, that literary histories have conventionally tended to privilege black English-language writing as the true bearer of resistance over and above indigenous-language writing which has still not wholly overcome its historical patronage by mission-school and government presses.

To return to questions of pedagogy: how then does one develop a curriculum dealing with the literature of the colonial scene and its aftermath that does not fall back on misleading dichotomies? Before answering that question, I shall deal with what for some might be the prior one: why bother with the literature of the encounter at all? Why not simply decolonise the canon altogether and teach an entirely Afrocentric curriculum? I am not suggesting for a minute that courses in the literature of the encounter should substitute for courses in African or diasporic literatures. But I am sug-

gesting that properly conceived, they are a necessary adjunct to such courses. Teaching the literature of the colonial encounter could entail an analysis of how literariness and literary value are established and negotiated in cultures which have been, and continue to be, subject to colonial intrusion. The broader 'cultural poetics' I am referring to here could serve as a necessary caution to the unthinking entrenchment of literary forms whose diffusion was a function of the civilising mission (de Kock 1994: 34). The point would also be to draw students into an understanding of the many-layered cultural transactions that have led to the formation of a 'national' literature. (I would not want to argue that the textual emphasis here excludes consideration of orature: that subject deserves full and separate treatment.) It almost goes without saying that I am arguing (and here I support Barber's position) that the sweeping generalisations of the 'Empire and Response' formula ought to be counterbalanced, if not replaced, by an engagement with the specifics of a particular literary and historical context.

Pratt's work begins to delineate what we might informally call the rhetorics of contact. I shall extrapolate from two such rhetorics: 'anti-conquest' writing entails

strategies of representation whereby European bourgeois subjects seek to secure their innocence in the same moment as they assert European hegemony;

frequently, 'in travel and exploration writings these strategies of innocence are constituted in relation to older imperial rhetorics' (Pratt 1992:7). 'Autoethnographic' writing entails

instances in which colonized subjects undertake to represent themselves in ways that engage with the colonizer's own terms autoethnographic texts are those the others construct in response to or in dialogue with those metropolitan representations [They] are not, then, what are usually thought of as 'authentic' or autochthonous forms of self-representation Rather, they [involve] partial collaboration with and appropriation of the idioms of the conqueror ... [and they are typically] addressed both to metropolitan readers and to literate sectors of the speaker's own social group, and bound to be received very differently by each. Often such texts constitute a group's point of entry into metropolitan literate culture (Pratt 1992:7).

One may use these terms as the starting point for a course or syllabus, recognising that while they do not wholly escape the self-other binarism, they certainly complicate it and lead eventually to its erasure in the proposition that the colonial scene entails a continuum of transculturation which includes all the expressive cultures which feel the impact of the encounter in a given context; in other words, one recognises points of origin, but only in order to observe that nothing is left unchanged in a historical process which ceaselessly throws up new expressive forms. To put this in curricu-

lar terms, one might begin by selecting a wide range of nineteenth century materials, including but not limited to the literary, which introduce the imperial rhetorics to which anti-conquest writing is a response. I have found visual texts the most economical way of doing this: the orientalist paintings of North African subjects by Gérome, Delacroix and Renoir, for instance, and landscape paintings of the South African interior by Samuel Daniell, F.T. I'Ons and Cornwallis Harris. Visual imagery dramatises effectively the imperious 'roving eye' of the explorer, the tension between foregrounded, organised space and backgrounded, disorganised/threatening space, and the replication of perceptual models drawn from European contexts. After this visual material one could begin a discussion of anti-conquest, using extracts from John Barrow's *Travels* (1806)—discussed by Pratt herself—but also a work such as Catherine Barter's *Alone Among the Zulus* (1866). Students might be expected to identify the particular 'strategies of innocence' at work in such texts. Barter's narrative is particularly useful in extending Pratt's analysis, to show that the strategies of innocence are both more marked and more conflicted in the feminine subject position. The end-point of this process might be an analysis of Thomas Pringle's and Roy Campbell's ethnographic poems (which are heavily anthologised and which could usefully be recontextualised). Pringle's ambivalence, for instance, becomes more apparent to students if it is understood as anti-conquest. Consider the following stanzas from 'Makanna's Gathering' (Pringle 1970:48):

Wake! Amakósa, wake!
 And arm yourselves for war.
As coming winds the forest shake,
 I hear a sound from afar:
It is not thunder in the sky,
 Nor lion's roar upon the hill,
But the voice of HIM who sits on high,
 And bids me speak his will!

He bids me call you forth,
 Bold sons of Káhabee,
To sweep the White men from the earth,
 And drive them to the sea:
The sea, which heaved them up at first,
 For Amakósa's curse and bane,
Howls for the progeny she nurst,
 To swallow them again.

Recent anthologisers of this poem refer to it as helping to initiate a tradition of protest poetry by 'adopting a pseudo-persona in order to advocate retaliation by the Xhosa

against the injustices of British colonial incursions' (Pringle 1989:xxiv). But this is misleading. In his *African Sketches*, Pringle's tone in discussing the career of Nxele ('Makanna') is entirely unsympathetic; indeed, the syncretic prophecies and rousing rhetoric are presented as a dangerous charade by a power-hungry lesser chief (appended to Pringle 1970:144-148). Students could be asked to resolve the anomaly: why does Pringle seem to extend support to 'Makanna' in the poem, only to withdraw it in the historical memoir? The notion of anti-conquest enables students to make sense of this: as one student put it to me:

Thomas Pringle chose to write 'Makanna's Gathering' from the Xhosa anti-colonial prophet's point of view *because* by the time he wrote the poem, Nxele's challenge had already been curtailed.

Pringle's representation of aspects of Xhosa cosmology in the poem—as in the fanatical reverence for Uhlanga, or the anthropomorphism of the sea as the terrible mother who will swallow the White Man she once disgorged on the shore—enables the settler imagination to become awakened to a full apprehension of surrounding dangers. The ethnographic sonnets, 'The Hottentot', 'The Bushman' and 'The Caffer' encode a similar ambivalence: secure in the tradition of ethnographic reportage, they offer a critique of settler morality from within, thus humanising, indeed 'civilising' settler consciousness. Recognising this ambivalence is surely more valuable than attempting to position Pringle as the founder of a line of oppositional discourse. Anti-conquest provides a convenient explanation of it, enabling students to see it as a quintessentially settler mode which facilitates partial adjustments to the colonial environment while ensuring a position of privilege. At the level of cultural poetics, one could point out that the aesthetic mode of a poem like 'Makanna's Gathering'—the distancing of immediate reference—makes possible a safe area of imaginative apprehension for the settler consciousness as it struggles to come to terms with the frontier; the detached, iconic quality of the aesthetic, in this context, helps to secure the historical position.

A suitable selection of autoethnographic writing would have to begin, perhaps predictably, with the work of Tiyo Soga. The point here would be to show that there are different Sogas, beginning with the well-known, post-Enlightenment Soga, the contemporary of Edward Blyden, proclaiming in the *Kingwilliamstown Gazette* the ordinary Xhosa homesteader's right to the discourse of rights³—a useful corrective to the prevalent opinion amongst many students that pan-Africanism was born in the

Soga (1983:178-182) published this statement as 'Defensor'. Since Soga and this passage in particular have received substantial critical attention recently, I have not quoted the relevant passage. See de Kock (1994; 1996) and Attwell (1997).

1960s and that it involves an assertion of 'tradition'. Students (not to mention some public figures in South Africa) could usefully be shown that pan-Africanism also has roots in the French and American revolutions, that it is a Black diasporic phenomenon acting reciprocally on African political consciousness by appropriating the discourse of Reason. But Soga also had another rhetoric, which was written in Xhosa—exemplifying Pratt's point that autoethnographic writing is 'heterogenous at the receiving end'. Here (in translation) is part of the passage in which Soga welcomes the first issue of the Lovedale mission's Xhosa-language newspaper, *Indaba*:

So it is, night follows day! Greetings Mr Editor! We hear that you will be reporting and publishing events. Is this true? So we are to have a national newspaper! The news will come right inside our huts. This is really welcome news. We Xhosas are a race which enjoys conversation. The sense of well-being among us is to hear something new. When a man who has things to relate comes to a home a meal is cooked in a tall pot because the people want him to eat to his satisfaction so that the happiness which is the result of a good meal will open his heart and the sore parts will heal. As soon as that happens there will be a stream of news flowing out of the mouth ... (Soga 1983:151).

Whereas the first Soga brought an Afrocentric consciousness into a detached, Enlightenment mode of European textuality, here the situation is reversed. Here he brings textuality into a realm of Xhosa orality, and develops a narrativising voice which mimics oral discourse. However, Soga's (1983:151) attitude to orality is ambivalent, because despite the enthusiasm of the opening paragraph, later he is suspicious:

One advantage we shall reap with the coming of this journal is that we will be confident that the people now will get the truth about the affairs of the nation. As people who are always hungry for news often we find ourselves dupes of deceivers under the guise of relating genuine facts. We are fed with half-truths by travellers who pass near our areas.

The chief advantage of the journal for Soga (1983:152), however, is that it will become

a beautiful vessel for preserving the stories, fables, legends, customs, anecdotes, and history of the tribes. The activities of the nation are more than cattle, money or food. A subscriber to the journal should preserve the copies of successive editions of *Indaba* and at the end of the year make a bound volume of them. These annual volumes in course of time will become a mine of information and wisdom which will be a precious inheritance for generations of growing children.

Here autoethnography, as folklore and oral history, appears as the instrument whereby a living orality is transformed into literate tradition, which in turn helps to consolidate

a certain national consciousness, the ultimate purpose of which is to domesticate modernity. Autoethnography is here shown as cultural brokerage.

The differences between Soga's English- and Xhosa-language writing might lead to an examination of the choices—with their attendant risks and opportunities—that writers of autoethnography face, given their interstitial positions as products of mission schooling. Over-schematically (in pedagogic shorthand), these choices can be said to involve either entering the traditions of the colonial culture and adapting its forms and genres to new concerns, or activating indigenous traditions and adapting them to changed historical circumstances and performative situations. The first choice has the advantage of engaging the hegemonic culture in what is the language of power, though it entails the risks of allowing that culture to dominate to the point that the autoethnographer is unable to establish a position of authority, or isolating the writer from possibly the most desirable audience. The second choice has the advantage of speaking from a position of strength, secure in a known idiom, but it entails the risk of not being understood or even taken seriously by those in positions of cultural authority.

One sees these strategies with their successes and failures being played out in the work of early black South African poets. In 1906, in response to the Bambatha Rebellion, there appeared in the Durban newspaper *Ilanga Lase Natal* a spate of poems, some of them published anonymously, which dealt partly with the efforts of the rebels to recreate the Shakan tradition of seventy years earlier. This traditionalism fired the imagination of some of the literate elite who used the occasion to reflect on the state of Zulu—and African—authority and custom in the idiom in which they had been schooled, an idiom permeated by Romantic and Victorian models. Thus Wordsworth's 'Tintern Abbey' appears in 'Amagunyana's Soliloquy':

And o'er this grand old Ethiopian veld,
High guarded on its farmost lines by you,
Blue mountain range, how oft, for countless moons
My kin hath chased the striped herd and slain
And roasted on the spit, and ate, and ate,
Till kings could eat no more (Couzens & Patel 1982:35f).

Not all of this writing is amusing; at times, the negotiation of subject positions it entails is acute and poignant. In the same poem we have a transculturated, literate voice taking on a putatively pre-modern persona in order to critique the 'Christian' episteme through imagery of contrasting landscapes:

In yonder vale he's placed his
Kraal marked everywhere with all that never
Grew. I hate his most unnatural paths; his

Close right angled corners and hot walls
My home is all the
Vast horizon wide, my couch is earth, my
Blanket quilted stars ... (Couzens & Patel 1982:36).

The final triumph of this negotiation comes when the poet affirms an Africanist spirituality, engaging with Christianity but reserving the right to express it on his own terms:

Tis true the Whiteman brings
a Book which tells
Of many a vision yet unknown to mine.
I may not read the hazy mazes of
His much curved ink, but I read earth and sky
And men and should it all prove true in hours
Not yet arrived that his Eternal one
Is Great or greater than our own Great-Great,
Then will I do Him homage and serve Him,
And in the manner he had fashioned me.
But not in theirs (Couzens & Patel 1982:36).

The second of the autoethnographic strategies mentioned earlier—that of activating traditional forms and adapting them to meet new challenges—is demonstrably more confident and effective than the first. Of many available possibilities one might use translations from the well-known Xhosa-language poets S.E.K. Mqhayi and J.J.R. Jolobe. The former's praise poem to the Prince of Wales—which he delivered on the occasion of the prince's visit to the country in 1925—ironises its praise names to the point where there can be little mistaking Mqhayi's intentions ('body-that-smokes', and 'scourge-of-the-nation') and asks hard questions about colonialism's contradictions (the bible and the bottle, the missionary and the soldier [Chapman & Dangor 1982:34f]). Similarly, Jolobe's 'The Making of a Servant' is a powerful allegory of subjugation and resistance, written in an idiom in which there is no cultural anxiety:

I can no longer ask how it feels
To be choked by a yoke-rope
Because I have seen it for myself in the chained ox.
The blindness has left my eyes. I have become aware,
I have seen the making of a servant
In the young yoke-ox (Chapman & Dangor 1982:39).

As the narrative of the ox's subjugation reaches its point of climax through the poem, so a countervailing voice, through direct interpolations and the refrain, intensifies in its articulation of defiance. This double movement—along with other factors such as

the regularity of the stanzas—suggests that this is not, in fact, a poem constructed purely on autochthonous lines; evoking oral modes, it is crafted as a written text which sustains repeated readings. To return to the theme of a cultural poetics: aesthetic literacy is, in this context, transculturated as an authoritative discourse at the service of African nationalism.

As a corrective to the possible impression that the emphasis on rhetorical strategies is to some degree ahistorical, I have found it useful to teach two contrasting passages dealing with the subject of circumcision rites in the Eastern Cape. The first is by John Henderson Soga, from his pathbreaking *The Ama-Xosa: Life and Customs* (1931), and the second is from Nelson Mandela's autobiography (1994). J.H. Soga writes dispassionate ethnography, museumising the activities and songs of the *abakweta* as timeless formulations that have intrinsic historical value. By contrast, after describing the initiation procedures he experienced, Mandela recalls an elderly chief haranguing the new initiates, and telling them that while they thought they were now men, they were in fact subservient to the State, and that until liberation was achieved the rite meant very little. The younger Mandela's disappointment is contrasted with the mature Mandela's retrospective agreement with the position taken by the chief. Mandela's text subjects autoethnography both to the discursive antinomies of conventional Western autobiography (the assertion that Mandela's book turns its back on the European autobiographical tradition is at best, only partially true), and to a profoundly historical understanding of the changing meaning of tradition under oppression. Interestingly, J.H. Soga's neutral version was written at virtually the exact historical moment when Mandela was undergoing the rite, although the contextual complexity is erased from the earlier account.

I hope I have demonstrated some of the possibilities for allowing the notion of cultural translation to facilitate a wide-ranging discussion of rhetorical strategies that evolve during the early phases of a colonial literary culture. The strategies discussed here develop in more complex forms later in South African literatures, but this analysis enables students to identify a range of strategies comparatively, with the emphasis on their mutual, interactive development. If there is a 'new South Africa' agenda here, geared towards unassailably heterogenous classrooms, so be it, but I do claim that this approach at least de-emphasizes the construction of a homogenous national tradition. It also makes pedagogic sense, at this point in our history, not to construct South African literature as a field of competing canons and traditions, but rather as theatre of activity in which various expressive modes are deployed to secure cultural authority, with varying degrees of success.

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