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Discharging Liminality: An Approach to Ndebele's *Fools*

Frank Rumboll

Summary

The deconstructive negotiation of a text is, by turns, utilised and disburdened in the following exploration of Ndebele's "The Prophetess" from his short story cycle *Fools*.

In the course of this dissemination an attempt is made to illustrate how texts may be enriched by directing enquiry and critique *at* end-points rather than *to* end-points.

Opsomming

Die problematiek van die dekonstruktiewe diskoers word beurtelings benuttig en "veroorsaak" in die volgende ondersoek na Ndebele se "The Prophetess" uit sy kortverhaalsiklus *Fools*.

Daar wil aangetoon word hoedat die soeklig van kritiek wat op gerepresenteerde sin val 'n belangrike netwerk tekstuele betekenisvesels blootlê; daar word aangevoer dat sódanige *onteiening van gedissemineerde sin meer produktief* is as eksplorasie wat gerig is op die bereiking van finale konklusies.

One sense of "discharge" in its relation to the problems of liminality or limit which I would like to stress in this article is "the relief of pressure by redistribution". Deconstructive processes, with which we shall concern ourselves in this article, are directed against intensely pressurised textual areas which result from any mode, method or structure of overbearance. But it is important to note that these deconstructive negotiations are worked over so that they, in the process, do not themselves take on the pressure in turn. The enterprise of any deconstructive reading is thus to be on guard against what Derrida describes as "the tranquil assurance that leaps over the text toward its presumed content, in the direction of the pure signified" (Derrida 1976: 159). Any assurance, be it self-induced or social, is a presumption which the deconstructive process places "under erasure" in a rigorous program of interrogation which is not productive of any form, mode, method or content of containment. In "discharging liminality" we therefore disburden overzealous attachments, too clearly defined boundaries, or too rigidly fixed thresholds, while, at the same time, not denying these structurations any mode of existence by rigorously demoting any innovatory attempts to reattach, to redraw as or more clearly, or to legislate magisterially.

Barbara Johnson examines the deconstructive process as follows:

> Instead of a simple either/or structure [the binary opposition: FCHR], deconstruction attempts to elaborate a discourse that says *neither* "either/or", *nor* "both/and" nor even "neither/nor", while at the same time not totally abandoning these logics either.
>
> (1980: 9)

What could be added, at a risk, is that deconstruction trades in suspension, which relates to the resistance to any attempts at settling out. Binaries cannot

be established. Binaries are run in. The "both/and" and "neither/nor" positionalities are directed *to* end-points. Deconstructive dissemination is directed *at* end-points, which include positions of oppositionality. It interrogates the stations in the progress by a process of intersubstitution. The New Criticism, for example, set about discarding possibilities of meaning to find the core meaning of a text. Deconstruction discards core meaning to open texts up to possibilities of meaning.

My article falls under "African Literature: Theory and Practice", which I shall presume for my purposes to be "Black Literature in English: Theory and Practice". I sum up my standpoint on this controversial issue briefly. It is my belief that deconstructive initiatives could be more relevant in a less decisively segregated South Africa where greater impetus would be on a running together of cultural texts so that the dimensions of each are neither undercut nor overexposed. This is perhaps what Ndebele glances at in his reference to being shocked through complex writing "into a fresh recognition of familiar situations" which "should force us to consider dismantling oppressive structures" (Chapman 1982: 193). By "oppressive structures" I assume Ndebele also includes those appropriative textual practices which silence the text, which is always waiting to speak. Other respected black writers have commented in like vein. Serote, for example, points out that on either side (i.e. black and white) people are both dangerous and desperately vulnerable [i.e. in each of themselves: FCHR] (Chapman 1982: 74). Sepamla reminds that he does not write conscripted poetry (Chapman 1982: 83) and Johennesse advises that we "self-examine" (Chapman 1982: 86) so that "we can write about all the prisons that entrap us" (Chapman 1982: 133). Mphahlele pleads for "a resonance going to the past and . . . going to the future " (Chapman 1982: 149). Black writing, to my mind, needs to run together its pain and its probing so that even more vitality may be injected into the South African literary dynamic of the future. And I would like to demonstrate some of these possibilities through a deconstructive reading of Ndebele's "The Prophetess".

My choice of "The Prophetess" was deliberately made on grounds of simplicity of text. A number of teachers harbour the erroneous belief that a text must of necessity be abstruse or inordinately complicated to be scrutinised deconstructively. In addition, the title suggested interesting possibilities in its obvious pretensions at what Immanuel Kant termed "the exalted vision which is the death of philosophy"(Derrida 1984: 7) in that it closes off the dynamic of textual exploration. In this respect it is interesting to note that Derrida cites Kant approvingly (1984: 3–37) even though he has in mind a more radical project to subvert whatever relates "to fundamentals, to principles, or to the center [*sic*] [that] have always designated the constant of a presence" (1976: xxi). This subversion is effected by the continuous interrogation of the product and the result of that interrogation.

But let me kick off by running the chance of what Gayatri Spivak characterises as "tak[ing] the risk of essence" (Brooker 1989: 45) and distinguish two kinds of deconstructive dynamic which, I must stress, have as their common enterprise the exposure of all effronteries of unveiling: who have, that is, what Derrida formulates as a metaphysical urge, i.e. the

nostalgia or the desire for a science of full presence. In the first instance the revealment could be a conscious attempt at what has been called "mystagogic seduction" (Derrida 1984: 8). A deconstructive reading of these texts would thus, presumably, involve a deliberate search for ways in which the idealism of the text can be and is undercut without forfeiting the idealistic instance "before the text loses its signification or its original reference" (Derrida 1984: 8).

A text may also be a deconstructive strategy in and of itself. This self-reflexiveness, a return upon the fissures and lacunae of text, is a parody of the text's wariness and awareness of seduction. And it is in this motivity that I would suggest Ndebele's text, "The Prophetess", may be interrogated. I have thus not read Ndebele as a mystagogue. Nor do his characters appear to me, at least not simply, to "evince a teleological notion of history" as Michael Marais would suggest (*JLS* 4(4): 489). But this I shall attempt to demonstrate in the course of my probing of the text.

The creation of mutable connectives is apparent in the first paragraph of "The Prophetess". The pietistic soundings, "Would she curse him?" "What would she say when she eventually opened the door to find no one there?" (p. 30) are summarily displaced by the suggestions of the humanness of the Olympian figure. Her anger and its effects are articulated or connected on two liminalities: the godlike and the human. And both are in the process displaced. The mention of holy water in the last sentence of this paragraph structures and builds in an affiliation to a personage already implicated in its liminalities or power limits. In embryo we perceive a deconstructive critique at work in the fugitivity of meaning: in the creation of unstable connectives, distinctions, hierarchies and terms.

This interrogation of the prophetess's status is further secured in the first sentence of the second paragraph: "There was something strangely intriguing about the prophetess and the holy water" (p. 30). Such traces of introductory one-liners, suggestive of mystery and fallibility, of reality not matching appearance, remind of thrillers in which actual roles are in question except, finally, for the tracer, who is privileged in fictional terms to strip away the layers. The suggestion lingers (on the abyssal edge) that two forces are in tandem: the vulnerable prophetess and the peculiarly aware young boy. And this unsettled liminality is given some form of concrete expression in the free indirect speech of the key disclosure: "he would have to leave without the holy water for which his sick mother had sent him to the prophetess" (p. 30). Free indirect speech is itself, of course, a construction in suspension. It can with certainty not be assigned to anyone. It can with certainty be used by anyone.

The problematic unshaping of the prophetess is made more trenchant by the construction of the sentences which follow in the second paragraph. The rhythm of each jars with generally monosyllabic words. Allied to this is the almost trancelike heaping on of matters of fact: "And the water would be holy. And the water would have curing powers" (p. 31). We are in a sense reminded that this is common talk, with all its possibilities of rumour and gossip, of themselves a disregard of limits and boundaries; in themselves

limned in by a certain lack of knowledge. The paragraph closes with the free indirect speech of "That's what his mother had said too" (p. 31), confirming, yet leaving open to suspicion: a floatstone of puzzlement by distantiation.

In the third paragraph the boy appears to be the prophetess's antagonist and this is given some substance by the boy's greater assertiveness: his knocking on the door, "this time with more urgency" (p. 31). Immediately after this the almost nonchalant mention of the bottle "he had just filled with water" (p. 31) which would be turned holy and thus curative by the prophetess's powers is reworked into burlesque when the little boy imagines the uses of the potentially holy bottle of water: for example, he could hit the dog which frightened him so with it; he could stab the animal if the bottle broke. At the risk of putting too fine a meaning to this (which is of course a deliberate deconstructive risk), it would appear at this juncture that the mode and existence of the central artefact in this story is further, but subtly eroded.

But we are shifted with alacrity to a contemplation of the prophetess's response to this. She is firstly foregrounded in balance with the certain degree of diminishment mentioned earlier. The first sound to emanate from the prophetess is "faint" (p. 31). The door opens to "reveal darkness" (p. 31). These descriptions are both spectral and infirm, paralleled by the empowerment of the aggressive shooting back of the bolt and the dog being told to "*Voetsek*"! (p. 31)

As a further expression of the continuous shift in relationships and power protocol in deconstructive readings I would point to the reinforcement of the distance so carefully engendered between the prophetess and the boy by "the pleasant, tickling sensation and a slight warmth where the fur of the dog had touched him" (p. 31). The dog and boy are momentarily in league, strengthened by the "tickling sensation...going up to the back of his neck and seeming to caress it" (p. 31).

The prophetess's power status is enhanced by her adamant rejection of the dog, to be more subtly highlighted in her comment on that other archetypal power structure in the South African environment: "This is not at the white man's" (pp. 31–32). The binary opposition between black and white, the former apparently firm and viscid; the latter indulgent and comfortable, is necessary for the deconstructive fluidity of oppositional forces in creating this brief moment of alliance between the black prophetess and the black boy.

Deconstructive writing trades in platitudes, overt symbolisation and fixed notions as playfully parodistic opportunity. The connection with the Greek oracle is apparent in the darkness hiding the sight of the prophetess and the woman "moving somewhere in the dark" (p. 31). This connection is suddenly undercut, however, by the simple statement following on the prophetess's order to close the door: "But the boy had already done so" (p. 31). Her humanness is emphasised therefore, reinforced by the murkiness of the room being attributed to the only-too-human necessity to save candles. The prophetess is not above mortal toil.

Following on this, with the prophetess still in the dark physically and in the dark about the reason for the boy's visit, the texture of the descriptions take on an almost Keatsian distension:

> He had dared not touch that vine and its countless, velvety, black, and juicy grapes that hung temptingly within reach, or rested lusciously on forked branches.
>
> (p. 32)

The use of these boisterously hyperemic adjectives in the midst of the fear and the lack is deflated by the sinister image of the grapes looking like "a cluster of small cones narrowing down to a point" (p. 32), which would seem to encapsulate the boy's fears in a concrete image of foreboding. This is reinforced by the command "Don't touch that vine!" (p. 32) which, again achieves only anodyne status by its generalised referral. The flux of substantiation and desubstantiation is set in motion by the anecdote of the thieves caught in the sticky glue of the vine and the deflatory melodrama of the prophetess's "Away, away, sinful man; go and sin no more" (p. 33). You would have noticed a certain biblical reverberation, which readjusts the imbalance. Yet the indebtedness to the biblical text deflates the status of the prophetess's warning to the merely derivative.

After this the text is compounded of large statements such as "That vine; it was on the lips of everyone in the township every summer" (p. 33). Yet these too are deceptive when the woman in the bus asks: "Have you ever seen a person caught there? Just answer that one question" (p. 33). Her simplistic stance ("[s]he spoke with finality") does not of course detract from the possibility that seeing is not always believing: a key deconstructive ploy. And this is given substance in the language of "and threw her defiant scepticism outside at the receding scene of men cycling home from work in single file" (p. 33).

Deconstitution is one of the recurrent deconstructive strategies which we have been setting to work in this article. It is the activity of unceasing vigilance against institutionalisation by the privilegement of one or other term in a binary opposition. Deconstruction, instead of opposing binarily, therefore enmeshes itself in what Nietzsche termed "the intersubstitution of opposites" in the continual process of erasure and reactivation.

Yet, the "intersubstitution of opposites" is a difficult concept to teach. I try, as an example, to explain it to my students by referring to the tension between appearance and reality, using Shakespeare's *King Lear*. To recap briefly: Cordelia (under the guise of love) invests her sincerity with too much certitude. She is too unyielding, too uncompromising, assisting in her small way (which is in actual consequence, major) in creating the march of tragic circumstances. For Cordelia appearance and reality run counter too unselectively. Instead of a meticulous adjudication of the power investment required of each context, each occasion, each grammatology, she fixes the boundary, the liminality, between sincerity and a not so intense scrupulousness. This fastidious probity results in a grave miscarriage of justice. The sin of the father is made to fall on all. Lear's caprice is skewed into a crime whose exactions outweigh the old man's initial bizarre self-seeking. Lear expiates on the moor, divesting himself, layer by layer, of each of the installations that bind him to the earthly wheel. And when he is naked, bereft of all

hierarchised notions, only then can he understand the principles of pure state. And then learn to forgive, and understand, and die to this life in what Derrida terms "the vigil at the moment of the end" (1984: 25).

The "immaculately dressed young man" in Ndebele's short story adds further perspective to the controversy by asking whether persons caught in the prophetess's trap have ever been seen. The repetition of "supposed" (p. 35) is a pointed reminder of the conflict of language which is extended well beyond the dialogue in progress and in the amusing deflection of "She only asked when this person was caught and who it was" (p. 35). This gives students a further opportunity to discuss the difference in the meanings assigned to the question by each of the respondents and the recapitulative joke, "Don't be angry, mother", said the young man, ". . . I was only trying to understand" (p. 35). The problematics of the simple discourse is further highlighted by the comment of "the immaculately dressed man", following on immediately: "And that's our problem. We laugh at everything . . . . Is it any wonder that the white man is still sitting on us? The mother there asked a very straightforward question, but she is answered vaguely about things happening" (p. 35). The respondent himself begs the deconstructive question by taking for granted the status under erasure, and the intense multivalence of what he takes as granted and inviolate.

And the "immaculate man's" sober assessment of the prophetess's modality which he attributes merely to superstition immediately opens the narrative flow to those who reinforce the superstition label ("don't be surprised when a bolt of lightning strikes you on a hot sunny day" (p. 36)) and, simultaneously, to those who question its validity. And it is fitting that this movement should be embodied in the young boy's reflection: "Strangely, though, only the prophetess's trees had no bottles hanging from their branches" (p. 36).

The prophetess, despite her eponym, is by now a thoroughly controversial figure and the insubstantiality surrounding her fictional composition is given substance in the narrative focus on the *doek*: "The boy's eyes followed the *doek*. . . . The *doek* stopped . . . the *doek* descended somewhat and was still" (p. 36). The prophetess here takes on a wraithlike symbolic: appearance without substance. In a sense the text involutes by enacting through a visual field the problematics of its tale. And in this vital paragraph the text gives lie to those who would see art as bridging the gap between change and tradition. The text itself enacts the lost authority. Yet this lost authority, as has been discussed earlier, is not nihilistic but grammatological. It questions while affirming. The smell of camphor, for example, leads to the questions: "Was the prophetess ill then? Did she pray for her own water?", and to the crucial statement, "Suddenly, the boy felt at ease, as if the discovery that a prophetess could also feel pain somehow made her explainable" (p. 37). This, coupled with the prophetess's "thin voice" (p. 37), provides some answers to the fervent questions of the boy: questions which might subvert the belief in her occult powers.

The clearer the appearance of the prophetess the more insistent the questioning. We are reminded by Derrida in his essay "Violence and Metaphysics" that "[t]he infinitely other is the invisible since vision opens up only the

illusory" (1978: 93). The questioning of her status as mystical being is continually being intersubstituted by her physical denial of that status. In a sense, as the prophetess's fictional liminality takes on the bold strokes of what Derrida phrases as "the voice of full certainty" (1978: 92) so, as we have already noted, it is gently disfigured by actions and questions about actions. This spark and fade of the liminality of clear vision is re-enacted in the camera techniques of focus, off-focus. The prophetess is clearly visible for only brief moments, like the answers to the numerous questions are only fitfully forthcoming in the continual reminders of visions appearing and disappearing in mystical visitations, refiguring the fractured view of the prophetess. Note, for example, "More objects came into focus. Three white spots on the table emerged" (p. 37). Even the clearly focused words "ALL SAINTS CHURCH" and the chalice designs lose anchor and float when it is not clear where each belongs: on the boy's mother's crocheting or the prophetess's. Even the matches take time to catch fire (p. 38). When the candle is eventually lit and the prophetess is seen in the light it is to be divided by the light against the light: for example, she "peered through the light of the candle at the boy" (p. 38).

It is significant that the one personage in the short story around whom such a great deal of speculation persists should deliver the longest homily on the pitfalls of language. For the prophetess's words are "a gift from the Almighty. He gave us all a little pinch of his mind and called on us to think" (p. 39). But the prophetess is juggling with contradictory concepts. The "little pinch of [God's] mind" is the way to subjugation. Man is deficient in the face of God's Full Word as presence. As Levinas noted: "The spirit is free in the letter, and subjugated in the root" (Derrida 1978: 102). Mankind is not free under the letter of the Law. Nor are people free with the letter of the Law. In this respect it is instructive to take note of Derrida's comments on an idealistic text such as Hegel's which, according to Derrida, "exceeds its meaning, permit[ting] itself to be turned away from, to return to, and to repeat itself outside its self-identity" (*Positions* 1981: 78). Like Derrida we are exploring limitations seen as proliferations, proliferations as limitations, rather than "the identity of identity and non-identity" (Derrida 1985: 156).

Representation as reality presents itself as a major motif at this stage of the short story. The mask, shining and black on the wall opposite the prophetess and the unmasked picture of Jesus, "His chest . . . open, revealing His heart" (p. 40) are iconic in their severe representation. These prepare the scene for the transmogrification of the water which is accomplished in a conventional religious rhetoric.

Yet, just as the reader is being soothed by the gentle piety of the discourse the atmosphere is shattered by the flame guttering and "the darkness loom[ing] out" (p. 41). Then the prophetess laughs "out of the dark" (p. 41), the laugh beginning "as a giggle", giving way to a manic shriek. All the while "the mask smiled silently, and the heart of Jesus sent out yellow light". The mystical transubstantiation runs tandem with the apparently bizarre mundanity of the prophetess's erratic behaviour. Yet, in the deconstructive mode, and bearing in mind my earlier remarks about intersubstitution, the binarities of all these occurrences are effaced in the question of whether the prophetess

is to be believed or adjudged as bluff, or, more to our purposes, a bit of both.

The water and the boy are blessed: the warmth of the prophetess's hands "seemed to go through his hair, penetrating deep through his scalp. ... Perhaps, he thought, that was the soul of the prophetess going into him" (p. 43). The prophetess is now transmuted into the boy. As he leaves he feels free, also because of the powerful impulse of the prophetess. He, in a sense, is now the prophet and has taken on her strengths and imperfections. This is given body in his need for isolation ("Yet, somehow, he wanted to avoid any contact with all this activity" (p. 45)). And taking on mystical powers enables the narrative at its end to resume for full circle, avoiding closure.

Like the fictional treatment of the prophetess at the start, the boy's humanness is juxtaposed with his newly found mystical powers, as he would have it. And his frailty is given substance in the choices open to him as he runs home. Too many people, too few people. He chooses one of the two evils: the "lit Moshoeshoe Street and its Friday night crowds" (p. 45) rather than the route past the "dark, ghostly Bantu-Batho post office" and the "huge gum trees behind the Charterston Clinic" and "the quiet golf course" (where dead bodies were sometimes found) (p. 45). As he walks towards a gang of boys the narrative reminds us of its crucial fimbriation: the bottle of blessed and *holy* water. The boy tightens the bottle cap: "[n]ot a drop was to be lost" (p. 45). He approaches the gang, and "slow[s] down to an anxious stroll" (p. 45). And the narrative focuses on a boy named Biza for its final surge to climax. Discussion focalises on whether Biza did or did not tempt a girl successfully "in broad daylight" (p. 46). Visual proof is demanded of Biza (we are reminded of *Othello*). But the inconclusive proof of semen which could be saliva, both following "like a spider's web" when touched, directs us easily to the crucial episode of the bottle. The appearance/reality matrix is highlighted, bolstered by the dramatic *mise en scène* of an inner circle inspecting Biza's penis, watched by the boy who cannot see inside the circle, even though, so he says, he has taken on mystical powers. This irrelation is stressed, dramatically it would now appear, by the boy's ruminations on the silliness and sinfulness of the gang. And further distantiation is created when the boy, clutching the bottle and feeling "strangely superior" (p. 47) says that he has the power of the prophetess in him: all this constructed in free indirect speech and implicated, thus, in an intimate and a distantiatory mode which serves to create the necessary suspense and suspension of absolute references for what is to follow.

For the projection of this short story as an "affirmative indeterminacy" (Radhakrishnan 1989: 189) it would be necessary that the emphatic mark of representation, the bottle of holy water, be subjected to an ascesis, a disciplining, an impoverishment of will. And this happens very dramatically when the boy collides with the bicycle, breaking the bottle and spilling the holy water.

As the boy lies on the ground in pain and torment he discards the idea of returning to the prophetess. Instead, he selects a bottle from a pile of bottles in his yard, and "[c]almly, as if he had known all the time what he would do in such a situation" (p. 49) he fills it with water. Unlike Lear he accommo-

dates himself to the situation; rather like his mother's visitors prattling on about the goat that has to be slaughtered to cancel ties of blood and the fearful consequences visited upon those who deny this master-discourse.

The mother drinks the water, sharing it with those who are not in need of it, and pronounces herself feeling better already. And the little boy, it will be noted, has been both instrumental and critical in this process: he has drawn the water and administered the potion himself. He has become a prophet.

And so Ndebele's short story ends, not with a bang, apparently, but with a whimper. But this reading would be to underestimate the deconstructive complexity at work. In its curling in upon itself by the young boy apparently becoming a prophet, and thus reprivileging a binary side the whole project of hierarchalisation which has been constantly under erasure in the short story now appears writ large, to be deconstructed in the story about to begin at the end of the story.

Throughout this article, I have attempted to show genealogies of power at work, continually subserved by other accumulations of domination. I have attempted to show how these require what Derrida has termed "an eternal protocol of vigilance" (1984: 32). I have tried to explain how this protocol is informed by deconstructive processes. And how this could provide a method of teaching literature (including black literature), literature which itself should be, I believe, a "protocol of vigilance".

All the structured effects of the story are shown up for the authorised "identity-effects" (Radhakrishnan 1989: 200) that they are. Not artless, but deeply incisory of those limits we would wish to place on them: i.e. liminalities as "transcendental cure", liminalities as the avoidance of the possibilities of cure. In all these cases we discharge our obligations in the South Africa of today and Fanie Olivier's PASA[1] of tomorrow for enriching teaching and for being ever-vigilant and responsive. By being deconstructive of liminalities which silence what can be in our discharge.

Notes

1. Used, so far as I can establish, for the first time by Olivier for "Post-apartheid South Africa" at the UPE seminar, March 1990.

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