

Defining South African Literature for a New Nation

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South Africa is the one country where social and political contradictions have been so stark that the influence of politics on other social activities and vice versa, has been most easily observable. Many pious denials by racist apologists of the system that such an influence actually existed have actually turned out to affirm the truth of close relationships between politics and society. How often have we been told that sport and politics don't mix, when as a result of deliberate policy, the distribution of sports opportunities in the country ensures that sport and politics do mix. The same has been the case in the relationship between the history of the debate about literary standards, on the one hand, and the social distribution of opportunities for artistic development, on the other hand. Literary standards in South Africa cannot be discussed outside the context of opportunities for many aspirant writers, who are black, to obtain a basic education.

If at some future date in South Africa the relationship between art and society becomes blurred, as it has in many Western countries, due to the mediation of many complex effects of economic and technological development, the world will have lost, in this country, a very useful teaching aid. That will happen when the relationship between a state of affairs and its origins can no longer be directly perceived. I want to suggest in my brief commentary that the state of literature in South Africa also mirrors in a very fundamental way the larger historical imbalances in the country, and that lasting answers to some of our literary problems are to be found in the manner in which the larger struggle for liberation is finally resolved.

Gloria Emerson, an author from the United States, made the following comment, back in 1965 at a writers' symposium at Northwestern University in Chicago: "The trouble with the most brilliant people in America...is that things don't happen to them. They happen to other people, and then they discuss what has happened." This situation plays itself out in South Africa, where world-renowned writers tend to be white people who write about what has happened to "Others". The result has been a literature of what we have done to others, how it has affected them, and how it may have affected us. This kind of literature emerges from a society that perceives itself as history's primary agent in the South African context. However, political agency ended with the first question: What have we done to them? We have conquered them; now it is our task to build and shine the light of civilization.

Since then, the human interest in the conquered "Other" has not evolved significantly beyond the perimeters of military objectives. Keep the conquered "Other" at bay. For the state, the domination of the "Other" posed no major moral problems, only military ones. This resulted in a state management culture in which the state became preoccupied with its own methods and techniques of domination. This situation has spawned a profoundly insensitive society.

If art plays an adversary role in society, asking disturbing questions, revealing unsettling feelings, attitudes, and experiences, then we will understand why it was writers who went further to ask the next two questions: "How has what we have done to them affected them? How has it affected us?" It will be immediately clear that the "us" in the last question does not include the "Other," for the

writers are trapped in their own society. They were born within it: it sent them to well-equipped schools; it provided them with publishing opportunities; it sanctified their languages through legislation and language academies; it gave them theatres, museums, art galleries, concert halls, and libraries; it arranged for them special salary scales that ensured access to a range of cultural facilities as well as the ability to buy books and newspapers; it created literary awards to honour them; it also made it possible for some of them to become critics and reviewers who influenced literary taste and declared standards; it protected them in law against the claims of the "Other," by assuring them of the privacy and security of residential areas legally inaccessible to the "Other," thus ensuring that they socialized among themselves; it gave them passports to travel, and they could meet other writers internationally; it sought to make them take for granted the elevated status of their citizenship and its attractive resulting comforts. However, since they were concerned about the "Other" and the effect of the "Other's" plight on their own humanity theirs became a bipolar existential reality of moral abhorrence accompanied by a physical inability to escape the conditions of that abhorrence. Even when the system banned their books, I am certain that it entertained a grudging admiration for their worldwide acclaim. I am certain that South African diplomats, albeit embarrassed by the routine bannings of books, nevertheless shared in the international glory of their compatriots or, at worst, condescended towards their "misguided" artists.

If this far I have referred to "writers" and the "Other" in general terms, it is because I have steadfastly avoided the intellectually debilitating signposts all South Africans will habitually expect. I have chosen rather to imply the signposts. But now, I should indulge in the South African pastime and be more explicit. South African literature is "white" South African writing expressing a limited range of concerns within a particular set of historical circumstances. It was literature concerned with what happened to the "Other" produced by writers who were existentially unable to experience what the "Other" went through. Indeed, the best of it (J.M. Coetzee, Nadine Gordimer, Andre Brink, Alan Paton) represents the artistic achievements of the era of apartheid. The fact that this literature stood in moral opposition to the era that produced it does not affect that objective historic reality. It owes its achievements to the special legitimizing opportunities as well as to the agonies of conscience that nurtured its growth. This reality represents both the limitations of that literature as well as its lasting relevance.

From that edified position, this literature then became a standard against which other literatures could be measured. Thus came into being a two-literary phenomena. The first one was called "writing in the indigenous languages," while the second one became known as "black South African literature" which implicitly did *not* include "writing in the indigenous languages." "Black South African literature," because it was written in English or Afrikaans, qualified to be called literature, but was a special nonstandard literature called "black." This setting apart of this literature confirmed its alien character. For some critics, mainly white, this literature assumed the kind of position that the Congress of South African Trade Unions played in South African politics: something with pretensions to political status but essentially naïve, crude, untutored, inexperienced, yet threatening, but ultimately incapable of defining a labour culture. Yet to others, it was like Nelson Mandela's African National Congress: personable, worthy of being understood, but often times quite frustrating. Substitute "literary" for "political" and "labour" and you get a good sense of the relationship between politics and culture in South Africa. We can say that within the structure of domination in South Africa "white" South African literature, as a sociological phenomenon, effectively oppressed other literatures. Of course, that it did so was a situation not personally

intended by its writers but a result of the dominant political sociology of official “white” South African culture.

I am reminded, at this point, of the significance of our recent participation in the Olympic games at Barcelona, which occasioned a lively debate in the evening phone-in programme of Radio Metro. Many callers, black, declared that strictly speaking, South Africa was not returning to international sport, but that we were actually participating for the first time. They were making a distinction between South Africanism as a hoped for national attribute, universally distributed, as against South Africanism as a powerful concept of domination narrowly distributed and applicable to one moment in our history. The latter represents an appropriation of nationhood by a powerful racial group. In this connection “white” South Africa literature of the apartheid era should properly be seen not as a universally representative phenomenon, but as the manifestations of a dominant literary or intellectual trend running through a particular historical era.

Where does all this take us? I think I am attempting to highlight the ultimate impossibility of arriving at a timeless definition of South African literature. If the era of apartheid is part of South African history as that history paradoxically stretches into the future, then “white” South African literature will represent a moment in the history of South African literature. From this perspective, South African literature will be seen to be made up of a variety of intellectual trends in history. It is not the definition that matters ultimately but the understanding that informs it, and the social context from which that understanding emerges.

Now, I have had to learn very quickly since the dramatic events of February 2, 1990, which led to the release of Nelson Mandela, that any attempt at a nonjudgmental understanding of our history is quickly interpreted by many white people as letting them off the hook. They become comfortable and begin to make arguments and demands that have the effect of reinforcing their privileged status. They want to enjoy the levelling benefits of objectivity without abandoning their claims to privilege. Unfortunately for them, sooner or later, “white” writing, to use J.M.Coetzee’s expression, like apartheid, may become exhausted. With the “Other” having attained freedom, “white” writing may run out of a central and sustaining philosophical and moral focus. Its concerns may become marginal. Then white South Africans and their arts will have to engage in fundamental reflection on their cultural future.

The irony is that the future of that phenomenon known as “black” South African literature has been questioned by white critics for similar reasons. With the monster of apartheid gone, what will “black” writers write about? This question thus far has been thrown at “black” writing. “White” writing has thus far not been able to recognize its own precarious position. It has been basking in the self-confidence of one who has habitual right to ask questions about the “Other”.

What we are likely to have in our hands is a general loss of focus. And there lies the crisis of culture in South Africa. Central to the resolution of that crisis is the achievement of a genuine democracy in our country. In practical terms it means the creation of a society that can throw up new creative problems for writers. It means that the possibilities for new writing are inseparable from the quest for a new society – a society in which everyone is entitled to education for which the state must assume some responsibility; in which there will be much cooperation between accessibility and affordability of books for a greatly increased reading public; in which literary awards are freed from the culture of “white” writing; in which African languages are vigorously promoted; in which cultural

institutions are more available and accessible; in which most people enjoy good health and decent housing. All this has everything to do with literature and all the other arts. It has everything to do with a new sense of nationhood.

The current transitional period of negotiation, if it is too long, is likely to exacerbate the condition of cultural crisis, resulting in a blurred vision of liberation. It seems to be the intention of the Nationalist Party, the party that built apartheid and is still in power, to engineer and then take advantage of this situation in order to hang on to the dead end of "white" history for as long as possible. This is a reflex response on their part, for they are incapable of acting in any other way. Which means that if they cannot fall from the tree on their own, they need to be plucked from it. Whatever the case may be, the future of literature in our country is inseparable from the future of democracy and the difficult tasks of working towards it. Writers and artists of all kinds need to be centrally located in that struggle for democracy. The nurturing of their imaginations and new artistic skills will take place within that struggle and be informed by it. Possibly, they may even inspire it.

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