Re-thinking Teaching English for Another South Africa

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Summary

The article suggests new directions for the progressive teaching of English based upon Gramsci's notion of counter-hegemonic struggle and Eagleton's recent study of the European aesthetic lineage in order to facilitate a process of cultural transformation conducive to a radical democratic society. Marxist literary theory needs to move beyond its mimetic and Althusserian models in order to confront fully these new demands. If English is to be the *lingua franca* of a post-apartheid South Africa, English departments in universities and schools have a central role to play in this process.

Opsomming

In hierdie artikel word nuwe rigtings voorgestel vir die progressiewe onderrig van Engels. Dit word gebaseer op Gramsci se idee van die stryd teen die hegemoniese en Eagleton se onlangse studie van Europese estetiese afkoms. Dit word gedoen om 'n proses van kulturele transformasie te vergemaklik wat bevorderlik is vir 'n radikale demokratiese samelewing. Marxistiese literêre teorie moet verder gaan as sy mimetiese en Althusseriaanse modelle om hierdie nuwe vereistes voldoende te konfronteer. As Engels die *lingua franca* van 'n post-apartheid Suid-Afrika gaan word, sal Engelse departemente in universiteite en skole 'n sentrale rol speel in hierdie proses.

1 Introduction

This article is addressed to progressive teachers of English, and emerges from my dissatisfaction with Left responses to Albie Sachs's paper, "Preparing Ourselves for Freedom". His sharp denunciations of "resistance" art and his espousal of a tired liberal humanist aesthetic have been rightly criticized, but in their haste to situate Sachs within the inherited (and now tedious) "Aesthetics vs Politics" debate, it would appear that all too many progressive academics are paying insufficient attention to Sachs's central (and obvious) point: we need to re-think our cultural strategies and priorities as South Africa moves from a "coercive" to a "hegemonic" formation. To do this requires a similar re-thinking of existing *theoretical* practices, because increasingly outmoded critical positions are now impeding any serious confrontation with this emerging political context. What is now needed is a comprehensive *vision* of the future purpose of English university departments, in which the details of the construction of syllabuses and the usage of critical methods will more readily make sense.

From the 1970s onward in South Africa an emergent intelligentsia, radicalized by both the resurgence of Marxism in the West in the wake of 1968, and the rise of local black militancy during the 1970s, launched a critique of an academically hegemonic Liberal/Leavisite discourse, identifying its depoliticized aesthetic as the very effect of its Anglocentric colonial complicity. As I am calling for something of a "rupture" with dominant

practices, it is interesting to return to that special 1984 edition of *Critical Arts*, "English Studies in Transition", which amounted to something of a manifesto for the future of Marxist literary criticism in South Africa. The articles are concerned with providing an ideology-critique of a dominant Leavisite/New Critical "practical criticism", to which Marxism is then offered as a solution. Michael Vaughan, for example, in his article, "A Critique of the Dominant Ideas in Departments of English in the English-speaking Universities of South Africa", berates the conservatism of English departments for promoting a superannuated liberalism through "universalism, humanism, individualism and non-politicism (1984: 45), which is seen to foster a "form of (political) *disengagement*" through the promotion of a "colonial dependency".

The "political unconscious" of "practical criticism" – its liberalism – was foregrounded and condemned. For Nick Visser, "liberalism revealed itself to be incapable not only of generating a reordering of South African society but even of making that society explicable" (1984: 7). Thus Michael Green calls for "ideological criticism", a "fifth column within the realm of literature, exposing the ideological implications of the 'purest' concepts within the realm" (1984: 14). Such a theoretical orientation would enable a serious engagement with African/South African writing, to which a "colonial humanism" was unremittingly hostile. If for Tony Bennett

> Marxism should be conceived as a set of discursive interventions which seek to interrupt, uncouple and disrupt the subject identities and forms of political alliance constructed by dominant ideological discourses so as to forge new ones. (1986: 78–79)

then it is important to recognize the purpose of this counter-hegemonic intervention as being to "uncouple" (largely white English-speaking) students of English from "liberal humanist" subject-identities in order to produce politicized Marxist subjects capable of engaging in the struggle against "colonial capitalism". To read South African/African writing rather than the "Great Tradition" was to be placed within one's own history, exposed to its oppression and the resistances to it.

As this is the area whose inheritance is most problematic, it is useful to examine the definitions of the concept of Ideology mobilized in this challenge. Generally speaking, there was almost no emphasis placed upon a Gramscian sense of ideological struggle within and over culture, those twin processes of disarticulation/rearticulation of inherited cultural discourses. Instead, the struggle was *against* (the dominant) culture, in the name of (Marxist) "truth", with the former now identified as truth's Other: ideology. The influence of Althusser was marked here, and yet, despite the remarkable re-readings of literature his "revision" of Marxism made possible, one needs also to confront its limitations. If Althusser placed a renewed emphasis upon the active role of ideology as a socializing apparatus, then his "functionalist" account, bereft of a theory of ideological *struggle*, could only view such processes of interpellation as producing subjects reconciled to the dominant order. Althusser identified two discourses of potential resistance to this conformist totality: the aesthetic and theory, the former, thanks to its autonomy from ideology,

enabling us "to see" ideology, the latter able to reveal its "false consciousness". In practice, however, Althusserian literary theory viewed literature as implicated within the dominant ideology. Thus the Eagleton of *Criticism and Ideology* (1976) recognized the specificity of the aesthetic as an autonomous discourse, but only to resituate that autonomy within ideology: "the ideological produces within itself that internal distantiation which is the aesthetic" (1976: 177). It is precisely its "internal distantiation" which enables the fictional text to produce a "second order" totalizing resolution of potentially disruptive ideologies in the name of hegemonic consensus. For the later Macherey (1978), the aesthetic has no autonomy at all, but simply functions within educational ideological apparatuses to reproduce exploitative social relations. This development was not entirely surprising, given that ideology was seen necessarily to involve "misrecognition", a fate avoided only by Theory (the discourse of truth), and thus the Marxist critic could emerge as the "scientist" of the text, through ideology-critique revealing the limitations and mystifications of aesthetic discourse.

Within "white" English universities in the 1970s such a model of a highly conformist totality had much in common with pre-1976 South Africa, and in particular with a largely conservative student body. For progressive critics, the ideology whose critical autonomy disguised a deeper systemic complicity was Liberalism/Leavisitism, which as we have seen was identified as producing de-politicized Eurocentric subjects, and hence the need, as with Michael Green, for the "critical theory" of ideological-analysis which involved, as with Althusser, assuming a position "outside" of the repressive totality, the position of "truth" from which reality could be understood. For Michael Green, literature (with the focus firmly on the "Great Tradition") is collapsed into ideology, which is itself viewed wholly as functional to the production of dominant interests, which would thus disable any notion of specifically *ideological* struggle.

> To the extent that ideology serves to legitimize the contradictions inherent in a particular historical moment, literature and the reading of literature. . .partake of the concealment, for they are, in themselves, ideological.
>
> (1984: 14)

In similar fashion radical black and dissident white South African writing was also situated as an external oppositional discourse, and if Althusser enabled an explanation of the mystifying role of liberalism within colonialism, then somewhat curiously Lukács (of whose literary theory Macherey's *A Theory of Literary Production* (1978) could be read as a sustained critique) would be influential in accounts of this critical literature, since he provided a mimetic theory of art as potentially capable of transcending the ideological in order to reveal the "truth" of its historical referent. The most well-known example of this is perhaps Stephen Clingman's book, *The Novels of Nadine Gordimer: History from the Inside* (1986), where the author typically provides an analysis of the history (unproblematically defined as the "truth") of a period in which a Gordimer novel is set, and then relates the novel to that external reality through the category of representation. Kelwyn Sole, in his 1983 article,

"Culture, Politics and the Black Writer: A Critical Look at Prevailing Assumptions", seeks to "debunk mythical constructs" of black consciousness ideology (its idealist nationalism, an organicist romanticization of African history, its racial populism, etc.) which prevent its literature (and cultural theory) from providing a "class analysis" of the "economic causes of exploitation". What is instead needed are "political writers who view the world in all its contradictory dynamics and address questions and problems with real meaning to the working class" (1983: 74). In short, what is needed are *Marxist* artists (and critics), and my point is that the critique of BC writers is structured according to an ideology/truth opposition: Marxism as truth leads to an understanding of reality, while BC, contaminated by irrational myths, distorts the possibility of such an understanding.

Looking back over the 1980s, the effects of this counter-hegemonic struggle were uneven. Having failed to crush this movement coercively, departments of English went for an incorporationist strategy, so that now departments are typically pluralist, with the occasional Marxists working alongside more-or-less reconstructed Leavisites, while the influence of poststructuralism and feminism can be detected in both camps (even the Old Guard can now safely allude to Bakhtin and intertextuality). Perhaps the single most important contribution of Marxism was the institutionalization of the study of South African writing, and indeed a new strain of (what I would call) "Liberal Africanist" critics enthusiastically turned to this area, often displaying an unnerving theoretical melange of ideological analysis and orthodox humanist empiricism.[1] However, as we gradually move into a sociopolitical context markedly different from that to which 1980s Marxist criticism was a response, new priorities and departures are vitally necessary. The rest of this paper will give my view on what these will be, and I will also argue that the limitations of the inherited Marxist paradigm increasingly act as fetters upon a full engagement with these demands.

2 Towards Cultural Transformation

> Art cannot change the world, but it can contribute to changing the consciousness and drives of the men and women who could change the world.
>
> Herbert Marcuse

Against those who are seeking to convince us that the "new South Africa" will have all but arrived with the imminent shift to a democratic state (and the conservatism of this view is obvious, the strategy motivating it being to leave as much as possible as it is), we need to recognize that the demise of apartheid totalitarianism simply (and thankfully) alters the rules of political contestation, enabling the players to win consent to their views through persuasion rather than through "coercion". The "Utopian" goal of a liberated society will clearly continue to be a very long way off, and progressive intellectuals will need to focus their attention on constructing its foundations. Radical History was the master-discourse of the 1980s, not only freeing students from emplacement in Eurocentric obfuscation, but also revealing reality as contradictory and thus mutable (a history of colonial capitalist oppression and the

resistances to it), a discourse most suited to a sociopolitical context which required the destruction of a "naturalized" social formation, and which functioned with a rather simple myth/truth (ideology/truth) opposition. However, in an emergent post-apartheid context, I will risk exaggeration by arguing that it is entirely possible that English departments could assume a similar dominance: if a vital task is the building of a non-racial, democratic, national and non-sexist *culture*, then departments of English are ideally placed to play a central role in this process of *cultural transformation*. Indeed, if the English language is to become the *lingua franca* of a post-apartheid South Africa, a "second-order" national discourse in a context of linguistic and cultural pluralism, then English teachers have an added responsibility to use this privileged space for this purpose.

As South Africa moves from a predominantly "coercive" to a predominantly "hegemonic" society, the work of Antonio Gramsci receives a greater importance (Gramsci 1971), shifting political struggle away from direct assaults on the coercive State apparatus and instead situating it in the arena of ideology and its institutions. Gramsci, alarmed at the Marxist concentration on political contestation at the economic Base (trade unionism), and the allied dismissal of ideology as simply functioning to mystify that essential/material class conflict, argued instead for a "*cultural politics*". In modern societies, and this is particularly true for those which are formally democratic, progressive social transformation is dependent upon a specifically cultural transformation: the citizenry will only be persuaded to accept the former if they have "spontaneously" internalized a range of values (as "common sense") which reconcile them to a future thus seen to be fettered by the political economy of the present. Therefore Gramsci emphasized the need for counter-hegemonic struggle upon the terrain of cultural and ideological institutions in order to build an alternative progressive culture, which is precisely the urgent task required in South Africa.

Such a counter-cultural project would involve universities producing a body of what Gramsci called "organic intellectuals"[2] (a wide-ranging term including journalists, teachers and cultural workers) who, motivated by liberatory ideologies, would engage in counter-hegemonic struggle within inherited cultural and – vitally – educational institutions in order to forge a *radical democratic* culture. This "long march through the institutions" would mean such "intellectuals" entering the SABC, newspapers, provincial Arts Councils, publishing houses, educational bodies, film companies, and so on (most of whom continue to be dominated by Afrikaner nationalist and Eurocentric Liberal ideologies) in order to transform them from within.[3] If one of the struggles within English departments will necessarily be against attempted revivals (now that the political struggle is over) of the classical Liberal hegemonic project (or the articulation of a bland South Africanist Liberalism), then in these other cultural institutions a central struggle must be against the (continuing, but now even more flagrant) production of a tawdry "consumer culture" by a dominant capitalism, now largely in control of the mass media apparatuses.

If one wants something of a model for such a strategy, one need look no further, curiously enough, than the *Scrutiny* project. For Francis Mulhern (*The Moment of "Scrutiny"*: 1979), its purpose was to "mediate the large-scale entry of a new social layer into the national intelligentsia" (1979: 318), and if Mulhern berates the Leavisites for their "depreciation, a repression and, at the limit, a categorical dissolution of politics as such" (1979: 330), then this correct criticism however ignores the politics of its counter-hegemonic project, which attempted to produce a critical "autonomous culture" of, in Denys Thompson's phrase, "'misfits', not spare parts".[4] The Leavisites saw English departments (throughout the educational system) as central to their strategy, and perhaps this is equally true for us now, notwithstanding the recognition that they require a similar process of transformation.

If the strategy is to use English departments as a space in which a radical intelligentsia is to be produced capable of waging a counter-hegemonic struggle against declining (racialism, authoritarianism, traditional liberalism, ethnic chauvinism) and contemporary (a capitalist culture of consumerism) antagonists in order to build a progressive culture, then such a cultural politics will also involve a similar struggle within English departments over the selection and readings of "literary" texts. But no longer fought solely with inherited weapons: if Michael Vaughan dismissed "humanism (and) individualism" as part of the fabric of the ideology of a colonialist Liberalism, then this critique appears to be dependent upon a view of specific ideologies as being essentially bound to a particular class: thus humanism is merely bourgeois ideology. Because there is no recognition that ideologies, in the words of Chantal Mouffe, have no necessary "class-belonging" (1979: 195) (and thus can be re-defined by opposing groups), the effect is to struggle *against* ideology, in the name of "truth" (class-analysis, etc.). If ideology can be defined either as a mystifying opposition to knowledge, or as a discourse of power whose "truth" is discursively constructed, then the former proposition is seemingly at work here, one which fundamentally misrecognizes the ideological status of Marxism, and which therefore theoretically lacks a specific account of the importance of a cultural politics/ideological struggle. Thus what Stephen Clingman's mimetic study of Nadine Gordimer's writings suppresses is Gordimer's and his own discursive *construction* of reality/truth which both a "realist" historiography and the realist fictional form of her novels obliterate through the elision of their own active signifying processes. In the context of the 1980s, "politics" had become narrowed down to the overt struggle against a repressive State, with ideology seen all too often simply as that which interfered with that possibility.

If, however, the task is to build a radical national culture, and to persuade others in a context of democratic competition to this view, then this can only be achieved by contesting the various inherited discourses of the many social groups whose ideologies must be re-articulated into such a hegemonic consensus. In this regard, for example, we need to move beyond the (correct) "negative" critique of humanism's present class location (which articulates humanism in a specific way) in order to re-articulate this vital discourse (and if Marxism is to survive it will only do so as a (radical) humanism) as one only

achievable through radical social transformation. For example, if one produces an ideology-critique of a South African "Liberal" novel, revealing the questionable colonial power-interests its humanist ideology serves, then the point of the analysis is that the humanist discourse mobilized by the text is *limited* by its present class-belonging. It is questionable not because it is ideology but because it is colonialist ideology. Thus a "dialectical" reading can salvage a "positive" reading from these exclusions, re-defining humanism in a more liberating manner. Such re-readings of texts will of course take many forms, and so I will only refer to two areas which are particularly helpful here. If one is looking for the embryo of an alternative South African culture, then it is to be found in the "resistance" art of the post-1976 period, and to re-read these artifacts in a Gramscian manner is to shift attention away from their more overt agit-prop politics (art as conscientization) in order to recognize an emergent South African counter-culture (emphasizing, in radical ways, the qualities of humanism, democracy and nationalism) developing in an autonomous space won by sustained counter-hegemonic struggle. It is a profound cultural transformation which played a crucial role in mobilizing militants to work for political transformation, and which has laid the foundations of an alternative South Africa.

Similarly, the "Drum" generation of the 1950s can be re-read as an emergent counter-public sphere, an autonomous space in which a very different South Africa was in the process of being defined. In his book, *The Function of Criticism* (1984), Terry Eagleton examines the development of a bourgeois public sphere in post-Restoration England as a cultural politics whose purpose was to forge a cultural-hegemonic alliance of the aristocracy and the mercantile bourgeoisie: "in this ceaseless circulation of polite discourse among rational subjects, is the cementing of a new power bloc at the level of the sign" (1984: 14). In the periodicals, literary societies and coffee-houses, a "public opinion" began to develop that amounted to the formation of a new "cultural consensus":

> Criticism here is not yet "literary" but "cultural": the examination of literary texts is one relatively marginal moment of a broader enterprise which explores attitudes to servants and the rules of gallantry, the status of women and familial affections, the purity of the English language, the character of conjugal love, the psychology of the sentiments and the laws of the toilet.
>
> (1984: 18)

Eagleton goes on to argue for the need for the creation of a revolutionary counter-public sphere for contemporary Britain, where the socialist intellectual as critic could escape the confines of the Academy by being able to address such a *public*. I would argue that this is precisely what is needed in South Africa, and in this regard we have much to learn from the "Drum" counter-public sphere, which can be identified in the many cultural societies and political organizations, in the extraordinary flowering of the arts in this period, as well as of course throughout the pages of *Drum* magazine, whose overt political articles were only part of a much broader creation of an emergent cultural consensus (one marked difference between these two

moments is that the coffee-house has been replaced by the shebeen!). This is not of course to unproblematically celebrate its brief moment – the most rigorous ideology-analysis is required to identify its limitations, and this task becomes more urgent as the Culture Industry of capitalism discovers in the 1950s images of a confident black middle-class which can now in freedom re-discover its Yuppie vocation – but to register its emergent importance for our own time.

3 Aesthetics

> What an age is this anyway where
> A conversation about trees is almost a crime
> Because it entails being silent about so many misdeeds?
>
> Bertold Brecht

One of the notable effects of the Albie Sachs paper has been to bring yet again to centre-stage the "Aesthetics vs Politics" debate, with all too many on both sides seeing Sachs as supporting the former against the latter: now that the political struggle is all but over, writers and critics can return art to its true vocation, which was severely limited by its overt politicization. This may be a crude account of the debate, and yet this aesthetics/politics opposition continues to enjoy a wide currency. The earlier and more left-wing Stephen Watson, for example, criticizes the poetry of the liberal romantic Sydney Clouts for being "inclined to fall silent when confronted by history and the secular, scarcely poetic voices of politics and its practices" (1990: 58). Such a conventional Marxist critique of *white writing* is then replaced by the later conservative Watson with an equally conventional condemnation of black South African poetry and Marxist critics for "politicizing" the aesthetic (1990: 9–29; 82–99). It is my view that both Liberal humanist and Marxist critics have simplified the issues involved, and that instead of continuing to take sides in an increasingly sterile debate, it would be more helpful to deconstruct the aesthetics/politics opposition to enable the demands of our emerging political conjuncture to be more intelligently confronted. While Marxists have correctly exposed the apolitical aspects of the Leavisite/New Critical paradigm, and sought to defend political art, they have all too often worked within inadequate conceptions of both "aesthetics" and "politics", and it is arguable that progressive critics can have much to gain from examining more attentively the Liberal defence of the autonomy of aesthetics from politics.

What Sachs's paper focuses on is the transition of South Africa from a society ruled mostly by "coercion", to one ruled by "consent", and indeed the Gramscian flavour of this analysis is further revealed when Sachs argues that the ANC must "give *leadership* to the people, not exercise control over them", in order to "create the *widest unity* of the oppressed and to encourage all forces of change". He continues that the ANC should "lead by example" "...let us get the *voluntary* adherence of the people to our banner" (all my emphases). In short, a *hegemonic* alliance can only be produced through persuasion in the context of a democratic South Africa, and such a project will only be successful if the autonomy of artists from political control is fully

recognized. In this light, Sachs is not in any way arguing for the "de-politization" of art, but for a *re-definition* of its political function. If the focus increasingly shifts from opposition to a "coercive" apartheid regime (the sort of writing Sachs begins his paper by criticizing) to "building national unity and encouraging the development of a common patriotism" (which fully accommodates "cultural diversity"), then it is clear that these demands place *culture* at the centre of *political* activity. What Sachs is calling for is a "cultural politics" of counter-hegemonic struggle in order to build a non-racial, national, democratic and non-sexist culture, a process that crucially involves the disarticulation of the various cultural groups from their implication within the ethnic chauvinism of the apartheid system, and their consequent re-articulation within his national-democratic unity/diversity model. This necessarily involves a "broadening" of what is up for political contestation, since attention must be paid to the language, "the dance, the cuisine, the poetry, the dress, the songs and riddles and folk-tales" and so on, of each cultural community. Sachs's call for the autonomy of aesthetics from politics (in the sense of State intervention) is therefore to free it from its partisan affiliation to what can be now seen as sectarian interests precisely to enable cultural workers to function in a space autonomous of inherited ideological positions in order to forge this "second-order" national-hegemonic discourse.[5]

If Sachs has been accused of returning to Liberal humanist themes, it is worthwhile examining the aesthetic/politics opposition *historically* in the South African context in order to define the problematic nature of this inheritance. Before 1948, the "political" and "aesthetic" elements of what Martin Legassick (1983) has called the "new liberal" project were pretty much in harmony. Unlike crudely "coercive" methods of social control (most notably that of Afrikaner nationalism), Liberalism depended more on the politics of "consent": settler colonial hegemony would be assured by interpellating blacks and whites as subjects of the common discourse of "western civilization". Thus a *cultural politics* (which included the European Romantic aesthetic) through education was central to this incorporationist/reformist strategy, which attempted to divert black people away from the more radical ideologies of African nationalism and Marxism (which, being anti-colonial discourses, called for a direct assault on the State), and which also vitally relied upon a more overt politics of the promise of the gradual liberalization of the State apparatus. After 1948, this two-headed project (art being of course "autonomous" of politics since its project was a hegemonic one) would enter into crisis, since from that date the possibility of progressive political reform became untenable. Thus in this period, and particularly through the 1960s, bereft of a viable politics, Liberalism increasingly becomes a "Utopian" discourse, affirming and defending its values within a self-consciousness of its political impotence[6] (Wade 1989). In other words, "politics" and "aesthetics" would separate, and a Eurocentric Liberal humanist aesthetic, its hegemonic project without a practical means of achieving its goals, would then seek refuge in the English departments of the English-speaking universities in order to keep the flame alive through dark times. This defensive posture can still be found, for example, in the recent writings of Stephen

Watson, where "the 'aesthetic is' in reality the ethical. . .one way of keeping a check on our more active commitments" (1990: 17).

In other words, the Aesthetics/Politics opposition, when couched in such misleading abstract and universal categories, loses its historical specificity in the South African context, because what we are really talking about is the more mundane tension, internal to Liberalism, between a specific *Anglocentric Liberal humanist* aesthetic and an effective, *radical* (i.e. non-Liberal) politics. With the arrival of Bantu education, the closing down of the mission schools and the segregation of the universities, Liberalism lost its ability to pursue its hegemonic project amongst the black communities, but its retreat to the white English-speaking universities did not prevent it from continuing a "cultural politics" deeply marked by its political failure. Here its aesthetic was mobilized to produce "Utopian" Liberal subjects, living a critically detached and ironic relation to the present (and hence the importance of the nineteenth-century British Realist novel). This was compensated for by a rich inner life contemplating one's Being, and the deeper one journeyed inward, the more faint became the screams of the tortured.

If Liberals kept "aesthetics" and "politics" apart, while privileging the former, then the characteristic Marxist move was to rejoin them, by privileging the "political": the Great Tradition was thoroughly ideological, while dissident and oppositional South African art was entirely political (or was criticized for not being sufficiently or correctly so). In doing so, Marxists tended to work on the terrain laid out for them by Liberalism: if the latter obliterated politics, then Marxists called for the "death of aesthetics" (Vaughan 1984: 49). A problem with this is suggested when Stephen Watson criticizes Sydney Clouts's poetry for ignoring the "scarcely poetic voices of politics and its practices". Clouts's poetry is berated for lacking a political *content* in its aesthetic obsession with "Being", and yet what has gone missing here is any sense of the "cultural politics" *within* his poetry, a view that leads inevitably to the contemplation/action opposition: politics is "action" beyond art. The point needs to be stressed that what the "colonialist humanist" aesthetic was producing was not "apolitical" subjects but *non-radical* political subjects (a sort of negative politics), precisely because the Liberal project could not provide a militant theory of systematic opposition to the colonialist system.

If simplified mimetic models of the text/history relation tended to offer no recognition of aesthetic specificity, and if Althusserian critical methods recognized that specificity only to ultimately identify it as functional to ideological domination, then neither of these Marxist positions seriously offered any "positive" account of aesthetics. Yet it seems to me that now more than ever we need to treat more seriously Sachs's call for a renewed emphasis upon this discourse, along the lines suggested by Fredric Jameson:

> Such a view dictates an enlarged perspective for any Marxist analysis of culture, which can no longer be content with its demystifying vocation to unmask and to demonstrate the ways in which a cultural artifact fulfills a specific ideological mission, in legitimating a given power structure, in perpetuating and reproducing the latter, and in generating specific forms of false consciousness (or ideology in

> the narrow sense). It must not cease to practice this essentially negative hermeneutic function (which Marxism is virtually the only current critical method to assume today) but must also seek, through and beyond this demonstration of the instrumental function of a given cultural object, to project its simultaneously Utopian power as the symbolic affirmation of a specific historical and class form of collective unity."
>
> (Jameson 1981: 291)

For Jameson, a dialectical reading of a text involves both a "negative" ideology-critique and the "positive hermeneutic" of a Utopian impulse which can be salvaged from its legitimating function, and which is to be found in aesthetic form. If Sachs identifies a shift from "coercion" to "hegemony", from external State repression to internal self-regulation where aesthetics can play a valuable role, then it is interesting to observe that this view has much in common with intellectual events, particularly the rise of the discourse of aesthetics, in an eighteenth-century Europe then moving from Absolutism to Modernity. In a famous passage from his *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1795), Friedrich Schiller wrote:

> If man is ever to solve the problem of politics in practice he will have to approach it through the problem of the aesthetic, because it is only through Beauty that man makes his way to Freedom.
>
> (1982: 9)

In a text concerned, in contrast to more recent de-politicized accounts of aesthetics, as much with politics as it is with "Beauty" (Schiller saw the book as his "profession of political faith" which affirmed that true political freedom was the highest good), Schiller argued for the vital need for the *cultural* development (an education through the aesthetic) of individuals, "the development of the whole complex of our sensual and spiritual (rational) powers in the greatest possible harmony" (1982: 143), which, while fully recognizing the concrete specificity of the individual, situated that "variety" within the (hence unoppressive) totality of the State "in which all the diversity of individual subjects strive to unite" (1982: 17–19). This aesthetic "unity-in-diversity" (see Sachs) has a fundamentally democratic end:

> Once man is inwardly at one with himself, he will be able to preserve his individuality however much he may universalise his conduct, and the State will be merely the interpreter of his own finest instinct, a clearer sense of his own sense of what is right.
>
> (Schiller 1982: 21)

The road to the "Aesthetic State" of freedom thus begins with the emergence of the "Rational" State, and can only be attained by the development of cultivated individuals who are capable of living self-regulated lives in a social context. In his recent book, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (1990), Eagleton argues that the rise of aesthetics had less to do with a sudden interest in the philosophy of art than with the transference of an "ideological reading of (art) known as the aesthetic" (1990: 65) – art as autonomous, self-regulating, achieving a "spontaneous" unity of form and content, the universal and

particular, the sensuous and rational, etc. – to broader social concerns, so that it becomes a *model* for the bourgeois subject (autonomous, self-regulating) and for social cohesion (the unrepressive unity-in-diversity of society, "a dream of reconciliation – of individuals woven into intimate unity with no detriment to their specificity, of an abstract totality suffused with all the flesh-and-blood reality of the individual being" (1990: 25)). The possibility of social cohesion threatens to disappear down a gap opened by Modernity between the State and the individual, between, that is, an abstract Rational State and an emergent monadic bourgeois individual pursuing economic self-interest and egoistic appetites. Such a tension is resolved in aesthetic discourse through a theory of *hegemony*, whereby social cohesion can be produced through the notion of a self-regulating subject disciplined by the "spontaneous" internalization of the singular hegemonic (Moral and Rational) Law. If Schiller spoke up for the needs and desires of the sensuous individual, then it is ultimately because, Eagleton argues, "Reason must achieve hegemony in collusion with the senses it subdues, rather than trampling roughshod over them" (1990: 104).

However Eagleton wants to offer a "dialectical" reading of the European aesthetic tradition, one equally opposed to the conservative de-politicization of aesthetics, and to a Marxism which identifies it solely as "bourgeois ideology". He therefore salvages from this idealist lineage a Utopian prefigurement of the radical democratic society (and here we notice the influence of the Frankfurt School), a humanist ethic central to the young Marx, "that human powers and human society are an absolute end in themselves. To live well is to live in the free, many-sided realization of one's capacities, in reciprocal interaction with the similar self-expression of others" (1990: 226).[7] Indeed, Eagleton will re-write the communist society as the "final aestheticization of human existence" (1990: 227), a goal only attainable, of course, through an instrumental politics of social transformation. My point is therefore a simple one: instead of abandoning aesthetics to the enemy, progressive literary critics need to treat it as a contestable terrain, at once alive to its hegemonic purposes (for example, the "colonialist humanism" of the classical Liberal project) and to its Utopian/critical potential pointing to the *post*-hegemonic society. Such a literary-critical strategy in South Africa enables a re-reading of the "Utopian" aspects of the European aesthetic tradition, from whose emphasis upon the sensuous and erotic body and upon non-dominative ecological relations with Nature we continue to have much to gain within the broader ambit of a "cultural politics". A similar re-reading is possible of our own Romantic aesthetic tradition from Pringle to Gordimer, which, despite severe ideological weaknesses, continues to defend a range of humane values which the Left ignores to its own disadvantage.

We need to recognize more fully that *both* Ideology-critique (Critical Theory/Reason) and the Aesthetic have functioned as discourses of critical negativity within Modernity, and both have existed in a productive tension in this epoch. When a dominative reason has sought to discipline the sensuous subject, then the Aesthetic has been on hand to defend the desiring body; when the Aesthetic has played its role in hegemonic domination, critical

reason has been on hand to reveal its ideological secrets. We also need to be aware that when conservative literary critics refer to *the* aesthetic, their usage of the definite article represses the fact that theirs is only a specific version of aesthetic discourse. If one is looking for glimpses of a sensuously cohesive community, then it is to be found in oral performance poetry, with its sensuous rhythms and collective festivity, yet at the same time rigorously "rational" in its political critique. Wally Serote's novel, *To Every Birth Its Blood*, is driven by a Utopian aesthetic of a future totality, but it has very little in common with a colonial humanist aesthetic, not the least because it is not tormented by any contradiction between its normative goal and the political activity necessary to attain it. However, if a common national-democratic culture is to be built, we need to draw on the best of what each of the South African communities has to offer (as opposed to the apartheid regime, which drew upon the worst aspects – Western racism, ethnic chauvinism, etc.), and it seems to me obvious that the European aesthetic of Modernity has much of value to contribute.

When traditional Liberals defend the autonomy of art from politics, they do so for a number of reasons: (a) a hostility to various "commissars" who wish to interfere with the "freedom" of the artist through censorship; (b) art is seen to occupy an independent position from which political life can be critically examined; (c) art has nothing to do with politics at all, but is instead concerned with Beauty, the erotic, and so on. Progressive cultural intellectuals should happily agree with the first two propositions (the third obviously represses its own cultural politics), since the critical/Utopian viability of art – its ability to negate the present in the name of liberation – is dependent upon them, and indeed some of the most strenuous arguments for the autonomy of art have come from Marxists such as Theodore Adorno (1984) and Herbert Marcuse (1978) (a position which led to constant criticisms of the plays of Brecht). Art which is dependent upon the patronage of the State, the Court or the Church ends up producing panegyrics to the powerful, while the dependence of the contemporary Culture Industry upon the economics of capitalism has ensured that such cultural products remain firmly within a hegemonic consensus conforming to the interests of Big Business.

However, what conservative criticisms of the politicization of art all too often ignore is that their defence of the autonomy of aesthetics has taken place within a white sociopolitical sector which, thanks to the Cape liberal tradition, has continued to prioritize the separation of the State and civil society. While the Afrikaner nationalist regime has done its best to lessen this separation, the State's legitimacy was in the final analysis dependent upon maintaining at the very least its illusion. Despite the highly "coercive" nature of the apartheid State, which set severe limits on what was acceptable, white South Africa therefore continued to function predominantly by "hegemony" (hence white elections, the existence of a variety of white political parties and their newspapers, etc.). As we have seen, if Liberalism initially used this autonomous space to attempt to build "western civilization" in South Africa, they would then spend the apartheid years defending, not only their ideas and

values, but the very autonomy of that space itself (hence the defences of the autonomy of the universities).

The trouble with the "resistance" art from 1976 onwards, according to Liberalism, was that it did not respect these borders. However, Liberal opposition to "the political" was in reality simply a description of its hostility to both Afrikaner nationalism and the revolutionary politics of the ANC and its allies, and what this criticism of black writing crucially missed was that the cultural struggles of the last decade have importantly been *creating* a cultural space autonomous of the apartheid system (and Liberalism and traditional ethnic formations), and one which is in embryo an alternative South African culture, an emergent civil society whose growth we need urgently to encourage. But this space was won only through the bitterest struggle because, unlike white society, black society has never functioned within colonialism with any suggestion of a separation between the State and civil society: here the State has ruled predominantly by "coercion", and black artists could not be expected to be treated any differently from your average opponent of the regime. The Liberal view of the autonomy of art can therefore either mean art's autonomy from political activity *per se*, or the autonomy of art from the State. The first view I would argue is nothing more than a universalization of South African Liberalism's specific opposition to all central political movements from the 1950s onwards, while the second view should continue to be vigorously defended. As E.M. Wilkinson and L.A. Willoughby, the editors of Schiller's aesthetic treatise, argue, on the question of the autonomy of art Schiller made a distinction between its *form* and *function*: "It is the *language* of poetry which. . .turns back on itself to achieve a self-sufficiency" (Schiller 1982: clxxviii) of form, while its function was "art for life's sake", not, that is, the autonomy of "art for art's sake" but a commitment to the achievement of the "Aesthetic State".

4 The Future of English Departments

Some English departments, despite the critical transformations in the 1980s, continue to bear the marks of Liberalism's strategic withdrawal during the years of apartheid, sometimes carrying the traces of a curious Home Counties cultural ambience that is scarcely any longer to be found in England itself. And, without a public role, literary critics now speak largely to themselves through the pages of literary critical journals, and indeed, if the 1980s saw an increasing professionalization of English Studies, then in this hot-house context such a development would at times produce a hyper-careerism (which uses rather than challenges the system). While it is pleasant to have a literary article published abroad, I continue to be amazed that this is considered to be a sign of the highest academic achievement. One is granted recognition by the members of American universities, and this is much more important than the relationships with and effects upon cultural practices at home. Besides the obvious colonialism behind this assumption, it is also salutary to contrast the enormous effect the cultural intervention of Albie Sachs's paper had locally: if this debate has travelled abroad, it has done so on our own terms, and not because its themes happened to fit the house-style of a particular journal in California.

To this extent, we can see the Left struggle against the Academy as incomplete: while it won a space for itself where alternative texts and critical theories could be read, it stopped short of producing a radical critique of the Academy itself, particularly regarding its extreme isolation from broader sociocultural struggles to which it had no structured relationship, in contrast, for example, to the eighteenth-century "cultural" critic in England. All too many universities, and English departments themselves, continue to operate in undemocratic (or partly democratic) ways, with both all too often run with varying degrees of patronage, a practice which continues to be an embarrassment to individual lecturers who feel obliged to berate the absence of democracy beyond the university. In this light, the struggles over the last decade ultimately served to negotiate the entry of a new intelligentsia *into* the system itself, an opening up of a space for these emergent energies, which led to no more than its structural *reform*. The South Africanization and democratization of English departments are therefore projects yet to be fully completed, a task proving all the more necessary as the composition of the student body changes within a different political context.

Finally, if English Studies is to position itself as a central educational space in the process of cultural transformation, then it may prove necessary for it to become a broader Cultural Studies discipline where, in the phrase of the Durban department, the "rhetoric of everyday life" may more easily be encountered. If English departments are to avoid the High Culture elitism of the *Scrutiny* project in order to assist in popular cultural transformation, then there needs to be a serious engagement with "popular culture" that moves beyond simply denouncing it as debased and ideological, or simply celebrating it as the voice of the people. Furthermore, if a central struggle will be against a Mass Media bent upon producing a patriarchal culture which feels at home in the Volkswagen family, then students need to possess a rigorous understanding of the mechanisms of "popular" cultural forms, from newspapers to the cinema, in the realization that these are the spaces in which much of the struggle over culture will take place.

Progressive intellectuals need to ensure that the *momentum* which now appears to be leading to a post-apartheid democratic State is maintained so that a post-hegemonic radical democratic culture can be constructed. If the *Freedom Charter* has at various times been described as a Socialist (nationalization), an African nationalist (anti-colonialism), or even as a (radical) Liberal (democracy, human rights) document, than what these criticisms have missed is that it actually contains all three discourses, since it is a hegemonic appropriation of them in the interests of building the broadest possible anti-apartheid alliance, appealing to all the strata of the black communities and to dissident whites. It seems to me that this alliance of social forces and ideologies is one which lays the basis upon which such an alternative South African culture can be built. If Marxism has learnt in recent years that its survival depends on it affirming the centrality of democracy and humanism, then this enables a productive dialogue within English departments with our radical Liberal tradition which may very well lead to a similar consensus around the issues discussed here.

Notes

1. It is interesting to observe how "Liberal Africanist" critics have latched on to the "truth" of black experience" when analyzing black South African writing, which possibly explains their interest in black autobiographies. This critical category may explain their enthusiasm for the early Wally Serote, whose poems anchor his criticisms of apartheid society in individual experience, and may also explain their hostility to his later "epic" verse which does not.
2. By using the term "*organic* intellectual" I am not suggesting an unmediated relationship between intellectuals and the "people". Notwithstanding the recognition that "social being determines consciousness", intellectuals operate within an autonomous space and attempt to *persuade* others to their views. The claim that one "represents" the voice of the people is in reality to mobilize a mimetic model which, as always, only serves to disguise the discourse that constructed that representation.
3. This is not to ignore those "alternative" cultural institutions already largely in place: Ravan Press, COSAW, the Market Theatre, *The Weekly Mail*, *Vrye Weekblad*, the SACHED Trust, etc. Furthermore, State intervention in this area should encourage their expansion and the creation of other similar bodies.
4. See "Advertising God", in *Scrutiny* (1932 1(3): 245–246).
5. For Gramsci a hegemonic discourse is fundamentally different from a class-ideology, which articulates the specific interests of that class. By contrast, a hegemonic discourse is impelled by the need for such a "fundamental" class to "universalize" itself, which it can only do by entering into alliance with other social classes and groups, which in turn produces the necessity of forging a hegemonic discourse which incorporates the ideologies of these other groups into a new discursive formation, "led" by the interests of the fundamental class.
6. See for example Alan Paton:

   > But there are times when you cannot get down and play the game of power, because you have no steed, no armour, no lance. The only thing that you have is your belief, and the only thing you can do with your belief is to affirm it.
   >
   > (Paton 1975:201)

7. For those who continue to think of the socialist ideal in wholly collectivist terms (as opposed to "liberal individualism"), Eagleton argues that "Marx does indeed possess an 'absolute' moral criterion: the unquestionable virtue of a rich, all-round expansion of capacities for each individual" (1990: 223). A "communist ethics" however stresses that "we should foster only those particular powers which allow an individual to realize herself through and in terms of the similar free self-realization of others" (1990: 224). His re-articulation of what is seen as a valuable Liberal discourse is here clear.

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