

Literary Studies in South Africa: Problematizing an Africanist's Perspective

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Summary

This opening address looks at a number of issues complicating the Africanist's understanding and vision, against the background of the country's recent political past and its implications for education in general and the study of African-language literature in particular. These include the comparative "imperative", the oral-written interface and the transitional text, canonicity and possibilities of understanding arising from colonial and postcolonial readings of Southern African literature. However, a century-old oral genre - the *Difela tsa ditsamayanaha* - cautions against decontextualized, uncritical applications of theory. The challenge probably lies in translating problems into opportunities.

Opsomming

Die openingsrede kyk na 'n aantal vraagstukke wat die Afrikanis se begrip en visie kompliseer, teen die agtergrond van die land se onlangse politieke verlede en die implikasies vir onderrig in die algemeen en die studie van die literatuur in Afrikatale in die besonder. Dit sluit in die vergelykende "imperatief", mondeling-geskrewe raakvlakke en die oorgangstekes, kanonvorming en verklaringsmoontlikhede wat uit 'n koloniale en postkoloniale lesing van die Suider-Afrikaanse literatuur na vore kom. 'n Eeu-oue mondelinge genre - die *Difela tsa ditsamayanaha* - waarsku egter teen gedekontekstualiseerde, onkritiese aanwending van teorie. Die uitdaging is waarskynlik dat probleme in geleenthede omskep behoort te word.

Coping with the Carapace of the Past

South African literature is almost entirely what one would expect; what one would expect from a society which has deliberately narrowed its horizons, which has frightened the writer both by legislation and threat, and which is based on the denial of the humanity of the majority of its populace. There are exceptions, of course, both in writers of humane perceptions and of extended awareness, but the general picture is that of writers expressive of a society in retreat from its own reality, taking an occasional peek outside the carapace of its insensitivity. This does not make it unique - there are other societies where the denial of freedom

to the writer gives the same impression of withdrawal - but it is not unfair to speak of South Africa having a tortoise literature.

(Brutus 1971: 85)

This is the South African poet Dennis Brutus speaking in 1971, almost a quarter of a century ago. Brutus rightly problematizes South African literature at a time when the road to deliverance would still be long and uphill, if at all visible: a literature forced to withdraw into its shell by the political machine of apartheid, blockaded not by the "obedience" of the country's many and talented writers, but by manifold controlling measures by which natural otherness came to be overexaggerated and comprehensively institutionalized into one Great Divide. The Divide is noticeable also in *literary studies* in South Africa with our great many literature curricula neatly organized into separate departments of Afrikaans, English and African languages, each as if comfortably caged in under its own carapace.

The situation has changed now, and changed considerably almost immediately after 2 February 1990, when the State President of the time announced the first steps that eventually led to the democratic elections of 27 April 1994. Writers, as well as scholars of literature, have made good use of the slackening of controlling measures, and in particular have seized the opportunity to improve the literary infrastructure and to strengthen fraternal bonds. Comparative literary studies and joint deliberations have become fashionable, is as evidenced.

Let me briefly cite four examples. Firstly, the highly successful, even emotional, Writers Conference of December 1991 in Johannesburg, jointly organized by the Congress of South African Writers (COSAW) and the Johannesburg-based weekly, *New Nation* - an occasion which saw the return to their country, temporary and otherwise, of many women and men of letters who had spent several decades in forced or self-imposed exile. They gathered to deliberate; to renew ties of the past and compare visions for the future; they gathered to celebrate. Secondly, the Cape Town conference on African Literature in the Curriculum in February 1995, where South African and overseas' writers as well as educationalists, librarians, high school and university students, publishers and trade unionists discussed the renaissance of this crucial component of South African literature. A number of vital resolutions were referred to the Council for Black Education and Research Trust (COBERT) (compare Makhubela 1995: 23).

Thirdly, the Tongaat Colloquium of May 1995 on the Rethinking of South African Literary History, organized by the Centre for the Study of South African Literature and Languages (CSSALL) at the University of Durban-Westville - an occasion which showed participants from Afrikaans, English

and African-language literature how divergent their respective perspectives on and attitudes towards South African literature were. They also realized, I think, that "discursive formations are not hermetically sealed", as Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin (1989: 168) succinctly put it; "they overlap and intersperse in ways that may be fruitfully and reflexively utilized". Fourthly, the firm initiative as recently as July 1995 towards the formation of a South African writers' guild, which will unite most of a large number of separate bodies of different language writers.

These are all positive steps which augur well for the future, but they have not wiped out the constraining legacies of the past. Underpinning most of the legacies is the political machine, which has had a ripple effect on almost all walks of life such as education, occupation, economy, writing and reading. They have caused a situation of hegemony and subordination, of advantaged literatures and a disadvantaged literature, of literatures occupying the centre and a literature in the margins; of skilled and self-confident literary personalities and literary personalities still in need of the essential poise; a situation which, rightly or wrongly, casts a shadow of suspicion over the work of many scholars of African-language literature, black or white, who simply wished to describe what they had heard and read, certainly not to belittle, but to encourage.

I am referring to circumstances which have benefited the flourishing of literatures in Afrikaans and South African English for the greater part of this century, and to circumstances which have detracted from a *similar* success in African-language literature. The causes are of course not always only political, and not only attributable to the politics of the past half century. The advance of colonial and postcolonial theories of literature in recent years compels one to look back several centuries over time and space, to the scramble for control over the southern tip of Africa by the Dutch and British powers. What we shall have to overcome are, certainly, the hampering legacies of the immediate past, but also the way in which the immediate past was *informed* and infected by the legacies of the even more remote past.¹

The topic suggests a cluster of problems which cannot be addressed directly. Some of these are the concepts "Literary studies in South Africa", "South African literature", "African literature"² and "African-language literature or literatures"³ (of which I prefer the singular for the purpose of this paper); the definition of an "Africanist" from a literary point of view; and the eleven languages (and literatures) challenge embodied in the country's multilingual composition as acknowledged in the Interim Constitution and compounded by differences in development, geographical distribution, registers of usage and status.

The task here is not only to define and understand these concepts, but also to read aspects and examples of past and current problems and practices of African-language literature, and its study, in the light of aspects of emerging colonial and postcolonial visions of literature and literary studies.

Oral Evidence of Written Text

My escapist bent forces me to explain that most scholars of African-language literature study one language and its literature, and then indulge in mild comparison when the need arises. Most of the time the scholar of literature also works within the genres in which s/he has had the best theoretical training. In this process one avails oneself of all relevant information on cultural aspects that may have informed the text(s) under consideration and may assist understanding and interpretation - be it of an oral performance text (transcribed in written form, or on sound or videotape recording), or a text produced by way of writing. In African literature there is significant interaction between the oral and the modern written literature. The Africanist as a student of literature often needs to reach out to pre-colonial times in order to trace the roots of a text (narrative or poetic) back to its possible oral moorlands, which may lie far beyond the zealous researcher's immediate and well-known field of "speciality". The task, and perhaps also the knowledge, grows like the growth-rings of an aging tree.⁴

A specific example could be useful here. The debate about "the epic in Africa" has reached an interesting stage. Daniel P. Biebuyck, in what is probably his latest publication on the topic, concedes that

African oral epics have now been recorded in a wide belt of populations ranging from the Gambia and Mali to Nigeria, in West Africa, to the Bantu-speaking peoples of Cameroon and Gabon and culminating among the Bantu-speaking people of Zaire.

(Biebuyck 1993: 13)

At the same time written epics - or publications undoubtedly signalling epic style - are starting to appear in Southern Africa. J.J. Moiloa's Sesotho text *Thesele, Ngwana Mmamokgatjhane* (1992) is an intriguing contribution to the literary scene of the subcontinent. It is likewise an intriguing contribution to the debate. The seventy-page text in *Dithoko* (praise-poem) style tells the full story of the life of Moshoeshe I, first King of the Basotho (1786-1870). The question is: is this yet another "praise-poem", or is it an epic? If it is, is it the continuation of an oral epic tradition, or is it a literary epic couched in traditional oral praise-poem style?

There is no ready answer since there is a considerable difference of opinion among scholars about whether the eulogistic heroic poems of Southern Africa are in fact epics. Jeff Opland, for example, states:

The debate on the existence of the epic in Africa has been heated (see Finnegan 1970: 108-110, Okpewho 1977 and 1979, Biebuyck 1978 and Johnson 1980); in spite of Scheub's reference to Xhosa epics (1977b), I believe that the epic does not exist in South African oral poetic traditions (though it has evolved in vernacular written literature: see Mundell 1975 and Groenewald 1981) Basic and crucial questions of generic definition await the researcher's attention.

(Opland 1984: 111)

Moilola's (1992) text is a long historical narrative of great national appeal consisting of thirteen sections demarcated only by dates. All of them correctly relate to acknowledged milestones in the hero's personal and public life: from his birth, his childhood, feats during youth, the many wars he fought, through to his death at the age of eighty-four. The poet makes use of stanzas of varying length, but the heroic style is sustained throughout the poem. Formulas of all kinds, lengths and contents, catalogues, genealogies, and long stretches of poetic narrative abound. Sometimes there are genres within the overreaching genre, such as *koeetso* (birth-song), *mokorotlo* (war-song) and *kodiamalla* (dirge). This text underscores the generic if not ontological problem which the Finnish folklorist Lauri Honko captured as follows:

The relation between oral and written in our documentary sources on epics is problematic because we tend to perceive this relation as a "mixture" of both without being able to postulate a "pure oral" and a "pure written" discourse as the starting points. We may wish to speak of a mixture of oral and written discourses both identifiable in a given text. Or we may speak of a mixture of performance styles, i.e. an oral style in a written text or a written style in an oral performance. In a diachronic perspective we may observe a continuous interaction between not only the contents but also the textures of oral and written sources. In more than one respect our published epics may be viewed as transitional texts.

(Honko 1995: 1)

Clashing Over Canon

The debate about the epic in Africa cannot, in my view, be divorced from the debate about canonicity, the canon being "a list of texts believed to be culturally central or 'classic'" (Sitterson 1993: 166), a text - to speak in the singular now - whose ideological, religious and aesthetic appeal leads to the

assumption that it belongs to or constitutes the best of a tradition, in terms of both national relevance and literary significance. Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin have this to say:

A canon is not a body of texts *per se*, but rather a set of reading practices (the enactment of innumerable individual and community assumptions, for example about genre, about literature, and even about writing). These reading practices, in their turn, are resident in institutional structures, such as education curricula or publishing networks.

(Ashcroft et al. 1989: 189)

This useful characteristic, probably unwittingly, of Ashcroft et al. does not include the "international" and prestigious status attached to the "epic". Underlying the debate is the probably false assumption that Africa has not produced or cannot produce a work worthy of the label of epic. What Africa is still believed to have produced belongs to what the Chadwicks called "panegyrics", or, what is widely also called eulogistic or heroic poetry. In this sense canon formation in Africa is strongly dictated by international yardsticks of class, intellectual ability, even race. Complicating the matter, and problematizing the Africanist's predicament even further, is the emergence of the written (literary) epic such as Moilola's (1992), a problem aptly phrased in the shape of John Miles Foley's question (Honko 1995: 2): "What happens when performances become libretti?"

The example to which I have referred is but one aspect of a complex set of problems relating to canon formation in Sub-Saharan Africa where the region has been strongly influenced and even dominated by the West. Referring to the development of literary forms in Africa, Abiola Irele (1995) chooses to speak of a Euro-African intertextuality, thereby implying that the development of literary forms (genres) under colonial systems can be seen as a process of appropriating, even imitating, the West.

In African-language literature of the South, drama is perhaps the best example of a most debatable importation. Instead of rescuing time-honoured oral performance genres such as storytelling from their all too anthropological interest (until very recently), instead of encouraging prospective playwrights to adapt well-known and still performed traditional rites, rituals and other ceremonies to the drama mode, they were introduced to Western models such as those of Shakespeare, not for the purpose of performance as had been the case with the Elizabethan master, but mostly for the purpose of reading in the school, college or university classroom. Read together with the restrictions wrought by the apartheid machine, which also prevented Africans from attending theatres in white areas until the early 1980s; read together with the African-language playwright's general flair for creative

dialogue, as well as the African actor's natural gift of performance, the position of drama in the African languages is probably one of the most debatable aspects of the modern literature: a large body of highly interesting literary texts, though ill-advisedly missing the essential intention of the genre as performance (Swanepoel 1993: 267).

Whither Theory?

From the foregoing perspective it may have become clear that African-language literature finds itself not only in a unique position but also in a marginalized one. This position does not only lie in its absence, or exclusion, from the centre in terms of accessibility, relevance to the political debate or general status. It also lies in the field of literary studies, be it according to "traditional approaches" or in the appropriation of the well-known "Western" theories. I am not saying that these theories do not work on, or cannot be applied to, African-language literature. But the theories fail to capture it (I am aware of the ambiguity of the metaphor) in its true nature as (and in) the articulation of the African Experience - to use another of Abiola Irele's (1995) eloquent terms.⁵ The nearest successful theoretical framework rigorously emerged during the latter part of the 1980s as a branch of what is referred to as Cultural Criticism and its associates such as Marxism and colonial and postcolonial theories of literature.

However, I cannot present the latter as a total solution to the problem, since it is not. To plot African-language literature within this wide area may easily amount to plotting it into a position it does not deserve unless one proceeds in a particularly discerning way. Both the concepts "colonial" and "postcolonial" carry ramifications for African-language literature of the South which cannot be solved in the remainder of this paper. A few complicating factors will have to suffice. The first pertains to the conception of "colonial" and "postcolonial" and the space and time they represent, and the other to language as such.

Whereas colonial literature "is assumed to be reflecting a colonial ethos" (Boehmer 1995: 2), postcolonial literature is "that which critically scrutinises the colonial relationship" (p. 3). This rather radical dichotomous distinction Elleke Boehmer quickly corrects by stating:

The main difficulty with a warring dichotomy such as this is the limitations it imposes, creating definitions which, no matter how focused on plurality, produce their own kind of orthodoxy. Thus the postcolonial tends automatically to be thought of as multivocal, "mongrelized", and disruptive, even though this is not always the case. Similarly, on the other side of the binary, the colonial need not

always signify texts rigidly associated with the colonial power. Colonial, or even colonialist writing, was never as invasively confident or as pompously dismissive of indigenous cultures as its oppositional pairing with postcolonial writing might suggest.

(Boehmer 1995: 5)

This is true and this is exactly where the first irony starts. Ashcroft et al. help us to explain:

The institution of "Literature" in the colony is under the direct control of the imperial ruling class who alone license the acceptable form and permit the publication and distribution of the resulting work. So, texts of this kind come into being within the constraints of a discourse and the institutional practice of a patronage system which limits and undercuts their assertion of a different perspective. The development of independent literatures depended upon the abrogation of this constraining power and the appropriation of language and writing for new and distinctive usage.

(Ashcroft et al. 1989: 6)

In Southern Africa the written literature was initiated by missionaries, some of whom had no colonial (that is political interests) here.⁶ "Missionary" literature did, however, develop under the moral constraints and patronage of missionaries, as the long debacle surrounding the issue of whether or not to publish Thomas Mofolo's *Chaka* (1925) clearly indicates.

When Difela-singers Talk Back

There is an even bigger irony. Ashcroft et al. (1995: 7) state: "One of the main features of imperial oppression is control over language". The Dutch (1652) or British colonial powers (annexation dates: S.A. 1795, 1806; Lesotho 1868) did not interfere with the indigenous languages. They in fact allowed them to develop, albeit in low key and regionally. Yes, the colonial powers did bring new languages through which "the hierarchical structure of power is perpetuated, and the medium through which conceptions of 'truth', 'order', and 'reality' is established" (Ashcroft et al. 1989: 7). But the indigenous language did provide an opportunity to talk back, albeit mildly and often concealed in a highly codified language such as poetry (cf. K.E. Ntsane's (1945) satirical Sesotho poetry), and it did serve as an outlet which to some degree asserted the African presence.

A last example will suffice. One of the results of colonial rule was the discovery of Africa's mineral riches which led to the questionable migrant labour system. Operating between the Kingdom of Lesotho, other neigh-

bouring states (as sending countries) and South Africa, this system dates back to the middle of the 19th century when diamonds were discovered in Kimberley (1868) and gold on the Witwatersrand (1886). Male workers were recruited in Lesotho and transported to the mines where they were trained to work for some months before being given leave to spend a few months at home.

In the early days people seeking work made their way to the mines on foot only to return home after several years. At the mines the miners were housed in "compounds" where they met with circumstances considerably different from the homogenous rural background they were used to. They met different people from various parts of southern Africa who spoke foreign tongues and had different customs. There were white authorities together with surly shift-bosses who invented a makeshift communication slang called *Fanagalo* in order to convey basic instructions. Circumstances and working conditions on the mines did improve after the Lusaka Charter of Rights for Migrant Workers in South Africa (1978) and the subsequent Industrial Conciliation Amendment Bill of 1979 in South Africa.⁷ Nonetheless, the possibility of human suffering remains, and the Orkney mine disaster (May 1995), when one hundred workers fell to their death, is a case in point.

The worker and his family, as Goldman (1987: 42) ironically states, "cannot eat abstract concepts such as human rights". A way had to be found to cope with the predicament as briefly sketched. One of these was the miner's inborn flair for oral poeticizing. It is precisely the migrant labour system that contributed to an oral (and later also written) poetry genre of particular significance, the *Difela tsa ditsamayanaha* (Chants of [Basotho] migrant workers). Following in the great *Dithoko* (heroic poem) tradition for which the Basotho have been known since time immemorial, and drawing on the considerable oral skills of the *diroki* (praise-singers), the *Difela* are significantly less declamatory, more narrative, and rendered in an entirely different performance style. As reflections of the singers' experiences on the mine, they relate aspects of their journey, of conditions at and in the mine, of the singers' longing for home, their disappointment when discovering that home is not what it used to be. They are chanted in an almost subdued tone, reminiscent of the singer's mood as a wayfarer, living in two worlds, but not really at ease with either. Under such circumstances the thousands of *Difela* composed over more than a century could be seen, among other things, as documents of personal and personalized affliction - in foreign fields fending for family and fatherland.⁸

Describing the way in which the *Difela* assert the African presence, Coplan observes:

Migrant workers and their women, without whose labour Lesotho cannot, even for a short time, survive, are producing elaborate forms of *auriture* (text/melody/rhythm genres) which do not simply preserve, but enlarge and revitalize Sesotho in direct confrontation with the social forces that threaten it Basotho migrant performers do not cast aside historical Basotho culture but root themselves deeply within it. The resonant images and shared understandings of Sesotho are used to comprehend, assess, decry, and even celebrate the quality of Basotho participation in a world they cannot control, but which should not be allowed, at any cost, to control their collective and individual sense of self, their continuing reformulation of a national culture.

(Coplan 1990: 262)

This is an art form which developed directly from colonial enterprise but at the same time represents an act which interrogates the system in which the singers have been caught up.

Open Conclusion

Much has been said about the relative "value" of the African-language literature of the South, given its alleged failure to interrogate the system which has sponsored and censored it and led it to its present position. Colonial and postcolonial reading and rereading may well enable us to arrive at a perspective significantly different from and more complex than the early and incomplete conclusions the carapace forced us to make. The *Difela*, which have developed a written component as well since the 1950s, is only one example of the challenge. If the Africanist as a student of literature succeeds in clarifying that, our present overwhelming diglossic society may become acknowledged as polyglossic in the true sense of the term, and the present monocentric literary situation polycentric, as it had been before colonization.

Africanists are faced by the challenge of their future perspective and task.

Notes

1. One way of addressing the task of overcoming the constraints of the past could be to problematize them in the hope that the exercise will contribute to a process of concentrated soul-searching and possibly also have the effect of a catharsis. At this unique occasion I would like to problematize a number of cardinal ones, specifically from an Africanist point of view as a contribution to a process which has already begun: under the auspices of the Department of Arts, Culture and Technology, an Arts and Culture Task Group (ACTAG) has just completed a

monumental report under the chairship of Mr. Andries Oliphant, a staff member of our Department of Theory of Literature.

2. When, for example, it comes to "African literature" and "African-language literature" the problem tends to be compounded instead of diminished. African literature is a field as vast as the continent itself. With living oral literatures in as many as its eight hundred acknowledged languages, its fast growing written literatures in at least fifty languages, and its acclaimed literatures in the former colonial languages English, French and Portuguese, it becomes clear that the concept applies to association and identification rather than a field of specialization, even if one narrows the problem down to South Africa only. Ashcroft et al. (1989: 17) write: "While the idea of an 'African' literature, for instance, has a powerful appeal to writers and critics in the various African countries, it has only limited application as a descriptive label."
3. In a rather hopeless bid to escape "the high wall of sea water that pushes him back, resisting him, flinging him back on the shore" - to quote what Es'kia Mphahlele (1977: 170), that Nestor of Black South African English literature, said in a slightly different respect - your Africanist may explain that s/he concentrates on South African literature in African languages. Yet even this does not help much. There are nine fast growing modern literatures in the African languages of the South: the literature in Xhosa, Sesotho, Zulu and Northern Sotho are substantial. Setswana has a smaller, although significant literature of its own, while those of Venda, Tsonga, Swati and Ndebele, although even smaller, are too far ahead to ignore, since, in their oral manifestation, they are equal in size and the available material equally overwhelming.
4. Expanding research concerns and the demands made by the lecturing profession often force one to brave adjacent areas. The task leads to the exploration of new theoretical domains, it leads to comparable neighbouring literatures and to theoretical discourses based on and couched in other literatures.
5. Theories can tell us much about *texts* in African-language literature - their description, definition and explanation, but this they also do for texts in all other literatures. The theories do not help us to determine their own position as a body of literature asserting the African presence. Rooted in living oral tradition, the written literature developed under specific, mostly Protestant, missionary enterprise. When the missionary enterprise had run its course, the advancement of literature passed to the state and private publishing houses, working in close collaboration with successive state departments ("Native Affairs", "Bantu Education" and "Education and Training"). This is a process which has never been completely free, nor in which the literature really exists according to its own dynamics, as is the case with Afrikaans and English literature. The theories to which we have referred can only partially account for the essential factors which determined the *raison d'être* at this point in history.

6. The Paris Evangelical Mission Society (PEMS) started missionary work in the Kingdom of Lesotho and developed its literature. If they were the ruling class, it was a ruling class of a different order, such as ethics. They displayed little political interest. The mission, and later the church, operated with only limited interference from the state for a period which could be as long as a century.
7. Most probably starting on an exploratory basis with little anticipation of the enormous socioeconomic and political implications, the system soon grew at an uncontrollable pace to become a major international problem. Exactly because of its implied violation of basic human rights, the system has given rise to momentous and legitimate materialist criticism against the ailments of capitalism. The international world, especially the neighbouring SADDCC countries, reacted and the *Charter of Rights for Migrant Workers in South Africa* passed in Lusaka, Zambia, in 1978, was the direct outcome of international protest. South Africa, for its part, also responded by passing the Industrial Conciliation Amendment Bill of 1979 which followed in the wake of the Wiehahn Commission Report.
8. This section is based on my article "Sefela sa Diate Kometsi: Human Rights and Civil Justice" (Swanepoel 1994: 177-180).

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