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THE SYSTEM OF THE SOUTH AFRICAN NOVEL ANNO 1981¹

The purpose of this study is the reconstruction of the system of the South African novel during 1981 by means of the comparison of three novels and their reception. The three novels are *Op die rug van die tier* by Anna M. Louw, *A ride on the whirlwind* by Siphon Sepamla and *July's people* by Nadine Gordimer.

In chapter 1 the key concepts of the general systems theory are discussed and a theory of literary systems deduced from the work of literary theorists. The main conclusions are:

1

A literary system is a proposal for arranging diverse literary data into a unified whole. The boundaries of such a system must be drawn beyond the text, since literature as a system is open to its environment via writer and reader. The entities within such a system are further specified in an model of a novel system.

2

A literary system is a hierarchical structure of forms and norms in which certain entities are dominant, but which also changes by way of conversion and automatization. A literary system is not monolithic, but consists of competing strata.

3

Every new work both continues a system and changes it. The state of a literary system can change very quickly. Such changeability does not, however, mean that a system cannot be perceived.

The model of a novel system proposed in chapter 1 focuses on the structure of the code. It proposes a code consisting of three components, viz. a syntactic, a semantic and a pragmatic component. In the syntactic component the relations between chosen syntactic units such as character, time, setting, mood and

¹ The following is an English summary of a doctoral thesis under the title "Die Suid-Afrikaanse romansistiem anno 1981, submitted by H.M. Viljoen. The promotor was prof. T.T. Cloete.

voice are described. The semantic component describes the relations between signs and denotata. Here principally literary historical segmentations of the semantic universe are used. The pragmatic component describes the enthralling effect a novel has on its readers.

This model has been used to describe the main novel systems in South Africa. After that the three novels are analysed and their reception compared with the system descriptions. To avoid interference the analyses have been done independently of the system descriptions.

Chapter 2 surveys literary systems, the drawing of system boundaries and also the origin of literary systems in South Africa. It is postulated that literary systems in South Africa originated by a branching-off from two "mother traditions", viz. the English and the Dutch traditions. In the course of that transition Afrikaans literature as well as the emergent Black literatures underwent a transition from oral to typographical culture. By a survey of the pioneer missions among Blacks and of the First Afrikaans Language Movement it is demonstrated that the same methods have been used and the same objectives set.

From the early literary history of South Africa the following hypotheses are deduced:

1

There exists a common South African system of the novel.

2

The principal systems (or subsystems) are the Afrikaans, the English and the Black system of the novel. (By *Black system* is meant the system of Black writers writing in English. Novel systems in African languages are excluded from this study.)

3

The principal differences between the three systems can be ascribed to different degrees of transition from an oral to a typographical culture. This particularly concerns plot structure, time, the nature and depiction of characters, distance and perspective. These concerns are subsumed under the concept of *interiorization*.

The following pictures of the postulated systems have subsequently been drawn on the basis of existing historical research into South African literature:

The Afrikaans novel system

Syntactically the Afrikaans novel tends towards innovation, experimentation and a marked degree of interiorization. Typically its structure is a re-enactment of the past from some point in the present. The climactic linear plot remains a convention. The dominant character type is the anti-hero, the little man, the outsider.

Semantically the recent novel, particularly in the seventies, tries to capture the "full South African reality" (the racial problem). In the work of the so-called men of the eighties topics like violence, meaninglessness and "erotic materialism" are found. Uniqueness is frequently emphasized.

Pragmatically the old didactic tendency is continued and much effort is expected from the reader, which makes the novel elitistic. Nevertheless the novel still has a function to be critical of society, but also to create meaningful patterns. In the work of the eighties there is to some extent a *rapprochement* between the novel and the general public.

The English novel system

This system is characterized predominantly by realism, but a change towards Fabulation is under way. The semantic component dominates the system. The principal oppositions are good/bad, light/darkness, black/white, which have semantic offshoots like Africa, sex across the colour bar and concepts like freedom, responsibility and power. Paradoxically the realistic writer writes books instead of trying to change the conditions he depicts.

Syntactically certain character stereotypes are used and much attention given to settings. Character is viewed realistically. Landscape is used as an image of spiritual barrenness. The chronological sequence is maintained. Generally heterodiegetic narrators and variable perspective are used.

Pragmatically the function of the novel is mainly to expose poor social conditions, thus inducing in the reader the need to change. Self-knowledge of the reader is an important issue, implying reader

identification. The pragmatic component, however, has a subordinate position in the system.

By increasing interiorization many of the conventions of realism are changing. Past and present of a character blend, distorting the chronology. A sense of fragmentation leads to a fragmented text structure and fragmented characterization. Mental space is explored. The social problematic is to a certain extent replaced by a personal problematic. Much reader effort is expected, in particular as regards identification with the characters. Plot structure deviates from the usual climactic linear type.

The Black novel system

This system shows the typical themes of the African novel (mainly the conflict between the West and Africa). This conflict is enacted in an urban setting and is described in language that distinguishes it from literature in the Black languages and with an emotional intensity that distinguishes it from Afrikaans and South African English literature. It is orientated towards the present and shows few traces of traditional colloquialisms and proverbs. Oral narrative structure still plays a prominent part, however. This includes narrator commentary, a simple plot structure and simplistic characterization. Characterization is, however, more complex than in the African novel in general using more interiorized methods. Female characters are especially important.

The Black novel still has primarily a social function but there are signs of the increasing importance of the individual problems of the writer.

Conclusions on *Op die rug van die tier*

The main semantic oppositions in this novel are spelled out in the exposition. These include opposition like earth/heaven, pious/wicked, funny/serious. Thus the theme of this novel is man's quest for holiness amidst life's banalities.

This quest is embodied in the main character, Wynand Vercuyl. The semantic oppositions are also reflected in the traits of the characters. In Wynand traits like piousness, heavencentredness, and comicality are revealed. He is a complex character, and also the most important embodiment of the motif of the clown in this book. Self-revelation

is the main method of characterization, especially through the dialogues of Wynand with his alter egos and with the pictures on his walls.

Multiple focalization and a polyphony of voices are characteristic of this novel. Not only Wynand but also the other characters, other ideologies and other texts are given voice in this novel. It also shows a predilection for reported speech (dramatization).

The first part is a subsequent narration, but the novel does not end when the present is reached. On that follows a second book. The novel thus in its temporal structure also reaches out to the wonder realizing itself.

Although this is a difficult book, there are many factors that contribute towards its suspense. This includes the strong prospection, the variable mood and the ironic contrasts. The common reader will easily identify with pathetic little Wynand.

The reception of this novel corroborates the dominance of the little man, the anti-hero as character type and of the realistic view of character. The autodiegetic-hypodiegetic polyphony in the novel is seen as an innovation of the system. Semantically the personal problematic of Wynand's quest is more important than the racial issue. Pragmatically there is a strong convention of reader identification. Complexity, mainly the contrast between the simple surface and the complex deeper meaning of this novel, is positively evaluated.

In at least five respects this novel deviates from the system. I have already mentioned the polyphony. Secondly it is not primarily a "remembrance of things past", but in its temporal structure reaches out towards the future. Thirdly religion and occultism are much more predominant than in the system. Fourthly Wynand as outsider does not show any of the meaninglessness of other outsiders in recent Afrikaans novels. And finally the comicality of the book is in marked contrast to the high seriousness of most Afrikaans novels.

Conclusions on *A ride on the whirlwind*

This novel is full of images of unity and integration, but this changes to chaos and disintegration owing to the whirlwind of the title. That is also its theme.

The whirlwind consists of seven cycles of violence and counter-violence, the effect of these being particularly the disruption of cosy groups among the characters. The disintegration of the group of 12 students is particularly important.

There are two opposing groups in the book, viz. the revolutionaries and the police, but there are also a number of intermediaries between these groups. The "empathy centre" of this book is, however, the kind-hearted Sis Ida. Her inner character is revealed more detailedly.

The narrator-focalizer is conspicuous throughout and the narrative distance is great, internal focalization being less important. In this respect there is thus little interiorization.

Although the book is set in historic space and time, reality is fictionalized and telescoped. There is also a transition to subjective time in the end. Duration is mostly that of scenes, linked by indications of time reminiscent of comic books. The chronological sequence of events is maintained. The main settings in the books are interiors dominated by women.

It is likely to be a gripping book, because it treats of things known to a Black public, generates pathos with the suffering of common people and has a strong prospective effect. Western readers will probably recognize the gripping situation of a hero sent on a mission.

The committee of expert's reservations about the book can all be regarded as typical traits of the Black system. This includes a naive style, forced character development, the journalistic theme and episodic structure. From the reception it is also clear that the police are not treated totally unsympathetically; neither does the book allow complete hero-worship of the revolutionaries.

The book shows a greater affinity with the oral tradition than is the current tendency within the Black system. There are also some signs of interiorization. The characterization and the relation to reality are more complex than in the system. The book shows much "philosophical distance" and less emotional intensity than was expected.

Conclusions on *July's people*

The epigraph to this book is an important key to its understanding. Semantically an ironic reversal of middle-class liberal values takes place. Subtle shifts in interpersonal relationships are the main events.

The Smales undergo a sharp process of deterioration in the novel as various Blacks claim credit for years of service. By that the Smales' wrong consciousness is dismantled. The end remains open, even though a psychologic, existentialistic or feministic interpretation of it is possible. In the whole process technological things like the bakkie and the helicopter acquire a magical function.

Characterization remains rather flat, an important technique being the description of characters' possessions. Outwardly Maureen is degraded most; July however, regains an identity. Intimate conversation is also an important technique of characterization.

The norm for this novel is internal focalization through Maureen, although variations do occur. The transition from the perspective of the narrator-focalizer to that of Maureen are not marked, thus causing an illusion of complete interiorization.

The novel is set in an hypothetical future, but is narrated subsequently. In the final chapter, however, simultaneous narration and the present tense are used, suggesting the beginning of something new. The first narrative is furthermore narrated singulatively, against a background of iterative narration of the past. In the same way scenes from the present are juxtaposed to scenes from the past.

The book seems to have a cautionary function for white middle-class readers. Strong suspense building factors are the uncertainties, the contrasts and the prospective effect on the book. Although a complex novel readers seem to be able to identify with it.

From its reception it is clear that the racial problem still is the system's dominant theme, although some wider implications are noticed. Although the conventions of realism are still strong, a movement away from it is accepted. There are signs of marked interiorization, like much internal focalization and the use of mental

space. Pragmatically much is expected from the reader. Nevertheless the tendency still is to demand a social function of a novel. Identification with the characters still seems to be a major requirement for a novel's success.

The reversal of the polarity between the West and Africa is seen clearest in the male characters. Bam is gradually emasculated, while July regains his dignity. Bam represents the "great white hunter". His hunting is in view of the system an ironic reverse of the traditional rites of initiation. Still, individual problems are less important in this novel than has been postulated for the system.

General Conclusions

In general the hypothesis has been corroborated that the differences between the three systems come down to differences in interiorization and to different degrees of transition between an oral and a typographical culture. Mukařovský's view that literary change is a matter of both continuity and deviation also seems to be corroborated. The marked syntactic similarities between the Afrikaans and the English system are conspicuous, although the English system still is strongly realistic and the Afrikaans system still tends towards experimentation.

The major difference between the three systems is a difference in ideological focalization: every system shows its own ideological orientation or viewpoint. The biggest difference between the Afrikaans and English system lies in the preponderance of the racial problem in the English novel. In that respect it resembles the Black system. In the light of the many differences the hypothesis of one common system of the South African novel cannot be upheld. It seems justified, however, to maintain the view of the three systems as separate but interacting wholes. Therefore much more attention should be given to comparative literature in South Africa. Students of literature should also study the major South African literary systems before they can be regarded as properly trained. Such training is of special importance for the evaluation of the South African novel.

It is clear from this study that the systems approach offers many advantages in the study of literature. It poses new questions and opens up new fields for research. A most important benefit is the synthesis of diverse literary data into a unified whole it makes

possible - of great importance for literature because it has become, through excessive attention to the analysis of single works, a totally fragmented field. The greatest benefit deriving from the systems approach is the rendering describable of the meaning of a particular work for a specific audience at a specific point in time in a fairly accurate way.

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