Writing Literary History in Southern Africa. The Relevance of a Social Theory[1]

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Summary

The article suggests a paradigm for the historiographical understanding of the several culturally distinct but interrelated literatures of southern Africa. Instead of regarding the literatures as discrete linguistic-ethnic entities, the comparative approach contextualised within the functioning of society questions conventional boundaries of language, race and genre. In seeking to delineate a "single story", translation refers broadly to the activity of making the insights of one culture accessible to the other, the aim being to respect difference while identifying points of common concern in a democratic enterprise.

Opsomming

Die artikel bied 'n paradigma vir die historiografiese verstaan van die verskillende kultureel-onderskeie, dog onderling verbonde, letterkundes van Suider-Afrika. In plaas daarvan om die letterkundes as afsonderlike linguisties-etniese entiteite te beskou, bevraagteken die vergelykende benadering binne die konteks van maatskaplike funksionering die gewone grense van taal, ras en genre. In die poging om 'n "enkelverhaal" te beskryf, beteken "vertaling" rofweg die toeganklik maak van een kultuur se insigte vir 'n ander, met die doel om verskil te eerbiedig terwyl dit gemeenskaplike belange uitwys as deel van 'n demokratiserende onderneming.

This is the introduction to a literary history of southern Africa. The history, *Southern African Literatures* (to be published by Longman, U.K., in 1996), contains my view of the several distinct but, interrelated literatures of the subcontinent. Selections range from the expression of the stone-age Bushmen to that of modern voices in the independent states, and the countries to be covered are South Africa, Botswana, Lesotho, Swaziland, Namibia, Mozambique, Angola, Zimbabwe, Zambia and Malawi. As far as literary distinctions are concerned, I accept that social, political and linguistic specificities will designate Zambian literature as recognisably different from Zimbabwean literature, for example, and that given a politics of division, a unitary South African literature will be more difficult to define than

several hermetic sets called South African Literature in English, Afrikaans Literature, Zulu Literature, Xhosa Literature, and so on.

At the same time, I do not follow the practice in most existing surveys of regarding the literature of the region as a series of discrete linguistic-ethnic entities[2]: entities that can be unwitting reminders of the divide and rule tactics of the colonial legacy. Instead, I adopt a comparative approach contextualised within the functioning of society. In looking at frontier clashes in early nineteenth-century South Africa, by way of illustration, the question is whether Xhosa literature would have taken the direction it did had there been no colonial settlement in Xhosa space; obversely, whether early South African literature in English would have followed its particular course had it not encountered indigenous people around its early settlements. The questions in themselves are not meant to be profound; we are reminded, nonetheless, that the Xhosa bard and the settler journalist, though divided by language, literacy, race and probably sentiment, were both part of the same story - a story which, of course, remains susceptible to different interpretations. In extending the idea of a single story to the entire region, I have sought points of common reference such as the shared experience of colonialism in its abrasive, economic form attendant on strong, permanent settler populations, the influence in the texts of European languages and racial theories and, above all, the transition from traditional to modern loyalties in aggressive, industrialising societies. These issues cut across strongholds of language, race and nationality, and remind us of the need to open the social and literary field to acts of cultural translation. The comparative principle and method seem particularly apt at a time when the intent in southern Africa is to move beyond conflicts of the past and chart new African destinies.

As these prefatory remarks should have suggested, the literary history - as I view it - is not easily disentangled from the political history. In fact, the initial premise of the study is that in the countries of southern Africa the texts of politics have tended to overwhelm the texts of art. In a history characterised by groups imposing their domination on other resisting groups, ancient charters have felt the intrusion of harsh, modernising forces. This modern pattern begins with the earliest people of the region, Bushmen hunter-gatherers and Khoi pastoralists, having to defend themselves against expanding African groups (the descendants of Iron Age Bantu-speaking people), and from the mid-seventeenth century against Dutch trekboers who spread into the arid interior of what is now South Africa in search of grazing lands for their cattle. (The parched Karoo has symbolic significance in the literature as a place of solitude, a place of physical and spiritual testing.) With the Dutch East India Company having used the Cape of Good

Hope as a refreshment station on journeys to the spice markets of the East, white settlement had begun on the southernmost tip of the continent. Just over a hundred years later, in 1795, the British occupied the Cape, set up administrative structures in Cape Town, and, in 1820, settled on the eastern frontier of the Cape colony. This brought colonists into direct confrontation with the Xhosa who experienced the colonial mercantile and military presence on the perimeters of their ancestral land.

Racial and ethnic conflict have continued to characterise South African history, and further details of all the countries are given in the course of the study. The point is that it is difficult, in the subcontinent, to separate literary discussion from a social referent when political events have attained the dimension of compelling public narratives. In societies of thin literary cultures, in fact, the art genres of fiction, poems and plays can easily seem to be mere reflections of massive activities in an external history. In granting such a perception its reality in the material circumstances of the region, I have based the present literary history on a social theory in which forms of literature are integrally part of the event. A consequence is that while the study of literature in the academic or artistic sense may want to remain receptive to the subjective impact of works, social responsibility demands that we attend not only to the richness of cultural heterogeneity, but also to inequitable distributions of power in economic, educational and literary resources. In seeking to increase understanding of society and culture, therefore, the critic remains committed to an ethical base: literary activity, including the activity of criticism, is regarded as a social activity concerned with justice. It is concerned with justice not only in the comprehensive sense of what it is to be human, but in its capacity in southern Africa to extend liberties and contribute to the creation of a civil society. As the countries struggle out of divisive pasts, the historian's task is to recover and reconstitute the past in ways that are valuable to both current enquiry and future participation in a democratised public sphere. Instead of the past retaining its impenetrability in antiquarian interest, or shedding its impenetrability in transhistorical notions of relevance, the exploration proceeds according to a dialectical relation of past significance to present meaning: the structure of the work is created in specific times, places and conditions, but lives in the process of its reception. Accordingly, the present study itself is a form of literature which not merely reflects what is *in* other texts, but which intervenes in the construction of a literary and moral narrative.

That the study should have a function, a design, even a tendency, is consistent with its social theory. The literary history I am writing does not seek objectivity: the cause and effect mode of explanation associated with traditional historiography. Neither, in formalist terms, does it seek to privilege

a dynamics of literary structure (that is, the replacement of the exhausted device by its defamiliarised equivalent) over and above both reference to a world and communication with an audience. Rather, the challenges to both extrinsic and intrinsic history derive from the two not entirely complementary interests of deconstructive textual analysis and a politically conscious criticism. The former insists that all kinds of writing, whether history-document or poem, are texts, that the relation between language and society is analogical, and that facts and truth are determined not by their properties in the world, but by discursive practice. The latter insists that we know the society not only by interrogating texts, but also by experiencing its determinative effect on our lives: that the literary scholar, accordingly, cannot set apart literature as an aesthetic object of study in seeking refuge from other forms of cultural practice or social engagement. In short, material forces are not to be wholly absorbed by symbolic needs, but are to retain the external purchase that might initiate action leading to change: in literary analysis, the change involves the interpretation and evaluation of moral and aesthetic perception in relation to a societal claim. The literary impact of a work is thus allowed its pragmatic purpose, and a tension - both problematic and necessary - characterises the approach. There is, at the one pole, a need for a hermeneutics of suspicion: a rereading of authorities, a questioning of positions, reputations, traditions, influences, as texts are set in contexts of controversy in which terms such as major/minor, functional/aesthetic, the West/Africa, are held up to discursive investigation. At the other pole, there is the need in societies of severe inequalities for a humanism of reconstruction, in terms of which damaged identities are reassembled, silenced voices given speech, and causes rooted close to home in the priorities of the southern African scene examining itself while it examines its relations with the West.

Of course, in procedures of repositioning alternative or marginalised voices, the critic risks an impasse of race or gender. By assuming a commitment especially to black or women writers and giving the previously neglected author exclusive prominence, for example, it can become difficult to relate the study to functionings of the entire society. I have tried to identify interrelationships by locating the concepts race and gender in a politics of power where subjects, values, entire fields of activity, struggle for their centres and by recognising that any mode of enquiry entails the social production of meaning. In fact, a similar principle of involving the workings of society as a whole underlies the comparative method that I mentioned earlier on. Accordingly, literatures in different languages may be interpreted not as self-enclosed within their own ethnic systems, but as having been influenced by linguistic and cultural interchange in the context

of events: events which in the politics of the subcontinent have often been cataclysmic (the Great Trek of Afrikanerdom, the national suicide of the Xhosa, the actions of Soweto school pupils in 1976). In turning textual criticism to referential account, we could say that such events are themselves texts: validations of myths, struggles for the icon and the sign, that have required and, in changing circumstances of reception, will continue to require semiotic interpretation.

In refusing clear demarcation between the text of the book and the text of the world, I am proffering a particular definition of literature. It is a definition that, in literary history, has consequences for the relationship of genre change to political change, and for matters of periodisation. I have regarded literature in southern Africa, most usefully, as speech and writing: generally, as a rhetorical activity with the purpose of persuading an audience. In this, I am endorsing a long tradition in the region from ceremonies of ritual in ancient African communities to modes of survival such as story-telling among migrant workers in the alien city environment. In both these instances, the literary sign is held in close correspondence to the event: the consequence is a conception of the content producing the form and the function lending substance to the aesthetic insight. Similarly, literature attached to settler communities, Afrikaner language struggles, and campaigns of African mobilisation has been characterised by weighty topicality, the turn of the public phrase, and an imperative of communication. The pamphlet or periodical has often had to serve the demand for the swift dissemination of information with an appeal to fact and opinion. Of course, the risk of rhetoric in the insidious allure of fine language and the potential of rhetoric to assist in change, truth being regarded not as fixed and abstract but as situated in human conversations, identify the perennial difference and tension between the serious and the rhetoric condition. What is inescapable is the implication of the reader (the critic as well as the public) in the sense-making procedure. If truth may be regarded, rhetorically, as the property of statements, which statements are valuable, which dubious and for what reasons? Perhaps more fundamentally, in a literary study, which forms of expression are literature if literature has been cast as functional rather than ontological?

As I have intimated, my own social theory should permit any speech and writing to be included in a literary history. Certainly, oral voices as well as written voices should be permitted their say; traditional, popular, and elite voices all need to be heard, and non-fictional forms of expression should not necessarily be regarded as having less insight than the art genres of romantic imagination. Had I remained entirely consistent with my criteria, however, I could have ended up, conceivably, with a study that subsumed forms

of fictional expression under the combined output of history studies, religious sermons, political orations, and so on. In times of social instability the ideas, insights, visions and prophecies of art may not necessarily be truer than those of the document, while the document has the advantage of its immediate interest. It is worth recollecting, in this respect, that the demands of public commitment have led many creative writers in southern Africa - I think randomly of Pringle, Plaatje, Schreiner and Paton - to complement their fictional works with substantial prose commentaries. In pursuing non-fictional forms in literary history, however, one has to consider the expectations raised by convention. The term literature today, in Africa as well as the West, raises the expectation of imaginative expression, and historians, lest they be regarded as eccentric or perverse, are obliged at some point to hold on to the view that any discipline tends to distinguish and consolidate itself by the precision of its definitions and conventions: hence, through some degree of exclusivity. Most readers will expect a literary history to focus on the imaginative forms. Indeed, were the literary historian to neglect the novel, the poem and the play, who else would devote attention to these particular configurations of culture? Despite entertaining the idea of literature as a range of rhetorical effects, I have still wanted to devote most attention to the poem, play and story as kinds of discourse distinguished by the concentration of their sensory and experiential appeal in the shaping of consciousness within specific social relations.

Adhering to convention, most readers will also expect literary history to focus on elite forms of expression. University study, after all, has entrenched the conception of literature with a capital L. Instead, I have considered the elite (the serious novel, the contemplative poem), the traditional (the Bushman story, the Zulu military panegyric) and also the popular: that difficult to define category of hybridised, often opportunistic, city-bred response that may encompass conservatively inclined religious ritual and politically progressive tracts. Given that some forms are more popular than others, the popular may veer towards the serious expectations of literary culture (city-slick stories in *Drum* magazine in the 1950s by writers like Can Themba and Es'kia Mphahlele) or towards the entertainment of mass media culture (the TV sitcom or soap). Here, the demands of space combined with my own competence as someone trained in literary, as opposed to cultural, forms have led me to devote more attention to the literary convention than to the entertainment convention. Hence, the elite novels of Gordimer and Coetzee are given sanction in a way that Wilbur Smith's adventure blockbusters are not. Another history - I realise - could be written on the signs of South African culture. Similarly, another history could be written on re-arranged relationships, in literary education, between metropolitan and

local texts. Instead of thinking of African booklists replacing Western booklists in syllabuses, for example, we could ask how *Othello*, *The Tempest*, *The Pilgrim's Progress* or *Heart of Darkness* - texts that have been associated with colonial African dilemmas - might most fruitfully be taught in southern Africa. To take the case of Thomas Mofolo's epic *Chaka*: we could identify the influences not only of African oral sources and the politics of the author's day, but the influence of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* which provides a prototype for character and plot. We might go on to ponder whether courses on Shakespeare in Africa should include comparative studies of the Shakespeare and Mofolo texts. I only hint at such rearrangements while remaining more concerned with the southern African perspective on its own materials.

In granting that notions of authorial genius and artistic autonomy may be qualified by the social context, the aim is not to privilege the base over the superstructure, but to read the literary and historical terrain as a semiotic whole. Consequently, I do not offer an introductory section of intellectual and social trends as a prelude to chapters which, drained of context, account in terms of genre change for the period's major works. Instead, in minimising the division between the text and the historical event, I have examined each as a constituent of the other, and thus reiterate my criterion of literary production itself as a form of social practice: it is one of the many discourses that have helped create and affect the consciousness of society in its attitudes, behaviour and actions. It follows that periodisation is not to be regarded primarily as a genre consideration but as responsible to political change. The problem is: which key events may begin to act as period markers? For not only does each country have its own key events but, given the history of political conflict, groups within single countries have based their claims to socio-cultural identity and power on rival events. In South Africa, for example, Afrikaans literature has regarded the Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902) as a key political and literary moment: out of Afrikaner defeat arose renewed commitment to the language as the shaping force of the volk. As far as African writers in South Africa are concerned, however, the dates 1910 (the Act of Union, which confirmed English-speakers and Afrikaners as citizens and excluded black people from political rights), or 1913 (the Natives Land Act which dispossessed African people of rights of tenure) may be more appropriate dates/events to mark the start of a period of important change: a period that witnessed the beginning of modern, organisational opposition to white rule. The ANC was founded in 1912, and in seeking a key work consolidating several events, the critic could identify Sol T. Plaatje's indictment of the Land Act, *Native Life in South Africa* (1916).

As these random examples will suggest, considerations of literary periodi-

sation are connected, emotively, to the general history of oppression, struggle and liberation and, in deciding on the selection and arrangement of the subject matter, I have kept in mind the useful insights of Christopher Heywood (1976) and Dieter Riemenschneider (1987). In discussing the question of periodisation in colonial/independence studies, both resist the temptation to emphasise disputes in settler communities as the main force of the literary historical movement. Instead of granting, say, the Boer War status as period marker, I have allowed larger, ongoing questions of cultural, political and economic development to help me place settler communities in past time, Africanisation in future time, and all the countries of the region in the transitions of their colonial dependencies and independent destinies: flag independence has not stopped the process of history but has provoked the questions of real or mock emancipation in the new nation, real or mock citizenry in the new society. By beginning with oral tradition, I mean to remind readers that in the forms of its indigenous voices, southern Africa was neither mute nor savage, and that in resilient modifications to changing circumstances, oral expression remains a key component of the literary response. As far as the colonial enterprise of "writing up" Africa according to the metropole's own image of the dark continent was concerned, the late nineteenth century saw a flurry of activity in modes of both imperial confidence and dissent from within the ranks. The spread of higher education in the early twentieth century, particularly in South Africa, led to a surer sense of institutional literary life; consequently the creative genres as distinct from the earlier prose commentaries began to make their presence felt. By the early 1960s decolonisation was beginning to define the period and, with a new confidence in local commitments, the current phase poses questions about independence and modernisation in which Africa and the West remain complicit in each other's forms of concern.

Given that the literature continues to be marked by a shuttling back and forth between Africa and Europe not only in terms of language, literary conventions and critical debate, but in that some of the most penetrating insights have been offered by sojourners or commentators from abroad, the qualification for being a South African writer or a Zimbabwean writer or, generally, a writer of southern Africa would seem to have less to do with birth, nationality or race than with intimate knowledge of and close identification with the life of the region. At least, this is how I have chosen to regard the matter. In decisions as to what writers or works are important in a politically contested field, I have granted most value to content that is committed to what may generally be considered democratic, non-elitist activity in southern Africa. The study measures African priorities against colonial practices, however, not to effect easy endorsements or dismissals

of works, but as a means of arriving at greater human understanding in the functioning of society.

Finally, I wish to return to my initial point of trying to look across the barriers of language, race and culture that, in academic disciplinary custom as well as in surrounding life, can severely circumscribe fields of enquiry and experience. In my own English Department (University of Natal, Durban), for example, courses on South African literature focus on literature in English, usually written literature adjudged to be serious art. The other countries of the region rarely feature in the syllabus, and neither do those South African literatures composed originally in languages other than English. Similar practices of language exclusivity operate in departments of Afrikaans and in departments of African languages and literatures. (In the case of the latter, the texts studied will be in Zulu or Xhosa, or one of the other indigenous languages.) In countries like Zimbabwe, Zambia and Malawi the British tradition, partly as a result of Ngugi's various critical pronouncements, has yielded somewhat to an African demand. But the Africa that enjoys prominence and delineation is the reasonably established literary field of West and East Africa. Having imbibed their Soyinka, Achebe, Ngugi, and their Heinemann African Writers series, many academics in southern Africa are more conversant with developments in the rest of Africa than with developments in the subcontinent. Much of what I have just said of course is understandable. Tuition in the original language is part of the university teaching intention; critical material on West and East African literature is readily available. The democratising process in this part of Africa requires, nevertheless, that we begin to hear, understand and value what Stephen Gray refers to as "the Babel that is sprawling Southern Africa" (1989a: xxvi). Of crucial consideration here is a theory and practice of translation. In regarding translation not as source-text orientated but as a socio-cultural model (as an act of intervention that functions in the receiving culture), my purpose, as I have mentioned, has been to identify loci of comparative reference as we struggle out of the divisive past. The socio-cultural principle does not argue for definitive translations when a version of any text may be regarded as bound to the use to which it is being put. Accordingly, dynamic equivalence - the attempt to capture the spirit of the original in verbal re-creation - is given lesser claim than formal equivalence: the attempt to convey the message. This is appropriate whether we are referring strictly to the translation of one language into another or, more generally, to the project that motivates the entire study: translation as the activity of making the insights of one culture accessible to the other. The principle of translation is also appropriate to the historiographic aim, which is not so much to negate artistry as to give weight to attitudes and ideas.

Notes

1. There has not been sustained debate about the writing of literary history in the countries of southern Africa, and most literary surveys make only cursory references to their own historiographical principles. Despite this, the commentaries listed in the References have helped me formulate my approach.

   The insights of Gray (1989: xx): "The proximity of writers arranged this way tends to stress the importance of common public events over individual biographies. The comparative approach is usually more sociological than aesthetic ..."; Hofmeyr (1979: 44): "The history of South African literature is not the tale of the literary endeavours of a small fraction of its people ..."; and Gérard (1981: 38): "But in spite of the inherent divisiveness built into the cultural make-up of the country by historical circumstances, there is also a decisive element of unity which binds together all these racial and ethnic groups with their different languages and traditions", anticipate in significant ways the approach and spirit of the present study.

   As far as debates on literary historiography on the international scene are concerned, I am indebted especially to Robert Weimann's study, *Structure and Society in Literary History: Studies in the History and Theory of Historical Criticism* (1976). A summary of current thinking on the rewriting of literary history (in this particular case, American literary history) is offered by Russell Reising's *The Unusable Past: Theory and the Study of American Literature* (1986). Contributions to the lively debates on literary history and culture are too numerous to list here. The reader, however, is directed to the journals *Critical Inquiry* and *New Literary History* as well as to Robert Young's *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West* (1990) and Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths & Helen Tiffin's *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-colonial Literatures* (1989). Young and the authors of *The Empire Writes Back* offer excellent summaries of debates in Western and African literary culture, respectively, and their bibliographies provide details of key works and articles pertinent to current enquiry.

2. South African literature, for example, may be surveyed by turning (for African-language literature) to Albert S. Gérard's *Four African Literatures: Xhosa, Sotho, Zulu, Amharic* (1971) and *African Language Literatures: An Introduction to the Literary History of Sub-Saharan Africa* (1981) and D.B. Ntuli and C.F. Swanepoel's *Southern African Literature in African Languages: A Concise Historical Perspective* (1993), for Afrikaans literature to J.C. Kannemeyer's *Die Afrikaanse Literatuur, 1652-1987* (1988) and for English-language literature to Malvern van Wyk Smith's *Grounds of Contest: A Survey of South African Literature in English* (1990). For a comparative treatment of written South African English and Afrikaans literatures see A.J. Coetzee, Tim Couzens and Stephen Gray's "South African Literatures to World War II" in Gérard (ed.) *European-Language Writing in Sub-Saharan Africa,* vol. 2 (1986). As the title of Gérard's volumes suggest, indigenous language literature (written and oral)

is excluded from consideration while the English-Afrikaans comparative approach adopted by Coetzee, Couzens and Gray is not consolidated in the essay "White South African Literature After World War II": rather, Afrikaans literature is dealt with by A.J. Coetzee and English literature by Michael Wade. The circumscriptions imposed by "European-Language Writing" characterise other relevant essays in the same volumes: the Portuguese in Africa (Gerald Moser), Zimbabwe (John Reed), Angola (Gerald Moser), Mozambique (Manuel Ferreira), Portuguese Africa (Ferreira), South Africa: Black Consciousness (Lewis Nkosi), Malawi (Gérard) and Zambia (Michael R. Ward). In the essay "Written Art and Oral Tradition in Southern Africa", Daniel P. Kunene reminds us that surveys have usually separated oral and written literatures. In their respective studies of Angolan and Zimbabwean literatures, Hamilton (1975) and Veit-Wild (1993) refer to European-language and indigenous language writing, but ignore the oral voice while studies by Ruth Finnigan (*Oral Literature in Africa*, 1970) and Vail and White (1991) focus entirely on oral expression.

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