Identikit:
The Politics of Critical Thought[1]

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One of the key outcomes of education is hoped to be the production of critical thinkers. What forces and choices shape the identity of the critical intellectual?

As a way of approaching this question I would like to begin by recalling the work of one of South Africa's celebrated critical intellectuals; Govan Mbeki's study, *South Africa: The Peasants' Revolt* (1964).

Mbeki's strong identification with the Transkeian peasants and his outrage at the imposition of tribalism on South Africa is submerged into a clinical critique of the socio-economic realities of the Transkei, the show-piece of the Bantustan scheme. In his dissection of the fraud of separate development, Mbeki analyses apartheid ethnicity as retribalisation, and cultural identity as the means of 'divide and rule'. This attempt to seduce Africans with the re-emergence of pre-colonial identities is, he argued, a gross distortion of reality.

In response he offered a tendentious formulation that has its own history and raises other questions, principally concerning the definition of a nation: 'South Africa is a single multi-national society, integrated and inter-dependent' (Mbeki 1964:18). Mbeki shows that, at their best, intellectuals can oppose prejudice and identitarian structures of domination by demystifying belief and committed ideology.

Still, it is equally true that intellectuals can be seen working in the name of Enlightenment and the interest of bureaucratic technocracy. In this scenario rooted beliefs are seen as an impediment to Reason in its

universalising and identitarian vocation. Such activity can function as part of clearing the ground for unobstructed planning and exploitative 'development'. Clearly intellectuals working against oppressive identity-constructs are not themselves outside of the identity game.

Although it may not be immediately obvious, I believe that literature, or to be precise the study of literature, has a bearing on these issues.

Apart from the relation between the literary canon and national or linguistic identity there are a number of relevant connections. Identity as identification in the sense of empathy and intersubjective understanding is essential to the humanistic provenance of literary studies. The humanistic ethos proffers the literary monument as an antidote to the sociopathic refusal of identification at the root of discrimination. This is why teachers of literary studies persistently maintain that the study of literature can help to weaken prejudice and instil, amongst other things, critical cosmopolitanism rather than bland sociophilia (we produce 'critical citizens of the world', we intone when cornered).

The litany runs as follows: literature as the medium of rediscovery of self, of recognition, reflection or even restitution, self-formation, and reading as experiencing something rather than simply attaining knowledge. In its redemptive form this can slide into an intentionalist delirium of identification with a symbolic author that downplays the contradictions of production. Identification always threatens to obliterate the complexities of textuality, to liquidate history.

From this unlikely source, with the autopsy on literary studies now all but completed (smell the disinfectant), lessons can be learnt regarding the power and mechanics of representation. It opens the way for the strategy of stressing non-identity when identifications are being demanded, and of emphasising social identity when difference is being deployed to undermine the sharpening of collective interest.

I would like to give a brief example of the critical strategy I have in mind by considering a non-literary text that shows the pitfalls of evoking identification as empathy.

In his essay entitled "Nature, History, and the Failure of Language: The Problem of the Human in Post-Apartheid South Africa" John Noyes is concerned to endorse what he calls the 'imperative on intellectuals to confront the politics of their own critical thought' (Noyes 2002: 275). The problems associated with the TRC elicit the following appeal:

> What this shows is just how seriously we need an academic or critical discourse that can articulate the conflicting group identities that have to be negotiated if a democratic practice is to be possible in South Africa today .... We must critically examine the conceptual basis for establishing a South African identity in the wake of apartheid. (Noyes 2002:271-2, 273)

Noyes is concerned to criticise 'the brand of identity politics whose ideal is the deracialised but ethnically targetable subject of consumption in a global economy' (272). It is in the name of a still more inclusive identity, 'common humanity' (274), that the constrictions of the consumerist subject are criticised.

However, Noyes notes that the spectacle of the TRC has made it imperative to also interrogate an idea of humanity that appears to pre-empt the demand for justice as much as it facilitates reconciliation. The danger highlighted here is of legitimating a coercive humanism that constrains the victim but that has in fact failed to constrain the perpetrators. If you don't forgive in the name of human solidarity you (the victim) will be compounding the crime and be complicit with the inhumanity of the perpetrator. Therefore, Noyes reasonably concludes, 'isn't it necessary to retain a certain political function of difference within the concept of the human?' (276):

> This imperative forces us to bear in mind that redistribution—a political issue which is intimately tied to reconciliation—requires a sustained engagement with the differences introduced into universal subjectivity by the rhetoric and policies of apartheid. In this sense a politics of redistribution is profoundly opposed to the rhetoric of common humanity that drives the Truth Commission. (Noyes 2000: 275)

It seems to me that this formulation leaves at least one vital question unanswered. If redistribution is incompatible with the form of reconciliation promoted by the TRC, then what alternative form might the 'politics of redistribution' (and hence reconciliation) take?

Despite a strong identification with the violated and oppressed, Noyes makes no mention of alternative traditions of thought and praxis that have centred on the question of redistribution. He chooses to displace the urgency of redistribution with the task of 'interrogat[ing] the idea of the human' (280). Upping the ante of pious criticism of the TRC's 'rhetoric of common humanity'

efficiently locates the major barrier to meaningful redistribution (and reconciliation) within humanism rather than, for example, the legacy of apartheid-era garnered wealth.

The logic runs thus: there are problems in post-apartheid South Africa that can be traced to the historic compromise and that call on us to identify with the victims of history; but this should not be taken to mean that other alternatives to that settlement should be considered as viable since they have, after all, been rejected (by others who must assume that responsibility); so: all is not well but there is no alternative beyond epochal change.

The politics of critical thought dovetail with the politics of the status quo. To see this ritualised deflection for what it is brings into sharp relief the importance of refusing to gloss over the non-identity of intellectual representation and general freedom. Predictably, and rather unfortunately, I confess that it is equally true that gestures to the force of this disjunction should not be hastily taken for the wonders of critical integrity either.

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References

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