

Introduction: Special Issue

Aspects of South African Literary Studies

Part I

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This is the first of two double-volume special issues devoted to *Aspects of South African Literary Studies*. Conceived neither thematically nor with any specific theoretical focus, its aim, rather is to gather current essays by leading researchers in the field in a journal with a theoretical orientation which is open to general literary studies. This symptomatic approach is intentional. It seeks to open the field to practices neither constrained by nor preoccupied with this or that theory without in any way placing theoretically informed approaches under erasure.

This approach is mindful of the fact that the field of South African Literary Studies, as my opening essay indicates, has had considerable difficulties with regard to its demarcation as an object of study. This of course is a theoretical problem. Hence an attempt is made to move behind theoretical disputes in order to delineate language-based typologies for how this object has been conceived in the past and how it may be defined today for scholarly purposes. What is proposed is a multilingual South African definition as a way of overcoming the difficulties inherent in other conceptualisations discussed in detail.

Two pertinent questions lurk behind this conceptualisation: they are that of national literature and what might be the most appropriate method or methods for approaching this multilingual field of study. The question of a national literature is dealt with in the second double volume to follow this one. Methodological questions require separate treatment and will receive attention in a separate volume devoted to these matters. This is planned for the near future.

For the rest, the volume consists of a variety of essays reflecting on work now being done by a selection of the scholars in the field. Michael Titlestad and Mike Kissack's essay "The Foot Does Not Sniff: Imagining the Post-apartheid Intellectual" deals with the role of literary institutions during the apartheid past and new possibilities for its future in a democratic dispensation characterised by cultural heterogeneity. They draw on postcolonial theory to propose what they call a postdialectical secular mode of interpretation and critique as a way through which the postapartheid literary scholar and intellectual could engage with the past and the present in terms other than the

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“politics of blame”. Their essay, through a reading of Zakes Mda’s *The Heart of Redness*, establishes interconnections between contemporary fiction in English and early Xhosa writing, which, due to a history of division, has received scant attention in the past. Work in the opposite direction from English and Afrikaans to the African languages is just as necessary.

Related to this, is Mike Marais’s reading of the textualisation of race in three postapartheid novels in English and its inscription in culture. Where Titlestad and Kissack seek to overcome the paralysis induced by the accusatory politics concerning the past, Marais examines whether the construction of a nonracial culture is at all possible and how racialism may be counterveiled. The critique of race which is central to postcolonial literatures has of course been at the heart of the brand of colonialism which prevailed for so long in South Africa and is indelibly inscribed in all the literatures. His reading establishes that these novels conclude that the transcendence of “race” through a metaphysics of nonracialism is impossible but that acknowledgement of local cultures and meaning structures combined with an ethic of tolerance provide discursive possibilities to resist racialism.

From the problem of racial prejudice which structured the processes of human othering Africans close to, if not part of the realm of animals, Wendy Woodward’s “Postcolonial Ecologies and the Gaze of Animals: Reading Some Contemporary Southern African Narrative” looks at the process of othering animals in culture and Derrida’s designation of animals as “the absolute others”. As Marais has found with regard to race, Woodward finds in fictional narratives forms of local knowledge which construct relations between humans and animals.

The essays of Marita Wenzel and Harry Sewlall are both comparative readings of novels by Zakes Mda. Sewlall reads Zakes Mda’s *The Heart of Redness* and Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* for how they disrupt forms of subjectivity produced by colonialism. Wenzel, on the other hand, examines the role of space in the conceptual and physical localisation of human beings as in and of the world and how colonialism disrupts this. In Christina Lamb’s *The Africa House* and Mda’s *Ways of Dying*, through a comparative reading, she excavates the cultural dimensions of space as textualised in the narrative and the alternatives they offer.

Leon de Kock’s essay on the translation of Marlene van Niekerk’s *Triomf* deals with the rights and claims of authors, translators and readers. Based on his practical experiences as the English translator of the Afrikaans novel, the essay is concerned with the commerce between literatures affected by what Bassnett (1993: 138) considers one of the most important recent developments in comparative literature by virtue of the fact that contemporary translation theory views translation not as a secondary or derivative activity but as a form of primary literary creativity which places literary texts in different languages

in intricate proximity and distance to each other, thus providing new materials for study.

These essays solicited from researchers working in the field of South African Literary Studies and other fields, notwithstanding all their marked differences, display striking interrelatedness. While this is neither imposed nor designed, they cover questions concerned with the ethics of knowledge and power and how these, at a time of local and global shifts, are as much undergoing changes as well as responding to change in a field that is being reconfigured through critical practices which draw on any number of theories and many texts. These practices are all marked by postcolonial gestures in the way in which they interrogate and frequently reject the ideological imperatives and the limits this places on aesthetic forms and content imposed by literary institutions founded on a political order that has collapsed. They are thus concerned with how contemporary South African writing, not as Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin (1999: 6) suggest abrogates what was once “the constraining power and the appropriation of language and distinctive usage” of any nationalist discourse but for the recovery of what has been under erasure. At the same time they converge on the works of some authors. Zakes Mda’s and J.M. Coetzee’s fiction feature in several of the essays. Further, they produce readings which establish relations between different texts from South African literatures as well as relations with texts from literatures elsewhere. They are concerned with current writings and their relationships to prior writings. The comparative and interdisciplinary thrusts of these essays, it seems, is appropriate for the multilingual, heterogeneous and unstable object of this field, designated here as South African Literary Studies.

References

- Ashcroft, B., Griffiths, G. & Tiffin, H.
1999 *Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*. London & New York: Routledge.
- Bassnett, S.
1993 *Comparative Literature: A Critical Introduction*. Oxford: Blackwell.