Some Processes and Functions of Literary Knowledge Production in South Africa

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Summary

Literary Knowledge is presented as institutionally and historically constrained. Canonicity is discussed in terms of metaphors derived from religion and economics, and in relation to the politics of exclusion. Cultural studies is explored as a replacement for the decentered discipline of "English Studies", although the notion of cultural studies is itself problematical. Some practical issues concerning tertiary English teaching in SA are raised, and the paper concludes by way of a discussion of authority.

Opsomming

Literêre Kennis word aangebied as institusioneel en histories begrens. Kanonisiteit word bespreek in terme van metafore wat spruit uit godsdiens en ekonomie, en in verhouding tot die politiek van uitsluiting. Kulturele studies word ondersoek as 'n vervanging van die gedesentreerde dissipline van "English Studies", alhoewel die idee van kulturele studies op sigself problematies is. Sekere praktiese aspekte rondom die tersiêre onderrig van Engels in Suid-Afrika word aangeraak, en die artikel sluit af met 'n bespreking van outoriteit.

> Literate, scholarly culture is defined by reference; it consists of the permanent game of references referring mutually to each other; it is nothing other than this universe of references which are at one and the same time differences and reverences, contradictions and congratulations.
>
> (Pierre Bourdieu)

> Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living.
>
> (Karl Marx)

People who discuss or write about knowledge (that is, knowledge production and maintenance) frequently discuss it as free-floating, self-determining and transhistorical. Tony Bennett suggests that literary criticism has a strong transhistorical tendency because it originated in a discourse intended to transcend time and place:

> Criticism, in its classical nineteenth-century formulations, was conceived as the site of a universalising discourse. Owing to the privileged place accorded literary texts as both expressing and influencing the general state of a culture or society, practices of commentary which took such texts as their object were regarded as the means for the circulation of discourses which, at least in principle, were as totalising in terms of the readership they imaginarily addressed as in the range of issues they sought to encompass.
>
> (Bennett 1988: 135)

And Chris Baldick says that one of Arnold's principal goals for criticism was to effect its "careful extrication from controversy" (Baldick 1983: 25). This is

particularly revealing of Arnold and the tradition (of Western literary knowledge production) over which he has had so much influence. Controversy belongs in the world of conflict, worldliness and difference. Arnold's desire was to create a critical discourse above the world of contest and human dispute, in the realm of uncontested truth. Controversy implies that which is partial (in both senses of the word) and therefore incomplete.

Rather, knowledge should be seen as an institutional affair. Knowledge systems derive principally from institutions designed to produce and impart knowledge (universities, colleges, research institutes, etc.) and seldom spring from the breasts of men and women of private means and no institutional affiliation. In the case of the so-called "applied sciences" (which, Stanley Aronowitz shows, is a euphemism for the development of economically profitable technologies), there is often a drive in favour of the new, precisely because success here means having the innovative hardware before anyone else, but in the realm of cultural knowledge (the humanities) the opposite occurs. The institution becomes resistant to the new, and fiercely protects the old. Why is this so? Academic institutions are bureaucracies of knowledge. They use ranking systems for their employees reminiscent of the ranking systems of the military. A highly developed ranking system (a crucial and prominent feature of a bureaucracy) ensures the smooth-running of an hierarchical system. One ascends the hierarchy by allegiance to the ideologies prominent at the upper end of the hierarchy. Those in power want the perpetuation, not just of "informed ideology" (another term for knowledge) but *their* ideology. Appointments, promotions, grants, and awards are given to those who support the prevailing ideology.

Moreover, the bureaucracies of knowledge foster incompetence. For anyone wishing to ascent the hierarchy who is also incompetent (ill-read, stupid, etc.), the endless reiteration of existing ideologies is both easy to do and very successful. Bureaucrats perpetuate themselves, and frequently, the bureaucracies of knowledge foster the absence of thinking, and the glorification of the hegemonic ideology. Far from being free-floating, the historically-constituted nuts and bolts of knowledge production and dissemination determine the knowledge-product to such degree that it is time one discussed knowledge as principally institutional rather than as a system that is autotelic and autogenerative. The "thing itself" is not the thing itself but is reducible to the specifities of its production. From this perspective, knowledge is still fascinating, but for different reasons. No longer does one debate an issue because of its intrinsic merits or demerits (that activity becomes no more than a stimulating and harmless game) – one discusses knowledge as the product of institutions at particular times and places.

Aronowitz makes the following observation concerning science:

> Since we can only calculate effects and infer causes, control and predict behaviour by constituting the object of knowledge theoretically and changing it in the process of our intervention I argue that the so-called laws of nature are better described as *laws of science*.
>
> (Aronowitz 1988: 33)

Similarly, in the humanities, the so-called properties of texts, events and phenomena should more correctly be viewed as the properties of the prevailing ideologies. The tale tells us about the teller – the whole of the humanities needs to be viewed as the teller's tale. The mechanics of telling and the position of the teller should constitute the subject – the tale is a symptom and it is important in so far as it reveals, symptomatically, the behaviour and constitution of the subject, that is, the situated teller. It is ironic that very few institutional knowledge producers (academic and professional staff) turn attention to the details of their own position: they prefer to see knowledge as belonging to a higher realm, relatively untainted by the politics of bureaucracy. All of the apparently banal and mundane processes governing the production of knowledge require investigation. Can one imagine the effect, on the idea of knowledge, if we had generated 100 Ph.D.'s, not on yet more readings of *Hamlet*, but on the mechanics of the bureaucracy of knowledge? We would know so much more about that which we purport to know.

Regardless of how the "theory decades" have influenced, or will influence the practice of literary criticism, they have brought about an increased awareness of what it is we do when we pursue literary-critical knowledge. Ian Hunter expresses this more worldly-wise shift as follows:

> . . .knowledge in modern criticism is inseparable from the instituted relations and activities through which a special form of aesthetico-ethical power is generated and exercised.
>
> (Hunter 1988: 183)

I wish now to introduce the two dominant metaphors in this paper, first, that of the priesthood and, second, that of market capital.

The corpus of revered texts in any society can, as the word made flesh, profitably be analyzed in terms of religious images, because of the number of points of similarity between religious practice and literary-critical practice. Both institutions have a hierarchy of power (ranging from the high priests to the common worshipper). Both have, as they believe, essences as their object of worship, essences which transcend history and culture. (This is God in the case of religion, and transcendent literariness in literary studies.) Both attempt to bridge the gap between time and eternity, corruption and immortality, the human and the sublime. (Jesus is perhaps the best example of the human raised to the sublime, revealing thereby the transformative power of sublimity, whereas the so-called timeless texts are seen to rise above the circumstances of their production, and span, as Jesus does for Christians, the mortal and immortal realms.) Both employ doctrines that are shot through with nonrational laws. Their ranking systems (judging actions and achievements) evade rational investigation. This comparison between the institutions of religion and literary criticism highlights the reverential tendency in both institutions.

Despite the obvious correlations between religious discourse and criticism, very few theorists or critics ever discuss the issue. Berel Lang is one exception. She says:

> . . .the tradition here defers to the text as master – in its religious appearance, as Master; and as commentary surely is a critical genre, Biblical commentary takes life from the ideal of an absolute text where meaning is a function of every gesture of the text.

And:

> The potency of both meaning and its commentators [in criticism and Biblical studies] is viewed here as inexhaustible – for the one, because of the infinite reach of its source; for the other, in the commentator's dependence on the source.
> (Lang 1990: 246)

Of course, the correlation between critical and biblical discourse ceases abruptly when one realizes that the pose of the selfless, adoring critic is a most skilful means of pretending that one's discourse is subservient to textuality, a servile window onto literariness. Servility is the disguise masking the real action, which is to fill the discursive space with a discourse of strong self-interest. What is adored is not transcendent literariness, but that particular critical community's version of transcendent literariness.

Berel Lang resorts to another interesting metaphor to describe the role of the literary critic. She says:

> The role of the critic is to enable, to provide for a consummation: he serves the object (like a waiter at table).
> (Lang 1990: 259)

Once again, the metaphor is appropriate in that it conveys the stance of servility and of delivering up the object of desire – the dish or the text. And, as with the metaphor of the "priest" of criticism, one can examine its underbelly and see that the metaphor conceals the fact that the waiter, in the case of literary studies, does not simply serve the dish, but makes the sauce and all the accompaniments.

Another system of metaphors one may employ most profitably when examining the cultural phenomenon of literary studies is the notion of capital. Bourdieu comments on the formation of cultural capital as follows:

> . . .like every form of performative discourse, symbolic power has to be based on the possession of symbolic capital. The power of imposing on other minds a vision, old or new, of social divisions depends on the social authority acquired in previous struggles. Symbolic capital is a credit, it is the power granted to those who have obtained sufficient recognition to be in a position to impose recognition: in this way, the power of constitution, a power of making a new group, by mobilization, or of making it exist by procuration, by speaking on its behalf, as an authorized spokesperson, can be obtained only at the end of a long process of institutionalization, at the end of which a representative is chosen, who receives from the group the power to form the group.
> (Bourdieu 1990: 137–138)

The canon is not only the word made flesh – it acts as the capital employed by the brokers who inhabit the field. As powerful equities or blue chip shares, these great works embody or express dominant literary critical ideology. As

with capital in the economic world, it is bestowed only on the finest projects. The more revered the text, the more capital-intensive it becomes. The function of English Studies is to preserve cultural capital and, like banking institutions, to make it increase. Religious metaphors, and metaphors from the world of economics, while highlighting different aspects of the domain of literary studies, both reveal one aspect very starkly. I refer to the vested interests of the high priests or brokers of capital. Their allegiance is not simply to their domain, but to their own continued control of that domain. In short, each domain carries considerable power, and if one does not employ every power strategy to retain control, one's competitors will wrest control. And, of course, the best strategy of all is to conflate one's own control of an arena with the arena itself, thereby inextricably linking one power group with the essence pursued or worshipped by that power group. Thus "Christianity" often becomes "religion"; a major conglomerate becomes the field of economic activity (the perfect example here is South Africa, where a relatively small number of white males are entrenched as the high priests of commerce). Similarly, New Criticism became synonymous with Criticism, for some decades. This conflation of power group and domain thus removes the power group from risk, by placing it above reproach. The power group, by inference, absorbs some of the atemporality and essentiality of its domain, thereby removing it from the world of contestation. Bourdieu makes the following remark:

> It is through the illusion of freedom from social determinants (an illusion which I have said a hundred times is the specific determination of intellectuals) that social determinations win the freedom to exercise their full power.
>
> (Bourdieu 1990: 15)

Every power group strives for transcendence of the world of contestation and, in the domain of literary studies, such an attempt has been very successful, with disastrous results both for the other competitors for literary-cultural power, and for dynamic evolution of the domain itself. Competition and reversals of fortune at least ensure change, and not stasis.

Every discipline seeks essences for its domain – reverential objects beyond the tide of history. But in the search for timeless cultural objects (and an essence called literariness) there is a danger of glorifying stasis. The pursuit of essence (and of one's own continued control of cultural power or capital) frequently does not lift one into timelessness – it just makes one out of date.

To return to the metaphor of capital, those who realize (and write about) the fact that a power group which has managed skilfully to remove itself from the combative field by pretending to take on some of the essentiality of its discipline, usually discuss the fact that such a power group has complete control over the allocation of capital (that is, the decision concerning which texts are to be canonized). Less frequently, analysts discuss those texts which are *excluded* from canonicity (or even prevented from partaking in literariness). In fact, three categories are constituted. First, there is the large group of texts deemed literary (of course, to coincide with the ideological predilections and efforts of the dominant power) and from this group, specific texts

are canonized as embodying the timeless essence of literariness to a greater extent than the merely literary. Then there is a third group, the largest of all, comprising those which are excluded from participation in literariness. Usually, these are called "faddish" or "transient" (precisely because those in power refuse or neglect to bestow literariness on them). The manoeuvre here is to render a powerfully exclusionary judgement in the guise of a disinterested observation. Research into the exclusionary practices of canon formation is very important, especially because they have received relatively little attention in South Africa. One recent case of the employment of such exclusionary tactics was the move to disallow literariness to so-called "protest literature". Attention was deliberately focused on the circumstances of production and the texts were widely judged to be worldly, and thereby non-literary (since literariness is timeless). The result was that many emerging forms of literary creativity (in many genres) were dealt a severe blow because of the destructive and dismissive category "protest poetry". Texts were not taught, prize and grants were considerably fewer than those awarded to more "literary" writers, and the majority of both informed and "common" readers genuinely believed in the hopelessly subordinate status of "protest literature". In the last decade, various South African English departments have reassigned canonical capital from the gender and culture bias of the Arnoldian tradition, to a more gender-equitable set of texts generated either in Africa or in other parts of the world currently emerging from cultural colonialism. This postcolonial shift is a welcome blast of pure oxygen in the room of our own that we call tertiary English Studies, especially because many of the occupants of our room were having to pant vigorously to keep from slumping into cynical stupor. Two observations concerning the postcolonial shift are relevant here. First, one can no longer speak of an homogenous group of South African English departments. Second, the action of ranking (of evaluation and canon-formation) remains in place. In the more forward-looking departments, new notions of literariness displace older ones, but the politics of exclusion remain in place.

These politics of exclusion will remain in force, regardless of which is the dominant literary ideology, for as long as literature courses uphold the notion of literariness. Rather than viewing literariness as a transcendent essence, the cultural analyst should see the term as a mechanism of ideological judgement. Definitions of literariness are culture-specific. There is a mutually supportive relationship between the notions of "literariness" and "judgement", one that is highly repressive in its exclusion of texts which conflict with the aims and goals of the prevailing literary ideology. Perhaps the only way of breaking the cycle of a series of ideologies of "literariness" is to re-invent the notion of literary studies as a cultural study, whereby texts are studied as cultural phenomena, and not as capitalized objects. However, such a notion is not without difficulties of its own. To what degree does one retain a language of literary criticism, when its terms are so ideologically loaded? If one abandons the currently popular literary critical terms, one eventually abandons the discipline. In fact, this abandonment may well be implied in the notion of "cultural studies". In what manner is one then to teach so-called "literary"

texts? As soon as one begins to discuss a text in any more detail than to say, "This text was written in the 1930's in this culture" one is making use of certain literary-critical protocols and terms which can, in all cases, be traced to a particular ideology. In short, while one may wish to drop the destructive and exclusionary practices entailed in a search for literariness, it is not possible to move into an ideology-free, culturally neutral examination of cultural objects – one's method is of cultural (and therefore ideological) origin. Even if one refuses to rank texts, the manner in which one investigates the corpus of works under consideration will entail ideological bias. The only other option, that of subordinating texts wholly to the demands of a cultural studies programme, will entail the closure of all literature-teaching departments. It may be true to say that while the members of such departments often disagree on almost everything, they all agree on the relative autonomy of literary studies.

Bennett takes the "long view" in the following comment on literary criticism and, while some of his observations may seem bland or obvious, these are the historical realities of the activity:

> Criticism. . .is a specific practice occupying a distinctive institutional and discursive space (and one resting on definite social underpinnings) which effects a specific ordering of the relations between texts, readers and practices of textual commentary. As such, its effects are not limitless, either historically or contemporaneously. Such a space has not always existed, nor is there any reason to suppose that it will unendingly continue to do so.
>
> (Bennett 1988: 138)

And Hudson is similarly broad in his perspective; when he says, "A cultural space is emptied. It ceases to be clear what criticism is for" (Hudson 1988: 188). So, as a remedy to the exclusionary effects entailed in a search for literariness, the "cultural studies" option is neither the ideologically neutral option which it may appear to be at first glance, nor will it probably be desirable to those who are employed in literature-teaching departments. Despite these complications, a shift of some sort to the "cultural studies" option will discourage students and staff from perpetual (and often implicit) ranking and judging, which can never be anything more than the imposition and maintenance of cultural prejudice and imperialism. There is one final problem which needs to be discussed concerning the term "cultural studies". Because the historical origins (in the past three decades) of cultural studies have been interdisciplinary, the "discipline" has never been more than a locus for practitioners from other disciplines. Stuart Hall comments on the history of cultural studies in England as follows:

> Cultural studies was then, and has been ever since, an adaptation to its terrain; it has been a conjunctural practice. It has always developed from a different matrix of interdisciplinary studies and disciplines.
>
> So, in that sense, cultural studies is not one thing; it has never been one thing.
>
> (Hall 1990: 11)

The basic motivation to replace the fiercely independent disciplines which constitute the humanities with a unified cultural studies program is, for two

reasons at least, excellent in its intentions. First, the products and dispositions of a particular culture may be approached in a less fragmentary manner. If a totality of culture exists and if it is accessible to the cultural analyst, then cultural studies will be the place in which to undertake such research and teaching. Second, by focusing attention on the specificity of various cultural formations in time and space, the analyst is less inclined to elevate one cultural system of value to the status of truth and transcendence. The notion of cultural studies implies the attempt to present, impartially, various specific cultural formations. The ideologies governing such formations are regarded as part of the object of study, rather than as hidden agendas directing one's endeavours, to be defended at all cost. Hall regards such acts as demystification as fundamental to the notion of cultural studies:

> When cultural studies began its work in the 1960's and the '70's, it had therefore, to undertake the task of unmasking what it considered to be the unstated presuppositions of the humanist tradition itself. It had to try to bring to light the ideological assumptions underpinning the practice, to expose the educational program (which was the unnamed part of its project), and to try to conduct an ideological critique of the way the humanities and the arts presented themselves as parts of disinterested knowledge. It had, that is, to undertake a work of demystification to bring into the open the regulative nature and role the humanities were playing in relation to the national culture. From within the context of that project, it becomes clear why people wrote us rude letters.
>
> (Hall 1990: 15)

Perhaps the interrogative nature of cultural studies – that is, the tendency not to perpetuate humanism, but to uncover its vested interests and claims to disinterested knowledge-gathering – is the only dominant rhythm or theoretical matrix which one may discover in the activities of cultural studies. From the cultural analyst's point of view, an understanding of the power mechanisms employed by dominant rhetoricians is crucial, because it is the academic equivalent of exposing scams. Those in the technocratic money markets are very familiar with scams, but what most people do not realize is that where there is power, there are scams. What could be a greater scam than convincing others that one's own cultural vested interests amount to disinterested and transcendental truth?

Said's declaration, in 1984, of how criticism should constitute itself is still perhaps the best one could wish for, but practically impossible. He says:

> If criticism is reducible neither to a doctrine nor to a political position on a particular question, and if it is to be in the world and self-aware simultaneously, then its identity is its difference from other cultural activities and from systems of thought or of method. In its suspicion of totalising concepts, in its discontent with reified objects, in its impatience with guilds, special interests, imperialised fiefdoms, and orthodox habits of mind, criticism is most itself and, if the paradox can be tolerated, most unlike itself at the moment it starts turning into organised dogma.
>
> (Said 1984: 29)

Of course, guilds and orthodoxies, and their "reified objects" have nothing to recommend them, but where there is cultural capital, there will be attempts

to take control of it. A criticism "most unlike itself" is almost certainly unattainable. Instead, if those involved in this cultural activity (or any other) were to be schooled in suspicion, shrewdness and worldly-wisdom, that is, to be alerted to the mechanisms of power and the seizure of capital, then monopoly discourses will not reign so unchallenged and the possibility of monopoly will substantially be reduced. By analogy, if we were all schooled in the strategies employed by used car salesmen, there would be less chance of being sold a lemon.

It is peculiar that when people enter the arena of knowledge production – the places of cultural power – they believe that the laws of self-interest, capital and profit-seeking do not operate in this realm. They seldom stop to ask, when receiving an impassioned lecture from one of the high priests of dominant culture, "what's in it for you?". These priests are salesmen, and they sell three things. First, they sell prevailing dominant culture. Second, they sell their own important position within dominant culture. Third, they sell the untouchability of dominant culture – the "fact" that it is obvious, common-sensical, logical, necessary and far above petty squabbles for power. One is accustomed to exercising caution when approaching a car salesman. One should learn to exercise extreme caution when approaching rhetoricians. If the role of cultural studies is no more than to teach people that where there is power and capital, there are salesman, they will have drawn aside a veil that has been in place for decades (even centuries, depending on one's interpretation of the documents of history).

In a recent book, Derek Longhurst (1989) and others explore various forms of popular literature. While they explore different genres with different aims, the contributors all operate as analysts of culture and they all come up against representation of dominant culture. These representations of dominant culture are alarmingly uniform and repetitive: power and interest is located within white, heterosexual males, and "women are either distractions or objects to be rescued, reformed or won" (Longhurst 1989: 5). If recent studies of what we do in tertiary English departments repeatedly reveal gender to be perhaps the most crucially determining factor, then attention should be focused on gender as a deep structure in cultural activity. My point is that once one concurs with Gramsci that dominant cultural formations need to be unravelled in order to access the site of power, it becomes increasingly clear that gender plays a most central role. It follows that gender should become a major locus for future cultural research. All patriarchal attempts to marginalize gender studies, and to discredit them as the domain of shrill and sexually suspect women, should be exposed as no more or less than very unprofessional attempts to maintain vested interests and to preserve a very white, heterosexual male version of the world. The goal of the gentleman scholar, namely disinterested speculation, is shown to be a sham precisely because it is never disinterested and seldom gentlemanly.

Now I wish to turn attention, briefly, to some important priorities in South African tertiary English education. In South Africa in the 1990's, the dominant function of English departments should be to promote literacy. If English is to be seen as the most suitable *lingua franca* for South Africa (and

this seems to be one issue concerning which most groups agree) then the need to promote English literacy is enormous, because for the majority of our people, English is only a second or third language, and most of these second language English speakers have suffered from the appalling education devised by those who created and maintained "Bantu Education". The failure of University English departments to respond to the literacy crisis is directly traceable to the way in which these English departments were constituted as "civilizing" agents. It has long been assumed that those entering English-language South African universities are already fluent, and that the proper object of the domain of English studies is a literary canon regardless of whether this canon falls into the category of the "colonial" or the "postcolonial". Generally speaking, when the literacy crisis was forced on departments (by means of the realization that many of one's students did not have the linguistic skill to appreciate literary "pearls") literacy courses were grudgingly introduced, but as cinderella courses only. It occurs, in at least one major English department, that 65% of the departmental revenue accrues from such cinderella courses, which are given only 25% of the staffing points for their prosaic labours. Moreover, these literacy courses are most often staffed by the most subordinate, least culturally enfranchised members of staff (that is, women of all ages and very young men), many of whom have been hired for their proficiency in medieval lyrics or nineteenth-century English fiction. Culturally speaking, the continued marginalization of the task of making university students English-literate is fascinating, because the process displays so many of the mechanisms of colonial humanism that are still in place, but it is difficult to "cast a cold eye" when literacy or the lack thereof may be one of the most crucial factors in the future functioning of South Africa as a developed technocracy. There may also be resistance to the creation of one-year or three-year English reading and writing skills courses because most members of English departments were hired according to criteria which privilege the candidate's training in some aspect of literariness, rather than for any ESL-related skills or training. This inertia against ESL programmes can only be overcome by more market-related hiring policies.

When discussing the role of university English departments in developing literacy, many departments fail dismally in a second way. We all shake our heads at the corruption, inefficiency and lack of funding that is a strong feature of the education system for most young South Africans, but there is minimal intervention by university English departments. The most obvious site of intervention would be the DET English literature syllabus which is as inappropriately eurocentric as many university syllabuses. The 1990–1992 matriculation syllabus for English second language higher grade consists of the following: *Romeo and Juliet*, *I Heard the Owl Call My Name*, a short story anthology and a poetry anthology. *I Heard the Owl* is a more successful choice than the others (although even this book, culturally remote from current South Africa, is arguably inappropriate). Despite the fact that *Romeo and Juliet* contains a dramatic presentation (of fraught young love) with which many students may identify, the remoteness of the cultural setting and the sheer inaccessibility of seventeenth-century English make this book an

appalling choice. Even if, in their colonial wisdom, white educators deem it desirable for schoolchildren to taste the literary greatness of Shakespeare, they fail: even white students, often culturally and linguistically far better equipped to read Shakespeare, find the task difficult. The poetry syllabus consists largely of culturally and temporally removed poems, and the short story syllabus is insulting. There is a relatively high proportion of South African stories, but they almost exclusively deal with the lives and loves of white (often Afrikaans-speaking) beings. The few stories by Africans about Africans are of the pastoral, mythical type – often as culturally remote to metropolitan blacks as *Romeo and Juliet*. If university lecturers represent the top of the pyramid of English education, why are their more clear-sighted members not intervening in syllabus design?

The fact is that most university English lecturers wish that the problem of mass literacy would just go away. In many of the traditionally white universities in this country, their 15% to 30% black enrolment consists principally of those who have benefitted from private schooling and a less educationally deprived childhood. So, for these universities, there is far less of a literacy crisis.

One other area within the domain of literary studies in South Africa which, to my knowledge, has received no attention whatsoever, is the set of conditions whereby a text comes to be. By "set of conditions" I mean answers to questions such as,

> Under what economic conditions does the writer write? What are the relations between writer and publisher, or agent and publisher? What captive markets are set up in advance for specific texts? What are the relations between members of tertiary English literature departments and the publishers? How does it occur that specific books receive more aggressive marketing than others?

Such questions may be especially valuable when studying the "canonical" South African authors. Douglas Livingstone's canonization, in the 1970's and the 1980's, for example, may be traced among other things to specific relationships between people within the academy and publishing. Presumably a study of the mechanics of canonization of any of the other South African canonical writers would reveal fascinating, and hitherto unknown, facts of considerable importance for the critical analyst of literature and its institutions. To assume that Nadine Gordimer or Mongane Serote came to occupy centric canonical positions when they did simply *because they did* would be as absurd as saying Coca-Cola is the best-selling carbonated drink because it is the "best". Such a stance obscures the mechanics of both competition and the creation of commodity value. Critical studies of this or that canonical South African writer seldom mention any facts pertinent to the mode of production and mechanics of canonization of the corpus and they suffer, as a result, from a curiously disembodied, other-worldly condition. This is because, institutionally, their object of study (namely, "literariness") also suffers from a high degree of disembodiment and transcendent other-worldliness. It is the very worldliness of the creation of revered cultural objects that needs to be investigated; that is our proper object of study. One may call this literary

anthropology. Jerome McGann refers to this relation of purpose between author, publisher, academic, reviewer, etc., as "collaboration" (1983: 121 and elsewhere), while Pierre Macherey insists that "the work is not *created* by an intention (objective or subjective); it is produced under determinate conditions" (Macherey 1978: 78). The materialities of how a work comes to be, and how some works come to be "great" are of crucial importance to critical activity. A sanitized, dehistorized study of textuality becomes little more than a game taken seriously. John Sutherland declares that "the material facts of literature's making are neither contextual nor subtextual but, in a primary and inherent sense, textual" (Sutherland 1988: 584).

To conclude, and to return to the issue of authority in our discipline, power is displaced so that a different set of individuals can occupy that position, thereby creating a new power or dominant culture. And if this is to be avoided strenuously, how does one proceed? There is the way of Barthes, the nomadic discourse that never allows itself to become the law. This is the ideal of postmodernism – the suspicion of all masternarratives. In its most extreme form, this may well be an unattainable ideal. The legacy of postmodernism though, should not be one of a failed ideal. It has taught us to be smarter concerning the institutional world around us.

We cannot live, it seems, without institutions and regulations, but we can be more aware (as we are with car salesmen) of "who is putting one over on whom" and precisely how it is that they are doing so. Foucault's contribution is to reveal that where there is power, there will always be someone to take control of it, but that one can come to understand the mechanisms of cultural power, that is, the wheeling and dealing of capital in the cultural world. Simply speaking, forewarned is forearmed, and analysts (in fact, all who enter the field of so-called knowledge production) can learn to spot a sales pitch for what it is. Stated more eruditely, Foucault says:

> I don't believe there can be a society without relations of power, if you understand them as means by which individuals try to conduct, to determine the behavior of others. The problem is not of trying to dissolve them in the utopia of perfectly transparent communication, but to give one's self the rules of law, the techniques of management, and also the ethics, the ethos, the practice of self, which would allow these games of power to be played with a minimum of domination.
>
> (Bernauer & Rasmussen 1988: 18)

This is Foucault at his most practical, that is, most aware of the constraints and limitations placed on human endeavour. One can become streetwise without becoming thoroughly cynical about the mechanisms of power. To escape institutional power by destroying institutions will only create a field in which new, and potentially more repressive, power relations can function. An increased awareness of how cultural power operates can assist one to "minimize domination and maximize freedom" (Bové 1990: 92).

One way, in South Africa, of preventing a totalizing masternarrative from gaining a stranglehold on the discipline of literary studies is to historicize all literary critical activity, thereby using different discourses in different situa-

tions, and not try to force all pedagogical institutions into a single, overarching and authoritative discourse. Ian Hunter expresses this option more simply and more elegantly than I have done, as follows:

> And this means that strategies to modify the institution of criticism cannot assume the global form of a reduction of authority to reason: one that would reconstruct the supervisory relations of criticism on the basis of a single fundamental knowledge of its object and subject. Rather, such strategies must make their calculations within the inescapable relations of authority in which aesthetico-ethical power and knowledge are formed in modern literary education. They must take as their object the occasion of criticism, its ethic and its pedagogy.
>
> (Hunter 1988: 183)

Different historical circumstances require different intellectual strategies. The history of literary studies has been a history of attempts to totalize the discipline, to make it conform to a set of transhistorical literary critical and literary-evaluative procedures (hence, for example, the so-called universality of Shakespeare and the scientistic and so-called "objective" New Critical procedures) in an attempt to constitute an object of study and a method. These goals simply cause authoritarianism in our discipline, and close (rather than open) our discursive possibilities.

In a discussion of the work of Said & Jameson, Tony Bennett makes a crucial observation, one which applies to many theorists of literature. He says:

> . . .their positions are similar in conceiving "the literary" as a property of texts in relation to which criticism functions as a secondary process which merely helps to realise its intrinsic tendencies rather than, as I have suggested is more appropriate, regarding it as a sphere of social and cultural action that is produced for those texts nominated as literary by virtue of the ways in which they are constituted within the institutional and discursive space of criticism. In brief, they mistake the sphere of criticism and its product, literature, for a natural horizon with the consequence that they are unable to address the questions raised by the forms in which literary texts are socially deployed outside that space.
>
> (Bennett 1988: 155–156)

Literature or literariness is not a natural horizon beyond any culturally constituted critical method or theoretical position. Frequently, those who seek theory in order to reassess their own cultural habits and taboos, achieve a fruitful re-examination of the way in which criticism is done, but the culturally predominant notion of literature is left in place, escaping the revisionary gaze. For this reason, "literariness" (and its concretization, the canonical texts) remains a natural horizon, as part of an unquestionable brute facticity. And as long as the canon is seen as transcendent, rather than as constituted or "nominated", it is exempt and aloof from the gaze of the cultural analyst. Even if one approves of the current constitution or nomination, it is humanly constituted within ideological space, and must be seen to be so.

Moreover, once one recognizes the circumstantial nature of both the canon and of critical practice, it is no longer necessary to opt for, and support a

single canon and a single critical practice. Bennett concludes a fine article with the following observation:

> To pose the questions of criticism's function in the singular and monolithically is to suppose that such an addressee does or might exist. It is only by breaking with this illusion that the question can be dispersed and broken down into a set of calculations regarding what might be accomplished by different practices of textual commentary conducted in relation to different publics, institutions and circumstances.
>
> (Bennett 1988: 157)

Difference is the crucial term here. The realm of cultural activity, as a realm of contestation, is characterized by difference. Culture is not singular, and all attempts to make it so are highly successful imperialisms. From a theoretical point of view, criticism and its objects must be seen as contingent cultural formations. From a literary-critical point of view, criticism and its objects must be conceived of as multiple and decentred, according to the matrix of cultural activity in which criticism occurs.

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