Rejecting the Mother Tongue: Afrikaner on the Margins

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Afrikaner Nationalism concentrated power in the hands of white male Afrikaners throughout the entire apartheid period (1948-1994). It might thus seem fatuous to select a white Afrikaner man's autobiography to illustrate a theme of marginality. But Natie Ferreira's *The Story of an Afrikaner: Die Rewolusie van die Kinders?* (1980) constructs an autobiographical subject which contests the ideological and political scripts encoded in his mother tongue, choosing rather to marginalise himself by registering his unhappy dissent in English.

The use of English as the medium for testimony against apartheid was common amongst South Africans whose mother tongue was not English. Albert Luthuli (a Zulu), Z.K. Matthews (a Tswana), Maggie Resha (a Sotho speaker) and Alfred Qabula (a Xhosa), simply illustrate a general trend by writing or publishing their testimonies in English. In fact, it would seem that most autobiographical texts by South Africans in the apartheid period across the language spectrum¹ are written in English. There are obvious reasons for this: English is the language most accessible to the largest number of readers, both within South Africa and beyond her borders. Thus autobiographies and other writings are more attractive to publishers if they are in English. Moreover, since the aim of most non-English autobiographers was (during the 46 years of apartheid) political—the subversion of the apartheid state—the desire to spread the message to the largest number crucially affected the choice of language.

For all of these South Africans the employment of English has implications beyond the pragmatic. It is hardly a revelation to state that language is by definition ideological. Thus the use of English may indeed be conducive to greater political efficacy, but it can also be construed as simultaneously shoring up a global hegemonic system. As far back as 1986, when the obvious bogey was Afrikaans (this was the time of extended national states of emergency, and increasing militarisation of the conflict between the State and black and brown South Africans), Njabulo Ndebele (1987:219), argued that

¹ There are, in post-apartheid South Africa, 11 official languages: Zulu, Xhosa, Southern Sotho, Northern Sotho, Venda, SiSwati, Ndebele, Tswana, Tsonga, English, and Afrikaans.
the history of the spread of the English language throughout the world is inseparable from the history of the spread of English and American imperialisms.

He further points out that when the colonised ‘chooses’ to communicate in English rather than in an indigenous language—a Hobson’s choice, given the economic and technological supremacy of the first world—the language offers her or him subject positions of inferiority, of disablement, of dissonance, for she or he will almost invariably have to struggle through lack of command, absence of fluency.

[T]he functional acquisition of English in a capitalist society such as ours [in South Africa] can further reinforce the instrumentalization of people as units of labor ... precisely because [English] has been reduced to being a mere working tool, [it] can actually add to the alienation of the workforce (Ndebele 1987:233).

Every utterance, whether in the mother-tongue or otherwise, involves a dialectical process which simultaneously offers the speaker the position of subject of the utterance while also subjecting the speaker to its ideological power; but the process becomes more brutally one-sided when the speaker is using a second, or, in the case of black South Africans, a third or fourth language. In such cases the empowerment of the speaker through language usage is radically checked. This extreme curtailment of the speaker’s position as subject of the utterance is further compounded when the autobiographer has to speak through the layers of mediation provided by mother-tongue English speakers who act as ghost writers, amanuenses (Albert Luthuli has Charles and Sheila Hooper as his amanuenses), co-writers (Frances Baard’s title page reads: ‘My Spirit is Not Banned: Frances Baard as told to Barbie Schreiner’), and compilers (Belinda Bozzi and Hanlie Griesel act as ‘arrangers’ of the stories of groups of women, Anne Benjamin and Mary Benson for Winnie Mandela).

But the title of this paper is ‘English as the language of resistance against apartheid’, and while we must not overlook the complex problems involved in the use of English by non-mother tongue speakers as outlined above, we must remember, too, that by and large English was a medium of enablement in the struggle against apartheid. For the indigenous peoples of South Africa, from 1948 onwards (the time of the ascension to political power by Afrikaner Nationalists) Afrikaans culture and language came to represent the primary system of oppression. Hein Willemse (1987:240), a black South African whose mother tongue is Afrikaans, notes that

Afrikaans is the language of the riot policeman sjambokking students. It is the language of the ill-mannered shop attendant. It is the language in which a former minister of police, Jimmy Kruger, said on the death of Black Consciousness activist, Steve
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Biko: ‘Dit laat my koud’. [‘It leaves me cold’.] Given this proven legacy of callousness, inhumanity and brutality, is it any wonder that black people demonstrated so forcefully their rejection of apartheid and Afrikaans?²

It was rejection of the enforced use of Afrikaans as medium of instruction in black schools that led to what came to be known as the Soweto Uprising in 1976. The use of English in testimonies of the oppressed served to undermine the apartheid project by helping to enlighten a wide readership about the realities of lived victimisation, and by concretising the statistics of apartheid’s horrors which could so easily numb one’s sense of living people. These testimonies served, too, to cross the language barriers of the different indigenous South African linguistic groups so as to affirm the importance of the individuals represented therein to those whose experiences might be similar.

But for speakers of the other indigenous South African language³, the Afrikaaner autobiographers, the case is somewhat different. There is and was a small, but productive, Afrikaans publishing industry in South Africa; so the autobiographer was unlikely to turn to English because of difficulty in finding a publisher unless, of course, the work was considered to be so revolutionary that it would be likely to be banned by the South African censors⁴. So when the Afrikaaner autobiographer chose to write in English we have to look beyond practical considerations. In the cases of Breyten Breytenbach and Natie Ferreira, the decision to use English arose out of deep alienation with the mother-tongue and its cultural and political institutions. I say that the alienation is profound because Afrikaaner culture is generally hostile to the English and their language. Britain had first begun its colonial enterprises in the southern tip of Africa as early as 1795 (but more than a century after the Dutch), and it was the desire to escape British rule that led to the Great Trek, that migration of Afrikaners into the interior of Southern Africa. The Boer War at the turn of the century left even greater

² Hein Willemse (1987:241) notes, further, however, that Afrikaans, in large parts of what were the Cape, Transvaal and Orange Free State provinces, is also the language ‘of the impoverished underlings: the farm laborers, the fishermen, the general populace of the barren hinterland’.

³ Afrikaans can justifiably be referred to as an indigenous African language; Hein Willemse (1987:238) argues that the creolisation of Cape Dutch probably developed out of the contact between European colonisers and the aboriginal Khoikhoi and San people, as well as the influences of the slaves from Angola, Java, Madagascar and Malaysia. The language is thus indigenous; the Afrikaner tribe is not. Afrikaans, literally translated, means from Africa, Africa’s (1987:238).

⁴ For instance, according to Hein Willemse (1987:245), for the black Afrikaans writer who wished to articulate a counter-hegemonic position in Afrikaans ‘all the major Afrikaans publishing houses [were] off-limits. The political and economic interests of the South African government and these publishers [were] decidedly coterminal’.
antipathy to the English, for twenty-six thousand Afrikaner women and children died in concentration camps set up by the British, and the British 'scorched earth' policy left survivors impoverished. So while it is true that any European language carries with it the stigma of colonialism for the peoples of Africa, the case of English for the Afrikaner is much more complexly problematic than it is for other South Africans. English, it must be remembered, was used as an instrument of oppression of the Boers by the British. Thus for the Afrikaner the act of distancing the self from the mother tongue and its cultural and political milieu is fraught with implications of collusion with the enemy. As we shall see, this is especially true for Natie Ferreira. Writing in English, Ferreira's narrator is distressfully marginalised from the Afrikaner centre, indeed, from his Afrikaner-ness which he believes is central to his identity.

Natie Ferreira was (and probably still is) a journalist who defines himself primarily as an Afrikaner: the autobiography is entitled The Story of an Afrikaner (1980). But it is a paradoxical decision to write even that title in English: how can one claim to be an Afrikaner and not declare that in Afrikaans? Does the use of English, the language of 'rooinek', not contradict the self-defining statement, and more importantly, frustrate the speaker's desire to identify himself as an Afrikaner? That this sort of struggle is not simply a peripheral issue for Ferreira is indicated unequivocally in the subtitle. This is interrogative, and in Afrikaans: Die Revolusie van die Kinders? (meaning, the revolution, or rebellion, of the children). This patently refers to the cover illustration which contains a drawing of a man (presumably the author) in the foreground, against a representation of that most famous of photographs from the 1976 Soweto Uprising of the limp and bleeding body of Hector Peterson. He was alleged to be the first of many hundreds of children shot by the South African Security Forces in what has often been called 'The Children's Revolution'⁶. But, more pertinently, since the Afrikaans version of that name ('The Children's Revolution') has been appended to the title in the form of a question, it serves to suggest that this story of an Afrikaner represents a possible rebellion by one of the Afrikaner tribe's children⁷.

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⁵ Cameron (1986:214). Incidentally, what has recently come to be recognised by historians is the fact that even greater numbers of Africans died in British concentration camps; a colleague in the History Department at the University of Durban-Westville says that the current estimate is around eighty thousand black South African fatalities in British concentration camps.

⁶ That Hector Peterson (there is more than one version of the spelling of this name) was the first to die at the hands of the Security Police in June 1976 is widely acknowledged. See, for instance, Caesartina Makhoere (1988:4). Ferreira writes 'a small dirge for the children of Soweto' (168-171).

⁷ Ferreira (1980) allies himself with the children of the Revolution (180 and elsewhere).
The narrator comments on these two titles; he says to his daughter:

Your final choice of title, seeing that I’ve given two, will depend on your vantage point from the end of this letter; your view of words, of the world, of yourself in the world of words.

Personally, I prefer the second one. The first means being trapped in the dull repetition of measured days, the acceptance of defeat, the paralysis of the impossible. The second means the recognition of the possibility of the impossible, which is not a paradox but a refusal to impose my limitations on the limitless (Ferreira 1980:18).

So, for him, (at this point, at least) choosing Afrikanerdom as the essential defining characteristic meansihilation, whereas revolution against doctrinaire Afrikaner nationalism is fraught with liberatory potential.

That this text is indeed ‘a quest for freedom’ (1980:4) from the strictures of Afrikaner Nationalism and its blind racism is evident from the outset; Ferreira notes:

I should really be writing in Afrikaans. But as you know it is impossible to do so at this stage. It irritates and saddens me but at least I know that time is on my side.

The point is: our politicians, newspaper editors and Afrikaans publishers will allow us to write (and think, and say) only certain things—those things that fit the grand schemes and narrow thoughts of a powerful cabal. I know because I’ve tried. I pleaded with them, argued and fought. Nothing helped.

So I will write in English but always with the hope that one day my people will know that they are not free (1980:3f).

The trouble for Ferreira is that rebellion against the politics of Afrikaner nationalism means that this is an admission of failure to be the kind of son his father wanted him to be; it means loss of family, of community, of self. His father wanted him to be a ‘boerseun’, in the ‘image of the (Afrikaner) father—the strong man; the one who hits first and leaves the questions for later’ (1980:9). That he cannot conform had seemed to him as a child to be his failure, not the failure of a father to recognise his individual needs: ‘In that world my father had the same authority as God’ (1980:9). Thus this adult confession, which is a searching for a position outside of Afrikaner paradigms, is also a rebellion against the father, and his people: ‘My child’, he writes to his daughter,

even while I am writing now I sense a vague but nagging feeling that I am wrong in telling you these things. Am I betraying my father and my people’s hopes again? (1980:10).

Ferreira (1980:11) identifies the forces of evil within Afrikanerdom, and calls these:
Dwurq ... a kind of acronym for all the words of my conditioning, the name of the organisation (sometimes called civilisation) responsible for my production. It is also a shortened version of Doodwurq, the Afrikaans word for ‘strangle to death’. When I wrote that first letter I was fighting Dwurq out there—his ideology, prejudice, petty politics and institutional murders. I clearly saw his face in our System of Christian National Education; our System of justice based on immoral laws; our elaborate System of self-deception and our pious System of belief in God which we use to achieve our selfish aims. And now? At least I know that Dwurq lives inside me (1980:11).

The Story of an Afrikaner (1980) testifies to the struggle to create a self in the vacuum left by rejection of the evils of the system which had spoken him, shaped him;

I am wrapped up in words defined by other people, choked by the flotsam of history.... What I am is demarcated by a billion past experiences and fixed ideas. I am at the end of an assembly line (1980:10).

But having come to the point of reconstituting the self in narrative, the narrator faces the terror of aloneness. He says of his indictment of Afrikaner ideals: ‘My tainted words are the rope around my neck’ (1980:11).

Ferreira himself answers the question of whether he can construct a self in a language which by his own admission is despised by ‘good’ Afrikaners (1980:4) when he switches to Afrikaans in the last quarter of the book. Interestingly, even in the English part of the text (the first 153 pages) his denunciation of Afrikanerdom is consistently underwritten by his identification with the tribe; he refers to himself and Afrikaners as ‘us’ and ‘we’ (e.g. 1980:139), so his relief and exultation when he changes to Afrikaans is not unexpected. He says: ‘Now, at last, I am using my own language! And I skip weightlessly from word to word like a honeysucker in a tree full of blossom’ (1980:156). He no longer faces the dilemma of constituting an autobiographical self in the language of the Other.

The Story of an Afrikaner (1980) begins with a profoundly ironic frontispiece which reads:

I write the way I talk;  
As I am,  
What I am

The echo of a birth-cry ... (1980:v)

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8 I am using the publisher’s translation which accompanies the Afrikaans text.
What makes this so heavily ironic is the fact that this English translation is taken from the folkloric narrativisation of the birth of the Afrikaner language! The narrator recounts that:

Afrikaner consciousness was born when our language was born—when one of the first Afrikaners, in proud self-recognition, declared to the world: 'We write the way we talk'.

That was the birthcry of the Afrikaner nation. And that is my birthright. And no-one (least of all a coterie of party men) will take that away from me. I will say it again: 'Ek skryf soos ek praat, soos ek is, wat ek is' (1980:4).

But to say this in English, or to say it again in Afrikaans as an isolated line in an English text, is to rob it of its meaning. It is only in the last part of the text (the last 78 pages) that he can declare in his mother-tongue that he is defined by that which he speaks, that he can celebrate the self as textually constructed, that he can honestly say, 'En my geboortereg is: Ek skryf soos ek praat' ('And my birthright is: I write as I speak'; 1980:158f). Ferreira thus finally solves for himself the quandary which faces all autobiographers who write in English as Other-tongue, namely, can one write/con-struct an autobiographical self in another language? Is a self in another language not another self? By turning back to Afrikaans he demonstrates that for him an autobiographical self in English cannot be more than a pained approximation, a betrayal of self.

This linguistic act, the change to Afrikaans, denotes the wrestling away of power over the very notion of Afrikanerdom, as well as of his own self-construction, from the Afrikaner Nationalists, the racists, the powermongers. Shortly before he shifts to Afrikaans he refers to this mythic birth of Afrikanerdom and argues that the declaration of the taalstryder that Afrikaners write as they talk

meant having the freedom to think, to talk, write and act as a free individual. To express honestly your deepest beliefs and hopes for yourself and for your people .... What has happened to this freedom to talk openly, to say things the way they are? Why should an Afrikaner have to write in English? Why can't I write the way my people talk? In Afrikaans?

Because the 'voice' of the Afrikaner, his press, radio and TV is no longer the voice of my people. It is the voice of the Nationalist Party ....

If only we would learn to write the way we talk again. If only we would return in this crisis hour to those principles—volkbeginsels—which once commanded the respect of the world .... When are we going to stand up and say 'Enough is enough!' (1980:136f).
Finally, the return to Afrikaans in the text is, in psychoanalytic terms, the murder of the father by the son; it assumes the right of the son to determine his own identity, to redefine genealogy, to reinvent the very tribe. The issue becomes not only personal survival, but ‘the survival of the Afrikaner’ which is indeed at risk; he warns, ‘Afrikaners, history will not give us another chance’ (1980:139).

The narrative concludes in a celebration of self and volk as indivisible, a rejoicing which, it seems to me, borders on delirium. For instance, he writes to ex-President John Vorster:

My people, we have come a long way and today we face our greatest challenge. May this also be our finest hour, the beginning of a new beginning freed from the shackles of transitory notions.

History has placed us here and this is where we belong. I believe we have a destiny to fulfil and the courage to do it.

History has also chosen us to be at the focal point of that particular moment in time when it is necessary to act, decisively in the full knowledge of our human potential and worth, instead of drifting like flotsam caught in the undercurrents of our folly (1980 publisher’s translation, 226; author’s Afrikaans version, 227)

And how is this adulation made possible after the angst-ridden soul-searching which fills most of the preceding pages? How has he come from an admission that ‘I exist in a universe of panic’ (1980:20) to the jubilatory tones of the concluding lines of the text? How has he come from condemnation of Afrikanerdom’s schizophrenia, its deceitfulness, its drive to conquer, to the point where he can celebrate in the final pages ‘the Afrikaner heart and hand ... [and] the Afrikaner’s direct gaze’ (1980:224), and can seek to recuperate, and endorse, the Afrikaner myth of their status as a chosen people?

This volte-face is made possible by positing an Other against which the self is defined and congratulated. And who is this Other that Ferreira constructs in the final pages of the text? It is not the Other of Afrikanerdom, ‘Dwurg’, which is explored throughout the first 153 pages of the text; in this last Afrikaans part the Other is the rest of the world, perhaps, specifically the English speaking world since Ferreira addresses them in English, inserting this English section into the Afrikaans part of the text. And this Other, the buitelanders who reviles Afrikaner racism, is denounced in Afrikaner Nationalism for being blinded by arrogance. Ferreira comes very close to endorsing this delusion. Ferreira’s short message ‘To the world’s political diviners (in plain English)’ (1980:216)9 denies that apartheid is an invention of the Afrikaner:

9 Ferreira uses the Afrikaans term heiliges, which also means holy ones; obviously, in this context, used ironically.
In our land apartheid thrives, divides, belittles both black and white. In your part of the world it exists, for sure, the same thing but of a different kind. And the results are exactly the same—everywhere (1980:216f).

Now while one can follow his line of argument—that apartheid literally translated means separateness, and that the division and oppression of groups of people by others is not unique to South Africa—I contend that to attempt to dismiss the specificities of apartheid’s evils, the particulars of which he has himself been at pains to expose in the 153 page long English section, is to engage in (self)deceit.

But the strategy has its uses for Ferreira: he is able to construct the world as being just as guilty as are Afrikaners:

We [conspicuously aligning himself with all Afrikaners here] want to state quite clearly, without the slightest fear of contradiction, that apartheid is not our exclusive sin. If we are guilty we are not alone.

Apartheid is just our local word for an addiction of the world: a Dwurgish struggle for supremacy of each and every kind.

Our fault has been to call it by its proper name, to enshrine it in our laws, to practise it openly for everyone to see. And how the world is pointing, panting, saying: ‘Stop your evil sin, your power game’ (1980:216f).

This is just a paler version, it seems to me, of the Afrikaner paranoia of the ‘total onslaught’10. And just as this fantasy of an embattled (and, in the original version, righteous) people functioned to perpetuate the loyalty of Afrikaners to the notion of the volk, so this serves to justify Ferreira’s jubilant return to the tribe, a sinning tribe (he concedes) but one which at least avoids what he now argues is the compounding sin of hypocrisy. The text concludes,

Greetings, Ignatius, Ignatius11
(Kyk net rondom jou, (Just glance around you. alles is só pragtig blou Everything is so beautifully in jubelland blue in the joyous land Azania!) (1980:231)

10 This notion conceived of the Afrikaner tribe as the whipping boy of the ignorant vainglory of all nations who were critical of apartheid, adding their weight to the struggle of South Africans (who were held to be the dupes of communist states) who sought to overthrow the apartheid state. Afrikaners were thus facing a ‘total onslaught’ from within and without South Africa’s borders.

11 His forefather was Thomas Ignatius Ferreira, a Portuguese sailor. I assume that the author is named after him (see 56) and that he is addressing here both his great-great-great-great-grandfather as well as himself.
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The prodigal son has indeed returned.

As we have seen, Ferreira cannot sustain the rejection of the mother-tongue; English has served him well as a tool to dissect Afrikanerdom's evils but it fails to offer him a position as originary and integrated subject. Needing to crawl back into the centre, Ferreira can only do this by redefining that centre. Ferreira's interrogation of self and culture results finally in the therapeutic reinvention of (Afrikaner) self and the reinterpretation of Afrikaner politics (in the context of global oppressive practices). The drive for resolution which propels most narratives can be found in this text to enable the construction of a vantage point which reintegrates a self torn apart by knowledge and shame. It is an observation post which fictively retrieves advantage.

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