

‘Why is There Something and not Nothing?’

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Although he devotes hours of each day to his new discipline, he finds its first premise, as enunciated in the Communications 101 handbook preposterous: ‘Human society has created language in order that we may communicate our thoughts, feelings, and intentions to each other’. His own opinion, which he does not air is that the origins of speech lie in song, and the origins of song in the need to fill out with sound the overlarge and rather empty human soul (‘Lurie’ in Coetzee 1999:3f).

1 Introduction

Alternation celebrates its tenth anniversary in 2003/2004. Established in 1994 as the international journal for the study of southern African Literature and Languages under the auspices of CSSALL (Centre for the Study of southern African Literature and Languages; cf. Smit & Van Wyk 1998/1999)¹, it aimed at cultivating critical perspectives and interactions from within ‘literature’ and ‘language’ studies which constructively feed

¹ In this essay, we highlighted background elements—both past and present—in terms of which the CSSALL wished to intervene, the Centre’s establishment, its articulation with postcolonial studies, its research projects (both theoretical and applied), and its lecture/ learning practices. We tried to also bring to the fore the need to research ‘the literary’ as to the social realities the aesthetic suffers, harbours or harnesses—which are normally passed over in silence, or are marginalised or suppressed within science, technology and ‘development’ discourse.

into developing a discourse which would be relevant to current concerns and challenges².

Alternation focuses its contribution on this complex through its interdisciplinary approach³ within the larger ambit of the Humanities. It is feeding into the discourse development we posited as goal. This is one of the significant ways through which the journal contributes to our country's transformation challenges. It transcends the limitations, constrictions, and mono-discursive boundaried and exclusionary formations, as well as the mere transplanting of theories and discursive formations generated elsewhere by and for different communities and their aspirations, into southern African academia⁴. It also proactively develops ones which creatively and constructively confront our own realities, critically engage those which are alien to or have alienating and marginalising effects on our contexts, and cultivate, encourage and promote those which are central to the diversity of our societal constitution. As I said in my first 'Introduction' to the journal in 1995, we ought to also publish our own locally generated research for local, continental and contingent consumption. With the productive co-operation of more than 250 scholars having their refereed articles published and 82 other contributors, we published twenty substantial

² This related to the various articulations of the 'ego-alter' binary and as it can be read back against (and forward beyond) the dominant discursive formations we have inherited from the apartheid and colonial eras. This discursive break simultaneously continues to challenge intellectuals to contribute to the empowering of previously disadvantaged, underdeveloped, and dis- and mis-educated sectors of society—especially in research capacity development.

³ Even though we have published multi-disciplinary contributions—as they aided interdisciplinary thought—as editorial board, we have viewed the interdisciplinary field in terms of questions and problematisations which are not normally asked or brought to the fore in the specific subjects or canonised branches of learning. As such, they may contribute towards the adding to or broadening of the field, the redefining of its boundaries, or its displacement or transcending into a new domain.

⁴ Much of southern African academia has been known for this (cf. Sole 1997 for example).

journal issues. They significantly contributed towards these goals. They are only the beginning. Another ten years from now, this discourse and this interdisciplinary field will have been even more radically advanced, and its constructive impact on our societies—especially through our research capacity development engagements—much more enhanced.

In this essay, I provide a few pointers on *Alternation's* contributions to the development of our common discursive commitment(s)⁵. They were interventions which provide perspectives on the threads and strands in our critically constructive discourse development programme⁶. These threads form part of the critical material we are busy developing for the weaving of a shared new (southern) African socially responsive and responsible literary/language and culture discourse, more broadly speaking, which forms part of the foundations of a new community—the 'alter-nation'⁷.

2 Ten Years of *Alternation*

The ten years of *Alternation* can be divided into two complexes—the first four years and the last six.

2.1 *The First Four Years*

The first few years were characterized by the posing of a number of questions concerning 'alternation' in the study of 'southern African literature and languages'. During this period, contributions mostly treated

⁵ These 'pointers' come from an earlier draft of a paper I delivered at the 2000 conference of the International Comparative Literature Association, in Pretoria, titled, 'Ten Years of Alternation'.

⁶ My views, obviously, are not 'final', but rather a personal reflection on my own appreciation of a few of these 'streams' and 'strands' as they emerged through the refereeing processes, the critically-constructive feedbacks, and on the editing screen.

⁷ There are many individual contributions which opened new vistas and perspectives onto southern African literature and language studies. However, for lack of space, I hope to elaborate on this in another publication at a later stage.

topics significant for the programmes offered in and relevant to the rationale for the founding of the Centre for the Study of Southern African Literature and Languages (CSSALL) and its researches. They also reflect contributions on the CSSALL's focus on the development of a Southern African Literary History—also drawing on contributions deriving from its first bi-annual conference in 1995.

1994

Some of the items brought to the fore in the first year, concerned the challenge towards the development of a more comprehensive 'Southern African Literary Historiography' (Van Vuuren⁸); the articulation of indigenous culture with 'European Theory', especially psychoanalytic models (Van Wyk); orality (Alant; Turner; Van Vuuren); historicizing perspectives on drama (Mngadi⁹) and novel (Hemson), on travel writing (Pridmore), on philosophy (More); European, especially French writing on Africa (Sienaert); themes 'modern Africans' write about, especially as these provide access to 'experience beyond [the] limitations of gender, race and class' (Voss); and the theorizing of narrative analysis from within indigenous culture (Canonici).

1995

The second year saw the continuation of critical dialogue and research on some of the thematic focuses already broached, but also the introduction of some new themes. Theoretically, and as it is relevant and significant (or not), the following issues were addressed: Marxist aesthetics (Easthope); deconstruction (Moran); cultural transformation (Mngadi); the role of a national literary history in S.A. (Wade); social concerns in Afrikaans drama

⁸ Please note that, for reference purposes, I provide only the author. The full details are available in each individual published issue. The full indices for the first four years, can be found in *Alternation* 4,2 (1997). The indices for 1998 - 2003 (also containing all the abstracts/ summaries of the contributions of the first ten years) are in preparation.

⁹ Cf. Wade's (1994) introductory reflections in the first issue.

(Van Wyk); how to address/ analyse or read history as cultural text (De Kock); ideological analysis in linguistics/ literacy programs (Van Zweekel); and elements of change in education (Sookrajh; Samuel; and Muthukrishna).

The second volume contained pragmatic (ethnographic) approaches to literature (Killam); narrative analyses of modern Arabic literature (Hafez); /Xam narrative (Jeursen); orality (Turner); anthropological presentation (Thorold); history writing (Jaffe); canonized literary texts (Meintjes); historical linguistics (Bailey); tsotsitaal (Molamu); 'language maintenance' (Maartens); and 'relearning' of the 'self', as transformative strategy in terms of the dynamics of 'change' in the sub-continent (Govinden).

1996

The third year was introduced by the dialogue on the prescribed literature at universities in South Africa (Lindfors; Coullie & Gibbon; and Lindfors); and followed by 'radical historical consciousness' in South African drama (Mngadi); a Lacanian analysis of Afrikaans drama (Vermeulen); processes of social and cultural transition in a South African drama (Flockemann); the representation of South Africa in Mozambican Literature (Bartlett); and challenges in African Philosophy (More).

The second issue of the year was introduced by contributions on African Diaspora literature (Boyce Davies) and black feminist reflections on the politics of the representation of women (Abraham). On this issue, two more contributions focused on black women, writing and identity, i.e. as present in Afro-American women's writing/ critique (Smit) and two book reviews reflecting on 'the black Diaspora' and the question of the invention of 'cultural identity' in African, African-American, and Caribbean drama (Gadsby). The issue also contains contributions on feminist perspectives, from reflections on three Xhosa poems (Mtuzze), Afrikaans women writers and the question of 'identity' (Conradie), and a feminist perspective on 'the canon of Afrikaans Poetry' (Lourens). Moran (a), Alvarez, Meyer, Gilfillan, and Moran (b), respectively reflect on a critical reception/ challenging of Spivak's postcolonial articulations with 'post-' discourse, representations of railway-culture in indigenous resistance literature, the problematizing of the fact-fiction articulation in Du Toit's *Di Koningin fan Skeba* (1886-1889), Eugène Marais' *Dwaalstories* (1927), and neo-liberal strands of critique.

Van Wyk, Mitchell and Smit and De Kadt, again, addressed the problematic issues deriving from the representation of poor white realities in early twentieth century Afrikaans literature, and this complex's articulation with the rise of 'nationalist blueprints', the literary and social significance of 'the young adult novel' in South Africa, and the power relationship(s) underpinned by the language(s) of minorities.

1997

The highlights of our fourth year were to publish some significant theoretical reflections deriving from different forms of indigenous critique¹⁰, and a refereed selection of the papers from the CSSALL's first bi-annual conference, held in 1995¹¹.

As for the first focus, we published Sirayi's study of 'indigenous African theatre', Duggan's analyses of Mda's plays, Cloete's critiques of anthropological and feminist writings around the !Kung, Conradie's study of Krotoa (Eva) in the Van Riebeeck household in the late seventeenth century, Pridmore's researches of the 'wives of Henry Fynn' and their lives 'as authors' but also their 'experiences' in the nineteenth century, and Davidson and Filatova's work on Soviet Perspectives on South African society (1917 - mid 1950s). A focus we may generally label, 'contrastive rhetoric' is then presented. Singh addresses double-sided analyses on what we may call the work(s) of culture—i.e. the issue of 'cultural entrepreneurship' and its counter-point, the 'culturalisation of politics'. Sole, in his award-winning article, provides a meticulous analysis of the production and exigencies of literary 'post-discourse', while Moran weighs in with a critical study of the post-Marxian representations in current South African literary-theoretical studies—i.e. where they combine a misrepresentation of Marxian theory with a decontextualisation of post-structuralism. He criticizes this approach

¹⁰ I say this in addition to the theorisings which have already taken place in the *Alternations* of the previous three years.

¹¹ Another refereed selection was published in the volume, *The Dancing Dwarf from the Land of Spirits* (1999). A selection of the second biannual conference was published as *Body, Identity, Sub-cultures and Repression in Texts from Africa* (1999).

for its oversimplification of the category of class, the fallacy of replacing the category of class with race, and the further marginalization of the already marginalized. This is complemented by his critique of over-simplified articulations with 'deconstruction'—in his 'Derrida and the Political'—and Smit's critical analyses of Umberto Eco's oeuvre and its studied apprehensions. Enkvist, from his well-know pragmatic background, contributed two articles. One is on the understanding of his linguistically-informed version of 'discourse comprehension', and the other, on his rationale(s) for 'contrastive rhetoric'.

The second issue of *Alternation* contained a sample of manuscripts from our first biannual conference. Apart from those already published, we have here contributions on a sample of the discursive perceptions necessary for the comprehension of a Southern African Literary history. Smith addresses the historical uses of 'Ethiopia' in ancient, classical, medieval and Renaissance Europe, and what happened to this representation after Europe established contact with 'Ethiopia'. Köppe, Roos, Lloyd, Pridmore, Meihuizen and Gagiano, respectively present studies on W.H.I. Bleek, the /Xam, perceptions in literature dating from the early British period in Southern Africa, H.F. Fynn (in the context of early eighteenth century travel writing), Thomas Pringle, and A.C. Jordan.

Turning to more recent contributions, we have Davidson and Filatova reflecting on the reception and representations of 'the South African War' among the Russian public, Coetzee on the South African farm novel, Balfour on novels by Schoeman, Coetzee, and Conrad, Claasen on a significant student conference in the 1930s, Prabhakaran on the social stratification in South African Telugu, Bourgault on reports of occult practices in the Liberian Press under Sam Doe (1988-1989), Attwell on the inherent reciprocal—ontological—reflexivity present in 'colonial discourse' and 'South African Literature as Colonial Discourse'. Stiebel contributes a study on the publications by Rider Haggard, and Brooks, on the critical articulations of land, literature and history.

2.2 *The Second Six Years*

Continuing the general *Alternation* approach, the second six years focused both the problematisings as well as the discursive addressing of these into a

volume a piece. I am not elaborating on each of these contributions in the same way I did above. I only provide a brief characterization of each of the contributions. The volumes need to be engaged on their own terms.

1998

* Shane Moran—Significant Theory Development in South Africa: *Alternation* 5,1 (1998). This volume contains studies of a sample of Ngugi's writings, the issue of vernacular languages in the post-colony, and various historical and historicising perspectives on a variety of historical texts.

* Johan van Wyk, Lindelwa Mahonga & Johannes A. Smit—Marginal Literatures, Marginal Figures and Marginal Genres in South African Literature: *Alternation* 5,2 (1998). Including manuscripts initially delivered as papers at the second CSSALL biannual conference, this volume provides a wide overview of critical perspectives on a sample of such literatures, figures and genres in the South African context.

1999

* Pitika Ntuli & Johannes A. Smit—The African Renaissance: *Alternation* 6,1 (1999). The question of the African intellectual's articulation with 'power' and 'truth' introduces this volume. It contains critical studies dealing with indigenous sensibilities and commitments.

* Johannes A. Smit—Significant theoretical approaches to Southern African Literature and Languages: *Alternation* 6,2 (1999). Literature and critical perspectives addressed, range from Thomas Mofolo and Kofi Awoonor to Breyten Breytenbach, Alan Paton and Njabulo Ndebele.

2000

* Thengani H. Ngwenya & Jabulani Mkhize—Autobiographical Writing/South African Life-writing: *Alternation* 7,1 (2000). This volume contains a good sample of critical studies on a number of South African autobiographical publications.

* Irina Filatova, Mandy Goedhals, Stephen Leech and Barry White—Development: Perceptions, Perspectives, Identities: *Alternation* 7,2 (2000). Representing a number of critical perspectives in the midst of curriculum restructuring activities, this issue of *Alternation* provides samples of research from the disciplines of Anthropology, Geography, History and Sociology.

2001

* Judith Lütge Coullie—Identity and SA Literature: *Alternation* 8,1 (2001). This volume contains a cross-section of manuscripts which were refereed and accepted for publication at the time and deals with topics such as colonial women's representations of indigenous realities, curriculum in Fort Hare's pioneer years, and the relationship(s) to 'home' in Diaspora circumstances.

* Shane Moran—Intellectuals and Knowledge/ The Function of Intellectuals: *Alternation* 8,2 (2001). Focusing on the relationship of intellectuals with regard to knowledge produced but also on the knowledge intellectuals themselves produce, this issue questions the presumed silencing of 'critique', the articulation of 'nationalism' and 'feminism', and 'nation' and 'migration' amongst other issues.

2002

* Catherine Addison—Communication Theory/ Intercultural Communication: *Alternation* 9,1 (2002). The volume contains a number of studies initially delivered as papers at a Communication Theory conference and provides perspectives on the complexities involved in communication, as they derive from cultural determinants.

* Graham Stewart—Information Technology and Research Output/ Humanities Computing: *Alternation* 9,2 (2002). Due to the significant growth in information systems and technology, this is *Alternation's* first volume reflecting on different aspects important for the development of literature and language studies in terms of these very significant media.

2003

* Rembrandt Klopper—Cognitive Science: *Alternation* 10,1 & 10,2 (2003). Due to the rising significance of 'cognitive science' these issues provide multi- and interdisciplinary contributions to this field, opening possibilities for developments concerning the study of literature and languages.

3 Conclusion

I have attempted to provide a brief sample of some of the contributions to *Alternation* over the last ten years. A large variety of issues and literatures were addressed, and theories developed which importantly contribute towards 'discourse development'. What stands out, I believe, is that a significant number of contributions dealt with historical and historicizing issues/ approaches. Such approaches provide new ways of engaging history, but also open new spaces, ways and possibilities of engaging current literary productions and language studies.

Finally, as token of our appreciation for his important contributions to the founding of *Alternation*, CSSALL, as well as his role in the organising of three biannual conferences, we want to dedicate the two issues of the tenth year of *Alternation*, to Johan van Wyk, who was the Director of CSSALL before his untimely illness. Few before him, have done as much to encourage and facilitate inter-disciplinary studies in literature and languages in southern Africa¹².

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¹² This is also the context for the title of this paper – i.e. apart from its various metaphysical and post-metaphysical interpretations, it signifies creative endeavour.

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