

# Direction<sup>1</sup> in Afrikaans Literature

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(Translated by Johan van Wyk)

To indicate the direction of an intellectual<sup>3</sup> trend of your own time is in no way an objective, precise or scientific undertaking. The idea itself is a figure of speech and unclear, because 'direction' is not as distinct and singular as on a map or in the veldt. The starting point, the present, we never comprehend in a concise, mental way, but with our own humanity, the full range of emotions; and the next point, somewhere in the future, we posit with our desire and will. You need only ask a communist, a liberal or a nationalist the future direction of the world. For each it would seem as if the world is developing according to his or her own aspirations.

So determining a direction is actually an impassioned play of the total personality wishing for a particular trend; it is a longing, even a wish to participate in the making of that future. That is why we all claim (it is the intellectual affliction of our human limitations) that 'so it will be, so it shall be', when it should read 'so I want it to be'.

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<sup>1</sup> *Rigting* could also be translated as 'trend'.

<sup>2</sup> Originally a lecture presented at Stellenbosch, March 1936 and published for the first time in 1939 as: 'Die Rigting van die Afrikaanse Letterkunde'. In *Berigte te Velde: Opstelle oor die Idee van 'n Afrikaanse Letterkunde*. Kaapstad, Bloemfontein, Johannesburg: Nasionale Boekhandel Bpk. (pp. 9 – 16.)

<sup>3</sup> *Geestelike* could also translate as 'spiritual'.

But it is also not just pure fantasy, because they who experience the trend in earnest, will attempt with all seriousness to try and understand and express the facts within the necessary imperatives.

Our literature must return, and is returning, to its deep sources amongst the people. This is what marks all great literature. The artist and the people are so closely linked to each other that this might sound vulgar. And yet we have to state it vigorously and again and again everywhere where we hear 'we must move away from the national in our literature'<sup>4</sup>. If this would be achieved, it would mean the end. We would then in an artificial atmosphere produce rarefied verse, pale prose, or the equivalent of the Latin verse of the Renaissance or of modern intellectuals; but without the eternal thrust of the will or the pain of the people, it will all remain a distant game, a far-off rumour.

The trend away from the national is but temporary and can be explained thus:

The older patriotic literature (after 1900) was a true expression of the people, it was the voice of the people itself. The task of those authors was the spiritual absorption of the war, so that it became meaningful and not just a brutal material event; but this task, this making sense of the senseless, was the task of each of us, so that we could become human again, with human worth and values. Just as immediate was the necessity of the humiliated to again derive self recognition from their history—therefore our historical romances.

But from this there developed after the First World War the good-natured local realism of which Jochem van Bruggen is the most representative and *Ampie* still the most attractive text. Technically and in its portrayal of the person this book is so much better than the older prose that it was seen as a radical departure and renewal. Essentially, though, this work does not embody such a renewal; it is intrinsically related to the historical trend of which it is a continuation and refinement. The historical is merely brought closer, from the remote past (East India Company, Great Trek, etc.) to the period immediately preceding our own. Realism that confronts fairly

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<sup>4</sup> Footnote in original text: 'This statement was more common in 1936. The same people now demand, and unfortunately for the same reason, the popular slogan—"Blood and soil"'.  

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the simple wonder of the real we still do not have; it is the good-natured idealisation of the happy rural existence of the past where the landowner and the tenant still knew their respective places in society. We do not know Ampie as he is immediately in the presence of God, but as he, with all sympathy, is seen through the eyes of Booysen and his class, the older patriarchal landowner. It is not Ampie as he is, but as he is seen from the convictions and certainties of a particular social perspective. One could also write the novel of Booysen as seen through the eyes of Ampie. A completely different view of farming life it would be. That is not completely relevant here; what is to the point is that that perspective and those social certainties have disappeared. The world is completely different; today Ampie is not the start of a new era, but the completion of the old.

Around this attractive figure there are dozens of prose writers from the time (it was the period in which prose dominated) to whom the same is applicable, even though not all of them write about rural life; also the urban Afrikaner (the poor and wealthy classes) are depicted only from this limited class perspective. To trace this trend of thought into greater detail is the possible topic of a separate study. I just want to refer to one significant date to illustrate the alienation between literature and the people in those years: in 1922 *Ampie* (to return again to the best example) appears, the quiet and sympathetic portrayal of the poor white from this class perspective, and in 1922 that same poor white views South Africa through the notch of a mauser. So the people and the literature have slowly grown apart.

Three things destroyed that world view for us and will form the grounds of the new literature: (1) the movement to the city; (2) the disappearance of an older, pleasant life in the rural areas and on the farms; and (3) a more acute awareness of class divisions amongst our people. These three points made our new South Africa which is not attractive and pleasant, but which has to be accepted soberly if we want to achieve great things for this country. For the city-dweller there are the same urban problems as in the rest of the Western world<sup>5</sup>; the literature will increasingly have the features of the European, it will only differ in the local solution, but not in the problems raised. Life will throttle the poor farmer, he will either be mute, without expression in literature, or inspire an image of the hard land-bound

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<sup>5</sup> *Beskawing* could also translate as 'civilisation'.

struggle without any beauty. And the divisions between rich and poor will also be reflected. The higher civil and bureaucratic class wants peace and rest, not a spiritual life; he demands and produces alien anaemic things and will separate completely from the people. In that way the authors will be forced closer to the people, they will express their anger at the dissidents in protest and satire.

Life became more serious and severe and a literature close to the people will contain the same signs. Precursors of this can be identified: in *Droogte* fragmentarily in *Booia* in *Haar Beproewing* there is something of the new severity which indicates a more rigorous art. With the sterner intellectual positing of all the great human questions, the sober and frank answering of these, even in the recent poetry we see the play with 'modernity' passing<sup>6</sup>. And if one could predict: when this extreme honesty becomes the life of our art there will be a new heroic spirit: a heroism of a small nation finding itself between Black Africa and the World Powers. And the heroism of the individual alone among the stars; possibly the source from which our epic and great future art will grow.

So then did the old way of life in South Africa come to an end, and in these directions lie the growth possibilities of a new art, as far as I can see from within the scope of my human and personal limitations: back to the severe life of the people, therefore fierce, frank, heroic.

Through these things the spirit of our new literature will be determined; but its content must be understood differently. The most important change a society can undergo is the change from a colony to a nation. This transition is only partly determined by political emancipation; it doesn't happen on a specific day; but must work through into all aspects of life over a long period, it is a spiritual change in which one 'starts dreaming in a different key'.

The colony is a national rupture and it knows that it is fragmentary, that the full beam of a people's life does not pass it. Usually it does not encompass all classes and types (officials dominate); it does not give

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<sup>6</sup> Footnote in original: 'Very slowly I would say today (1936) where we still see how there is indulged for instance with the New Objectivity. When one is young you assume that this idiocy is slowly dying, later you learn to include it in your calculations'.

direction but is directed from the motherland. A people is a unity and universal; it comprises all classes and ranks, and transcends all; it is equal in its right to other nations as bearer of culture; it is conscious of its individuality.

When the colony expresses itself in literature (for instance in South West Africa, Dutch India, or British East Africa), then it offers the *local* and the *typical* (for example the hunting story, indigenous animals and tribes, the exotic East), but the expression of a simple, timeless humanity it leaves to the literature of the mother land. When a real author finds himself in the colony (Roy Campbell) then he finds himself to be an exile and he has to escape from that narrow-minded confines. A people above all expresses itself in the total human-being: it encompasses, also in literature, all contradictions, directions and periods, and gathers them into a national literature with its own identity.

This national becoming is still developing in obscurity and unconsciously with us, complete areas of our spiritual life must still be conquered by it, much must be destroyed and started anew—also in the literature. We must still come to a realisation that our people's literature should be a mirror of everything that is part of our life. If Afrikaans will remain with the typical, the specific which is always the untrue, if it stays with the local, then it is doomed. As long as we say this and that belongs to European languages, but not in Afrikaans, that any passion or thought that is part of an Afrikaner's life or thought, principally does not belong in our literature, then we are the colony of an alien culture, and not a nation. Then the presupposition remains: English, German, Dutch are universal; but Afrikaans is local. Everything, absolutely everything that inspires modern man, that constitutes his joy or sorrow, must also find its sediment in our literature. We may not shrink back and say: that is too complex for our simple culture, it is too dangerous or too profound. The Afrikaner is simply a modern person in an Afrikaans environment. As in literature the concept of a 'ruling passion' which is sufficient indication of an individual, had been replaced by the mighty and complete humanity of for instance a Dostoyevski's characters, who do not have any peculiarities anymore, so the idea of the limited traits of the people must disappear before the idea of a complex humanity in the context of the people. This becoming of a nation must happen in our literature in this generation otherwise it would be too late.

When this happens new areas of human experience will be annexed by our literature. Of this I can only give a few loose indications because eventually it would bring about that universal form of thinking and feeling which is the essence of any national literature. I name but a few:

(1) A colonial or local literature has no place for individualism, for the severe personal expression of the universal experience, because in its looking outwards it still does not recognize the personal. A poet such as Gorter is inconceivable in such an intellectual environment in both his individualist verse ('Verzen') and his beautiful longing for the Movement of the New Humanity. A national literature has space for all apparent contradictions such as people's literature and individualism, it gathers them together and reconciles them.

(2) A national literature can never really escape from the difficult responsibility of thinking. Our technically schooled philosophers do not concern themselves with literature, and our writers do not care much about philosophy. And yet in every great art work there is a steel hardened structure of thought hidden, every great art work is the perfect formulation of a world view which is a product of intellectual struggle. The anthologising of moods, the search for the typical detail for a description does not make a people's literature. The honest, severe thinking through of modern life, as seen from our national perspective, with the help of the greatest world philosophers should be the basis of our literature.

(3) In our literature the relationship between man and woman has hardly been touched upon; we possess no love novel and very few love poems. In a colonial environment one does not dare to be truly human, and this, the most typically human relationship becomes a petite bourgeois affair of courtship and marriage. These passions which in the nations of our ancestors always constituted the beauty and severity of life and art becomes purely good-natured with a little cute suggestivity; against the essence and frankness of the modern sexual experience only concealment is placed. What is beautiful is turned into the vulgar; what is frank is avoided. That is how our petite bourgeois expression manifests itself: powerless to decide on both the beautiful or the objective.

But also here the coming-into-being of the people will happen. The dictatorship of the small minded will be broken here by the people and the writers, because its social foundations have already collapsed.

(4) The working life of both white and black in our country is another productive theme, when it is no longer seen as idyllic, but anew: the difficult struggle against the powers of nature by powers in itself still nature and unconscious. I'm thinking of a farmer who built a dam three times and saw it washed away three times before he broke himself. Here we remained with the theme of drought, with a little bit of the fisher's life (Malherbe), but mining, forestry—complete sections of our people's labour—are not yet touched upon.

(5) The Bantu and the coloured have hardly been seen by us; to a small degree we described them as enemies, then later sympathetically and humorously from the bourgeois point of view<sup>7</sup>; but they still need to appear in our literature as human beings, in books which do not come with simplified liberal solutions, but with the total burden of the fate of our nation.

(6) Upliftment and instruction, even true religiosity, is not unknown in our literature, but great religious poetry, the expression of the human's immediate relationship with the cosmos, the conversation between the mystic with God as if they are addressing one another directly in the infinity—this does not happen in a small local literature. It is only when the human being feels himself a bearer of full humanity that he could truly address God.

Just a word about language. It should be obvious that also in this we cannot remain with the typical. We are familiar with the foreigner and tourist type of realism that achieves local colour through words such as *kopje* and *voetsak*. In a people's literature one cannot idealise typical Afrikaans words. We will need the profusion of words and images from the farm, the factory, and the whole new way of life.

And to conclude: no particular content can constitute a great literature; something else should be added; something concerning the form; something I cannot describe but with the word *immediacy*. All the compositional advice from the handbooks is irrelevant, but it remains an important element of a great literature. The author must strip himself of all that is accidental to the environment and class to say only the essential; he must confront his subject as if they were alone in the world, and his words must be as intended as words uttered on the death bed. Being an artist with

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<sup>7</sup> Footnote in original: 'Mikro and his followers'.

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us, even in this barren civility of ours, must be accepted with grace and total commitment; and he who does this will know that he cannot claim much from the world for it, but that he should demand much from himself.

Purity of form and word is the technical side to the same thing. With perfect technique one could find a feeble literature (although I am not convinced of it), but without it you have not even started with a poem or prose work, because it is precisely the form which transforms a psychological fact (such as an emotion) or a sociological fact as named by me into a work of art. The author should not be easily content with inspiration. Inspiration combined with indifference produces rhetoric—the eternal Mephistopheles of literature. But if we want to produce something great in the future, our authors will have to apply the greatest measure of self discipline until we could formulate in beautiful and transparent words everything that marks our national life.

I did not focus on the distinction between prose and poetry, but the general tendency of the literature, which applies to both. I did not try to identify where the growth can be located. I wanted to make you aware of the great task to produce a new civilisation in this country—the destination of our people. I did not want to speak as a prophet about things which are assured (the future could make me into a liar as it frustrates all our expectations). I wanted to show what a valuable adventure it is to live in this country at this time. There are still so many magnificent things to be achieved. If we remain with a literature of school books and middle class sentiments we will be the scorn of nations and our language will disappear from this land.

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