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Afrikaans and South African Literature

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Summary

The dichotomy between the ideal of a South African literature and the continued separate existence of different literatures in South Africa necessitates analysing the concept "South African literature" somewhat further. This is done by analysing N.P. Van Wyk Louw's ideas on national literature and the establishment of Afrikaans literature in the institutional sphere. Against this background it is argued that a further investigation into the history of different literatures in South Africa would be a more rewarding exercise than premature attempts at establishing a tradition of "South African-ness".

Opsomming

Die teenstelling tussen die ideaal van 'n Suid-Afrikaanse letterkunde en die voortgesette bestaan van verskillende letterkundes in Suid-Afrika wys op die noodsaaklikheid om die konsep van "Suid-Afrikaanse letterkunde" verder te analiseer. Dit word onderneem deur 'n ontleding van N.P. van Wyk Louw se idees oor nasionale letterkunde en die vestiging van die Afrikaanse letterkunde in die institusionele sfeer. Teen hierdie agtergrond word geredeneer dat 'n verdere ondersoek na die geskiedenis van verskillende letterkundes in Suid-Afrika 'n vrugbaarder onderneming sal wees as voortydige pogings tot die daarstelling van 'n tradisie van "Suid-Afrikaansheid".

1 Introduction

While it is not unusual to hear academics and politicians talk about a "South African literature", the situation at ground level is characterised by diversity and even fragmentation. With a few exceptions, the literatures of South Africa are studied and taught in separate university departments, and changes in the curricula towards greater inclusiveness are often inspired by fears of rationalisation rather than theoretical conviction. Some departments of Afrikaans, which have on occasion been criticised for their elitist and exclusive nature (Willemsse 1990a: 182-184), now embark on comparative courses. English departments used to be quite happy teaching the canon of English classics, leaving African literature to the departments bearing that

name. In the past few years, however, departments of English have responded to the demand for courses on English literature produced outside England, a development which raises the possibility of a territorial battle with experts in African literature. The uneasy overlap between English and African literature highlights the fact that the latter is not a clearly demarcated area. Linguistic, geographic and racial criteria are often at odds in approaches to African literature, a discipline which grew out of the colonial neglect that used to be the norm in departments of English literature.

The concept of a South African literature interacts in a bizarre way with the linguistic diversity of the country, as well as with the institutional framework within which literature is produced, consumed and taught. In the sphere of publishing and reception, the situation is not fundamentally different to that prevailing in educational institutions. Afrikaans publishing houses occasionally venture into the English market, but generally the old divisions remain. While some Afrikaans dailies and journals make a point of reviewing publications of note in the English language, Afrikaans books normally make it to the English press only if they are controversial for some reason. Thus the dissident Afrikaans writer has become one of the pervasive myths of English literary journalism in South Africa.

There is no obvious reason why it should be unhealthy or abnormal for different literatures to co-exist in one country, each possessing its own infrastructure and allowing theoreticians to develop impressive theories about polysystems. Yet there is a strange dichotomy between the way in which the idea of a South African literature is put forward as a *desideratum* by various proponents and the failure thus far to translate that ideal into reality. In the past couple of years, Afrikaans literature has experienced an unprecedented period of growth, both in terms of the number of books published and increased readership. English literature in South Africa continues to be a sort of extension of British or international English literature. A new development is that some prizes, e.g. the M-Net Prize and the Nasionale Boekhandel prizes, are now also awarded to books in black South African languages.

Such a split between a discourse of unity on the theoretical level and the continued existence of diversity in the practical sphere is not untypical of the transformation that our divided society is experiencing. At present, the South African situation seems to be characterised primarily by the diversity of conflicting interests that emerged soon after the celebration of unity during and after the elections in April 1994. Could it be that the idea of a South African literature comprising texts in Afrikaans, English, Xhosa, Zulu, etc. was a form of resistance to the partitions imposed on society and culture by apartheid, and that the need for such a concept is disappearing

now that a constitutional agreement for a non-racial society has been reached?

It appears that the concept of a South African literature is in need of further analysis, if only because it so often tends to be restricted to literature written in English only. This phenomenon also occurs in other post-colonial societies. I was astounded to discover to what extent the South African situation resembles that of India, where although 221 languages are spoken, eighteen major languages manage to co-exist. Professor Dev's (1994) question about Indian literature, "Is it a valid category?", seems to be a valid question regarding South African literature as well. If the term is not to be relegated to the sphere of rhetoric, we need a better understanding of the way in which a national literature is created and the conditions under which it can be said to be an operative rather than a merely rhetorical concept. I propose to cast some light on these issues by briefly investigating the creation of Afrikaans literature as the only literature in South Africa to have become a successful National literature. By this I mean that the validity of an Afrikaans literature came to be accepted by a significant number of people who had sufficient power to propagate it and keep it alive on various institutional levels.

2 Afrikaans Literature

The deliberate use of Afrikaans for literary expression traditionally originated in 1875, when the *Genootskap vir Regte Afrikaners* was established in the Western Cape. The aim of the *Genootskap* was to promote the use of Afrikaans actively on all levels, thus exploiting the language as a full medium of expression equal to English, which was then in official use. With the development of Afrikaner nationalism in the latter part of the nineteenth century, literary expressions were increasingly linked to nationalism. Most of the early critics worked with a simple mimetic model of Afrikaans as "mirror image" of the Afrikaner's living space, national characteristics and way of life (Wiehahn 1965). It was only in the Thirties that a fully developed theory about Afrikaans as a national literature was launched by the erudite poet, N.P. van Wyk Louw, in his two collections of essays *Lojale verset* (1939) and *Berigte te velde* (1939).

A national literature is not an entity existing on the same level of objectivity as, say, an individual literary text. It is a theoretical concept that provides order in the empirical domain. This demarcation is often influenced by ideological assumptions and political interests. When Louw talks about "our Afrikaans literature" or "our national literature" he is proposing

a conceptual framework within which the diversity of literary utterings in Afrikaans can be seen in relation to one another, as part of an organic whole that contains them, but also requires them for its existence. Louw's essays were a polemic against contemporary critics who tended to sideline the poetry of the Thirties as too esoteric, too obscure, too alien to the concerns of the nation. He rejected the thematic approach of critics like E.C. Pienaar, who insisted that a national literature should stick to a depiction of a presumed typical Afrikaans way of life. Louw, on the contrary, provides an essentially Romantic view of a national literature which could accommodate even the most personal or esoteric expressions as a necessary part of the whole (Olivier 1992: chapter 2).

Many of Louw's successors in the literary field assimilated these views as a natural way of talking about Afrikaans literature. Yet in Van Wyk Louw's writings, more than a linguistic unity is at stake. His theory illustrates the phenomenon that the concept of a national literature is usually underpinned by political and ideological a prioris, as well as by a philosophy of history. To Louw, the unity of Afrikaans literature is guaranteed not only by a common language, but by the "volksgees": that mystical collective entity within which every individual spirit is embedded. In response to those critics who complained about the "individualism" and "brokenness" of Dertiger poetry, Louw postulates a theory, disguised as natural fact, of organic unity underlying all apparent diversity. Thus the contradictions arising from social and economic divisions are dissolved in the concept of a national literature as the expression of spiritual unity. It is a theory that smooths over differences.

Louw's ideas on national literature are logically preceded not only by the assumption, derived from nineteenth-century idealism, of a national spiritual unity, but also by the conviction that literature is a medium of primary importance in the birth and growth of a nation. These thoughts are clearly displayed in his periodisation of Afrikaans literature (Olivier 1992: chapter 5). The colonial period, when Afrikaans mainly served to depict the *couleur locale* of a particular group, is followed by a brave plunge into history. The nation starts "thinking in a different key", as Santayana said with reference to the Renaissance: it becomes a mature being, expressing through its literature the fullness of its own existence in time, the diversity of its experience and a potentially endless variety of themes. Louw simply depicted those aspects of Afrikaans literature that were seen as foreign invaders - individualism, aestheticism, symbolism - as developments that were not in conflict with nationalism but, indeed, an expression of national aspirations *per se*.

Louw's seminal intervention in Afrikaans discourse on literature and

nationalism illustrates a few striking characteristics of theories on national literature. His ideas satisfied the need to define the Afrikaans language and Afrikaans literature as separate and fully fledged entities that could hold their own against the colonial and imperialist power of English. He dissolved the possible contradiction between a seemingly insignificant language and universal values by claiming that the universal is accessible only through the particular.

The importance of Louw's intervention does not, however, reside purely in his coherence and sophistication of thought. He wrote at a time of political turmoil, when various developments on the economic and political front were regarded by Afrikaner intellectuals as a threat to the unity of the "volk". While others embarked on economic action (O'Meara 1983), or tried to maintain some ideological cohesion amongst newly urbanised rural people (Moodie 1975), Louw propagated the view that cultural activity, or what he called "spiritual life", served to unify the nation beyond all divisions of class. In addition to this, he believed that only the life of the spirit, as expressed in literary texts of international quality, could ensure the Afrikaner's right to continued existence as a small nation among the great powers of the world.

The remarkable influence of Louw's ideas stems from the fact that they were never substantially disputed by his peers. In 1953, D.J. Opperman, his most important successor, stated without qualification that Louw's marriage of individualism and nationalism was broad enough to satisfy virtually any writer (Opperman 1953: 53). Sixteen years later another important poet, Ernst van Heerden, gave a lecture on literature and nationalism in which he reiterated the main tenets of Louw's thought (Van Heerden 1969). Louw's theory provided the intellectual and philosophical space within which poets and novelists could exercise their craft without fear of transgression; in short, it became the paradigm for Afrikaans literature.

Louw's essays appeared at a stage when various publishing houses were already involved in publishing Afrikaans literature. He was a regular contributor to popular magazines like *Huisgenoot* and newspapers like *Die Burger*, which devoted much attention to Afrikaans literature. A few years later, in 1946, the journal *Standpunte* was launched and for several decades remained the flagship of Afrikaans literary and intellectual discourse. Afrikaans literature was taught as a subject at schools. In the early fifties, Louw once again entered the debate to defend what he considered to be the only appropriate method of literary analysis, and also to outline a role for literary theory. Thus Afrikaans literature gradually established itself as a mental concept, an academic discipline and a social institution. The success of this project depended on the fact that Afrikaners had access to significant

political power, and after 1948 even succeeded in establishing a political hegemony.

Louw's insistence on individualism, universal themes and the formalistic method was one of the factors contributing to the rather elitist nature of mainstream Afrikaans literature. His theory, while claiming to be inclusive, was primarily designed as a defence of complicated and sophisticated literary products, and he is also famous for his condemnation of the "local-realistic" mode of writing. Van Bruggen, whose social realism formed an important part of literary production during the thirties was regarded with scepticism. In later years, when authors like André P. Brink embarked on a form of *littérature engagée*, many critics saw this as a departure from the tradition of the self-contained text embodying universal values. It took many years before mainstream Afrikaans writers reclaimed immediate social reality as part of their subject matter.

Of all the literatures in South Africa, Afrikaans literature has been the only one to have become a national literature in the sense that it developed a clear image of itself as a separate entity, and that by way of institutional entrenchment through teaching, distribution, a review culture, journals, etc. it could ensure the continuation of that concept. Studying the debate on a "South African" literature against this background, is profoundly edifying.

3 A South African Literature?

Among the many contributions to the debate on South African literature, I will single out a few most clearly demonstrating the problems involved in attempting to conceptualise the variety of literary production in the country as a coherent whole, which Professor Dev called a "valid category". The first and most obvious difficulty is the diversity of languages spoken in the country, combined with the fact that literary production in African languages has, as a result of apartheid and stigmatisation, remained comparatively meagre. The interim constitution theoretically gives equal status to no fewer than eleven languages. It remains to be seen to what extent these languages will enjoy regional recognition, but on the national level practical and commercial considerations will undoubtedly bolster the present tendency towards monolingualism. English is and will remain the *lingua franca*. There is a strong and growing lobby fighting attempts to reduce the role that Afrikaans has played as one of the two official languages since 1925. No significant pressure groups are actively promoting African languages, but that may change.

Language policy and linguistic arrangements in the future South Africa

belong to the domain of speculation. In the meantime, let me offer a few thoughts on the possible future of the concept South African literature.

To begin with, one may pose what sounds like a facetious question: Who is the subject of South African literature? In whose mind can South African literature be said to exist? It would seem almost a logical requirement to postulate such a subject, and indeed a scrutiny of Sachs's influential paper entitled "Preparing Ourselves for Freedom" (1990) reveals the presence of such a (collective) subject, even though it is not explicitly presented. Sachs is most revealing when he talks about South African literature and culture as the expression of "the emergent personality of our people" (Sachs 1990: 21) - a point underscored by Cronin's remark that "The emergent literature offers itself as the expression of the specificity, the genius or 'soul' of the people" (Cronin 1990: 180). On many levels, Sachs is very far removed from Louw, but they both seem to need a collective spirit or personality in which to secure their concept of a national literature.

As I pointed out earlier, the ideal of a unified nation, albeit in the first stages of development, was an effective weapon against the divide-and-rule policies of the previous government. One of the most striking aspects of President Mandela's inauguration was the concert on the lawns of the Union Buildings, during which a variety of performing arts was celebrated by an equally diverse audience. Yet in the field of culture one should be cautious of totalising discourse, no matter how many reassurances are given about "each cultural tributary [contributing] towards and [increasing] the majesty of the river of South African-ness" (Sachs 1990: 25). If no meaningful and practical attempts are made towards a more inclusive approach, the term *South African literature* may simply continue to mean what it so often means: English literature written in South Africa. As in the case of Louw, inclusiveness on the conceptual level may still imply marginalisation in literary practice. That would be a disservice to Afrikaans with its highly developed literature; but even more so to the African languages in which, in the past, literary production was hampered by lack of opportunity as well as by resistance to balkanisation.

The concept *South African literature* may satisfy a sentimental need to launch South Africa in the international market as a fully fledged cultural partner. But after many years of linguistic and racial divisions, we are talking about something which has to be created or invented. What South African literatures reflect is a past characterised by colonisation, racial oppression and political turmoil. What the present is yearning for is political reconciliation. Creating or inventing a cultural tradition of "South African-ness" would inevitably imply a process of selection and possibly of hasty canonisation. In such a case South African literature may turn out to be a

highly idealised and highly selective account of a glorified past, built around a selection of texts that pre-emptively establish a tradition where no such tradition existed before.

It will, in the long run, be more rewarding to investigate the historical processes that influenced the way in which different literatures in South Africa interacted or moved in different directions. In this respect, it was enlightening to hear from Professor Dev about Sisir Kumar Das's simultaneous description of Indian literature, combining chronology and narrative in ten volumes. Despite its staggering size this is a modest undertaking in which Indian literature is not seen as an existing category, merely as a *rationale* for further research, making use of methods derived from comparative studies. Similarly, the fact that South African literature has been produced in a variety of languages in one country where all the writers have, in one way or another, been confronted by similar social, economic and political issues, provides sufficient justification for further investigation. Academics do not need concepts like national unity in order to continue their work.

In a review article on black literature in South Africa, Andries Oliphant (1992: 514-523) refrains from assuming that South African literature can be discussed in an unproblematic way. He locates the unifying principle of his analysis not in an a priori concept of unity, or of a collective personality, but in the descriptive category of "blackness". Literature produced by black sections of the population traditionally fell outside the canonised main-streams of Afrikaans and English writing. This literature could be said to have an overarching theme in the sense that black writers to varying degrees wrote in a situation of ambivalence to colonial powers. To name but a single aspect, the hostility of colonial powers towards black culture combined with the fact that black writers often picked up their literary skills from missionaries, created the kind of double-bind that Henry Louis Gates Jr (1986) so forcefully described.

Oliphant's approach opens up more constructive possibilities than many other suggestions that have been made about the study of South African literature. Firstly, his conceptualisation of the term "black" avoids the rhetorical pitfalls that landed Willemse (1990b) in theoretical difficulties. Secondly, instead of imposing a ready-made concept of "South African" literature on his material - a concept which, in any case, historically tends to favour literary production in English - he embarks on a description and interpretation from the perspective of colonial conflict. This is one way of giving voice to the subaltern and, as Oliphant points out, the study of "black" literature could be a first step towards a more inclusive approach and possibly a more sophisticated conceptualisation of South African literature.

By placing black literature in a space of historical conflict, Oliphant also opens up further possibilities for exploring Afrikaans literature. In a slightly different form, many of the tensions that characterise black literature also feature in Afrikaans literature. An early essay by the poet, C. Louis Leipoldt (1906: 197-208), could serve as an example of this. In a very critical analysis of the Australian poet, Adam Lesley Gordon, Leipoldt discusses the problem of the colonial poet's dependence on literary techniques and models derived from English literature. By simply emulating literary models from England, Leipoldt argues, Gordon was unable to do justice to the particular landscape and problems that confronted him in Australia. Leipoldt's own poetry could be fruitfully studied from the issues he himself identified - those of the poet relying on literary traditions and conceptual frameworks rooted in the metropolitan centre, while searching for expressions that would be adequate to his particular context. Similar issues are discussed in J.M. Coetzee's *White Writing* (1988). When Van Wyk Louw started theorising on national literature, the complex relationship between a fledgling literature in the ex-colony, and the power of European literature was one of the problems he tried to address.

Ultimately, the only sustainable basis for a future South African literature would be provided by understanding the way in which each of the literatures, functioning in relative isolation, occupies a particular space within a history defined by colonialism, neo-colonialism and nationalism. Several attempts at bringing about a process of cross-fertilization have been made, most notably perhaps by Van Wyk, Conradie and Constandaras (1988) in their monumental *SA in poësie/SA in Poetry*. We would also need an acknowledgement that, in addition to the diversity of literary production, literary methods are also part of that history.

A comparative and historical description aimed at making greater sense of the past would be a more constructive attempt at recognising and describing communality than empty statements about an "emergent South African personality". Over a period of time, such projects may lead to a view on South African literature that would not be a mere extension of what Professor Dev called *nation-state hegemony*. Such a tentative and exploratory approach would be in keeping with the peculiar fact that in South Africa, a multitude of obstructions to cross-cultural and cross-linguistic contact were removed only very recently.

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