

A Social Function for Literature?

Two Women Critics and South African English Literary Studies, 1939-1948

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Debates in contemporary South African literary studies routinely make claims about the contribution of English Studies to the formation of a critical public sphere and a democratic citizenry¹. Such aspirations and gestures are not original. In the 1930s and 1940s two talented women critics invoked the same political and cultural ideals in their literary criticism. In this paper, I set out Christina van Heyningen and Dora Taylor's literary criticism from the 1930s and 1940s, exploring the following concerns: their attitude to politics; their understanding of the social function of literature; and their critical method. Finally, I assess their respective efforts to connect English Literature and the promotion of democracy in South Africa in the decade leading up to 1948.

Christina van Heyningen

The daughter of an English mother and an Afrikaans father, Christina van Heyningen was born in one of Milner's notorious concentration camps in 1900. She attended schools in the Orange Free State, went on to study at the University of Stellenbosch where she received a Masters Degree in English Literature, and continued her studies at Somerville College, Oxford where in 1926 she was awarded a degree in English. In 1932, she took up the post of Senior Lecturer in English at Stellenbosch University, joined the staff of the University of the Witwatersrand English Department in 1947, and went on to become Professor of English at the University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg in 1955. She published book reviews and critical articles in a number of South African journals and periodicals including the independent periodical, *Trek*, the Afrikaans periodicals, *Vandag* and *Ons Eie Boek*, *Standpunte*, and later the Pietermaritzburg journal, *Theoria*. She completed a number of textbooks on English language and expression, and is remembered, particularly, for her work on Samuel Richardson, John

¹ See for example the contributions in Smit, Wade & Van Wyk (eds) 1996.

Milton, and the South African playwright H.W.D. Manson. Along with Geoffrey Durrant—with whom she enjoyed a lifelong friendship—Van Heyningen was a key figure in the implementation of the techniques of practical criticism in South African English Departments in the 1940s and 1950s³.

As regards Van Heyningen's attitude to politics, her most consistent concern was an opposition to totalitarianism of any form. Van Heyningen was particularly troubled by the support shown by members of the Afrikaans community for Nazi Germany. Fiercely opposed to all forms of ideological and political control, she identified with the values of democracy and individual freedom, and devoted considerable time and energy to their defence. These commitments are best summarised in her response to the enormous growth of pro-Nazi ideas and sympathies in South Africa in the early 1940s. In 1941, she published a petition in the *Cape Argus* which was signed by eighteen other colleagues at the University of Stellenbosch. The petition, which was also published in the *Sunday Times*, the *Cape Sun* and the *Star*, was written in protest against 'the slavish imitation of foreign methods of ideological warfare, blind prejudices and bitter intolerance' (1941a:5) amongst the Afrikaans-speaking community. The signatories argued for the need to protect 'personal freedom' and autonomy, and rejected excessive state intervention. It also gave an important place to the role of education:

Being a student means, in the first place, studying, acquiring knowledge, for the purpose of translating his knowledge into deeds later on in life. A student who does not study will be a man who does not know, and such an ignorant person, is of course, the best subject of a totalitarian state (1941a:5).

For Van Heyningen, the training in critical thinking is an important antidote against the propagandist tactics of Fascist ideologues. This commitment extended to the post-war period when as a founder member of The Johannesburg Education League—an organisation established to combat government indoctrination by means of pamphlets and letters—Van Heyningen resisted attempts by the Institute of Christian-Nationalist Education to enforce religious and cultural instruction in schools. Notwithstanding her commitment to active political involvement, she retained a faith in the inevitable spread of liberal ideas. Responding to a demand by the University of Cape Town's SRC in 1948 that a unilateral decision be made on the question of whether or not Africans should be allowed to participate in the social and sporting life of the university, she criticises UCT for 'not lett[ing] sleeping dogs lie', arguing instead that

if nothing more is said on the question, non-Europeans will be accepted as equals in those places that are liberal enough not to mind, and the letter of the law will be carried out in the illiberal places, and that in this way liberal ideas

³ For a short biography of Van Heyningen, see the introduction to the collection of essays edited by J.A. Bertoud and C.O. Gardner (1969).

will gradually gain ground (19 July 1948c).

Always an independent thinker, Van Heyningen formulated her critical position in relation to Matthew Arnold, T.S. Eliot, Q.D. Leavis, and Denys Thompson, and whilst not always agreeing with individual contributors, the assumptions of the *Scrutiny* school always remained an important critical touchstone. She owed a principal intellectual debt to F.R. Leavis (with whom she corresponded on a number of occasions), and reiterated his sense of cultural and intellectual decline, and his antipathy towards popular culture. Like Leavis, her efforts were principally directed towards the training of a critical vanguard capable of appreciating and promoting Great Literature and resisting consumer culture. Van Heyningen assigns a central function to the reading and interpretation of poetic works. Poetry, like all literature, is valued because of its difficulty, and because of its transformative power. The reading of poetry is

of the utmost moment ... [f]or poetry, partly because it demands so much of us, of the whole man, not merely his brain, his emotions or his body, is perhaps the most valuable activity of the human spirit' (1945: 16).

Poetry is a difficult pursuit calling into play 'incessant movement and "vigilance" of the senses, brain and emotions' (1945: 16), and because it is concerned with the problem of 'value'—of its affirmation, renewal, and definition in an ever-changing world—the reader 'is forced to go through the same process, to reconsider, to renew, to re-affirm the values that we live by' (1945: 16).

Van Heyningen's literary criticism also reveals a pervasive concern with individual morality and personal responsibility. For her, both life and art are subject to the operation of absolute moral laws. The artist has a primary 'duty of giving direction' (1946a: 17), in the process disclosing the universal moral order in his/her work. She criticises what she regards as the modern tendency to blur distinctions between 'good' and 'evil'. Macbeth himself, she argues, understands the lie of the witch's claim that 'fair is foul, and foul is fair':

That foul is not fair his soul knew in its unknown depths, and the knowledge wrecked his nerve, and turned him into the insatiable bloody tyrant he became To Shakespeare good and evil were not dead, nor can I think of any great writer who has not accepted the responsibility, explicitly or implicitly, of choosing between them, and who has not made the affirmation of values his chief right and function as an artist (1946a: 17)³.

Van Heyningen's moral preoccupations lead her into difficulties when she attempts to evaluate the work of an author whose values she feels compelled to reject. In a discussion of the novels of Henry James, she criticises his implicit acceptance of 'immoral' and 'dishonourable' (1946e: 16) behaviour, and sums up his achievement in

³ For more on Van Heyningen's Shakespeare criticism, see Johnson (1996: 159-161).

the following image borrowed from H.G. Wells: ‘the beautiful cathedral has been laboriously built, and James has ever so reverently laid upon the altar—a dead kitten’ (1946e:17). What are, for her, flippant and perverse moral judgements, particularly in his later works, make it impossible to endorse James’ writing, and she veers between admiration at his stylistic achievements, and horror at the moral bankruptcy of his themes.

Her belief in moral absolutes which transcend time and space made Van Heyningen suspicious of any attempts to locate Great Literature in a political context. Responding to Shakespeare productions which sought to meet the aesthetic criteria of contemporary realism, Van Heyningen argued:

... these scenes should be somehow withdrawn from a too specific reality, a too natural speech; being poetry as much as they are drama, they should have an ideal and universal rather than a real and particular nature, and the beat of the rhythm should be heard clearly and steadily through the most intense emotion and the sharpest conflict (1949:69).

This tendency to privilege the universal over the concrete realisation of human experience is clearly evident in a discussion of a production of Sartre’s ‘The Flies’ in Nazi-occupied France. While Van Heyningen acknowledges the play’s covert pro-Resistance sympathies, she quickly moves to a discussion of the particular moral problems it poses, concluding that the ‘universal principle’ (1948a:52) offered in the play’s resolution is that ‘every man has in the last analysis ... to forge the moral law out of the actual facts in which he finds himself living’ (1948a:52). For Van Heyningen, the conscious foregrounding of artistic form helps to purge art of its social roots, and move it beyond the concerns of a particular time and place. This is especially so in the work of Shakespeare:

The metre should have lifted the [emotion], by that process of pleasure that Wordsworth describes, into a calmer region of contemplation, where one does not so much suffer as reflect suffering, and accept it as in real life it could not at that moment be accepted (1949:69).

Similarly, in a discussion of a performance of Shakespeare’s ‘The Tempest’ by ‘non-Europeans’ (1946b:134), Van Heyningen approves of the way the disturbing political aspects of the play are displaced, finally, by an atmosphere of peace and magic:

[A]ll the harshness, the grim and angry lines, the disappointment that bites like acid into this disquieting play, were eased out, as perhaps the author would have wished, and the element of spell-bound charm was underlined in every part ... and, as if Ariel’s veiling wings had passed before our faces and lulled our commonplace selves to slumber, we sat rapt in enchantment, and feasting on strange, sea-like, Protean beauty (1946b:134).

Like the criticism of F.R. Leavis, the ultimate effect of Van Heyningen’s critical pre-

occupations is the elevation of literature above politics. Although never conceived of as political in any direct sense, Leavisite English Studies was nevertheless understood as

the permanent precondition of fecund political thought. Ever 'above' and 'beyond' politics itself, 'culture' was a permanent meta-political sanction, the tribunal before which politics stood judged in the name of 'the human' (Mulhern 1981:99).

For Van Heyningen, what prevented literature from performing this redemptive function was consumer culture. Her remarks on 'the triviality and debasement of our time', the 'meanness of modern life, the squalor of promiscuous love, of the greatness gone from England, and London's glory faded' (1945:16), bear the familiar signs of a *Scrutiny* nostalgia for the values of Old England, and an uneasy sense of a civilisation in decline. For Van Heyningen, all that remains of this heroic past is a desperate sense of spiritual unease, which

is the one sign left of man's nobility, the neglected stirring in him of a forgotten idea of manhood, of a harder, but a finer and more victorious past (1945:16).

Her views are best summed up in an unpublished review of *The Postman Always Rings Twice* where she inquires:

Is it Democracy that has brought us to this gutter art, where neither beauty, nor grace, nor brains, nor talent, nor sense, nor affection, nor loyalty, nor honour, nor anything is admired anymore, except what? a desire to get on in business, and a carnal attraction (1946i:1).

Van Heyningen's method of teaching literature—forged as a response to the threat of consumer culture's ubiquity—is set out in her contribution to the 1946 conference of English Teachers. She argues that the training of critical judgement is best achieved by means of guided small-group discussion and comparison⁴. Using this method, students are taught both to distinguish between good and bad poetry, and to identify the 'false feeling', 'cant' and 'sentimentality' of contemporary popular culture (1948b:14). The result of such an education will ultimately be registered in the emergence of a critically-astute citizenry. The values of a threatened critical minority are thus able to secure continuity in the present age. For Van Heyningen, interest in historical background is confined to the information it provides concerning the artistic,

⁴ Examination questions such as the following exemplify her approach. A third year practical criticism question asks: 'Which of the following poems do you prefer and why?' In another example, students are asked to describe the mood of a poem, and to decide whether or not it is 'healthy' (Pietermaritzburg Archives STP 2/6/4). See also Van Heyningen's textbooks for the study of English Literature written with A.W. van der Horst, *A Practical Course in English* (1935), and *English: Intelligent Reading and Good Writing* (1938).

moral and social conventions of the period. Accordingly, her critical method is dominated by detailed attention to literary form (rhythm, use of language and imagery), and her critical gaze is directed towards a narrow canon of European texts.

Finally, what does the teaching of English Literature in South Africa entail for Van Heyningen? Or, to return to the original question: how might English literature contribute to a critical public sphere and democratic citizenry in South Africa? Van Heyningen's understanding of this question is best grasped by focusing on her thoughts about the encounter between black South Africans and European high culture and its attendant aesthetic imperatives. For Van Heyningen, art reveals the universal human condition, 'penetrates through all the wrappings to the man in all men' (1942:12) and—in a version of Matthew Arnold's Culture and Anarchy thesis—she suggests that art can combat race prejudice by directing individuals towards their common humanity. John Dronsfeld's drawings of the coloured community are held up as exemplary because in them

we see the coloured people not as a class or a race, as we are accustomed to seeing them, but as a people. This is why of all those who serve humanity, the artist plays the greatest part, even when an unconscious one, in building up our human solidarity. When Shakespeare turned traitor and tried to write a popular anti-Semitic play, he couldn't do it. His imagination took control, the deeper part of his artistry struggled with the shallower part, with the result that the play became the monster it is, and Portia, Antonio and Jessica dwindle and freeze, against their creator's will, because Shylock is realised (1942:12).

An article entitled 'Entering a New World' published in the Afrikaans periodical, *Vandag*, records her experience of marking the English examination papers of African students.

[I]n the Bantu essays I saw a people turning over, waking up in the brave new world, and rubbing their eyes with wonder; and I found it so touching and so interesting that I should like to show it to other people (1946h:9).

Her excitement at the prospect of being witness to this intoxicating and liberating cultural encounter is marred only by a concern that this might soon be denied them:

One must fear for these young Bantu, when one sees how, rooted in the old tribal tradition, they love to spread their branches and breathe and flower, and expect to go flowering, in the new and enchanting air of white civilisation Will they sweeten the air? Or must they wither too? Must they too be poisoned? (1946h:14)

Van Heyningen's earlier gestures towards a common humanity are belied by her

insistence on the superiority of British culture as embodied in English Literature, and her assimilationist ends. In addition, her sense of the relationship between white and black South Africans is defined in terms of liberal patronage rather than any kind of political solidarity.

Dora Taylor

Dora Taylor and her husband, J.G. Taylor, arrived in South Africa from Aberdeen in 1924. They settled in the Cape Town suburb of Rondebosch, whereupon J.G. Taylor took up a lecturing post in the psychology department at the University of Cape Town. Dora Taylor began writing book reviews for the *Cape Times* in the early 1930s. In 1939, she contributed a series of articles to the independent periodical *Trek*—then edited by Andre Bruwer—and was a regular contributor of book reviews and feature articles between 1941 and 1946. Taylor and her husband were initially drawn towards a cluster of left intellectuals (many of whom were themselves immigrants) centred at the University of Cape Town⁵. Taylor subsequently became a member of the Trotskyist Worker Party⁶ ‘whose members helped form the Non-European Unity Movement in 1943 and acted as its secret inner core through the 1940s and 1950s’ (Drew 1996:36). She also worked in close collaboration with I.B. Tabata, founder member of the All Africa Convention (1935) and the NEUM. Described by Tom Lodge (1983:39) as ‘the major political force among coloured intellectuals’, the NEUM was part of a new spirit of non-compromise and non-collaboration amongst African, Indian and Coloured South Africans which emerged in the early years of the 1940s, and which was in marked contrast to the reformist tactics of the previous generation. According to Neville Alexander, the Non-European Unity Movement was

a highly distinctive South African liberation organisation [which] ... remained independent and mostly derisive of other more prominent national opposition forces (1990:92)⁷.

Apart from her work in the Non-European Unity Movement, Taylor gave lectures in literature to a variety of student fellowship groups, and was also the author of a number

This group included British-born academics like Benjamin Farrington, Lancelot Hogben and Frederick Bodmer, who had been part of early Marxist student movements in Britain. See Hirson (1992).

⁶ For more information concerning the origins and development of Trotskyist groups in South Africa, see Hirson (1993) and Drew (1996).

See also Lewis (1987) and Chrisholm (1991).

Apart from the as-yet unpublished work done by Ciraj Rasool, Dora Taylor's contribution to South African politics and letters has been largely ignored. There is a short biographical note in the introduction to her history of missionary activity in South Africa, *The Role of the Missionaries in Conquest* (1952), published under the pen-name Nosipho Majeke. For two short summaries of her contribution to South African history writing, see Saunders (1988) and Smith (1988).

of unpublished plays, novels, and poems. In 1960, she and her family were forced to flee to England, where she remained in exile until her death⁸.

Whereas Van Heyningen's notion of democracy is often unconnected to the social reality it purports to describe, Taylor's understanding of politics displays a strong sense of the racial basis of South African society, drawing attention to the gap between liberal ideals and material reality. South Africa is described as

a society where the ruling class is a privileged minority planted on the back of a conquered and oppressed people and sucking from them its wealth and power (1943d:12).

In South Africa, aside from inequalities in the judiciary, the growth of anti-Semitism and poor economic conditions, racist legislation such as the Colour Bar Act and the Masters and Servants Act are a further 'blot on the democratic page of our statute book' (1941c:7). She continues,

The anti-Native Acts, the Native Representation Bill, the Land Act and the Urban Areas Act, are a still graver denial of the principles of democracy, and embody two conflicting policies: thrusting the native out of the political and social life of the community, but recognising that he is vitally important to its economic wealth (1941c:7).

Furthermore, human freedom and self-determination remain illusory in any society which is based on economic inequality. With its 'class basis', she argues, 'bourgeois democracy [is] a travesty of true democracy' (1942e:13). While remaining sceptical about any notion of democracy which does not include the satisfaction of basic economic needs, she questions the liberal belief in the inviolability of individual human rights and freedoms in a capitalist system, pointing out that the individual under capitalism is at the mercy of the impersonal forces of a vast 'state machine' (1939:14), and that social consensus is achieved by subtler—but no less effective—forms of state coercion.

In answer to questions of social justice and the strategies through which this may be achieved, Taylor criticises the liberal response because of its tendency to confine itself to abstract notions of democracy, and its failure to develop its assumptions into concrete political terms. Olive Schreiner's early liberal hopes, for example, while espousing 'the all too familiarly vague terms of "the welfare and happiness of humanity as a whole"' (1942e:13), are understood as exceptional in their demand for an unrestricted franchise. Finally, while she acknowledges the need for a more vigorous, critical and independent public sphere, she argues that a liberal faith in such channels of social reform as a free press, parliamentary representation and political transparency is misplaced:

The liberal knows the non-European is not getting a square deal and realises that a change is imperative, if White as well as Black and Coloured are to survive. Fearing both catastrophe and violent change, he has a mighty faith

in sweet reasonableness, in petitions and table conferences, in changing the individual hearts of oppressors. And it is a faith that dies hard (1942j:13).

While Olive Schreiner may be forgiven for her turn-of-the-century optimism concerning what the liberal spirit might achieve,

... time has conclusively, ruthlessly proved the bankruptcy of liberalism to stem the tide of political events. Such thorns as it might have fancied itself as inflicting on the rhinoceros hide of governments have been brushed aside like thistle-down (1942e:13).

Taylor is in broad agreement with the perceived need to foster a more critical and independent public sphere in South Africa, and echoes Van Heyningen's emphasis on the importance of education. Discussing the South African education system, Taylor expresses anxieties concerning the cultural philistinism, intellectual docility and political apathy of increasing numbers of South Africans. This she attributes, in part, to an authoritarian school system based on rote learning and the examination method. Taylor's fears about 'the lure of the penny dreadful', and her arguments about the necessity of 'trained judgement' (1940b:14) bear the distinctive influence of the Scrutiny position. However, it is not the decline of the 'organic community' that she fears, but the political consequences of public 'suggestibility and ignorance' (1941e:6) in the face of increasingly sophisticated techniques of mass persuasion. She argues:

We do not want a nation of docile, regimented men and women unable to think for themselves, unable to judge between the true and the false They provide an excellent seed-ground for the Fascist ideology and Fascist methods, for goose-stepping and racial vanity, for intolerance and the idolatry of Führers, football captains and film stars (1941d:7).

Armed with the critical skills acquired in an education which fosters independent thought, the South African citizen will be able to successfully negotiate the modern menace of both advertiser and propagandist. In addition, South African children will be made fit both 'to take their place in society and ... to change it where it is rotten' (1940b:14). Taylor, however, adds an important qualification to the argument that education can achieve social change. In response to the demand that training in democratic citizenship should begin in schools, she argues that these attempts at reform—worthwhile in themselves—are nevertheless based on the assumption that 'the school exists in a vacuum whereas it is an inseparable part of a social and economic system' (1941i:9). Present economic and social inequalities already dictate that only a privileged few will benefit from these reforms. Furthermore, carefully instilled democratic principles will be at odds with

an economic and social world where the ideals of justice and equality ... are at a discount; where deeds and words stand at opposite poles; where the dignity of the individual and the dignity of labour are fiction and not fact (1941i:9).

To teach people about democracy without changing society as a whole is to produce 'cynics' and 'madmen' (1941i:9). Educational reforms, therefore, cannot take the place of genuine efforts at social and economic redress.

Turning to her literary criticism⁹, Taylor sets out her allegiances in the following passage:

The Marxist approach to art, in so far as it shows the relation between art and society, in so far as it explains why and how a certain tendency in art has arisen at a particular period in history, in so far as it assists the critic in analysing the individuality of the artist into its component elements, in so far as it is able to examine critically the 'above the battle' attitude of both artists and critics and reveal the social roots even of 'pure' art, is invaluable as a means for more fully understanding the artist and for a more complete interpretation of art (1945b:16).

Where Van Heyningen looked to England and Leavis for guidance, Taylor did not draw in any great measure on English Marxists of the 1930s¹⁰. Described by Perry Anderson (1992:55) as a 'spontaneous radicalisation within traditionally dormant milieux', English Marxism was primarily a reaction to the social, economic and political crises of the period, and it took its political and theoretical cue from Stalinist Russia, rather than Central Europe. Whereas there had been a tradition of Marxist thought in Germany, Italy and France since the late eighteenth century,

[n]o comparable local heritage was available to the marxisant intellectuals of Britain in the 1930s The works of Marx, Engels and Lenin were, of course, available, but for their knowledge of contemporary Marxism, the British neophytes were almost entirely dependent on the officially sponsored writings of Plekhanov, Bukharin and Stalin. The memories of Trotsky and Luxemburg had by this time been thoroughly effaced; and the works of Lukács, Korsch and the Frankfurt School remained undiscovered (Mulhern 1974:39).

Increasingly contaminated by Stalinist control, English Marxism was cut short after a few years by the Nazi-Soviet Pact and the Second World War. In subsequent years, English Marxist literary criticism became a source of embarrassment—simultaneously pilloried for its vulgar determinism and its Romantic roots—and suffered a

⁹ I have argued elsewhere that Marxist literary criticism in South Africa was conducted outside a formal academic context in popular periodicals like *Trek*. Although Taylor's work constitutes the most developed and most sustained attempt to apply Marxist critical principles to the study of literary texts, the achievements of other South African Marxists should not be overlooked. See Sandwith (1998).

¹⁰ It is worth noting that the opposition between Marxism and *Scrutiny* was not absolute. Leavis confessed to an admiration for "the dangerously intelligent" Trotsky, and T.S. Eliot sympathised with certain of Lenin's ideas. See Stan Smith (1994).

corresponding lack of critical attention¹¹. In a summary of English Marxism, Francis Mulhern (1974:40) argues that English Marxists

were united in their insistence that literature could be understood only in relation to the social conditions in which it was produced. Hence, literary criticism came to be regarded as the elucidation of the social determinations of a text, as the identification of the 'social equivalent' of a given character, sentiment or situation.

While Taylor's criticism can also be broadly understood in these terms, she does not share their intellectual origins, claiming instead the intellectual and political tradition of classic Marxism, which she received from Lenin and Trotsky. Unlike much of its other cultural and political traditions, then, Taylor's strand of South African Marxism owes very little to Britain¹². In an article which appeared in University of Cape Town journal *The Critic* in 1935, Taylor (1935:84-85) registers her indebtedness to the Lenin-Trotsky heritage, and opposes the perversion of their ideals under Stalinist rule:

Under the Soviet regime art has become synonymous with propaganda. It was not so immediately after the revolution. In the first naïve enthusiasm of the liberated proletariat forty thousand poets blossomed in Russia. But when Stalin, in opposition to Trotsky, turned the Russian Communist Party into a nationalist organisation surrounded by a hostile Europe, it was necessary to create weapons of defence not only in iron and steel, but in every medium of art as well. Art became state-controlled like any other form of labour It is possible that this is a transition stage. This tyrannical attitude to art is a contradiction of Lenin's whole purpose in liberating the proletariat. Culture is possible only where there is leisure, and in spite of the present work-worship in Russia, the ultimate goal of the movement is to create more leisure for the masses. Freedom from the tyranny of the machine will enable them to study the culture of the past and other countries.

Taylor's arguments concerning the relationship between literature and its material context derive principally from the work of Leon Trotsky. His major work, *Literature and Revolution*, was published in the early 1920s in the years following the momentous events of October 1917, which saw the successful overthrow of the Tsarist autocracy and the establishment of a workers state, and four years of bloody civil war during which a fragile people's government had to be defended against a powerful counter-revolution. Stalin's rise to power in 1921 marked the beginning of a period of increasing

¹¹ For a critique of English Marxism, see William's (1958). See Pechey (1985) for a more sympathetic account of the outcome of the 1940s Marxist/Leavisite contest in England.

¹² An alternative strand of South African Marxism is to be found in the literary criticism of Michael Harmel, a member of the South African Communist Party. See, for example, his series of articles on Olive Schreiner published in 1955 in the periodical *New Age*.

state bureaucratisation and regimentation, which in the cultural sphere reproduced itself in the doctrine of socialist realism, and the rise of the proletkult movement. Consequently, *Literature and Revolution* treads a difficult path between an endorsement of revolutionary literature, and an indictment of emerging tendencies towards rigid ideological prescription and control in the cultural sphere. Much of Trotsky's contribution lies in his attempt to take up the problem posed in Marx's key argument in the 'Preface to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy' (1859) that 'changes in the economic foundation lead sooner or later to the transformation of the whole immense superstructure' (Marx 1992:426). In his 'cultural continuity' thesis, Trotsky rejected the notion popular amongst Soviet intellectuals in the 1920s that a new proletarian culture would be formed in 'laboratory' conditions under the direction of a proletarian avant-garde. Both Trotsky and Lenin had argued that continuities with pre-Revolutionary bourgeois culture should be preserved and extended rather than discarded. What Taylor shares with Lenin and Trotsky is the attempt to apply Marxist categories to literature, and a desire to complement critical endeavour with active participation in political struggle. Taylor's critical method is based on the assumption that

the writer is largely the product of the society and the culture that nourishes him and that an understanding of that society acts like a searchlight upon his work (1943c:12).

and it is towards the identification of the social roots of art, that much of Taylor's criticism is directed. Her examination of South African literature, in particular, reveals the priority she gives to the historical and material circumstances in which literature is produced. She argues that, the economic, political and social context of cultural production in South Africa has had a distinct bearing on the kind of culture which has emerged. As she puts it: 'A culture ... bear[s] the stamp of its material basis' (1943d:12). According to her, the compromised political and economic position of white English-speaking South Africans in the 1940s, bolstered as it was by a number of racist and capitalist fictions, led inevitably to a sterile literature which could contribute nothing to social change, and she concludes: 'on such a rotten foundation culture, art and even science are tainted and warped and cannot reach their full growth' (1943d:12).

Another good example of how Taylor applies her materialist method to particular literary texts is her examination of writing by black South Africans. She begins by examining its oral roots. Like Fanon, Taylor is wary of an uncritical endorsement of pre-colonial oral traditions. For Taylor, the material conditions which produced these cultural forms in the first place have been irrevocably destroyed by the destruction of 'tribal life' (1942l:10) under colonialism so that they exist in the present only in 'emasculated' (1942l:10) form. Consequently, she gives attention to those cultural forms which emerge in response to industrialisation and proletarianisation, and favours 'literature that is in active process of creation and is a reflection of life as it is lived in the present' (1942l:10). Here, Taylor's remarks echo Trotsky's post-revolutionary distaste for the cultural 'backwardness' of an agrarian existence. And

while she recognises that the desire to preserve indigenous oral traditions can be an important element of an insurgent nationalism, she is also wary of the ideological and political consequences of such preoccupations in the hands of the less scrupulous. For the government official, their existence is used to justify oppressive racial policies like 'trusteeship' and 'separate development', and for the missionary—under the auspices of a mission-controlled press—they become a vehicle for religious indoctrination. Turning to African writing of the early twentieth century, Taylor argues that the material conditions of racial oppression and economic exploitation, and a corresponding political docility, have been inimical to the growth of culture:

Culture requires a sound basis on which to build. Where is it for the African? There is no basis. There is an abyss. Africans form an oppressed mass, without political power, without democratic rights; their political and economic destitution is summed up in the pass laws, in the Colour Bar Act, in the Urban Areas Act, in the Land Act, in the whole policy of segregation. Under such conditions there must be cultural destitution also (1942m: 10).

Aside from the poverty of its material base, another factor that contributes to the mediocrity of writing by black South Africans, Taylor argues, is the fact that African writers are reliant on a mission-controlled press. Apart from the restrictions on subject matter imposed by missionaries, the dominance of religious values results in the stifling of social protest and freedom of expression, the falsification of history in keeping with official historical orthodoxies, and blindness to the injustices of colonial conquest. For Taylor, it is a conservative literature which perpetuates rather than challenges oppression. In support of her argument, she cites H.I.E. Dhlomo's positive reading of the cattle killing incident in 1857 in his novel *Nongqause*, an event which secured white economic and political control over the amaXhosa. Similarly, Taylor endorses R.R. Dhlomo's realistic depiction in *An African Tragedy* (n.d.) of social conditions in the Johannesburg of the 1920s, but argues that his concern with individual morality and the Christian themes of sin and repentance prevents him from either describing or critiquing the social forces which have produced the situation he depicts. Growing political consciousness, a common sense of oppression, collective organisation and the 'determination of a whole people to strive for democratic rights' (1942m: 15) are the necessary pre-requisites for the production of 'a culture worthy of its name' (1942m: 10)¹³.

Taylor emphasises class in her study of black writers. In an argument which anticipates the 1970s materialist rejection of both Eurocentric and Africanist approaches to writing by black South Africans, she points to the anomalous position of educated black writers in the social formation as members of a privileged group, alienated both from the majority of uneducated blacks and their white oppressors, and implies that their position of partial social and economic elevation in relation to the

¹³ In this regard, see also her discussion of the work of Peter Abrahams (1943a).

working masses makes them reluctant to challenge the status quo:

It must not be forgotten either that the few who contrive against great odds to rise above their fellows, hold a precarious footing between two worlds. They are neither at one with their oppressed brothers, nor are they acceptable to the white man They are moreover apprehensive of losing through any action on their part the little they have gained as individuals. It is an atmosphere fatal to the flowering of any art (1942f: 10).

As with her analysis of black South African writing, so too in her understanding of white South African writing, Taylor (like Trotsky) argues that art is an expression of class interests. Taylor distinguishes between William Plomer and Roy Campbell's social critique (in *Turbott Wolfe* [1925]1985; and *The Wayzgoose* [1928]1971 respectively) on the basis of their class affiliations. According to Taylor, Campbell's critique is the 'expression of contempt of the petit-bourgeois herd on the part of the poetic aristocrat' (1943e:12) while Plomer's is the scepticism of the bourgeois intellectual in the aftermath of World War I. Taylor's analysis of class and race in South African literature is influenced by the notion prominent amongst Unity Movement members of race as a construct, and 'racialism [as] a mere excrescence of capitalism' (Saunders 1986:76). White South African writers, then,

reflect the ideology of their class as in a mirror. When they admit an African or a Coloured into the pages of their book in more than a decorative capacity ... they write as members of a dominant white caste looking from afar at some almost sub-human species. When he is not a mere victim, an object of humanitarian pity, he is a Problem, a menace, a threat to white purity and white civilisation (1942f:10).

A final instance of her critical method is the series of articles on late nineteenth and early twentieth-century European and American poetry published in 1944, which resembles the kind of wide-ranging cultural and economic analysis attempted by the English Marxist Christopher Caudwell in *Illusion and Reality* (1937). The series of political, social and economic crises which mark European history from the mid nineteenth century are understood to have produced certain observable reactions in the artistic production of the period. These she summarises as a 'tendency towards a more strongly marked individualism in art, and more complete occupation of the Ivory Tower' (1944c:13). This broad conception of artistic movements in relation to changes in the economic base is qualified by a recognition, first, that artistic movements are subject to their own laws of development and, second, that individual responses may take different forms:

The development of literary (artistic) movements is not a simple thing to be traced mechanically in each country in parallel lines according to the development and decline of capitalist society in each. While the economic base is an invaluable and essential guide in tracing the rise of certain ideological concepts, literature at the same time has its own laws of growth,

change, assimilation, imitation and revolt when imitation lacks the dynamic spirit of the movement in its beginning (1944c:12).

Where Van Heyningen consistently elevated literature above politics, Taylor insisted upon the primacy of economics and politics in relation to literature. This is most vividly apparent in how they understood the relationship between literature and social change. Theirs is the traditional disagreement between the idealist and the dialectical materialist: Van Heyningen stresses the role of ideas in historical change, and Taylor looks to revolutionary insurgency. Commenting on early twentieth century attempts to awaken Irish national sentiment by means of Celtic theatre and the work of the Gaelic League, Taylor argues that

it is well known that revolutions cannot be made by literary or cultural movements; the deep social discontent of the masses must supply the urge to action (1941f:15).

Similarly, Upton Sinclair is guilty of

over-emphasis[ing] the role which art plays in the social process, the function of art as a weapon of propaganda, as the maker of a new world. Art in many varied and subtle ways reflects social processes, art accompanies great historical movements and the study of art illuminates these. But Sinclair was compelled to regard art as a lever in social change, as the mighty agent of a peaceful revolution, as a substitute for the workers taking over by force (1945c:16).

Here, Taylor draws on Trotsky's understanding of the relationship between literature and its economic base. For Trotsky (echoing Hegel),

the nightingale of poetry, like that bird of wisdom, the owl, is heard only after the sun has set. The day is the time for action, but at twilight feeling and reason come to take account of what has been accomplished.(1925:53).

And for Taylor,

it is not possible to steep literature over-night in a political program, nor is it desirable. Creative literature is impossible without a deep imaginative assimilating of experience (1943a:15).

What follows from this understanding of the relationship between literature and social change is that literature should not be pressed into the service of a political cause. For Taylor, this is to confuse art and politics.

Taylor's unwillingness to abandon the category of the 'literary' in pursuit of 'political' art, and her far more nuanced understanding of the relationship between literature and its material context did not prevent her work from being recuperated by both laymen and academics as Stalinist prescription and vulgar determinism. Much of

the hostility towards her literary criticism was voiced in the letters page of the Cape Town periodical, *Trek*, which by the mid 1940s had become an established forum for such critical debate. According to D. la Cock (1944:1f), for example:

Mrs Taylor has sinned greatly in so far as she has attempted to force down the already raw throats of poets standards which belong to the world of narrow, distorted and factitious conceptions of value.

And Geoffrey Durrant (1944c:2) writes:

The horrible suspicion has entered my mind that what worries Dora Taylor is not that the poets refuse to face facts, or are not interested in politics, but that she cannot forgive them for not sharing her own political views. This is an offence of which, alas, we shall have to convict many others besides those she has pilloried. Dante, Villon, Shakespeare, Homer, Virgil, even Ella Wheeler Wilcox and Rupert Brooke, are all damned. We shall have to face the situation frankly. Not one of the great poets, or even the lesser poets, was a really clear Marxist thinker. They will all have to be scrapped when we get out a New Progressive History of literature. In the meantime we can comfort ourselves with the thought that their poetry proves how rotten bourgeois society has been for two thousand years or so¹⁴.

Durrant is equally dismissive of Taylor's attempts to make connections between literature and its material base, claiming that her understanding of the relationship between art and society is crude and reductive. Trotsky's (1973:118f) comments on the subject are an appropriate reponse to this kind of sneering from the academy:

The opinion that the economics presumably determines directly and immediately the creativeness of a composer or even the verdict of a judge, represents a hoary caricature of Marxism which the bourgeois professordom of all the countries has circulated time out of end to mask their intellectual impotence.

Finally, how does Taylor understand the place of English Literature in South Africa? While always emphatic that art cannot substitute for revolutionary change, it does nonetheless have an important ideological role. A letter written by Isaac Bongani Tabata makes reference to one of Taylor's own plays, and he goes on to provide an accurate outline of Taylor's (and his own) understanding of the social function of art in 1940s South Africa:

¹⁴ Private letters between Durrant and Van Heyningen also contain exasperated references to Dora Taylor's literary criticism, and reflect their patronising attitude towards her work. Durrant, for example, writes: 'As for DT, I want to have another go at her when she has finished her series of articles. She is showing some willingness; did you notice the "saving" paragraph in her second article. But unless I'm much mistaken she won't be able to make anything coherent out of her ideas. (Can't make out yet quite what she is driving at; she seems to be circling cautiously round the question like a boxer)' (23 May 1944c).

In view of the distortions and belittling of the past of our people so that the African youth is not aware of the true nature of the struggles of our people, the dignity and the spirit of resistance—this play seeks to give them a past of which they can be proud and to restore also their self-respect, from which alone can flow that desire for human freedom and that determination not to submit or yield until it is won. I need hardly emphasise to you the well-known fact that literature—particularly drama and the novel—has always constituted a very powerful weapon which was used effectively by the oppressed nationalities and peoples in their struggles. The non-Europeans in this country are now entering upon a new phase of struggle in which the scope is much broader. The whole community on a national scale will be brought into the stream and each one will contribute according to his or her capacity and talent. The novelist and the dramatist will hold the mirror up to the present-day society and portray a true picture of the struggle, past and present, in such a way that the social and political awareness of the people will be sharpened (18 August 1948).

This view presupposes the ability of art to tell the ‘truth’ about history and society, and its ideological aims are to restore personal dignity, and to act as a spur to political action¹⁵. In a letter to Tabata, Taylor explains her own political aesthetic, defining her efforts in direct opposition to the Romantic individualism of Roy Campbell:

Briefly, B, what do you think of relating this upsurge of individualism more specifically to the expanding capitalism and indicating its collapse still more clearly as part of the ideological decay bound up with the crisis of the system itself. Then, instead of ending there, I expand ... on the picture of how the individual can only truly fulfil his potentialities under socialism. You know how the writers, desperately clinging to their ego, look for a solution inside themselves. But the paradox is that it is only when there is a healthy communication with, and a belonging to, a community that the individual can expand to his full height. Retreating into his ego, the ‘sole reality’ defeats itself, for without the group contact, the ego shrivels up. There are different kinds of individualism says the old man. Pursuing that thought—which I didn’t quite understand—I see a way to make my picture more complete. Individualism standing tip-toe on that world of far-reaching

¹⁵ Taylor’s *The Role of the Missionaries in Conquest* (1952) is written in a similar spirit. Its revisionary aims and polemical style are intended to have a conscientising effect, in the hope that this will inspire its readers to political action. There are also indicators that much of Taylor’s own fictional writing was written with the same purpose in mind. According to Christopher Saunders, Taylor is the author of at least one unpublished novel *Kathy* which deals with the story of a Coloured family, and addresses the issue ‘of passing for white’ (1986:77). Also of interest are I.B. Tabata’s comments on another of Taylor’s short stories: ‘It is a story based on an actual incident which took place in South Africa, the most bestial and brutal act reported in the SA Press. But in the telling of it, it is the impression of human worth and dignity which predominates, though the cruelty is not softened’ (25 May 1950).

horizons at the beginning of capitalism ('what a piece of work is man') achieved much. But it is nothing compared with that individualism which will blossom when the forces of socialism are planting the deserts with corn and conquering nature to man's needs. This is all the more important to emphasise because there is a common and deep-rooted bogey from arrogant poets like Roy Campbell downwards through the unleavened mass of people, that socialism will produce a dead level of 'equality' and destroy the individual (28 January 1952).

conclusion

Both Taylor and Van Heyningen share anxieties about the rise of Fascism in the 1930s and 1940s, and argue for the need for a more critical and independent South African public sphere. They are both reliant on the critical approach of influential Northern Hemisphere thinkers, and work out their critical practice in close collaboration with charismatic male colleagues. Neither of them, it seems to me, brings a distinctly feminist perspective to bear in their work, and instead lend their considerable talents to elaborating the discourse they appropriated and were appropriated by.

Perhaps more striking than their similarities are the differences between them. While Van Heyningen remains committed to the gradualist methods of liberal reformism, Taylor consistently advances the need for radical political and economic change. With regard to the question of literature's social function, Taylor's insistence on the primacy of politics over literature means that she assigns literature a limited function in the attainment of political ends, and is critical of Romantic individualism. In addition, her desire to reveal the connections between literature and its social roots allows her to offer penetrating social and political critique that sees the liberation of the South African oppressed as part of the global narrative of anti-capitalist revolution. In contrast, Van Heyningen's hopes that a democratic citizenry will emerge through the reading of exemplary literary texts, and her elevation of abstract moral and universal categories amount to an evasion of politics and an endorsement of the status quo. Finally, in relation to the South African context, Van Heyningen focuses exclusively on an all-white caste of writers, and her discourse of liberal paternalism, which endorses colonial-metropolitan hierarchies, is in marked contrast to Taylor's commitment to more inclusive definition of community, which is registered, in part, by the critical attention she gives to the work of black writers. The disappearance of the kind of radical social commentary offered by critics like Taylor, and the rapid institutionalisation in South African English Departments of the formalist, de-historicised methods of practical criticism coincided with an increasingly repressive state policy towards black South Africans, which culminated in the triumph of Afrikaner nationalism in the 1948 elections and the implementation of apartheid rule.

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