Nation, Narration and Cultural Translation:
Heart Of Darkness and
Mhudi

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Preamble

Since this paper was written originally some four years ago, it seems relevant to supply a little of its history. My interest in Bhabha came about somewhat fortuitously as a result of research into the concept of 'cultural translation'; a concept which has become rather more current, and, perhaps, rather more respectable, now, than it was at that time. Again, the quest which preceded my discovery both of the concept and of Bhabha was motivated by a need for a theory that would provide ways of reading metropolitan, mainstream, canonical, European texts side by side with local texts. This need had its roots in my teaching context: being 'white', teaching 'white' and 'black' literature at a 'black' institution to 'black' students demanded the formulation of at least pedagogical reasons for selecting texts for study, and it seemed important then, as now, to step back a little from the more pressing hegemonies of, on the one hand, *apartheid* and the 'South African situation', and, on the other, questions of aesthetic value which still seemed to permeate the English academy. The two texts which proved most productive of such formulations, and which, I confess, I drained dry, were *Heart of Darkness* and *Mhudi*. At the time it seemed an innovative manoeuvre to couple and compare them: and this paper represents the most theoretically developed articulation of the concerns that motivated the manoeuvre. The paper was prepared originally for the 1993 Conference of the European Association of Commonwealth Languages and Literature Studies, which had the distinction of being the first conference I'd been to abroad in the company of a number of South African colleagues. The paper is itself already a rewriting of earlier ideas; and this re-presentation offers me an opportunity to test the currency of the theoretical positions I struck then: the somewhat self-conscious sense of writing back, critically and theoretically, to the European centre which had at last graciously overcome the cultural boycott and opened its cultural and academic arms to us.

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In his 1990 critical collection, Homi K. Bhabha made the theoretical move of coupling the concepts of nation and narration: a coupling which I've tried to complicate by adding the concept of cultural translation. While it is not my intention here to examine the intricacies of Bhabha's theoretical explorations, I briefly summarise points that emerge in his introduction to the book and in his contribution to it. Though problematic, this ethnographic concept, in my view, constitutes an interesting paradigm case of the relations between nation and narration and can be fruitfully studied in terms of *Heart of Darkness* and *Mhudi*.

Bhabha's emphasis, in the first place, is on 'nation' as an idea, as a discursive and cultural construct, as, in his words, 'a system of cultural signification ... the representation of social life rather than the discipline of social polity' (Bhabha 1990:1f). His theoretical move of studying the nation through its narrative address is thus one which 'does not merely draw attention to its language and rhetoric: it also attempts to alter the conceptual object itself', to recognise the 'performativity of language in the narratives of the nation' (Bhabha 1990:3).

In the second place, the 'incomplete signification' that characterises the 'address to the nation as narration' has the effect of turning 'boundaries and limits into the in-between spaces through which the meanings of cultural and political authority are negotiated' (Bhabha 1990:4). It is in such 'in-between spaces' that new critical and theoretical bases are developing. Says Bhabha (1990:6):

> It is when the western nation comes to be seen, in Conrad's famous phrase, as one of the dark corners of the earth, that we can begin to explore new places from which to write histories of people and construct theories of narration.

If we grant with Bhabha, therefore, that 'English is no longer an English language', then we should also recognise the 'post-colonial and neo-colonial conditions as authoritative positions from which to speak Janus-faced to east and west', and the onus that exists, in such conditions, of dealing professionally with local situations that are themselves defined as liminal and borderline (Bhabha 1990:6).

Granting thus the authority of postcolonial positions, Bhabha comes to a tantalising and somewhat paradoxical conclusion. He says,

> there are those who have not yet found their nation; amongst them the Palestinians and the Black South Africans. It is our loss that in making this book we were unable to add their voices to ours. Their persistent questions remain to remind us, in some form or measure, of what must be true for the rest of us too: 'When did we become "a people"? When did we stop being one? Or are we in the process of becoming one? What do these big questions have to do with our intimate relationships with each other and with others'? (Bhabha 1990:7).

The questions are Said's, and they are cited to represent what Bhabha thinks must be the problematic of nationness for 'Palestinians and Black South Africans'. The paradox of which Bhabha appears unaware is the alterity of the 'us-them' relationship thus engendered, an alterity which might become apparent if we recall the traditional prominence in Africa of linguistic formulations such as *ubuntu*, or the ways in which, in African society, the naming of an individual can reflect the renewal of the community. An anecdote from Bessie Head (1981:xxi) describes an instance of such naming:

> *Rebatho* means 'Now we are people'. The grandparents had seen no grandchildren in the family for a long time. Then a young grand-daughter married and gave birth to a son. This caused joy and relief to the grandparents. They exclaimed: '*Rebatho*, now we are people again'.

The reservation might justifiably be expressed that it is precisely this 'nationness' that has been lost to 'Black South Africans', but it is a reservation that would emerge oddly from the pen of one who is not, I suspect, in a position to advance it with the kind of postcolonial authority he has himself advocated. It would also emerge oddly from the pen of one who has asserted that:

> The 'other' is never outside or beyond us; it emerges forcefully, within cultural discourse, when we think we speak most intimately and indigenously 'between ourselves' (Bhabha 1990:4).

It is not my purpose simply to quibble with Bhabha when I am in substantial agreement with him, indeed am appropriating for my own use the postcolonial spaces to which he gives theoretical recognition. And yet the authority with which I advance my critique is a significant one, since it draws on the ethnographic claim of 'being there' (the term is one coined by Clifford Geertz in his 1988 study *Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author*); the claim of dealing on a daily basis, in my own 'local situation', with the 'Black South Africans' who have, in Bhabha's reading, 'not yet found their nation'. It is this situation that directs my interest in Bhabha, and motivates both the theoretical exploration of cultural translation and the comparative application that follows.

Bhabha's full-length contribution to his collection is entitled 'DissemiNation: Time, Narrative and the Margins of the Modern Nation', and it is in this article that I find terms in which to construe my situation: in the recognition of 'the cultural construction of nationness as a form of social and textual affiliation' (Bhabha 1990:292f), and in the argument for

> a tribe of interpreters of [the] metaphors [of nation]—the translators of the dissemination of texts and discourses across cultures—who can perform what Said describes as the act of secular interpretation.

To adopt these terms is explicitly to declare my allegiances: in addition to being a white South African teacher of black students I am one who is convinced of the need to recognise the linguistic and the cultural interfaces that characterise postcolonial readings of much literature in English (and in other languages as well).

The ethnographic bias of these allegiances might already be apparent: before exploring them in relation to the concept of cultural translation it seems apposite to give attention to Bhabha's own consideration of the ethnographic model which might be seen as informing colonial power. In his earlier paper, published in 1986 and entitled 'The Other Question: Difference, Discrimination and the Discourse of Colonialism', Bhabha offers an analysis of such power that works towards an understanding of 'the processes of subjectification made possible (and plausible) through stereotypical discourse' (Bhabha 1986:149). In this analysis he asserts that [the]

> predominant strategic function [of colonial discourse] is the creation of a space for a 'subject peoples' through the production of knowledges in terms of which surveillance is exercised and a complex form of pleasure/unpleasure is incited (Bhabha 1986:154).

'Colonial power', he says a little later,

> produces the colonized as a fixed reality which is at once an 'other' and yet entirely knowable and visible. It resembles a form of narrative in which the productivity and circulation of subjects and signs are bound in a reformed and recognizable totality. It employs a system of representation, a regime of truth, that is structurally similar to realism (Bhabha 1986:156).

If the production of an 'other' which is 'entirely knowable and visible' is a recognisable feature of colonial power, it is also strikingly characteristic of traditional ethnographic practice. Recognising this, we should recognise also the perilous susceptibility of conceptions of ethnicity to a spirit of ethnocentrism (and its ugly sister racism) in any study which insists on cross-cultural difference.

This corrective notwithstanding, there remain important reasons why literary studies should retain—or develop—an interest in the sphere of ethnography. Not least among these is the substantial theoretical upheaval which the discipline has undergone, in response to postmodern suspicions of grand narratives and reflexive explorations of the literary nature of the narrative activities of the ethnographer.

Indeed it would be doing Bhabha himself an injustice to oversimplify his appreciation of ethnography. He speaks, in the article in *Nation and Narration* to which I have already referred, of the 'narrative splitting of the subject of identification [that] is borne out in Levi-Strauss' description of the ethnographic act', a description which Bhabha (1990:301) summarises as follows:

> The ethnographic requires that the field of knowledge—the total social fact—must be appropriated from the outside like a thing, but like a thing which comprises within itself the subjective understanding of the indigenous. The transposition of this process into the language of the outsider's grasp—this entry into the area of the symbolic or representation/signification—then makes the social fact 'three dimensional'. For ethnography demands that the subject has to split itself into object and subject in the process of identifying its field of knowledge; the ethnographic object is constituted 'by dint of the subject's capacity for indefinite self-objectification (without ever quite abolishing itself as subject) for projecting outside itself ever-diminishing fragments of itself'.

If it was Bhabha's contention earlier that the address to nation as narration attempts to alter the conceptual object itself, it seems fair to register the ways in which revisionist ethnography has done so too (and here I draw a distinction between it and the traditional ethnographic practice which might be seen as constituting a model for colonial power). A major figure in such revisioning is James Clifford who, in a collection entitled *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, makes the radical claim that ethnographic writings should be recognised as fictions, in the dual senses of having been made and having been made up (Clifford 1986:6). He speaks in particular of reflexive accounts which

> have the effect of transforming the 'cultural' text (a ritual, an institution, a life history, or any unity of typical behavior to be described or interpreted) into a speaking subject, who sees as well as is seen, who evades, argues, probes back. In this view of ethnography the proper referent of any account is not a represented 'world'; now it is specific instances of discourse. But the principle of dialogical textual production goes well beyond the more or less artful presentation of 'actual' encounters. It locates cultural interpretations in many sorts of reciprocal contexts, and it obliges writers to find diverse ways of rendering negotiated realities as multisubjective, power-laden, and incongruent. In this view, 'culture' is always relational, an inscription of communicative processes that exist, historically, between subjects in relations of power (Clifford 1986:14).

Rather than the objectification of the self which Bhabha, following Levi-Strauss, recognises as characterising ethnography, Clifford's version is a subjectification of the object of study: a deliberate recuperation of the autonomy and intactness of the language-culture systems being studied, and, in traditional parlance, being translated.

It has not been my innovation to apply the concept of cultural translation to narration: I am following the initiative of Robert Hampson in a study entitled '*Heart*

of Darkness and the Speech that Cannot be Silenced' (1990), which is in its turn a response to the comparison Clifford draws between Conrad and the anthropologist Malinowski. Yet if we join Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin (1989:36) in recognising

> cross-culturality as the potential termination point of an apparently endless human history of conquest and annihilation justified by the myth of group 'purity', and as the basis on which the post-colonial world can be stabilized

we might get some sense of the productivity of the concept of narration as cultural translation.

The use I am making of the concept here is twofold. First, I wish to take up Bhabha's contentions about 'Black South Africans' by reflecting on the ways in which the act of cultural translation that takes place in Joseph Conrad's 1902 novella *Heart of Darkness* is reversed in the 1930 novel *Mhudi*, which has been identified as the first novel in English by a black South African. Subsequently, I wish to position myself, in the terms Bhabha (1990:293) advocates, as a 'secular interpreter', as a translator of 'the dissemination of texts and discourses across cultures'.

It has been my concern elsewhere to offer readings of *Heart of Darkness* and *Mhudi* which seek to reveal their respective alignment on 'two sides of Empire' (Hooper 1992), and which seek to contrast the respective treatment given in them to 'woman of darkness' and 'mother africa' (Hooper 1993). I will here restrict myself to the positioning of the respective narratives as acts of cultural translation: that is, in relation to the communities which they evoke and in relation to the Empire of their day.

In the article referred to already, Robert Hampson draws attention to the pressures of audience which are brought to bear on Marlow's act of narration. Citing Benita Parry, Hampson (1990:26) reminds us that Conrad's

> original constituents were the subscribers to *Blackwood's* and *New Review*, an audience still secure in the conviction that they were members of an invincible imperial power and a superior race.

It is Hampson's (1990:26) own observation that:

> Conrad shows his understanding of the parameters within which he was writing by mirroring them in Marlow's relations with his audience. Marlow's audience, like the readership of *Blackwood's Magazine*, is made up of males of the colonial service class.

Marlow's narrative of Africa is thus predicated on the imperial language-culture system which he shares with his auditors. As Talal Asad (in Hampson 1990:26) points out:

> When anthropologists return to their countries, they must write up 'their people', and they must do so in the conventions of representation already circumscribed ... by their discipline, institutional life, and wider society.

Asad has elsewhere drawn attention to the relative power of languages out of which and into which translation occurs, in the first place by citing Walter Benjamin's injunction that the translator should (though doesn't often) allow his or her own language to be 'powerfully affected by the foreign tongue', and in the second by insisting that the translator's *language* is not always willing to 'subject itself to this transforming power'. He says,

> I attribute, somewhat fictitiously, volition to the language because I want to emphasize that the matter is largely something the translator cannot determine by individual activity (any more than the individual speaker can affect the evolution of his or her language)—that it is governed by institutionally defined power relations between the languages/modes of life concerned. To put it crudely: because the languages of Third World societies—including, of course, the societies that social anthropologists have traditionally studied—are 'weaker' in relation to Western languages (and today, especially to English), they are more likely to submit to forcible transformation in the translation process than the other way around (Asad 1986:157f).

Complicating the picture Asad offers is the fact that the allegiances of the 'translator' are neither simple nor clear-cut. Daniel Kunene, for example, who is also by birth a black South African, and whose first language is Zulu, describes the difficulties he experienced in translating the Sesotho text *Chaka* into English. Despite an initial decision that his 'first loyalty was to the original', in the end, he tells us, 'I split my loyalty virtually equally between the donor language and the recipient language' (Kunene 1981:xx). The reason he offers is that:

> The translator comes as a kind of cultural go-between who provides his good services to pass on, as best he can, the benefits of one culture to the practitioners of the 'other' culture (Kunene 1981:xix).

From these problems—the authority of medium and the allegiances of the translator—it should be apparent how significant is the question of 'for whom' the translation is made. Unlike criticism, Asad (1986:156,159) points out, which, in order to be responsible, 'must always be addressed to someone who can contest it', cultural translation is addressed to 'a very specific audience, which is waiting to read about another mode of life'. And unlike linguistic translation which is 'faced with a specific piece of discourse produced within the society studied', the challenge confronting cultural

translation is the 'meaning implicit in a range of practices' (Asad 1986:16), the silences that must be responded to and interpreted.

It is perhaps the respective responses to silence that most crucially distinguish the narratives of *Heart of Darkness* and *Mhudi*. As Chinua Achebe (1978) has claimed in a biting critique of Conrad's novel, Africa serves merely as a setting or backdrop for the story that is Kurtz (as Seidel 1985:86 has put it), and the Africans are effectively silent. The focus of my interest has been the African woman in Conrad's text, and particularly the iconic mode in which she is represented. The African woman in Plaatje's text, by contrast, is the central character around whom the narrative coheres, and a woman who is defined, in large measure, by her voice. Deriving its power from the community which sanctions it, Mhudi's voice is nevertheless a distinctly individual one, and one which I believe reflects both the concerns and the communal positioning of her writer.

Unlike the complicated frame which characterises Conrad's text, the narrative strategy which Plaatje adopts is relatively straightforward: predominantly omniscient with a brief first-person recapitulation given to Mhudi in Chapter 3. The critical attempt to read the novel as the narrative of 'Half-a-Crown', the grandson of the protagonists, is rendered most obviously problematic by the 'padded Victorian style' of which Plaatje has been accused (by Janheinz Jahn, amongst others, cited in Couzens 1978a) because, in combination with a sophisticated incorporation of images, symbols and structural devices gleaned from oral tradition, it reveals the writer's location at the interface between two demanding language-culture systems. Unlike Marlow who represents an alien culture for an audience of intimates in the language he shares with them, Plaatje is representing his 'own' culture for an 'alien' audience in the 'alien' language.

As the first black South African to write a novel in English, Plaatje thus stands as a particular instance of the concatenation of the concepts of nation and narration which concerned Bhabha. A founder member of the South African Native National Congress, Plaatje travelled abroad both to England and America to plead for their intercession at a time when extremely punitive legislative measures were being enacted against his people. His decision to write in English, then, (made, as Tim Couzens 1978b:61 has it, without fuss), can clearly be understood in terms of his desire to represent their cause.

It should also be understood in terms of the two 'objects' Plaatje specifies in his Preface to the Original Edition:

> (a) to interpret to the reading public one phase of 'the back of the Native mind'; and
> (b) with the readers' money, to collect and print (for Bantu Schools) Sechuana folktales, which, with the spread of European ideas, are fast being forgotten (Plaatje 1978:21).

The potential loss of his cultural heritage was plainly a keen experience for Plaatje. And yet the problems that confront him in his narrative endeavour are endemic to its cultural translation because it comes so close to the ethnographic act of salvage which James Clifford (1986:112f) denounces thus:

> Ethnography's disappearing object is, then, in significant degree, a rhetorical con-struct legitimating a representational practice: 'salvage' ethnography in its widest sense. The other is lost, in disintegrating time and space, but saved in the text .... The re-corder and interpreter of fragile custom is custodian of an essence, unimpeachable witness to an authenticity. (Moreover, since the 'true' culture has always vanished, the salvaged version cannot be easily refuted.)

In Plaatje's concern with the preservation of oral culture against the inroads of British colonialism, we must, furthermore, recognise two paradoxes. On the one hand, the translation of oral culture takes place into the medium that is threatening it. On the other, in inscribing traditional stories Plaatje is effectively abrogating many of the functions they would have had in an oral culture, not least of which is the delimitation of access. His act of cultural preservation, then, impacts back upon the culture it is seeking to preserve because he is translating it for an alien readership. In this regard, Plaatje is very like the character he writes: dislocated out of the community of oral culture by his education, by his use of English, and particularly by his act of inscrip-tion, the voice he attains is an implicated voice, a hybrid voice characterised by the syncreticism which Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin (1989:180) recognise as the 'condi-tion within which post-colonial societies operate'.

Yet since, in addition to the voice he allows Mhudi, Plaatje succeeds in incor-porating multiple language-culture systems into his text, his achievement might be seen as approximating the kind of polyphony which has been recognised and advo-cated by revisionist ethnographers. In Clifford's (1986:15) words, again:

> As Bakhtin ... has shown, dialogical processes proliferate in any complexly repre-sented discursive space (that of ethnography, or, in his case, a realist novel). Many voices clamor for expression.

Again, 'as written versions based on fieldwork, these accounts are clearly no longer the story, but a story among stories' (Clifford 1986:109).

The questions with which, in conclusion, I would like to return to Bhabha are these: whose nation? in whose language? for which readers? Given the authority I have claimed for my position as a postcolonial critic and teacher, it is perhaps apposite to emphasise the subjectivity of this reading: the texts I have chosen to exemplify processes of cultural translation are English texts because I am English-speaking; my

interest in Bhabha's comment is motivated by my experiences, as a white South African, of black South Africans. The differences of which I write are not those of alterity, but those of multiplicity, and the nationness of which I am myself conscious arises in the complexly rendered discursive spaces of dialogical processes. I hope these are spaces which Bhabha himself would deem worthy to explore.

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This is the point at which the original paper ended. I would, now, like to recur to the bracketing comments with which this version of it began, because, looking at the paper with older eyes which have witnessed some changes in the interim, (of both a sociopolitical and an academic nature), it seems curiously incomplete. I have, subsequently, made further studies using the terms outlined above: of Mofolo's *Chaka*, of Lessing's *Grass is Singing* and Rooke's *Grove of Fever Trees*, even of Coetzee's *Life and Times of Michael K.* Part of my efforts have been directed at incorporating a theory of reading and readership into the paradigm of narration as cultural translation, and in doing so I have drawn on Nkosi's concept of cross-border readers who are interpellated by the texts they read and which read them. I have also been conscious, within the defined field of Conrad studies, for example, of the incursions and reclamations that are being mounted by critics and scholars abroad. One cannot simply revert to the parochialism of 'hands off our lit'—tempting as this response might be. Yet despite my awareness of the proliferation of postcolonial theory (with which I battle somewhat vainly to keep up), one of the reasons I feel I speak with more authority now than I did at the time I made these explorations is, perhaps paradoxically, the confidence of canonicity, in its more positive aspect. To writers, critics and theoreticians abroad who would speak on behalf of the South Africans, black and white, who 'lost their nation', it is much easier in 1997 than it was in 1993 to retort, No they haven't! Haven't you heard ...? Haven't you read ...?!

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