Cultural Transformation in South Africa: The Role of Literary Studies

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Abstract

A comprehensive national literary history can contribute importantly to the cultural transformation of South Africa along non-racial and democratic lines. This would be made possible by an inter-disciplinary approach to the field which transforms literary studies into cultural studies, which constructs a conceptual unity around history rather than languages, which engages with contemporary literary theories, and which encourages a suspicion of the discourse of nationalism.

> Students of South African literature must outgrow the situation which has prevailed in their discipline; its most striking feature has long been the absence of any unified, systematic, integrated account of the country's literary production as a whole (Gérard 1993:59f).

It is quite remarkable that, at the close of the twentieth century, South Africa has yet to produce such a comprehensive national literary history. The reasons are both political—the ethno-linguistic segregations imposed by colonialism and exacerbated by apartheid—and theoretical: the absence of adequate models to conceptualise such an 'integrated account'. It is now apparent that these political and theoretical obstacles have been severely weakened by the emergence of a non-racial democratic State and the radical transformation of literary studies in recent decades by contemporary literary theory (Marxism, Semiotics, Post-structuralism, Deconstruction, Psychoanalysis, etc). This is no idle academic exercise: South Africa's recent political transformations need to be accompanied by an allied *cultural transformation*—the building of a non-racial, democratic, national and non-sexist culture. If language and literature departments at (segregated) schools and universities played their part in interpellating ethnically divided subjects, then it would seem that a key element in the educational re-structuring of post-apartheid South Africa would involve the construction of an integrated national literary history manifesting itself in school and tertiary syllabuses.

It is crucial to accept that such a national literary history cannot be constructed from the space of a single discipline. It is therefore central that such a project be rigorously *inter-disciplinary*, drawing not only upon work done in the eleven official South African languages, but also upon disciplines such as history, anthropology and cultural studies. However, Roland Barthes (1974:79) has pointed out the radical consequences of such an approach:

> Interdisciplinary activity, valued today as an important aspect of research, cannot be accomplished by simple confrontations between various specialized branches of knowledge. Interdisciplinary work is not a peaceful operation: it begins *effectively* when the solidarity of the old disciplines breaks down ... to the benefit of a new object and a new language, neither of which is the domain of those branches of knowledge that one calmly sought to confront.

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If a 'new object and a new language', a renewed, unrecognizable literary history, is to emerge from the breakdown of the deadeningly familiar 'old disciplines', then it seems to me that specific transformations need to take place in a number of important areas.

Firstly, the very notion of literary studies in South Africa would need to be radically re-conceptualised. It is not only a matter of, for example, suddenly filling up syllabuses with South African literary texts, but of making a decisive break with the hegemonic notion of what counts as 'literature'. Such a notion of the 'literary' is structured around a series of binary oppositions whose first term is always privileged: the written book rather than the oral performance; the fictional text rather than 'factual' texts such as historical writings, diaries, travelogues, and so on; 'high' literature rather than the 'popular'; and alphabetical writing rather than other writing systems. It is imperative to break with this model because so much of the literature that deserves serious consideration is thereby marginalised. To disturb this structure is not to privilege its denigrated other but to re-position literary studies in terms of a *cultural studies* paradigm which, as Antony Easthope (1991:60) argues, analyses texts generally as 'examples of signifying practice'. Such a textualist approach, Easthope continues, is grounded upon the following notion:

> Both literary and popular cultural texts operate through a system of signs, meanings arising from the organization of the signifier, so both can be analysed in common terms.

Secondly, in his recent essay, 'Towards a National History of South African Literature', Albert Gérard has confronted the serious difficulties South Africa presents to such a project. He draws our attention particularly to the pronounced racial, political and linguistic divisions, but then interestingly argues that despite the 'diversity of South Africa's population and the resulting variety of her literature(s)', there is to be found a 'decisive element of unity which binds together all racial and ethnic groups with their different languages and traditions' (Gérard 1993:47). This element is a shared South African *history*, which he briefly divides into four 'phases':

> ... first, the settlement of migrants, black and white, on territory that had previously been occupied by Khoikhoi and San; second, the British conquest; third, the discovery of enormous mineral riches and the ensuing developments, industrialisation and urbanisation; fourth, the rise of Afrikanerdom and the institutionalisation of *apartheid*. Each of the human groups that constitute the population of the country was diversely affected by each of these processes. The various branches of the national literature emerged and grew as specific responses to these wider processes (Gérard 1993:47).

As we are aware, traditionally national literary histories have been constructed around a single dominant language. In South Africa, with its multilingual and multicultural diversity, this would be an impossible task. Indeed, there is a danger, identified by Jeremy Cronin, of the establishment of a 'national literature under the hegemony of a white, liberal, English project', a

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possibility encouraged by the emergence of English as the *de facto* national language of a postcolonial South Africa. It is for these reasons that Gérard's emphasis upon *history* is so important, a point developed by Johan van Wyk (1995), in his paper entitled 'Towards a South African Literary History':

> In South Africa ... with different language groups merged into one national identity, literary history cannot be conceived on the basis of language. Rather, the basis is a literature as product of shared historical interaction within a common geographical area—although different, even conflicting, perspectives and ideologies embody this interaction .... The traditional literary history assumes that continuity of texts written in a particular language is stronger than the possible links between texts of different languages. In a multilingual society, language is secondary to the experience of a common history.

This emphasis upon historical *interaction* leads me to my *third* point, that our analyses of texts in this multicultural and hybrid social reality need to draw on the important theoretical concepts of intertextuality (Kristeva), heteroglossia (Bakhtin), discursive formations (Foucault) and différance (Derrida), that is, to see texts as unstable entities traversed by a multiplicity of (cultural, political, literary) voices or codes which are themselves without origin or telos. As Roland Barthes (1974:12) explained in *S/Z*:

> ... the one text is not an (inductive) access to a Model, but entrance into a network with a thousand entrances; to take this entrance is to aim, ultimately, not at a legal structure of norms and departures, a narrative of poetic Law, but at a perspective (of fragments, of voices from other texts, other codes), whose vanishing point is nonetheless ceaselessly pushed back, mysteriously opened: each (single) text is the very theory (and not the mere example) of this vanishing, of this difference which indefinitely returns, insubmissive.

It seems to me that post-structuralist theories of the text such as these, which break with traditional notions that texts are enclosed totalities containing single meanings and wholly determined by their 'original' context of production, enable us properly to account for the vibrantly *hybrid* South African literary (inter-)text. Moreover, such readings of South African literature enable an avoidance—they are both complicit antagonists in a closed binary logic—of an organicist national discourse which reduces difference to an essentialist Same, and a fetishization of difference (ironically a perpetuation of apartheid axiomatics) which precludes an encounter with these intertextual spaces.

Such a literary model is something of a microcosm of the democratic nation, seen, in the phrase of Laclau and Mouffe (1985), as 'an articulated totality of differences'. The 'totality' or 'unity' is 'articulated'—constructed, provisional, mutable, indeterminate, resistant to closure—to separate it from any suggestion of an essential unity grounded in some transcendental signified, and it is a 'totality' made up of irreducible 'differences'—that multiplicity of voices which make up our national terrain. Simon During (1991:34) writes of something similar in the case of New Zealand when he refers to 'constructing a non-essentialist unity across a maintained difference'.

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Fourthly, I hope it is clear from what I have been saying that I am as suspicious of the discourse of nationalism as I am of the discourse of 'literature'. In the post-colonial context, nationalism all too easily becomes a new master narrative, an unreflexive 'myth' which 'naturalises' historical and political contingency. As Benedict Anderson (1983:131) argues in his *Imagined Communities*, nationalism 'naturalises' historical and political contingency:

> Something of the nature of political love can be deciphered from the way its (nationalism's) languages describe its object: either in the vocabulary of kinship (motherland, Vaterland, patria) or that of home (*Heimat*, or *tanah air*) .... Both idioms denote something to which one is naturally tied ... in everything 'natural' there is always something unchosen.

Nationalism not only elides the cultural complexity of a specific nation—its specificities of class, gender, regions, ethnic groups, languages, and so on—but it also, in its desperate bid to construct a local 'Other', elides the reality of cultural syncreticity, 'an inescapable and characteristic feature of all post-colonial societies and indeed the source of their peculiar strengths' (Ashcroft et al 1989:30). Furthermore, in its hostility to 'cultural imperialism', an essentialist nationalism is unable to account for the *international* dimension of cultural exchange, what Diana Brydon (1991:196) refers to as

> this new globalism (which) simultaneously asserts local independence and global interdependencies. It seeks a way to cooperate without cooption, a way to define differences that do not depend on myths of cultural purity or authenticity but that thrive on interaction that 'contaminates' without homogenising.

It is for these reasons that any teaching of a South African national history—alive both to the complexities of local differences and the ways in which 'local' cultural discourses are inevitably caught up in a global cultural network—must occupy the terrain of the 'national' in a profoundly critical manner, working within a space which must be constantly discussed *sous rature*.

Perhaps what we are really after in South Africa—beyond nation-building—is the construction of a radical democratic culture. In their book, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, Laclau and Mouffe make a distinction between what they call a 'popular subject position' and a 'democratic subject position'. In the third world, the popular struggle has a single enemy—the imperialist, which has the effect of 'dividing the political space into two antagonistic camps'. The 'popular subject position' is therefore one constituted by this binary division—in South Africa the 'national-democratic' subject position of the 'people' versus the apartheid-colonialist regime. The 'democratic subject position', however, is found in societies with a multiplicity of antagonisms (class struggles, the new social movements) which cannot be subsumed under any unifying notion of the 'popular'. Perhaps we need to lay the basis for such a pluralist democratic society, where 'we acknowledge differences—the particular, the multiple, the heterogeneous ...' (Laclau & Mouffe 1985:36), the fact that we are all

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'multiple and contradictory subjects, inhabitants of a diversity of communities' (Mouffe 1988:44).

It is by the encouragement of such a radical democratic culture that we can break with the essentialised unitary subject of nationalist discourses, and instead begin to celebrate our cultural diversity and hybridity, itself caught up in a global network of cultural exchange.

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