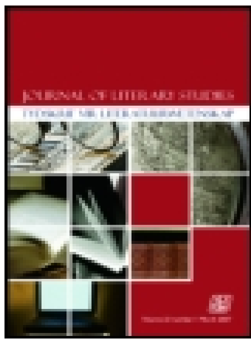

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Literature, politics and universalism: A debate between Es'kia Mphahlele and J.M. Coetzee

Leon de Kock

Summary

A debate is constructed in the field of South African literary aesthetics between Es'kia Mphahlele's "African humanism" and J.M. Coetzee's" post-modernist practice. The two writers are linked by their approach to the "problem" of creative writing in South Africa in relation to political factors. Where Mphahlele makes a distinction of value between "local" and "transcendental" forms of expression, arguing that political constraints prevent South African writing from transcending the "tyranny of place", Coetzee regards the local/universal polarity as an ideologically loaded construct within which a certain order of terms are subservient. For Coetzee, dealing with politics must first be addressed at the level of the politics of writing, while Mphahlele situates the "problem" of politics outside the sphere of lanugage.

Opsomming

'n Debat word gekonstrueer op die terrein van Suid-Afrikaanse literêre estetiek tussen Es'kia Mphahlele se "Afrika humanisme" en J.M. Coetzee se postmodernistiese praktyk. Die "probleem" van skeppende skrywe in Suid-Afrika gekoppel aan politieke faktore, is die bindende faktor tussen die twee skrywers. Mphahlele sien 'n waardeverskil tussen "lokale" en "transendentale" vorme van uitdrukking. Sy argument is dat politieke begrensings Suid-Afrikaanse skrywe tot die "tirannie van plek" beperk. Coetzee weer, beskou die lokale/universele polariteit as 'n ideologies gelaaide konstruksie waarbinne 'n sekere orde van terme werkbaar is. Vir Coetzee moet politiek eerstens op die vlak van die politiek van skrywe gehanteer word, terwyl Mphahlele die "probleem" van politiek buite die sfeer van taal situeer.

In this paper I have abstracted a "debate" from selected writings of two key figures in the field of South African literary aesthetics, Es'kia Mphahlele and J.M. Coetzee. My real subject thus concerns aspects of "South African literary aesthetics" in the last 30 years or so: Coetzee and Mphahlele are discussed because they appear to represent contrasting positions in relation to a central question during this period. This question, put simply, relates to the possibilities and conditioning circumstances of South African writing and criticism. Or, put negatively, the question concerns the "problem" of South African (English) writing, especially in its relation to politics (in the broad, historical sense of this word) as a strongly determining factor. Although Mphahlele and Coetzee both focus on fiction in English, their implicit aesthetic assumptions appear to be held with more general reference. I do not pretend to be impartial: in the process of outlining these positions (especially Mphahlele's more overtly theoretical position), I have allowed myself to enter the debate.

Of course, one can hardly discuss the subject of "South African literary

aesthetics" as though this were a single or homogeneous entity: the value systems projected in South African English literary activity are so varied as to make such a concept theoretically naive. One can, however, take a view of the subject as a convergence of aesthetic and cultural imperatives contesting the site of English-language writing and criticism in South Africa (and here, too, one must qualify by adding that the "English-language" is meant in a non-purist sense). One can therefore argue for the existence of a "site of contention" within writing in English, but then it should also be obligatory to acknowledge that aesthetic systems arising out of Afrikaans and vernacular writing/uttering must also form an important part of any overall view of "literary aesthetics" in South Africa. Within such a field, the only possible way of proceeding seems to be from the particular to the general.

In this instance, Mphahlele has been chosen as a starting-point because his aesthetics bring together, in a particularly unique way, conceptions of cultural value vis-a-vis politics which are drawn from both the highbrow institutions of English teaching in South Africa, and from the field of actual literary production in its more popular forms. In addition, his and Coetzee's positions, when placed in juxtaposition, begin to suggest a framework for the subject which seems generally instructive. In short, the juxtaposition places Mphahlele's conception of African humanism in opposition with Coetzee's post-modernist practice. However, the debate constructed here is, by its nature, highly selective and does not pretend to reflect fully the multifaceted components of current literary aesthetics in South Africa. Such a task would necessitate consideration of a wide range of views, including those of writers like Njabulo Ndebele, Mbulelo Mzamane, Nadine Gordimer, to name but a few. I wish merely to consider the theoretical implications of two very pronounced positions within the field.

Mphahlele has, over many years, articulated his own, clearly defined theory of aesthetic conditions in South African writing. His contribution to the literary-critical debate in South Africa has been substantial: he is one of the few South African critics to have attempted, in *The African Image* (1974), a systematic theoretical and critical overview of writing in this country. In 1956, six years before the first appearance of *The African Image,* Mphahlele was working on *Drum,* and fulfilled the position of a figurehead of a group of writers whose work, in the more commonly accepted view, contributed to a mass readership[1] in an increasingly urban, industrial and capitalistic setting. This was the decade when apartheid was being consolidated in a series of repressive laws, including the Suppression of Communism Act (1950), The Population Registration Act (1950), the Group Areas Act (1950), the Bantu Authorities Act (1953), the Native Laws Amendment Act (1952), and the Bantu Education Act (1953). It is tempting to see the role of these writers as serving a proletarian readership within a capitalist hegemony buttressed by the elite cultures of Afrikaans on the one hand, and English liberal humanism on the other. To some extent, there is a tendency to romanticise the "Drum" generation for just this reason, but one need only look at the sheer literary sophistication of writers like Can Themba, Nat Nakasa, Mphahlele himself and others to realise that the position cannot be nearly so simple. In Mpha-

hlele's case, there is the curious (if inevitable) paradox that while he was part of the real process of producing what one may term a kind of "popular culture", he was also reading for an MA at a culturally reactionary institution, the Department of English at the University of South Africa. *The African Image* grew directly out of Mphahlele's MA thesis, entitled *The Non-European character in South African English fiction* (1956), which was the first senior degree to be awarded a distinction by the Department of English at the University of South Africa.[2]

An interesting process of symbiosis seems to have resulted from the snooty elitism of English departments such as they were then and the thinking of Mphahlele. It is not difficult to demonstrate, with substantive proof, that the dominant aesthetic in English departments in 1956 was a bourgeois, humanist programme based on what Michael Vaughan has called "the concept of a universal aesthetic order" (Vaughan, 1984: 37). English departments then, and some feel now still, fulfilled a supremely political role by marginalising all works and procedures outside the programme of what Rory Ryan calles "the humanist agenda insofar as humanism dovetails with the ideals and activities of a civilized and civilizing colonial patriarchy" (Ryan, 1987: 1). Here one may add that this programme was implicitly in cahoots with state apartheid by depoliticising the field of literary studies with an appeal to "universals". It did this, ironically, by institutionalising "an imperialistic discursive form under the guise of a neutral (objective, truth-serving, self-evident, ideologically disinterested) rationality" (Ryan, 1987: 4). The concept of "universalism" was used as a key idea to push a particular *conception* of supposedly inherent literary value. An epistemological system evolved which posited oppositional conceptual structures as natural, and thus one finds "parochial" vs. "transcendant", "specific" and "local" ranged against "universal", "political" and "propaganda" opposing "symbolic" and "complex", when in truth these oppositional concepts were no more than an ideological predisposition which sought to avoid at all costs any direct involvement with South African society, South African politics (of which, ironically, such a predisposition is an integral part) and South African culture.

Conclusions similar to these have been carefully argued and very well substantiated,[3] and it would serve little purpose to labour the point here, although the *political* ploys of pretending not to be political, or of pretending to be political in a voguish way while really marginalising "lesser value" all over again, remain realities of cultural power in the South African English academy. My real interest here is to analyse the apparent contradiction between Mphahlele's ostensible role as a producer of "popular" culture and his academic role as a propagator of, surprisingly, "universal" literary value. It seems a reasonable deduction that Mphahlele was to some extent influenced by the aesthetics of an English department where he read for a BA degree, an honours degree and an MA. There is also evidence of this influence in his critical writings.

One encounters, in *The African Image,* a broad condemnation of South African English writing by white writers from Pringle through to the early Gordimer. Mphahlele identifies the "problem" of these writers as their inabil-

ity to portray black characters "in the round" (Mphalele, 1974: 130-31). The black characters in the works of these writers, Mphahlele avers, appear as savages, degenerates, "children of the wasteland", migrants, as "man with a halo", "menacing servants", rebels and finally, the "annoying" category of an "aspiring Zulu" (1974: 136–193). Against this, Mphahlele discusses work by Joseph Conrad, E.M. Forster and William Faulkner, in which, according to him, black characters are portrayed with more fortunate results. In his discussion of these writers, Mphahlele uses commendatory phrases such as "untrammeled by labels and provincialism", "in the round", "emotional catharsis", "not just a black man whose problems are externalized in terms of racial discrimination" and the like (1974: 126–131).

These observations are capable of arousing several reactions. They look and sound like a rule-of-thumb application of critical standards based on the idea of "transcendental" or "universal" value, where complexity of characterisation in Forsterian terms is sought. These are critical standards which have held firm in English departments for many decades, although in the late 1950s they enjoyed the confident status of an unquestioned agenda for literary studies.[4] However, by analysing the above categories of response by white writers to their black characters, Mphahlele provides, almost contrary to his methodology of applying value judgments based on literary standards of complexity, an astute analysis of how his South African authors are themselves being *written into* their works or, as J.M. Coetzee puts it in a different context, are written by their books. Coetzee hints at "a particular kind of writing, writing in stereotyped forms and genres and characterological systems and narrative orderings, where the machine runs the operator" (1984: 13). It strikes me as extremely valuable to analyse the kind of process which Coetzee describes, in that it exposes the concealed cultural imperatives and patterns of thought underlying apparent figurative unities within works of writing. It seems that Mphahlele directed his criticism primarily at the *object* of writing itself, the text. For him, value lay in the text rather than in an analysis of the cultural processes which produce the text or in the social uses of texts. Indeed, in a later essay, he dismisses the idea that literature can "mobilze people for social action" and asserts that "literature is an act of culture, of self-knowledge, revitalizes language and keeps it alive, increases the reader by expanding his capacity to feel and think" (Mphahlele, 1983: 24). These comments, in their emphasis on individual refinement, indicate standard liberal humanist proclivities. Elsewhere, Mphahlele also stresses the need for literature to be "transcendental", when he says "I mean literature in the sense in which we speak of a process of tradition and refinement, a memorable act of language with transcendental possibilities" (1983: 14).

Mphahlele's critical disposition, which he himself describes as "African humanist" (1981: 1), is however not quite as straightforward as all this. He uses the vocabulary of local/universal not to impose a colonial/bourgeois ideology, but out of a great sense of frustration as a South African writer himself. He often decries the "tyranny of place" and the restrictions of "ghetto"-perception in his writings, on the grounds that South African writers are never able to be comprehensive, and can never escape the distortions of

limited perception arising from a society divided by apartheid. In *The African Image,* the point is made as follows:

> We are all trapped, black and white, in South Africa. Ours is a history of frontier wars, covered wagon invasions, racial strife. Our literature must perforce record this. The writer feels impelled to register human behavior [sic] at various levels of the racial experience. He tries to impose his kind of order on a chaotic situation. But what are we to think when he begins to believe that he has said all there is to say, because patterns of stimulus and response have become set, predictable? (1974: 133)

In this contention, there seems to be an assumption that literature has a direct and empirical correspondence with "patterns of stimulus and response" which exist in society. Since these "patterns of stimulus and response" have become solidified in social relations, Mphahlele argues, writing about such a society is equally constrained. Speaking of his own practice as a writer in *Down Second Avenue,* Mphahlele says:

> That's the trouble: it's a paralysing spur; you must keep moving, *writing* at white heat, everything full of vitriol; hardly a moment to think of human beings as human beings and not as victims of political circumstance. But one must crack up somewhere. Maybe this is it for me. I'm sick of protest creative writing and our South African situation has become a terrible cliché as literary material.... (1959: 210).

Reading this, one can begin to see how the academic standard of universality ("human beings as human begins") came to represent, for Mphahlele, an ideal community which sounds a lot like the Leavisian ideal of an "organic community" in which "labour was not alienated but a fulfilling exercise of genuine craftsmanship, life and death were made meaningful by an instinctive connection with the soil and the rhythm of the seasons, and if most of its members were illiterate, they nevertheless had their own folk art and a richly expressive oral tradition which nourished the roots of higher culture" (Lodge, 1971: 271). The key concepts here are unity, coherence, continuity. Compare, in this regard, Mphahlele's complaint that

> In the absence of a national literature that is defined by common ideals, sentiments, major concerns, South African writers find themselves speaking, recording and replaying from separate cubicles, talking to minute constituencies. (1983: 25)

Another dimension of this complaint is that

> The poetry, the plays, the novels we write are unfortunately not aimed at that very sizeable segment of Africans who are literate but who are not educationally equipped to penetrate literary complexities. (1981: 6)

The problems of writing "from separate cubicles", in Mphahlele's view, are thus manifest. One writes in a state of disturbance and without the sense of an organic, integrated and just community in which a kind of "recollection in

tranquillity" would both be possible and appreciated within a common value system. Significantly, in the ideal set-up, the tyranny of politics would be absent: politics acts as a *dehumanising* agent, as implied in the statement that there is "hardly a moment to think of human beings as human beings and not as victims of political circumstance". In the apartheid state, Mphahlele argues, one either creates stereotypes of characters of another race, and/or one becomes too obsessed with day-to-day political concerns (1959: 210). Political content expresses itself in a "manifesto" or a "sociological text" (1983: 24), and the problem then is first that one produces literature with no possiblity of "transcendental" value, and second that literature has very little effect on the processes of power and tyranny in any case. So one is left with a perfect Catch-22: the only really worthwhile writing is writing which would arise from a "national literature" stripped of the divisions of apartheid and the limitations of necessarily vulgar political content, but such writing remains impossible for as long as we remain as we are. Taken to its logical extreme, Mphahlele's position implies that writing should be suspended pending the realisation of what he expresses as a "Pan-African consciousness" (Mphahlele, 1981: 12).

In reality, however, Mphahlele solves the contradiction by distinguishing between two orders of writing:

> [The literature from Blacks that began to emerge during the late Sixties] is at once a response to the immediate, to the instant, and a direct, urgent confrontation with the dominant political morality. The dramatization of a message is the major concern. The intention to *make* literature is either ignored or subdued. I mean literature in the sense in which we speak of a process of tradition and refinement, a memorable act of language with transcendental possibilities. (1983: 14)

Although Mphahlele, in these later essays, has avoided overtly evaluative conclusions and stated contentions like the above in a wry tone of accepting the inevitable, the conclusion is inescapable that the two orders – the "immediate" and the "transcendental" – are used in an evaluative framework. The transcendental would be possible only within the Pan-African ideal, while the immediate, inside the South African balkanisation, must perforce remain provisional. Overall, Mphahlele appears to have argued within the framework of a fairly standard humanist programme for literature, but redefined the ideal of "universality" to mean a projected political and aesthetic ideal for South Africa, an integrated society which is in touch with the rest of Africa. Mphahlele concludes his essay entitled "The tyranny of place and aesthetics: The South African case", with the following words:

> The artist's aesthetics may very well link up with the aesthetics of other African nationalities as these develop a Pan-African consciousness. So that the larger African landscape will become the writer's field of reference. He must, however, first confront the tyranny of his local setting and deal with it. (1981: 12)

What appears to be ironic about this position is that Mphahlele seems to want

to reject social and historical *determination* as long as such determination derives from divisive social and aesthetic structures, but that his own position itself appears to be strongly determined by culturally specific factors. The distinctions between immediate and transcendental, between writing for the transient present within a fractured society and writing for transcendental value within an organic community, are based on critical suppositions which can be traced back to facets of the critical ideology of British humanism, an ideology which itself was a major partner in the division and subjugation of people in South Africa. In addition, the implication that the relegation of art to "political circumstance" will disappear in the future ideal, is by no means certain. Raymond Williams has noted, admittedly in a different context, that "If there is one thing certain about the organic community, it is that it has always gone" (quoted by Lodge, 1971: 272). Here, we might add "that it will always loom in the future". For the present, at least, it is an idealisation which necessarily leads to idealist critical practice (and here "idealist" must be taken to read as the converse of "materialist", although this term is not without its own difficulties).

If the ideal of a "Pan-African consciousness" does remain chimerical, the question arises whether one can continue to displace certain important procedures of criticism pending the millenium, while restating dissatisfaction with present and past writing on the basis of critical concepts which depend on a fairly fixed value judgment. If one uses a critical code which argues that there is no directly *causal* relationship between culture and revolution, then one is forced into seeing writing either as provisional and deficient now, or capable of attaining perfectablility later, when the ideal has been achieved. Few people would argue that culture alone *can* bring about the desired revolution, but there appears to be merit in switching attention from the elusive ideal of the "transcendental" literary object after the revolution, to the reality of the processes involved in making the imperfect literary objects we presently have. The "balkanisation" of culture which Mphahlele rightly decries presents to critics a formidable challenge in terms of revisionist analysis. However, such analysis will not be possible on the basis of the kind of evaluative framework described above, simply because the conclusions have become implicit in the methodology – the conclusions would always precede the analysis.

J.M. Coetzee enters this debate from an entirely different perspective, but with a strikingly similar aim: to create a universalised fictive mode within the South African balkanisation. In *Life & Times of Michael K* (1983), Coetzee appears to create a universal victim of apartheid, with the difference that his intention appears to be to do this only to show that it cannot be done. Coetzee seems almost to be responding to Mphahlele's challenge to create a fully perceived character across the racial divide, except that in doing so, Coetzee finds that his character is in fact utterly determined by his position in time and place on the one hand, and beyond the grasp of epistemology and figurative meaning on the other. The tyranny of place and of aesthetics is absolutely supreme in Coetzee's novel, yet it remains a workable novel. Coetzee has in fact employed the problematic which Mphahlele sees as inherently limiting

for literary/cultural production, as the inevitable material for writing about the South African situation. What he brings to it in a new way is a post-modernist spirit of reflexivity, counterbalancing his efforts to symbolise the plight of Michael K with a strong sense of the inability of language to "capture" meaning. Ultimately, there is a recognition that even the attempt to "transcend" the more vulgar social categorisations of apartheid by entering the symbolic or "universal" realms, is doomed to failure. Imputations of "symbolic" meaning are shown to be just another form of the tyranny of camps, restriction and confinement so pervasive in *Lifes & Times of Michael K* as a whole.

From the beginning of the novel, Coetzee resolutely resists classifying Michael K in terms of race. Although his name, as given by Coetzee, is itself enigmatic, it can be deduced (or so it seems) that Michael is from the servant-class of people living in the Cape Peninsula. From this one assumes a racial category which is fairly obvious, but it is interesting that the author himself avoids using the label. One may regard this as somewhat disingenuous, but the apparent purpose, to "universalise" Michael K, is later questioned by the author himself in an implied author-subject dialogue (a dialogue which finds full expression in Coetzee's next novel, *Foe* (1986)). In not taking his cue from official-style population registration as the first step towards defining a person in South Africa, Coetzee refuses to participate in the processes of classification and confinement which his character nevertheless encounters at every juncture in the story.

However, in avoiding the "ghetto"-stereotypes pointed out by Mphahlele, Coetzee faces a new problem: how to describe and characterise his protagonist within the figurative dimensions of fictive language. He cannot merely replace bureaucratic labels like "Cape Coloured" or "Black male" with labels of his own, no matter how figuratively universal they may appear to be, since this would undermine the belief that *all* classifications are the enemies of freedom (this is a belief with strong thematic weight in the novel). So one finds in the narrative many metaphors jostling for predominance, in such profusion that they almost cancel each other out. In counterpoint to the busy author seeking more and yet more words, Michael himself is mostly silent (in fact, he seems to be a prefiguration of the dumb character Friday in *Foe*). A fictional dialectic thus develops of which freedom and confinement are the parameters and which is reflected in terms of both the novel's thematic content and its technique. The outcome of the story is that Michael escapes both the camps and the attempt to impute meaning to him. He literally climbs over camp fences and slips through the gaps between words.

Apart from his silence, Michael is described as being mentally backward (Coetzee, 1983: 4), so that a tension is established between his own perception of himself (described in terms of a "gap", a "hole", a "darkness" (1983: 150-151)) and the author's recreation of him in terms which irresistably lead outward into symbolic signification. This tension is reflected in the narrative, where the story is told from within Michael's consciousness, and in which Michael is given to understand concepts and speculations which he could not possibly understand. This means that there is a consistent irony within the

modus operandi of the narrative itself. While the author, in recreating Michael's story, reveals the tyranny of camps and classifications, he is forced to create a second order of classification – the symbolic order – to find an alternative definition in language within which Michael is to be held, this time by the morally sanctimonious humanist writer. As indicated, this accounts for the extraordinary number of metaphors seeking to find the essence of the "meaning" of Michael K. Michael is variously described as the "stony-ground" (1983: 65), a "savage" (72), "as insubstantial as air" (80), "a gardener" (81), "a termite" (91), "an ant" (114) " a speck" upon the surface of the earth (133), "a wild man all skin and bone and rags rising up out of the earth at the hour of batflight" (145), "a worm" (147), "a parasite dozing in the gut", "a lizard under a stone" (159), "a skeleton" (178), an "opgaarder" (188), a "simpleton" (193), "a poor idiot" (194), "the obscurest of the obscure" (195), "a figure of fun, a clown, a wooden man" and "a stick insect" (204). And these are only a few examples.

In the face of this plethora of descriptive vocabulary, the authorial voice begins to falter and question its own procedure. Examples of narrative anxiety become prominent when Michael is given to speculative thinking about his situation. At one stage, Michael (who was originally employed as a gardener) reflects on the importance of gardening during a war, or at least the "idea of gardening" (150), as though a man like Michael would make such quaint distinctions between the real thing and the "idea". The following paragraph reads:

> Between this reason and the truth that he would never announce himself, however, lay a gap wider than the distance separating him from the firelight. Always, there remained a gap, a hole, a darkness before which his understanding baulked, into which it were useless to pour words. The words were eaten up, the gap remained. His was always a story with a hole in it: a wrong story, always wrong. (150–151)

Accumulatively, a paradox begins to manifest itself: while the novel reads fluently, in smooth and often beautiful prose, Michael's "story", when *he* tries to speak of it or think of it, is inchoate, disordered and often devoid of meaning. His memories "all seemed to be of parts, not of wholes" (67), he reflects early in the novel. And when he tries to tell his story to people who befriend him near the end of the novel, he stops halfway:

> It struck him that his story was paltry, not worth the telling, full of the same old gaps he would never learn how to bridge. (240)

Coetzee shows an awareness of the tension between a writer's meaning and a character's reality when he transliterates Michael's thoughts but simultaneously qualifies his own words:

> The lesson, *if there was a lesson; if there were lessons embedded in events,* seemed to be not to kill such large animals. (78–79, emphasis added)

At another point, Coetzee writes:

> He could lie all afternoon with his eyes open staring at the corrugations in the roof-iron and the tracings of rust: his mind would not wander, he could see nothing but the iron, the lines *would not transform themselves into pattern or fantasy:* He was himself, lying in his own house, the rust was merely rust ... (158–159, emphasis added)

In both cases, the emphasised clauses register a sense of exhaustion with the manipulative processes of fiction, while the main body of narrative reflects a continuing desire to search for and find meaning. But is meaning recoverable? Coetzee finally confronts this question in Part II, where he hands the narrative over to the medical officer. The result is partly the ironic detachment which often arises from the distance between author and first-person narrator, partly an identification with the medical officer, since both he and Coetzee try to write meaning into Michael's story. If one reads the medical officer's imaginary addresses to Michael as an analogue of the dialogue between author and subject, then several questions can be seen to arise. For one thing, Coetzee questions the luxury of creating a "universal soul" out of the human mess that is his projected future South Africa at war. In the medical officer's imaginary confrontation with Michael (and it is significant that this and other addresses are not actually delivered to Michael), he says:

> Did you think you were a spirit invisible, a visitor on our planet, a creature beyond the laws of nations? Well, the laws of nations have you in their grip now; they have pinned you down in a bed beneath the grandstand of the old Kenilworth racecourse, they will grind you in the dirt if necessary. The laws are made of iron, I hope you are learning that. No matter how thin you make yourself, they will not relax. There is no home left for universal souls, except perhaps in the Antarctica or on the high seas. (206–207)

Of course, this address, in an imaginary letter, works on a literal level first: the officer wants Michael to eat, and he imagines himself persuading Michael that he cannot escape the needs that bind all people. But, at the same time, the address reads as the author concluding that even the most "universal" of creations cannot in the end escape the crushing realities of the "laws of nations". Read in this manner, Coetzee is posing the question of how far one can go beyond, and escape, the political realities dominant in a place like South Africa in the process of creating fiction, the same distorting realities which Mphahlele sees as suffocating and rendering writing non-transcendental.

However, even this "message" is called into question when the medical officer imagines himself running after a frightened Michael, pelting words at him:

> At this moment, I suspect, because such is your nature, you would break into a run. So I would have to run after you, ploughing as if through water through the thick grey sand, dodging the branches, calling out: "Your stay in the camp was merely an allegory, if you know that word. It was an allegory – speaking at the

> highest level – of how scandalously, how outrageously a meaning can take up residence in a system without becoming a term in it. Did you not notice how, whenever I tried to pin you down, you slipped away? I noticed. Do you know what thought crossed my mind when I saw you had got away without cutting the wire? "He must be a polevaulter" – that is what I thought. Well, you may not be a polevaulter, Michael, but you are a great escape artist, one of the great escapees: I take my hat off to you!" (227–228)

Michael K, a South African Houdini, seems to be an escape artist from meaning. The reference to "an allegory of . . . a meaning taking up residence in a system without becoming a term in it" may refer to the social reality of people living in camps and ghettos (a system) without having a say in whether they want to be "terms" in a system of camps or not. But if this is also the author talking about his character and his fiction, he is expressing frustration about, or at least awareness of, how the "meaning" of Michael K exists in a system of meaning in which he is not himself a "term", i.e. his terms of meaning are created for him by others such as the medical officer and the author. The terms of meaning, the interpretation, are *put upon* Michael, just as the camps enclose him, yet he slips away every time an attempt is made to pin him down. Coetzee is here concurring with Mphahlele about the danger of *set* and predictable meanings (Mphahlele, 1974: 133), but he is also turning Mphahlele's proposition on its head: if Mphahlele would like to see more "universal" human creations than the stereotyped products which he sees as "determined by the race problem" (Mphahlele, 1974: 128), Coetzee is saying, yes, but even the "universal" character is a falsification, and will always be a falsification in any social system. The inbuilt irony about the above passage is that while it unfolds, the "real" Michael is sitting on a beach, utterly unaware of the medical officer transforming him into a "meaning" in an "allegory".

Where Mphahlele questions the ability of writers to capture comprehensive meaning as a result of limited perception, Coetzee locates the meaning-gap at the more primary level of language itself. He cannot escape a post-modernist awareness of the circular self-referentiality of fictional language masquerading as a somehow "objective" truth about the world, especially when the language carries a history of subjugation and colonialism and is then used, imperialistically, to "explain" the very people who have never been independent "terms" in that language and its history. This is Coetzee's problematic as an "interpreter" in this novel. He does suggest some very profound symbolism, "universal" enough, but he can no longer pretend that this meaning is adequate. So, in a sense, he is really analysing his role as a writer, entering into the "narrative" of South African fiction, and confessing to the impossibility and near-treachery of such a project given his status and historical/cultural determination. Perhaps this is why in his latest novel, Coetzee has virtually abandoned the attempt to deal comprehensively, or at all, with the South African set-up, writing instead about writing.

Conclusion

In his acceptance speech for the 1981 CNA literary award, Coetzee makes a case for regarding the entity "South African literature" not as a "national" literature, but as a "provincial" literature. Coetzee writes:

> The question I should like to ask tonight is a simple but, I think, radical one: whether there is adequate reason for calling *any* of the bodies of writing in English coming out of Africa and carried on within national boundaries national literatures; or, to put the question more precisely, whether there can be a good motive for thinking of them as national literatures other than the political motive of wishing to open in [sic] the energies of writers for national ends. (Coetzee, 1981: 2)

Coetzee poses this question on the basis of a belief that any innovations in or adaptations of form, while writing in English, can only happen in relation to "metropolitan" culture. He argues as follows:

> The important adaptations of form to make new expression possible have not typically taken place on the peripheries of civilizations. They tend to take place where the overlay of old forms is densest and where the resistance of old form to new expression is felt most oppressively, that is to say in the cultural centres of civilization, which I will gather together under the name of *the metropolis*. (1981: 4)

It seems to me that this point can usefully be placed against Mphahlele's call for a "Pan-African consciousness" within a national literature which in Coetzee's words, "gives expression to national aspirations and, in some general sense, becomes part of the national struggle for survival, independence, unity, hegemony, or whatever" (1981: 2). Coetzee does not seem to be making the reactionary point that a national literature is undesirable, just that a national literature in the pure sense seems an unlikely ideal given the cultural relationships within which English writing occurs anywhere in the world.

This is a tricky point capable of much argumentation, and without going into such a debate, it does seem inescapable that a degree of metropolitan cultural determination is inescapable within the field of South African English writing and aesthetics. In terms of my argument in this paper, the practice of both Mphahlele and Coetzee are seen to be strongly related to metropolitan aesthetics. Mphahlele's African humanism is founded on key aspects of the critical practice which evolved out of metropolitan humanism, while Coetzee's writing clearly employs a post-modernist philosophy, which is, in some sense, a reaction against the epistemological self-confidence of humanism.

The point that metropolitan and "provincial" cultures are interrelated is perhaps obvious. What is pertinent for our present purposes, however, is the uses we put to our metropolitan inheritances and the degree to which we are aware of their presence, especially when these inheritances appear, through cumulative use, to be "natural" and "objective" truth-serving apparatus. If we examine Mphahlele's argument, a key supposition is the idea that lan-

guage reflects experience unproblematically, that if social experience is trapped in division and fragmentation, fictional language is equally trapped, since it has an empirical relationship with the world at large. Overlaying this supposition is the notion that there are two orders of literature, the parochial or immediate and the transcendental, and that the transcendental is possible only within a South African/African version of the organic community. From this there arises what appears to be a "natural" evaluative framework which draws on humanist, and ultimately bourgeois, conceptions of cultural value. The limitation of this approach in our present situation is that it represents what some may regard as an act of closure in a cultural and political situation which demands maximum reflexivity and adaptability if we are to break through established and repressive ways of thinking.

Coetzee's contribution to South African aesthetics in the practice of his fiction, which has served as a corrective to certain key humanist assumptions within the South African context, has been well-documented.[5] For our purposes here, Coetzee enters into a "debate" with Mphahlele by contesting the empirical function of imaginative lanugage on the one hand, and certain assumptions of value on the other. On the central point, which is the impossibility of creating a "universal" character in a fictive mode which can approach "transcendental" significance, Mphahlele and Coetzee are in agreement. However, Coetzee arrives at this point from the opposite direction. Like Mphahlele, he recognises the local/universal or provincial/metropolitan axis. The difference, though, is that he does not accept this axis as implying opposite measures of value. Rather, he sees the imposition of "universal" value as a culturally and politically problematic venture, both in a general sense and more specifically within the South African historical nexus. A key element in his view is an awareness of the ideological weight of certain uses of language. Specifically, where Mphahlele sees language as naturally reflecting a local/universal polarity, Coetzee regards the local/universal polarity as an ideologically loaded construct within which a certain order of terms and language applications are subservient. For Coetzee, therefore, dealing with politics must first be addressed at the level of the politics of writing and the politics of one's assumptions about language and "reality" within a discursive mode which is inherently imperialistic. For many black writers the politics of writing are obviously different. Such writers may wish to undercut precisely the notions of form, beauty, permanence, symmetry and transcendence (which Mphahlele implicitly seeks) because they reject the ideological content of such notions.

Notes

1. According to Visser (1976: 48), *Drum's* readership in 1954 had grown to 100 000, 30 000 of that outside South Africa. See also Visser's description of Mphahlele as the "elder stateman" of the "Drum" group (1976: 48).
2. Mphahlele (1959: 196) himself provides this information.
3. See the entire issue of *Critical Arts* on "English Studies in Transition" (1984: Vol 3, No. 2), as well as Ryan (1987).

4. See Ryan (1987).
5. See Michael Vaughan (1982), Stephen Watson (1986 and 1983), and Paul Rich (1982).

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