

Nonidentity and Reciprocity in Conceptualising South African Literary Studies

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In his essay, "The Task of the Translator", first published as the preface to his translations of Baudelaire's poetry, from French into German, Walter Benjamin stresses what he calls the translatability of all literary works. This is possible Benjamin (1992: 73) claims, due to the basic "reciprocal relationship between languages". He likens this reciprocity to "a kinship of languages" marked by a "distinctive convergence". Writing from a European linguistic context, he states: "Languages are not strangers to one another, but are a priori and apart from all historical relationships, interrelated in what they want to say". All languages, in other words, are vehicles for a range of common articulations.

In what seems like a countermove, he stresses the specificity of languages. This uniqueness, according to him, marks the limits of translation and announces the untranslatable aspect of language as manifested in the phenomenon of nonequivalence at all linguistic levels: lexical denotation and connotation, semantic, syntactic and contextual. Because languages are distinct, they are marked by difference so that according to Benjamin (1973: 74) it stands to reason that "kinship does not necessarily stand for likeness". This nonidentity, understood in the sense formulated by Heidegger (1960: 15) with regard to identity, should not be viewed as sameness, expressed as $A=A$, or self-coincidence or abstract equality, phrased as "the jejune emptiness of what, in the absence of internal relations, remains in persisting monotony" but is also applicable to literary works. In Saussurian parlance, this nonidentity is not something fixed or essential but a nonpositive, relational phenomenon. To be sure, for Benjamin, nonidentity, likewise, implies reciprocity and the other way round.

What do these two concepts, nonidentity and reciprocity, pertaining to an essay on translation, have to do with South African literary studies? On the face of it, apart from translation practices and studies relevant to a multilingual field, very little if not nothing. Such a conclusion, of course, issues from the face of matters: the face here signifying the surface of things. I enlist these two concepts because they are handy here in what is an attempt to chart the ways in which the field of South African literary studies has been conceptualised over time.

1

South African literary studies, which this special issue of *JLS* and another to follow are devoted to, has been beset by conceptual exigencies since the beginning of the twentieth century when reference to South African literature first came into circulation. These difficulties, while arising from many interrelated factors, can largely be attributed to the changing ideological perspectives which shaped successive political, cultural, linguistic orders and their inscription in academic practices for almost a century. This produced a society with a cultural order of discursive divisions, fragmentations, shifts and instabilities flowing from the linguistic and literary divisions which developed in the wake of the ethnic division of South Africa well before but especially after 1948. This either precluded an inclusive conceptualisation or marginalised such conceptualisation for much of the century.

In addition, the sway of poststructuralist theory, with its suspicion of grand conceptualisations during the last quarter of the twentieth century, also played a role in barring the approach to the object. With its emphasis on heterogeneity and difference and a rejection of anything suggesting homogenisation, the particularities of the various South African literatures were regarded as mutually exclusive systems beyond the capture of theoretical systematisation.

Independently and in combination, these factors checked attempts at arriving at even an operational definition which admitted to the object of South African literary studies not as the sum of its parts but as a field where both the reciprocity between languages and their nonidentity could be approached.

Contesting this, some scholars, as we shall see, accentuated the opposite. While diagnosing the tendency to treat South African literatures as separate entities as the consequence of the various ideologies of white supremacy and segregation, they posted an interrelatedness between the languages and the literatures. Their position was grounded, if seldom fully theorised, nevertheless it did in a sense of affinities between the literatures and languages in South Africa.

Not surprisingly, then, scholarly engagements with the field have been, and still are, charged with vehement disagreement. This is evident in three recent publications dealing with literary historiography and the literatures of South Africa. In *Rethinking South African Literary History* (Smit, Van Wyk & Wade 1996), a compilation of the proceedings of a conference held by the Centre for the Study of Southern African Literature and Languages, based at what was then still known as the University of Durban Westville, the reader is struck by the divergences between the contributors, each writing from specific linguistic and literary enclaves. The main lines of difference are traceable as a divide between those who seek to construct a multilingual object inclusive of all the literatures of South Africa and those who insist on the distinctiveness of each

of the many literatures in South Africa.

If no conceptual clarification, let alone consensus, was reached at the conference, a subsequent publication, this time a special issue of the *Journal of South African Literary Studies*, edited by Helize van Vuuren (1994: 273), weary of what by then seemed like insurmountable difficulties, all but abandons attempts to conceptualise the field save for underscoring the fact that from a theoretical point of view thrust is away from the totalising impulse, to plead for “a practical need for a comparative, integrated literary history of South Africa, even if only as a sourcebook for students and researchers”. These barriers and differences culminated in the publication of Michael Chapman’s *Southern African Literatures* (1996) and can be read in contributions made to a panel discussion hosted by the subfaculty of languages at the University of South Africa and published in the *Journal of Literary Studies* (1997).

Given this conceptual impasse, I propose to deal here with how political power as manifested in the formation of the state in South Africa over a century, directly and discursively shaped conceptions put forward at different times with regard to what the field South African literary studies ought to be. By means of a reading which retreats from the immediate field of contestation, a descriptively oriented taxonomy of the various definitions of South African literature put forward at different times, is presented with attention to how this coincides with specific conceptions of language and literature.

At a glance, the delineation of South African literary studies seems unproblematic. However, once one approaches the field and examines conceptualisations of the field formulated by scholars, this supposition dissipates quickly. As we shall see, it has never been self-evident not even at the time when the first attempts were made to delineate the field.

Any assumption of self-evidence flounders in the face of the perennial question: what is meant by the term “literature” within a context with widely practised orature and other nonfictional forms of writing which deviate from the formalist notions of the traditional literary genres on which the Western canon is founded. It stumbles on the singular form of the nomenclature in a context with several languages and literatures: the lumping together in a unitary object of distinct literatures is viewed as conceptual violence. And further, what about the literatures in a language such as English, not indigenous to South Africa? And as if this is not all, what about languages like Setswana, isiNdebele and Siswati, which are also spoken beyond the boundaries of South Africa? Then there is Afrikaans, which developed from seventeenth-century Dutch, spoken mainly in South Africa and in Namibia.

Just as pertinent is the case of Gujarati, Tamil, Sanskrit, and Hebrew, which are respectively, Indic, Dravidian, and Semitic languages, with speech communities in South Africa and with extensive literary traditions, but with origins of these in Asia and the Middle-East. If the communities who speak these

languages are South African, why are their languages considered Asian? And those of the Germans, French, Italian and Portuguese, living in South Africa, as European? On what basis, if any, can these languages and literatures then be considered South African? On what basis, if any, should they be excluded from the field of South African literary studies? If they are included, does this, by analogy, mean that the literature of the Turkish community living in France is French literature, or the literature of the Tamil community in England is part of English literary studies? Should the term South African literature then not be restricted to the indigenous languages? And if so, what about the differences between these languages? Does the term South African literatures force them into a homogenous category which ignores their linguistic and cultural traditions and distinct identities?

Evidently, the conceptualisation, hypothetically posited or put forward in practice, which reads: "South African literatures are the literatures of all the languages spoken in South Africa" is riddled with problems. On the other hand, even if the conceptualisation of the field of South African literary studies is based on the principle that every literature in a language spoken within the borders of South Africa is a South African literature and therefore integral to the field of South African literary studies, were to be adopted, this would still require justification. It cannot simply be stated and expected to be accepted. At the minimum, any delineation would have to negotiate the following:

- (1) South Africa is a multilingual society with a diversity of languages and literatures. The Constitution of 1996 accords official status to eleven languages and identifies a number of other significant speech communities speaking both indigenous and foreign languages. Unlike some monolingual societies, the concept of a South African literature, in the single sense of the term, cannot be identified with any particular language.
- (2) The restriction of the object of South African literary studies to the eleven official languages includes English but excludes several indigenous and many other foreign languages.
- (3) The geographical boundaries of South Africa have been relatively unstable. Before 1910, and later with the advent of the Republic of South Africa in 1960, the geographical area which now constitutes South Africa either did not exist or was fragmented and subject to frequent change. This makes it difficult to relate the languages and literatures to a continuous and unified geopolitical territory over time.
- (4) The languages spoken within the borders of South Africa are not confined to the boundaries laid down in 1910 when the Union of South

Africa was formed nor to those specified by the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa of 1996.

- (5) The histories of social, cultural and linguistic differences between the various indigenous communities on the one hand and the differentiations made between the white settler communities of European descent and the African indigenous population on the other, brought about many divisions. These served as barriers against the development of an integrated conception of the various literatures in South Africa.
- (6) The history of colonialism in South Africa implies that the indigenous languages and literatures responded to European languages and literatures while the European languages spoken in South Africa have been subject to indigenous languages and literatures. This interaction, however asymmetrical, renders any postulation of hermetic cordon between indigenous and foreign literatures untenable.

These factors have ensured that definitions of what might constitute the object of South African Literary Studies have diverged over the last hundred years. What follows is an attempt to broadly map these definitions within the context of the multilingual fact of South Africa.

2

A review of the literature on this field demonstrates, if only from the perspective of power as represented by the state and the official language policies which flowed from this, how the factors outlined above shaped the ways in which the literatures of South Africa have been conceptualised and defined. Systematised, these definitions can be grouped into a taxonomy of three main types. They are the *monolingual*, *bilingual* and *multilingual* definitions.

In this regard Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin (1991: 39) identify three types of colonial and postcolonial societies, labelling them *monoglossic*, *diglossic* and *polyglossic*. These three types of societies, it might seem, correspond to the three definitions in the taxonomy proposed above. However, while there is an important connection between these two sets of terms, there is no homology. Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin's terms, to begin with, do not necessarily reflect linguistic demographics. Without a nod, they apply the discursive vocabulary of Bakhtin to refer to the number of languages which the populations in colonial and postcolonial societies either agreed to speak or were compelled to adopt. A closer look at these terms illuminates this.

In the taxonomy of Ashcroft et al. “monoglossic groups” are “single-language societies using English as a native tongue, which corresponds generally to the settled colonies” (Ashcroft et al. 1991: 39). Examples are the United States, Australia and New Zealand. “Diglossic societies”, they write, “are those in which bilingualism has become the enduring societal arrangement” (p. 39). India with English and Gujarati, and Canada with English and French are cited as examples.

“Polyglossic societies”, according to them, “occur principally in the Caribbean, where a multitude of dialects interweave to form a generally comprehensible continuum” (p. 39). It should be clear that South Africa, despite a century of official bilingualism and the existence of urban forms of polyglossia such as “flaaitaal”, “tsotsitaal” or “kaaps”, is not a monoglossic, diglossic or polyglossic society: it is a multilingual formation.

Hence, I retain the descriptive terms *monolingual*, *bilingual* and *multilingual* for the various definitions proposed for the object of South African literary studies over time. The discursive imperatives, that is, the social and political agendas which accrue to this taxonomy are broached by way of historical explication. They are introduced, not in numerical succession but in temporal sequence.

3

The bilingual definition considers the literatures in Afrikaans and English, if not as the object of South African literary studies, because at the time this was put forward such a field could hardly be said to have existed then as the literatures of what became South Africa in 1910. The main proponents of this definition are Purves (1910), Besselaar (1914) and Nathan (1925). With different accentuations, they all viewed English, and what was then referred to as Dutch-Afrikaans, as the two main, if not only literatures of South Africa. Their definitions, proposed in the first quarter of the twentieth century, are embedded in the political and social discourse of the moment.

Bilingual definitions were closely associated with the early concept of a “South African Literature”. This concept, of course, is related to the concept of a South African national literature. While active and unavoidable in any discussion aimed at crystallising the object of South African literary studies, it is here acknowledged but deferred to be treated in a separate essay dealing with the concept of a national literature.

Bilingual definitions, then, gained prominence in local literary discourse in the historical context of the formation of the Union of South Africa. Established in 1910, the Union of South Africa was a white exclusive government which united English and Dutch-Afrikaans populations in a single state which

covered the territory which today constitutes South Africa. It was constructed after the Anglo-Boer War of 1899-1902 by consolidating the British-ruled colonies of the Cape and Natal with the Republics of the Orange Free State and the Transvaal, ruled by Dutch-Afrikaans settlers, into a single entity. The Union excluded the indigenous peoples and other population groups, classified as non-European, from direct representation in its institutions.

The bilingual definition of South African literatures issued from this bi-ethnic framework of the power-sharing settlement after the Anglo-Boer War. It posited affinities and difference between the English and what was then still an embryonic Afrikaans literature on the basis of their common European heritage. It differentiated these literatures from African literature on the basis of *écriture* to proclaim a radical nonidentity between these literatures and those with European lineages. Read back, the conceptualisation, while technological in nature, issued from the construction of political power at the time in white supremacist terms.

Given, as Ashcroft et al. (1991: 39) assert, the centrality of language as a medium for the expression and exercise of power in colonial societies, the correlation of the bilingual policy with the ethnic composition of the Union manifests this. This ethnolinguistic correlation and white exclusive power, troubled as it might have been by internal contestations, would come to haunt South African literary studies for much of the twentieth century.

The Union of South Africa, as is well known, precipitated a counter-movement of African nationalism. This was in the form of the South African Native Convention, established in 1912. After the defeats in protracted wars against British imperialism in the Cape and Natal and, in the north, against Afrikaner settlement, it sought to unite all South Africans and achieve representation in an inclusive nonracial state based on equality. The achievement of this object in 1994, we shall see has far-reaching consequences for language policies of South Africa.

But what do the early bilingual definitions consist of? Purves (1910: 21), writing in the historic edition of *The Cape Times* commemorating the formation of the Union of South Africa, asserted that “South Africa cannot be said to have developed a literary consciousness”. He presumably meant that literature in South Africa had no awareness of itself as a distinct entity from European literatures.

The literatures of South Africa, according to him, were nevertheless made up of works written in English and Dutch-Afrikaans by authors born in South Africa, as well as those not born or living in South Africa, but whose works have a South African content. Purves (1910: 23) writes, “it is not possible to distinguish between the *uitlander* and the native born”. Any such distinction, he argues, when used to disqualify the writings of those not born in South Africa, would serve only to deprive South African literature of some of its best

works. While he recognises that the oral literature in the African languages constitutes “the only true indigenous literature” of South Africa, he attributes only historical and ethnographic significance to it. Such literature, in his estimation, represents no more than exemplary “instances of the primitive workings of the inventive fancy, allied to the shrewd criticism of life”. It could at most provide subject matter and themes for Dutch-Afrikaans and English literatures in South Africa.

Besselaar, in an article published in the *Natal Mercury* in 1912, and in his study *Zuid-Afrika in de letterkunde* (1914), distinguishes between, on the one hand, literature in Portuguese, French, German and Swedish in which South Africa is the subject matter, and, on the other hand, English and Dutch literature of a similar kind. He juxtaposes this to what he calls “South African Literature in Afrikaans and English”. In what appears to be an oblique rebuttal of Purves’s assertion that South Africa had not quite yet developed a distinctive literary identity, Besselaar identified Afrikaans literature as the harbinger of a distinctively South African literature. According to him, Afrikaans is a distinctive literature produced in a language fashioned in South Africa by a people with a growing sense of a separate identity derived from an intimate relationship with the physical geography of the country. Like Purves, he asks whether the indigenous peoples had literatures before the arrival of the Europeans. He finds that while the indigenous people display a “natuurlijke aanleg tot zingen, tot vertellen en verdichten ... tog van een eigen letterkunde bij hen weinig sporen aanwijsbaar” [while the natives display a “natural talent for singing, for storytelling and poetry ... of an own literature there are hardly any traces.”] (Besselaar 1914: 183).

He disqualifies indigenous literature in oral, transcribed and translated forms and claims that the indigenous peoples, who have no culture or civilisation, have value only insofar as they contributed to a desire by Afrikaans literature to be separated and distinguished from it. He writes (1914: 184): “Van een eigen beskawing der naturellen voor de komst van der Europeanen zijn geen aan-wijzingen”. [“Of an own civilisation of the natives before the arrival of the Europeans, there are no signs.”]

Manfred Nathan, in his *South African Literature* (1925), the first South African book-length study in English, follows Purves. He acknowledges Besselaar’s work and responds to it. In delineating the scope of his subject, Nathan (1925: 11) writes: “Although there is a large and increasing literature which deals with South Africa and South African subjects, very much of it has been produced outside the borders of the country and cannot be truly defined as South African”. Literature with South Africa as a subject, or set within the subcontinent, he argues, “is not South African any more than the works of Herodotus can be said to be Egyptian or Persian”. Such literature belongs to the language and country of the author.

He however qualifies this statement:

At the same time it is not possible to say that South African literature is confined entirely to writers who were born in South Africa. On the one hand, this would unduly limit the scope of the subject; on the other, the mere accident of birth might class an author South African, although he spent the remainder of his life in another country and devoted himself to subjects which had no connection whatever with the land of his birth.

(Nathan 1925: 11)

By specifying the birth of the author as a guarantee for classifying the work as South African, the definition of the object of South African literary studies, he proposes it as follows: “It is sufficient for us to consider as South African literature that which is *in or of South Africa*” (Nathan 1925: 11). Accordingly, his survey includes writers who were born and resided in South Africa or those who have lived in South Africa for some length of time. His survey, however, is limited to English and Afrikaans literature written by whites.

It is important to reiterate that these bilingual conceptualisations refer to the African languages but excluded them from the field of South African literature, by virtue of the conviction that no literature (or nothing of literary significance) existed in these languages. The early bilingual definitions then are basically colonial. The practices of excluding indigenous literatures as Nathan does, or disparaging it as Besselaar does, are products of a colonial discourse which places the literatures and cultures of the colonial settlers at the centre of their definitions.

4

The monolingual definition posits that the various literatures in South Africa are distinct entities. Consequently, the only objects provided for are the individual and separate literatures in each language. Such a definition makes no provision for an object of South African literary studies at all. It defines each literature as confined to its language and refuses to locate it in a larger set of languages. Thus, we will have South African English literary studies, Afrikaans literary studies, Xhosa literary studies, Zulu literary studies, Sesotho literary studies, and so forth. The main proponents of the monolingual definition emerged in Afrikaans and later in English, with some parallels in the African languages. This definition is a correlative of the segregationist ideology of ethnic nationalism better known as apartheid.

I should point out that my intent is not to discredit or reject monolingual approaches to literature. Rather, it is to foreground how, in a multilingual

society like South Africa, the monolingual definition, at a specific time, functioned in a particular literary discourse linked to a political ideology. It served to block conceptualisations which sought to cluster the South African literatures across linguistic and ethnic lines.

Monolingual definitions, predictably, followed in the wake of renewed quests for Afrikaner self-determination. The nascent Afrikaner nationalism goes back to the First Language Movement launched in 1875. Although interrupted by defeat in the Anglo-Boer War and the formation of the Union, it was by no means extinguished. Taking up arms against Britain was seen as waging a war of liberation and a struggle for Afrikaner freedom. With the failure of this struggle, the Second Language Movement was launched in 1905 and resulted in the recognition of Afrikaans as an official language alongside English. This was part of a strategy whereby constitutional means were used to advance the cause of Afrikaner nationalism and self-determination during the twentieth century. In 1948, with the rise to power of the National Party and the institutionalisation of apartheid, this objective was achieved.

The accentuation of ethnic separation which followed ensured that the bilingual definition of South African literatures was discarded in favour of monolingual conceptions. This was so even though the South African state, under apartheid, remained bilingual in its recognition of Afrikaans and English as the official languages. The emphasis now, however, fell on the separateness of Afrikaans literature from English and from the African languages. Afrikaans consequently produced a series of histories focusing exclusively on the literature of this language.

This set a pattern which was for the African languages and English. It spawned a tradition which insisted on the separateness of the various literatures, emphasising the differences between them and spurning any suggestions of affinities and commonalities between Afrikaans and English literatures on the one hand and literatures in the African languages on the other. Gerrit Dekker's *Afrikaanse literatuurgeskiedenis* (1935) is the proto-ethno-nationalist and monolingual approach. It was followed by Antonissen's *Die Afrikaanse letterkunde van aanvang tot hede* (1955) and culminated in John Kannemeyer's *Geskiedenis van die Afrikaanse literatuur* (1978, 1983). In English, Van Wyk Smith's *Grounds of Contest: A Survey of South African English Literature* (1990) is an example. A.C. Jordan's *Towards an African Literature: The Emergence of Literary Form in Xhosa* (1973) of collected essays which appeared between 1957 and 1960 in the journal *Africa South*, represents this in the African languages.

The central postulate of the monolingual definition is the contention that the various South African literatures developed in total isolation from each other. In this regard Malvern Van Wyk Smith (1994: 74-75) claims that the various South African literatures have nothing in common since there "is hardly any

evidence of Afrikaans-English intertextuality, let alone African-Western, or even, amazingly, of that influence of pre-literate orality on South African black writing that is so often mentioned as if totally self-evident”.

In this definition, the various South African literatures are not only separated from one another, but black South African writing in all the languages is separated from its own preliterate traditions. It makes no provision whatsoever for even the most tenuous interaction between the various South African languages and literatures. Here, the a priori affinity between languages which Benjamin posits, is ruled out. This by definition, excludes the conceptualisation of an inclusive concept of South African literatures as a possible object of study. It precludes all comparative studies investigating similarities between literatures. All it permits, without really providing any theoretical justification for it theoretically, is only for the radical separateness of and differences between the South African literatures. Even the affinities posited by the bilingual definitions are thus ruled out.

As an approach to the literatures of South Africa, the monolingual definition, conceived in Van Wyk Smith’s vocabulary, in a startling fashion, resembles the segregationist ideologies of apartheid. This plainly, is the crude and uncritically unmediated literary transcription of the injunctions of the ethnic-national discourse on which apartheid was founded. So extreme is its emphasis on nonidentity and difference that it is unable to come to terms with the elementary fact of the entangled and fraught linguistic and literary histories of Afrikaans and English. At the same time, it is oblivious of the way in which both English and Afrikaans, impinged on and deeply penetrated the African languages and literatures as any study of the history of literacy in South Africa would be unable to avoid, let alone deny. Furthermore, its conception of the African literatures harks back to the ignorance with regard to literature in the African languages as manifested in the writings of the early proponents of the bilingual conception.

5

Multilingual definitions address the linguistic diversity of South Africa. They consist of two types: regional multilingual African languages definitions which include the African languages of southern Africa and multilingual regional definitions which include the literatures in the African languages as well as the literatures in Afrikaans and English. Both types are regional insofar as they include the literatures of South Africa and southern Africa. They differ with regard to what they consider “African”.

The African Languages Regional conception, among others, include Albert Gerard’s (1971) *Four African Literatures: Xhosa, Sotho, Zulu, Amharic* and

D.B. Ntuli and C.F. Swanepoel's (1993) *Southern African Literature in African Languages: A Concise Historical Perspective*. These two studies depart from the monolingual and the bilingual approaches. In the case of Ntuli and Swanepoel, southern African literatures are grouped together by virtue of their shared history as belonging to various families of the Bantu languages of southern Africa. They also have shared precolonial and colonial histories. In countries like Zimbabwe, Botswana, Swaziland and Lesotho, which became independent before South Africa, they also share related but not identical postcolonial histories. Where the bilingual definitions posited affinities and differences between English and Afrikaans and the monolingual conceptions stressed the nonidentity of all the literatures of South Africa, the African languages regional conceptions emphasise the affinities and differences of the African languages and literatures. They also record the roles of English and Afrikaans as well as other non-African languages and literatures in the transition of the African languages and literatures from orality to writing, thereby implicitly positing a relationship. This relationship is, however, not elaborated. Why?

This can be explained by the fact that while conceptions of the field, based on regional African languages, are antithetical to the monolingual and segregationist views outlined above, they however reside in the suppositions of the bilingual conceptions which set Afrikaans and English literatures apart from African literatures. It therefore submits to the divide constructed between colonial and native literatures established in the political and cultural order of the Union of South Africa which is the foundation of the later apartheid state. In this, it follows the logic of colonialism which, as Fanon (1990) perceived, society splits the peoples of the colony in two with the settler community set apart from the natives.

The Regional African Languages approach, however, has a longer history than the studies of Gerard (1971), Ntuli and Swanepoel (1993). It goes back to the work of D.D.T. Jabavu's *Bantu Literatures: Classification and Reviews*, published in 1921, which deals with Southern Sotho, Zulu and Tswana literature, and C.M. Doke's report "A Preliminary Investigation into the State of the Native Languages of South Africa as to Research and the Development of Literature" (1933). This earlier treatment of the African literatures as separate from Afrikaans and English is rooted in the European/African division which structures colonial discourse in South Africa and which, as we saw, was institutionalised by the Union of South Africa and later modified and pressed into service by apartheid by upholding official bilingualism, necessary for preserving white power, when in fact the cultural and linguistic agenda under apartheid was directed towards radical segregation which, if carried to its logical conclusions, would result in a society divided along linguistic and ethnic lines. Evidently they also are attempts to refute the assertions made by

Purves, Besselaar and others that the African languages have no literatures.

In both Gerard (1971) and Ntuli and Swanepoel (1993) a critical awareness that the separation of the African languages from Afrikaans and English is the product of a segregationist discourse, is articulated. In the introduction to their study, Ntuli and Swanepoel (1993: 4) refer to statements by Gerard, who as a comparatist, subscribes to the view that all literatures, for all their distinctive qualities are interconnected. They suggest that the “political developments which reversed the attitudes of separateness and exclusivity to one directed towards national unity and inclusiveness” will eventually render all segregationist approaches anachronistic. In this sense, the studies flowing from the regional multilingual African languages definitions, while producing studies restricted to the literatures in the African languages, by virtue of their multilingual orientation alone, gesture towards inclusive multilingual regional conceptions where a confrontation with their affinities and difference would become unavoidable.

Regional multilingual definitions are put forward in Stephen Gray’s *Southern African Literature: An Introduction* (1997) and Michael Chapman’s *Southern African Literatures* (1996). Gray posits a multilingual definition which does not limit South African literature to the Republic of South Africa, but extends it to include the literatures of southern Africa. His study unfortunately is limited to South African literature in English. Gray (1979: 2) justifies this thus: “Calling a body of work ‘literature’ implies that it has a distinctiveness, so that it might be isolated from other literatures for independent scrutiny, and is assumed to have certain internal cross-references which gives it unique cohesion”. This is an echo from Purves and Besselaar. Nevertheless, based on criteria of “distinctiveness”, “independence” and “internal cohesion”, Gray like his predecessors, finds South African literature wanting. “But the first problem in defining South African literature”, he writes,

is that South Africa cannot be said at present to have a very precise sense of distinctiveness with regard to its literature in English. One reason for this is that the literary works deriving from an English cultural world in South Africa are not and never have been part of a closed system. The cultural history of South Africa has always been one of a multi-lingual composite, within which English South African culture is merely one part of a broader historical-cultural happening; like Andrew Geddes Bain’s, “Polyglot Medley”, the whole story is a very mixed affair.

(Gray 1979: 2)

Gray uses the term “South African literature” to signify local literature written in English. Furthermore, his criteria of “distinctiveness”, “independence” and “internal cohesion” leads him to conclude that South African literature in

English does not constitute a distinctive literature. According to him, its hybridity has deprived it of a separate identity. It is seen as part of a larger body of literatures in the languages of the region. His study, which is basically monolingual, is presented as a “preliminary exercise in defining South African Literature as a whole” which will become apparent once a totality of literatures is constructed from the multilingual perspective. Gray (1979: 2) contends that “this whole will not be in view until the parts are assembled within a suitably all-embracing comparative theory”.

In the absence of such a theory, Gray advances what he calls a “metonymic conception” of South Africa. He writes:

The term “South African” then requires definition. South Africa here must be taken to mean the Southern triangle with Cape Town as its apex, which is merely a small part of the larger triangle of the continent of Africa. The geographic field with which this introduction is concerned consists of the territory that is currently known as the Republic of South Africa (that is, the Cape Province, The Orange Free State, Natal and the Transvaal) and includes the modern Lesotho, Botswana and Swaziland, and Rhodesia/Zimbabwe and South West Africa/Namibia, through which a concept of a larger English whole can be demonstrated to be operative.

(Gray 1979: 2)

This disregard for “any rigid sense of geopolitical borders” results in the curious phenomenon that “South African” is used to signify “southern African”. While Gray’s view that linguistic affinities and literary connections between these countries renders national boundaries insignificant is important, the question that arises here is why he finds it at all necessary to apply the designation “South African” to what in reality is the southern African region. This, as we shall see, is symptomatic of the parochialism to be found in all the regional definitions of South African literary studies, put forward by South African scholars. Equally muddled, is that although Gray stresses multilingualism, his concern is with English literature in southern African regions and his study itself is largely based on English South African literature.

The shortcomings of Gray’s survey, if not with direct reference, are addressed by Michael Chapman’s *South African Literatures* (1996). Like Gray, his conception is regional and multilingual. But where Gray’s definition is contradictory, confused and not borne out by his survey, Chapman (1996: XV) writes: “This study contains my view of the several distinct but interrelated literatures of South Africa”. The countries which constitute the southern African region for Chapman are: South Africa, Botswana, Lesotho, Swaziland, Zimbabwe, Zambia, Malawi, Angola, Mozambique and Namibia. The definition put forward by him is contrary to tendencies in all these countries to “define and describe the different literatures according to separate linguistic-

ethnic units". South Africa, he mentions, with its history of enforced ethnicity "presents an extreme case of literary linguistic division". This has led to a situation where "for example, we have South African literature in English, Afrikaans literature, Zulu literature, Xhosa literature, Sotho literature and so forth, each with its hermetic set of assumptions, myths and conventions while there is little consensus on how we might constitute a single South African literature" (Chapman: 1996: XV).

In contrast to monolingual conceptions which insist, as Van Wyk Smith does, on the separateness of the literatures of South and southern Africa, Chapman (1996: XV) contends that these regional literatures have "entangled histories". This has led to the term "southern Africa" acquiring "substance in several common subjects and concerns. In the literature of all the countries, there is the shared experience of colonialism and its abrasive, economic form attendant on strong, permanent settler populations". The liberation struggles against racial domination and the experiences of modernisation and urbanisation have further ensured that the forms of literary expression moved "beyond any stronghold of language, race and nationality".

For Chapman, then, the literatures of southern Africa, while different and distinct, are nevertheless interrelated by virtue of their shared sociohistorical experiences of colonialism and struggles to overcome it. This results in, as Chapman (1996: XX) claims, "the first study to consider all the literatures – oral and written – in the various languages of the several countries of southern Africa".

Chapman's definition of southern African literatures, based on the distinctiveness of each of the literatures in the various languages, as well as on a shared history, presents an advance on both the bilingual and monolingual definitions of South African literatures. It also addresses the linguistic restrictions found in the regional African languages definition as well as the conception put forward by Gray. Chapman includes the African languages of South and southern Africa, Afrikaans, English and Portuguese. If his conception in some ways resembles its multilingual regional object, it is not without problems.

Positing similarities between the various literatures within the framework of a generalised sociohistorical narrative which is presented as "the same story with different interpretations", homogenises contexts and inscribes a single historical narrative over different locales with specific histories. The "cohesion" which Gray found wanting in South African literature in 1975, and which he postulated would be discovered once "a suitably all-embracing comparative theory" is constructed, is supplied by Chapman, not by comparative means but by a disregard for differences. Homogenisation haunts all regional definitions of literatures here and elsewhere. It distorts its object by the imposition of identity and an inattentiveness to what Heidegger calls "the mediation

prevailing in unity” and what Benjamin, in positing the affinity of languages, qualifies as kinship that does not mean sameness.

Hence, in Chapman’s history of southern African literatures, South African literature and more parochially, South African literature in English occupies a central place. He writes

... of the countries that comprise southern Africa, the largest and most continuous is South Africa which, in terms of its literary interests, publication outlets and relatively large readership, has virtually subsumed any literary identity there might once have been in the neighbouring states of Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland.

(Chapman 1996: XVII)

Accordingly, “South Africa in the sheer bulk of its literary output occupies considerable attention” in his study. So what is presented as regional perspective turns out to be South Africa-centred.

6

This essay, as stated, is concerned with delineating the field of South African literary studies for scholarly purposes. The conceptualisation, I advance, is neither as most of the definitions discussed above, rationales for publications, nor is it oblivious of the problems besetting the field. It is attentive to the affinities and divergences between literatures everywhere. It therefore does not seek to annul the distinctiveness of the literatures by imposing on it an identity in the sense of singularity or sameness.

In doing so, it does not at all uphold the idea of literary separateness in the sense of any literature being a hermetically sealed entity with contact at all with other literatures. It does not impose or even postulate abstract or any other commonalities, thematic or formally, on literatures or make unsustainable claims of unity among South African literatures or any other literatures for that matter.

It centres on the specific, evolving relations within and between various literatures. These relations, if they are relations of differences, obviously, are staked out in a field, if not of identity or sameness, then on the now well-established idea that differences are always relational.

The object of South African literary studies may therefore be defined as consisting of all the literatures in the languages spoken within the borders of South Africa as specified in the Constitution of 1996. Where the indigenous African languages and their literatures are related to languages and literatures spoken within as well as across the borders of South Africa, it will include the

literatures of the languages in countries other than South Africa.

For this purpose then, South African literatures are made up of the languages accorded official status in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa of 1996 namely, Sepedi, Sesotho, Setswana, SiSwati, Tshivenda, Xitsonga, Afrikaans, English, isiNdebele, isiXhosa and isiZulu, as well as the Khoi, Nama and San languages. The relationship between these languages and what is referred to as the European and Asian heritage languages, are included here.

The above conceptualisation is a multilingual South African languages definition. It considers the various languages and literatures of South Africa as both distinct and interrelated. The object of South African Literary Studies, therefore, is not a single, uniform South African literature. It is an ensemble of literatures in the African languages and Afrikaans and English. It is therefore an object made up of multiple literatures, all of which are accorded equal status within the field of study.

7

While its coordinates are geographically specific, that is, the territory presently designated South Africa, this is by no means a national or even nationalist conception of the object delineated above. With all its internal differentiations it is also placed in relationships to literatures of the region and further afield. This involves a grouping together, not by means of a preconceptual foundation, but in theoretical terms, based on linguistic and literary facts. As such it is nothing more than an operational specification which may facilitate the study of South African literatures, whether in isolation of each other or in relation to each other and the literatures of the world.

The object proposed above is geographically located and contextually embedded. At the same time, and not in contradiction to its situatedness, it is always already in relationships of difference to all literatures. This implies that it might be best approached by a variety of methods which provide tools for dealing with entanglements across literatures, disciplines as well as across spatial and temporal boundaries. The essays in this issue bear this out. Far from being a total, totalised or even unitary conception, it offers an infinite number of pathways towards, from and back to the multifaceted object which itself is never singular, stable or closed off. The methods best suited for approaching it and why the above conceptualisation is not national or a nationalist conceptualisation require separate treatment.

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