

Marginality, Afrikaans Literature and 'The Undefined Work of Freedom'

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Kuns is ons laaste verweer teen chaos
(Aucamp 1996:20).

I
Sometimes there are texts—and even moments in texts—which seem curiously pre-disposed to grabbing the attention of readers. For me, as reader of Afrikaans literature, such a text has from my first reading been 'And our fathers that begat us' in a collection of short stories by Koos Prinsloo entitled *Die hemel help ons* (1987)¹. In this story a young man returns the day before Christmas to his parental home in Natal for a short visit, during which, as we learn at the end of the story, he 'reveals' (Prinsloo 1987:26) something to his father. Within the context formed by the stories in the collection it is probable that this 'revelation' concerned his sexuality. More specifically it is probable that he used the visit to tell his father that he was homosexual. This 'fact' is however never stated explicitly in the story, the focus rather falling on a narrative reconstruction by the young man of the lives of his ancestors. This reconstruction consists of a number of 'real' or documentary texts juxtaposed to one another: a photograph of the young man's father sitting on an elephant shot by his grandfather in Kenia (Prinsloo 1987:12), an autobiographical sketch by the young man's grandfather (Prinsloo 1987:12-14), photographs of the young man's father (Prinsloo 1987:17-18), two letters by the young man's grandparents to his father, signed 'J.P. and E.C. Prinsloo' (Prinsloo 1987:19-20), a newspaper clipping noting the death of the young man's grandfather, J.P. Prinsloo (Prinsloo 1987:21) and finally a letter to the young man from his father, which he received in Johannesburg ten days after his visit to the parental home in Natal (Prinsloo 1987:25f) (while he was busy writing part of the story which was to become 'And our fathers that begat us').

One of the functions which the documents fulfil in the story is to clarify the relation between the ancestors of the young man mentioned in the story (J.P. and E.C.

¹ The story first appeared in 1984 in *Stet* 2,4, an Afrikaans 'minor magazine'.

Prinsloo), the 'young man' and the writer of the story, Koos Prinsloo. These documents make it possible to think that the 'young man' in the story is actually 'Koos Prinsloo'. Such an interpretation is strengthened by other information provided: a biographical note in the front of the book informs the reader that Koos Prinsloo was born in Eldoret in Kenia and came to South Africa in 1962, concurring with information in the story as such (Prinsloo 1987:10), and in the colophon the writer of the book is given as 'J.P. Prinsloo'.

The attraction that this story has for me has less to do with these 'documents' and with their possible veracity as such than with the narrative by which they are linked, and by which the story itself is created. The documents however play an important role in determining the nature of this linking narrative. In this narrative is described—in painfully exact detail—the visit of the young man/'Koos Prinsloo' to his parental home, from his first sighting of the Ingagane power station near Newcastle where his parents reside, through his arrival at the parental home, his walk through the lounge and a passage to his bedroom, a spartan supper to the Christmas lunch he enjoys with his parents the next day. On this Christmas day he also masturbates, looks at photo albums and talks with his father about the past of the family, specifically about his grandfather's farm on the Uasin Gishu plateau in Kenia.

To illustrate what I mean by this, I cite the description of his arrival at the parental home:

Op die toegebooue stoep met die blou afdakkie wag sy ma. (Ma is op 27 Junie 1924 op Gwelo in Suid-Rhodesië gebore—die vyfde van nege kinders. Sy het 'n slap voet, waarskynlik weens 'n ligte vorm van polio wat sy as kind gehad het, en sy kry soms asma.) Hy haal sy naweektas uit die kattedak van die motor en stap nader. Die grasperk is reeds nat van die dou.

Hallo, seun. Sy soen hom. Hoe gaan dit?

Goed.

Haar bors sluit effens. Hy stap agter haar aan, verby die breimasjien onder die plastiekkleedjie op die stoep en verby die kaggel in die sitkamer waar die wit Kersboom van plastiek tussen twee kanondoppe en twee ivoortande, wat elk in 'n olifantpoot gemonteer is, staan (Prinsloo 1987:11f).

On the enclosed veranda with the blue awning his mother stands waiting. (Mother was born on the 27th June 1924 in Gwelo in Southern Rhodesia—the fifth of nine children. She has a lame foot, probably the result of a mild form of polio which she had as child, and she sometimes suffers from asthma.) He takes his travelling case out of the boot of the car and walks closer. The lawn is already wet with dew.

Hello, son. She kisses him. How are you?

Well.

Her chest wheezes slightly. He walks after her, past the knitting machine under

a plastic cover on the veranda and past the hearth in the lounge where the white plastic Christmas tree stands between two cannon cartridges and two tusks, each mounted in an elephant foot (a.t.; see also citation from *Wolftyd* in footnote 2).

What is first notable about the description of the young man/'Koos Prinsloo's' actions is the disinterested objectivist tenor thereof, mainly the result of the 'objective' third person narration. More than a form of objective vision is however discernible in the fragment, namely something which can provisionally be called alienated observation. This alienation is given clear form in the fragment by the parenthesis which makes it clear that the voice of the narrator is split internally, and that there are actually two voices, both of which can be related to the author of the story, 'Koos Prinsloo'.

In the parenthesis—as is the case in the rest of the parentheses and the letters as well—the narrating voice retains a personalised quality, signalling in itself the presence of others, and of dialogic and filial links to these others. The personalised nature of expression in these sections of the story is further signalled by the references to intense experiences, illness and emotions such as longing, concern and indignation.

In the 'objectivist' narrative sequences, the emphasis falls on a neutral detailing of ordinary actions—standing, looking, walking—and on a focus on domestic objects. The nearly anomic tenor of these sequences is clearly manifested in the description of the young man taking a Sunday afternoon nap. He lies down on a bed and starts masturbating, apparently without much interest. While masturbating he looks at two prints of paintings by Tretchikoff hanging on the wall and then falls asleep without achieving an orgasm (Prinsloo 1987:16).

This 'split' in the voice of the narrator is further complicated when the impersonal narrator switches to a first-person address, speaking as the young man 'Koos Prinsloo' to his father (Prinsloo 1987:24). The manner in which the story is constructed thus emphasises the heterogeneity in the narrating voice, making the upholding of the usual boundaries between third-person narrator, first-person narrator and character untenable. At the same time, with the inclusion of 'documentary' fact in the story enabling one to relate the different voices to the same 'real' person (the author 'Koos Prinsloo'), an extremely intense sensation of alienation and anomie is created.

What makes the 'split' voice of the narrator in this story further remarkable is that by being inserted in a self-reflexive story, it implicates artistic creation in the alienation by which the narrator/author's voice is characterised. In this sense it lends clear form to the process of observation at the basis of artistic creation, showing not only the outer world being taken as object for observation and artistic representation, as is customary, but the 'inner' world of the character/narrator/author as well. The intensity of the alienation that is represented in the story can be seen as an achievement of Afrikaans literature at a specific point in its development, as representing an

important 'marker' in the aesthetic history of this literature—and in the history of the community out of which the text comes and which is reflected therein.

The importance of this 'moment' is borne out by the fact that a representation of a similar intensely alienated observation is found in another self-reflexive Afrikaans novel published four years later at the other end of the generational spectrum of Afrikaans literature, namely *Wolftyd* by Anna M. Louw (1991).

Wolftyd (1991) tells the story of Leonie Obach, a woman in her sixties whose husband, Luk, dies at the age of seventy-five. While going through documents he left behind, she discovers that he cheated on her right from the start of their marriage. The discovery of these infidelities causes her intense pain, more so as it seems that Luk purposely left the 'evidence' of his betrayal for her to discover. The novel basically deals with the process Leonie goes through attempting to deal with the pain caused her by the discovery of her husband's infidelity. After the initial shock Leonie develops an intense resentment towards Luk and starts feeling that he had deprived her of a large part of her emotional life. The resentment soon changes into a very intense feeling of aggrievement and simultaneously, anger. It is out of this anger that she will find the energy to accomplish 'healing' (Louw 1991:21, 117, 140). This healing Leonie eventually finds in an upsurge in her creativity, events narrated in Chapter four, 'Leonie se storie' (Leonie's story) and Chapter five, 'Winter' (Winter).

The novel however opens with Chapter one, 'Op soek na verlore tyd' (Searching for lost time), after Luk's death. In this first section of the novel the author provides the reader with a third-person report of a journey to Berlin, undertaken by a character identified only as 'die weduwee' (the widow). The purpose of this journey seems to be to trace the tracks of the Obachs, that is of the character Luk who had been married to Leonie. The report of this journey provided in the novel has a curious quality, mainly because of the appearance of a first-person narrator next to 'die weduwee' and the third-person narrator, as in the following extract:

Die weduwee skrik ligdag wakker en luister. Stil. Net die stemme van fietsryers onder in die binnehof wat na vroeë werkskifte vertrek. Sy het die vorige aand die rygsel fietsse gesien wat met veiligheidskettings aan die fietskrip onder vas is. 'n Ruk lank lê sy nog en luister hoe die verkeer in Grolmanstraat toeneem, terwyl sy haar eerste bewegings beplan.

Die duvet is met stekelige bokhaarstof gestop en dit ruik na nikotien. Ek slaan die oortrek terug en ontdek onlangse brandplekke. Iemand het in die bed gelê en rook. Ek gaan 'n ander duvet aanvra. Dis beslis 'n derderangse pensioen (Louw 1991:4)².

² The widow awakes before sunrise and listens. Quiet. Only the voices of cyclists in the courtyard below departing to early work shifts. The previous evening she had seen the string of bicycles chained to the cycle rack. For a while she lies listening to the traffic increasing in Grolman Street, whilst planning her first movements.

This first-person narrator (who appears sporadically in other parts of the novel), apart from being an extension of the third person narrator, seems to be—like Leonie and 'die weduwee'—an older woman (Louw see 1991:163, also 232). This first-person narrator is also on a journey to Berlin—on the tracks of the Obachs. Her attention—like that of the third person narrator—is mainly focused on 'die weduwee'. The first-person narrator and the widow thus appears to be the same person, something which can be inferred definitively from the fact that they share the same intimate spaces.

There is however an important difference between the two personae appearing in the first section, namely the first-person narrator and the widow. The first-person narrator consistently remains neutral and provides an objective report of her journey. In contrast in the description of the widow (by the third-person narrator) consistent reference is made to the emotions she experiences: anger (Louw 1991:1,13), self-pity (Louw 1991:3), loneliness (Louw 1991:16), depression (Louw 1991:14), hate (Louw 1991:15,21) and sorrow (Louw 1991:21). The effect created by this kind of narration can be described in two (paradoxically) related ways: on the one hand an extreme form of alienation is created by the juxtaposition of a third-person and first-person description of the same person, the widow (which is at the same time both of them), and on the other hand this kind of narration actually implies the erasure of the customary barrier between first- and third-person narration.

The similarity with 'Out fathers that begat us' which is apparent from the above discussion is further borne out by other aspects of the narration in *Wolflyd* (1991) which lead to a similar disturbance of the barrier(s) between character or art (Leonie 'die weduwee'; the first-person narrator) and reality ('the writer/third-person narrator'; Anna M. Louw), such that the process which is narrated 'in' the text comes to be seen as 'outside' the text as well.

The first chapter of *Wolflyd* (1991) is concluded with a note informing the reader that the 'first-person/third-person narrator/writer' put down her pen and provisionally closed her notebook in which she had been making notes of her visit to Germany and to the area where the character Luk spent his youth. This act is clearly dated, 'Oktober 1987'—that is, before the publication of *Wolflyd* (1991). One of the implications of this note is that the 'narrator/writer'—also a 'widow' (like Leonie)—had some relation to 'Luk' (or someone 'like' him) and experienced a similar personal trauma. The note also implies that when the notebook was taken up again, its elaboration resulted in the novel, *Wolflyd* (1991) (of which the notebook forms the first part). If the note is read in this way it makes a reading of *Wolflyd* (1991) possible as not only

The duvet is stuffed with prickly angora wool and smells of nicotine. I fold the cover back and discover recent burn marks. Someone had been smoking in bed. I am going to ask for another duvet. It is definitely a third-rate pension (a.t.).

the story of Leonie but also as the representation of the process of the creation of the novel, this process taken up into the novel itself.

Most importantly however, such a reading makes possible an association between *Wolflyd* (1991) as creative text and the process narrated on a thematic level in the novel itself, namely Leonie's process of 'healing' through artistic creation. This would make *Wolflyd* (1991) a text of 'healing'—representing this process with reference to the author, Anna M. Louw (or at least, someone 'like' her), and seen (or extrapolated) sociologically, with reference to the (Afrikaans) reader. Read in this manner, *Wolflyd* carries the implication that it provides a 'map'—it advises the reader on how to—or makes it possible for this reader to see how he or she can—submit his or her self to a process of transformation through aesthetic expression³.

Wolflyd (1991) and 'Our fathers that begat us' thus—curiously—show clear similarities. In both texts the authorial voice is 'split' between a first-person narrator and a character observed by this narrator with a third-person narrator hovering in the background, effectively erasing the boundary between narrator and character and simultaneously creating the impression of an acute form of alienation. Both texts provide the reader with the means whereby he or she can relate the first-person narrators in the stories to the personae of the actual authors. In both texts the apparently extreme form of alienation represented is simultaneously a representation of the process involved in artistic creation, with the personae of the actual writers ('Koos Prinsloo'; 'Anna M. Louw') implicated in this process. In both cases the representation is part of a process by which someone tries to deal with a personal trauma and the consequent alienation by gathering material which is to be (re)casted in the form of art.

II

Part of the answer to the question why I have always found these two texts arresting appeared when I came across a discussion in which a similarly peculiarly intense observation figures centrally and in which this observation is connected to aesthetic expression and the transformation of the self. In an essay entitled 'What is Enlightenment?' in which Michel Foucault tries to define, amongst other things, what 'modernity' might mean he makes reference to an essay by Charles Baudelaire on the artist Constantin Guys. According to Foucault modernity is defined by Baudelaire firstly with reference to a kind of observation and secondly with reference to a related orientation towards the self:

³ Burger (1995) comes to a comparable conclusion regarding André P. Brink's novel *Inteendeel* (1993), using Rorty's idea of an 'ironist' creating the values according to which he is to be judged himself.

For the attitude of modernity, the high value of the present is indissociable from a desperate eagerness to imagine it, to imagine it otherwise than it is, and to transform it not by destroying it but by grasping it in what it is. Baudelairean modernity is an exercise in which *extreme attention to what is real* is confronted with the practice of a liberty that simultaneously respects this reality and violates it.

However, modernity for Baudelaire is not simply a form of relationship to the present; it is also a mode of relationship that has to be established with oneself. The deliberate attitude of modernity is tied to an indispensable asceticism. To be modern is not to accept oneself as one is in the flux of passing moments; it is *to take oneself as object of a complex and difficult elaboration* (Foucault 1984:41; e.a.).

The same elements are found in these words of Foucault that were referred to in the discussion of the two Afrikaans texts above—an 'extreme attention' to the present and simultaneously, a transformative aesthetic relation to the self. In the Afrikaans texts the 'extreme attention' is directed towards the observing and narrating self, this process concretised in the 'split' voice of the narrator, slipping between and from character, third-person narrator and first-person narrator to the autobiographical persona of the author. The clear resemblance(s) between the Afrikaans texts and the 'attitude' Foucault's essay addresses justifies associating Foucault's pronouncements on this 'attitude' with the Afrikaans texts.

Foucault's use and discussion of Baudelaire's vision is first of all part of an attempt to define what 'Enlightenment' might mean in the last quarter of the twentieth century. It is however also part of a development in Foucault's thought which has been characterised as a turn towards the problem of ethics⁴. Foucault's attempt to deal with the problems associated with a conventional approach to the heritage of the Enlightenment results in an ethics which emphasises an 'aesthetics of the self' as the only way of continuing the heritage of the Enlightenment.

In his attempt to provide an 'alternative' definition of the ethical heritage of the Enlightenment in the essay 'What is Enlightenment?' Foucault first of all distances himself from the theme of 'humanism' (Foucault 1984:43-45). In the process he also jettisons the conceptual baggage associated with humanism, such as certain ideas about history and progress and the accompanying rationalist orientation towards 'formal structures with universal value' (Foucault 1984:46). To the humanist perspective orientated towards 'bettering' our lives in accordance with a projected, 'rational' meta-physical goal, Foucault opposes what he calls 'the undefined work of freedom' founded on a perspective which treats the world as fundamentally historical:

... this critique will be genealogical in the sense that it will not deduce from the form of what we are what it is impossible for us to do and to know; but it will separate out, from the contingency that made us what we are, the possibility of no longer being,

⁴ See for example the following: Harpham (1988); Rajchman (1992); and Jones (1994).

doing, or thinking what we are, do, or think. It is not seeking to make possible a metaphysics that has finally become a science; it is seeking to give new impetus, as far and wide as possible, to the undefined work of freedom (Foucault 1984:46).

One of the advantages of this approach to the possibility of freedom is that it does not pre-emptively determine what this 'freedom' might be, or what the best approach thereto might be, as was the case in 'liberatory' projects undertaken in the Soviet Union, Socialist China and elsewhere which resulted in increased repression and oppression. In these cases the 'work of freedom' were subsumed under abstract, systematic schemes. By moving the locus of freedom away from systematic rationality to the aesthetic sphere Foucault's approach privileges heterogeneity. It is to this purpose that the references to Baudelaire and to an 'aesthetics of the self' or an attitude of 'self-fashioning' is made.

Foucault feels justified in associating the heritage of the Enlightenment with such an 'attitude' of self-fashioning because, he argues, this is actually in line with the way Kant approached the Enlightenment. Foucault argues that Kant's manner of addressing the question is 'an 'exit', a 'way out' (Foucault 1984:34; see also 38). Foucault thus highlights the fact that there is nothing prescriptive or teleological in Kant's perspective on the concept of the Enlightenment. It is this aspect of Kant's concept—and Baudelaire's perspective—that enables Foucault to see an open-ended, active, personal engagement with the world implied therein. It is also by linking Kant's meditation on the Enlightenment in this way to an 'attitude' (Foucault 1984:39-42,50), to action, that Foucault can justify speaking about such a personal, non-rational aesthetic engagement with the world, and especially the self, as an ethical injunction, analogous to the ethos according to which the Greek philosophers lived (Foucault 1984:39).

The argument in this article is that the 'attitude'—an intensified awareness of the present and the self coupled with an aesthetic transformation thereof—which Foucault associates with the practice of freedom and the continuation of the tradition of the Enlightenment is clearly present in contemporary Afrikaans literature. Following Foucault, it is thus possible to show that the peculiar kind of narrative perspective in Afrikaans texts such as in 'And our fathers that begat us' and *Wolfstyd* (1991), as discussed above, is a clear indication of the 'modernity' of these texts and of the manner in which an ethical practice is realised by means of 'elite' aesthetic expression⁵.

⁵ To the two texts analysed here can be added a number of other contemporary Afrikaans texts in which the barriers between art and life are problematised. In Prinsloo's case such a 'defictionalising' tendency started with his *Jonkmanskas* (1982), and then continued through *Die hemel help ons* (1987); *Slagplaas* (1992); to *Weifeling* (1993). Recent elaborations include *Relaas van 'n moord* by Antjie Krog (1996); *Vreemder as fiksie* by Johan de Lange (1996); and Hennie Aucamp's *Gekaapte tyd. 'n Kladboek September 1994 - Maart 1995* (1996); and *Allersiele. 'n Dagboek Mei 1995 - Februarie 1996* (1997).

III

If the approach followed thus far has seemed to emphasise the elite, universal nature of contemporary Afrikaanse literature, this does not preclude attention to the question of 'marginality'. Attention to the problematic(s) associated with this term is important because it provides a (further) potent 'lever' for the discussion and understanding of contemporary Afrikaans literature.

'Marginality' has in some form or other figured centrally in Afrikaans literature throughout its history. Two of the most important levels on which this has happened are firstly the sociopolitical situation of the literature and secondly on the thematic level, or the 'content' of the literature.

Afrikaans literature was historically positioned marginally first of all on a political level as part of Afrikaans culture's struggle against British imperialism⁶, and secondly on a literary-cultural level with relation to the European tradition. At the same time, Afrikaans culture functioned as a centre with regard to the other South African cultures and literatures, as a result of the Afrikaner Nationalist control of the country. The relation between Afrikaans culture and British imperialism on the one side and African culture on the other was mainly a political one. The dominant cultural relation was however oriented towards Europe from which Afrikaans literary theorists derived their conception of Afrikaans literature as a 'national' literature.

Afrikaans culture has currently been displaced from the centre, this displacement however not (yet) resulting in a simple reversal—the old centre now becoming margin, and the old margin becoming the new centre. The new centre is presently itself unstable and insecure, having only recently been occupied after the ANC election victory of 1994. It is still heterogeneous and subject to contradictory (and frequently ill-defined, amorphous) tendencies. Operating with a simplistic margin-centre-dichotomy in this situation is ill-advised, and is one of the reasons for the problematisation of the term 'marginality' which is attempted in this article.

On a thematic level a consciousness of marginality has for some time now been manifesting itself in a particularly intense form and in a variety of forms in Afrikaans literature. One of the interesting things about this development is that the contemporary intensification of a consciousness of marginality can be traced back to the start of the eighties, that is, long before the political changes of the nineties.

⁶ Afrikaners fought - and won - their first 'War of Liberation' (Eerste Vryheidsoorlog) against Britain in 1884. They achieved 'national' liberation (i.e. decolonisation for whites) in 1960 with the founding of the Republic of South Africa. Brink (1991) provides an extensive discussion of the positions taken by Afrikaans culture in the course of South African history.

⁷ A consciousness of marginality is however not something new in Afrikaans literature. A 'history' of this consciousness will have to include attention to manifestations of this consciousness - apart from the canonised forms, such as in the concern with the poor-white problem in early

A central text in this regard is *Die kremetartekspedisie* by Wilma Stockenström (1981)⁸. This lyrical novel exhibits many of the features which start appearing with an increasing frequency in Afrikaans prose after this date (and by which the two texts analysed in this article, namely 'And our fathers that begat us' and *Wolftyd* (1991), are also marked). These features include the following: a metatextual self-reflexive level, a narrator—a slave woman—who belongs to a marginalised social grouping, a pronounced sense of the narration taking place at a limit, namely on the verge of death. The novel also makes use—through the reference to slavery—of historical material, characteristic of many novels after this date.

One of the clearest indications of a 'turn' towards a concern with the space and questions of marginality in Afrikaans fiction is the large number of novels, published especially since the start of the nineties, in which the central protagonist and (usually at the same time) narrator is a bed-ridden geriatric woman dealing with her reminiscences⁹. The positions which these narrators occupy are all the result of social marginalisation.

Further related forms in which an intensified consciousness of marginality has manifested in Afrikaans fiction over the last two decades include the following: the usage of characters and narrators on the verge of death¹⁰, the usage of 'dead' narrators,

Afrikaans fiction - in such unlikely places as the nationalistically-imbued novels of D.F. Malherbe, especially with regard to his Biblical novels, in which - as early as 1933 with *Die hart van Moab* - a pessimistic perspective as to the workability and acceptability of nationalism can be read off. A significant number of early Afrikaans fiction can in a related manner be 'mined' for suppressed expressions of dissidence or a counter-discourse, usually in the form of the representation of the process by which Afrikaans society tended to destroy 'softer' aspects of the personality such as creativity and compassion. Representations of this kind can be found in figures such as Leonora in *Die meulenaar* by D.F. Malherbe (1926); Hansie in *Langs die grootpad* by C.M. van den Heever (1928); Kosie in *Die sprinkaanbeempte van Sluis* by Jochem van Bruggen (1933); and in the 'softer', more 'feminine' young man in C.M. van den Heever's prose as analysed by Coetzee (1995).

⁸ *Die kremetartekspedisie* has been translated into English under the title, *The Expedition to the Baobab Tree*, by J.M. Coetzee.

⁹ Examples are: *Hierdie lewe* by Karel Schoeman (1993); *Juffrou Sophia vlug vorentoe* by Berta Smit (1993); and *Sandkastele* by André P. Brink (1995).

¹⁰ Examples include the already mentioned *Die kremetartekspedisie* by Wilma Stockenström (1981); *'n Ander land* by Karel Schoeman (1984); *Kroniek uit die doofpot* by John Miles (1991); *Abjater wat so lag* by Wilma Stockenström (1991); *Hierdie lewe* by Karel Schoeman (1993); and *Sandkastele* by André P. Brink (1995).

that is narrators speaking from 'behind' death—an extremely marginalised position¹¹, and texts dealing with life amongst marginalised social groupings such as poor-whites¹². A significant development in Afrikaans prose bringing experiences of marginalisation into the centre of the literature has been the publication of novels by coloured and black people such as Abraham Phillips¹³, A.H.M. Scholtz¹⁴, Karel Benjamin¹⁵ and E.K.M. Dido¹⁶.

IV

Any attempt to engage meaningfully with the problematic of marginality will have to take cognisance of the elaborate and extended scholarship which has developed around the term¹⁷. All that is attempted in this article is to first of all indicate the relevance of the problematic for the study of contemporary Afrikaans literature and secondly, as a humble contribution to the discussion around the term, to bring it into relation with what is usually placed in opposition to it, namely 'elite' aesthetic expression. In essence, the texts used above, 'And our fathers that begat us' and *Wolftyd* (1991), which were used to establish the 'modernity' of contemporary Afrikaans literature are simultaneously used in conjunction with the 'opposite' of elite expression, namely marginal expression or minority literature.

The main objective of this approach is to show that there need not necessarily be an exclusive tension between marginality and universality and that marginality is actually an indispensable pre-condition for universality. An associated objective will be to forward the argument that attempts to define a literature simplistically or exclusively with reference to marginality as a minor or minority literature, for instance as

¹¹ In a number of cases the narration takes place from 'behind' death, such as in *Die eerste lewe van Adamastor* by André P. Brink (1988); *Missionaris* by Elsa Joubert (1988); *Die reuk van appels* by Mark Behr (1993); and *Inteendeel* by André P. Brink (1993).

¹² Examples include *Triomf* by Marlene van Niekerk (1994); and *Droster* by Tinus Horn (1995).

¹³ *Die verdwaalde land* (1992); and *Erfenis van die noodlot* (1993).

¹⁴ *Vatmaar. 'n Lewendagge verhaal van 'n tyd wat nie meer is nie* (1995); en *Langsaan die vuur. Vyf lewensverhale* (1996).

¹⁵ *Slaan uit die water uit! 'n Kaapse jeug* (1996).

¹⁶ *Die storie van Monica Peters* (1996).

¹⁷ Two representative collections are *The Nature and Context of Minority Discourse* edited by Abdul JanMohamed & David Lloyd (1990); and *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Culture* edited by Ferguson et al. (1990).

the expression of a group's identity, might be a serious distortion, limiting the possible profundity of expression in the literature.

'Marginality' can and has been approached from a variety of perspectives. The most recent attention given to the term took place within the ambit of a centre-margin-dichotomy in postcolonial studies (e.g. Seshadri-Crooks 1995). One of the characteristic forms in which the centre-margin-dichotomy appeared before this time, was however as overlaid with dichotomies associated with colonial discourse theory, such as metropole/periphery, coloniser/colonised and oppressor/oppressed. This is to be expected as postcolonial studies can be seen as an off-shoot or development of colonial discourse theory. The general 'climate' in which colonial discourse theory and postcolonial studies developed was simultaneously deeply influenced by poststructuralist theory so that the coloniser/colonised dichotomy was further overlaid with and sometimes displaced by other frameworks expressive of the concerns of social groupings characteristically formed and conceived on the basis of categories associated with race, gender, sexuality and ethnicity. In these frameworks the notions of agency, subject, identity and subjectivity figured largely. These frameworks characteristically emphasised the silencing, marginalising working of discourse—especially of Western discourse as seen from the perspective of marginalised subjectivities. Study in this general terrain seems to have two main objectives, namely first of all the critical exposure and unmasking of the marginalising working of hegemonic discourse and secondly the reparative advancing of opportunities for expression by marginalised 'voices'.

An earlier elaboration of marginality took place within the ambit of 'minority studies' mainly founded on an anthropological or ethnic base (e.g. Karrer & Lutz 1990:11). This part of the 'terrain' was also fundamentally transformed by the fervent theoretical activity of the past decade or so, as for instance evidenced by the complexity introduced into the field by the placing of the term 'minor literature' next to the more customary 'minority literature'¹⁸.

A significant part of the discourse on marginality as far as it refers to literature is devoted to exploring the problems associated with the accompanying categories and frameworks, such as 'minority literature', 'women's studies' and ethnic studies. A number of contributions indicate that the placement of a literature with reference to such categories is frequently accompanied by an impoverishment thereof. Such impoverishment happens in two main ways, both where the literature is closely associated with the interests of a clearly delimited social group. In the most severe and

¹⁸ Some of the implications of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's term 'minor' literature are explored in Rumboll (1995).

problematic cases a minority placement limits the literature (and criticism thereof) to the expression of the authentic 'soul' or 'being' of a group of people. In its worst form this kind of placement relegates the literature to the parochial, exotic and touristic. In its more positive incarnations, the implications of a minority placement might be less deleterious, such as where the literature is placed next to and against another, more dominant discourse, the minority or minor literature fulfilling a counter-discursive function. The main problem with such a placement is that the literature is inextricably tied to the more powerful literary discourse, so that it remains dependent and secondary, its semantic horizon set by the dominant discourse. This is arguably the case with most 'counter-discursive' postcolonial approaches.

At the same time discussion has indicated that the placement of literature(s) as minority discourses have unique strengths and can come accompanied by definite privileges. Two of the more positive perspectives on this side of minority discourse emphasise first of all the disruptive potential of such discourse, and secondly its productive potential. The insistence on particularity which is characteristic of (some) minority expression can perform a valuable anti-totalising function, problematising the elaboration of all-inclusive frameworks (see Godard 1995; Wynter 1990:457-462). Minority discourse can also produce new knowledge when it functions as an 'exotic new frontier' (Seshadri-Crooks 1995:53,59).

That a number of the frameworks mentioned above can in varied ways be brought into association with the situation of Afrikaans literature, or with facets of this literature, is clear. The point of this article is however not how to specify which of the mentioned frameworks can be applied to contemporary Afrikaans literature, but rather to problematise any such attempt. The question which this article would like to leave the reader with is thus: what does it mean to on the one hand classify Afrikaans literature as 'marginal' or a 'minority literature', and on the other to be aware of the 'modernity' of the literature, of how it fits into an 'universal' aesthetic expressive regime?¹⁹

I would like to suggest—on the basis of the analysis of the two texts above—that it is possible to see texts (or a literature)—simultaneously affiliated to 'universal', 'elite', 'modern' aesthetic expression and to a particularistic, 'marginal' expressive base. Such an argument has important implications, especially in the—heterogeneous—South African context. Texts such as those analysed in this article, and the literature from which they spring, place a special burden on South African society. They

¹⁹ In an analysis of Marlene van Niekerk's *Triomf*, Ina Gräbe (1995) approaches the problem from a slightly different angle, arguing that the 'aesthetic' representation of marginality can fulfill a humanising function.

make clear that any tendency or policy which is knowingly or unknowingly premised on emphasising the 'marginality' of Afrikaans literature at the expense of the aesthetic modernity thereof, is limiting the 'undefined work of freedom' and striking at an important emancipatory resource in the South African context.

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