SOUTH-AFRICAN LITERATURE IN TRANSITION PERIOD

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Abstract

The paper begins with a short presentation of the society and history of the Republic of South Africa in order to better understand the attitude of writers who have never separated in their work the politics and history of the country from literature and aesthetics.

The paper goes on to mention the names and works of the most representative writers of the period of transition (1970-1995) in poetry, theatre and prose, whose writings can often be considered manifestoes in the struggle of the South African people for equal rights and independence.

Background

South Africa is one of the ten countries (Angola, Botswana, Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, Swaziland, Zambia, Zimbabwe, South Africa included) that form the region called Southern Africa, with a specific history, politics, culture and literature, deriving from entwined events.

The population of the country consists of black South Africans (about 74% of the total); whites, mostly Afrikaners (Boers) and those of English descent (14%); persons of mixed descent (9%); and Asians, largely of Indian descent (3%). The people who are not white or black are called coloured. English and Afrikaans are the official languages, but there are ten main African languages, including Zulu and Xhosa, and a lingua franca called Fangalo that was developed in the mines. Cope compares Afrikaans with English (1982: 20) saying that the most important development which resulted in a great difference between English and its dialects, took place in a single century (1150 to 1250), when grammar changed resorting to natural gender and giving up most of the inflections, phenomena accompanied by a massive borrowing of French words brought by the Normans. He also says that Afrikaans is in some ways closer to English in structure and word formation than the other 'kindred tongues'. National, political and social forces have worked upon Afrikaans and English and at the same time these two Germanic languages influence and are influenced by contact with native black languages. "The country (South Africa), and indeed the whole of Africa, is likely to continue for centuries to be a vast smelting furnace of linguistic evolution." (Cope 1982: 21)

After 1650 racial mixing was not discouraged, but it can be broadly said that almost during the same period of about a hundred years between the end of the 17th century and the British occupation of the Cape in 1806 the 'Dutch' Language used in the Colony had undergone a radical evolution in some respects comparable with that which transformed Old English between the 12th and 13th centuries. It was on the whole a spoken language, but from the few phonetic transcriptions made at the time about the manner in which

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'the Boers and their slaves' talked, it seems that the basic outlines had already been formed of what was a century later to become the foundation of written Afrikaans, which is an analytic language.

The narrative prose is written in the present tense, using for instance, 'then' and 'last year', to refer to past tense. Even the Bible is translated into the present tense. All the diminutives (six different forms of the diminutive) except plurals have unaccented *–ie* endings, adding a further gliding tendency to speech, that, taken all in all, makes Afrikaans the most 'feminine' of the Germanic languages, which Cope says that it is an African acquisition. (1982: 25)

Afrikaner was a name first given to the dark-skinned people of the Cape, meaning simply African. But by the mid-19th century the descendants of the Dutch, French and German settlers were using the name with pride to distinguish themselves from other races and nationalities. They were Africans, they spoke African (Afrikaans). The militants of the First Language Movement voted for maintaining Hollands in the future, though in a secondary and formal role. The only language through which Afrikaners could survive as a definite people was Afrikaans. The Second Language Movement was launched in Pretoria early in 1905, with Eugène Marais and his close friend Gustav Preller as the most important militants, the direction of the movement being in rivalry with English.

Eugène Marais was the first to use Afrikaans in the Transvaal in press. He began (1891) to write and print reports in the language people spoke in everyday life in his newspaper "Land en Volk"– though they did not write it or expect to see it written. The printed language was Hollands (Nederlands) and the new script with its strange phonetic spelling and plain structure was quite new, even to Marais himself. Among his writings are *The Soul of the White Ant* and *My Friends the Baboons*. One of his best known and cherished poems is 'Winternag' (*Winter's Night*), which uses diminutives, feminine rhyme and skilful handling of long open vowels, showing the musicality and characteristic of the language, impossible to reflect in English, although freely translated it sounds like this:

Winter's Night

O cold is the wind's breath / and spare. / Agleam in the half-light / and bare / and wide as the pity of God /the veld lies in the starlight and shade. / And spilt on the burns / where the mountain path turns/ the seed-grass rustles / like beckoning hands. / O sad melody / of the winds that rove / like the song of a girl who's / forsaken in love. / On each blade of grass / the dew shines still / and quickly it pales / to frost in the chill.

Although the language derives chiefly from the 17th-century Nederlands, the racial origin of the Afrikaner people is thought to have been largely German, some 35%; then after a further 35% of Dutch descent there are small percentages of French, British and other ethnicities, and 7 to 10% from African and other dark races. It is not historically fair to consider the Afrikaner nation as white or 'European' exclusively, aliens or intruders of the 'Dark' Continent. They can be designated as Africans from many perspectives: racially, linguistically, and culturally. They evolved as a recent nationhood under the sun of Africa in the same historical period and almost in similar circumstances like the American nation in North America.

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History

South African history has been characterized by a politics of racial and ethnic conflict. Bantu-speaking peoples moved into the region from East Central Africa at about 1500. The first permanent settlement, a Dutch East India Company station, was set up in 1652. By 1707 there were about 1,780 freeholders of European descent in South Africa, with about 1,100 slaves. The first of a long series of wars broke out (1779) between the Xhosa people and white farmers, known as Boers, who had moved inland. Britain replaced the Dutch at the Cape in 1795 and was awarded the territory by the Congress of Vienna in 1814. Disturbed by British rule, which accorded legal rights to free blacks and Coloureds and abolished slavery, some 12,000 Boers left the Cape in what is known as the Great Trek (1835-43) into the interior and Natal. Britain annexed Natal (1843), but the Boer republics of Orange Free State and the Transvaal were established (1850s). The discovery of diamonds (1867) and especially of gold (1886) spurred great economic development. Following increasing tensions between the non-Afrikaner whites (Uitlanders) and the dominant Afrikaners, the two Boer republics declared war on Britain. The South African War (Boer War, 1899-1902) was won by the British, who established (1910) the Union of South Africa, with dominion status. South Africa joined the Allies in World War I and afterward received a mandate over South West Africa (Namibia). Under the Prime Minister J. B. M. Hertzog (1924-39) South Africa gained final British recognition of independence (1931), prospered economically, and further suppressed nonwhites. J. C. Smuts brought South Africa into World War II on the Allied side. Through the policy of apartheid (complete segregation), white supremacy was strengthened during the regimes of H. F. Verwoerd (1858-66), B. J. Vorster (1966-78), and P. W. Botha (1978-89), leaders of the National Party, which ruled from 1948 to 1993. F. W. de Klerk, who became President in 1989, removed the ban on the African National Congress (ANC) and other antiapartheid parties and released Nelson Mandela and other political prisoners. A multiparty trans-national government council was formed, and the first elections, open to all races, were held in April 1994. The ANC won over 60% of the vote, and Mandela was elected president. (The Concise Columbia Encyclopedia 1994: 818-9)

Independence has brought almost nothing to people who, for thirty years, have been at permanent war: first the struggle for freedom, and after the 1975 disastrous civil conflict. Together with Angola, South Africa fell victim to United States and Soviet Union power politics and to South African military destabilisation who attacked neighbouring states in order "to weaken African solidarity and create client dependences." (Chapman 2003: 3) Like in other countries of the world, there is debate in the post-communist period about the validity of the structural adjustment programmes of World Bank and International Monetary Fund between those who are for capitalist enterprise and those who do not trust the new elites and see little improvement in the plight of the poor.

The literature of Southern Africa is tightly linked to the linguistic and cultural change and context of events, such as the great trek of Afrikanerdom, the national suicide of Xhosa, and the actions of the Soweto youth in 1976, being difficult to distinguish between the written text and the text of the world. Each nation has its own events that constitute their landmarks: Afrikaans literature considers as key event the Anglo-Boer

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War (1899-1902), while African writers take the dates of 1910 (the Act of Union which confirmed English-speakers and Afrikaners as citizens and excluded black people from political rights) and of 1913 (the Natives Land Act which dispossessed African people of rights of ownership) as the most important. All these dates, throughout the twentieth century, mark the beginning of modern, organised opposition to the white domination and ruling.

The liberation movements, which had been proscribed after the Sharpeville shooting in 1960, were unbanned on 2 February 1990 and laws based on racial discrimination abolished, in 1994 South Africa becoming a non-racial democracy. In spite of a policy which sustained labour in the countryside, Africans have continually populated the big cities of the country, especially Johannesburg. By the early 1980s, against the state's policy, a great number of African workers were members of the giant trade union COSATU, which had become a key force in their opposition against apartheid rule.

The New Wave: Poetry

Among the political forces that militated for their rights and freedom was Black Consciousness, which is associated in literary terms with the so-called township[1] poetry, the new black poetry, and further back, Soweto poetry. Its predecessors were Peter Abrahams with his poems included in *A Blackman Speaks of Freedom!* (1940) and H. I. E. Dhlomo with *Valley of a Thousand Hills* (1941). Black poets began to publish their work in the literary journals *The Classic* and *The Purple Renoster*, the latter publishing the already rejected Oswald Mtshali's volume *Sounds of a Cowhide Drum* (1970). It also published Mongane Wally Serote's *Yakhal'inkomo* (1972), who, together with the other black writers, clung to their African names, not to their 'Christian' names. Thus Mtshali referred to himself not as Oswald Joseph but as Mbuyiseni Oswald and joined the Black Consciousness writers group, which included Serote, Sipho, Sepamla, Mafika Gwala and many others. In their work they spoke about the township life with all its drawbacks, poverty, violence, alienation and needs for a better community. As Chapman says, they also "provoked argument and debate about the efficacy of the art product in contexts of socio-political urgency". (2003: 333)

These black writers were not exclusivists, although the South African Students' Organization militated for it, and they were helped by white editors, like Lionel Abrahams who published their work in *The Purple Renoster* and other white-run publishers, such as Ravan Press (1970), David Philip (1971) and Ad. Donker (1973). The new black poetry had a rapid transfer from the street folk culture to the literary art, being a self-conscious form of literary expression, with influences from English romanticism, American beat poetry, modernist imagism, African-American spirituals and jazz, Christian religion, African oral lore and popular township music. As a means of expression, English was chosen as a neutral lingua franca, without ethnic involvement and also without its cultural biases. Thus, what resulted was a disregard for correct syntax, a usage of ghetto Americanisms, tsotsi-taal[1], slang and phrases that could not be understood by the non-African reader and emotional-charged words like Soweto, Biko, and Mandela.

Stephen Bantu (Steve) Biko and Richard (Rick) Turner both died for their ideals, the first in prison and the second assassinated by unknown killers. Biko understood that only when the black people have been aware of their self-esteem in their status they can start

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the quest for true humanity. He and Turner looked for connections between the international and the local cultures, as opposed to the influence of British materialism revisionism. They were two of the most influential thinkers of the time, Turner having "the ability to convey subtle ideas in accessible style" (Chapman 2003: 339). In his *The Eye of the Needle* (1972) he tried to adapt Marxist economic analysis and Christian ideas to a just South Africa.

The other side of the coin was showing white African's attitude towards black empowerment during the 1970s and 1980s: challenge, despair, resentment and cynicism. As Chapman says, most white poets of this period were aware that neither English nor Afrikaans could go on serving poetry in a 'correct' way. Patrick Cullinan uses in his poems clear and quiet conversational tones, being able to address the abstract and absurd as well as the colloquial life of the 1970s. Peter Horn wrote a poetry which hinted at the Brechtian moral story in a kind of romantic feature which had got rid of the bourgeois-individualistic influence, and explains through the Marxist theory the South African city life, a socio-economic space in which the poor and oppressed are addressed by the poet in a mild way, opposed to that of Arthur Nortje and Douglas Livingstone. Other prominent names of the period are Wopko Jensma with his volumes of poetry *Sing for our Execution* (1971), *Where White is the Colour Black is the Number* (1974) and *I must show you my clippings* (1977); Stephen Watson, who claimed that English poetry in South Africa suffered from linguistic deadness, wrote *Poems 1977-1982* (1982), *In This City* (1986) and poetic renditions of traditional Bushman songs and stories in *Return of the Moon* (1991); Lionel Abrahams who showed in his poetry the potential of a middle-class able to shape its own ideas and emotions without refrains or mortifications:

O, Doctor History, we
thank you very much, but
can you mend one
broken brain? (from 'Dr History Delivers Another Political Martyr'
in Chapman 2003: 341)

A special place in the South African literary space is held by the Afrikaans poet Breyten Breytenbach, who has lived in Paris in a self-imposed exile since 1960, but nevertheless executed a seven-year sentence in South Africa when arrested on political charges. He wrote *Judas Eye* (1988) where he recreated in English his Afrikaans poems and which is representative of his non-sophisticated style. In *A Season in Paradise* (1980) he recorded in a philosophical-travel story the crises and longings of "the Afrikaner who had rejected his own inheritance" (Chapman 2003: 346).

Theatre

Black Consciousness with the help of the South Africa Students' Association promoted another cultural form to show the chasm between the rich (found in the art-going elite) and the poor (people in townships) – the theatre. It was performed by theatre groups tightly linked to student activism, such as TECON (the Theatre Council of Natal) and PET (the People's Experimental Theatre), expressing its mission of raising consciousness. *Shanti*, written by Mthuli Shezi who was killed in 1972 in a racial confrontation, was first performed and printed in 1973 where the protagonists are representatives of the oppressed who fight against "the caricatural forms of brutal state

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functionaries and their black sell outs." (Chapman 2003: 351) Sometimes the BC plays were accused of being too radical, too Marxist-oriented, and too intellectual to be effective. During apartheid there hardly existed any theatres in black areas, almost none in townships. Theatres also faced interdiction from white authorities who feared large gatherings with political connotations. Gibson Kente's realistic popular plays (*Beyond a Song, Taximan and the Schoolgirl, Manana, The Jazz Prophet*), on the contrary, had large audience of black people in township communities. In his plays he mixed Hollywood musical with urban-African marabi[1] rhythms.

Other playwrights like Matsemela Manaka, establishing themselves at the Market Theatre, had artistic ambitions. Chapman argues that the black theatre of the 1970s provided a pivot from which a tradition emerged that had "the potential to attack the static character of the closed society and contribute a dynamic dimension to social life." (2003: 353) A play of reference for the black theatre is *Woza Albert!* (*Woza* means 'rise up'), which involved improvisation and mime and where the two actors rush in and out of roles to give the impression of "bustling community presence". It is not a traditional play, relying more on city experience. The theatre of this period looked more like the *commedia dell'arte* or the theatre of the absurd found in Beckett's plays about tramps, with elements of poor scenery and few actors from Grotowski and Brook. The plays are real metaphors for an ideology of poverty, which try to rediscover the human richness sheltered in oppressed souls.

In the black theatre the performance, more than the script draws the stage closer to conceptions of popular culture, to remind people, if ever necessary, that they live among the shacks for urban alienation and ethnic instability – its aim being to generate a sense of belonging to a community. The theatre that falls outside these rules is called minority theatre. Outside the majority black theatre model there has been a verse drama, coming from university circles and dealing with surrealistic themes. The Afrikaans drama of the 1930s proved to be more stimulating to younger playwrights than the Euro-absurdism of Bartho Smith (*Christine* 1971). An interesting experiment proved to be Pieter-Dirk Uys's *Die Van Aardes van Grootor* (1979), which was first performed in 1977, having its origin in a popular radio serial, *Die du Plooys van Soetmelkvlei*. It includes sketches of Afrikaner history, concentrating in the end on the corruption of the government of the day. Among other contemporary Afrikaans dramatists we can mention Reza de Wet and Deon Opperman who focus on the family and its attitudes against the contemporary political change.

In the popular white theatre form, the cabaret-like revue, authors satirise the arrogance of P. W. Botha's military state in the 1980s, including larger segments of the society. Uys mocks at the far Right and the far Left with F. W. de Klerk and Nelson Mandela in the centre, as two blind mice. Another clear and straightforward message is displayed in the worker plays that began to appear in the mid-1980s under the umbrella of COSATU and where everyday life issues were dramatised in factory situations, trying to communicate information to semi-literate workers. Other plays dealt with large-scale strike actions, such as *The Clover Story* and *The Dunlop Play*, focusing on trade unions' support for widespread political activism. As a conclusion about this kind of representation, we can quote what Chapman says, "Theatre as an institution, as distinct from rituals of survival and fulfilment, has no base in African working-class life, the closest theatrical experience being the township plays of Gibson Kente." (2003: 359)

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Athol Fugard and Zakes Mda are two authors who have adapted the black theatre model to their aims. Mda wrote *Dead End* and *We Shall Sing for Fatherland* in the 1970s, having as models Beckett's absurd theatre and African storytelling. His personal element is found in the specificity of the topics chosen, his concern with the subjective consciousness and indeterminacy, but he does not surrender in front of an absurd universe. Fugard, a white African dramatist with a troubled conscience, inspired himself from the poor, industrial, urban environment of Johannesburg. His early plays, *No Good Friday* (1958) and *Nongogo* (1959) show the struggle of small people to tear themselves away from their plight and enter the world of the whites. These were followed by *The Blood Knot* (1968), *Hello and Goodbye* (1966), *People Are Living There* (1968) and *Boesman and Lena* (1969). Two other plays were written in co-operation with John Kani and Winston Ntshona in a kind of workshop, *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead* (1972) and *The Island* (1973), which anticipated the Black Consciousness theatre of the 1970s.

Fiction

According to Chapman, "white literary life has granted more importance to the novel" (2003: 385), which was a means of expressing writers' attitudes as white Africans on a black continent and which was more comprehensive than the short story in depicting their lives, mentality and philosophy. African novelists have got more of the national and international prizes like CAN Award or Booker Prize than short story tellers or other genres. Some representative names are Nadine Gordimer, André P. Brink, J. M. Coetzee, Dan Jacobson, Karel Schoeman, Elsa Joubert, Wilma Stockenström and others. Both Brink and Gordimer (the latter a winner of the Nobel Prize for literature), in spite of their topics connected with life under apartheid and other national subjects, as well as their appearance on public platforms, are considered abroad more literary and artistic than realistic. The position of the white African writer is fragile and can be interpreted from many perspectives, as in this region of the earth there are at least two worlds that have had strict boundaries for centuries, and the transition period proves to be very difficult. But we can take Gordimer's thoughts as a sum-up for this artistic experience, when she says that "While loyalties to a cause, or a party line, may be important for an oppressed people, the writer has to retain integrity, for loyalty is an emotion, integrity a conviction adhered to out of moral values". (Chapman 2003: 387) Gordimer has been a fervent militant against racial injustice and her books reveal her creed, some of them being: *A Soldier's Embrace, Something Out There, Jump and Other Stories* (short stories, 1980, 1984, 1991 respectively) and some novels such as, *A Guest of Honour* (1971), *Burger's Daughter* (1979), *None to Accompany Me* (1994).

In contrast with Gordimer, who does not substitute the writer for the politician and writes about life from the inside, Coetzee is more imaginative and fictional, creating archetypal characters who sometimes demystify actions, giving them a vein of truth. His work was said to be mostly influenced by the postmodernist writers of Europe and America. In his first book, *Dusklands* (1974) he draws a parallel between the American war in Vietnam and the colonization of Africa in the 18th century. He himself has an Afrikaans education and this can be noticed sometimes in his affinities to the Afrikaans Calvinist conscience. He is strongly influenced by his own personal background as a native South African. Although a white writer living in South Africa during apartheid,

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Coetzee nevertheless has written with strong anti-imperialist feelings. Many of Coetzee's personal experiences and beliefs can be seen in his books, where he describes his sense of alienation from fellow Afrikaners and writes about the laws that divided himself and others into racial categories that served to further alienate him, such as *Boyhood:Scenes from Provincial Life* (1997). His first novel that won the Booker Prize, *The Life and Times of Michael K* (1983), is set in Cape Town, a city on the verge of racial wars and the great weight of the novel can be found in the fact that it does not focus on racial separations but is more concerned with saving humanity as a whole. In his latest novel that was awarded a second Booker prize, *Disgrace* (1999), Coetzee deals with many of the current issues of South Africa, such as land, crime, rape, lack of police protection and racial stratifications.

André P. Brink challenged most the Afrikaner power and in his early novels changed from surrealistic and metaphysical dramas to the political allegations. A good example is *Kennis van die Aand* (*Looking on Darkness*) (1972), which was the first Afrikaans novel to be banned and which dealt with racial persecution and injustice, torture by the police, apartheid and its disastrous effects. In Chapman's opinion, he distinguishes himself from the other Afrikaans writers, with the exception of Breytenbach, through his willingness to speak out both in fiction and from the public platform, regarding himself like an artist of political convictions. In *A Dry White Season* (1979) Brink uses the most emotive symbol in the late 1970s, and that was the black person tortured to death in the police cell.

Another earlier opponent of the apartheid and communist systems was Laurens van der Post, "who rebelled in spirit, action and words against the canker of colour prejudice in South Africa" (Pottiez 1994: x). Both Post's life and writing mirror his awareness of history, shown in his commitment to the cause of the Kalahari Bushmen, among the priests and authentic representatives of original life on earth, whose stories, dreams and ancient ways belong to a timeless tradition and whose intimate relationship with nature exemplifies the sense of balance, proportion and harmony. *Venture to the Interior* (1952) and *The Lost World of the Kalahari* (1958) drew the attention of a vast audience to the unmatched spirit, skills, vitality and wisdom of the aboriginal desert Bushmen and their desperate plight. Van der Post's faith is the sanctity of the human spirit, never accepting the severe, sexist, misogynist and intolerant Calvinist concept of God which was dominant in Africa in his youth. Like all the other writers mentioned so far, he also took part and joined in causes that promoted the conservation of nature and respect for animal life, militated for a new order of emancipation and multi-racial integration in South Africa.

South African cultural and literary life is still waiting for the great novel which, according to J. M. Coetzee, should contain characterisations of society at all levels during the time in which it is set; it should use realistic techniques that make the work accessible to most of the readers and which can make the local universal.

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