Literary Studies in the University

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Summary

Most problems facing literary studies in South Africa are not remediable by ideological or theoretical means. This polemic focuses on underlying structural problems: the canon; the linguistic bases of literature studies; postgraduate studies and career tracks; particular problems caused by our South African situation; and concludes with several practical recommendations for literary studies in South Africa.

Opsomming

Die meeste probleme waarmee literatuurstudie in Suid-Afrika te kampe het, kan nie in terme van ideologiese of teoretiese middele aangespreek word nie. Hierdie polemiek konsentreer op onderliggende strukturele probleme: die kanon; die linguistiese basis van literatuurstudie; nagraadse studie en riglyne vir loopbane; besondere probleme wat veroorsaak word deur ons Suid-Afrikaanse situasie. Dit sluit af met verskeie praktiese aanbevelings vir literatuurstudie in Suid-Afrika.

Introduction

Some of us who complain about literary studies in the university wake up one day to find, like Pogo, that the enemy is us. Complaints about the system have served to advance us in it and, with some shock, adversarial and radical stances have to adapt to holding power. I write thus about social and institutional constraints on literary studies in the university in schizophrenic mode, at once as analyst of symbolic capital and educational reproduction influenced by Pierre Bourdieu, and as the current head of the English Department at the University of Cape Town and, necessarily, an institutional player.

Let me sharpen the stakes by saying that I head a literature and language department under what would seem to many to be the closest to ideal circumstances enjoyed, or likely to be enjoyed, in a South African university in the late twentieth century. We have the best student intake in the country (nearly a quarter of our 700-odd first year students have A's for English in matric, students with worse than a C for English first language higher grade do not automatically qualify for entry to English I, entry to English II demands 55% for English I), the best enrolments for honours (40-odd annually) and postgraduate studies (about 20 M.A. and 20 Ph.D. students, in addition to students in course work programmes in Medieval Studies and the interdisciplinary Literary Studies), three full-time administrative staff (all with degrees in English), reasonable staff-student ratios for a large department, good support for equipment, research and travel. We even have our own Xerox machine. We are also a highly democratic department, memorably defined by Nick Visser as having twice as many factions as staff members.

Our problems cannot thus simply be blamed on bad manners, gerontocracy, the dead hand of tradition, or any other ideological quick fix. They

show, I would submit, the problems of our interpretive community in its starkest terms. In addition, of course, my description of our situation (I trust mouths watered?) was designed in part to make the point that there are what one might call class and structural differences between departments that weigh heavily in deciding what should and can be done.

Speaking as a bureaucrat, I shall thus look at structural and material conditions of and constraints on our discipline and activities at present and start with a materialist, voire vulgar-Marxist observation. The major problems facing literary studies in South Africa now are not ideological in any narrow sense, nor are they remediable by any adoption of faith, political belief, theoretical position, or teaching method. Our problems are at once a product of local educational and social conditions and broadly typical of the discipline internationally. The way forward will have to deal both with urgent local issues and with a variety of issues bedeviling university-based literary studies more generally. I discuss five issues: the canon; language competence and education as bases for literary study; literary training and literary careers; particular pressures in the current South African situation; and recommendations.

1 The Canon

Instead of having a canon in the currently debated American sense of great works of Western Civilisation by Dead White Males, English Departments in this country have in many cases had F.R. Leavis's prescriptive version of a Great Tradition. This tradition has served as a kind of triple ghost: moral imperative; disciplinary minimum; imagined link with a pedagogic tradition elsewhere. Leavis's death and the failure to bury him properly (so to speak) means that the Leavis legacy survives in odd ways. The challenge to purpose has been kept in disguised forms in curricula and elsewhere (some of the enthusiasm for cultural studies has impeccable *Scrutiny* origins) or dropped with some embarrassment, and the sense of a link with literary criticism elsewhere has become simply random. If English Departments, in particular, are to move forward with any sense, they need to assess and clarify what their sense of the disciplinary canon, the links with literary studies elsewhere, and the departmental and public justifications of literary studies are. Let me give one example of what I mean by the failure to bury Leavis properly. The example of the *Scrutiny* school and of Leavis himself was that of a wide-ranging criticism which decried – overtly or covertly – any kind of period scholarship or specialisation. Our expectations of students; our job advertisements; our own teaching practice show, I suspect, that in this matter (whose importance will be further explored below) we are more Leavisite than we care to admit.

It seems highly unlikely that any South African students of the future will accept a Leavisite or even a largely Anglocentric or Eurocentric version of tradition, though they are likely to resist any attempts to force them into a narrow national mould. (The notion that South African culture has some kind of pristine local authenticity rather than being permeated by international

capital and global pressures lingers on in unlikely places such as the Sachs paper and its aftermaths.) At UCT many students want to study media and film, theory and American Literature – the trendy, even the classics if they become trendy. Most would feel cheated if they felt we were holding back on major texts because they were too difficult, distant. Many students – not only white – will keep strong international connections while having a much more detached and distant attitude to the other, once-dominant cultures. These students will continue to be central to literary studies here.

The implications for teaching are, I think, that we should teach British literature not, as we have tended to do, as a set of loosely-connected touchstones, but in survey and general reading courses which should occupy a major part of the undergraduate syllabus. We should make use of, devise, superior anthologies with explanatory material for material pre-dating the twentieth century. One reason that our Chaucer course works steadily well is that the edition gives students enough contextual literary and social material for them to get an historical imagination going. Our new English I course, which works on four period-defined quarters with emphasis on language and literature in each, has had tutors comparing it favourably with their own far more piecemeal or haphazard course structure in the past.

What of theory? Many critics in departments have a faith in theory which seems to me genetically descended from the Leavisite faith in a kind of felt experience – a transhistorical force which will overcome other intellectual or cultural disadvantages (the need for specialist knowledge of a period, for example) and give us a cultural bond with father or mother figures elsewhere. Let me, unkindly, suggest several reasons why theory should not be seen as a major priority here now in the undergraduate classroom. The first is that we are unlikely ever to be able to do it very well or very originally. French intellectuals come from a tradition of formal study of philosophy; a wide range of language studies; and a culture of philosophical debate. Theory as a natural by-product of French intellectual life is one thing; as a mediated import into a situation where few of us and hardly any of our students can react with any rigour to the claims of a Derrida or a Lacan is something else. The second is that theory is very difficult to incorporate successfully into an undergraduate curriculum in such a way as to ensure the active participation of all staff. The moment one tries to imagine a centrally agreed-on theory course, a departmental orthodoxy, one senses the strains or the historically based compromise that would emerge in such cases.

When theory has been introduced in lectures here in first year, for example, it has not been consistently followed up in senior years because of a wide variety of current theoretical models and practices and students seem puzzlingly immune to what we might hope were mighty conceptual tools. It may be that smaller departments may be more able to work with one consistent theoretical model but (another problem) we see few signs of theoretical training in other departments filtering into ours.

We have tried ways around this. Our department runs options in the senior undergraduate years taking a particular theoretical perspective. Some of us have tried the "ten ways of reading *Hamlet* or *Heart of Darkness* or 'The

Purloined Letter'" approach. I enjoy this but find that even the brightest of third year students find such courses very difficult. The most promising model may be to try to set up a compulsory theory course for all literature majors and teach it on an inter-departmental basis but there are considerable academic-political problems with this.

I am not advocating a *politique de l'autruche* but pointing out that the hope for theory and the theory arrogance of the zealous alike are themselves a kind of blindness as to whom theory benefits and how and why. It may be that there are areas of theory we should explore and test, but theory (even theory of colonialism) as imported commodity in a colonial situation should be regarded with the same scepticism reserved for other cultural imports and discourses.

2 Training of Students and Their Needs

Any government spending public money on the training of literary scholars, or on literary studies generally, may be persuaded into doing so on a variety of grounds. Let me say some unpleasant things about the grounds on which we have failed. As literary students and teachers, too many of us have fed a contempt for language teaching and teachers and ignored the linguistic competences that underlie literary study.

In general, foreign language departments here have failed to produce South African students who could serve as indigenous mediators of French or German or Italian, or even as adequate translators. Most students graduating with a major in French here at UCT would probably not pass the language exam which gives foreign students language exemption for entry into French universities. (Note that our French department demands three years after matric French, so one could expect the situation to be worse in other universities.) How rich, how satisfactory can such students' readings of literature be? How would majors in modern languages in South African universities fare generally on a variety of tests based on contemporary writing in the languages concerned?

The linguistic failure of imagination of literary studies is reflected all the way down into the falling enrolments for modern European languages in high schools and the difficulty university departments have in responding to new pressures for rationalisation. German departments go back to relying on mother-tongue imports from South-West, French barely survives on a vestigial social cachet for young ladies; appointments are usually made in foreign-language departments from abroad. The pressures likely on European foreign languages in schools with the advent of African language courses there make it imperative that such departments think radically if they are to survive, let alone flourish.

Having infuriated, as best I can, mes chers collègues, let me say that English departments have only recently, if at all, faced up to the challenge of being a minority mother tongue and a majority lingua franca in a country desperately in need of common ground. English is taught in many cases in universities to groups of students sharing another mother tongue by lecturers

who do not speak the mother tongue and thus cannot use translation as a teaching or educational aid. An appalling number of English department staff seem to be monoglottal, to want to study British literature without European languages, or African literature without any other relevant European language or an African language.

What we should be teaching students who are to teach in a future South Africa should be the major concern of university departments for on it will depend the future generations of students at university and formal literary studies in the country. Questions of language should be central to this teaching. In the case of English we also urgently need research into the teaching of writing so that there will be highly literate second-language writers of English working as communicators and legislators in the new South Africa.

3 Postgraduate Studies and Literary Careers

We face, at UCT and in South Africa more generally, a situation which is, in objective material terms, grim for graduate students and increasingly grim for those who want to teach high literature in high schools. There are many very bright students (about three-quarters of our M.A.'s take the degree with distinction), very few jobs of the sort they would like. They would like to lecture at somewhere very like UCT, the jobs we need to fill are likely to be in black universities or schools or training colleges. The students want to pursue high literary study or theory; the needs are for language and skills. The situation is aggravated by an age bulge in permanent staff in South African universities because of a mass of appointments in the early seventies – most of us in literature departments are in our forties and were lucky to be coming onto the job market at a time of rapid expansion of universities.

The situation is, of course, perfectly analogous to that in the United States or Europe (though more the United States of fifteen years ago) where demographic trends and declining student enrolments in the universities led to a decline of morale. It is also very typical that the bright American graduate student ends up in a college or junior college teaching lots of basic courses rather than in a university teaching postgraduates, but their system is large and complex enough to allow movement and career fluidity whereas here neither teaching nor work in a black university has been regarded as a positive step by enough graduates. It is best not to be hypocritical about this – many teachers at newer universities make it an article of faith that teaching there is more exciting, more alive, than teaching at stuffy old UCT or another largely-white campus. In reality (or in private confession, or in the real world of job applications) most of them recognise that what they would really like to do is to move from a situation where their literary training is only partially engaged and the open admissions policies of the universities in question involve literature departments in language and remedial work for which their training has not prepared them.

Part of our problem in devising adequate graduate training is that we have never known how seriously to take graduate studies here as many of the best students still go abroad; nonetheless there are promising initiatives of taught

M.A. courses that use local materials for training – the Durban M.A. in Southern African writing is the prime example. It would seem imperative that graduate students should receive formal instruction in teaching writing and in working with second language students. It would seem highly sensible to set up jointly taught postgraduate courses on a regional basis – or even nationally by using UNISA creatively in some cases. We should also be directing a good deal of our energies at graduate studies for in-service teachers as superior high schools are likely to be the destination for many of our postgraduates.

What of specialisation? Specialisation superficially offers the answer to many of our problems. Let staff members, one could argue, shed their Leavisite pretensions and let us make appointments of area specialists and get over the illusion that anyone can, with a little scholarship and a lot of sensibility, be, say, a first rate Renaissance or Romantics scholar. This, it may be argued, was the reason for the relative decline of British literary studies, with their emphasis on general studies for undergraduates and lecturers, as opposed to the American model of specialisation. To do this, of course, would mean a fairly radical revision of our own haphazard graduate training where students do an honours degree and then two dissertations which may be in widely different fields and never have to demonstrate by advanced course-work or examinations that they really can be regarded as experts in a particular period or area of study.

The argument for specialisation can go further. Why can't departments all specialise either by level of teaching, or area of specialisation, or both? The advantages – in terms of having specialists talking to each other; in library holdings; in planning graduate studies – are alluring, but in practice no one wants to give up any area: we all want to have honours and postgraduate students; we all want to cover the field. Within departments, most staff members already in place would be restive if asked to choose their area for the rest of their careers. We are, for better or worse, left with a Leavisite/British/amateur/generalist legacy.

4 South Africa and the Pressures on Us

The pressures on the schooling system and the likely demographic changes in the composition of matriculating students and the consequent challenges to universities in general are too well-known to need repeating. In the case of literary studies, more and more students will be prepared to work from African languages, fewer and fewer will enter with a "foreign" European language or the kind of preparation associated with Rhodesian/Zimbabwean A-level students who have in the past formed a large proportion of the superior achievers in literary studies at university. It is likely that the trend whereby certain schools will become the equivalent of grammar schools, producing almost all university entrants for the universities which keep high entrance standards, while others produce almost none, will become accentuated and schooling re-form on class lines. Such schools will become crucial developing grounds for new literary studies and universities should be working with them.

We should take stock, with some humility, and reflect that there are some disadvantages to being literary scholars in South Africa. The South African Library, to take one example, shares a budget of some R10 million a year with the State Library in Pretoria. This budget, which covers salaries and operating costs as well as acquisitions, does not even allow the library to acquire any new books in humanities from abroad. Compare the Australian National Library's annual budget which runs at about 10 times that, or the library holding of a good American or European university with even a very good South African university library. UCT would not even appear in the top 100 American university libraries and the poor state of the rand has sharply aggravated the situation. Furthermore, we do not have a strong research and scholarly tradition or record in literary studies – we do not usually even have much sense of how to write funding proposals, use graduate students as research assistants, or run any form of research project – all skills that are likely to be needed if literary studies are to keep pace with other disciplines in the future scramble for funds and results.

5 Recommendations

(a) We need to recognise that literature departments will need to show how they can influence language and writing skills positively and contribute culturally to a new South Africa. Second language teaching and translation studies should be given a high priority in research and other terms. Literature departments should give a high priority to language education in secondary schools or to how such studies are to be made up at university.

(b) Links with literature teachers in schools should be encouraged. Such teachers should be encouraged to take further degrees which should be adapted in part to their particular needs. We should intervene in setting realistic and attractive language goals for school syllabi and for university graduates.

(c) Departments should work to try to combat the bittiness of undergraduate degrees, either by collaboration between literature departments or by degree structures.

(d) Theory, in a pure sense, should take a back seat to survey and general reading courses. Theory should be taught on a larger than departmental basis where possible.

(e) The scientific model whereby a group accepts a major issue or area and tries to achieve international standing in it seems to me our best way of making an impact on literary studies. Our major success has come in the study of South African literature (not unnaturally), and it may be that concentrations on colonial discourse, South African cinema, women and colonialism, or whatever, might be the kinds of focus to energise various departments or groupings of scholars. This happens already of course – the question is to what extent it can or should become a curriculum question.

(f) There should be more prospects for scholarly re-cycling and refresher courses for university staff. For example, it would be far more profitable to pay a world authority R10 000 for a two week course in South Africa which

ten graduate students and university lecturers could attend than to send two people to a conference abroad. This would break down local isolation and bring us into certain key debates in a forceful and informed way. The American NEH system may be the best one to follow in other instances in that it would enable us to bring graduate students and staff together under the guidance of a senior academic or academics here. (The model of the Dickens project, run by Professor John Jordan, a recent visitor to this country, at the University of California at Santa Cruz, is another one which shows what can be done regionally.)

(g) Departments should weigh the advantages of period specialisation as opposed to generalisation for academic staff, postgraduate training, and research, especially where teaching moves to a period/historical basis.

(h) The training of postgraduates should include elements enabling them to function well and productively in the new South African educational system.