Revisiting the Canon and the Literary Tradition: A South African Case Study*

H.P. van Coller

Summary

Literary evolution is a process that occurs in every literary system. Due to the fact that literary systems do not merely exist, but come into being, it follows that they organise and protect themselves; changes therefore do not readily occur. Literary evolution cannot be described in neopositivistic terms and neither can possible changes be accurately predicted. The whole process of literary change is affected by intersystemic aspects as well as "extraneous factors" like historical events. It is customary to describe literary evolution as the succession of "streams", "movements" or "periods". A period can be described as a "regulative idea", a system of norms and conventions. In this study the above-mentioned terms are discussed and their interconnectedness explained. Shifts in the Afrikaans literary system of the past decades are subsequently described and possible explanations offered.

Opsomming

Literêre evolusie is 'n proses wat in elke literatuursisteem plaasvind. Omdat literêre sisteme nie maar net bestaan nie, maar tot stand kom, is dit ook so dat hul sigself organiseer en beskerm, en derhalwe nie geredelik verander nie. Literêre evolusie kan daarom nie bloot in neo-positivistiese terme verklaar of voorspel word nie en intersistemiese aspekte speel 'n ewe groot rol in literêre evolusie as sogenaamde buite-faktore soos historiese gebeure. Dit is verder gebruiklik om literêre evolusie te beskryf as die opeenvolging van "strome", "bewegings" of "periodes". Laasgenoemde is duide-lik markeerbare norme- of konvensiesisteme. In hierdie studie word bovermelde terme eerstens bespreek en logies verbind. Vervolgens word verskuiwings in die Afrikaanse literatuursisteem van die afgelope dekades beskryf, en verklarings vir hierdie prosesse word aan die hand gedoen.

1   Introduction

The objective of the following study is to offer an interpretation and (hope-fully) an explanation of systemic shifts in Afrikaans writing during the past decades. After the dawning of a new democratic era in South Africa since 1990, and especially since 1994 when the first democratic elections took place, the expectation was that Afrikaans literature would now change dramatically,

leaving apartheid and politics aside. But the opposite happened, and many Afrikaans literary scholars have consequently pointed out that Afrikaans literature (which has made a historical turn since the sixties) (cf. Renders 1995, 1996; Van Coller 1995a, 1995b; Smuts 1997, 2000; Roos 1998; John 2000; and Du Plooy 2001), continued with this trait in the nineties. Van Coller (1995a, 1995b) went so far as to describe contemporary Afrikaans fiction as an obsession with the past. In his proposed topology he discerned two opposing tendencies in this revisiting of the past: nostalgia and parody. He also illustrated that these two approaches are underpinned by different conceptions of literature and different ideologies.[1]

2 Literary Systems

De Geest (1997: 102) discusses the nature of literary systems in depth. In his discussion he is indebted to the French structuralist, Piaget. Piaget defines a system as a totality, not as a clustering of elements at random; diverse elements are mutually linked on the basis of certain properties. Such a system is in a sense an autonomous entity which, although it is not hermetically sealed, is yet clearly distinct from the surrounding world.

   This implies that a system does not merely exist, but comes into being. It must differentiate itself from surrounding systems, fundamental and essential aspects are developed (and protected) and strategic differences with other systems are stressed.

   Piaget mentions that an important aspect of a system is the potential for change. By means of dynamic evolution it can stabilise, maintain and even transform itself. Especially in a situation of (revolutionary) changes the latter is a prerequisite for the maintenance of a system. On the basis of these arguments, De Geest concludes that cultural systems are characterised by "conservative" and "renewing" tendencies that can be described as the struggle between the canonised and noncanonised aspects.

   This potential for transformation and assimilation eventually are dependent on *autoregulation* (De Geest 1996: 108), the third aspect that can be associated with Piaget's concept of a system. This is the idea that systems are able to organise their own activities and that they do not give access to foreign elements. Those that are permitted are changed and adapted, rearranged, etc., on the basis of tendencies, aspects and needs of the system itself.

   So-called "open" and "closed" systems should, according to De Geest, not be seen as opposing concepts, but in terms of a gradual arrangement. It might even be the case that a certain system, in a certain stage of its evolution, may find itself on different points of this spectrum of openness and closeness. A relatively young system may initially be open for exterior influences and may

even actively seek exterior models and examples from other systems. In a later stage of its development it may isolate itself, and screen itself off from other systems in order to develop and protect its own distinctive characteristics. In a still later stage of development it may become so autonomous and resilient that it will open itself readily for other systems. As De Geest (1997: 165) points out certain strategies which need to be followed in order to change a system whilst openly challenging its "hard core", will only end in rejection.[2]

3   Decolonisation in Systemic Context

André P. Brink (1991) writes extensively on the relations between political decolonisation and literary decolonisation in Africa, southern America and the Third World. On the basis of the theoretical observations of Amuta (1989) and Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin (1989), Brink discerns three stages in the process of decolonisation:

- emancipation by appropriation of the moulds and traditions of the dominant culture,
- the emergence of a defying nationalism by means of which the "own" is demarcated and protected from that of the former coloniser,
- the third stage of almost complete emancipation, when there is such an assurity regarding the acquired identity that it no longer needs to be protected scrupulously.

Brink stresses that these three stages need not take place chronologically. In the first stage of Afrikaans literature, Brink argues, Afrikaans literature took as its models and examples texts from European literatures (most notably English and Dutch literatures). Due to the long history of strife between Afrikaners and English imperialism, and due to the fact that the Cape vernacular (early Afrikaans) was initially very near to Dutch, it is primarily Dutch literature that was utilised as example and model.

   In terms of De Geest's description of a literary system, it is clear that the Afrikaans literary system, in its early stages of development, was receptive to exterior influences. After the Second Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902) national-ism developed rapidly amongst Afrikaans-speaking whites ("Afrikaners") resulting in an impact on views of literature and literary approaches. In the first decades of the twentieth century prominent Afrikaans literary critics and literary historiographers (like P.C. Schoonees and E.C. Pienaar) unabashedly approached individual texts (and the even bigger literary context) from a nationalistic perspective. The Afrikaans literary system therefore displayed quite a lot of "insular" tendencies during this period, adhering to what Jurij

Lotman called the Aesthetics of Identification. Dramatic transformations of, and assaults on the system were at that time almost impossible, the censuring of such attempts being sanctionised.

A decade later N.P. van Wyk Louw (entrenched in the literary canon and still regarded as one of the most prominent Afrikaans poets) approached this assault on the literary system much more strategically and effectively. During the initial stages of his literary career Louw wrote essays on different aspects of culture. Though he was critical of many aspects of Afrikaans culture (e.g. the ineptness of leading literary critics, the absence of a profound critical tradition, the necessity of high literary standards, etc.) he still wrote with compassion and respect about key figures in the Afrikaans literature (notably poets), his writing being imbued with nationalism. After thus establishing his bona fides, Louw attacked more central aspects of the literary system. Strategically it is important that Louw operated from a nationalistic basis (even though he propagated a new version of the same, so-called "liberal nationalism").

Real emancipation in the Afrikaans literature happened, according to Brink (1991: 5), much later: initially during the sixties of the twentieth century, and thereafter it represented a salient feature of Afrikaans literature. Although Brink tends perhaps to judge his own contemporaries too leniently, one can generally concur in the main with his assessment that real emancipation increased considerably after the sixties of the twentieth century. In this period there was a marked tendency to follow international trends and movements. The so-called frontier literature (written during the South African frontier wars in the seventies) was influenced by Vietnam literature and the "faction"-, and documentary realism-movement in the USA. Literature published after 1980 clearly is indebted to postmodernism and postcolonialism with many important works exhibiting traces of (southern American) magical realism. In the majority of the above cases (as Brink argues) Afrikaans writers succeeded in creating a specific South African adaptation or interpretation of these trends.

Implicit in Brink's argument is that Afrikaans literature only became emancipated when it freed itself from extraneous influences and models. The examples provided by Brink illustrates his belief that this emancipation also amounts to an "inward turn": discovering Africa, (critically) rewriting your own history and a shift toward "democratisation" by making texts accessible to a larger corps of readers.

The real question is what emancipation really amounts to. Does it mean (as Brink seems to be implying) a democratisation in the sense that texts must be made accessible to more people? Does it imply a critical revisitation of history and "lieux de histoire" ("historical sites)? Is it necessarily writing in accor-

dance with postmodernist or postcolonial paradigms? Is (constant) revisiting the literary tradition or the canon (even in the forms of parodies) a form of emancipation (thus opening the system) or entrenching (closing) the system?

To address these issues we need a theoretical excursion.

4   Periodisation

When discussing the concept "periodisation", Wellek's definition (Wellek 1963: 225, 1970: 93) still seems to be widely accepted. According to him his concept is neither a metaphysical entity ("Platonic idea") nor a mere arbitrary linguistic label.

> It should be understood as a "regulative idea", as a system of norms, conventions, and values which can be traced in its rise, spread, and decline, in competition with preceding and following norms, conventions, and values.
>
> (Wellek 1963: 225)

It is, however, never easy to demarcate a period, since radical shifts seldom occur. This possibly explains why the use of the term "period" has been preferred in describing literature of the eighteenth and nineteenth century, whereas we tend to speak about "currents" or "movements" in literature after the twentieth century (cf. Fokkema & Ibsch 1987: 1). The concept of "generation" forms a part of periodisation, as such a generation may in fact be central within a specific time span that later may be termed a period. The so-called "Dertigers" and "Sestigers" in Afrikaans literature are cases in point, and in Afrikaans literary historiography these movements are seen as concurring with literary periods. In the treatment of Fokkema and Ibsch of the "modernism"-movement it becomes clear that the modernists should not only be seen as movement or current, but also as a literary period. In their discussion of modernism, Fokkema and Ibsch not only discern certain encoding practices peculiar to this movement (thus identifying it as a new literary code), but also describe modernism as a period with its own peculiar semantic, syntactic and pragmatic fields.

Literary evolution does not come about in a neopositivistic fashion, and thus no valid predictions can be made as to the rise, decline, and fall of any specific literature. The Russian formalists (notably Jurij Tynjanov) have described changes in any literary system as gradual change, an evolution. Literary evolution takes place against the backdrop of a literary system: a selection of literary norms and forms arranged in a certain hierarchy. Dominant elements in this hierarchy become automatised and are then replaced by less dominant ones (cf. Viljoen 1992: 549). This process refers to any feature of any literary

system (thematic features; genres, etc.) that, having become automatised, will lose its effect and consequently will have to be replaced. These changes affecting different aspects of the system need not take place at the same time, which implies that any literary system is a poli-system. Any given literary poli-system is autonomous in a sense, but as there are direct relations with "adjacent cultural, behavioural, and social series" (Fokkema & Ibsch 1977: 24), literary systems cannot be studied in isolation. This also implies that historical and social changes can affect the evolution of literary systems. As will be discussed in depth later, this is indeed true in the case of Afrikaans literature.

The above-mentioned relative autonomy of literary systems implies that any specific system has its own history, tradition and canon. This again results in the implication that any process of evolution will out of necessity be composed of traditional and renewing aspects. Howard Bloom's concept of "anxiety of influence" aptly illustrates this: "Any strong literary work creatively misreads and therefore misinterprets a precursor text or texts" (Bloom 1994: 8). Hans Robert Jauss's concept of the "horizon of expectations" is also a case in point. The reader's expectations have inter alia been formed by his or her reading experience (knowledge of the tradition) and any new literary work will add new norms (renewal). Strict adherence to the horizon of expectations will amount to "trivialliteratur". Every author confronts the canon anew; literary change is thus always the product of a dialectical relation between the text and surrounding elements (Viljoen 1992: 549).

Schutte (1992: 374) refers to Fokkema (1979) who clearly states that in literary communication there always exist simultaneously two apparently opposing tendencies: the tendency to enhance understanding by stressing the referential aspect of communication (the familiar), and at the same time the aesthetical effect which relies on surprise, the penetration of the familiar decoding methods (renewal). This in a sense rekindles Lotman's two opposing Aesthetics (of Opposition and of Identification). Bloom asks the (almost) rhetorical question as to what makes the great author and the great works canonical.

> The answer, more often than not, has turned out to be strangeness, a mode of originality that cannot be assimilated, or that so assimilates us that we cease to see it as strange ... uncanniness, their ability to make you feel strange at home.
> (Bloom 1994: 3)

What Bloom purports (in contrast with Lotman's dichotomous scheme) is that all "great" literary works exhibit a strangeness and that even works written within an era where the Aesthetics of Identification abounds, will never precisely adhere to the expectations of readers.

5   The Afrikaans Literary System After 1990

As stated before, Afrikaans literature is characterised by its historical turn, especially since 1990. Not only are certain historical texts rewritten, or sub-genres (like the farm novel) revitalised (Van Coller 1995c), but history itself is being rewritten and historical sites revisited. In the process voice is given to marginalised groups and individuals (cf. Van Niekerk 1994) by rendition of their little histories (often also by letting them narrate their own histories). This does not only occur in (historical) novels but also in poetry (cf. Krog 2002). Translation is another strategy in this process. Antjie Krog translated several poems written in indigenous tongues into Afrikaans *Met woorde soos met kerse* [*With Words Like Candles*] which was published in 2002. In 2004 she again published an anthology of translated poems *Die sterre sê "tsau"* [*The Stars Say "tsau"*]. This latter collection consists of poems (so-called /Xam-poems) translated from the San language.

   The work of poets as diverse as Marius Crous 2003; Melanie Grobler 1991, 2002; Antjie Krog 2000; Johann Lodewyk Marais 2004 and Gert Vlok Nel 1993 (to mention but a few only) is also illustrative of the preoccupation with the past and the revisitation of historical sites as diverse as texts, periods, writers, etc..

   Amongst others Glorie (2003) referred to the concept "cultural memory" as a theoretical approach that can cast new light on these revisitations of the past in current Afrikaans literature.

5.1 Cultural Memory and the Traumatic Past

Cultural memory is out of necessity an "employment" of the past from the perspective of the present in order to structure the future. This especially is apparent in the case of traumatised societies or countries. Whilst some theorists have maintained that revisiting of the past results in the re-enactment of traumatic experience (Adorno 1986; John 2000), many others differ decisively. Many articles in Bal, Crewe and Spitzer (1999) emphasise the need for traumatic memories to be legitimised and narratively integrated in order to lose their hold over the individual or group who suffered the traumatising events in the past.[3]

   Kansteiner (2002: 187) remarks that traumatic experiences do not retain that traumatic quality if the memory successfully becomes a collective memory (as in literature it indeed does), memory is an action: essentially, "it is the action of telling a story" (Bal 1999: ix). Collective memories, says Kansteiner (2002: 188) originate from shared communications about the meaning of the past "that are anchored in the life-worlds of individuals who partake in the communal life of the respective collective". This possibly explains the focus in contemporary

Afrikaans writing on the Second Anglo-Boer War and the era of apartheid. Certain events like the Korean War can be termed "failed" collective memory – events, like wars, will sometimes be commemorated but then again forgotten. Likewise certain events could be called "repressed collective memory", as the atrocities of the British against women and children (in the Second Anglo-Boer War) and the reprisals of the Allied Forces against German civilians in the aftermath of World War II most possibly were. These latter types of memories apparently occur when victorious groups or nations were never compelled to openly confront their past, like postwar Germany and post-apartheid South Africa were forced to do.

5.2 History and Memory

Nora (1989: 8) makes a distinction between *history* and *memory.* History "is the reconstruction, always problematic and incomplete, of what is no longer"; memory "is a perpetually actual phenomenon, a bond tying us to the eternal present; history is a representation of the past". By this distinction Nora proposes that in this quest for memory there must occur a shift from the social to the individual, "from the objective message to its subjective reception, from repetition to rememoration" (Nora 1989: 15). His reference to the past as "a land apart" is important. A historical text tries to resurrect this past; while it in fact should be a question of representation. "Representation proceeds by strategically highlighting, selecting samples and multiplying example." This way of representation of the past is apparent in the novels of Karel Schoeman, one of the most prominent writers in Afrikaans. In his representation of the past he makes use of all the elements of traditional historiography (archives, documents, etc.) but also tries to smell the past, hear the footsteps and voices, and eventually to afford (often marginalised and mute) personae from the past the opportunity to speak for themselves. All of these individuals have their own specific focus on the past, in a sense all of them are "struggling to find individual identity, a new moral identity" (Burger 2001: 89). In this process Schoeman focuses on specific sites of memory (as in his *Stemme* trilogy) thus almost illustrating Nora's words: "Memory attaches itself to sites, whereas history attaches itself to events." (1989: 22)[4]

   In almost all of these accounts André P. Brink's impassioned pleas for a more Africa-oriented literature (Brink 1985 and 1991) are seen as an important impetus. The earlier, experimental novels of Brink, who was one of the most important Afrikaans modernists, were imbued with all the typical modernist theories and traits. Since the seventies however, his work has focused almost exclusively on (initially contemporary) South African history. Later he also used aspects of colonial Southern African history as a setting for many of his subsequent important novels.

5.3 Historical Writing as Assessment of the Present

In the case of Brink, Hella S. Haase (1985: 174) and Nelleke Noordervliet's (1995: 71) remarks are apt: historical writing is always more about the present than about the past. Brink's many novels were often rewritings of South African history, revisiting of sites of memory and reinventing of South African myths, but always from a contemporary perspective. It is thus clear that this "historical turn" of Afrikaans literature is above all about coming to terms with a traumatic past. It is also a process of cultural recall: a rekindling of forgotten histories, a strategy to let marginalised histories be known and marginalised voices be heard, a shift from totalising discourses to "petites histoires" – all written from a very specific ideological perspective, that of an extremely critical (re-)evaluation of Afrikaner nationalism and its history and myths. "Myth" is described by Gelderblom (1991: 47) as the ideological reversal which portrays a historical reality (comprised of dialectical oppositions) as a harmonious whole of natural essentials. A myth comes into being when *culture* is presented in terms of *nature.*

5.4 Afrikaans Literature as Debunking and Demythologising

Contemporary Afrikaans literature abounds in examples of the debunking of Afrikaner myths and sacred sites of memory. Some of the most enduring Afrikaner myths are the pious, religious and valorous Afrikaner patriarch, the chaste, steadfast Afrikaner wife and mother ("volksmoeder") and the defiant Afrikaner warrior and hardliner. Sacred sites of memory are the Great Trek, the Afrikaner farm, the Anglo-Boer War. All these myths and sites have given rise to many novels, short stories and poems. In the case of the farm novel the farm is imbued with metaphysical overtones. The farm is often portrayed as a utopia, free from the corrupt influences abounding in its antithesis, the city. Core aspects are a lineal consciousness (hereditary succession), the hierarchical social structure (often along gender and racial lines), its inalienability and that it is proffered as a valid claim to a piece of South Africa itself.

Many of the most important recent Afrikaans novels attack these myths and sites of memory vehemently. The majority of these novels have also been translated in the last few years and have enjoyed great success abroad. *Triomf* by Marlene van Niekerk parodies the first two mythological archetypes. Her core Afrikaner family consists of a "patriarch" whose forebears lost their precious farm and still longs for it. They now live in poverty and the patriarch is engaged in an incestuous relationship with his sister, the travesty of the pious Afrikaner wife. Like her mythological predecessors she too is the fibre that bounds this family together, but ironically by engaging in sex with her brothers and her son!

J.M. Coetzee (1985, 1988) wrote seminal studies on the Afrikaans farm novel and allusions to this subgenre abound in his internationally acclaimed novel, *Disgrace.* However, international critics ignored the very important implications these allusions and intertextual relations with important Afrikaans (farm) novels have for a possible interpretation of Coetzee's novel (cf. Van Coller 2003).

Other important Afrikaans novels debunk the archetype of the valiant and honourable Boer officer in the Second Anglo-Boer War. Christoffel Coetzee's novel *Op soek na generaal Mannetjies Mentz* [In Search of General Mannetjies Mentz] and *Die swye van Mario Salviati* [The Enduring Silence of Mario Salviati] by Etienne van Heerden are critical rewritings of a sacred piece of Afrikaner history, namely the Second Anglo-Boer War, 1899-1902 (also incorrectly referred to as the South African War). Coetzee's main character is a villainous Boer general who is guilty of the most atrocious deeds, yet proclaimed a hero. In this fictional account – rendered as a factual historical account – Coetzee not only equates his infamous characters with characters accused of atrocities in the Truth and Reconciliation Hearings, he in fact suggests that Afrikaner history is rife with villains. Pretorius (2002: 74) makes out a strong case for the argument that the Boer officers were extremely valiant and religious men and good leaders. Yet it is precisely this cadre that is parodied and stereotyped by Coetzee and Van Heerden. This "Boer bashing" should be seen in context. Both Coetzee and Van Heerden use this to accuse the Afrikaner leaders during the apartheid era, who were responsible for many atrocities but never accepted any responsibility for their misdeeds.

In this revisiting of historical sites it is conspicuous that attention is now also given to forgotten (or repressed) memory. Cuthbertson, Grundling & Suttie (2002: xiv) writes on the Anglo-Boer War:

> It is still important to note, however, that in contrast to the way the war is embedded in Afrikaner memory, relatively little is known about the conflict's long-term impact on African historical consciousness. Nasson's pioneering work [Nasson 1991] on the martyrdom of Abraham Esau and the Coloured community of Calvinia has yet to find a counterpart that deals with African memories of the war.
>
> (Cuthbertson, Grundling & Suttie 2002: xiv)

Esau's story is revisited by no less than four prominent Afrikaans authors (Karel Schoeman in *Verliesfontein,* P.J. Philander in *Rebunie,* Johnita le Roux in her novel *Kus van die winterskerpioen* and Elias Nel in his work *Iets goeds uit Verneukpan?)* which illustrates that recounting the misdeeds of the past (which as a collective past belongs to you) has all to do with morality.

5.5 Inventing a Tradition

Eric Hobsbawn (1983) illustrates how traditions are often invented to imply continuity with the past. André P. Brink is prone to do just that in his novels where the slave, the oppressed but free-spirited wife, the conscientious intellectual and the emancipated and promiscuous female are often presented as archetypes thus creating a form of tradition: In Brink's writing Camus's rebel has its forerunner in the rebellious and runaway slave, and Sartre's individuals, plagued with existentialist vagaries and problems, their historical prototypes in several historical figures and types from South African history.

Eilande by Dan Sleigh, Karel Schoeman's *Armosyn van die Kaap* and André P. Brink's *Donkermaan* are all rewritings of (aspects of) the history of the Dutch East India Company's reign in the Cape. In the process not only forgotten or suppressed history is brought to the fore, but personae with mythical proportions in traditional historical accounts like Jan van Riebeeck, Simon van der Stel, etc. are portrayed as human beings with human failings. The cruelty of a political dispensation, based on neglect of human dignity and driven by greed, is emphasised and parallels with the apartheid era are often drawn. Clearly these postcolonial novels "desire to contest the power of the colonizer, and assert the authority of the oppressed subject" (Attridge & Jolly 1998: 8).

What is clear from recent Afrikaans literary texts (whether poetry or prose), is that the rendition of the past does not merely include parody, but that a nostalgic stance can also be discerned – often in one and the same text. Texts can thus not be categorised in the form of binary oppositions, but *parody* and *nostalgia* should be used as markers on a scale. This calls to mind what Leo Spitzer wrote on nostalgia:

> Nostalgia, Halbwachs argued, frees individuals from the constraints of time – in effect, it enables a transcendence of the irreversibility of time – permitting persons to stress positive experiences and aspects of the past selectively. It recalls in Suzanne Vromen's words, "a world from which the pain has been removed".
> (Spitzer 1999: 91)

Nostalgia, in the words of Bal (1999: xi) is "only a structure of relation to the past, not false or inauthentic in essence". For many Afrikaans writers this nostalgic turn often provides alternative means of dealing with the (often traumatic) past.

Kansteiner (2002: 180) emphasises the fact that collective memory is not history, though it is sometimes made from similar material. It is a collective phenomenon, but it only manifests itself in the actions and statements of individuals. Collective memory is thus understood as collectively shared

representations of the past. By opting for representation of the past by I-narrators from different racial and social groups Sleigh, in his novel, clearly illustrates that there is no collective memory of the past in South Africa, with all its divisive effects on the present. Collective memories usually have a strong bias toward the present (cf. Kansteiner 2002: 183).

6   Replenishment or Extension of the System: A Dilemma.

It thus becomes clear that in spite of what Brink joyously termed emancipation of contemporary Afrikaans literature, a danger looms in the sense that many texts are still characterised by insular tendencies in that they either are too obsessed with the past or pay too much homage to international trends. Afrikaans writers are creatively rewriting history, parodying seminal canonical texts and subgenres. This critical revisitation is in itself valid but an obsessional preoccupation with the historical past can also be an inhibiting factor in the development of a literature.

Many, and also diverse novels, like *Die jakkalsjagter* by Alexander Strachan, *Inteendeel* by André P. Brink, *Eilande* by Dan Sleigh, *Gesprek uit die kolonies* by Marius Crous and *Daar's vis in die punch* by the teenager Jackie Nagtegaal, were not always that positively reviewed. One of the repeated objections was that these novels were cast in the mould of foreign models and that they merely curtsied to current literary fashions. Brink (1991: 10) accused Strachan (who was the winner of a prose competition) of the self-complacent play of superficial games. Brink himself was often accused of running after foreign fashions, Sleigh's book was termed as another illustration of the theories of Hayden White, and Marius Crous was not only blamed for following in the footsteps of Antjie Krog, but also of merely making a literary adaptation of postcolonial theory.

What is abundantly clear, is that there are marked similarities between literary systems and scientific paradigms, as Kuhn defined the latter. Fokkema and Ibsch (1987: 15) refer to Karl Eibl who is of the opinion that literary evolution has a parallel in the evolution of the sciences: "[I]n literature some 'crypto-theories' survive, while others, perhaps the majority, are discarded after some time thus causing a succession of literary systems". Paradigms change when certain of their central aspects are questioned or seen as defunct. Fokkema and Ibsch thus state that literary texts provide tentative answers to particular concrete problems. Often central figures within a specific paradigm will go to great lengths to protect and even to adapt the paradigm. It is much easier for people on the margins (the periphery) of the system to change to a new paradigm. This is also the case with the overthrow of any system, e.g. an evolutionary or a revolutionary political change. In South Africa it is clear that

many agents in the Afrikaans literary field are at present propagating (although only implicitly) a new system which functions as a more encompassing South African literary system.

This system is a direct result of the new political dispensation where the ideal is a "new" South Africa, the rainbow nation, yet where only one language, English, is favoured. Although major propagandists of this new South African literary system (like Antjie Krog, Reza de Wet and Deon Opperman) are reluctant to go so far as to openly favour English as substitute for Afrikaans, they all publish more (or in the case of De Wet, exclusively) in English. Another strategy, inter alia followed by Krog (and in itself a valuable example of literary "import") is to replenish or extend the current Afrikaans literary canon/system. This boils down in the first instance to the importing of new models, books, themes etc., preferably from autochthonous literatures, but also from extraneous (like Dutch) literature. In the second instance strategies are devised to change/extend the current Afrikaans canon/system by re-evaluation of historical (and often marginalised) texts. This happened with the publication of the new anthology of Afrikaans poetry by the Dutch poet and compiler of anthologies, Gerrit Komrij (1999). Komrij not only almost discarded the traditional Afrikaans poetry canon by his inclusions of "marginal-ised" poets, he also included historical poems written in Dutch and the Cape vernacular.

Elleke Boehmer remarked that now that there is freedom in South Africa

> it will be liberating to see the lens of vigilant social observation crack across to give life skewed, fragmented, upended, not by apartheid as before, but as part of the manipulation of aesthetic form, of the testing of visionary, hallucinatory, dislocating, non-camera-ready ways of representing the world.
>
> (Boehmer 1998: 53)

There are many signs that this is indeed taking place in Afrikaans literature.

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Notes

1.   Kansteiner (2002: 184) says in this regard: "Attempts at historicizing memory such as Nora's indicate that our crises of memory are concomitant with crises of identity." In almost all accounts of contemporary historical writing in Afrikaans and in numerous political comments in newspapers mention has been made of an Afrikaner identity crisis.

2. Van Coller and Odendaal (2004) provided several examples of recent attempts at replenishing or challenging the Afrikaans literary system.

3. Brink remarks in this regard:
    > Yet, if artists were really to refrain from confronting certain territories of experience, would that not amount to an additional insult to our humanity? If at least a large measure of what makes us human is vested in language (however imperfect, treacherous, or tentative that language may be) then nothing could possibly be excluded a priori from the endeavours of language.
    > (Brink 1998: 20)

4. Memory has never known more than two forms of legitimacy: historical and literary. These have run parallel to each other but until now almost separately. At present the boundary between the two is blurring; following closely upon the successive deaths of memory-history and memory-fiction …. History has become our replaceable imagination .... History has become the deep reference of a period that has wrenched from its depths, a realistic novel in a period in which there are no real novels. Memory has been promoted to the centre of history: such is the spectacular bereavement of literature.
    (Nora 1989: 24)

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