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Assimilation and Transformation of African and European Literary Traditions in the Present Day South African Novel

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Summary

It is argued that texts published in South Africa during the past five years are a literary reflection of transcultural movements characteristic of the South African socio-political scene today. Throughout the broad spectrum of South African literature, key motifs and themes recur which dramatize this phenomenon. Translations of popular local works, the prominence of women authors, introduction of elements of oral narrative, the innovative use of folk tales as well as topical matters and historical facts in stylized form, are but a few of the manifestations suggesting the emergence of a common South African trait in what has always been an extremely fragmented literary world.

Opsomming

Die argument in hierdie beskouing is dat werke wat die afgelope vyf jaar in Suid-Afrika gepubliseer is, op literêre wyse die transkulturele aard van die hedendaagse sosiopolitieke toneel reflekteer. Oor die hele spektrum van die Suid-Afrikaanse letterkunde kom daar sekere sleuteltemas en temas voor wat so 'n verskynsel verbeeld. Die toenemende vertaling van gewilde werke vir die plaaslike mark, die prominente rol van vroue outeurs, die ontginning van orale vertelelemente, die gebruikmaking van sprokies maar ook van aktuele en historiese feite, suggereer almal hierdie nuwe gemeenskaplikheid binne 'n literêre wêreld wat nog altyd tradisioneel inherent verdeeld en gefragmenteerd was.

1 Introduction

The preface to this essay is a reference to a very successful art exhibition held in 1993/1994 in the Netherlands, a dual show during which ancient African rock art was displayed in an anthropological museum, while at the same time the popular crafts of a group of Bushmen from Southern Africa were for sale at a local gallery ("De terugkeer van de maan. Bushmenkunst uit de Kalahari". Year of indigenous peoples. Museum of Anthropology,

Rotterdam, December 1993 - April 1994). The commentary in a Dutch newspaper ran thus:

In a museum for European art this kind of exhibition would not easily be held. Rock engravings thousands of years old are not displayed in a suburban art gallery together with the products of an elementary course in art. Such a comparison may be crude, but then it is deliberately so. It clearly indicates how very great the difference between African and European art and their histories of art is.

(Stichter 1993: 5)

A remark like the above not only indicates European confusion about African culture, but also encapsulates the different points of view which exist regarding the state of the arts and of literature in present day South Africa. On the one hand the interested observer becomes aware of great diversity, and even of deep divisions; on the other hand one is struck by a general mood of unusual and enriching creative vitality.

The past five years has been a period of immense political and social changes in South Africa, a time of variety and vicissitude, both in an historical and cultural sense. At the same time, and because of huge technological developments, especially in the field of communication, Africa has been experiencing its own postmodernist era, resulting in the disappearance of all kinds of established categories, hierarchies and boundaries. As part of this transition, traditional cultural and ideological opposites were juxtaposed, and at times these opposites were even reconciled with one another. Ethnic and cultural differences today no longer seem to lead naturally to conflict, and often meaningful similarities are discovered in what used to be regarded as unrelated or even conflicting matters.

In daily life South African society is slowly coming to terms with its inherently multilingual and multicultural character. Literary works of which most are still published in mainly English and Afrikaans, though texts written in several African vernaculars are also coming to the fore, appear to reflect on structural and thematic level this new process of assimilation. I would like to discuss in more detail some specific manifestations of this acculturation in present day texts.

2 Situations Past

A brief outline of the traditional literary scene as it existed up to even very recently may be useful. The written literary tradition in South Africa originated with texts published in the form of journals and scientific reports by white travellers and settlers during the 17th century. Oral narratives re-

mained the mainstay of Black literary production until the 19th century, when primarily through the efforts of missionaries such as Casalis (1841), some of the very many traditional stories became known in the written form (Ntuli & Swanepoel 1993). These early texts were presented mainly as translations or transcriptions (Bleek & Lloyd 1911), in most cases strictly edited by whites (as in the case of Plaatjie's *Mhudi* (1930)), and retold in English or French or sometimes Afrikaans. The four volumes of indigenous stories and folklore collected and written down by Von Wielligh (1919), is perhaps the best known example of such work.

With very few exceptions, literary historians have up to now described these various literatures as separate entities which exist within rigid compartments, downplaying or simply not recognizing transcultural phenomena. Two recent histories of African-language literatures (Gérard et al. 1993; Ntuli & Swanepoel 1993) do mention the possibility of a "national" literature, acknowledging the fact that "a decisive element of unity binds together all racial and ethnic groups with their different languages and traditions. (This) is the fact that they have been living in close symbiosis for a significant period of time" (Gérard et al. 1993: 47). But both these surveys focus on the rehabilitation of the vernacular literatures, and therefore emphasize the uniquely black identity that is traditionally displayed in those texts. South African English literature, despite the fact that several of its authors have achieved international fame, remained for the best part of the past century in the shadow of the metropolitan centre of British and American works, and has only recently cast off its label of being colonial, local, and therefore inferior. As for Afrikaans, derived from the Dutch of the 17th century settlers, and until recently conventionally categorized as the language of the ruling white class, many well known literary histories describe an Afrikaans literature completely separated from the surrounding South African culture, and even propose a specific date and place of exclusive origin. Very likely this view formed part of a conscious effort over decades by politicians to "purify" Afrikaans of its unmistakable African connection, and resulted in isolating the language and its literature all the more.

3 Present Day Narratives

A survey of novels from the 1990s shows a situation markedly different from the canonized image as indicated above. In many texts published recently, an intrinsic and meaningful repetition of themes, narrative patterns

and even of ideological voices exist. This is a phenomenon not circumscribed by any defined literary movement, but it is being recognized by readers of different kinds. And through textual and empirical studies, the sources of these similarities are revealed as ranging from shared socio-political realities to allegorical and postmodernistic devices; from intertextual echoes of classical Western fairy-tales to the oral rhythms of prehistoric African folklore.

Canonized Afrikaans literature has historically been viewed as the cultural translation of an isolated, inward looking ideology; its manifestations of cross-cultural assimilation, therefore, seem to be even more unexpected and radical. In the most recent novels of lauded (and translated) authors like André P. Brink, John Miles and Wilma Stockenström, this cultural merging can be traced in each individual text. However, in the generalised survey which follows, I intend highlighting themes and key motifs that occur throughout the broad spectrum of South African literatures.

3.1 Recurring Themes

3.1.1

A very noticeable occurrence nowadays is the increasing availability of English translations of texts originally written in the other South African languages, hereby introducing what used to be separate cultures to one another. A related phenomenon is that more and more authors are writing and publishing in more than one language, which is, of course, not entirely new. Through translations of Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* in Xhosa, Sotho, Zulu and Setswana between 1866 and 1909, the novel as genre was introduced to many black Africans. The great epic *Chaka* by the Sotho author Thomas Mofolo, written in 1909 but only published by 1925, became available in English in the 1930s. However, these early translations had a mainly didactic purpose and were never widely read; the ideological premise seemed to be that not the indigenous text in itself was of much value, but the fact of its being read in or originating from English was the norm of achievement. Since the 1960s, several of the better known Afrikaans authors have also been translated for a limited and mostly overseas audience. The difference at present is that translations are now being made almost as soon as the original, often best-selling novel is published. Evidently because so many South African readers from another language group are expected to be interested in the contents of a book because of a common field of reference, translation becomes a sound financial move. (I refer here specifically to the translations of popular Afrikaans novels, by authors like

Dalene Matthee and Marita van der Vyver, and even more recently by Mark Behr.) Apart from the large group of Black South Africans writing in English, there have also been isolated cases of white authors writing in more than one South African language. From the 1920s onwards, Frank Brownlee and the Hobson brothers used both English and Afrikaans, and the educationist, G.H. Franz, wrote in German, Afrikaans, English and Sotho. Notably, these older authors were telling stories about the African veld, the animals and folklore, and by their choice of a specific language they implied that their "exotic" subject matter required a special language form. Nowadays writers like André P. Brink and Breyten Breytenbach, publishing either or simultaneously in English and Afrikaans, reflect in their work the growing awareness of shared experience, using the ability to write in more than one South African language to communicate those experiences to as large an audience as possible.

3.1.2

It is highly ironical that the long struggle for political emancipation developed into the most divisive as well as the most commonly shared experience during three centuries of South African life. In the history of South African literature, this theme permeates and defines the work of every twentieth century author. This may appear to be a sweeping generalization, but in choosing to write or not to write about political matters, through the buying or boycotting or crowning of particular books, and in rereading and re-evaluating older texts nowadays, all South African authors, readers and critics view literature from within a political context. From both inside and outside the country, authors like Brink, Breytenbach, Fugard, Gordimer, Paton, Abrahams and La Guma, who were directly associated with *littérature engagée*, came to personify the essence of South African writing. Deleuze and Guattari (1976), two present-day literary philosophers well-known for their postmodernist thinking, once remarked that a characteristic of every "small" literature is that everything written in it, is always political. In this sense, apart from its short history of a written tradition, as well as with reference to its limited number of readers and writers, the different parts as well as the whole of South African literary culture surely make up a "small" literature. In post-apartheid South Africa, however, the struggle as literary motif has already moved back to a less visible place, although through the lifting of censorship, previously banned authors and censored books enjoy belated attention from a new generation of uninformed readers.

The passionate involvement with actuality, with the country's past,

present and future history, remains the most prominent feature of present-day narratives. Most of the important novels published during the past five years can be called historical - historical not in the sense of depicting exciting events from a romanticized past, but because of unearthing the roots and causes of the state of present society. In these narratives the narrator seems to be intimately involved, concerned with and committed to understanding his individual part in the seething whole of the country's history, and then always speaking as one of the many ordinary people experiencing that history. In Afrikaans the prizewinning novels of John Miles, André Brink, Etienne van Heerden, Elsa Joubert, Lettie Viljoen, Jeanne Goosen and Chris Barnard are all written in this vein. The most recent works by Nadine Gordimer, Christopher Hope and Sheila Roberts confirm the trend. Black authors like Mandla Langa and Joel Matlou do the same. Autobiographical fiction and fictionalized autobiography also abound: Rian Malan's *My Traitor's Heart* became a prizewinning topseller; the tales told by political figures like Ronnie Kasrils, Frank Anthony, Hein Grosskopf and Jay Naidoo - many of them holding prominent positions in the new government - fill the bookstores today. Nelson Mandela's *Long Walk to Freedom* grabbed international headlines at the end of 1994, and was crowned with the Alan Paton Book award in 1995. These books have become a form of documentation which may help to dispel the myths of a divided community; telling the personal history in an attempt to come to terms with the past and the forces that have shaped us all. In an essay reviewing ways in which Afrikaans literature is becoming more Africa orientated, the well-known author Etienne van Heerden (1991) mentioned Africa's greater awareness of the community in contrast with what is seen as the typical individualistic focus of Western thought. If this is a valid observation, recent South African literature is without doubt reflecting its inherently African foundation.

3.1.3

The increasing volume of women's voices which can be heard nowadays, is a very notable characteristic of South African literature. The fact that the Nobel Prize for literature was awarded to Nadine Gordimer in 1991, underlines this feature. Not only Gordimer, however, but almost all South African women authors have depicted everyday society, and in South Africa that means socio-political reality, in their work. Elsa Joubert, the doyenne of Afrikaans authors, has been committed to Africa and its particular Southern African problems since her debut in 1948, focusing solely on the violent but intimate and enduring relationship between black and white. The

self-exiled Bessie Head wrote some of the most engrossing of narratives in exploring the history of her adopted country, Botswana. From Miriam Tlali came a series of stories and novels about the life of an urban black woman, while the autobiographical *Call me Woman* (1985) by Ellen Kuzwayo has become one of the best known books in South African English today. In Afrikaans and in English there has been a veritable explosion of debuts by women, and new anthologies of short stories by women abound. What differentiates these texts from those published in Western countries reflecting the mainstream feminist movement, is once again the explicit involvement with socio-political matters and the accent placed on the aspirations of the community instead of on the purely personal. Women writing in vernacular African languages are unfortunately still the exceptions. The Sotho playwright, N.M. Khaketla, who is especially concerned with modern woman and her view of marriage (Ntuli & Swanepoel 1993: 92), remains the best known, though most of her work had been written by the middle seventies.

3.1.4

In an interesting marriage of the oldest of narrative forms, orature, and one of the most recent of Western literary fashions, namely the paradigms of New Historicism, several texts have been published in which verbal accounts have been organized into factually based narratives. *Women of Phokeng* (1991) edited by Belinda Bozzoli, is the documentation of a rural community broken up by sociological and political changes, an event completely ignored by historians, but brought back to memory through the stories and anecdotes of the women who used to live there. The thoughts and feelings of that most marginalized of social groups, the female labourer, were transcribed into a narrative called *Vukani Makhosikazi* (1985) edited by Jane Barrett. How great the impact of this kind of historical narrative can be, was demonstrated when Elsa Joubert published *Poppie* (1980) (original Afrikaans title *Die swerffare van Poppie Nongena* (1978)), the story of a black domestic worker's life. Despite (or is it perhaps because of?) the artistic intervention in the form of temporal and spatial patterns, metaphorical allusions and images, and the creation of intertextual meanings, the authentic tone of the report caused it to become a landmark in Afrikaans political writing.

3.1.5

It seems highly paradoxical that fairy-tales, a form of narrative usually regarded as completely divorced from real life, should appear to be one of the most fertile of motifs in South African literature today. Interestingly enough, the European versions are mostly used in an ironic, even treacherous way. One of the most explicitly feminist authors in Afrikaans, Wilma Stockenström, uses implicit references to the tales of "Sleeping Beauty" and "Snow White" in her latest novel, *Abjater wat so lag* (1991) ("Abjater who laughs"). This is the monologue of an unattractive and ill-educated middle aged woman living in the countryside, a person of no standing, but one who slowly emancipates herself by discarding the conventional myths of society. In Marita van der Vyver's *Entertaining Angels* (1994) (the original Afrikaans title referred to a modern day Gretl writing modern day fairy-tales), most of the great Western fairy-tales are debunked in the process of writing about a young South African woman's daily life.

Completely different is the mood and structure of another well-known author's work, namely that of Riana Scheepers and her collection of short stories, *Die ding in die vuur* ("The thing in the fire"). In these stories the basic structural device is the oral form which favours the Zulu tradition, not only in the telling of the stories, but also in the choice of the narrator, situation and theme accompanied by introducing incantations and Zulu idioms. Scheepers writes her stories in Afrikaans, placing them in present day South Africa, and these transformations of primeval patterns can be seen as one of the most visible forms of transcultural writing today. The presentation of indigenous stories, myths and folklore for a white audience has a long tradition in South African literature, both in English and in Afrikaans. But those earlier renderings remained on the edge of canonized literature and were mostly presented as stories for children (and I refer especially to women authors like Poland and Postma). What is new now is the absence of a patronizing attitude, and the introduction of a sense of empathy and enrichment. Publications in African languages show definite evidence of the same trend. An "ardent revival of the love for folk narratives" is noted; that so many new texts are published is probably aided by the fact that these narratives were formally included in high school syllabuses during the 1980s (Gérard et al. 1993: 166).

3.1.6

The following describes in greater detail the meaningful recurrence and integration of one specific Southern African image as it appears in a wide

range of literary works. The Bushmen, that nomadic group of hardy artists and hunters who were the earliest known inhabitants of Southern Africa, left not only a countryside filled with marvellous paintings and engravings, but also some vestiges of their narrative art before they were exterminated by white settlers. The most detailed transcriptions of their myths and stories were done by the linguist Bleek and his sister-in-law Lucy Lloyd after listening to the tales told by three imprisoned men speaking /Xam (Bleek & Lloyd 1911). But apart from this academic endeavour, the typical characters and events which form part of the Bushmen and the Khoikhoi cultures, were also taken up amongst Afrikaners who then constructed anecdotes and stories for children, whilst acknowledging their sources as old servants and slaves. Two of the best known and most lauded narrative works in Afrikaans have assimilated and transformed episodes from these Bushmen stories in an innovative way. In 1927 the poet and novelist Eugène Marais published a collection of four lyrical tales, *Dwaalstories* ([1921] 1974) (in translation it could mean something like "tales without meaning"), in which a most remarkable manifestation of the nineteenth century symbolist mode appears. Marais uses the authentic world of the Bushmen, one of drought and hunger and the harsh African veld to create through his use of recurring colours, images, characters and rhythms an indigenous symbolistic artifice (Roos 1990). Clearly, during a period when his Afrikaans-speaking contemporaries were locked in the chauvinistic struggles concerning a just emerging literature, Marais had already crossed boundaries of culture, genre and time. In 1991, John Miles published the docunovel *Kroniek uit die doofpot* (1991), ("A story no longer suppressed") which brought back into the spotlight the real but still unsolved murder of a young black policeman and his wife. The couple was killed viciously by fellow police officers who feared that the man could supply information on death squads in the South African Police Force. In this modern novel the structural patterns and narrative devices of traditional European folk tales are integrated with explicit references to characters, episodes and even specific phrases from those primeval stories "edited" in 1927 by Marais (Roos 1993). The result is an overpowering demonstration of how the ancient struggle of the small and insignificant against the powers of evil is continued through modern atrocities. No less powerful is the ingenious manner in which intertextual links with seemingly unrelated texts are forged.

One of the most striking autobiographical narratives written down in the Bleek collection, is called "The Return of the Moon" (this, by the way, is also the title of the Rotterdam exhibition mentioned at the beginning). In this monologue one of the narrators, /Kabbo, speaks of his passionate long-

ing to return to his home, Bitterpits. There, he says, social life is shaped by story-telling, through stories far places are reached, and in telling stories one's name becomes known to later generations. In this lament of homesickness, the myth of the growing moon which mocks man's mortality, becomes the image of futile but everlasting hope. In 1991 one of South Africa's well-known English poets, Stephen Watson, published *Return of the Moon. Versions from the /Xam* (1991), a book of verse based on the Bleek transcriptions. He intervened stylistically in creating an elegiac mood where appropriate, in changing the narrative into a poetic form, and in using the artifice of poetic closure. In his preface he admits to aspiring

to bring the words of the narrators to life once more, and in such a way that they might continue to speak to us who are alive in the last decade of the twentieth century. Although a few of the translations as they appear are so close as to be almost literal renderings, (this) goal has inevitably meant that a good number of the poems are "imitations" ... rather than exact word-for-word versions. The /Xam believed that the dead spoke to the living.

(Watson 1991: 11)

Evidently Watson regards these poems as an analogous effort to achieve (literary) immortality.

A remarkably similar mood is created in the poems of the Afrikaans poet, Petra Müller. In a collection of poems published in 1987, called *My plek se naam is Waterval* ("The name of my place is Waterfall"), she uses images from the world of the Bushmen and specifically the myth of the returning moon, to speak of the mortality of man and animal. One of the poems, "Witbooi Toren", is based directly on an excerpt from Bleek and Lloyd, titled "Smoke's Man".

One of the most successful Afrikaans novels to appear in South Africa during 1993, titled *Karoliëna Ferreira*, was written by one of the many younger women authors, Lettie Viljoen. In this story about a young female scientist, entangled in the personal and political problems of a small rural town, one of the most interesting characters in the book is the mysterious Willie, a homeopath whose profound knowledge of the healing power of plants and minerals stems from the way his own deadly wounds were healed when he was saved by nomadic Bushmen. But even more meaningful in the context of this specific motif, is that throughout this very modern novel, images of the moon, linked to supernatural and almost shamanlike experiences, recur. The idea that name-giving, or the characterizing function of naming persons and objects, can reach a mystic dimension, is explored at the same time.

Another interesting text that may be mentioned here, is a novel by

Geoffrey Haresnape, called *Testimony* (1990). The narrative takes the form of an oral report by a woman of ill repute, describing the last, decadent days of a nineteenth century Afrikaner community during which also the few remaining members of a Bushmen clan were exterminated. She meets with and experiences salvation by another outcast, and her final song of passionate longing after he disappears, recalls a Western Christ-like image as well as the ancient Bushmen myth and places both within the modern context:

Was it not for this man that the song to the new moon had been sung out of the koppies and in the dry places? A song sung for thousands of years and its real meaning not known until now?

Give us this joy
that you possess forever;
that, living, you return
when we did not see
you there.
You tell us, too,
that when we die
we shall
return
again.

It was then that the man spoke my name. Suddenly I knew that I knew him as surely as I could feel my lungs lifting and falling with each breath inside the cage of my ribs. Hearing my name upon his tongue was sweeter than honey to my taste. My heart was like the veld in which flowers unfold after unexpected rain.

I, too, cried out in delight; to name his name that for me had become a name beyond any name.

(Haresnape 1990: 104)

In all these texts mentioned, specific images, typical story patterns and even names and characters known from the ancient Bushmen narratives appear repeatedly.

It seems indeed as if "the wealth of oral literature has succeeded in penetrating to the central preserve of the nation's literature".

(Ntuli & Swanepoel 1993: 16)

4 Conclusion

The banner under which the inaugurational festivities of the new South African president took place on 10 May 1994, proudly proclaimed: "many cultures, one nation". The texts I have mentioned all seem to form a part of this ongoing political and cultural discourse, namely that of seeking accommodation for and assimilation of a broad South African diversity. They therefore demonstrate that the world of the book and the world outside, are closely and functionally linked.

To the historian, these works confirm that literary origins are inextricably entwined, and that present-day South African literature shares a pool of experiences reaching back to the prehistory of all the country's peoples. In acknowledging that, conventional boundaries are extended or overrun, while at the same time the bonds which explain the uniqueness of the South African scene, are strengthened and renewed.

To conclude, one could refer once again to the exhibition in Rotterdam, and to quote in translation the final impressions of the Dutch reviewer:

The exhibition could have created the romantic impression that between the ancient rock art and the modern graphics a continuous tradition exists. That isn't so. Most Bushmen live and draw in a completely different way from that in which their forefathers did. But they can be inspired by their cultural past.

Knowingly or unknowingly, they use different methods to continue the same traditions. And that activity bears new, sometimes awkward, but often enchanting fruit.

(Stichter 1993: 5)

It seems to me that in a similar way, recent developments in South African literature have brought about an innovative, even inspired reappraisal of a shared, but long neglected heritage.

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