Textuality and worldliness: Crossing the boundaries

A Postmodernist Reading of Achebe, Conrad and Lessing

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Summary

In its oppositional discourse postmodernism emphasises, among other things, the need for an incisive critique of the excesses to which an unqualified belief in reason has led. This need opens up a space for responses to literature such as Chinua Achebe's reading of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, in which he accuses the author of being a NAZI type of racist, guilty of the dehumanization of Africa and the setting of men against each other. Achebe's "hard look at Conrad" is firstly placed within the postmodernistic framework of Said's theory of culture by means of an investigation of the complexity of the relationship between the text and the world in Conrad's novel; and then within the wider context of texts by non-African writers, such as Doris Lessing, who have made different kinds of use of African space.

Opsomming

Postmodernisme se opposisionele diskoers beklemtoon o.a. die noodsaak vir 'n indringende kritiek van die oordadigheid waartoe 'n ongekwalifiseerde geloof in die rede lei. Hierdie behoefte skep 'n ruimte vir Chinua Achebe se soort radikale interpretasie van Joseph Conrad se *Heart of Darkness*, waarin hy die outeur beskuldig van 'n soort NAZI-rassisme, wat verantwoordelik is vir die dehumanisering van Afrika en die opsweep van mens teen mens. Achebe se krasse benadering tot Conrad word in die eerste plek binne die postmodernistiese raamwerk van Said se kultuurteorie geplaas d.m.v. 'n ondersoek van die komplekse verhouding tussen die teks en die wêreld in Conrad se roman, waarna dit benader word binne die breër konteks van tekste deur nie-Afrika skrywers, soos Doris Lessing, deur wie Afrika-ruimte op verskillende maniere gebruik word.

The ongoing debate around Postmodernism has seen it being set up to embrace a great variety of complex issues, almost to the point of being all things to all people. Kirsten (1988: 20) describes this state of affairs as follows:

> Nie alleen duik dit in 'n verskeidenheid van diskoerse op nie, maar daar bestaan binne hierdie gespreksverbande ook geen eenstemmigheid oor hoe postmoderniteit formeel omskrywe, sy wesenlike aansprake getakseer en sy posisie binne die huidige kulturele formasie opgesom moet word nie. Is dit, heel elementêr gesien, 'n konsep, 'n teoretiese paradigma of is dit (ook) 'n praktyk, 'n kwessie van artistieke styl bv., of dalk 'n nuwe kulturele beweging? Presies waar, in watter vorm(s) en met welke effek manifesteer dit sigself? Is dit 'n profetiese tydsdiagnose in die kultuurkritiese tradisie van 'n Rousseau en 'n Nietzsche, 'n illusielose mag van radikale demistifikasie, of 'n simptoom van verval en impotensie, 'n afbrekende poging van die kant van ontnugterde gewese Marxiste om die dissipline en kontrole van 'n rasioneel-geleide beskawingsproses te saboteer? Wat word met 'n 'afskeid van die Moderne' geïmpliseer? Het ons te make met 'n destruksie of 'n transformasie van die tradisie? Is postmoderniteit alleen op 'n

anti-modernistiese grondslag moontlik of kan dit ook as 'n kritiese voortsetting van die Moderne, as 'n selfverligting van die Verligting, verstaan word?

No matter what the answers to the question posed above, what does transpire from this description of Postmodernism is that we are living in a poststructural period, in the sense that the boundaries between different forms, between different practices, between different disciplines, between different discourses, become less rigid. Literature and literary criticism, for instance, can no longer be seen as existing by and for themselves, but merge into a larger cultural whole; and in more general terms a new postmodernist as opposed to modernist reconciliation is proclaimed between art and reality – "nie deur die werklikheid na die beeld van die kuns te verander nie, maar deur die kuns in die wêreld tuis te maak" (Kirsten, 1988: 26). But while a less rigid boundary implies a movement beyond, as in a movement beyond the boundary of modernism to postmodernism, it also implies the merging of what is on this side of the boundary, with that which is beyond. The postmodern thus seems to be unable to free itself entirely from the modern:

> Dit is moeilik om die suspisie te onderdruk dat die postmoderne denke alleen retories vir sigself 'n transendente status opeis, terwyl dit implisiet en in feite gebonde bly aan die vooronderstellinge van die Moderne wat deur Hegel bloot-gelê is, nl. die filosofie van die subjek.
> (Kirsten, 1988: 31)

In the light of the above, the space opened up for the activity of the literary critic would appear to be situated somewhere between the postmodern and the modern, in the area from which a postmodern perspective can be brought to bear on the modern. Not only has this space been opened up but its occupation is also a matter of urgency:

> Oor die aktualiteit van die problematiek wat deur die postmodernisme aan die orde gestel is, kan daar geen twyfel bestaan nie. Dit is onteenseglik so dat dit in sy redekritiek die Achilles-hiel van die Moderne projek ontbloot het, t.w. die prinsiep van die subjek-gesentreerde rede en die egoïstiese en imperialistiese konsekwensies wat uit die aanvaarding van die idees van 'n outonome, rasionele subjek en 'n rasioneel-gewaarborgde vooruitgang in die geskiedenis voortvloei.
> (Kirsten, 1987: 23)

Chinua Achebe's reading (1978) of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* can be situated in this space opened up by the need for an incisive critique of the excesses to which an unqualified belief in reason has led. In the following extract he does indeed seem to highlight the "egoistic and imperialistic consequences" resulting from the "acceptance of the ideas of an autonomous, rational subject and a rationally assured progress in history":

> The point of my observations should be quite clear by now, namely that Conrad was a bloody racist. That this simple truth is glossed over in criticisms of his work is due to the fact that white racism against Africa is such a normal way of thinking that its manifestations go completely undetected. Students of *Heart of Darkness*

will often tell you that Conrad is concerned not so much with Africa as with the deterioration of one European mind caused by solitude and sickness. They will point out to you that Conrad is, if anything, less charitable to the Europeans in the story than he is to the natives. A Conrad student told me in Scotland last year that Africa is merely a setting for the disintegration of the mind of Mr Kurtz.

Which is partly the point. Africa as setting and backdrop which eliminates the African as human factor. Africa as a metaphysical battlefield devoid of all recognizable humanity, into which the wandering European enters at his peril. Of course, there is a preposterous and perverse kind of arrogance in thus reducing Africa to the role of props for the breakup of one petty European mind. But that is not even the point. The real question is the dehumanization of Africa and Africans which this age-long attitude has fostered and continues to foster in the world. And the question is whether a novel which celebrates this dehumanization, which depersonalizes a portion of the human race, can be called a great work of art. My answer is: No, it cannot.
(Achebe, 1978: 8—9)

The kind of humanism exposed by Achebe's reading is one firmly rooted in a particular kind of historical belief in enlightened reason, a nineteenth century belief that there are less advanced peoples such as those in certain parts of Africa, that these peoples ought to be treated humanely, and that advanced people share a critical interest in Western civilization, especially its impulse to colonize Africa. The extent to which a belief in reason has led to egoism, imperialism and even arrogance suggests that an important function of the postmodernist critic involves the development of post-rationalist and post-humanist views of the concepts of reason, the subject and history. The relationship between the text and the world is a major issue for the post-modernist critic in the development of these concepts, and can serve as point of departure for further investigation.

In his reading of *Heart of Darkness* Achebe at first appears to posit a direct relationship between text and world in equating Conrad, the man in "real" history, with Marlow who is one of two narrators, while making no mention of Conrad, the author. After referring to *Marlow's* description of his African fireman:

... to look at him was as edifying as seeing a dog in a parody of breeches and a feather hat, walking on his hind legs ... He ought to have been clapping his hands and stamping his feet on the bank, instead of which he was hard at work, a thrall to strange witchcraft, full of improving knowledge.
(Conrad, 1950: 106)

Achebe's conclusion about *Conrad* is the following:

As everybody knows, Conrad is a romantic on the side. He might not exactly admire savages clapping their hands and stamping their feet, but they have at least the merit of being in their place, unlike this dog in a parody of breeches. For Conrad things being in their place is of the utmost importance.
(Achebe, 1978: 5)

Later in his argument Achebe shows that he is fully aware of the strategies Conrad has employed "to set up layers of insulation between himself and the moral universe of his story" (1978: 7), such as having Marlow as primary narrator but with his account given to us through the filter of a second shadowy person. He still maintains, however, that Conrad has not provided an alternative frame of reference, that Marlow has Conrad's complete confidence and therefore that the attitude to the African in *Heart of Darkness* is Conrad's. Conrad may not have provided an alternative frame of reference, but what we need to ask is whether the one that is provided, does not lead Achebe to premature conclusions; whether the relationship between the text and the world has not been understood too one-sidedly, has not been weighted too much in favour of the world. To what extent has Achebe allowed for the complexity of the relationship between text and world?

One of the major critics grappling with the issue of this complexity is Edward Said, who places his attempt at addressing it, in the space provided by a postmodernist perspective. For him criticism must always be oppositional in that one of its most important functions is to guard against an entrapment within rigid boundaries, a solidification of knowledge within hermetic systems:

> In its suspicion of totalizing concepts, in its discontent with reified objects, in its impatience with guilds, special interests, imperialized fiefdoms, and orthodox habits of mind, criticism is most itself and, if the paradox can be tolerated, most unlike itself at the moment it starts turning into organized dogma.
> (Said, 1983: 29)

As the title of Said's text, *The World, the Text and the Critic* (1983) indicates, his position is that although it is not possible to apprehend the "real" world directly through texts, they are "worldly, to some degree they are events, and, even when they appear to deny it, they are nevertheless a part of the social world, human life, and of course the historical moments in which they are located and interpreted" (1983: 4). He suggests that there are "ways by which texts impose constraints upon their interpretation", that "the closeness of the world's body to the text's body forces us to take both into consideration" (1983: 39). Joseph Conrad, for instance, is the type of author "who deliberately conceives the text as supported by a discursive situation involving speaker and audience; the designed interplay between speech and reception, between verbality and textuality, is the text's situation, its placing of itself in the world" (1983: 40). Said describes the Conradian encounter as more than a meeting between a man and his destiny embodied in a moment of extremity . . . it is "just as persistently, the encounter between speaker and hearer" (1983: 44). For Said the opposition between texts and the world is untenable, as historical, ideological and formal circumstances firmly place the text in the world. His thesis is "that any centrist, exclusivist conception of the text – ignores the self-confirming will to power from which many texts can spring" (1983: 50).

According to critics such as Said the function of postmodernist criticism is thus to resist a philosophy of pure textuality and critical non-interference, by

engaging with social reality through the investigation of the connection be-
tween texts and the existential actualities of human life, politics, societies and
events. The critic's concern is with the realities of power and authority and
the resistance to them which "make texts possible, that deliver them to the
readers, that solicit the attention of critics" (Said, 1983: 5). But in this
endeavour the critic has to be constantly aware of breaking new ground in
order to further the development of post-rational and post-humanist views of
reason, the subject and history. He has to walk the tightrope between what
Said terms secular and hermetic interpretations; between viewing texts as
"historicalgrounded in public occasions and socially supported codes" as
opposed to being "radically self-reflective and non-referential – and therefore
beyond the reach of criticism" (Scholes, 1985: 76). As he must constantly be
at the cutting edge "between the dominant culture and the totalizing forms of
critical systems" (Said, 1983: 5), the postmodernist critic must be familiar
with the identifying forces within any culture which help set up the boundaries
beyond which that culture cannot successfully retain its own identity.

In this regard Said uses "the word *culture* to suggest an environment,
process and hegemony in which individuals (in their private circumstances)
and their works are embedded, as well as overseen at the top by a super-
structure and at the base by a whole series of methodological attitudes" (1983:
8). For the purposes of placing the postmodernist critic, Said (1983: 8−16)
distinguishes and elaborates upon those aspects of culture which form the
basis of its hegemony. Culture designates something to which one belongs,
and something which one possesses, as well as demarcating a boundary "by
which the concepts of what is extrinsic or intrinsic to the culture come into
forceful play" (1983: 9). Because of its elevated position culture also has a
powerful differentiation function both within its own domain and beyond.
These kinds of pressure which culture exerts suggest that resistance to culture
has always been present, e.g. in the form of outright hostility for religious,
social or political reasons or from individuals or groups declared out of
bounds by the culture, such as social pariahs, visionary artists and alienated
intellectuals.

According to Said an appreciation of the workings of these hegemonic
forces in culture is found in "the individual consciousness placed at a sensitive
nodal point" (1983: 15) – because of a worldly self-situating awareness this
consciousness is able to place a critical distance between itself and its natal
culture or filiation. By means of "a knowledge of history, a recognition of the
importance of social circumstance, an analytical capacity for making distinc-
tions" (1983: 15−16) filiation is replaced by affiliation, which belongs exclus-
ively to culture and society. Different kinds of movement are possible from
the filiative to the affiliative order – if, for instance, "a filiative relationship
was held together by natural bonds and natural forms of authority, involving
obedience, fear, love, respect, and instinctual conflict, the new affiliative
relationship changes these bonds into what seem to be transpersonal forms –
such as guild consciousness, consensus, collegiality, professional respect,
class, and the hegemony of a dominant culture" (Said, 1983: 20). For Said the
co-operation between filiation and affiliation is located at the heart of critical

consciousness in that the critic must be aware of, and guard against in his own practice, the "process of representation, by which filiation is reproduced in the affiliative structure and made to stand for what belongs to us (as we in turn belong to the family of our languages and traditions), [reinforcing] the known at the expense of the knowable" (Said, 1983: 22–23).

In the light of the above and bearing in mind the basic postmodernist assumption on which this paper rests, namely that the boundaries between different forms, between different practices, between different disciplines, between different discourses, become less rigid, we can now return to the issue of whether Achebe's reading of *Heart of Darkness* is too onesided, weighted too much in favour of the world. Achebe's reading reduces the relationship between text and world to a direct one between Marlow, the central narrator-cum-character and Conrad, the "real" person behind the author of *Heart of Darkness*: Conrad is equated to Marlow and the attitude to the African expressed in the text is attributed to Conrad in the world. On this evidence Achebe likens Conrad to "all those men in Nazi Germany who lent their talents to the service of virulent racism whether in science, philosophy, or the arts" and suggests that the time has come to take a hard look at creative artists such as Conrad, who use their talents "to set people against people" (1978: 9).

Achebe's suggestion that Conrad is one of those who use their talents "to set people against people" alerts us to Said's description of the critic's concern as being with "the realities of power and authority" and the resistance to them which "make texts possible, that deliver them to the readers, that solicit the attention of the critics" (1983: 5). In order to assess radical utterances which posit a direct connection between text and world such as that of Achebe about Conrad, the critic's attention is directed to the complexity of the relationship between pure textuality and worldliness/social reality. In order to appreciate the working of the hegemonic forces in culture the critical consciousness, by means of a worldly selfsituating awareness, must place a critical distance between itself and its natal culture or filiation.

With this kind of critical consciousness in mind, we can therefore begin to take Achebe's suggested "hard look at Conrad", by tracing the movement from filiation to affiliation in Conrad and Marlow respectively. Conrad, the "real" person behind *Heart of Darkness* was an Englishman only by affiliation – he took on the adopted identity of an emigré turned Englishman. In his creation of Marlow and his systems of order and value Conrad can thus be described as creating an affiliative order in his text to compensate for a failed filiative order in his context – his affiliative order is presented in terms of nineteenth century English liberal humanism. Said describes this "transition from a failed idea or possibility of filiation to a kind of compensatory order that ... provides men and women with a new form of relationship" (1983: 19) as prevalent in modern cultural history. In terms of those aspects of culture which form the basis of its hegemony as described by Said (1983: 19), Conrad through a "dialectic of self-confirmation" (Said, 1983: 12) has *to demarcate his cultural boundaries* in order to protect that *to which he belongs* and that *which he possesses*. In view of Conrad's contextuality it is a textual imperative

that he imperialistically performs an imaginative expropriation of a space of otherness, such as Africa; furthermore, the other must remain other, to the extent of a dehumanization of Africa and Africans. Marlow, on the other hand, as central narrator-cum-character is filiatively and affiliatively an Englishman. Brian McHale's description of Conrad's modernist expropriation of African space aptly places this filiative-affiliative relationship:

> Conrad's narrator, Marlow, recalls how as a "little chap" he used to be fascinated by the unexplored "blank spaces" on maps, in particular the blank space in the interior of Africa. The map of Africa appears here as a screen upon which the young Marlow projects his fantasies of adventure and (no doubt) conquest, a "white patch for a boy to dream gloriously over".
> (McHale, 1987: 54)

Conrad's affiliative order is indeed similar to that of Marlow, but not identical – he cannot simply and naïvely be equated to Marlow. Like Marlow, he is in thrall to his cultural imperatives – he demarcates his culture's boundaries and protects both what he possesses and that to which he belongs. No one is free of these imperatives – "There is no reason to doubt that all cultures operate in this way or to doubt that on the whole they tend to be successful in enforcing their hegemony" (Said, 1983: 14); and the kind of thralldom in which Conrad found himself was not unique as Achebe also pointed out – "white racism against Africa is such a normal way of thinking" (1978: 18):

> The large cultural-national designation of European culture as the privileged norm carried with it a formidable battery of other distinctions between ours and theirs, between proper and improper, European and non-European, higher and lower: they are to be found everywhere in such subjects and quasi-subjects as linguistics, history, race theory, philosophy, anthropology, and even biology.
> (Said, 1983: 14)

To Conrad Africa was the other, that which was different, the non-European which he set up against his own European, English culture in order to strengthen its identity. But this does not mean that he "set people against people" and it would be patently unjust to suggest that he lent his "talents to the service of virulent racism" (Achebe, 1978: 9). Achebe's one-dimensional reading of *Heart of Darkness* which leans towards the body of the world ("Conrad is a bloody racist ... [who] sets people against people") is thus given some perspective by this reading which contextualizes Conrad's text.[1]

For further perspective, it may be useful to place our "hard look at Conrad" in the wider context of texts by non-African writers who have made different uses of African space. A distinction, based on an investigation of the relationship between textuality and worldliness/social reality in such texts, could be made between "outside of Africa" and "out of Africa" texts.[2] A non-African such as Conrad in *Heart of Darkness* who uses African space as a foil in order to strenghten the boundaries of his own culture, writes an "outside of Africa" text; whereas a non-African (in the sense of being European) such as Doris Lessing in *The Grass is Singing* who does not use African space to

emphasize her own cultural boundaries, but investigates the very nature of boundaries, the nature of the worlds which they enclose and what happens when different kinds of worlds (in this case white Southern African and African) are placed in confrontation in Africa, writes an "out of Africa" text.

Brian McHale's thesis (1987) which suggests that the dominant of modernist fiction is epistemological and that of postmodernist fiction ontological, is useful as a further qualification of the different uses Conrad and Lessing make of African space. According to McHale, for a modernist like Conrad the existence of his world is taken for granted; he accepts that there is a knowable and ascertainable reality beyond the text and the question for him is *how* to reach this world through his text. For the postmodernist such as Lessing the question is ontological as opposed to epistemological. McHale suggests that some of the typical postmodernist questions concern either the ontology of the literary text itself or the ontology of the world it projects, for instance:

> What is a world? What kinds of world are there, how are they constituted, and how do they differ? What happens when different kinds of world are placed in confrontation, or when boundaries between worlds are violated? What is the mode of existence of a text, and what is the mode of existence of the world (or worlds) it projects? How is the projected world structured?
> (McHale, 1987: 10)[3]

In *The Grass is Singing* Lessing investigates the weaknesses of the affiliative order of white Southern Africans (about two decades before the Rhodesian Civil War), by way of testing its boundaries when two "failures and misfits" of that order allow the erosion of its boundaries by not sufficiently reinforcing them (Dick Turner) and by crossing them (Mary Turner). Although the ontological question about the nature of a world and of different kinds of world is thus focused on the world of the white Southern Africans (whose main representative is Charlie Slatter) and their "failures and misfits", the boundaries of two further worlds are needed as foils to "place" these worlds, namely the world of English liberal humanism (whose representative is Tony Marston) and the African world of Moses, the Turners' native cook. The second epigraph of *The Grass is Singing* reads:

> It is by the failures and misfits of a civilization that one can best judge its weaknesses (Author unknown).

The "failure and misfits" in this world are Dick and Mary Turner as they threaten the boundaries of the affiliative order to which they belong:

> Thus the district handled the Turners, in accordance with the **esprit de corps** which is the first rule of South[ern] African society, but which the Turners themselves ignored. They apparently did not recognize the need for **esprit de corps**; that really was why they were hated.
> (Lessing, 1980: 11)

Dick is redeemed, however, and taken back into the fold, and the coercive

power of a culture to exclude and expel from it elements which threaten to collapse its boundaries, to erase them from memory, even posthumously, comes into play:

> The most interesting thing about the whole affair was this silent, unconscious agreement (p, 10). . . . Whom should it concern, if not the white farmers, that a silly woman got herself murdered by a native for reasons people might think about, but never, never mention.
> (Lessing, 1980: 11–12)

Mary's removal from the affiliative order (she will never be mentioned again) after her crossing of that order's boundaries has led to her murder, is an example of Lessing's use of the play of power in the discursive situation described by Said as follows:

> . . . and far from being a type of conversation between equals, the discursive situation is more usually like the unequal relation between colonizer and colonized, oppressor and oppressed. . . . Words and texts are so much of the world that their effectiveness, in some cases even their use, are matters having to do with ownership, authority, power and the imposition of force.
> (Said, 1983: 48)

Mary is silenced not only literally, by her murder, and historically by having her memory erased by a dominant culture, but also practically while she is alive, as a participant in discourse:

> As for Mary, Tony hardly saw her. He was disturbed by her, when he had time to think about the strange, silent dried-out woman who seemed as if she had forgotten how to speak. . . . She would suddenly break into one of Dick's slow, patient explanations about a plough or a sick ox, with an irrelevant remark about the food . . . and relapse suddenly into a blank, staring silence.
> (Lessing, 1980: 195)

Mary, the central character in *The Grass is Singing*, is involved in discursive situations which exemplify the only outcome possible for interpersonal relationships across the boundaries of the worlds projected in this text. Silence is the only possible outcome when a more powerful discourse partner wields his authority in this kind of non-negotiable situation.

Finally, it may be apt, regarding *The Grass is Singing*, to deal with that aspect of the relationship between textuality and worldliness/social reality on which Achebe bases his conclusions about Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, namely the relationship between author and narrator. Lessing, the author in the world outside the text, provides three clues about the world of the text. Firstly, the first epigraph is from T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* from which Lessing also takes the title of her text. This indicates a link with Eliot's thinking, a post world-war attitude of hopelessness at the sterility and wastefulness of modern life and suggests some kind of death, ending or silence. Secondly, the second epigraph indicates what aspect of modern life Lessing is going to deal with viz. the "misfits and failures" of a culture, by which their

weaknesses can be judged. After this, Lessing, the author in the real world, has to select (an) appropriate narrator(s) to present a Southern African rendition of *The Waste Land*, to fill in the specifics of the epigraph. Lessing's selection will depend on her own affiliative order, on how her systems of value and order influence her critical consciousness of the political, social and human values entailed when in the real world the issue of conflicting cultures and their boundaries are being dealt with in a specific time and space.

As in much postmodernist fiction the relationship between author and narrator is questioned and the role of the author as subject is curtailed, by making the act of writing the springboard from which the text is launched. A non-Southern African by filiation and affiliation, Tony Marston the would-be teller of the truth, is placed in a situation between a dominant culture and his own affiliative culture: "The two standards – the one he had brought with him and the one he was adopting – conflicted still" (p. 19). He would like to write this story about Mary, be its author:

> He would have liked to blurt out the truth in one overwhelming, incontrovertible statement; but the truth was not like that. It never was. . . . But the important thing, the thing that really mattered, so it seemed to him was to understand the background, the circumstances, the characters of Dick and Mary, the pattern of their lives.
> (Lessing, 1980: 23)

But Tony cannot write this story, cannot be its author – in the first place the truth is never so straightforward, so one-dimensional and secondly he is silenced by his fear of losing his potential place in the dominant culture:

> And he was beginning to understand. He knew now, at least, that what had been fought out . . . was nothing to do with the murder as such. The murder, in itself, was nothing. The struggle that had been decided in a few brief words – or rather, in the silences between the words – had had nothing to do with the surface meaning of the scene.
> (Lessing, 1980: 26–27)

So, who is to be the author/narrator of this story? There are, of course, two stories, the story of "the failures and misfits" and the story of that relative to which they are "failures and misfits", the dominant affiliative order.

In a way Charlie Slatter tells the story of the dominant culture as he controls this discursive situation. When the farm boys informed him about the murder, he selected the medium and the form of the discourse – "he ignored the telephone, but sent a personal letter by a native bearer on a bicycle to Denham at the police camp" (p. 12). What Charlie Slatter had wanted to keep secret had been suppressed; he did not use the telephone because he would have had too many listeners reading his "text" in too many different ways and keeping his "text" alive.

> [With a] branch telephone [. . . you] lift the receiver after you have turned the handle the required number of times, and then, click, click, click, you can hear

the receivers coming off all over the district, and soft noises like breathing, a
whisper, a subdued cough.
(Lessing, 1980: 12)

The result of Charlie's manipulation of the discursive situation is a short,
univocal message and Denham's "notebook was shut – [. . .] it had been shut
ever since they reached the crisis of the scene" (p. 25).

The narrator of Mary and Dick's story seems to be a composite, amorphous
narrator who progressively moves closer to Mary's perceptions (eventually it
becomes Mary's story), while at the same time sharing Tony's insights, even
using his agenda for telling the truth – "to understand the background, the
circumstances, the characters of Dick and Mary, the pattern of their lives" (p.
23). This story-teller has one advantage over Tony, however, in not being
caught up in a discursive situation in which conforming and belonging and
finally, silence is forced on the narrator. Instead, this narrator creates a
critical distance through a recognition of social circumstance and an analytical
capacity for making distinctions.

The critical distance enables the narrator to analyse the situation in which
"the failures and misfits", Dick and Mary Turner, find themselves. Through a
focus on Mary's perceiving consciousness the gradual disintegration of the
Turner marriage and of their alienation from the dominant culture is traced,
until they are both effectively silenced. By way of presenting Mary, from
chapters two to eleven, the last chapter, as the dominated speech partner in a
series of discursive situations in which the dominating partner is a represen-
tative of an opposing order, it becomes clear that Dick, on his own, would not
have been silenced. In chapter two Mary is presented as filiatively and
affiliatively homeless (her father's drinking habits made her mother miserable
and made them live in poverty; and when Mary made a new life for herself in
the city, she overheard two friends discussing her age and saying that she
should get married) and she escapes into marriage with Dick. Chapters 3−8
present Mary as unsuccessfully trying to join Dick's affiliative order or being
unable to join it (e.g. she realizes early on in their marriage that they would
be living in the same poverty as her parents had done and therefore when
Charlie Slatter and his wife come to visit, she feels ill at ease; later she refuses
to visit them). Then in chapters 9−11 Mary is presented as finally crossing the
boundary of the affiliative order to which she should belong, in the sense that
she actually treats the native cook, Moses, as a human being. But once again
Mary is the dominated discourse partner and Moses has her fully in his power,
in the sense that she is completely dependent on him. His control of her
becomes fully effective when she realizes that he can understand and speak
her language while she could not do the same with his. He is the one who
physically silences her by murdering her for previously humiliating him by
hitting him in the face with a sjambok, when all he was asking for was a break
from hard physical labour to have some water.

But shortly before her murder Mary has a prophetic vision of the silence
towards which she has progressively been moving in her relationships with
Africa, with her fellow white Southern Africans and with Dick:

And then the rains would break. The sky would lift and clear, and the trees grow lush and distinct, and the air would be shining like water. But at night the rain would drum down on the roof, on and on, endlessly, and *The grass would spring up* in the space of the empty ground about the house and the bushes would follow, ... At last the bush would cover the subsiding mass, and there would be nothing left.
(Lessing, 1980: 208)

This is the point at which narrator meets author as Mary's vision of the end, the silence, is the Southern African version of the silence predicted in the extract from *The Waste Land* in Lessing's first epigraph:

In this decayed hole among the mountains
In the faint moonlight, *the grass is singing*
Over the tumbled graves, about the chapel
There is the empty chapel, only the wind's home.
Ganga was sunken, and the limp leaves
Waited for rain, while the black clouds
Gathered far distant, over Himavant.
The jungle crouched, humped into *silence*.

Narrator meets author to present silence and the effect this meeting has on the mode of existence of the text and on the world it projects, is that *The Grass is Singing* situates itself in the world in a series of extended discursive situations, in which the participants are not always the same, but in which we are constantly aware of an oppositional tension indicative of some kind of power struggle ending in silence for the loser.

Unlike Conrad the modernist, Lessing the postmodernist does not use the discursive situation to confirm and reinforce boundaries; she investigates the nature of boundaries and the way discourse operates to confirm and reinforce them. Like Conrad, however, she too is acting according to her cultural, historically determined imperatives.

Notes

1   Although it would be illuminating to spend more time on Conrad's text, strictly speaking such an analysis does not fall within the scope of the present essay. Achebe's reading merely serves as an avenue leading to the literary – critical space opened up by Said, namely the postmodernist space in which traditional boundaries are seen to be collapsing and in which the Other of necessity has to be allowed to speak, however ingenuously.

2. Despite the obvious Blixen connotations of the term "out of Africa", its use does not imply that Blixen's position is analogous to that of Lessing in terms of the relationship between textuality and worldliness/social reality.

3. In what follows I hope to show that Lessing's text may be read as constituting implicit answers to precisely this kind of 'ontological' question which typifies postmodernist fiction. Moreover, although I base my own assessment of *The Grass is Singing* as a postmodernist text largely on McHale's differentiating categories, I do not suggest that these are the only ones applicable to the novel in question. An

approach in terms of, for instance, Lodge's familiar scheme (1981: 3–16) may in fact highlight features of the novel that make it appear more modernist than postmodernist – it is not governed by Lodge's suggested postmodernist compositional principles: "Contradiction, Permutation, Discontinuity, Randomness, Excess and The Short Circuit." It should be noted, however, that critics such as Lodge articulate a work's ontological status in terms of its formal features only, whereas the contention of this paper is that a text's ontology is not limited to its formal features, but concerns matters of broader ontological implication such as, in McHale's terms, the nature of a world, the conflict between worlds, etc.

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