

Fabrications and the Question of a National South African Literature

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Summary

The discourse in South African literary studies, post-colonial and general literary studies on the phenomenon of a national literature, this essay contends, is vague and undertheorised. It critically examines claims made by various scholars in the field of South African and post-colonial studies concerning the existence of a South African national literature and proceeds to identify the conceptual difficulties and confusions attendant to the concept of a national literature. It explores the meanings of the terms “nation”, “nationalism”, “nation-state” and provides a definition of what a “national literature” is. Based on this definition, it concludes that South Africa is a state without a nation and thus a state without a national literature.

Opsomming

Die diskoers in Suid-Afrikaanse literatuurstudies, postkoloniale en algemene literatuurstudies oor die fenomeen van 'n nasionale literatuur is, volgens hierdie artikel, vaag en onder-geteoretiseer. Dit onderneem 'n kritiese ondersoek na bewerings deur verskeie literatore oor die bestaan van 'n Suid-Afrikaanse nasionale literatuur en identifiseer die konseptuele probleme en verwarrings wat met die konsep van 'n nasionale literatuur gepaardgaan. Dit verken die betekenis van die begrippe “nasie”, “nasionalisme”, “nasiestaat” en stel 'n definisie van “nasionale literatuur” voor. Op grond van hierdie definisie word gekonkludeer dat Suid-Afrika 'n staat sonder 'n nasie is en dus 'n staat sonder 'n nasionale literatuur.

Fabricate: *v.tr.* **1.** Construct, manufacture, esp. from prepared components. **2.** Invent or concoct (a story, evidence, etc.). **3.** Forge (a document).
(*The Concise Oxford Dictionary*, p. 418)

1

Reference to the concept “South African literature” enters literary discourse into the field of South African literary studies in the genre of literary historiography with some persistence at the turn of the 19th century. It gains currency in the wake of the Union of South Africa formed in 1910 which brought English- and Afrikaans-speaking white South Africans to a single state after the Anglo-Boer War. This political formation held sway over the entire geographical space of South Africa, before being divided into the British colonies of the Cape and Natal and the Boer Republics of the Orange Free State and the Zuid-Afrikaanse Republiek. It encompassed what was then known as Native Reserves and later as the Homelands where the majority of the population was consigned to. This is now the consolidated geopolitical space of post-colonial democratic South Africa.

The frequent occurrence of references to a South African literature correlates to moments in the political history of South whenever the state is reconfigured. Its genealogy is inseparable from the currents and countercurrents of power instantiated by colonialism. While its fortunes, closely tied to the will to power, waxes and wanes tellingly during the 20th century, I do not intend to trace its South adventure here other than to examine how it features in some of the texts that sought to map out the field of South African literary studies with references to nationhood. My main concern is to theorise, in the broadest sense, that an essay of this kind permits the concept of a national literature, by way of answering the question as to whether a national literature exists in South Africa. Its excursive range, I think, issues from the question it set out to answer.

2

Implicit in the references to a South African literature, is, of course, the concept of a national literature. The latter, in turn, is linked to the concept of the nation-state. Hence, the concept of a national literature gained wide currency with the establishment of a unified, white-ruled South African state at the time of the Union.

While the Union was a state with political authority over the then South Africa as a whole, it was not a nation-state proper, since the white population groups with political representation in the Union did not form a single nation. It consisted of two cultural groups defined as “Europeans” with different languages, English and Dutch-Afrikaans, and with divergent ethnic affiliations. Furthermore, the Union of South Africa, although granted political authority over South Africa, was subject to the British Crown and governed by a

governor-general representing the British Crown. A part of the British Empire it was really nothing more than a self-governing territory, if not a colony, subordinate to Britain. The concept of “South African Literature” posited under these conditions was limited to the languages and writings of the two white population groups represented in the Union of South Africa. These facts rendered any suggestions or claims of a national literature in South Africa, as I shall attempt to theorise it here, meaningless.

In this regard, Swanepoel (1990: 1) asserts that the concept of a “national literature” has a relatively long history in South African literary discourse. It was, he claims, first mentioned by the Afrikaans poet N.P. van Wyk Louw in 1939 and later, in 1975, it was referred to by Albert Gérard and subsequently by Stephen Gray in 1979. This is a misprision. Van Wyk Louw’s use of the term “national literature” had a restricted meaning: he limited it to Afrikaans literature. While “South African literature” meant Dutch-Afrikaans and English literature at the time of the Union, Van Wyk Louw (1959: 28) spoke of an “Afrikaanse nasionale letterkunde” and not a “Suid-Afrikaanse nasionale literatuur” in an article published in the *Huisgenoot* in 1939. His term neither referred to a South African national literature in the sense of one literature, in this case Afrikaans, as a national literature, nor in the sense of all the literatures of South Africa making up a South African national literature. Van Wyk Louw’s concept of an “Afrikaans national literature”, correctly understood, refers to a literature shared by white Afrikaans-speakers across South Africa.

Furthermore, in his essay, “Towards a History of South African Literature”, Gérard (1975) draws attention to the need for an integrated history of South African literature which includes the literatures in all the languages. He however, too, makes no direct reference to the concept of a “South African national literature” in the sense in which I will theorise here. To be precise, Gérard uses the term “South African literature”. For Gérard (1975: 99-80) the term “South African literature” designates “the body of creative writing in nine different languages – two of which are English and Afrikaans – while the other seven are the officially recognised Bantu Languages”. While the essay turns away the monolingual ethnically founded idea inherent to N.P. van Wyk Louw’s call for a national Afrikaans literature as well as from any isolated ethnic literatures, he, as a comparatist, is interested in what he calls the “symbiosis” between the various South African literatures which, according to him, are “more closely knit than usually assumed”.

It was not until 1983 that Gérard broached the question of a “national literature” with reference to South Africa, not directly, but with reference to literary historiography. This is elaborated on in the essay “Prospects of a National History of South African Literature”. He nevertheless addresses the definitional difficulties the concept of a national literature presents in multilingual societies. He mentions that a national literature is usually linked

to a nation “whose unity was established by the fact that all its members spoke the same language, or at least mutually intelligible dialects of the same language” (Gérard 1983a: 36), and shared executive, legislative and judicial institutions. Examples of homogenous states of this type, in his view, are Germany, Italy and France. In these cases, Gérard argues, “linguistic unity was the sufficient basis for literary identity” (p. 36). Many – indeed the majority of nation-states with membership of the United Nations – are heterogenous, multilingual and polyethnic entities. This has checked the assumption that a national literature is of necessity a literature in the national language of a nation-state. In the light of this Gérard (p. 36), asserts that “almost no attention has hitherto been paid to the theoretical problem of defining exactly what we mean when we speak of a national literature in all such cases”. Such cases being multilingual societies. He further postulates that the study of multilingual societies, such as South Africa, may “contribute to solving the problem of deciding how ‘a national literature’ is henceforth defined”.

While he draws attention to the problem of definition of this concept, he makes no effort to theorise it at any length. He merely assumes that researching and writing the histories of the literatures of multilingual states in Africa will lead to a redefinition of the prevailing concept of a national literature. Gérard (1983a: 36) writes: “In a sense it might be said that any significant study of the literatures of the continent both involves and contributes to solving the problem of deciding how ‘a national literature’ is henceforth to be defined”. Elsewhere, he “solves” this question by settling for the pragmatic but unsatisfactory view that “the national literature of any country is made up of all the literary works produced by the citizens of that country (in a broad sense)” (p. 98). Too broad to be useful, this leaves the concept “national” undefined and is merely a handy way of referring to all the writing produced by writers enfranchised in a state.

In the same vein, a gathering held in July 1989 at Victoria Falls between Afrikaans writers and the ANC released a conference communiqué in which the delegates committed themselves

to the dream of realising a truly representative South African literature. This national literature will be the embodiment of a shared cultural identity, unique in the richness of its sources, expression and diversity of language.

(Coetzee & Poley 1990: 205)

How this “dream” of a national literature, in the singular sense, and a shared identity will be realised in the face of the political and cultural legacy of divisions, is not addressed. Perhaps, like Swanepoel (1990: 10) writing at more or less the same time, the delegates assumed that “[o]nce the existence of a national literature has become generally acknowledged, also as a symbol of our

unity, our unity-in-variety, its overall description can proceed". All that is required, in this view, is that literary scholars become aware of the existence of this national literature and proceed to describe it. This has a great deal in common with Gérard's belief that writing the histories of the literatures of multilingual societies like South Africa will lead to a redefinition of the concept of a national literature.

This tendency to invoke the concept of a "national literature" without delving into the problems associated with it, is widely disseminated in South African literary discourses. It has haunted discourse on literature and nationalism here and elsewhere. An example of this is to be found in a seminal text dealing with national emancipation from colonial domination and the role of literature in this process. In *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice of Post-colonial Literatures*, Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin (1991: 16-18) include a discussion of the "national model" in their summary of the various critical models of post-colonial discourse on identity and affiliation. They single out the United States of America as "[t]he first post-colonial society to develop a 'national literature'". Strikingly, they place the term "national literature" between inverted commas. In marking it thus, they distance it from their articulation. Although they do not make this explicit, the implication is that they have reservations about the term.

All they do to justify the cautious use of the term is to explain that the American revolt against British colonialism to achieve independence inscribed the country's literature with the "the social and political history" of the United States, to produce a "distinct collection of texts" with "different characteristics from that of Britain". This established "its right to be considered independently". It accordingly signals the moment when the "concept of a national literary difference 'within' English writing became established", spawning a succession of emulators around the world. Still, Ashcroft and his co-writers acknowledge that for all the claims of a distinctive, self-constituting entity, controlling all the institutions of literary production, American literature often replicates the "theoretical assumptions, critical perspectives and value judgements of the British establishment". They conclude that "Nationalism, in which some partial truth or cliché is elevated to orthodoxy ... often fails to fall short of nationalist myth". This notwithstanding, their text offers no theoretical means for a more thorough examination of the term.

If the concept of a national literature is to be used, it seems to me, it has to be subjected to greater theoretical and critical attention than the casual references and the cautionary caveats customarily attached to its usage. This can be done by first examining concepts such as "nation" and "national" before attaching it to literatures in South Africa. These are the lines along which I proceed here.

3

I therefore confront a series of questions, the first being: What is a nation? The concept of a national literature is intimately bound up with the concept “nation” which is at the heart of this question. Other interrogations of “nationalism” and the “nation-state” will follow in a process which will lead me to confronting the governing question: What is a national literature?

What, then, is a nation? Greenfield (2001: 251-252), who traces the adventures of the term, informs that the modern concept “nation” has a long history. It is, she argues, a product of semantic changes it underwent over time in relation to social and political changes in Europe. Derived from the Latin word *natio*, it means “something born”. In ancient Rome it signified communities of foreigners who lived in the city-state as aliens without the rights and privileges of Roman citizens. The political meanings of the “citizenship”, often confused with nationality, carried forth across the ages, and still pertain as rights, accorded to persons at birth or through naturalisation, in a bounded space, of which national territories are cities or places, not merely of residence, but localities of birth, writ large. In Rome, communities of foreigners constituted “nations”. It signalled the fact that only foreigners possessed or were given a “national identity”. In this context, the term “nation” had a derogatory or inferior connotation. Being a member of a “nation” placed one below Romans in terms of civic status. Under these circumstances, national affiliation was hardly desirable. “It marked the extent to which the community of foreigners did not belong to the larger defining community of Romans” (Greenfield 2001: 252).

During the Middle Ages, which, roughly speaking, spanned the period from about 300AD to 1300AD, the term “nation”, Greenfield (2002: 252) tells, underwent a semantic change. It “was applied to the communities of students in medieval universities, who were rarely born where the university was situated”. The medieval universities were open to everyone across the Christian world. Students from different geographical regions were housed together in quarters shared with their professors. This is in accordance with the Roman usage of the word which set foreigners apart from local inhabitants. In the course of their academic life the students, along with their professors, participated in debates and in the process came to be associated with the intellectual positions they held, expounded and defended. The result was that every community of students and professors came to be identified with a particular set of ideas which differentiated them from other “nations”.

This, Greenfield (2001: 252) continues, changed the Roman meaning of nation as “a community of foreigners” to signify a “community of opinion”. In the universities, the new meaning did not completely supercede the earlier one. In restricting it to communities within the university the term no longer

bore a derogatory connotation even though its application was still exclusionary: only students constituted nations. Upon completion of his/her studies a student lost his/her “national identity”. The word attached to itself the meaning of a special group, even an elite. In the Middle Ages, this meaning of a “nation” as a distinctive or even exceptional group was applied to the various representatives within the Christian Republics with religious, cultural and political authority.

The term, still following Greenfield (2001: 252), acquired its modern meaning in sixteenth-century England. In dramatic transformation, it came to signify “the people”. From its ancient bio-geographical anchorings, marking identity and rights, this term once reserved for outsiders, and later for special groups, was given an inclusive meaning to encompass a population. From ascriptions first to marginal then to special groups, it came to signify a people as a whole. Thus the significance of birth in a specific geographical space, as well as the ascriptions of exceptionality associated with earlier meanings given to the term, were extended to the population of England as a whole.

“The magnitude of this conceptual revolution” Greenfield concludes,

can be fully appreciated only if we consider the change that occurred simultaneously in the meaning of the word “people”. In English, French, German and Russian discourse, among others, before it was made the synonym of “nation”, the word meant “rabble” or “pebs”; the general referent of the “people” was the lower classes.

(Greenfield 2001: 252)

Thus in designating the people as the “nation”, the population once despised suddenly

acquired immense prestige and was redefined as an object of loyalty and the basis of political solidarity. A major transformation was affected in the image of the social order: defined as a nation, the community, inclusive of all classes, had to be imagined as sovereign and as a community of equals.

(Greenfield 2001: 252)

Accordingly, Guibernau (1996: 47) writes that in modern political discourse “nation” refers “to a human group conscious of forming a community, sharing a common culture, attached to a clearly demarcated territory, having a common past and a common project for the future and claiming the right to rule itself”. Although the matter of birth and territory and the right to rule itself which serve to mark the group as indigenous, the master trope for this kind of collectivity is what is held in “common”. This commonality, while serving as a signifier for what is shared within the group, also serves to mark it as different from other groups. This conjures a chain of real or imagined identities

and differences suggesting that the axis along which the signifier “nation” operates is fraught with instability and tension.

This definition, in which the code is commonality, is however the plinth of the political and cultural framework of the modern nation-state. The salient features of a nation can be summarised as a substantial human with:

- (1) a common consciousness of forming a group
- (2) a common descent or origin
- (3) a common territory
- (4) a common culture
- (5) a common language
- (6) a common religion
- (7) a common political authority
- (8) a common economic system

These factors combine to provide a distinct identity to a people and serve to unify them in a homogenous social formation called a nation. But the very idea of unity and homogenisation suggests an overcoming of divisions, disunity and differences. Thus, the coming into being of a nation historically involves the fusion of previously divided peoples into a linguistic, cultural, territorial and political unity not once and for all but under specific historical conditions. Where this occurs in linguistically homogenous societies, which nowhere exists, it always involves either the voluntary sublimation of difference or its violent suppression. In linguistically diverse societies such putative unity is often achieved by the elevation of a dominant language, or the dominant form of various related languages, including variants of a language into a national language and the construction of a culture in which selective debris of the defeated are modified and incorporated into the dominant culture. This marks the nation as site of power, prejudice and violence. Hence the bloody trail left in the wake of nations.

Some qualifications are needed at this point. Not all these features are necessarily present in all groups who regard themselves, or are referred to, as nations. Linguistic, cultural and religious diversity has not prevented Belgium, Canada, Nigeria and many countries in Latin America, from referring to themselves as nations, nor from being viewed as such. A region like Europe which shares the same economy and Christianity, cannot be said to form a nation. Even if the features outlined above were present, by themselves, they did not bring about the formation of a nation. In themselves they constitute the features one would otherwise ascribe to a tribe.

This compels the conclusion that a nation is not just a linguistic, cultural, religious and economic grouping, but also, and crucially, a political entity. Its rallying cry is of popular sovereignty and unfettered self-rule. It issues from

within the group with regard to its rights of autonomy within the boundaries defined as the national territory; it is frequently a reaction to forms of foreign domination. Accordingly it is quite possible to have a nation-state, not made up of a single or homogenous people, which nonetheless, acclaim themselves to be a nation made up of indigenes as well as those who have come to identify with the cause of national autonomy.

If from this, it is still not clear why referring to heterogenous societies as nations compounds the problem, I have set out to clarify, it is salutary to reflect that what is often meant when “nationhood” is invoked, is not the actual linguistic and cultural homogeneity of the people, but rather, the territory of political sovereignty that is evoked: no matter how fragmented or tenuous. It is this divergence from the meanings in the term “nation” as signifying a homogenous people on the one hand, and its application on the other hand to a politically sovereign and centralised state with a diversity of cultures and peoples, which renders the term so unstable. This instability is of course a property of all lexical items enlisted to serve as essential, self-defining terms.

Given this, the meaning I reserve for the term “nation” here is that of a social formation with a common language, culture and history, conscious of constituting a community of interests and values residing in a geographically defined and unified sovereign state. This is the model nation-state. It can with justification claim to possess a national literature and national culture, if such a literature and culture is understood or believed to reflect the identity which that nation considers its own. Whether such societies larger than kinship clusters of comparatively localised communities, exist or ever existed, is open to question. The nation, in the sense of singularity, in all respects, is an ideological construction, with little purchase in reality.

How do these “imaginary” constructions come into the world? The question on nationalism, posed earlier, must be addressed, to clarify this. The social process or political and cultural forces which bring about the formation of a nation, is nationalism. It is the ideology which produces the awareness and the consent of being or the possibilities of becoming a nation. This is done by mobilising populations to work for support for the political institutionalisation of the nation. Nationalism is defined by Guibernau as

the sentiment of belonging to a community whose members identify with a set of symbols, beliefs and a way of life and have the will to decide upon their common political destiny.

(Guibernau 1996: 47)

“Sentiment” suggests an emotive affiliation or an affective belief, something one subscribes to rather than the assertion or endorsement of any empirical fact. It points in the direction of ideology in both its descriptive sense of

referring to a set of shared beliefs and views of the self and the world, as well as in the pejorative sense, of a consciousness incommensurable with an actual state of affairs.

This sentiment asserts a collective identity as different from other identities. It responds to specific historical challenges by appealing to the past. Ernest Renan writes:

A nation is a soul, a spiritual principle. Two things, which are in truth one, constitute this soul or spiritual principle. One lies in the past, one in the present. One is the possession of a legacy of rich memories; the other is the present-day consent, the desire to live together, the will to perpetuate the value of the heritage that one has received in an undivided form The nation, like the individual, is the culmination of a long past of endeavours, sacrifice, and devotion. Of all cults, that of the ancestors is the most legitimate, for the ancestors have made us what we are. A heroic past, great men, glory (by which I understand genuine glory), this is the social capital upon which one based the national idea. To have common glories in the past and to have a common will in the present; to have performed great deeds together, to wish to perform still more B these are the essential conditions for being a people. One loves in proportion to the sacrifices to which one has consented, in proportion to the ills one has suffered. One loves the house one has built and handed down. The Spartan song – “We are what we were; we will be what we are” – is, in its simplicity, the abridged hymn of every patrie.

(Renan 1995: 19)

Nationalism, in other words, is the collective expression, necessarily of diverse peoples, to become or to be part of a larger social formation called the nation. While nationalism draws on patriotism, or love for the fatherland, with all the patriarchal implications of this affection, its political aspirations are territorial sovereignty and its values are the equality of its members. Its cultural content is a shared language, common symbols, customs and values. Its physical, or nativist, element is birth in a geographically specified territory. Nationalism, then, is the ideological force which rallies and binds together different peoples by appealing to the idea of a common origin and a shared culture, regardless of their differences. Its objective is to constitute a state in which those who agree that they belong together may govern themselves with the promise of a free life and as equal citizens. Its central thrust, therefore, is to subsume all differences in a larger all-embracing structure. Historically this has frequently implied the solidarity of a diversity of peoples who consider themselves native to a territory in the face of what is experienced and opposed as foreign domination. Thus internal differences are suspended while a divide is projected outwards to mark a line of division between the indigene and the foreign invader.

Still, how does nationalism account for the existence or the coming into being of a nation? Some theory, that is, some explanatory intervention on how the various forms of nationalism account for phenomena they produce, is called for here. An interrogation yields two governing explanatory thrusts. One is *essentialist*. The other, *relativist*. While there are many varieties of each of these two types, for brevity, I focus only on the main forms of each.

The essentialist view on the origins of a nation is based on the belief that the distinguishing qualities of the nation are inherent to it and to the people who constitute it. The nation, in these terms, is considered a self-evident and necessary truth. These qualities, which are exclusive to the nation, make it a unique phenomenon. The essentialist view conceives of the nation as the expression of a primordial identity. In the words of Hans Kohn (1961: 4) it is merely the latest and most manifest “expression of the oldest and most primitive feelings in man”. The two main forms in which this is advanced, claim that the nation is a natural or a divine phenomenon.

The divine theory is associated with the German national philosopher Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834), who enlisted religion for nationalism. For him the nation as the creation of a divine intention is

a natural division of the human race, endowed by God with its own character. Every nationality is destined through its peculiar organisation and its place in the world to represent a certain side of the divine image For it is God who directly assigns to each nationality its definite task on earth and inspires it with a definite spirit in order to glorify Himself through each one in a particular manner.

(Schleiermacher quoted by Kedourie 1974: 58)

The nation, according to this view, is the instrument of a people chosen by God for them. This, obviously, is an extension of the divine discourse on which medieval monarchy was based, now carried over into the realm of one form of 18th-century German nationalism. It follows from this that the language, literature and culture of each nation will be seen as divine attributes and will be used to express and reflect the God-given identity of the nation.

The natural explanation is represented by Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744-1803), another 18th-century German thinker. His view also roots the origin of nations in a sacred source but here as a natural manifestation. Herder thinks of humanity, grouped into nations, as the highest form of divine perfection. According to him, “every human perfection is national ... and every nationality bears in itself the standard of its perfection, totally independent of all comparison with that of others” (quoted by Ergang 1969: 324). Every nation as an organic unit with each branch of its culture is an organic part of a larger unit. It is “natural plant”, a “national animal”. The biological, that is, the natural processes of birth, growth, maturity and decay as well as the ties of

blood, are the origin and history of a nation. "A nation", he writes, "is as natural as a plant, as a family, only with more branches" (Herder quoted by Ergang 1966: 84-85). Guibernau (1998: 49) calls it a "socio-biological" view in so far as it uses a natural metaphor in combination with the family as the primary social organisation for the reproduction of human life. In its biological metaphors this discourse on nationality has overt ethnic and racial overtones. It regards the nation, its language, its literature and culture as construed as organic products of a naturally given ethnic identity.

In both the divine and the natural accounts, the nation is conceived as a necessary, absolute and immutable entity. It is a phenomenon beyond human agency, historical circumstances and other contingencies. Definitions of a national literature based on these explanations will inevitably be informed by such sentiments.

The relativist view, which stands in diametrical contrast to the essentialist view, considers the nation not as something sacred and absolute, but as the product which is relative to its historical circumstances and context, and its relationship to a variety of other factors. It is not timeless, but subject to change. While national identity is viewed as part of the broader imperative of individual and group identity, it is posited that no identity is inevitable or necessary. Like all identity, the nation is a social, cultural and political construct or invention. Here too, two main explanations can be identified. The first is an economic account and the second a psychological explanation.

Ernest Gellner (1983) is a leading proponent of the economic theory of the origin of nations. He argues that the nation originated from forms of divisions of labour associated with complex and rapidly changing modern industrial society. The dislocations and a mobility resulting from this engenders forms of egalitarianism. In contrast to pre-industrial societies where social roles were fixed and stable and the barriers of rank were rigidly cast, the conditions of production in industrial societies, while still based on stratification, are less rigid and more fluid. This, along with new centralised and standardised institutions of education, mechanised production, regulated working hours, production rates, quality controls and transportation schedules, produces the homogeneity in the lives and culture of the population which is required for national unity. Thus the process of national homogenisation of a population uprooted from the micro-groups of local life and production produces the nation. Gellner asserts: "It is nationalism which engenders nations, and not the other way round" (1983: 55). In other words, it is not nations which give rise to nationalism, as is sometimes thought, although once formed nations ensure that survival by means of every form of nationalism it calculates will secure the nation. In the process of constructing nations, nationalism selectively draws on pre-existing and historically inherited cultures, including languages and literatures, transforming them to both reflect the aspirations of the people and

to meet the requirements of industrial society.

The psychological theory of nation is formulated by Benedict Anderson (1991). Like Gellner, he places the emergence of the nation in industrial society, but where Gellner emphasises the conditions of production in industrialised societies, Anderson singles out the role of

public education for everyone within its reach and mass market communications (first books, then newspapers, radio and television) which together appeared to make sense of modern life and to create the illusion of vast new “citizen” communities.

(Anderson 1993: 615)

Thus people who had never met each other were imagining themselves to be part of the same community. It was, however, the role of the printing press in disseminating literature in the vernacular languages in Europe which rapidly came to be associated with the broader social lives of the people within a specific language territory. The seeds of what would eventually become national languages were thus sown. Anderson claims that the languages which circulated in print facilitated the emergence of national consciousness by creating uniform patterns of communication and exchange in which large numbers of people participated. In the process, the language spoken by the majority of the people was for the first time also the language of power, public administration and discourse.

Nationalism, whether essentialist or relativist, relies on fabrication. It is the will to fabricate, that is forge, not in the sense of inventing commonalities by piecing together in the manner of a forgery, disparate peoples into a transethnic construction where differences are either elided or incorporated in what is held as a shared heritage. The nation is fabricated because, even in its non-pejorative sense, it is an assemblage of language, culture, religion, land and history and whatever could be forged into a single entity, not by whim or arbitrarily, but from the contingencies of power and in the furnaces of history.

If this commonality is always geo-specific and proper to people living under their own rule, then the structure within which this sovereignty is actualised is the nation-state. *The Concise Oxford English Dictionary* defines “state” as “the organised political community under one government”. It is the institutionalised political authority governing a community within a specific territory. It follows that a “nation-state” is the political authority of a homogenous people with a shared language, culture, religion and other symbols, values and traditions held in common.

As Guibernau asserts, the relation and difference between a nation and a nation-state

are that while the members of a nation are conscious of forming a community, the nation-state seeks to create a nation and develop a sense of community stemming from it. While the nation has a common culture, values and symbols, the nation-state as an expression of nationalism, has as an objective the creation of a common culture, symbols and values. The members of a nation can look back on a common past; if the members of a nation-state do likewise, they may be confronted with a blank picture – because the nation-state simply did not exist in the past – or with a fragmented and diversified one, because they belonged to different ethno-nations.

(Guibernau 1996: 47-48)

The nation-state, then, politically institutionalises the identity produced by nationalism.

In the light of the above, we can identify various strands of nationalism in South Africa. At the time of the Union of South Africa, British imperialism, after defeating a nascent Afrikaner nationalism, tried to promote a form of white settler unity as a way of ruling South Africa. This nationalism was driven by economic imperatives. It failed, as Afrikaner nationalism came to dominate political discourse in South Africa, promoting its ideology of ethnic nationalism. It was driven by essentialist ideas of racial purity and divine destiny. By the same token, white domination as established under the Union of South Africa served as a catalyst for a nascent African nationalism rooted in territorial and historical claims and demands for equality. The ascendancy of Afrikaner nationalism and apartheid gave rise to a national liberation struggle with a nonracial and transethnic ideology. Each of these variants of nationalism produced its own literary articulations, the strongest of which are perhaps the articulations of Afrikaner nationalism, African nationalism, and the nonracial national liberation discourse.

It is clear, however, that while present-day South Africa could be said to consist of a single state, the territory designated the Republic of South Africa is made up of a diversity of cultural and linguistic groups. These range across African, Asian and European traditions, all of which are internally differentiated. This fragmentation and diversity, upheld and fostered under colonialism and apartheid, represents an impasse to the emergence of a single nation with a common linguistic, cultural religion of the term. However, the establishment of a single unitary South African state which is the product of the struggle by the majority of the population against both foreign and minority settler domination is based on the principle of sovereign rule by all its people, all of whom are equal before the law. It may therefore be termed a democratic state without a nation. States without nation, Guibernau (1996: 115) mentions, is typical of situations where a single, territorially bounded state is made up of a diversity of cultural and linguistic groups. Such polyethnic and territorially based states are common in Africa having been constructed within the arbitrary

territorial boundaries pegged out by colonial occupation rather than out of protracted internal processes.

Hence, in a country such as South Africa, made up of diverse linguistic and cultural communities, the immediate and even long-term prospects of a single nation developing under a constitution which recognises cultural and religious diversity and accords equality to eleven languages and extends constitutional recognition and supports a variety of others, seems remote. In the absence of cultural and linguistic homogeneity, the constitutional framework of equality in diversity serves as the basis for a considerable degree of political stability and coherence. This relative stability and coherence, must, however, not be confused with unity in the sense of the complete oneness of undifferentiated uniformity. It marks what might be termed the post-nationalist state in which diversity, if not celebrated, is no longer placed under complete nationalist erasure, but accepted as a reality.

The pertinent question, however, is: can a state without a nation, such as South Africa, claim possession of a national literature?

4

A common language and culture, along with the other attributes outlined above, we will recall, are axiomatic to a nation. That literature, as a form of cultural practice, is integral to nation formation, flows from this. However, for a literature to be designated a national literature in the strict sense, it would have to display the characteristics, postulated by Guy Michaud (1978: 112) for collective identities, and adapted here for my purposes, to be:

- (1) The literary product, oral and written, of a people with a common language and culture.
- (2) Derived from and articulating a sense of belonging to a people living in, or expressing the desire for, a sovereign nation-state.
- (3) Articulated and be interpreted to confirm the shared identity experienced by the people who perceive themselves as, or who desire to become, a nation.
- (4) Characterised by a distinctiveness which differentiates it from other national literatures.
- (5) Coherence around a specified set of cultural and ideological values which are distinctive to the people in the given society who declare themselves to be a nation.

A national literature, then, might be delineated as a body of works produced over a period of time, which is interpreted, recognised and accepted as an

articulation of the proclaimed identity of a people with a common language and culture living in, or desiring to live in, a unified and sovereign national state. A national literature then, is not merely a common language. Important as that is for this definition, all the other indices which are constitutive of a nation and a national literature are relevant here. A common language, it hardly needs mention, does not necessarily mean a shared identity, culture or destiny. The history of English is testimony to this.

The question suspended over this essay and postponed for its duration must now be answered. That question is: Does South Africa possess a national literature? The answer must be given in the light of what, in this essay, has come before it, for it is this very question which asked for and received the extensive excursus on nation, nationalism and the nation-state and their implications for literature, which propelled this essay.

While post-apartheid South Africa is a sovereign and unitary state, liberated from colonial and minority domination, the linguistic and cultural diversity found among the people within this state renders any claim to the existence of a national literature, as outlined and defined above, untenable. It is not enough to simply claim, as Gérard does, that “a national literature” is the totality of the literatures which belong to a given nation. It is unsustainable since it circumvents the terms “nation”, “nationalism” and “a national literature”. If it can be demonstrated that the different languages all express an identity held in common regardless of language and culture, then a case can be made out for a national literature in various languages expressing a common identity. However, if linguistic diversity is related to cultural diversity, as it is in South Africa, this precludes the existence of an identity held in common by the linguistic and cultural communities across South Africa. To answer the question whether a national literature exists in South Africa, I must return to the literary discourse on the subject.

In my essay on the conceptualisation of the object of South African literary studies (Oliphant (2003: 243), I pointed out that John Purves (1910: 21), writing at the time when the Union of South Africa was formed, asserted that the South Africa at that time had not developed what he called an own “literary consciousness”. Besselaar (1914: 31) on the other hand, distinguished between “South Africa in Literature” and “South African Literature”. This is a distinction between mere subject matter on the one hand and “South African Literature” as a distinctive literature and a repository of a national consciousness on the other. He identifies the latter with Afrikaans literature. He regards Afrikaans a national literature since it emerged from groups of people with different European origins who came to develop a shared identity in the new country which shaped their history, experiences, values, language and literature. He writes:

A national literature represents national ideals and a national world view. Such a literature, which belongs to a people, vibrates with the memories of that people's past as well as with prophesies of the national future which breathes life into it. In it, everything which is beautiful and authentic in the people is reflected: it is a revelation of the individuality, the proof of identity, of the nation.

(Besselaar 1914: 31; my translation)

This view of Afrikaans literature as a proto-national literature, and the claims made for it, must be seen in the historical context of early Afrikaner nationalism. While this literature, in its 19th- and early-20th-century writings, articulated the desire for Afrikaner self-determination, it cannot be construed as representative of all South African literatures. It is nothing more than N.P. van Wyk Louw's idea of an "Afrikaanse nasionale literatuur". It arose from and gave expression to the life and experience of Afrikaners as a specific cultural group. The cohesion sought by Afrikaner unity was, however, soon challenged by dissident Afrikaans writers in the second half of the twentieth century.

Writing in the mid-1970s, Stephen Gray (1975: 2) pointed out "that the first problem in defining South African literature is that South Africa cannot be said at present to have a very precise sense of distinctiveness with regard to its literature in English". He attributes this to the fact that South African literature in English has not developed as a closed system but as one element or part within a "multilingual composite". How English fits into this larger cultural map posited by Gray, however, remains unexplained. For much of its history South African English literature was internally fractured, consisting as it did of white and black writers operating from divergent backgrounds, literary traditions and orientations. South African literature in English consists of colonial, liberal and radical writing by whites, while writing by blacks includes texts that range from colonial complicity to a variety of national liberation ideologies encompassing non-racialism, Pan Africanism, Black Consciousness, Socialist and all the shades in between as well as others, including liberal varieties. These ideological rifts, however, while inscribed in literary discourses and practices, are mentioned here not as a characterisation of the literature in English, but to suggest that while the *langue* happened to be English, the *parole* is heterogenous.

Chapman (1998: XVI) elects to leave "open" the question of whether a national literature exists in South Africa or other southern African societies. According to him, there is little consensus on how we might constitute a single South African literature where ethnicity was both encouraged and enforced. The absence of widespread literacy in a common language, which is a requirement for converting groups into nations makes the creation of a national literature difficult and dangerous. Furthermore, it would require a self-

conscious awareness by writers that they are contributing to a national literature and that their writings articulate some form of national allegiance in response to the idea of a nation. Since this is “doubtful”, the question as to whether a national literature exists in South Africa and the other countries in southern Africa “is permitted to remain open”. Whatever “open” and “doubtful” may otherwise mean, Chapman like his predecessors, circumvents the question to leave it unanswered.

5

I must conclude that a national literature does not exist in South Africa. What is to be found, as Shava’s (1989) study of a fragment of South African literature, that is mainly the politically oriented writing of black South Africans in English, is a literature of national liberation and, in opposition to this, the early ethnic nationalist literature in Afrikaans. Partly, and only partly, related to the latter are the various ethnic-based literatures in the indigenous languages. Taken separately or together, these literatures do not constitute a national literature when viewed against the criteria set out in this essay and the definition of a national literature this generated.

What is extant, is a disparity of literatures generated in different languages from different ideological perspectives. A national literature constructed metaphorically as a confluence of indices of commonality made up by a body of works bequeathed by the past in which a nationalist sentiment is expressed, is not to be found in South Africa. While the literatures in the various languages are not hermetically sealed-off entities they are not inscribed by a common identity whatsoever.

This notwithstanding, given the proclivities of nationalism even in what presently is a putative post-nationalist epoch of globalisation and eroded of nation-states in which multiplicity, diversity and difference take precedence over what the modernist impulses were towards singularity in which various nationalisms were forged, does not, speculatively at least, constitute an absolute impasse to future constructions of a South African national literature as defined in this essay. It has, as we have seen, been proclaimed without justification in the recent past. Its future announcement, need I say, will not be presented as a fabrication. It will be staged as the inevitable culmination of a teleology: this is as either purposive history or as the product of the economic contingencies of homogenisation.

Whatever form it takes, this invented narrative, to rephrase Bhabha (1990: 294) will have to reconfigure the “many” literatures into “one”. This singularity, of course, does not literally mean one literature in one language. Minimally, it presupposes a single all-embracing narrative with a nationalist

theme in which all the literatures are shown to have participated over time. This nationalist fiction until now, has not been produced with any degree of persuasiveness because it does not correlate to historical facts. If checked until now, its future production, however, cannot be ruled out.

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