Liberal Politics and Liberal Literature

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Summary

This article argues that neither Marxism nor poststructuralism (deconstruction) offers a viable means of conceptualising the relationship between politics and literature in the 1990's. It suggests, instead, that liberalism, properly understood – both as a political philosophy and as a foundation for literary activity – does provide a potentially successful way of approaching this interrelationship. The article begins by offering a liberal critique of Marxism and deconstruction at the levels both of their fundamental theoretical assumptions and their practical political and literary implications. It then attempts to clear up some of the confusion and misconceptions which continue to surround liberalism today by presenting a careful account of contemporary liberal political philosophy. Finally, the political analysis is related to the literary domain: a particular purpose is to consider how some of the key principles and concepts which inform modern-day liberal political thought may have pertinent application to literary practice, whether creative or critical. Throughout the article, the discussion is directed towards the question of literary culture in South Africa today.

Opsomming

Nóg Marxisme nóg poststrukturalisme (dekonstruksie) bied 'n lewensvatbare metode om die verhouding tussen politiek en literatuur in die negentigerjare te konseptualiseer, word in hierdie artikel beweer. Die skrywer stel voor dat liberalisme, indien behoorlik begryp – as 'n politieke filosofie en as 'n basis vir literêre aktiwiteit – 'n potensieel suksesvolle manier voorsien om hierdie interverwantskap te benader. Die artikel begin met 'n liberale kritiek teen Marxisme en dekonstruksie, beide op die vlakke van hul fundamentele teoretiese veronderstellings en hul prakties politieke en literêre implikasies. Daarna word gepoog om sekere van die verwarring en wanbegrippe wat nog liberalisme omgeef op te klaar deur 'n noukeurige weergawe van kontemporêre liberale politieke filosofie te gee. Ten slotte word die politieke analise betrek in die literêre domein: 'n besondere doel is om na te gaan hoe sommige van die hoofbeginsels en -begrippe waarop hedendaagse liberale politieke gedagtes steun pertinent toegepas kan word in die literêre praktyk, hetsy kreatief of krities. Die bespreking in hierdie artikel is deurgaans direk gerig op die vraag rondom die literêre kultuur in die Suid-Afrika van vandag.

1

Contemporary literary theories have focused a fair amount of attention on the question of the relationship between politics and literature, approaching the topic from a variety of ideological perspectives and utilising a diversity of critical methodologies. A great many of such theories seem, however, to derive from positions which are implicitly or explicitly antagonistic to what may be broadly termed Western liberalism, whether as a political philosophy or as a foundation for literary activity. The picture of liberalism which emerges from such hostile theoretical discussion tends, in consequence, to be at the very least partial and imprecise, and, more often, deliberately distorted or caricatured in order to suit the antipathetical arguments of the opposing theorist. The fault does not lie wholly with the opponents of liberalism. While liberalism as a political philosophy has been vigorously propounded so that it continues to exert a dominant influence over contemporary political thinking,

liberalism has not been as well served by its literary practitioners, at least in the South African context. The principle aim of this article, then, will be to attempt to redress the situation by providing an examination, from a liberal perspective, of the relationship between politics and literature, and, more particularly, between liberal politics and literature. It need hardly be added that such an examination will be of the nature of a preliminary exploration rather than a definitive statement.

It is equally important to note that the intention is not to work towards some kind of liberal "theory" of literature. To do so would be to misconstrue both the nature and the strategies of liberalism. In nature, liberalism is composed of a complex and even heterogeneous body of thought which cannot be facilely reduced to the status of a monolithic ideology. And in strategy, liberalism offers a broad and flexible philosophical basis for action which cannot be glibly formulated in terms of an all-encompassing grand theory. Instead, it is necessary to reach an understanding of liberalism on its own terms. By the same token, what constitutes a liberal approach to literature, or conceptualisation of literature, ought to be clarified through reference to its own internal terms of coherence rather than by trying to make it fit the conceptual framework of an alternative theorisation.

In terms of structure, this article will fall into three main parts. The first will focus on the current chief theoretical adversaries of liberalism, specifically Marxism and poststructuralism. Here, instead of following the usual route of seeking to defend liberalism from the various charges levelled against it by such antagonists, I intend to go onto the offensive and construct a liberal critique of these adversarial positions at the levels both of their fundamental theoretical assumptions and their practical political implications. In the course of such a pre-emptive critique, the general outlines of contemporary liberal thought should begin to emerge. The second part of this article will then be devoted to providing a more precise account of modern liberal political philosophy. The specific focus will be upon identifying and elucidating the central strands making up the liberal political tradition today, particularly those exemplified by the work of writers such as Robert Nozick and John Rawls. The third and final part of this article will seek to relate this political discussion to the literary domain. A particular purpose of this section of the article will be to consider how some of the key principles and concepts which inform contemporary liberal political philosophy may have pertinent application in the field of literary activity, whether creative or critical. Throughout the article, cognisance will be taken of the relevance of the discussion for literary culture in a post-apartheid South Africa, and, where necessary, the direct implications for literary practice will be spelled out.

2

In contemporary South African literary discourse, three main approaches have evidently come to dominate debates about the nature of the relationship between politics and literature: Marxism, poststructuralism and liberalism. In crucial ways, the underlying assumptions and claims to validity of each of

these approaches are mutually incompatible, so that the possibilities for reconciliation, synthesis or even eclectic amalgamation are limited. Given the exclusive character of these three positions, it is not surprising that a high degree of animosity has been generated in disputes between their respective proponents. While it is not my intention to add to these hostilities, it has become necessary to clarify the liberal position in contrast with its rivals and to dispel firmly some of the misconceptions about contemporary liberalism which these rivals have helped to promote. As a first step towards such clarification, it is essential to examine critically the foundational assumptions and claims, political and literary, of both Marxism and poststructuralism, particularly in the light of current macropolitical developments and their implications for literary practice.

It is logical to begin with Marxism, since Marxism makes certain explicit claims about the relationship of literature to politics, and specifically about the material determinants of literary production. Marxist literary theory is often portrayed as a hybrid body of work which has developed over time from early vulgar Marxism to a variety of sophisticated neo-Marxian modes. It is crucial to see, however, that, beneath this apparent diversity and sophistication of approach and method, all Marxist literary criticism is founded upon one basic premise, namely that literature must be understood as part of social reality which in some or other way determines it; or, put another way, that literature, to use a classical Marxist term, in some manner reflects social reality, however complex this process of reflection is taken to be by the individual theorist. Such literary theory derives essentially from general Marxist theory which asserts that, at bottom, the only true or scientific knowledge is that of the Marxist understanding of material conditions, historical dialectic, class struggle and the inexorable teleological movement towards the classless socialist future. Given that all other ideologies must, therefore, be mistaken, and given that literature is a form of ideological expression, it follows that the fundamental purpose of Marxist literary criticism is to demonstrate how texts either succeed or fail in representing the reality of the Marxist ideology. This, in turn, is part of the larger purpose of using such literary criticism as one further means (among many) of bringing about the revolutionary conditions which will usher in the Marxist political and economic order. Ultimately, there can be no other central coherent aim of Marxist literary critical practice.[1]

In view of this commitment to the Marxist social model, it is clear that Marxist theory must remain implacably opposed to liberalism which, far from constituting a potential ally, is regarded as actually hindering or undermining the movement towards the socialist utopia. More strongly, liberalism is at times accused of being in collusion with the dark forces of predatory capitalism, reactionary conservatism, and, in South Africa, apartheid nationalism, so that liberalism becomes subsumed under the whole "Western" system in all its supposed oppressiveness and imperialism. Gayatri Spivak (1992), for example, railing, in a recent lecture at the University of the Witwatersrand, against "Western exploitativeness", indiscriminately lumped together what she called "rapacious wide-eyed liberals", multinational cor-

porations, the World Bank and capitalist privateers. By simple extrapolation, liberal literary conceptualisations come to be seen as one more site of struggle, to use a popular phrase, in the Marxist fight against the perceived Western hegemony.

In the light of this understanding of Marxist theory, specifically literary theory, it is necessary to recognise and acknowledge the full implications of the tremendous upheavals in the geopolitical sphere over the past few years. In short, the world-wide disintegration of communist regimes must be seen as a fatal blow to Marxism at all levels of theory and practice. It is not simply a case of the practical failure of what Spivak, in the same lecture, quaintly called "the Bolshevik experiment", from which socialist theory can learn and adapt itself. On the contrary, at the very core of Marxist thought lies the principle that theory (consciousness, ideology, superstructure) is determined by material forces (economic relations, mode of production, base), not vice versa as in the Hegelian formulation. As such, the lesson of history is clear: material conditions and practice have proved incapable of successfully supporting a Marxist order, so that there cannot be supposed to be a basis for coherent Marxist ideology and theory in social reality. Indeed, even if there were acceptance of Hegel's idealist position that consciousness can and does alter material reality, the same lesson would apply: the recognition by Gorbachev, and the long-held belief of Yeltsin and the wider Soviet and Eastern European populace, that Marxism was a fundamentally flawed and unworkable system, would be seen as leading to and effecting the implosion of communist governments virtually throughout the world.

The obvious conclusions to be drawn from these developments have been bluntly and forcefully articulated by Auberon Waugh (1992). In a review of John Simpson's account of the disintegration of communism, *The Darkness Crumbles* (1992), Waugh asserts that

> the entire history of socialism – in the sense of material equality, selfless striving for the communal good, from each according to his ability to each according to his needs – proves that it is so alien to the normal promptings of human nature that it not only has to be imposed with the greatest severity, even cruelty, but that it also, by the resulting ill-will and incompetence, produces nothing but abject, grinding poverty. ... Socialism seems a good idea, but it simply doesn't work.
> (Waugh 1992: 18)

Waugh makes the point, furthermore, that there can be no salvaging of socialism by distancing it from, say, "Bolshevism", "Marxism", "Marxist-Leninism" or "Communism", since they are in real terms the same thing, as is evident in the very name of the Union of Soviet *Socialist* Republics. Indeed, a central thrust of Simpson's book is that ideal socialism failed almost immediately after being put into practice in the Soviet Union with the result that what was supposed to be a benevolent system of maximum advantage to the masses had to be imposed through sheer state violence for the next seven decades. And it is significant that where it continues to survive – Red China, Cuba, Burma – similar state terror (3 June 1989 in Tiananmen Square, for example) is required to maintain it. But beyond any theoretical argumenta-

tion, the strongest evidence of the failure of Marxism/socialism/communism must surely be the simple democratic fact of the sheer, unqualified popular relief and joy at its demise wherever this has occurred.

Such evidence makes it all the more puzzling and disturbing that Marxism should retain a high degree of support in South Africa. One thinks here not of those at the bottom levels of political organisation, steeped in years of Marxist liberation rhetoric which will naturally take time to dissolve, but rather of the many well-informed and perceptive "cultural workers" and intellectuals who steadfastly refuse to acknowledge the inevitable. Ultimately, there can be no future for Marxism. It is simply wrong to believe that the "socialist project" which has failed everywhere in the world (or which is maintained merely as a propagandistic veil for totalitarianism) can somehow succeed in South Africa. More particularly, it is, in consequence, equally mistaken to continue to theorise literature in terms of the lapsed dogma of Marxism. To believe otherwise is not merely quixotic, it is wilfully and dangerously irresponsible, intellectually, culturally, politically.

If Marxism makes explicit claims about the relationship of literature to politics, the assertions of poststructuralism in this regard are frequently obscure and equivocal. Thus, instead of seeking to identify the common purpose underpinning a number of variants, as was the case with Marxism, the difficulty here consists in establishing clearly what is meant by poststructuralism and what its understanding is of the intersection of literature and politics. For purposes both of brevity and clarity, I am going to focus specifically on the idea of deconstruction as developed, essentially, by Jacques Derrida and his immediate followers. Such a move is not merely expedient: the case of Derrida merits the closest attention since it presents the most far-reaching implications for politics and literature and hence poses the most serious challenge to liberalism. Thus, while by no means discounting the force of the ideas of Lacan, Foucault and others, they may, nevertheless, be regarded as occupying less radically anti-liberal positions than Derrida.

At the outset, however, it is necessary to disqualify from consideration a version of "deconstruction" which sees as its function merely the exposing and unravelling of contradictions or hidden agendas in theoretical systems or political discourses. Such a process has little to do with the deconstructive practices of Derrida and represents little more than a continuation of the tradition of sceptical analysis, established in the Enlightenment, based on the scientific principles of rational enquiry, experimentation and verification. This tradition is wholly consistent with the liberal tenets of rational, autonomous individuality and the need for constant vigilance against mendacity and tyranny. Where the argument is set in opposition to liberalism, its moral and philosophical basis must be clarified and the coherence of such a position scrutinised.

More properly, however, deconstruction, as it emerges in the writings of Derrida,[2] involves not simply healthy, rational scepticism, but rather, in its strongest form, the attempted subversion of the very basis of such rational discourse. In brief, deconstruction seeks to undermine the claims of any textual work, in terms of its linguistic system, to be autonomous, intelligible

or determinate; that is, it asserts that there can be no textual representation or demonstration of determinate truth or knowledge or reality. Derrida's ideas are complex and difficult, but are generally well-known, and so it is not necessary to provide a detailed summary of them here. My concern, in any event, is not so much with the validity of his thought – a matter which the present article could not hope to resolve once for all – as with the political ramifications of his thought.

Derrida's ideas may not initially seem to hold any direct or immediate relevance for specific political issues, particularly within the contemporary South African context. The abstruse philosophical arguments, the tendency towards solipsistic textual interpretation (or non-interpretation), the self-indulgent verbal gaming, would seem to be of limited concern to a society immersed in complex and often painful transition from an oppressive political past to a disturbingly unpredictable future. Of course, on the widest possible plane, a final verification of the validity of Derrida's thought would have profound implications for our understanding of all reality, including the specific political reality of our own place and time. In more practical terms, however, it would be unlikely to have much actual impact, just as other philosophies of radical uncertainty have had little effect on ordinary life. Examples that come to mind include the epistemological indeterminacies suggested by Descartes and asserted forcefully by Hume; the ethical relativism posited by Nietzsche in view of a system not grounded in an ultimate monotheistic reality; and even the brute scientific uncertainties confronted and acknowledged by Einstein, Heisenberg and modern quantum physicists.

There are, however, more immediate and alarming political implications of Derrida's thinking which are beginning to emerge with increasing clarity. The issues were recently thrust into prominence at the inaugural series of Amnesty International lectures, held at Oxford in early 1992 in aid of the incarcerated Burmese Nobel Peace Prize winner, Aung San Suu Kyi. Entitled "Freedom and Interpretation", the lectures were intended, according to Jim Reed, editor of the *Oxford Magazine*, as "an in-depth investigation of the relations between artistic and intellectual creation and human liberty", and focused particularly on the challenge posed by modern theories such as deconstruction to concepts like human individuality and meaningful communication which are naturally of prime importance to Amnesty. Derrida, in particular, was taken to task for promoting an arbitrariness of interpretative freedom which itself threatens to dissolve the very values on which individuals' freedom rests. As Reed, following the arguments of Frank Kermode and others, maintains, deconstruction has extensive political implications:

> Far from being always a democratic right and a weapon against the structures of power, "freedom of interpretation" has no keener practitioners than the holders of power themselves, from the relatively tame ones who cook and re-cook the unemployment figures to the lethal ones who deny all knowledge of the human beings whom they have "disappeared" tortured and killed. Freedom of interpretation is not a good to be blithely maximised without some regulative notion of what is not just "free", but true.
>
> (Reed 1992)

The relevance of such comments for South Africa is brought into sharp focus by any consideration of recent South African history under a government which has practised precisely the kind of lethal political engineering identified by Reed. What clearer exemplification could there be of deconstruction's radically arbitrary "freedom of interpretation" than the National Party's arbitrary classification of human beings into artificial racial categories like "Coloured" or "non-White"? Or the state's frighteningly Orwellian doublespeak in naming such legislative brutalities as the Immorality Act, the Extension of Universities Act and the Prohibition of Political Interference Act, and in formulating such euphemisms as "homeland", "resettlements" and "separate development"? Or the government's utter subversion of any notions of truth or justice in its "free" interpretation and manipulation of information, coupled with its draconian censorship laws? Or even, most cynically of all perhaps, the Nationalists' attempted justification of apartheid through grossly casuistical biblical exegesis? In the face of this state oppression, a potent source of opposition, protest and resistance has been the use of literature as a means of sustaining and promoting truth. To submit to a deconstructive arbitrariness of interpretation would mean to relinquish this mechanism for individual and popular power against the unjust practices of the present and any future government. Given the grim lessons of South Africa's political history, such a step would have to be regarded as most ill-advised.

3

I have argued that neither the lapsed creed of Marxism nor the interpretative arbitrariness of deconstruction offers a viable means of dealing with the question of the relationship between literature and politics, especially in the current South African context. I wish now to suggest that liberalism, properly understood, does, in fact, provide the basis for a potentially successful way of treating this interrelationship. In order to demonstrate this, it is necessary to present a clear and accurate account of the nature of contemporary liberalism, and especially of modern-day liberal political philosophy.

As I mentioned at the outset of this article, liberalism has tended, not least in recent South African literary-political writing, to be defined by its enemies rather than its friends, with the result that a rather distorted picture of liberal thought has emerged. Very often, in fact, critiques of liberal thinking have been founded upon fundamental misapprehensions of the actual nature of liberalism, particularly by Marxist critics, who have tended to judge liberalism as if it were similar in character to Marxism itself – a clearly circumscribed ideology or a solid body of theory which has remained fairly constant through time. In actuality, liberalism is none of these things: it is neither fixed in time nor completely homogeneous in content but is, instead, made up of several strands or variants and is by nature dynamic and developmental, continually evolving and adapting to changing social and cultural circumstances (see, for example, Girvetz 1963; Gaus 1983; Shapiro 1986). It is unfortunately true, however, that, as Michael Freeden (1978: 1) has pointed out, "even now,

many of its modern opponents assail with venom a set of principles that liberalism itself discarded almost a century ago". (For various defences of liberalism against such misrepresentations, in South African writing, see Wright 1977; Butler & Schreuder 1987; Foley 1992). The flexibility and pluralistic qualities of liberalism does not mean, however, that it is necessarily self-contradictory or amorphous. Instead, as I hope to show, contemporary liberalism is founded upon, and centred around, a powerful set of core values and principles which are capable of generating a coherent and compelling political philosophy.

Given the extensive and often quite prejudicial misconceptions and confusion which continues to surround the notion of liberalism today, it is necessary to clarify exactly what is entailed in contemporary liberal thought. As such, it is probably wisest to begin with some relatively straightforward accounts of the essential features of liberalism. John Gray, in his succinct delineation of liberalism, identifies four key elements making up the distinctively liberal conception of man and society which is common to all variants of the liberal tradition:

> It is *individualist*, in that it asserts the moral primacy of the person against the claims of any social collectivity; *egalitarian*, inasmuch as it confers on all men the same moral status and denies the relevance to legal or political order of differences in moral worth among human beings; *universalist*, affirming the moral unity of the human species and according a secondary importance to specific historic associations and cultural forms; and *meliorist* in its affirmation of the corrigibility and improvability of all social institutions and political arrangements.
> (Gray 1986: x)

And, drawing upon these constituent elements, Gray goes on to formulate a general description of the cardinal properties of the liberal state:

> The *sine qua non* of the liberal state in all its varieties is that governmental power be limited by a system of constitutional rules and practices in which individual liberty and the equality of persons under the rule of law are respected.
> (1986: 75)

Descriptions such as these are essential in illuminating the common core and basic properties of liberalism in general, particularly in the face of the often wilful misrepresentations of its antagonists. For our purposes, however, it is necessary to go beyond a general definition and to consider some of the internal variety and complexity of contemporary liberal thought in order to gain an appreciation of its dynamic character and its multifaceted potentialities.

It is part of the special identity of liberalism that it should have prompted numerous individual interpretations of what its principal emphasis should be, and, consequently, that it should have come to contain within itself several differing strands. It is possible, however, without simplifying matters too much, to isolate two broad positions within the liberal tradition which continue to advance strong claims to priority today but which are in at least partial conflict with each other. In essence, this conflict arises over the tension

within liberal thinking between the at least potentially divergent principles of liberty and equality. The two chief liberal positions may be roughly outlined as follows. On the one hand, "classical liberalism", as it has come to be called, tends to see individual liberty as an inviolable natural right which may not under any circumstances be qualified. Such liberals would, therefore, generally favour a minimum of state intervention and a stringently free market economic system, and would distrust any kind of welfarist or managerialist policies on the part of the government. With the origins of their position to be found in the thinking of John Locke, some prominent figures who are regarded as falling more or less into this category include Herbert Spencer, Karl Popper, F.A. Hayek, James Buchanan, Murray Rothbart and Robert Nozick. On the other hand, "modern liberalism", as it has become known, would argue that some degree of equality is a legitimate goal of liberal government, and that justice is sometimes best served by some form of state intervention in matters of unfair social and economic inequality. Finding the source of their modernity of thought in, *inter alia*, John Stuart Mill, some well-known liberals of this kind would include L.T. Hobhouse, T.H. Green, J.M. Keynes, Harry Girvetz, Amy Guttmann and John Rawls. This is not to say, of course, that these two positions form neatly demarcated "camps" or that the differences between them are not largely a matter of emphasis rather than principle, but the division is useful in focusing some of the options available within the liberal movement.

A consideration of these two variants of liberal thought incidentally underlines liberalism's middle position on the spectrum of contemporary political theory. Classical liberalism, with its heavy stress on individualism, has a tendency to move towards extreme libertarianism and even individual anarchism in one sense, and, in another, towards conservatism, especially in terms of its economic thinking. Modern liberalism, by contrast, with its concern for equality, has a tendency to move towards utilitarianism, radical egalitarianism and even social democracy. At the further ends of each of these flanks lie the extremes of reactionary conservatism and revolutionary socialism, both of which, as history has shown, are highly susceptible of rapid transformation into tyranny and totalitarianism. It may, therefore, be argued that the middle path of liberalism, as a safeguard against such excesses, represents a further point in its favour.

In order to provide a more detailed understanding of the continuing relevance and force of these two liberal strands, it is useful to focus on the particular arguments of the two moral philosophers who have come, over the past twenty years or so, to represent these two positions most powerfully: Robert Nozick and John Rawls. Such an exercise will serve two purposes: firstly, it will demonstrate that liberalism, far from being inevitably vague and diffuse, is capable of precise, coherent theorisation; and, secondly, it will help to identify some of the key liberal concepts which have direct bearing on literary practice.

In the first place, then, Robert Nozick, in *Anarchy, State and Utopia* (1974), presents a compelling case for classical liberalism in contemporary times. Against the competing claims of, on the one side, individual anar-

chism, and, on the other, government interventionism, Nozick develops an argument, from a broadly libertarian perspective, for the minimal state:

> Our main conclusions about the state are that a minimal state, limited to the narrow functions of protection against force, theft, fraud, enforcement of contracts, and so on, is justified; that any more extensive state will violate persons' rights not to be forced to do certain things, and is unjustified; and that the minimal state is inspiring as well as right.
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> (Nozick 1974: ix)

Partly in response to Rawls, Nozick formulates his own anti-distributivist theory of justice, that he calls "entitlement theory", in which it is asserted that economic goods arise already encumbered with rightful claims to their ownership and with these the state may not interfere. Moreover, he evolves a new and surprising conception of utopia based on his theory of the minimal state: here utopia is not conceptualised in terms of the particular content of any single way of life, but rather in terms of an overarching "framework" within which individuals or groups of individuals are guaranteed the freedom to create and realise their own personal notions of the best of all possible worlds:

> There will not be *one* kind of community existing and one kind of life led in utopia. Utopia will consist of utopias, of many different and divergent communities in which people lead different kinds of lives under different institutions. . .. Utopia is a framework for utopias, a place where people are at liberty to join together voluntarily to pursue and attempt to realize their own vision of the good life in the ideal community but where no one can *impose* his own utopian vision upon others. . .. Half of the truth I wish to put forth is that utopia is meta-utopia: the environment in which utopian experiments may be tried out; the environment in which people are free to do their own thing; the environment which must, to a great extent, be realized first if more particular utopian visions are to be realised stably.
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> (1974: 311–312)

Thus, Nozick argues that the minimal state, the framework for utopia, far from being pale and unexciting, is, in actual fact, "an inspiring vision" (p. 333) for it allows one the freedom and indeed encourages one to live the best possible life that one is able, literally, to imagine.

John Rawls, in his magisterial work, *A Theory of Justice*, adopts, like Nozick, a version of contract theory, but he employs a rather different methodology and he reaches rather different conclusions from those of Nozick. Whereas Nozick is content to propound an evocative and provocative social ideal without attempting to ground it in meticulous analytical detail, Rawls seeks to provide, through rigorous and exhaustive argument, a systematic theory of justice which will constitute "the most appropriate moral basis for a democratic society" (Rawls 1971: viii). The success of his endeavour is confirmed by the fact that his work has become predominant in contemporary political discourse (see Daniels 1975; Paul 1981), displacing both the unsubstantiated utilitarianism and intuitionism which preceded it

and resisting the various Marxist attacks launched against it (especially Barry 1973). In an important sense, modern liberalism is Rawlsian liberalism.

Given the highly formalised philosophical prose that Rawls deploys, his views are best presented intact rather than by means of paraphrasal summary. In §3, entitled "The Main Idea of the Theory of Justice", Rawls conveys the essence of his argument:

> My aim is to present a conception of justice which generalizes and carries to a higher level of abstraction the familiar theory of the social contract as found, say, in Locke, Rousseau, and Kant. In order to do this we are not to think of the original contract as one to enter a particular society or to set up a particular form of government. Rather, the guiding idea is that the principles of justice for the basic structure of society are the object of the original agreement. They are the principles that free and rational persons concerned to further their own interests would accept in an initial position of equality as defining the fundamental terms of their association. These principles are to regulate all further agreements; they specify the kinds of social cooperation that can be entered into and the forms of government that can be established. This way of regarding the principles of justice I shall call justice as fairness.
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> . . .
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> In justice as fairness the original position of equality corresponds to the state of nature in the traditional theory of the social contract. This original position is not, of course, thought of as an actual historical state of affairs, much less as a primitive condition of culture. It is understood as a purely hypothetical situation characterized so as to lead to a certain conception of justice. Among the essential features of this situation is that no one knows his place in society, his class position or social status, nor does any one know his fortune in the distribution of natural assets and abilities, his intelligence, strength, and the like. I shall even assume that the parties do not know their conceptions of the good or their special psychological propensities. The principles of justice are chosen behind a veil of ignorance. This ensures that no one is advantaged or disadvantaged in the choice of principles by the outcome of natural chance or the contingency of social circumstances. Since all are similarly situated and no one is able to design principles to favor his particular condition, the principles of justice are the result of a fair agreement or bargain. For given the circumstances of the original position, the symmetry of everyone's relations to each other, this initial situation is fair between individuals as moral persons, that is, as rational beings with their own ends and capable, I shall assume, of a sense of justice. The original position is, one might say, the appropriate initial status quo, and thus the fundamental agreements reached in it are fair. This explains the propriety of the name "justice as fairness": it conveys the idea that the principles of justice are agreed to in an initial situation that is fair.
>
> (1971: 11–12)

Building upon this foundation, through detailed developmental argumentation, Rawls reaches "the final statement of the two principles of justice for institutions" in §46:

> *First Principle*
> Each person is to have an equal right to the most extensive total system of equal basic liberties compatible with a similar system of liberty for all.

Second Principle
Social and economic inequalities are to be arranged so that they are both:
(a) to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged, consistent with the just savings principle; and
(b) attached to offices and positions open to all under conditions of fair equality of opportunity.

First Priority Rule (The Priority of Liberty)
The principles of justice are to be ranked in lexical order and therefore liberty can be restricted only for the sake of liberty. There are two cases:
(a) a less extensive liberty must strengthen the total system of liberty shared by all;
(b) a less than equal liberty must be acceptable to those with a lesser liberty.

Second Priority Rule (The Priority of Justice over Efficiency and Welfare)
The second principle of justice is lexically prior to the principle of efficiency and to that of maximizing the sum of advantages; and fair opportunity is prior to the difference principle. There are two cases:
(a) an inequality of opportunity must enhance the opportunities of those with the lesser opportunity;
(b) an excessive rate of saving must on balance mitigate the burden of those bearing this hardship.

(1971: 302–303)[3]

I have dealt with the work of Nozick and Rawls in some detail in order to dispel any notion that liberalism remains mired in nineteenth-century thinking, as well as to demonstrate that liberalism is capable of generating a coherent, yet flexible and dynamic political philosophy which may, in turn, provide the basis for a successful practical political order in a variety of sociocultural contexts.

Indeed, if the tremendous upheavals in world affairs over the past few years have demonstrably exposed the fatal flaws at the heart of Marxist theory and practice, then they have also served as a striking vindication of liberal political and economic systems and institutions. This point, I might add, is made not in a spirit of cheap triumphalism, but rather as part of an objective assessment of recent geopolitical developments. The argument is, in any event, not new, having been articulated most extensively and audaciously by Francis Fukuyama, originally in a 1989 article, "The End of History?", and then at more length in *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992). Whether or not one agrees with Fukuyama's re-reading of Hegel and Nietzsche, or with his view that history has indeed now reached its *telos*, there can be no doubting the cogency of his central assertion:

> As mankind approaches the end of the millennium, the twin crises of authoritarianism and socialist central planning have left only one competitor standing in the ring as an ideology of potentially universal validity – liberal democracy, the doctrine of individual freedom and popular sovereignty.
>
> (Fukuyama 1992: 42)

This is not to suggest, of course, that liberal government has taken or must take the same form everywhere: clearly, it has found differing expression in

America, Britain, Germany, Japan, for example, and it will no doubt undergo novel adaptations as it takes hold in Russia, Albania, Zambia, and, potentially, in South Africa. The point, rather, is that the core philosophical values and principles underlying all forms of liberal political practice have shown themselves to be uniquely suited to the conditions and demands of contemporary political life. In particular, the fundamental liberal values of individuality and the equality of liberty and opportunity have proved to be especially congenial to the idea of democratic rule, so that the world-wide drive towards democracy has been, more specifically, a movement towards liberal democracy. By the same token, it has become clear that of all the possible political systems amenable to liberal thought, democracy has clearly established itself as the best practical means of manifesting and sustaining liberal values in society and of approximating towards a liberal conception of social justice.

It is, therefore, a source of some encouragement that there appears to be a movement, however halting, in South Africa at present towards an acceptance of liberal democratic principles. This is apparent not merely in the sheer fact of multilateral negotiations taking place, but in the very language being used and the actual concepts being discussed, including constitutional government, the rule of law, protection of individuals under a bill of rights, checks and balances on state power, and the guaranteeing of civil liberties. There can, in fact, be no other alternative. The liberal democratic system represents the only possible fair and just central meeting point of all the diverse ethnic and ideological groups in this country, especially, perhaps, the major antagonists of Afrikaner and African nationalism. As such, it could be argued that the future peace and prosperity of this country depends not so much on the capacity of liberal democracy to provide it as on the ability of South Africans to see that it alone can.

4

I hope to have shown that liberalism, far from being either an outworn and otiose moral philosophy or an exhausted and ineffectual political movement, continues to exert a powerful contemporary influence at the level both of ideas and practice. A brief examination of the work of Rawls and Nozick reveals that liberalism is quite susceptible of coherent philosophical theorisation, while a survey of the current state of affairs in world politics confirms the unrivalled success of liberalism as a basis for democratic political systems. It is now timely to consider in what ways the values and principles inherent in liberal political thought may have application in the sphere of literary activity, and, in particular, how some of the key concepts in the work of political philosophers such as Rawls and Nozick may be used to bolster a liberal conceptualisation of literature. In doing so it will be useful to play liberal ideas off against those of Marxism and deconstruction.

In the first place, then, a literary criticism founded upon contemporary liberal thinking must stand in utter opposition to the prescriptive and restrictive aims and methods of Marxist criticism (as do, incidentally, poststructuralists like Foucault[4]). The ultimate goal of Marxism in general,

and Marxist literary criticism in particular, as suggested earlier in this paper, must be the actualisation of the classless socialist society, a process which literature, in a fundamental sense, either helps or hinders. As such, Marxist criticism arrogates to itself the right to pass normative judgements on literary texts, based on this political objective, and, consequently, to censure or even censor texts either through outright prohibition or through the critical "correction" or "re-writing" of their content in order to bring them into line with the approved political ideology. Liberals clearly reject such procedures by virtue of the fact that they are predicated upon the assertion that social or communal considerations take priority over individual rights, and in particular, that individual liberty may be violated for the supposed good of the collectivity. Endemic to such Marxist thinking is what Anthony Flew (1981) has perceptively labelled "the politics of Procrustes", a term he derives from the classics:

> After this Theseus killed a man called Procrustes, who lived in what was known as Corydallas in Attica. This person forced passing travellers to lie down on a bed, and if any were too long for the bed he lopped off those part of their bodies which protruded, while racking out the legs of the ones who were too short. This was why he was given the name of Procrustes [The Racker].
>
> (Diodorus Siculus, quoted as epigraph by Flew, 1981)

Flew's point is that Marxism, or socialism, forces upon people an artificial and inhibiting equality which prevents and neutralises natural human uniqueness and individual talent. By contrast, liberalism seeks to secure an equality of liberty but by no means an equality of outcomes deriving from such liberty, and so fosters creativity through individual differences. Such thinking underlies the work of both Nozick and Rawls, despite their divergences on other issues, and so it is possible to extend their political theorisations in application to the principles of literary critical practice.

From *Anarchy, State and Utopia*, Nozick's concept of the "framework of utopias", or utopia as a "meta-utopia", is especially germane to the matter at hand. The implication of Nozick's theory is that a liberal approach to literature should, as a prerequisite for all literary activity, insist on the fundamental and absolute freedom of writers to write what they like, how they like and from whatever perspective they like (subject only to the ordinary laws of libel, of course). Obversely, writers should be guaranteed the freedom *not* to have to write about any particular topic. Given this unconditional commitment to the individual liberty and autonomy of writers, it follows that a liberal literary criticism should, by nature, be descriptive rather than prescriptive, interpretative rather than normative, explicatory rather than correctional. While texts may certainly be assessed in terms of such characteristics as their aesthetic properties, their effectiveness, their perspicacity, and so on (however these may be conceptualised), there can be no support for a criticism which demands that a literary text conform to certain pre-existent and preceptive norms of "correctness" – political, moral, religious, or otherwise. Importantly, then, liberal criticism does not wish, much less require, texts to reflect or promote liberal thought since this would contradict the core liberal principle of indi-

vidual (authorial) freedom itself. Thus, a liberal approach to literature is neither the weak nor the conservative one it is sometimes accused of being, but is rather the most vitally and radically free. It nurtures truly creative art because it permits and, indeed, encourages experimentation, innovation, idiosyncrasy, eccentricity, and, perhaps most importantly of all, unpredictability. And it promotes truly critical thought because it allows and even values a free and open exchange of ideas, holding no subject above scrutiny and debate and believing nothing to be beyond potential improvement. Unlike the politics of Procrustes demanded by Marxism, liberalism stimulates and cherishes a literature of Proteus, the sea god who embodied the ocean's dual qualities of simultaneous constancy and change, sameness and otherness, familiarity and novelty. In the same way, then, that Nozick's political ideal consists foremostly of a stable environment in which utopian experimentation can take place, so a liberal approach to literature should as its first task seek to establish a secure context for the free play of the creative imagination and the critical mind.

The question arises, however, of what action liberals could or should take against writers or critics who take advantage of this freedom in order to pursue a programme designed, for whatever reason, to dissolve or dismantle the "framework" or free literary environment – and both Marxism and deconstruction do, in different ways, threaten to do this. Nozick suggests that the framework may have to be imposed and maintained as one of the few coercive duties of the state (1974: 329–331), but provides no moral argument to justify such action. It is necessary, in fact, to turn to Rawls for a systematic justification. This is not to imply that Rawls's and Nozick's work as a whole may be synthesised or reconciled, but simply that some of their ideas may be mutually reinforcing and may be usefully combined in particular relation to literary practice. In this instance, Rawls's theory of justice as fairness provides a moral and logical indication of the enforcement of literary freedom. Rawls's first principle of justice (1971: 302–303; see above), in asserting the equal right of all persons to "the most extensive total system of equal basic liberties compatible with a similar system of liberty for all", confirms that no person has the right to use his freedom to limit the freedom of others. More specifically, Rawls's first priority rule stresses that "liberty can be restricted only for the sake of liberty" and not for the sake of efficiency or welfare (always bearing in mind the conditions laid down in the second principle of justice). In essence, then, Rawls's theory of justice provides a compelling demonstration of the fact that there can be no logical or ethical reason for a violation of the principle of individual liberty in general or of authorial freedom in particular: it would not bring into being a fairer social system; it would not be to the material advantage of the members of the society generally; and it certainly would not be for the good of those (writers) whose liberty was restricted. Thus, the only instance where a writer's freedom may be limited is where (s)he uses such freedom to try to destroy the total system of liberty shared by all other writers.

From this it ought to be clear that what deconstructionists mean by "freedom" is not freedom at all in the liberal sense of the term, but mere arbitrariness or

randomness of linguistic meaning. As such, deconstruction can offer no safeguard for the "freedom" it pretends to promote, but instead represents a potential subversion of the very notion of liberty itself. From a practical point of view, it may be argued, as was done earlier in this article, that the consequences of advocating such an arbitrariness of meaning in the world of *realpolitik* are highly disturbing indeed. And from a theoretical point of view, it is apparent that deconstruction, by virtue of its own radical destabilisation of determinate meaning, can supply no intelligible conceptualisation – moral, political or literary – of what it claims to understand by freedom.

What deconstruction has made evident, however, and perhaps this represents its real value, is the need to locate the notion of freedom within a carefully theorised context. In political philosophy, as John Rawls, for example, has demonstrated, the idea of freedom ought to be placed within the context of a systematic theory of justice. The implication is that a similar context needs to be developed in the field of literary criticism, where freedom is postulated specifically in relation to the interpretation of meaning. The problem is slightly complicated in literary criticism since literature involves not so much the immediate, actual world of political reality but the world of fictionalised reality and the imagination. Nevertheless, critics like Reed (1992) and Kermode are surely correct in claiming that literary critical interpretation cannot simply be arbitrarily free but must rather be regulated by some notion of "truth". What is needed, then, is a far more highly developed theory of the imagination in order to clarify the nature of the truthfulness of fictional writing and the relation of imaginative thought and expression to phenomenological reality. The fact that this matter is not yet settled does not mean that it is necessary to accept the assertions of deconstruction. From a negative position, two of the more powerful critiques of deconstruction are those of John Holloway and Cedric Watts (both 1983), while from a more positive perspective, a range of theorists have produced compelling alternatives of a conventional kind to deconstruction. Among those whose work is particularly congenial to liberal thinking are E.D. Hirsch (1967; 1976), especially his crucial distinction between the determinate verbal meaning of a text and its non-determinate significance; Charles Altieri (1981), who develops a complex defence of humanistic meaning based on his reading of Wittgenstein; and Daniel R. Schwarz (1986), who provides a lucid delineation of the principles of humanistic formalism.

It needs to be stressed that while it is part of the distinctive character of liberalism to foster freedom of thought and expression, this does not mean that liberal literary critics are obliged to accept any or all conceptions of literary criticism as equally cogent. Despite its flexibility and tolerance for novelty and heterodoxy, there are certain limits to what liberal criticism would regard as valid, and these are set largely in relation to the liberal understanding of man as an essentially autonomous, rational individual agent. Such a conception of man, though under assault, has by no means been invalidated or superseded. Deriving in its most systematic modern form from Kant, it continues to provide the basis for much contemporary political and general philosophy (see Lindley 1986; Flathman 1987; Barrett 1987). And in

the field of psychology, it continues, despite Freudian notions of interior determinism or Skinnerian hypotheses of exterior conditioning, to be propounded by many theorists whose concern is not so much with psychological abnormalities or behaviour under exceptional conditions, but rather with the vast majority of ordinary human beings. Beginning with the individual psychology of Alfred Adler, a protégé of Freud who came to repudiate the theories of psychoanalysis, such humanistic psychology has been developed and expanded in recent times by Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers, to name but two prominent figures. Common to each of these thinkers is a profound belief in the individual coherence of the human personality, the essential autonomy of the human mind, and the ability of human beings to come to a rational understanding of themselves and their world and to strive consciously and meaningfully for betterment, or, to use a key phrase, "self-actualisation". In *Motivation and Personality* (1970: xii-xiii), Maslow encapsulates the humanistic perspective (see also Rogers 1961: 195ff):

> Human life will never be understood unless its highest aspirations are taken into account. Growth, self-actualization, the striving toward health, the quest for identity and autonomy, the yearning for excellence...must now be accepted beyond question as a widespread and perhaps universal tendency.
>
> (Maslow 1970: xii-xiii)

Given this understanding of human nature, it is obvious that liberal criticism stands in opposition to any form of literary theory which rejects the notion of the individual subject whether by dissolving the individual into a social aggregate determined by material conditions (as Marxism does) or by deconstructing the human subject into a decentred play of indeterminate signifiers (as deconstruction does). This does not mean that liberal criticism insists on a narrowly realistic or mimetic understanding of literature or on any concomitant interpretative procedure. It does mean, however, that at the very least it assumes that it is possible for a rational, autonomous authorial agent to convey meaning to an equally rational, autonomous reader, however complex the process and however complicated the relationship between writer and reader may be. It assumes, moreover, the capacity, at least potentially, of fictional writing to represent reality or to communicate insights about human life, though again without underestimating the complexity of the process.

Liberal criticism thus shares a belief, with Marxism, and in opposition to deconstruction, in the capability of literature to reveal and convey truths about human reality. Unlike Marxism, however, liberalism does not construe these truths to be limited to the prescriptive parameters of any particular ideology. Instead, based on its commitment to the fundamental principle of individual liberty, liberalism encourages writers and readers alike continually to explore and to refine our understanding of those truths. As such, it would be self-contradictory for liberal criticism to try to force any author to write from any specific point of view about any particular subject, even in a context of extreme political injustice. At the same time, however, the very condition of such authorial freedom has inspired many liberal writers to address the

subject of the political infringement of human liberty in their work. It is appropriate, therefore, to offer a final comment on one further aspect of the relationship between liberal politics and liberal literature: namely that it is part of the complex and unique nature of liberalism that it is able to function simultaneously as an absolute guarantee of freedom of expression *and* as a compelling moral incentive for writers to help extend to others precisely that same condition of freedom.

5

This article has been concerned to explore the liberal understanding of the relationship between politics and literature. It has been focused chiefly at the level of fundamental assumptions and principles, partly because of the numerous misrepresentations of the basic nature of liberalism which continue to prevail, and partly because of the paucity of adequate accounts or defences of liberalism in the face of such misrepresentations. The primary intention has not, therefore, been to provide a detailed examination of particular literary texts or of the specific conditions of literary practice in this country. It is hoped, nevertheless, that the implications for literary activity in present-day South Africa are reasonably clear.

It is necessary in conclusion, however, to offer explicit comment on certain disturbing trends in current South African cultural thinking. It was noted earlier in this article that there existed a generally centripetal tendency in South African political negotiations towards a broadly liberal democratic position. In the cultural arena, however, quite different forces appear to be at work. After having opposed the Afrikaner nationalist repression of free literary activity for so long, many liberals are alarmed at the signs of the potential for similarly repressive attitudes emanating from the left at the moment. Despite the lip service paid to the idea of free expression by certain cultural workers, the principle seems to have been but superficially assimilated. In particular, the key concept of individual liberty, without which there cannot be any true freedom of expression, continues to be repudiated in favour of illiberal collectivist conceptualisations which are reflected in the very language being used. The ideas conveyed by phrases like "cultural desks", "people's culture" and even "national literature" – all in common usage – reveal a demand for ideological conformity, however well-intentioned, and an intolerance of minority opinions and individual dissent, which stems from a disquietingly totalitarian conception of culture. It is depressing, indeed, to note that at a time of incipient emancipation the left seems intent on simply replacing one form of authoritarian control with another. To take a few scattered recent examples, instead of eschewing the idea of national policy directives devised by bureaucratically inept state bodies like the various Performing Arts Councils, the plan seems to be to establish a new bureaucracy to impose a new, equally prescriptive, "national arts policy" on theatre in this country. Similarly, instead of freeing the media from the kind of regimental control currently in operation, the apparent call is to force television and radio to comply with the new restrictions of "democratic

control"; and, instead of liberating literature from the curbs imposed by the moral watchdogs of "Christian national culture", the intention seems to be to subject it to the new strictures of "national democratic culture". The belief that these tendencies are either progressive or truly democratic is given the lie by the fact that the same small number of persons repeatedly and inevitably appear as the expert "cultural policy makers" on any issue from the print media to poetry, from fine arts to film, from literature to law. The implication is that what passes for the will of the people is, in reality, merely another instance of attempted central control by the few. If this is what is meant by "popular culture", what room can there be for those who disagree with the "people", or whose opinions are strange or unpopular?

Having stressed the contemporaneity of liberal thought in this article, it is paradoxically appropriate to turn back to some of the great liberal thinkers of the past to provide a proper understanding of the meaning of tolerance and freedom of expression in an open society. It was Voltaire, for example, who emphasised in his famous *dictum* that the toleration of free speech meant not that one permitted people to say what one believed was true and right and proper but rather what one believed was false and even offensive:

> I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it.

And it was John Stuart Mill, in the essay *On Liberty*, who demonstrated what was truly entailed by the concept of individual freedom of expression as opposed to majority opinion:

> Let us suppose, therefore, that the government is entirely at one with the people, and never thinks of exerting any power of coercion unless in agreement with what it conceives to be their voice. But I deny the right of the people to exercise such coercion, either by themselves or by their government. The power itself is illegitimate. The best government has no more title to it than the worst. It is as noxious, or more noxious, when exerted in accordance with public opinion than when in opposition to it. If all mankind minus one were of one opinion, mankind would be no more justified in silencing that one person than he, if he had the power, would be justified in silencing mankind.
>
> (1859: 76)

Ultimately, there can be no justification for the suppression of freedom, whether of expression or any other, for, as Alexis de Tocqueville (in Nozick 1974: 328) pointed out, it is not possible for people to grow and flourish and realise their full potentialities unless they are allowed to exist in conditions of maximum liberty:

> It is only by being free that men will develop the habits of free men and come to exercise the virtues, capacities, responsibilities and judgements appropriate to free men.

But it is apt that the final word should go to José Ortega y Gasset, a man who experienced firsthand what it was to attempt to uphold liberal values and principles in the face of violent tyranny. Confronted by the prospect of the obliteration of liberal thought by the forces of totalitarianism, he has provided a passionate and articulate summary of the liberal tradition:

> Liberalism. . .is the supreme form of generosity; it is the right which the majority concedes to minorities and hence it is the noblest cry that has ever resounded on this planet. It announces the determination to share existence with the enemy; more than that, with an enemy which is weak. It was incredible that the human species should have arrived at so noble an attitude, so paradoxical, so refined. Hence it is not to be wondered at that this same humanity should soon appear anxious to get rid of it.
>
> (Ortega y Gasset 1985: 83)

Notes

1. Without wishing to brutalise or trivialise Marxist literary theory, the point may be made through reference to the work of some of the best-known Marxist critics. Thus, this fundamental commonality of purpose – the actualisation of the Marxist politico-economic ideal – may be detected underpinning the social realism models of George Lukács (*The Historical Novel* 1955, for example); the "negative knowledge" critiques of the Frankfurt School, including Adorno (*Prisms* 1955) and Marcuse (*The Aesthetic Dimension* 1977, say); the linguistic analyses of the Bakhtin School, especially Mikhail Bakthin himself (see *The Dialogic Imagination* 1981); the interrogation of textual silences practised by Macherey (*A Theory of Literary Production* 1966) and Eagleton (*Marxism and Literary Criticism* 1976); the socioliterary focus of Goldmann (*Towards a Sociology of the Novel* 1964); and the reconstructive analysis of the political unconscious of Fredric Jameson (*The Political Unconscious* 1981).
2. I am thinking particularly of Derrida's seminal early work, such as *Of Grammatology* and *Writing and Difference* (both 1967), but the basic premises of his thought have remained relatively stable in more recent work: see, for example, *The Ear of the Other* (1982).
3. Rawls also supplies a "General Conception":
   > All social primary goods – liberty and opportunity, income and wealth, and the bases of self-respect – are to be distributed equally unless an unequal distribution of any or all of these goods is to the advantage of the least favored (1971: 303).

   However, this applies only in situations where a certain basic level of material well-being is unavailable in the society in general, and so is not of direct pertinence to this article.
4. See, for example, the attacks which Foucault launches against Marxism at various points in *Power/Knowledge* (1980).

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