



Revising Stanley's footsteps: encountering the "other" in *Darkest England* (1996) by Christopher Hope

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Abstract

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As has now become a familiar image in Hope's writings, once again the idea of looking at a society from the position of an outsider and an exile forms the central theme of Darkest England (1996). In this satirical novel, the tradition of nineteenth-century travel writings set in a colonial context is reversed, undermined, and then remarkably recreated to portray the present-day manifestation of encounters and relations between (black) Africa and the (white) West. Presenting the (fictional) journals of a Khoisan leader, David Mungo Booi, within a dynamic frame of reference to classical colonial texts by, among others, Livingstone and Stanley, Hope writes a new travel report. This essay discusses how, by the reversal of point of view, a change in time and space, and creating a satirical mood, the colonizer and the colonized are interchanged and the original texts are evoked to be rewritten. The notions of Self/Other, colonial/(post-)colonial and primitive/civilized are placed in new and disturbing contexts, adding to the complex structure of this fascinating text.

1. Introduction

Surely the best known phrase in nineteenth-century travel writing is Henry Stanley's rhetorical question: "Dr. Livingstone, I presume?" – a phrase dating from 1871, and one to which many facetious and trivialized meanings have been attached ever since. But from a current point of

view, there is also much more to it than just being an idiomatic cliché. Within the context of its historical and geographical origin, the social and political status of the original speaker and the one he addressed, and because of the cultural and ideological echoes resonating through the ensuing century, these four words encapsulate the tone, attitude and perspective which not only characterise colonial history but also suggest some of the complex issues surrounding postcolonialism today. In 1996 Christopher Hope, a South African expatriate living in London, published *Darkest England*, a text which inverts the whole literary tradition – a tradition which can be called “the rhetoric of Empire” (Spurr, 1993) – epitomized by Stanley’s writing and especially that of his most famous book, *In Darkest Africa* (1890). Hope’s inversion is based on the satirical recreation of voyages and discoveries, of barbarians and colonizers, heathens and missionaries as seen through the eyes of a modern day Dr. Livingstone.

2. Narrator and narrative

Darkest England is structured as a multi-layered narrative. The “Foreword”, signed and dated (March 1995) by Christopher Hope, and the “Postscript” form an encompassing frame. In these two framing parts a narrator speaks in the first person of how he was given a torn parcel containing two notebooks written by one David Mungo Booi, of what he did with these notes and how he disposed of Booi’s tattered hat which was also included in the package of books. Within this frame a second narrative unfolds; the contents of the notebooks are presented in eleven separate chapters, edited by Hope in the form of footnotes and the implicit translation of some passages originally written in “the vivid, earthy Afrikaans of the Karoo nomads” (p. xviii); but now with David Mungo Booi as the first person narrator. The storyline can be summarized as follows: On a visit to a small Karoo town in South Africa during that country’s first democratic elections of 1994, a narrator called Christopher Hope is given two notebooks by a group of impoverished Karoo nomads who, like David Booi, regard themselves as the descendants of the already extinct San people. Hope hears from them and reads for himself how David, a foundling adopted and educated by an “English Boer”, was delegated by his people during 1993 to travel to England to carry back the treaty granted them in 1877 by Queen Victoria, the “Old Auntie with Diamonds in her hair” (p. xiv), and now to seek the patronage of her great-granddaughter the Queen, because their “lives were trampled like those of dung beetles by black people and whites and browns” (p. 13). The notebooks chronicle this mission he undertook in the name of the “Bushmen Society for promoting the Discovery of the Interior Parts of England”, a journey also intended to explore the

possibilities of establishing a colony there and exploiting its commercial possibilities for his people "back home". On arrival David is jailed as an illegal immigrant while he imagines himself to be a respected guest of the Queen, and just before forced deportation he is released into the hands of a wacky, defrocked bishop with whom he stays among the strange people of the village of Little Musing. Here he revitalizes the life of the bishop's daughter Beth, a woman who, because of her huge, swaying posterior, lives as a recluse in England, but whom David regards as a remarkable beauty. He is stalked and poached for a mad peer's safari park, foxhunted but noisily rescued by Green activists, detained in a madhouse but then released into the community without receiving any treatment. He exchanges his little bag of uncut "star stones" for far too little money, outwits the security at Buckingham Castle by posing as a fruit dish, and finally, sadder and wiser, has a gratifyingly frank discussion with the monarch and her spouse. In sympathy with their reduced position, he offers them sanctuary in the Great Karoo, in a kind of Royal Game Park, where their heritage and person will be respected, an offer which they seriously consider but in the end regretfully decline. David never returned from this trip to England, his final whereabouts and fate remained unknown. His notebooks and hat were returned in a mysterious way, the latter eventually "buried" along the lonely Karoo roadside by "Christopher Hope", the inscription on the pile of stones above it the same as that on Livingstone's monument in Westminster Abbey.

Christopher Hope is mainly known as a novelist and has been awarded some of the most prestigious literary prizes in Britain and South Africa, although his best known works have been published since he settled in England at age 30 in 1974. Themes of exile, of isolation within refugee communities and of existential loneliness permeate his work; his characters can be summarized in the same way as he has described himself, namely as: "one who would inevitably end up a stranger in his own country" (Dear, 1995:200). However, the images of alienation and disillusionment are usually couched in witty, even "hilariously funny" terms (as claimed on the book cover); and it is with this same satirical perspective that Hope exposes in *Darkest England* the ridiculous cruelties of the colonial mind; a book described in the *Times Literary Supplement* (March 22, 1996) as "often entertaining, more often angrily moving" (Korn, 1996). Most reviewers, however, have described the novel as a modern traveller's tale, written in the mode of *Gulliver's Travels* or even the works of Henry Fielding (Lourish, 1996:37).

3. Postcolonial experiences

The complex nature of postcolonial writing, and the disparate nature of what constitutes settler and postcolonial experiences, are startlingly revealed in this text. Hope himself was in his childhood part of the internal colonialism of Apartheid South Africa, though he became a refugee from this state through self-exile. But he also is a settler/ colonial who migrated to the metropolitan capital, and one who – like the conquered others – rails against the colonial power which in Africa colonized both black and white, though in many different ways. He uses the freedom of expression that the English language and the English culture permit, to – as has been said of V.S. Naipaul (Boehmer, 1995:177-179) – articulate the “fractures” and “discordances” caused by his personal experience of constant transition, failed acculturation and underlying alienation in the new English life. In the person of the “bushman” David Mungo Booi, a representative of that most reviled and mistreated of all colonized peoples, Hope develops as the central idea of his book the theme of how bankrupt and ridiculous, but also how long-lasting, the notions of Empire and Colonialism are. Booi becomes a present day version of the Imperialist explorers, thus displacing the conventional representations of Western authority by the “act of doubling the white man’s image” (Boehmer, 1995:172). Being mimicked, the colonizer is cut down to size in crafted and complex ways.

The novel is developed within a familiar sociopolitical context in South Africa and Britain during 1993-1994. Through allusion and direct references, the South African history of racial conflict is part of Booi’s narrative. This includes the many wars between black and white and between white and white, and with both groups participating in the genocide of the San people. The historical *motif* culminates in the democratic government elected in 1994, an event of which Booi only hears when he is “found” deep in the English countryside by a latter day Stanley (who greets him with the words “David Mungo Booi, ek sê” p. 185), and an event which brought these descendants of the San – in fiction and in fact – very little of a new lease on life. From David Mungo Booi’s perspective it is the timeless wanderings of the Ash people (the “karretjies mense”), the anonymous nomads who criss-cross the Karoo on their little donkey carts in search of piece-meal employment on the isolated farms, which give history focus. He recaps their history by recalling the ancient “First Best Time” when “the land was fat and all the fountains flowing, loved by the she-rain falling softly from heaven (when they) roamed as wide as the wind” (p. 4), an age followed by the times of being hunted and killed by the whites. Then came the short-lived joy of the “Second Best Time”, that season when the red-clad soldiers from Britain “(k)icked the arses of the Boers all the way from the Snow

Mountains to Murderer's Karoo" (p. 4). In describing the typical "rhetoric of Empire", Spurr (1993:98) identifies a "discourse of negation", that is, the colonial text portraying Africa as having no history before the colonizers arrived. This "absence of history" is starkly corrected when it becomes evident that from David's point of view, the arrival of the colonizers caused the ancient and rich San history to be destroyed.

David's travels through England is contextualized by a dismal social structure depicting the early nineties: the bankruptcy and suicide of fraudulent businessmen, the vicious murder of little Jamie Bulger by his young playmates, the soccer violence, the race riots, the burning down of Windsor Castle, the conflict and chaos in the Labour Party and the Anglican Church, the Royal divorces. In short, that period referred to by Queen Elizabeth as her personal *annus horribilis*, and experienced and described by a perplexed Booi as the "true and accurate portrait of this near-mythical island race" (p. 99).

4. Text and intertext

The intertextual references in *Darkest England* are organized into an extremely dense and multi-layered structure. The nineteenth-century travel books of David Livingstone, Henry Stanley and Mungo Park, and the writings of "imperial" authors like Kipling and the poets Keats and Shelley, form the most important strain of intertext. But numerous idiomatic clichés also intersperse his narration: like Booi's speculation if "there were corners of foreign fields that were for ever England?" or his reaction during a sexual "assault" to "lie back and think of Bushmanland" (p. 100, 179). These references illustrate the story line of the baby David Mungo Booi being educated as a little Englishman by his Red-neck master, an education based on his master's own lonely and drunken delusions about a far off civilized, European culture.

From his old, rich books he taught me to say my letters, and told wonderful stories of horrible darkness and violent death, heathen tribes and disgusting savagery, as related by the great English explorers on their travels through darkest Africa from Bushmanland to Stanley pool, from Bonga's country to the mountains of the Moon.

Their names became my hymn; I still mutter them to myself when I wish to sleep: Baines, Baker, Bruce, Burton, Grant, Kingsley, Livingstone, Speke and Stanley ... Even now they make, when strung together like beads, a little Anglican necklace (p. 7).

The passages on p. 112 and 214 give but a few more examples of this frame of reference. But, in Boehmer's (1995:173) terms, it is through ventriloquizing the coloniser's voice, that David Booi subverts and

upturns the dominant meanings. Passages from the great travel writers taken over verbatim or in a slightly rewritten form appears throughout the narrative, and especially Mungo Park's *Travels in the Interior of Africa* (1799) provides a significant source of information. The lofty aims of the Africa Association, that venerable institution underwriting the fixation with British Imperial Discovery, and which sent Mungo Park on his tragic way, are renewed in the words of the wily but illiterate Karoo Nomads when they decide to send David overseas. When Booi is almost raped by the frustrated bimbo wifelings of his captor, the eccentric Lord Goodlove, the whole of chapter 7 in Park's classic book is re-created in chapter 8 of *Darkest England*. The similarities continue – David Booi, like Mungo Park, never returned from his trip, both were evidently drowned in the great rivers they wanted to explore (the Thames, the Niger), and all that remained of both men's belongings were their notebooks and their hats (Encyclopedia Britannica). Through these references conventional meanings are destabilized, generating new and ironic interpretations. Once again the reader recognizes binary stereotypes such as self/other, hero/victim and civilized/savage – but now the traditional roles are reversed. And in the reversal a sad awareness is conveyed of not only how senseless, but also how enduring these stereotypes are.

There is, however, a second text that resonates through David Booi's tale. This is a collection of poetry which, according to the publication date, he could not likely have known about, but which Hope in his role as editor, refers to several times. The text is *Return of the Moon. Stories from the //Xam* (1991), Stephen Watson's rewritings of nineteenth-century prose narratives by the San. Watson based his poems on the famous Bleek and Lloyd transcriptions of folklore, songs and other stories told by Bushmen convicts languishing in the Breakwater Prison in Cape Town during the 1870's. By referring to people and places and terms appearing in Watson's poetry, the ancient narratives of a people almost completely extinct are once more recalled. By recreating in a different context the same mood of those early lyrical expressions, and now also devoid of all satire and sneering, the idea that David indeed speaks for his long gone ancestors (and does so in a similar mood of nostalgia, with a great sense of loss and by means of beautiful imagery) is firmly set. A pervasive sense of doom is also established through these words: what happened to his forebears foretells his own fate. At the beginning of the last chapter, David's weariness and disillusionment are evident in his description of the wet and dark English park:

Too much water is never good; it sends people mad. !Kwala gave his creatures dry seasons, deserts, thirsts, so that they should ache for the love of the All-High and pray for his gift, the sweet she-rain to fall

and make all below grow fat and moist. For everything God loves is wet.

In my country when it rains all creatures pray, for then all the world is holy. The green succulents step closer to the edge of the old dam that has not seen water in living memory

.....

But in England their rain means nothing to them; they consider it merely water.

.....

I slept as I imagine one will sleep at the last, when the after-world awaits, a land – it is said – of locusts and honey. Those of my family, knowing that water and melons and meat cannot last, will build me a shelter against wind and sand and hyena, and, leaving what little they can in the way of wild onions and brandybush berries, slip away for ever (p. 247-249).

These lines are in imagery and theme, and sometimes even in the use of specific phrases and words, directly linked to poems like “The abandoned old woman” and “The rain that is male” (Watson, 1991:43 and 48).

Through these and many other such passages the “colonial rhetorical tradition in which non-Western peoples are essentially denied the power of language and are represented as mute or incoherent” (Spurr, 1993:104), is completely annulled. An alternative rhetoric, that of the “power, depth and beauty of the oral traditions of the San” (Watson, 1991:9) is recognised and revived.

5. Colonial counter-discourse

An absorbing counter-discourse to the conventional colonial rhetoric takes shape in *Darkest England* – a discourse developed on many different narratological levels. The authorial text – which I see as including the title, the cover illustration, the subtitle and motto, the detailed subheadings of each chapter, the contents of many of the footnotes and the direct comparisons made in the final “postscript” – gives perhaps the clearest indications that it is with the eyes of the postcolonial, mostly cynical author at the end of the twentieth century that the “great” colonial accomplishments of the West are seen and evaluated. The well known typographical style of early travel books and novels are visually recreated with surprising effects, as can be seen in the subtitle:

The Life and Strange
Surprising Adventures
of David Mungo Booi
who lived among
the English.

As told in his own
Words and written
down by Himself

(p. 1)

and the subheadings of the chapters:

Chapter One

The author tells something of himself,
his people and the great promise made by Old Auntie
with Diamonds in Her Hair; his expedition abroad
and arrival among the English

(p. 3)

The illustration on the cover mockingly uses the image of that other intrepid colonial, the Belgian comic book character TinTin in the Congo, showing four sturdy, bowler-hatted Englishmen carrying a black explorer in a sedan chair into the mysterious Heart of England. The travel writings of Livingstone, Stanley and Mungo Park are "resurrected" in style and content (see eg. p. 1, 3, 187, 112), but by their use in a fictional work and in the portrayal of a fictional character, simultaneously diminished to fictions themselves.

Many of the rhetorical features recognized as characteristic of colonial discourse appear in this novel, startling in their anachronistic bluntness, but also with an unsettling and ironic impact on the reader of today. I found it revealing to read *Darkest England* alongside David Spurr's *The Rhetoric of Empire. Colonial Discourse in Journalism, Travel Writing and Imperial Administration* (1993) in which he analyses modern European colonial discourse. Hope's satiric adherence to this kind of rhetoric is very obvious. For instance, both Spurr and Mary Louise Pratt (1992) refer to the rhetorical convention based on the visual mastery of a scene, the "monarch of all I survey" gesture, typical of all Victorian explorers and especially dear to Henry Morton Stanley (Pratt, 1992:201; Spurr, 1993: 17). This surveillance implied that the explorer, filled with self-satisfied pride in the advantages and innate superiority of Western ways, saw Africa as it might become under colonial rule. With this same eye of appropriation, the explorer/author also invaded the dwellings of the primitive and exotic "heathens", regarding these as the lowly locations of their inferior cultures, always comparing them unfavourably with civili-

zation "back home". As a final stage in this visual penetration, there is the minute observation of the human (African) body itself. Stanley for instance, continually comments on the bodies of the Africans he encounters, describing them in the same quantifying way as one would do with landmarks on a piece of land (Stanley, 1890:361-365). When David Booi travels through England, he observes and is observed by others in an almost exact repetition of Stanley's original "imperial gaze":

Their land is a world made of grass, monotonous, broken by trees or small woods with bulges here and there that pass for hills and a few mountains. I estimated that one cannot run in any direction for more than an hour without coming across a batch of little huts that seem to burrow into the cracks and creases of the green, grassy skin like fleas in an old springbuck pelt. The natives, on this island, are less occupants than infestations. It is clear that they breed like rock rabbits, and have done so since the beginning of time. If you were to slice through the centre of a tall standing ant-heap in the Karoo and examine the writhing life inside, you might have some idea of their clustering, scurrying, teeming millions. So it is in England (p. 75).

.....

Here we approach the primitive origins of the famous 'stiff upper lip'. This may even be a form of penile substitution. Perhaps their peculiarly repressive sexual culture allows stiffening of the lip, where it frowns upon tumescence in other procreative organs? (p. 77; also see eg. 113-114).

Through parody, the arrogant stare of colonialism is mocked in front of the more tentative readers who are now watching with end-of-the-twentieth-century eyes. The brutal judgments of "imperial eyes" (Pratt, 1992) are thrust into our politically correct intellectual lives; not only causing discomfort because the colonial roles are now reversed, but also because the harshness of the description reveals a narrative perspective directed by disdain.

A puzzling ambiguity is implied: David can be praised or pitied, but also be feared.

Other rhetorical conventions are exploited in a similar way. To mention but a few: colonial texts again and again explain the characters and morals (or, more usual, the lack of them) of the primitive people in terms of nature and the climate (Said in Williams & Chrisman, 1993:145; Spurr, 1993:180). This view also sees Africa as a hotbed of sexual passions and excesses, one big erotic swamp, an integral part of the primitive subordination to the uncontrolled, natural forces. To David such a synergy also seems a given: the outer appearance of the English with

their pustular faces, bad teeth, a long nose and lower lip, the inability to pronounce sounds properly and their repressive sexual culture, he naturally ascribes to their grey climate and choked countryside (p. 30, 75-77). The allegorization of colonized nations in terms of the female figure, of an exotic mistress and harems full of willing wives, and of the transracial love affair as the pinnacle of a colonial adventure, are well known nineteenth century clichés (Spurr, 1993:171; Pratt, 1992:81-85). David also becomes involved in a related form of discourse, as the seducer and the seduced. The sight of his permanently erect *qwai-xkhwe* drives Beth and her father wild and causes three frustrated “wives” of the mad Lord Goodlove to throw themselves at David with glee. These “seraglio scenes”, where the traveller is inspected by foreign females with a scientific-erotic gaze, are repeatedly described in *Travels in the Interior of Africa* by Mungo Park (Pratt, 1992:82). Although David tries to behave like a gentleman (also taking into consideration the growing jealousy of the young soccer hooligan warriors of Little Musing) and treats Beth with great courtesy, she stalks him like a hungry hunter does a fat eland. She goes “native” for a while, bare breasted and wearing grass skirts, camping in the rectory garden and singing to the moon. David is left musing about how this attraction would annoy his people back home, and wondering if by such an intimate relationship with one of the locals, “some of their less admirable qualities would not rub off on one?” (p. 124-125). These words echo Stanley's warnings about African women, whose sexual attractions he saw literally as a threat to the white man's life.

Through the medium of language and literature, assimilation, or subversion by imitation, has remained to anti-colonials an important mode of resistance (Boehmer, 1995:174). In *Darkest England* a resistance to the standard colonial binary notions (eg. Primitive x Civilized, Africa x the West, Margin x Metropolitan and Self x Other) steers the structure of the narrative and the ideological core. But it is a process of assimilated resistance during which these notions acquire complex and relative meanings, their frames of reference often changed and even undermined. For instance: even in a postcolonial world, London and the monarchy still constitute to many once colonized communities the metropolitan power, one that David respects and upon which he depends. But this “power” reveals itself to a gullible David as a corrupt, crumbling and disdained one. David's offer to relocate Queen Elizabeth to the Great Karoo where respect for age and tradition still exists, implies that it is in the so-called margins, however impoverished and isolated they are, that the real powers of meaningful life can exist. In the termite like suburbs of the big cities the new primitives reign, while among the nomads there are civilized neighbourliness and caring and

love. The conventional clichéd distinction between Self and Other is given a new significance when examined from David's point of view. The bishop addresses him as "my poor, deluded son", and David's response to this patronising attitude is:

They refer to all and sundry in familial terms: father, son, sister, mother – kinship terms used in a very casual fashion. Yet I soon realized that they have a very vague idea of the patterns of kinship. Perhaps they understood something of them once, but the memory has faded like the duiker's urine in the desert. For instance, they know nothing of joking partners, as we do. Their system appears functional to the point of awkwardness: all foreigners are regarded as avoidance partners; all related natives are held to be close partners, or kith and kin. Or, as they say in their economical way, the world is divided into 'Them' and 'Us'. This is, in our terms, a crude distinction, but it seems they know no other (p. 72).

Mary Louise Pratt (1992:7) uses the "idiosyncratic" term *autoethnography* to refer to "instances in which colonized subjects undertake to represent themselves in ways that *engage with* the colonizer's own terms". By this she means that the former subject, the "other", uses the traditional genres and narrative structures of the metropolitan culture, and that the idioms appropriated and transformed are often those of travel and exploration writing. "Autoethnographic texts are typically heterogeneous on the reception end as well, usually addressed both to the metropolitan reader and to literate sectors of the speaker's own social group, and bound to be received very differently by each" (Pratt, 1992:7). I would use this term to describe what Hope does in *Darkest England*, in this case, however, dealing with an unusually complicated version of the conflict colonizer x colonized. The part of colonizer should obviously be awarded to Britain and that of the colonized to David Booi, even though David intends at the outset of his journey to be just the opposite. But as I have argued above (Section three: "Postcolonial experiences"), Hope himself can be viewed as both colonizer and colonized; once part of a colonial settler community, but eventually settling uneasily in the superior metropolitan. Putting David Booi in Stanley's shoes is thus not merely satire. Debunking nineteenth-century travel writing and therefore the rhetoric of Empire, also implies a questioning of the (metropolitan) literary culture with which Hope himself has become identified, and therefore reveals the author's unease with his adopted identity.

6. Conclusion

One could say that in telling the story of David Mungo Booi, Hope also perpetuates a colonial stereotype; that the white male author still manipulates the uncomprehending native whether he is presented as a "noble savage" or as the "stooge from Bongo-Bongo land" (Boehmer, 1995:166; Hope, 1996:44). And it is true, David is mistreated and appears to be outsmarted at every turn; in the end he is even killed, probably by the kind of young thug he often pitied but in the end misunderstood. This fate, however, mirrors more than the face of a typical colonial victim. He also becomes a representative of all modern day minorities, going down fighting against the diminishing consequences of massification and neo-colonialism. But as an individual David never loses faith in himself or his beliefs – a very remarkable revision of nineteenth-century self-assurance – and perhaps that is why he is no stereotype. His reflection of his relationship with Beth verbalizes this attitude:

But the strength of the attraction was there, and it can be explained, I believe, by very compelling characteristics we held in common: in a world where others found us odd, we saw that we were beautiful; and in a world dominated by height, two smaller persons found each other truly towering (p. 125).

It is also possible to read the book as a personal, rather truculent attack on a society that is in fact much bigger and more complex than the selected slice portrayed in Hope's text. The reader may see the railing against an England of 1993 and the Old South Africa before 1994 as an outdated fight, and decide that the editor/narrator speaks too loudly from an individual, highly subjective point of view. Both Hope and his character David Mungo Booi can be called cultural halfbreeds in Derridean terms; "displaced identities belonging to the margins of two worlds" (Spurr, 1993:196). Revising Stanley's footsteps from the streets of the London of today, speaks of a simultaneous nostalgia for and disdain of the absolute certainties of an epoch long gone. *Darkest England* in many ways reflects the disappointments, quirks and tensions characteristic of our late postmodern age, and these general ailments surface clearly and often in the book.

But in acknowledging its signal excesses and limits, I read *Darkest England* primarily as a particularly interesting and very topical post-colonial text. It is a hybridic work, both factual and highly imaginative, displaying bitter satire as well as moving, lyrical lines. It appears culturally heterogenous, structured by means of multi-layered images, always subversive in its intent. The specific postcolonial questions of Race and

Politics and Power form the centre of the book; it does not focus on a vague millennium malaise.

To the readers not part of once British dominated Africa, many obscurities and silences exist which will complicate their comprehension of and grip on the text. The South African family and place names – eg. Prettyman Lottering and his wife Niksie, the farms Alles Verloren and Abraham's Grave in the Murderer's Karoo – are in many instances fictitious, but always recognizable as absolutely regional, and mostly emotionally and politically loaded as well. The idiom is very often locally rooted and represents distinct perceptions of a uniquely South African world: the policemen and shopkeepers of the small Karoo towns; the interracial snobbery and strife; the anti-British sentiment; the delusions and idealism which form part and parcel of our political life. The postmodernist notions of meaning as something arbitrary, of identity as an illusion and of value as relative at best, are resisted and rejected in this text. To David and the Ash People of the Karoo life is certainly capricious, but hunger and poverty and a history of pain are realities which they experience every day. Being part of the postcolonial discourse would have very little practical impact on their colonized world: "The word of white people ... was worth no more than sheepshit" (p. 16).

Darkest England is a text which belongs to the grainy, agitated and sometimes contradictory writings of most once-colonized literatures, a creative contribution to the differentiated postcolonial discourse of our day (see Boehmer, 1995:248 and Spurr, 1993:184-201). This is a discourse aware of and understanding the particularity of different textual situations, of locating texts in their specific worlds of meaning, of resisting patterned and thus limiting views of our world. It makes possible the encountering of the "Other", respecting and getting to know more about that "Other", recognizing the complexities and contradictions and not trying to construct only more copies of an idealised "Self".

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Key concepts:

colonial discourse
(post-)colonialism
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travel literature

Kernbegrippe:

koloniale diskoers
(post-)kolonialisme
postmodernisme
reisverhale