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Review Article/Resensie-artikel

A Survey of South African English Literature

David van Wyk

Grounds of Contest

Malvern van Wyk Smith 1990
Kenwyn: Jutalit

In the period under review in Van Wyk Smith's survey of South African English literature *Grounds of Contest* (1990), South Africa changed historically from a society in which white domination was originally limited to the Cape Colony, and even here it was contested as on the Eastern Frontier, to a full-fledged racial capitalist society, in which the capitalist mode of production is completely dominant. The period 1795 to 1860 was one of a gradually expanding merchant and agrarian capitalism, 1860 to 1914 marked the very rapid industrialisation of the economy on the basis of the mining and mineral revolution, with its attendant social relations of production of migrant labour, reserves and compounds. The period from 1914 through to 1948 was characterised by the growing sophistication of a secondary and tertiary industry whose labour needs brought into competition for hegemony[1] various factions of capital, that is agricultural capital, manufacturing capital and mining capital. The emergent Afrikaner bourgeoisie and petit bourgeoisie used the vehicle of a narrow racially defined nationalism to assert their hegemony within the ruling class, where they held numerical sway given the support of poorer rural and working class Afrikaners for their programme, while trying to increase their economic influence at the expense of English mining and manufacturing interests.

The period 1948 to 1968 saw the Afrikaner nationalist faction at the peak of its political, economic and social influence, a period of rampant Apartheid. The first major post-war economic crisis hit South Africa between 1968 and 1976, simultaneously with the political crisis caused by the successes of guerrilla struggles in the Portuguese Colonies and colonial Zimbabwe (cf. Callinicos 1978, 1982). These factors led to a serious crisis in Afrikaner hegemony and unity. This conflict of factions of the ruling class vying for control and for utilising the labour of the black proletariat gave rise, not only to the conflict between township dwellers with urban

rights and those who were migrants (and, therefore, marginalised in the urban environment), but also to disagreement within the ranks of white communities such as that of the Afrikaner. The Afrikaner bourgeoisie no longer saw the need for paternalistically protecting the Afrikaner working class or of defining itself in terms of language, culture or race. Mining capital realised that middle management costs could be brought down if blacks were allowed access to education, enabling them to compete for these positions with white skilled and managerial workers whose productivity levels had reached ridiculous lows, while their income levels had reached tremendous highs. Any assessment of South African English literature should take into consideration the changes which occurred in the geographical region known as South Africa and how these transformations in the mode of production impacted on the mind-sets of the inhabitants of the country. As writing literature must inevitably occur within a social and historical context, any survey of South African English literature should be periodised and contextualised, and the way in which the literature was informed by the period, as well as the informing of the period, needs to be investigated.

1795 - 1860

The process of the gradual penetration or shifting of the colonial border into the interior is variously described as the expansion of the process of *primitive accumulation* (Marx 1977: 716, 720) or the penetration of non-capitalist modes of production by the capitalist mode of production (Taylor 1979: 187). This process of imperialism, while valiantly resisted, was total. It had economic, political, military, cultural and psychological consequences. Despite the resistance of the communities who lived in the pre-capitalist modes of production, the process of imperialism, or primitive accumulation, led not only to the separation of the pre-capitalist direct producers from their means of production and their subjugation to capitalist exploitation, but also to language, cultural, political, religious and psychological alienation and subjugation. Colonialism was not only economic or physical, but also mental, hence Ngugi (1986: x-xi) speaks of colonising the mind.

The nineteenth century saw the gradual expansion of the peculiarly South African racial capitalist relations of production into the interior. Sometimes the expansion was swift, at other times it was more gradual, but it always occurred under the impetus of external or internal factors, such as the Napoleonic Wars, the abolition of slavery, post-war depressions in Europe and Great Britain, periods of economic and industrial boom, the discovery

of diamonds and gold in the interior of South Africa etc. The expansion of the capitalist mode of production through primitive accumulation in the nineteenth century evolved through traveller, explorer, missionary, soldier and administrator. The literature that sprang from this process of capitalist penetration gave those involved an alibi, a good conscience, a moral justification for colonialism, the creation of, what Van Wyk Smith (1990: 6) calls, "founding myths of the Cape".

Because South Africa was the scene of intense struggle between communities engaged initially in different modes of production, the hegemonic strata in the ruling class had to utilise a combination of means to break down the resistance of the indigenous societies, from warfare and taxation through to religion.

Clifton Crais (1992) describes the gradual change in white attitudes on the Eastern frontier as follows:

> By the middle of the 1820s, just half a decade after the arrival of the British settlers, the earlier positive assessments of Africans began to decline. This transformation in the representation of the black coincided with - and indeed was very much part of - a process of cultural adjustment as emigrants became colonists in a new society and a colonial identity began to emerge .... Elite's [sic] must share in a common perception of the landscape and have economic and social goals to which all aspire. And there must be an implicitly understood standard of behaviour and a sense of a common past.
>
> That British colonists entered an inhabited land populated by people who were culturally and/or phenotypically unlike themselves impelled them to confront - if only to defer - the place of the African in colonial society. This confrontation involved processes first of projection and subsequently of inversion.
>
> These psychological processes ... took place in a situation of rising conflict. A common perception of the landscape and shared social and economic goals required dispossession and the creation of a dependent class. Indeed, it was the development of agrarian capitalism and the protracted struggle over land and labour which accompanied it which initiated a fundamental change in the perception of the African in the colonial eye. Instead of a positive projection there emerged a discourse of condemnation situated around a chain of signifying dichotomies: "white" and "black", "civilisation" and "barbarism", "us" and "them", and so on.
>
> (Crais 1992: 128-129)

In writing a survey of South African English Literature, Van Wyk Smith is in a way writing about cultural imperialism. He clearly situates his work in an Anglocentric context in that he confines himself to English literature and in his discussion also reveals a Eurocentrism in his contention that South Africa was "invented" in Europe before it was discovered. The assumption is very much that South Africa fell outside the realm of history and con-

sciousness before its "invention" and "discovery" by a literate culture, the Portuguese.

Anglocentric historians and critics often conceive of the development of language and of writing as a measure of human civilisation. This, however, has definite implications for the way in which the social division of society, especially colonial society, evolved:

> Language becomes a hegemonic structure unifying but also formalising and creating divisions between human individuals and societies .... English and its study can be seen to serve the same purpose within England as in the colonies. While language was posited as a unifying factor, social divisions in England followed a pattern of linguistic stratification.
>
> (Azim 1973: 18-19)

Azim identifies the development of literature, especially the rise of the novel to be closely related to the imperialist project and the dominant capitalist ideology of the time. Van Wyk Smith's appraisal of South African literature focuses strongly on the individual writer. Writing and reading appear to be individual acts, superficially seeming to belong wholly and exclusively to the sphere of the individual:

> Oral communication unites people in groups. Writing and reading are solitary activities that throw the psyche back on itself. A teacher speaking to a class which he feels and which feels itself as a close-knit group, finds that if the class is asked to pick up its textbooks and read a given passage, the unity of the group vanishes as each person enters into his or her private life world.
>
> (Ong 1982: 69)

Dealing with English literature is dealing with the world of individualism. The dominant ideology in Britain in the nineteenth century was that based on Adam Smith's *homo economicus,* which held that one can conceive of a sphere of human activity which belongs wholly and exclusively to the individual. This hypothesis fitted in perfectly with the model of competitive capitalism, according to which the only possible contacts between individuals were antagonistic. This individualism, when expressed in terms of *Natural Law* pits man not only against all other men, but also against nature. Van Wyk Smith identifies the struggle for the land and its resources and the prevailing theme of man pitted against nature:

> Just as the history of South Africa essentially became the history of the struggle for the land and its resources, so its serious literature would turn out to be a record of the mythology developed by its people to justify or resist that process.
>
> (Van Wyk Smith 1990: 3)

Yet literary work is, as Ngugi claims,

> not the result of an individual genius but the result of collective effort. There are so many inputs in the actual formation of an image, an idea, a line of argument and even sometimes the formal arrangement. The very words we use are a product of a collective history.
>
> (Ngugi 1992: x-xi)

The English military administrators who governed the Cape for the first decade of the nineteenth century were mobilised in defence of European monarchism against the republican French armies and were of necessity reactionary, they were the shock troops of the European reaction against the French Revolution. For the duration of the Napoleonic wars, Britain experienced a massive war-induced economic and industrial boom, which had a positive rippling effect on the Cape economy seriously increasing the struggle over resources and the clash between the indigenous modes of production and those associated with imperialism. What impact did the tumultuous events in Europe have on South African English literature of the time?

The 1820 Settlers, on the other hand, were more or less forced to emigrate from Great Britain due to the hopelessness of the post-war depression in England and were generally of working class extraction (Cipolla 1973: 531). In South Africa, as in other colonies, a role reversal occurred in the class position of the ex-labourer now becoming settler farmer or small entrepreneur:

> ... in the colonies this fancy is torn asunder .... The wage labourer of today is tomorrow an independent peasant, or artisan, working for himself. He vanishes from the labour market, but not into the workhouse.
>
> (Marx 1977: 720)

Grounds of Contest (1990) essentially ignores any investigation of the ideological baggage carried by the early exponents of English literature. It does not mention the sense of a common past to which Crais refers, namely, that they had their roots in England; nor how the settlers, finding themselves in a completely new set of social relationships within the context of a completely different mode of production, are reflected in early English literature. The author draws a superficial distinction between *colon* and *settler* (Van Wyk Smith 1990: 9) arguing that the settlers, having settled in the colony permanently, had to reach a compromise with their new environment:

> The settler impulse encourages a literature of realism, in which the wilds have to be confronted as the only world there is, enforcing negotiations on which depend both physical and spiritual survival; it tends to be rationalist, liberal and progressive, even when offering a gloomy social prognosis.
>
> (Van Wyk Smith 1990: 9-10)

The *colons* on the other hand, having been temporary sojourners, emphasised the exotic while tending towards "the allegory of good (European) and evil (African) ..." (Van Wyk Smith 1990: 9). This assessment is completely contrary to that of Crais who demonstrates very clearly that it is exactly the *settler* who, after having initially projected "'portrayals of Africans' which 'were often more positive and open-minded than those of later years ...', later saw in the Africans all that they considered was repugnant in their own culture" (1992: 129).

While Crais (1992) is correct to situate the evolution of these early settler perceptions on the Eastern Frontier within the context of the struggle over land and labour, Van Wyk Smith's account in dealing with the entire history of English literature in South Africa is guilty of a rather wide generalisation when he claims that the history of South Africa "became the history of the struggle for the land and its resources", just as South Africa's

> serious literature would turn out to be a record of the mythology developed by its people to justify or resist that process. Thus every subject treated ... has turned out to be another act, another aspect, of an endless drama of domicile and challenge.
>
> (Van Wyk Smith 1990: 3)

Whereas the struggle in the Eastern Cape was between two largely agricultural modes of production, the one locked into the world capitalist economy, the other a subsistence self-sustaining pre-capitalist mode, struggles in the interior after the discovery of minerals, were far more complex.

As a materialist analysis, the contention that the history of South Africa revolved around the land and its resources and that all South African literature is again reflective of this, the analysis is not very sophisticated. The literary figures of settlers of European origin reflected through their work a consciousness informed by a particular, industrial capitalist mode of production. After having settled in South Africa that consciousness gradually transformed itself as a result of the evolution of new social relations of production and exchange, reflective of a more rural/agricultural mode of production backed by the colonial industrial power, and confronted by an indigenous pre-capitalist mode of production:

> The contradiction of these two diametrically opposed economic systems, manifests itself here practically in a struggle between them. Where the capitalist has at his back the power of the mother-country, he tries to clear out of his way by force, the modes of production and appropriation, based on the independent labour of the producer.
>
> (Marx 1977: 716)

While the early English literature initially attempted to domesticate the African landscape, and romanticise the indigenous African population (Van Wyk Smith 1990: 1-10) which reflected a degree of alienation (especially as in many instances descriptions of the landscape could not be distinguished from landscapes in England) the real reflection of settler alienation from the African environment and people, however, showed in settler architecture:

> Architecture excluded and defined as it reshaped the landscape. The farmhouse communicated a new hierarchy and pronounced a new set of sensibilities. The cold, austere exteriors of the farmhouse fortresses facing a threatening landscape contrasted with warm interiors filled with luxuries imported from the metropole.
>
> (Crais 1992: 137)

The same alienation, obvious in the architecture of the settler farmhouse on the frontier, an alienation from both the African environment and its people, is obvious in the English literature of the time. The settler writer, whether explorer as in the case of Barrow or literary figure as in the case of Schreiner, demonstrates this alienation in the depiction of boers and blacks. The Afrikaner *trekboer* is vilified, because as the descendant of European stock he has become part of the African reality he has "gone native". The black African, on the other hand, is romanticised, as already being African and of African descent. He does not know any better, and is therefore portrayed as the noble, if ignorant, savage (Van Wyk Smith 1990: 15). Van Wyk Smith identifies a reversal halfway through the nineteenth century.

While the Boers' literary stock rose sharply in the second half of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, that of the blacks fell rapidly, and the same period must be regarded as the dark ages of the literary representation of blacks in our literature (Van Wyk Smith 1990: 16).

1860 - 1914

The appalling literary presentation of blacks during this period was but a reflection of the rapidity with which the pre-capitalist societies in the interior were being destroyed in the process of primitive accumulation

activated by the discovery of gold and diamonds. Colin Bundy (1981) has demonstrated how the perceptions of black peasantry rapidly changed; first they were encouraged as suppliers of food and agricultural produce to the diamond fields, with Cecil John Rhodes praising the alacrity with which the peasants responded in supplying food. However, deep level mining, low grade ore, expensive overheads and low profitability margins changed Rhodes's perceptions of black South African peasantry. He slapped hut tax, poll tax, cattle tax, dog tax and the Glen Grey Act on the peasantry in an effort to proletarianise them forcibly. He extolled the virtues of labour under capitalism and "civilisation" while ranting about the laziness of black South Africans. His perceptions of humanity were clearly determined by the state of his bank account.

The victims of appalling living conditions in mines and compounds, and in shrinking agricultural areas, were criminalised in literature and turned into the villains of the situation. The portrayal of Afrikaners in English literature at this time did improve dramatically, perhaps because English capital realised the value of the Afrikaner who dispossessed black communities of their land, thereby making the members of such communities available as cheap labour. When English mining capital came into conflict with the Afrikaners over the issue of Afrikaner control over the Transvaal Republic, where the Gold Reef was situated, the stature of the Afrikaner as an adversary, had to be inflated. It would not have been acceptable to portray the Afrikaner as a poor, unsophisticated peasant who was hardly a worthy opponent in battle.

Van Wyk Smith correctly points out that Black English literature of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century underwent a transformation:

> For blacks, mining and all its consequences, whether in respect of ideological or physical exploitation, have become a focus of outrage and resistance.
> (Van Wyk Smith 1990: 37)

With the partial urbanisation (through migrancy) of blacks brought about by the development of the mining industry, and the almost complete urbanisation of a small class of educated petit bourgeoisie, Black resistance shifted from divided tribal resistance (the Bambata Rebellion being the last attempt at tribal resistance) to more united and more appropriate forms of resistance within, yet against the capitalist mode of production. Two courses of action evolved: The one following the introduction of the 1913 Land Act, was that of petit bourgeois black nationalism, drawing its leadership from the educated elite (the African Native National Congress); the other course was rooted in the working class and followed the strategies of strikes and trade

unions (after a number of spontaneous labour actions and strikes, the Industrial and Commercial Workers Union - ICWU, emerged). Both these tacks of struggle, in the first instance against white domination, and in the second against capitalist exploitation, no longer focused on the land and its resources as such anymore, but on issues like the franchise, political power, the situation of the workplace etc. Sol Plaatje, in particular, represented literature that emanated from the new budding black nationalist movement. In *Native Life in South Africa* (Plaatje 1987) he critically assesses the consequences of the Land Act, but his whole life-style, and the style of the resistance politics in which he involved himself, was essentially urban. Union activities, the example of the 1917 Revolution in Russia, the large number of strikes and the successes of the ICWU gave rise to the emergence of black working class poetry reflecting resistance, examples of which have been recorded in *The Return of the Amasi Bird* (1988) by Tim Couzens and by van Wyk, Conradie and Constandaras in *SA in poësie/SA in Poetry* (1988).[2] Van Wyk Smith (1990: 39) does point out that white ownership of printing presses did at times determine the content of black English literature pertaining to both mission presses and white funded black newspapers.

The author makes the following comment on black English poetry for the period concerned:

> Critical pitfalls yawn on either side of the cultural historian's way through such work. To explain away the wooden phraseology by apologies for the conditions of production, or to make readily conceded claims for such writing's sociopolitical significance while disregarding its equally significant inadequacies, does not make it more readable or escape the charge of being patronising.
>
> (Van Wyk Smith 1990: 40-41)

The point which the author misses is that the black writer of the time, apart from being "the voice of the people" as claimed by Dennis Brutus, is also the embodiment of the social relations around him and is therefore reflective of a people in the process of transition. It might, therefore, be worthwhile to investigate the influence of the remnants of pre-capitalist relations and forms on the author's work (the structure of orality, the praise poem, the fireside story) which might account for what is considered "wooden phraseology". The African oral poet, in the process of making the transition to written culture, might find that transition painful, much as his/her people found the transition from pre-capitalist agrarian society to capitalist urban society, painful. The colonised are forced to learn the language of the colonisers, and to express themselves in the colonisers' cultural forms.

The author shows that the mining revolution was also the cause of a shift

in the focus of South African English literature away from the literature of veld and farm; away from the romantic and pastoral towards that of the city (Van Wyk Smith 1990: 37).

Van Wyk Smith, unfortunately, does not explore the development of the split in the English settler community between English working class miners, and English mining capital and how this impacted on the literature of the time. The Labour Party representing the interests of the English working class, opposed the Dominion Party representing English capital. As they did not see eye to eye on most matters, a distinctly English working class literature evolved and received great impetus from the 1922 mine-worker strike and its brutal suppression. This is particularly noticeable in English poetry of the period 1900 to 1922 (Van Wyk *et al.* 1988: 166-273).

The pact between the National Party under Hertzog and the Labour Party under Cresswell, resulted in a peculiar union of a racially defined white English labour movement, whose ranks had admittedly been swelled by newly urbanised Afrikaner mineworkers, and Afrikaner Nationalism. What united these two groups was their opposition to the Smuts Government and the mining magnates who were perceived to favour not only British imperialism, but also the advancement of black labour at the expense of white labour. The 1924 elections saw Hertzog and the Pact alliance swept into power in what would eventually develop into a compromise between white labour and capital and give rise to the creation of a white labour aristocracy. Hertzog would eventually pass his "Native Bills" in 1936 that would meet the demands for cheap black labour by both the mines and the farms in a union of interests between Afrikaner agricultural capital and English mining capital. This led to the rapid growth of the Afrikaner urban bourgeoisie using the combined vehicles of Afrikaner Nationalism and *Volkskapitaal* (institutions such as Iscor, Sasol, Sanlam, Gencor, etc.).

These shifts in the allegiances between strata in the ruling class vying for hegemony that led to governments of *fission* and *fusion,* must have impacted on the literature of the time. Van Wyk Smith fails to exploit this as his focus is on the individual writer: from the work of the writer he draws inferences about the society of the time, instead of investigating the history and society affecting writers of that period.

The Post World War II Period

Van Wyk Smith indicates that white English literature during the post World War II period became increasingly introspective and pessimistic, while black English literature became more challenging. These trends indicated the

response of different communities, involved in producing literature, to the instituting of Apartheid. An important theme in the evolution of the *Drum Generation* (1990: 97-117) and of the literature of resistance and exile that Van Wyk Smith does not adequately explore, is that of the emergence of class differentiation within the black community, including the black nationalist movement. Lovedale College, later Fort Hare, produced the intellectual leadership of the entire subcontinent as far as Tanzania. The lawyers, doctors and teachers produced here had a major impact, not only on the political movements of the 1950s and 60s, but also on cultural life. Verwoerd's education legislation was an attempt to smother black culture and resistance at the source. The emerging class divisions were controlled by the strategy of a united opposition to Apartheid, and the system's inability to co-opt the black middle class. This did not mean, however, that the emergent class distinctions did not find expression in the literature or culture of the people. While black English literature of the post-Sharpeville and the post-Soweto periods superficially seem uniform, and have been labelled "Black Resistance" writing, the reality is probably more complex and needs further investigation. Exiles, on the other hand, also had various and different experiences. How did studying, for example, in situations as diverse as East Germany, the Soviet Union, Nigeria, Great Britain and France influence black English literature or are we still to see the effects in material eventually produced?

This brings us to the conclusion. Imperialism turned history into world history (Avineri 1968: 162-184). Similarly, capitalism constantly transforms the whole world, including South Africa, into universal history. The English language is very much the language of imperialism, and its literature is, therefore, world literature - imperialism has turned English literature into world literature. South African writers, both in exile and within the country itself, have become the focus of international attention. As in the case of J.M. Coetzee, South African authors have made a significant impact on world literature and have, in turn, been informed by it. Capitalism universalises culture, art, literature and technology. It universalises its own social relations of production; subsequently, the establishment of unified society and the return of exiles will no doubt have interesting and important consequences for South African literature which should demand the attention of cultural historians.

Notes

1. The concept of *hegemony* is central to the work of Antonio Gramsci (1985). It has been extensively applied in the context of Southern Africa by Giovanni Arrighi (Arrighi & Saul 1973).

2. See Callinicos, L. (1985 & 1987).

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