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Some problems of writing historiography in Southern Africa

Abstract

In this article, the author has come to the conclusion that the established literary definitions no longer serve to define the nature of the South African literary system, and that current literary criteria are no longer functional in determining the merit of a South African literary text. Not only do the traditional categories of Afrikaans, White English, and Black English texts have to be reconsidered, but the concept of the "true" South African writer has to be reevaluated. Historiography, therefore, is not a science that demands rigid adherence to fixed categories or rules, but an art that needs to address the structural imbalance that plagues our literary system today.

By way of preface

The following few problem areas arise from the notes of two interconnected talks: the first on 14 April, 1986, during the seminar arranged by CENSAL at the HSRC, and the second on 17 April at the SGLS' 4th Biennial Congress held at UNISA, during a panel on 'Aspects of Literary Historiography, with Special Reference to Southern African Literature.' Both talks were intentionally informal, using the tactic of 'autobiographical confession' – that is, of reportbacks from the front-line by a practitioner – rather than any more scholarly and systematic procedure. The intention on both occasions was to be persuasive and polemical (rather than dourly analytical), because the motivation was a call for bold gestures in decision-making in the fast developing field of literary historiography in Southern Africa, and an attempt to find some new directions in traditional fields of research endeavour.

The first talk traced an initial engagement with comparative literary studies, undertaken through most of 1978 at a time when terms like 'historiography'

and 'methodology', let alone 'systems-description', were certainly not current in the theory of South African university literature departments. The work was undertaken in response to Prof. Albert Gérard's commissioning a chapter for his HALEL project (the History of African Literatures in European Languages, sponsored by the International Comparative Literature Association in 1977), which was to survey the literature in English, Dutch-Afrikaans (and French, German, Swedish, Latin, etc.) about the African experience or by Africans in those languages. Gérard's own special interest in the literatures of Southern Africa, particularly as demonstrated in his path-breaking paper, "Towards a History of South African Literature", delivered at the European branch of the Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies conference in Liège in 1974, acted as a provocation and stimulus, principally because it tabulated the sub-literatures side by side. (The paper has been published in Hena Maes-Jelinek (1975).) Initially Gérard suggested a team: Ampie Coetzee (of the Department of Nederlands-Afrikaans), Tim Couzens (then of the Department of English), both at Wits, and myself of the Department of English at RAU, which should section the field into Netherlands-Afrikaans, 'black' English, and 'white' English and all other European languages respectively, and which would meet occasionally at least to agree on how this three-way demarcation would work in practice. However, we decided to complete our chapter jointly, and as it turns out we were the only contributors of some sixty chapters covering the literatures in European languages continent-wide who elected to submit a *collaborative* effort. (The final compilation is now published through the Hungarian Academy of Sciences in Budapest, funded by a grant from UNESCO – and I made the point that local historiography, far from necessarily being a parochial affair, can lead to entry into international scholarly forums not dreamed of by the team in its humble beginning stages.)

Procedures

In order to tackle our joint chapter, named AITACTOSAL ("An Introduction to a Comparative Theory of South African Literature") ground rules of procedures had to be laid. The first rule was that we should work by *consensus*, not by majority vote, although in practice the psychological possibility of two of the three 'ganging up' on the third was always likely, and probably did shape the final product in ways we still would not understand. To achieve this consensus, we each had to become exceptionally open, generous-spirited and frank; understanding one another's views, but free to be critical without giving offence. This was closest to being achieved once we had committed ourselves to a *routine*: in our case we were to meet on Monday afternoons every week until the ground was covered, no matter how long it would take. Each session, then, consisted of each of us commenting on our own copy of the work handed in by the other two in the previous week, and planning what ground would be covered for the next week, so that the evaluation of items on the table was automatically pre-adjusting what would

appear a fortnight hence, while the session itself 'rewrote' items until all three contributors were satisfied. At the end the team appointed a general editor (myself), solely responsible for homogenising style and editing out repetitions, and then each approved the final text.

The recurring points of decision at all times were as follows:

(a) The amount of *space* to be allocated to each work/author/period/movement, vis-a-vis another work/author/etc. This dilemma crystallised in the question: Which is the greater poet – Van Wyk Louw (Coetzee), H.I.E. Dhlomo (Couzens) or Campbell (myself)? (They were near contemporaries, and all of them men of standing in their literary communities.) We devised a diplomatic answer, which I suspect evades the core of the problem in comparative studies – we decided to sidestep the arguing of absolute merit-ratings that would have to occur if we forced the issue (Van Wyk Louw – 3½ pages; then Campbell – 3 pages; and Dhlomo – ?) by maintaining that the allocation of space in our study was not necessarily a significant index of 'literary merit', real or implied by us as historiographers.

Then (b) the amount of *simultaneity*: we felt (in those days of the 70s) that the three very actual separate directions we three came from to face this common task did represent the true situation in South African literature in general, and so evaded the period by period, even year by year comparison the project challenged us to engage in. We settled rather for allowing one 'stream' to run for an episode or career, and then doubling back to catch up the next for an equivalent stretch, and so on – thus our formulations included many "meanwhiles" and "on the other hands". We simply were not equipped, in our personal habits and methodological approaches, to break out of the three reasonably safe strongholds which had become the bases of our professional ways of life.

A further area of difficulty, that perhaps prevented us from arriving at the most challenging areas of such an enterprise, was that each of us came to the project from different perspectives: if I may generalise about the faiths and practices of my colleagues at that time (we have all travelled many different routes since then!) Couzens' approach was primarily 'sociological' (materialist, seeing the text as a product of the society), Coetzee's approach was primarily 'bibliographical' (annotating the sum total of texts in terms of the commonly received values), and mine was primarily 'aestheticist' (rating highly the creative skill of the artist in the artwork). Thus the medley of basic assumptions we held was hard to blend, let alone argue out into a single joint position. But I must record that our initial blueprint disallowed the necessary confrontation that would have resolved this dilemma; we were, I believe, then trapped in our inherited departmental formations.

Always feeling an approaching crisis, we in fact evaded it by terminating the scope of our project at 1945 – a date by which we agreed *all* South African writers were maintaining their 'Africanness' so that the parameters of the

'European' languages in Africa were closed. (Gérard disagreed, however, and appointed a further team to continue the survey into the apartheid period.)

A further area into which our three-way blueprint discouraged honest research was the phenomenon of the bi- or multilingual writer. This dilemma crystallised in the question: Which of the three contributors handles C. Louis Leipoldt, Sol T. Plaatje, Herman Charles Bosman? We crudely shifted whole oeuvres into the camp in which they were then currently most held in esteem (Leipoldt to Coetzee, Plaatje to Couzens, Bosman to myself), on the grounds that exigencies of space allowed treatment of only their very 'major' works anyway, so little would be lost in ignoring 'minor' or 'aberrant' works that awkwardly would not fit the scheme. This later became a source of concern to me, but within the ambit of 57 pages how else could we have acted? This unresolved issue became one of the spurs to later directions taken by myself.

The shadow of apartheid

But paramount in my personal decision-making since then, and deriving directly out of the AITACTOSAL experience, has been the conviction that Coetzee, Couzens and I were also working from positions of advantage, or lack of advantage, that were the direct consequence of the access to power we each had (or, at least, the 'group' of writers we represented had) within the apartheid South Africa of the time. Afrikaans literature was 'highly developed', well funded and served by universities, publishers, the press and other channels of the cultural life in general, and very 'industrialised' in terms of bibliographies, reference tools, data retrieval, etc. White English literature was 'developing', beginning to appear on conference and other agendas and to be institutionalised. Black English literature was 'under-developed', and still is a field in which one refers to the most preliminary information, biographies, etc., as 'pioneering.' I have to note (with shame) that the other literatures of South Africa, those in the autochthonous African languages, had no place even in our supposedly progressive schedule of the historiographical, although subsequently we did attempt to elicit a fourth contributor whose (unenviable) task would have been to insert the literature from that quarter into our scheme by means of cutting and pasting. Not surprisingly, this never occurred – the results of procedural insult are, literally, non-collaboration.

A new writer 'identikit'

In the intervening decade, then, as a research *tactic*, it seemed to me that this structural imbalance needed to be addressed. As long as the literary formation of South Africa directly reflects the socio-political formation, the attendant meaning and the value of the literature is itself grievously suspect. In order to create the arena in which a *literary* debate can occur with some

scientific validity, the literature itself has to be prized loose from the socio-polity so that its own inherent value-system may at least be seen to be semi-autonomous. For example, the criteria of apartheid principles (divisions by language and by colour) need not necessarily be the governing criteria for classification of the literary system. In fact, as a *polemical* stance I insist that the use of language and colour criteria has brought us directly into the literary impasse out of which we are only now attempting to climb. Thus, in order to reclassify the system convincingly the language-colour criteria have to be abandoned, or at least convincingly rethought. There is a correlative to this: as far as English South African literature is concerned it is *precisely* the writers who paid little or no heed to these boundaries who have been most neglected. And thus, together with a crude notion that the *true* South African writer might be the 'polyglot versatile' type, and using an uncomplicated empirical approach, I decided that the problem was best confronted by re-admitting these 'lost' writers into the 'mainstream.' Hence I embarked on several discrete editing projects which intended to make visible once again the careers of Douglas Blackburn, Sol T. Plaatje, Stephen Black, C. Louis Leipoldt and even Herman Charles Bosman (in his comparative, inter-ethnic, interlingual facets), key work by key work.

During this procedure – one might even call it a campaign – I found that the concept of the 'South African writer' I held was fundamentally changing. To state it in caricatured 'identikit' terms: the inherited portrait we have held to be definitive is of the writer as a spokesperson of a unitary, monolingual, single ethnic group, the typical representative of a 'group area' in the literature. This portrait is conveniently reductive; but also, I was beginning to feel, it was ahistorical. The habit derives quite naturally from classroom procedures, potted biographies, etc., and of course from practical necessities of syllabus compilation by representative works, the erection of hierarchies of value, and so forth. But it occurred to me that – to make a satirical point – we South Africans, who are only too quick to insist on our *similarities* to other people, and to underline our *differences* from other people, might well have fallen into the habit of locating these similarities and differences in the wrong places. A proposition: our literary system *is* similar to other literary systems (e.g., the language-race criteria, although persuasive, are as useless here as anywhere else), and it *is* different (*unlike* other literary systems, the total literary production of our system stretches across a vast spectrum of cultural manifestations, from Stone Age to TV, still currently in production, as is only to be expected from a society of such extremes in one melting-pot).

Therefore our system does have some norms peculiar to it. For one, the writer is always forced into a position of having to negotiate between extremes, into crossing the language-colour barrier; he or she can only be a syncretist and hybridiser. And *therefore* the basic act of writing is one of carrying information across one or another socio-political barrier, literally of 'trading' – and that is probably the writer's source of greatness. I propose, thus, a new identikit portrait: the writer exists at any of several boundaries (*not* at the

centre of one self-enclosed group); his or her act of making literature is part of transferring data across that boundary, from one audience to another – an act which in the broadest sense may be termed ‘translation’.

This identity of the writer has been forced on him/her by the peculiar nature and intensity of the two main events which are *common* to all makers of literature within the socio-polity of South Africa, and they have come as interconnected traumas: (a) the mass shift away from oracy as a result of the very recent advent of literacy among preliterate cultures, and (b) the rapid demographic shift from the rural to the urban modes of existence. The traces of these two events have major, conditioning implications in *all* the old ‘group areas’ of the old systems-description of South African literature. Our particular problem is that these massive events do not occur synchronically (e.g., we have wildly divergent answers to questions about the date printed work, translations of the Bible, cultural manifestoes, core readership, etc., first occurred in each sub-literature). This is exactly what is to be expected in such a divided, competitive society. Class analysis, the Marxists say, would be the technique for disclosing the pattern. For the ‘writer’, however, the key is the day-to-day stimulus of having to register these heterogeneities across a great complexity of fronts. The systemic approach must, in the end, at least release this working notion: that the South African writer has always been bigger than his or her assigned categories, because the system to which that writer belongs is itself larger than its components.

In order to be accurately described, this system needs to be seen as having been shaped by other bedevilling discriminatory boundaries besides race and language. If the Marxists are correct and, as in the spiritual about ‘dem dry bones’, ‘race’ is connected to ‘language’, is connected to ‘class’, is connected to ‘gender’, is connected to . . . then other criteria need also to be analysed, notably ‘religion’ and, a particularly strong and violent factor, the ‘home/exile’ distinction. This is necessary because the very subject matter of South African literature is *these very issues*. Our system is not divided, but it is *about* division. That is our common heritage, and comparisons may begin with confidence only from that common point.

Case history

In the second talk made from these notes I gave a case history of how these many concepts about the basic characteristics of our common literary system had to be located in practice, or rather, allowed to well up from underground in some empirical, visible way. I presented a rationale and defence of my editing policy in assembling *The Penguin Book of Southern African Stories* (1985). This is the first substantial work to compare the sub-literatures in our system in cross-section, the prolegomena of which is contained in my introduction. All editorial decisions, I found, had ultimately to be made with reference to some declared theory, although this was not a matter of establishing a blueprint and then finding the work to fit in with it; on the contrary, it was the sequence of works which then revealed its own pattern.

The editorial decisions were as follows:

- (a) to dump the existing canons of the various sub-literatures entirely, and thus to disregard 'representativeness'; e.g., not necessarily to feel one has to include highly-valued authors and their 'best' works. (Out of 43 works included, it is not particularly important how many derive from this sub-literature, how many from that – perhaps it is of even more interest to see whose work is left out);
- (b) to stress that the placing of stories in the sequence was more important than the story's autonomy per se (thus I deliberately chose *atypical* stories – and, I hope, fresh ones – concentrating on how they related one to the next, cross-referring, answering one another);
- (c) to select stories which reflected cross-lingual, cross-sub-group encounters, to demonstrate the thesis that, however unfashionable this may seem, this has always been, and still is, the *main* concern of all writers within the system.

Redefinitions: This occasioned some basic redefinitions of terminology, which in this case crystallised around backstage arguments over the title of the collection.

- (d) Firstly, I felt calling the collection *Short Stories* (in line with other such Penguin volumes) caused a prejudged (and very Eurocentric, albocentric) criterion to be used which would limit the selection, in effect, to the 'well-made' literary short story form (e.g., focus on R.R.R. Dhlomo, Nadine Gordimer, Hennie Aucamp), whereas in our system the category of 'short fiction' (that is, just plain 'stories') is more practised. This admitted into the scope of the collection proto-short stories in the fable, folk-lore, myth, fireside tale, yarn, anecdote, tall story and other originally oral categories, and post-short stories in quite surprising (and largely unanalysed) forms for which descriptions need yet to be coined (e.g., the story which is itself an anthology – Fitzpatrick's "The Outspan" – and the 'decameronian symposial' type – Lessing's "Out of the Fountain"), through even to the ill-codified novella form. I felt that this full spectrum of 'short fiction' should not be suppressed or foreshortened, but celebrated, and wished to show that its actual formation is not vaguely as one might have predicted or anticipated.

For example, a high percentage of the stories about cross-cultural encounters are also metafictional (they deconstruct their own techniques), and this formal characteristic is located just as firmly in Stone Age survivals as it is in one of the latest Gordimers! Furthermore, a high percentage of the stories are not only translated, but are *about* translation, and that invariably the act of translation is *connected* to cultural transition. This can occur anywhere on the time-scale, too – Brownlee's translation of the Xhosa fable of the 30s is performed to enable Xhosa-English comprehension, yet, while foregrounding an implicit warning about misunderstanding, has as background a cultural transition

(in this case from hunter-gathering to settled agriculturalism) which is only too likely to cause this misunderstanding. Meanwhile, and on the other hand, the last (and latest) piece in the collection, Wilhelm's science fiction story called "Space Invaders", uses precisely the *same formal devices* to deliver precisely the same message.

- (e) Secondly, the geography of our system seemed to be unnecessarily restricted by using the term 'South African' in the title – to an international readership that term has become opprobrious and synonymous with the 'literature of apartheid'. 'Southern African', although vague, is at least a literary rather than a geopolitical term. The 'capital' of this more literary system, as a writer like the late Bessie Head shows from an exile position, is Johannesburg, and to wherever the 'Johannesburg influence' extends, so does our system. Transport, communication, economic and labour routes shape a system out there in the world more fundamentally than we might observe from our ivory towers; therefore Namibia, Swaziland, Botswana and Lesotho, Zimbabwe and Malawi were 'in', as a sort of loose ex-British colonial conformation, with a history of its own. This I do not find strongly replicated in the flanking Angola and Mozambique, which remain Lusophonic, and, peculiarly enough, in Zambia, for reasons which I cannot presently locate. This mythical Southern Africa construct has the useful, immediately cashable advantage of crossing much of the home/exile chasm, and admitting to our attention another characteristic which is particularly prevalent in the work from outside South Africa – but which, nevertheless, is endemic to the whole system – that is, that much work by Southern Africans is *about borders*. And again, this is not located where one would expect: this is as true of Delius' 'frontier' narrative, "Hannie's Journal", as it is of what must be the quintessentially Southern African story, Joubert's "Milk". (A note on "Milk"/"Melk" – this occurs across *four* removes of translation, from the original Portuguese monologue, through the Afrikaans-speaking newspaper reporter, through Joubert the fictional organiser, into an English translation by Joubert and a collaborator. This in turn is related to the subject matter being border crossings, and the theme being classification by race and language!)
- (f) Finally, the situation of 'translation' in the workaday meaning of the word. In compiling the *Penguin Book* I initially assumed that, as it would obviously have to be in English, an enormous project of translation would have to be embarked upon. This proved not to be the case, and as I had chosen particularly to honour polylingual writers, I found that it has been far more common than we suppose for writers in general to translate themselves, or have themselves translated. Of the 13 external translations included (i.e., translations made post the composition of the story), 12 already existed, and I began to see that translation itself has a crucial and valuable role in our system, and always has had. This I honoured by making existing, historical translations prominent in the collection.

The art of historiography

In conclusion, both talks stated that a new attempt at systems-description would not be successful if it did not renovate, and in some cases revise, many of the inherited literary definitions which have to date inhibited our arriving at the true, empirically determined, nature of our system. Further, it should be stressed that the writing of historiography, no matter how systematised, remains an art (not a science), and thus is ruled by beliefs that might look like theories, and faith that might look like principles. In the final analysis, only the practice will reveal whether the project has value, and only the comparison of values can establish their worth.

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