

Literature as History, Literature as Mathematics: A contribution to the debate about African and Metropolitan Literature

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This article attempts to define ways in which, in present-day South Africa, African and metropolitan literature in English might perhaps coexist – both within the minds of readers, critics and students, and within the syllabuses of some of our English Departments.

Recent months have been a time of intense political and social stress, culminating in the state of emergency which is now upon us. All these developments have increased the pressure on South African academics, especially those working in the humanities, to clarify their concepts of relevance. How can we try to contribute, through our teaching and research, to the transformation of South African society, to the formation of a new, altogether more just and humane social order? How – to use another, perhaps more controversial terminology – can we be sure that our work in English Departments is generally a part of “the struggle”? Perhaps I should say at this point that my overall political position is that of the UDF – though I need hardly add that that umbrella organization has not formulated a policy in every area, and has certainly not attempted a programme for university English departments. (There has of course been considerable support within the UDF for the National Education Crisis Committee’s general but still fairly undefined notion of “people’s education for people’s power”: this must in the end involve, however, as far as I can see, not a simply “democratic” voting-in of the syllabuses that the students want, but an open discussion between the students, who realize what can make sense to them, and the teachers, who are likely to know the full range and implications of the subject.)

Having raised rather sharply – some may feel, a little alarmingly – the question of relevance, I must go on to say that my own notion of relevance is a relatively broad one. But it might be asked: how can that be so? Surely a broad concept of relevance is no true relevance at all? I don’t believe that to be so. This is of course a complex matter. The main point about relevance seems to me to be a willingness constantly to pose certain sorts of question about the teaching that one is doing, the areas and the works that one is studying and inviting students to study. A broad concept of relevance simply means that one is prepared to accept that a fairly wide range of works, of areas of study, may fall within the net of relevance – of what seems in these circumstances to constitute human, social and political usefulness.

I think one has to steer clear, particularly perhaps at times of political crisis, of too narrow, almost too panicky a notion of relevance. Let me suggest two analogies. One remembers that at a time of war (I think for example of Britain in 1939) not everyone is invited or allowed to fight in the front line:

large numbers of people need to stay back in order to maintain and strengthen the elaborate network of interlocking activities which make up the overall “war effort”. Or to glance, for example, at soccer: no team would function well if every player, struck by the need to score goals, chased the ball at every moment; the team which wins is the one in which the right players are in the right place at the right time – and yet, still, everyone’s eye is constantly on the ball.

One obviously cannot generalize easily about South African university English departments. Each department has its own history and its own necessities. The composition of some student bodies is very different from that of others. At some universities metropolitan literature, as I am calling it – the literature of Britain and the United States – may often seem to most students to be fairly distant and alien, while at others this literature, or much of it, may strike many students as being reasonably accessible. Then there is the fact that everywhere the situation of, and the situation in, English departments is continually changing. The views of many members of staff are undergoing constant modification; the nature of most of the student bodies is changing from year to year. Everything, as we know, is unusually fluid. There will be nothing wholly static, then – certainly there will be nothing merely Platonic – about what I shall propose as a tentative way of conceptualizing the relationship between African and metropolitan literature within our minds and within our syllabuses.

In 1987 it is unnecessary, I take it, to argue at length in favour of the presence of the literature of South Africa and of other parts of Africa in our teaching programmes. I myself believe strongly that this literature should feature prominently in our normal English I, II and III core syllabuses, and not be merely shunted aside into optional sub-courses, or into separate courses or departments (not that I disapprove of such further opportunities for the study of this literature).

The study of the literature of Africa is a necessity for the students that we teach for the simple reason that it grows or has grown in the immediate world that we live in. That is to put the argument in geographical terms. Perhaps one penetrates a little further by seeing the question in terms of history, history conceived of not simply as a way of describing the past but as a flow, a complex stream of happenings and thoughts that is forever passing from the past into the present and on towards the future.

A South African student of English who somehow managed to avoid studying any of the literature of Africa would almost inevitably end up with a distorted view of literature. Such a student would be likely to lack a sharp sense of literature as an emanation of immediate reality, as something that is always different, always unique, for all the traditions and conventions – a phenomenon which grows out of the elaborate complication of life as we know it, with its personal and social, its psychological, political, cultural, economic and other facets. The student that I’m imagining might gain a certain historical sense from metropolitan literature, but he or she might well never grasp the degree to which both literature and history are *us*.

But literature, if we are to allow the word any of the special resonance that it has acquired in the last two centuries (but behind this resonance lies a history of poetic theory stretching back to Aristotle) – of course literature in this sense is never merely history. Indeed it must define itself to some extent *against* history. I don't want to attempt a large definition here, but literature might well be thought of as that which emerges in the flow of history but detaches itself, to a greater or less extent, from that flow, so that it is able to be read and appreciated in its own terms, and (so to speak) for its own sake, in a way that most other modes of writing are not.

Many of the statements that I have made might apply also, up to a point, to the literature of other parts of the Third World – and certainly we need to find room and time for such literature.

But what is one to say of the literature of Britain and the United States? In what terms exactly, nowadays, would one attempt to explain or account for its presence on our syllabuses? I am assuming that it is not untrue but that it is not quite adequate to say, simply, "A lot of great literature has been written, and it is clearly our role to study and teach it." The questions are: what do we select, and how do we select, and *why* do we select? Which areas of metropolitan literature might be considered to be particularly relevant, even on the rather broad assessment of relevance that I suggested earlier on?

I have associated the literature of Africa with history, with our particular history, but of course metropolitan literature is in varying degrees a part of our history too. If we are to think of the English language as having a history, obviously all metropolitan literature would be deeply involved in that. And for some of our students (as I've said) aspects of the literature and the cultural history particularly of Britain are alive and immediately challenging. Indeed, given the cultural interfusions that have taken place in this country despite the desperate fence-building of the apartheid-mongers, various facets of metropolitan literature – especially perhaps of its poetry – seem to be fairly accessible to many literate South Africans.

Nevertheless the questions of selection and of relevance remain. It is at this point that I want to float, very diffidently, my mathematical analogy. It seems to me that metropolitan literature deserves and needs to be studied and taught in our universities whenever (or as far as possible whenever) it can reasonably be thought of as offering a reading of human psychology, life and society that has for us a status more or less equivalent to that of a *theorem* in mathematics. A theorem I take to be a proposition or insight, based often on other propositions or insights, which is of more or less permanent value in our thinking and perceiving.

This part of my argument, I realize in retrospect, has some relation to one put forward by Wordsworth in his 1800 Preface. Employing a rather more idealistic vocabulary than I've tried to use, and alluding not so much to mathematics as to physics (the science that by then had been dominant for well over a century), he describes his and Coleridge's poems as having attempted to make the "incidents and situations" that they present "interesting by tracing in them, truly though not ostentatiously, the primary laws of our nature".

Is a theorem ahistorical, then? No. All theorems, whether in mathematics or in literature or indeed in physics, come to birth at specific historical moments; they could not have occurred, at least in that form, at any earlier period. They are thoroughly built into history. But they are, I would suggest, to some extent transhistorical: their usefulness is not confined to the period or place which produced them.

My mathematical metaphor, even if it can be granted some validity, doesn't take us very far. It certainly doesn't usher us into a realm of objective and verifiable certainties. All kinds of new questions start up. At what point does a body of literature or a particular literary work attain theorem status? And once we've decided on some of the significant theorems, which of them are especially valuable to us? When do theorems lose their potency? These are all questions that are likely to be answered not only differently by different people or groups of people, but in different ways at different times. We are in a fluid evolving situation. (In any case, mathematicians also debate such issues, though in rather different terms.)

And yet the metaphor from mathematics may serve some purpose: it may suggest a principle other than a simply historico-geographical one for privileging or foregrounding certain areas or works of literature. If it cannot propose firm answers, it may at least suggest certain questions. But why have I invoked mathematics rather than some of the more normal arguments from aesthetics or literary theory? Because those areas of discourse seem at the moment perhaps to be throwing up more problems than solutions.

I should add, I think, that my metaphor is no more than a metaphor. I certainly don't wish to suggest that there is anything cold, abstract or unvivid about metropolitan literature: Ted Hughes may often be quite as alive to us as Douglas Livingstone, and Wordsworth may well be more vivid to most South Africans than Thomas Pringle.

Then too I don't want to imply that there is no sense of the theorem in African literature. Perhaps the metaphor may help us to characterize that element in literature which is not just history: it is the theorem, the thesis, the textured and enacted proposition which rides upon but also beyond history's flow.

What kinds of conclusion might one try to draw from the points that I have been making? Many of them, I'm afraid, are fairly obvious. I have been aiming (as I hope is clear) not so much for a new and revelatory way of seeing the coexistence between African and metropolitan literature as for a way of defining it which might do justice to both sides of the relationship.

In a syllabus which contained a fair amount of metropolitan literature, one might well focus on (say) the nineteenth-century novel, both British and American, and on Romantic poetry, and on Elizabethan and Jacobean drama and poetry. These are bodies of literature which, besides being rich in ways I don't need to describe, grow from and express periods and viewpoints which have a distinct bearing on contemporary South African experience. Here indeed, then, are relevant and viable sets of theorems – whole geometries and trigonometries which we can make human and social use of here and now.

But then what of the slightly more *recherché* and difficult elements in metropolitan literature – the metaphysical poets; Milton; Richardson, Fielding and Sterne; the medieval writers; some of the lesser figures of the twentieth century? At this point one's mathematics becomes more obviously personal. I myself would like to get in as much as one reasonably and validly can; but one has to try to make up a hierarchy of theorems. Some areas must become optional, presumably; others must unhappily drop away, if they haven't already done so.

Then one might look at some individual works, and take up issues that have been raised in various contexts. It might be valuable to spell out one's reasons for studying Wordsworth's "Daffodils", for example: the poem appears on South African syllabuses not because we don't look at good poems about cosmos and strelitzias (for we do), and not because most teachers of English have a crazy sentimental or neo-colonialist belief that there is something extra-specialy poetic about the Lake District and English flowers, but because the poem says something very important about one form of the relationship between human beings and the world of nature and about the subtle workings of the imagination and the psyche. So too, in various different ways, with Keats's nightingale, and Shelley's west wind, and Chaucer's pilgrims, and Shakespeare's Rome and Venice, and Yeats's Byzantium, and Blake's London, and Eliot's London.

I've suggested that both African and metropolitan literature may be seen partly as history, partly as a sort of mathematics, and that at the moment they are inevitably jockeying for position in our syllabuses and perhaps in our minds too. I'd like to conclude by saying something about what I see as the positive *value* of teaching African and metropolitan literature in the same department, in the same syllabuses.

It seems to me that a certain amount of mutual illumination and cross-reference is possible. One must beware, however, of seeming to tame or merely "co-opt" the literature of Africa. But to see vital links and similarities is not in my view to tame. (On the other hand it would obviously be inappropriate to place too heavy an emphasis upon such links.)

Let me take an example. I once found myself lecturing to an English III class, in the same week, on *King Lear* and on Mutlootse's short-story anthology *Forced Landing*. I found that the notion of *dishonour* developed by Matshoba in his account of the Bantu Administration officials in his story "To Kill a Man's Pride" remarkably similar to what Shakespeare pictures in Regan and Cornwall as they confront and maltreat Gloucester. A comparison of that sort, touched on briefly, serves also, incidentally, to reinforce both the stature of Matshoba and one facet of the continuing relevance of Shakespeare.

That brings me to another point. Critics of African literature have often tended, understandably, to stress that one must not either attempt to evaluate this literature by inappropriate Eurocentric criteria or hold false ideas or expectations of "universality". But such an emphasis is sometimes unnecessarily defensive. My own belief is that a good deal of the literature of Africa is impressive by any criteria, and that a fair amount of it is – if not "universal"

(but then how much literature is truly “universal”?) – at least of pretty general human interest and applicability.

One can put forward such views as these, I believe, without underplaying the very special qualities and purposes of both African and metropolitan literature.