Introduction: Reading/Writing - History and Discontinuity

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Far from assuming a direct correlation between reading and writing, the theme of this edition brings together various debates which find at best an uneasy coexistence - that is, if one is inclined to look for thematic and conceptual correspondences and continuities. Indeed, what the compilation of contributions to this edition shows, is the positing as well as the transformation of the objects of orality, writing, reading, history, and narrative, contingent on the types and levels of investigation. A social-historical account of "orality", for instance, will most likely treat "orality" as a historically determinate positivity. In an approach which investigates the psychic and social coefficients of representation, in contrast, "orality" could be found to be either effaced or transformed to such an extent that one might be led to talk about the oral character of the book (as is held to be the case in a "signifying paranoid regime", where the book has an external model or referent (see Deleuze & Guattari 1988: 126-127)), or about capitalism's illiteracy (on the assumption that writing functions as an archaism in capitalism (see Deleuze & Guattari 1984: 240)). The notion of Literacy as Critical Social Practice (as put forward by Brian Street's article on "New Literacy Studies"), on the other hand, assumes the continuity of reading and writing in the notion of literacy as process of cultural learning. This is in stark contrast to the distinct types of "graphism" reviewed in Allan Bowyer's article on "Writing and the Narrative", which points to the disjunction of writing (-as-inscription) and reading. In this account, the only necessary relation is that between narrative and reading - narrative being explained in terms of a function of reading, and of the psychic apparatus. It is with the "theoretical" status of the notion of "reading" that the articles by Bowyer and Van Zyl are concerned (albeit in different ways), thus producing explanations of a different order than those of the "New Literacy Studies".

The "orality - literacy divide", with its various corollaries, implicitly or explicitly features as a thread running through the articles compiled in this edition. This is perhaps not surprising, since it has inspired much educational policy and methodology; and has invited criticism within those institutional arenas, as well as critique on the level of a genealogy of representation, and on the level of a philosophy of history. It is these debates, types of

history, and modes of criticism and critique that this edition takes up.

As far as current social research and policy planning are concerned, a recently published socio-economic profile of South Africa (*The Star* 17 May 1994: 15) is probably an instructive example of prevalent assumptions on the role of literacy. Setting out to "hear the heartbeat of each province", and to "take the pulse of ordinary families", researchers of the Development Bank of Southern Africa applied the Human Development Index (HDI) devised by the United Nations, which reads average income levels in combination with such considerations as the span of life expectancy rates, and levels of adult literacy. Literacy rates in South Africa, calculated over all nine provinces, were found to stand at an average of 61,4% of the population.

While highlighting regional disparities and providing guidelines for socio-economic planning, the criteria, in linking literacy rates to "annual average disposable income per capita" within the framework of the Human Development Index, clearly reveal a notion of literacy that is tied to modernisation theory. This view of literacy, which has been promoted by numerous development agencies worldwide, broadly assigns to literacy programmes the function of "catching up" with the "social progress" of the "advanced nations".

Drawing out "The Implications of the New Literacy Studies for the New South Africa", Brian Street critically examines the assumptions and implications of the autonomous model of literacy, tied up as it is with modernisation theory. The article questions the prevalent view that literacy is inevitably empowering, by pointing out that literacy can do little to alleviate extreme poverty, and that elites holding power do not do so on the basis of literacy. By way of providing some alternatives, Street critically reviews other models of literacy, and their concepts: literacy events and practices, multiple literacies, domains of literacy, "community" literacy, ideological contestations over and in literacy. Street advocates the analysis of literacy as social practice, making explicit the assumptions and power relations on which specific models of literacy are based. Thus the programme of an "ethnography of literacy" advocated by Street combines interventions in the teaching of literacy and in policy-making in the field of literacy and language teaching with a social/sociological and historical analysis of the forces that shape particular literacies' practices, domains and models.

Mindful of the charges of political blindness and (multi-)culturalism (functionalism, cultural relativity, "culture as listed inventory"), Street reformulates his vision of an ethnography of literacy in the contrastive terms of "dominant literacies" ("genres of power") and "marginalised literacies". This reformulation, I would argue, does not entirely escape the criticisms brought against it. Being framed within a "Repressive Hypothesis" model

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(Foucault 1990), power is viewed as coercive, bifurcating its domain into the dominant and the dominated; the oppressors and the oppressed; the powerful and the powerless. The notion of power as coercion tends to obscure or preclude the analysis of literacy and language policy (including that pertaining to "marginalised literacies") as social sites of political intervention.

Some dualisms related to those mentioned above also feature in other articles in this edition. Isabel Hofmeyr's article on "Oral History as a Changing Phenomenon", for instance, relies on an "orality - literacy" distinction based on the demise of authoritative oral history under the impact of forced removals, and of the traditional order under the impact of formal schooling with its Voortrekker history teaching.

Both Street's and Hofmeyr's articles set out to transcend the "great divide" (between "orality" and "literacy"). Street, inveighing against Walter Ong's (1982) distinction of orality and literacy as distinct forms in the history of human development, criticises the notion of the shift from orality to literacy as the grand shift of history, on methodological, empirical, and political grounds. Hofmeyr, likewise, criticises traditional historiography for its evolutionary model which stipulates that oral forms wither in the face of supposedly "stronger" written forms. Yet, the "great divide" and related notions show a remarkable persistence and longevity despite attempts at criticising and transcending them.

The "great divide" poses as both a culturalist and a historiographical (or rather historicist) paradigm. It is the historiographical aspect of the "great divide" which is at issue in both Hofmeyr's and Kromberg's articles, insofar as both of them deal with much-debated notions of "tradition". In an account of "ethnic moments of identity" operating in worker poets' performance of *izibongo*, Steve Kromberg examines ethnically loaded forms - traditionally labelled "tradition" - as intellectual and cultural resources wielded by worker poets for purposes of political mobilisation; and the persistence of "traditional cultural practices" among members of ANC affiliates. Hofmeyr's account of the disappearance of the *kgoro*, with its attendant demise of authoritative oral history and of the traditional order, and her account of the "remade" world under conditions of state intervention, formal schooling, and school history teaching, assigns a transformative role to the latter, which leaves a relatively homogeneous notion of "tradition" to characterise the other side of the "divide".

The notion of "tradition" as it features in both of these articles, has been the subject of heated debates. The notion of "tradition" in South African historiography, in apartheid policies parading under the motto of ethnicity, and in cultural activisms of the 1980's, has been problematised by Andrew

Spiegel, among others. The notion of "tradition" in a trade union and worker performance context, he argues, "implies an acceptance of a static notion of what constitutes an original (real; pure) traditional form"; "discovering commonalities of content/form" across different performances of praise poetry, amounts to "creating an impression of static tradition" (Spiegel 1989: 62). In that case, the reference to "tradition" might be said to present mere "background" to ethnicity's contemporary role (see Vail 1989: 3). The notion of "tradition as resource", to be mobilised for different ends in different contexts, on the other hand, is marred by an instrumentalism of very limited explanatory power (see Spiegel 1989: 66ff).

This instrumentalism, however, does not characterise Kromberg's analysis as much as that of his sources. Ethnicity, in these accounts, is explained in terms of people "fashion[ing] ideologies and identities which help to sustain them in a harsh and changing world" (Delius 1989: 248); or in terms of its "capacity to create for the individual a sense of worth and wholeness in an oppressive social system" (Gunner & Gwala 1991: 31).

These psychologistic accounts are strangely at odds with Kromberg's own observations about the apparent contradiction between interests, political affiliation, and ethnic identity - which cannot be entirely reconciled with notions of a unitary "popular consciousness", reflected in "ideas expressed through cultural forms". This contradiction brings to mind the methodological dilemmas faced by Wilhelm Reich's *Mass Psychology of Fascism*. Confronted by the question of "what prevents the economic situation from coinciding with the psychic structure of the masses" (Reich 1970: 14), the tenets of social psychologism and economism have to capitulate. Setting his analysis apart from such tenets, Reich (1970: 21) refers this contradiction to the divided nature of the psychic apparatus, engendered by the contradiction between the social situation and the subject's structural formation (Reich 1970: 24). Considering the complexities of the issues raised, and conceptualisations developed by Reich, the commonplace references to categories of "consciousness", ideational content and "ideology", are of minimal explanatory value.

Kromberg's investigation of *Izibongo* and the Mobilisation of Ethnic Identities differs from earlier attempts at distinguishing between Zulu ethnicity and the ANC's non-racialism (see Sitas 1990), which tended to be respectively labelled "conservative" and "progressive". Sitas's account of the formation of "Zulu" identities in Natal describes Inkatha mobilisation as a "sleek and modernist affair", (then) government-sponsored and high-tech, with full media coverage under the watchful eye of the KwaZulu Police, but without active membership participation in the "impersonal happenings on the platform", apolitical in content - in short, "a public spectacle, stage-

managed for the international press and the media" (Sitas 1990: 260). The coinciding COSATU rally at Curries Fountain, in contrast, is described as "a more 'archaic' and more militant event", its crowd being "a seething body of energy", with workers performing poetry, dancing and choir-singing (Sitas 1990: 260).

While Sitas thus charts a qualitative difference between Inkatha and ANC-UDF-COSATU mobilisations, the article by Peter Horn on "Orature, Literature and the Media" implicitly challenges the criteria for such a distinction. The very possiblity of an electronically coded "universal hypertext", Horn argues, provides the context in which an oral poem is transformed into a media event, thereby transgressing all commonly drawn boundaries between the "oral" and the "written".

This shift in the assessment of the role of ethnicity and the notion of "tradition", would seem to find confirmation in retrospect by the spectacles of ethnic mobilisation in Natal in the wake of the 1994 general election, thus posing a challenge to those versions of modernisation theory which view "parochial ethnic loyalties [as] ... cultural ghosts ... destined to disappear in the face of social, economic and political changes". Echoes of this version of modernisation theory were, and are, to be heard from all sides of the political spectrum:

> Greater access to education, improved communications, and the shifting of people from the slumbering "traditional" rural sector of the economy to the vibrant "modern" industrial sector by the beneficient forces of economic growth guaranteed that ethnic loyalties would fade away. In their place would grow a new, nation-oriented consciousness which would underpin progressive "nation-building", especially if the new nation states could make good their promises of a better life for all their citizens.
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> (Vail 1989: 1)

The criticisms mounted by Brian Street and Steve Kromberg would tend to caution against such linear teleologies of "progress".

The first three articles in this edition attempt to transcend "the great divide" in its culturalist and historiographical/historicist aspects: Street by his criticism of culturalism; Hofmeyr by her criticism of an evolutionist historiography and by the question introducing her article, namely that of the relation between oral literature and topographical/historical change; and Kromberg by the starting point of his article, namely the discontinuity between interests, political affiliation, and ethnic identity. Yet the respective criticisms which they formulate, I would argue, do not entirely exhaust the *conceptualisations against which they are directed. This becomes evident particularly in those instances where the criticism has the effect of re-*

positioning the object of investigation, without challenging the paradigm or the relation between the paradigm and the object. In those instances, "the great divide" reveals its immunity to attempted refutations on empirical or historicist grounds.

To complete the critique, the questions of orality, literacy, history and narrative would have to be explored on a different level, on which the object assumed to exist in the "real world" and the object of knowledge, or the process of experience and the process of concept-formation, are thought of and treated as *discontinuous*. Catapulting these issues onto an epistemological level entails a transformation of the respective objects (a process much like the one Susan van Zyl describes at work in the exercise of "Symptomatic Reading"): The question as to what constitutes orality and what literacy entails a genealogy of representation at surface (the relation of hand-eye-voice to produce various types of graphisms) and at depth (various forms of psychic and social repression), correlated with types of social formations (see Deleuze & Guattari 1984, reviewed in Allan Bowyer's article on "Writing and the Narrative"). "The great divide", epistemologically treated, does not pertain to orality and literacy, each caught on either side of the divide within the confines of a "rise and fall" metaphor, but is inherent as discontinuity within the very definition and procedures of genealogical explanation and critique.

The notion of discontinuity divides the object of investigation into an empirical one, and an object of knowledge, which entails a rupture at the level of representation. An example of the rupture at the level of representation is provided in the opening paragraphs of Peter Horn's article on "Orature, Literature and the Media": the evocation, in performance poetry, of a pre-colonial Africa (or, for that matter, in Hofmeyr's terms, an "oral history"/"oral memory"/"oral performance" emanating from "rural societies") refers to an origin that *remains inaccessible*.

Secondly, the notion of discontinuity entails a rupture in the concept of history. A discontinuous history, which lies at the heart of any genealogical explanation or archaeological description (as it is reviewed in Susan van Zyl's article on "Reading for Symptoms"), differs from the historiography offered by the models and metaphors of linear history which underlies the notion of "the great divide" and its corresponding dualisms and binary opposites. The requirements of a discontinuous history are indispensable to a throughgoing critique of "the great divide" between "orality" and "literacy".

This becomes particularly clear if we compare the contributions by Derrida and Deleuze and Guattari to the "writing" debate (as it is reviewed in Allan Bowyer's article on "Writing and the Narrative"). Derrida is often credited with having fundamentally debunked the myths surrounding the

"orality"-"literacy" distinction by pointing out that the limitation of the notion of writing to linear and phonetic notation, or alphabetical and linear writing, represents a prime example of ethnocentrism which relegates the so-called "oral" societies to the other side of the divide, where they exist, as non-historic peoples, as a community of innocence and non-violence. Instead, as Derrida shows, there is no society corresponding to the designation "society without writing" (Derrida 1982: 109). A system of classificatory difference operating in the process of naming and of obliterating proper names, is what constitutes writing. This position, as it is endorsed in Horn's article, constitutes an exercise of criticism which confines itself to repositioning the object. As Bowyer's article shows, this limited criticism falls prey to the charge of ethnocentrism which it had itself brought against Lévi-Strauss's "The Battle of the Proper Names" and "The Writing Lesson" (in *Tristes tropiques*), by assuming a linear history of Western metaphysics and attributing a uniform type of writing to it. Deleuze's and Guattari's genealogy (in *Anti-Oedipus*), in contrast, attempts to avoid this pitfall by analysing representation through a discontinuous history, according to which each type of social formation has a unique way of repressing the representation of desire. Thus, and this might seem paradoxical, it appears that only a discontinuous history can analyse that which linear history has bracketed as "tradition", or as "pre-capitalist", "oral" societies.

The transformation of the object which arises with an epistemological approach to questions of orality and literacy, entails an analysis which would tend to subsume the notion of "orality" under a typology of graphism (in the broadest sense of the term). In Deleuze and Guattari's genealogy of representation in *Anti-Oedipus*, non-State societies (or more appropriately, societies of the type that Clastres (1977) terms "Society against the State") are not "oral" because they lack a form of graphism; on the contrary, everything is coded, and most visibly so in the form of marking or inscription on the body. They are "oral", according to Deleuze and Guattari, because this inscription remains independent of the voice, to which it is neither aligned nor subordinated.

If it is assumed that the history, memory, tradition and performance which form the subject of Isabel Hofmeyr's article are indeed "oral" (which could be a matter of some dispute), it is appropriate to look for the creation of this memory to a process of inscription which marks the (indivisible) earth, and marks bodies as the earth's products. Extrapolating from Nietzsche's notion of mnemotechnics as the prehistoric labour of man, Deleuze and Guattari outline the conditions of an "oral" memory:

> ... the first signs are the territorial signs that plant their flags in bodies. And if one wants to call this inscription in naked flesh "writing", then it must be said that speech in fact presupposes writing, and that it is this cruel system of inscribed signs that renders man capable of language, and gives him a memory of the spoken word.
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> (Deleuze & Guattari 1984: 145)

Mnemotechnics, understood as the implantation of territorial signs in bodies, however, is not automatically equatable with the notion of "oral memory", embedded in oral story-telling, or in oral history-as-narrative. Whatever links (oral) "writing"-as-inscription (understood in the sense in which it is analysed by Deleuze & Guattari 1984) with narrative, can only be posited across a discontinuity which assigns to inscription and narrative each a distinctive, historically and "archaeologically" contingent mode of representation.

As it emerges from Bowyer's article, narrative (in the narrower sense of the term, which is taken to designate a historically contingent and epistemically specific form) has been described in terms of a dual register: that of "story" - a sequentiality produced by the mutual conditioning of temporal sequence and causal-logical consequence - and discourse - consisting of units whose functionality in terms of plot is not immediately apparent, and which appear to provide "useless" detail not logically imperative to the propulsion of the narrative (Barthes 1975). In Barthes's functional syntax of narrative, the latter category would include "informants", defined as "bits of information used to identify or pinpoint certain elements in time and space" (Barthes 1975: 249). According to this model, spatial deixis in narrative is subject to the functional syntax of narrative, and, therefore, also to a disequilibrium generated by the dual register of narrative. Some of the effects of this disequilibrium are outlined by Barthes (1982) in an article entitled "The Reality Effect". Informants, or more generally speaking, descriptive detail signifying "reality", appear as resistance to meaning, structure, or intelligibility by virtue of not being subject to the conjunction of logic and temporality characterising the hinge-points of a narrative (Barthes 1982: 14-15). One might, therefore, be led to surmise that the notion of the "disappearance of a sense of place" is a function of historiography, if that historiography is assumed to take the form of narrative.

The latter assumption is addressed in Hofmeyr's article in the form of a question: "What of the idea that historical understanding is inseparable from narrative form? If the narrative form remains intact, then does it not, somehow, preserve a particular form of historical understanding?" This question is answered, in Hofmeyr's article, with "a qualified no", by virtue of the notion that "narrative form and historical understanding gain their

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meaning partly from a wider, institutional context which determines ... their correct transmission and reception", and which was shattered with the abolishment of the *kgoro* and the "traditional order" at large, precipitating a disintegration of the skill of historical narration. The level of disintegration is measured by the departure from "the qualities of a good oral historian" - qualities including "the skills of narrative ability, historical insight, and an outstanding memory". These criteria and norms, being derived from the testimony of the interviewees, might well be seen to legitimate the chiefly history from which they are inseparable, and thus function internally to the processes which they attempt to explain.

A genealogical explanation, in contrast, would bring a different set of criteria to bear on the definition of "oral memory", on that of "narrative" and on that of "history". An "oral" memory is teneted upon an active faculty of forgetting by which a biological memory is repressed, and another memory - a collective, social one - is created through inscription on the body (see Deleuze & Guattari 1984: 144-145). In the case of narrative (in the narrower definition of entailing a dual register), the narrative unfolds through a process of forgetting in order to remember. In the case of historiography, "narrative sentences ... give descriptions of events under which the events could not have been witnessed, since they make essential reference to events later in time than the events they are about" (Danto 1985: xii, 346). (This pertains especially to instances of temporal and spatial deixis in narrative.) Therefore we cannot use historical statements to make statements about the past (Danto 1985: 30). In other words, referring to the starting point of Horn's article, we do not have direct access to the past; and this is precisely what makes history possible (Danto 1985: 95); similarly, the gap separating the past recounted action and the present narration recounting that action, far from corrupting historical narration, is constitutive of historical narration (see Lyotard 1987: 109). This gap, if it is seen to constitute historical narration, could be seen to characterise both the narrative of Lucky Kekana and the narrators from the "orthodox" tradition; the difference, on this account, would lie less in the degree of historical veracity conditioned by the institutional context of the respective narrative, than in the treatment of historical time. As Hofmeyr's examples of the "orthodox" tradition show, the gap between the time of the narration and the events recounted is dealt with through a panchronicity, shaped by a regulated chain of transmission involving authorised heroes-turned-narrators, narrators-turned-heroes, and listeners-turned-narrators (see Lyotard 1987: 109-110). On the basis of the redefinition of "orality", "writing", and "narrative", the question arises as to whether "oral memory" can be narrative, and narrative can be "oral".

The resistance of an (effaced) orality/writing (in which "writing is not doomed to be the shadow of speech" (Coetzee 1986: 142)) to narrative is thematised in J.M. Coetzee's *Foe*. Reingard Nethersole's article on "Writing Space" analyses the spatial indicators in the episode of Susan Barton's "writing lesson" given to Friday, in order to highlight spatialising operations in and through language and writing. Despite the fact that this article assumes the transitivity of language, writing and narrative, the disjunction remains, due to the fact that spatial markers are treated in terms of deixis, rather than in terms of a functional syntax of narrative.

Thus, despite the fact that individual articles in this edition assume relatively continuous and stable relations between orality, writing, reading, narrative and history, comparisons between and across the articles compiled here would serve to problematise those assumptions. It turns out not only that the relations are historically and socially contingent, but also that these concepts will have to be seen internally differentiated, according to different levels of investigation, different types of positing of the objects, and different procedures required in different types of conceptualisation.

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