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## **REGIONAL AND CURRENT PROBLEMS IN SOUTH AFRICA AND THEIR IMPACT ON LITERATURE WITH REMARKS ON THE EVALUATION OF THE AFRIKAANS NOVEL\***

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

My paper centres round a specific situation and its impact on literature in South Africa with special reference to the modern novel in the Afrikaans language and the literary evaluation of the novel. This does not mean that I exclude references to the other genres, poetry and drama and to literatures in other languages within the South African context. Many of you might know but to clarify I would like to point out that I refer to Afrikaans as the Germanic language originating from the 17th century Dutch mother tongue of approximately 3½ million South Africans.

### **2. LITERATURE**

I use the term literature to refer specifically in this context to literary literature - literature which belongs to the so-called "belles lettres" and which has won respect in the eyes of the literary critics. Categories of literary value are, to my mind, universality, ambiguity, originality, imagination -much heard-of merits of the literary phenomenon. Literary value and literary evaluation are very complex issues. Suffice it to mention the more important categories of value.

### **3. LITERATURE IN SOUTH AFRICA**

It is obvious that in South Africa, as in many other countries, a definite actual and political situation has an effect on its literature. National circumstances are closely related to the development of the so-called "littérature engagée". This fact has been confirmed time and again by lectures already given at this congress. Again I must state that of course all literature is in one or other way engaged, especially when it centres around

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universal human emotions like love, sorrow and the experience of beauty. In this respect literary *artists* are all alike, also those who refer to and include the South African “scene” in their writings :

‘a poet is the same, the same breed continuous to love, beauty and hate oppression, to believe in spiritual values and the mind’s affinities ...’ (MacDiarmid, 1974 : 15).

South Africa has a variety of literatures which correlate with the variety of language groups within its borders: Twelve peoples and nine languages apart from the Afrikaans and English language cultures. Afrikaans literature and English literature are created by authors from different ancestries. Not only the true English-speaking person in South Africa but people from all creeds in South Africa write in English. In this respect there is an endeavour to reach the widest possible audience for commercial and ideological reasons, also because it is the language (the *lingua franca*) many people are taught in.

With so many literatures, oral and written, one would think that those literatures created within a relative geographic and constitutional unity should exercise a considerable influence on one another. This is actually not the case, when one looks at parallel themes or motifs. One subject, though, which towers above all others is the subject of *human relations*. Before I elaborate on this I would like to point out that one could in a way utilize the polysystem theory of I. Even-Zohar (1979:288) by which one could distinguish several divisions within the South African context dominated and organized by a particular national situation. One could distinguish several categories.

Every one of these following categories has its own peculiarities :

3.1 The Afrikaans-language literature mainly created by White authors though not all of them white because coloured people are writing in English as well. The Afrikaans novel belongs to this system.

3.2 The English-language literature, mainly created by White authors which of course ties in with the mainstream of English literature (English *and* American).

3.3 The English literature, mainly written by Black authors strongly connected with the South African English literature mentioned in 4.2. voluntarily (Rive, R. 1977:14).

### 3.4 Literature, written or oral, by Black authors in the 9 other main languages of South Africa.

Dissatisfaction with the social order forms a common theme in the literatures mentioned above, especially after 1960, with one barrier between these systems — that being a language barrier. In connection with the common theme of dissatisfaction with the social order in South Africa a *Time* columnist referred with envy to Nadine Gordimer who has such a rich source to choose her subjects from :

'South Africa ... that outlaw nation on a seething, exotic continent, with a social system based on a fiction of magnificent folly' (*Rapport*, 22/07/84).

Though this view is somewhat exaggerated, one can say that many present novelists in South Africa are, as a result of the current situation in that part of the continent of Africa, "being challenged to confront a society in tension" (*South African Outlook*, Vol. 114, no. 1355).

## 4. SOUTH AFRICAN LITERATURE

Firstly I would like — very briefly — to refer to the

### 4.1 South African English Literature

One could, as already mentioned, in this respect distinguish between two units: English literature written by White authors and English literature written by Black authors. A good example of the first category is Allan Paton's famous novel *Cry the beloved country* (1948), translated into many languages and Nadine Gordimer's *Burger's daughter* (1979). I would like to elaborate briefly on the second category which, ironically, is partly unknown to many people in South Africa and better known by people abroad. This relates particularly to the literature of the sixties which was subjected to censorship with the result that many books were banned. After the Sharpeville uprising many authors who identified themselves with the anti-apartheid movements were forced to leave the country, or did so voluntarily (Rive, R. 1977:14).

This situation has changed. In an interview Richard Rive, head of the department of English of the Hewitt Training College Athlone, Cape Town, points out that Black literature nowadays flourishes, due to the emergence of magazines like *Staffrider* and *The new classic*.

Thematically a change or a kind of development occurred during the fifties and up to the eighties. At first the school of protest poetry or prose (especially short prose) existed, written in English with the idea of having the Whites read it. In the late seventies and eighties the Black artist rather writes about Black identity and Black consciousness, works for the Blacks about the Blacks in order to ascertain their place in the world. These are rather variants of the protest poetry of the fifties, but protest poetry with a much greater impact.

This kind of protest literature has been encouraged, *inter alia*, from inside as well as from outside the country (USA). As an example one can mention the poet Malika Pascal Gwala in his poem "On being human"

'One thought never leaves  
That one is human  
with feelings of love and hate  
with pangs of desertion and embrace  
with inner urge to destroy and create'.

Many of his poems show bitterness against Black people who think of themselves in terms of their being "non-Europeans" and not as people in their own right with their own identity and pride.

He has eloquently pleaded that literature must not only be bound to its own period, but that it should be exalted above its own period and should refer more specifically to the universal existence of mankind.

In this regard André P. Brink states in the introduction to a book of poems entitled *A world of their own* (1976) that the literature of the Fifties and Sixties "was overtly and sometimes movingly involved in the 'South African experience', mainly with socio-political overtones sustained by all the anger and fierce inspiration of *litterature engagée*, but often *limited by the inhibitions and superficialities* and frustrations of a content and a context too narrowly identified with a local habitation and a name".

## **4.2 THE AFRIKAANS NOVEL FROM THE BEGINNING**

Regarding the Afrikaans novel, on which I will concentrate, one must look at the historical social situation of the Afrikaans people, commonly known as descendants of the Boers, well-known to Europe because of their fierce and heroic struggle during the destructive Anglo-Boer War which lasted for three years (from 1899 — 1901). Because of their scorched-earth policy, the British army destroyed farms, cattle were killed or taken and women and children were herded into concentration camps. Those Boers who escaped

death on the battle-field returned to their farms penniless and had to make a living from scratch. The Boer War thus created, at that time, one of the greatest social problems in South Africa, the so-called poor Whites problem. This problem was later on aggravated by the Wall Street Collapse and the succeeding world recession.

From this many related literary themes emanated: One of these was the social problem of urbanization. This theme included some permanent views of the Afrikaner, e.g. his traditional rural and religious ties. If one takes the prestigious Hertzog Literary Prize as a standard of literary evaluation for nearly 40 years from its inception in 1915 to the early sixties, these themes pervasively figured in the prize-winning novels. To some extent literary criticism *and* literary evaluation ran concurrently with a social situation, not uncommon in the "prize-winning business" — the Nobel Prize awards are, I think, often made along the same lines.

Another characteristic of the Afrikaans-speaking people was its strong religious sentiments. This too is manifested in literature, as seen in the works of a Hertzog Prize winner, a professor in Afrikaans literature, D.F. Malherbe, for his books on Biblical themes (1939), books which made an appeal to the religious sentiments of the Afrikaans readers but according to literary norms *never* reached a high standard. Today those novels are simply historical documents.

Afrikaans literature in South Africa before World War II, from the point of view of the implicit author, with some exceptions, "never" revealed racial tension in its intrigue and characters. This conclusion differs from reader to reader, especially when the reader is a coloured or a black reader. Jakes Gerwel (professor of Afrikaans at the University of the Western Cape) has a reading experience or reception of these books which shows, for instance, an explicit dissatisfaction with the representation of coloured people: He states that in the works referred to there is a constant representation of the coloureds as a differentiated social category characterized by abnormal social behaviour patterns, a comical and pathetic deficiency in the expression of imitated cultural patterns, emotional bankruptcy or childishness and in general a fall from the completeness of being a human being. This may be the case, but racial themes were not at all intended to be peripheral, rather than accentuated in these novels.

Though South Africa took part in the hostilities, World War II did not have a great effect on Afrikaans literature as such. In 1942, during the war, the Hertzog Prize was awarded to C.M. van den Heever for his book entitled *Laat vrugte* (*Late fruit*) a novel about the eternal cycle of youth, adult life, age;

about a dictator farmer whose life is in the end fulfilled by his son and his son's children.

#### 4.2.1 The great explosion

The great explosion in the Afrikaans literature and its appreciation came about during the sixties, concurrently with the advent of the Republic of South Africa. This meant to a large part of white South Africans (more than 60% of that group) the emancipation from Great Britain and the restoration of a republic, reminiscent of the old Boer Republics of the turn of the century. This in turn had a profound effect on the nature of the Afrikaans novel and the standard of literary evaluation. No longer were novels used to describe the Afrikaans people in their very limited social and religious and economical conflicts, but their social surroundings in a wider community of people's context came to be portrayed. This resulted in a fierce struggle of conflicting values.

The first object of this struggle was a novel, published in 1962 just after the Sharpeville uprising, entitled *Sewe dae by die Silbersteins* (*Seven days at the Silbersteins*), written by Etienne Leroux, of which Jack Cope (1983: 116) states:

“This book was published soon after Sharpeville and contains a resonance from that time of crisis and insecurity. It made a furore in literary circles and was seen as a great advance in Afrikaans fiction”.

It brought about a complete change in the literary scene in South Africa. One may label this as an era of social realism in South African literary history. One would guess that this system might be part of a greater South African polysystem (op. cit.) and might even form the centre of it. This is especially the case with its content but not its form. Regarding form, the Afrikaans novel of the sixties actually in a way belongs to a Western European polysystem with its centre in France, inspired by Robbe-Grillet, Sartre, Camus. This is due to the fact that many of the Afrikaans avant-garde authors lived and worked and studied in France, familiarizing themselves with the avant-garde literature of that country.

The following trends manifest themselves within the system to which the Afrikaans novel belongs :

- a. There is dissatisfaction with a social order.
- b. The “outsider” becomes quite prominent (i.e. Etienne Leroux's *Een vir*

*Azazel (One for the devil).*

c. Religion as a theme disappears from the literary scene and is often used in a negative way much to the anger of many “unliterary” Afrikaans language readers. Other religions manifest themselves. It is Breyten Breytenbach who for instance introduced Zen Buddhism to Afrikaans literature with the publication of *katastrofes* in 1964 (*Catastrophes*) and many other of his poems.

d. Authors within this system start to experiment with several tools from the literary toolkit, for instance with point of view. Fantasy and surrealism become an important part of the literary system. This applies especially to André Brink who from the beginning experimented with his novel *Lobola vir die lewe (Pledge for life)* of 1962. A climax of experiment within the system of the Afrikaans language is his most recent book *Houd-den-bek* (1983), with its indictment of the establishment by using a historical viewpoint picturing rural life with Afrikaans-speaking farmers with their non-white servants and slaves. Every character receives a turn — in a changing dialogue — to air his view on certain events. The accent is on Black-White relations. Within the scope of the Afrikaans literature language this brings about a new technique — in a wider context however, this is not new. Louis Paul Boon (*Menuet*) and Hugo Claus (*De Metsiers*) used this technique derived from William Faulkner.

e. Figures of speech like irony combined with satire, are used more extensively. It is again Etienne Leroux who fits in perfectly in this aspect of the system with his novel *Magersfontein, o Magersfontein!* One detects a kind of sadistic satire in which the “story” of a heroic Boer battle and victory is transformed into an indictment of the present establishment.

f. The new trends bring about a correlative shift in literary criticism. Panels of judges of the Hertzog Prize have come up to date with the new literary scene. Two years after the publication of *Seven days with the Silbersteins* they justifiably awarded the Hertzog Prize to Etienne Leroux for his then famous novel. This caused a public outcry — suddenly “literary evaluation” became public property. Some people branded the novel as a Communist plot, not recognizing the very noble appeal of the novel, contained in a remark by Henry, one of the main characters who says :

‘The fault lies with us Whites. We must learn to get rid of our old fixed ideas. We must search our own hearts. We must learn to think courageously’.

Authors like Brink, Leroux and Elsa Joubert (*Poppie Nongena*) and others

appear to have a strong vocation to deal with — and this is understandable — the local scene. This intensive engagement with the local scene may have the result that these novels do not attain a fourth dimension and do not become universal manifestations of men in distress, which can be disconnected from the South African scene. The publications of these novels often become “happenings” on the literary front. The present situation in South Africa evokes the creation of political novels which prevent the creation of novels with a great potential for universality, although not intensely engaged with the social problems of South Africa.

Another effect is that the focus of literary criticism of prose in South Africa is forced in the direction of the novels thus engaged. This also happens because these novels are translated into many languages and world opinion is focussed on them not necessarily because of their literary value.

(I confine myself to the Afrikaans novel, which means excluding drama and poetry. I would agree that drama has common denominators with the abovementioned categories, but strangely enough Afrikaans poetry, with exceptions, on the whole does not fit into the system to which the novel belongs, especially with reference to theme. The explanation for this could be that Afrikaans poetry throughout its existence up to now has had a tendency to move away from regionalism to universalism — though, once again there are exceptions.)

Afrikaans poetry can compete on grounds of literary value with poetry of many other literatures. Poetry of quality like the verses of Breyten Breytenbach, N.P. van Wyk Louw and D.J. Opperman will transcend its time.

In conclusion one may well ask whether there is not another kind of prose of literary value in Afrikaans, away from the political scene and theme. One must take into account that the Afrikaans-speaking population is relatively small and a small population can only produce a small literary corpus in which the social novel takes a dominant position.

In general many “famous” modern novels in Afrikaans, due to the pressure of the times, belong to the realm of sociology and for that matter in a way to social realism — *they are that, and therefore cannot be* “real components of world literary process” (1983 : 158).

The focus of literary criticism and literary evaluation tends to follow the lines of the novels thus engaged, resulting in a general viewpoint directed at this kind of literature not necessarily literary but very much socially orientated. Thus evaluation is often based on the external relationship of a



work, without taking into account the intrinsic values. This is to the detriment of the development of a novel which could well be regarded as belonging to the so-called "high literature". From this point of view I have, perforce, to come to the conclusion that the truly great novel in Afrikaans still has to be written.

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