

"Problems of creative writers":

A Reply

In writing this article, I hesitated momentarily at the editor's caveat that WIP was not for academic debate or 'the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake'. An article that was going to be perhaps nothing more than a methodological quibble, seems to fall within the ambit of 'academic debate'. But I jettisoned my hesitations for various reasons.

South African studies have of late been burgeoning, and South African literature has not been unaffected by this acceleration of research into the nature of the S A social formation. But literary studies started off with a disproportionate handicap in the form of an extremely reactionary colonial tradition of literary criticism. From this retarded catatonia, South African literary studies are emerging slowly and now stand in danger of becoming vogue and bandwagonish. If we are to derive any significant meaning from the study of South African literature for ourselves, and if it is to be taken seriously, the time has come to get methodological questions straight.

Now, the conventional approaches of ahistorical formalism which have held sway for so long and have not substantially altered in the past 100 years (1), are virtual non-starters in this respect and are unable to cope with, let alone explain coherently, South African literature.

The major problem appears to me to be to formulate within a socio-historical framework a sophisticated critical and theoretical method that is capable of articulating without reduction the relationship between literature and society, and it is in this direction that I wish to address my comments using Kelwyn Sole's article as a starting point. I regarded the article as an exceptionally fine, lucid and comprehensive piece of work and my comments are essentially more of a footnoting

affair, filling in the gaps and suggesting directions of research and pointing to supplementary methods.

His article was two-pronged - on the one hand, it attacked the Euro-centric formalists, whilst on the other hand outlining and sophisticating a materialist criticism for South African literature. As regards the latter, he was careful to point to the dangers of the reductionist pitfall and stressed that the utilisation of a sociological approach 'by no means implies a deterministic reduction of the literature to its social and economic base.' (p.20)

Materialist literary criticism is not the vulgar affair that purists have imagined it to be - this 'crude' approach, characterised by content correlation and determinism may have appeared in sociological literary approaches 40 years ago, but the tremendous strides taken over recent decades render such judgements anachronistic to say the least of it.

Now while Sole's article did stress the complexity and asymmetry of the relationship between literature and society, his study of black literature did not always do justice to the method and the analysis often fell into the content correlation trap that he had warned against. He suggests that research must look at 'opposition to specific government actions and how literature expressed this' (p.21) which seems to be the wrong way round. Also statements like 'Xhosa literature up to the end of the nineteenth century shows the political, social and economic changes affecting the Xhosa and, in particular, the attitude of a small educated group to these changes.' (p.11) and that '(an alternative form of protest and resistance) is reflected in the debates and poetry by contributors to Isigidimi' (p.10) and that 'the growing militancy of African nationalism and the ANC in the forties is demonstrated by Dhlomo's long poem 'Valley of a Thousand Hills'' (p.14) seem to suggest that literature is a mere reflexive reflection of material conditions

This shortcoming is partly attributable to the broad field with which he is dealing and I readily admit that a survey of more than a century's literary production in 20 pages does not leave much room for specifics. Furthermore statements like the ones quoted above are consistent with an unmediated literature which is the case in South Africa.

But I feel that the shortcoming also relates to a methodological hiatus. The major critical and theoretical category that was stressed throughout was to see literature in terms of its class origins and affiliations, rather than in terms of vaguely conceived monoliths like 'committed', 'protest', 'apartheid literature' and so on. The areas of research (p.21) Sole suggested hinged around a closer study of class

formation and overall he focused on the basis of black literature in terms of the contradictions manifest in the position of a petty bourgeoisie. With all of this I would fully concur and to see literature in terms of its class origins is absolutely crucial, but to leave it at that is to offer only a partial explanation in the right direction.

The notion of class when used in literary evaluation is problematic (2) - witness Sartre's aphorism, 'Valéry is a petty bourgeois, but not every petty bourgeois is Valéry'. Rather, to adumbrate and complement the starkness of class one could, taking the lead from Gramsci, make an analysis of writers in terms of organic intellectuals. Hence writers would not be seen simply as members of a particular class, but as standing in a particular relationship to their social group. Take as an example John Tengo Jabavu; objectively an analysis of his class position would locate him as an educated, mission school petty bourgeois, but his work, particularly his editing of Imvo zabaNtsundu identifies him more as an ideological functionary of a certain group of Cape liberals.

All of this was to a certain extent implicit in what Sole said. Gramsci has pointed out that certain strata, namely the petty bourgeois, traditionally produce intellectuals and the article tacitly assumes this while focusing on the contradiction endemic in the writer's position as a black petty bourgeois. Sole's concern with the extent or non-extent to which writers reached a mass base could be rephrased as the extent to which in certain periods writers could organically form cohesive units with the mass, whilst at other times various overdetermining factors like education, religion and class rendered them partially homologous to the dominating classes.

If such an analysis is to be pursued profitably the areas of research will have to be drastically extended to include a more precise study of religion, different forms of education, the numbers of people involved, media organisation and circulation, printing and publishing industries, libraries, cultural organisations and so on.

A recent English critic, Terry Eagleton has made some useful suggestions in this respect. His second book, Criticism and Ideology provides an excellent critique of both standard and materialist literary criticism which I will not go into here. But what is of relevance is his categories for a materialist criticism of literature which are General Mode of Production, Literary Mode of Production (production and circulation of books, access to publishing, libraries etc.), General Ideology, Aesthetic and Authorial Ideology and Text. It is the articulation of all these categories that produce the text

and hence each has to be investigated. While Sole dealt comprehensively with the first two, aesthetic and authorial ideology emerged as somewhat underprivileged members of the study. Aesthetic ideology would cover areas of literary development of form and its ideological implications, conception of the 'good and beautiful' and their ideological underpinnings, the sources of aesthetic attitudes like education journals, reviews etc., critical categories, whether aesthetic ideology challenges or supports general ideology and the relationship of art to ideology. (The assumption in Sole's article seemed to suggest that art was all of a piece with ideology and merely reflected it.)

Authorial ideology would take into account the particular position of the writer whilst looking to possible overdetermining factors like sex and religion and regional or national influences.

Another method that could be used in connection with class is that of genetic structuralism, whose exponent is Lucien Goldmann. He is concerned with 'transindividual mental structures', not always conscious, of a social group and the way in which the ideas, values and aspirations of a group are expressed in structural form. The genetic part is to explain how such significant structures are produced. 'Goldmann is seeking a set of structural relations between literary text, world vision and history itself.' (3)

Using this method one could take the writers of the 20's and 30's; the 'privileged-class-which-is-not-a-privileged-class' working through elitist bodies like the ANC striving for gradual social amelioration through the back door of the Cape franchise, is riddled with contradictions as the article pointed out. Sole goes on to mention the peculiar style of these writers, but the influence of their structural position can be traced further to formal qualities. In certain works - The Marabi Dance and certain stories of R.R.R. Dhlomo - there is a tension between a striving on the one hand towards an integrative, closed narrative form reaffirming standard values, and on the other a movement towards an open ended narrative moving beyond those values.

And this brings me to the whole question of form, on which Sole did place a great emphasis, particularly in the investigation of the influential reciprocity of oral and literary forms. But a statement like 'Breaking with the previous written tradition, without literary heroes or moral examples, they set out to forge a new literary tradition through autobiographies, novels, short stories, plays and poems.' (p.15) is inadmissible. The fact of the matter is that people

do not merely 'forge' new literary traditions, rather any new forms or permutations grow out of pre-existing conditions and have specific historical antecedents. The general rule of thumb is that new forms piece themselves out of previous modes of representation and circulation (generally not considered as art.) (4) Hence drama grows out of ritual and church procedure, the novel out of satire and essays, and the movie out of primitive slide shows. (This law is not definitive and the development of form depends on numerous other factors. Eagleton has suggested cohesion from ideological structures and a changed relationship between author and public.) (5)

Bearing this in mind, to what extent was this tradition of the 50's new? It would rather appear that it grew out of a previous newspaper tradition of columns, descriptive pieces and stories. (Sole does point out that these writers' nexus was in journalism which of course belies his statement that it was a 'new' literary tradition.)

But the entire section on 'The Writer and Apartheid' is somewhat contradictory. Initially Sole says that 'it was left to a younger group of writers to fully articulate the new and radical slant of the ANC and its policy towards finding a mass base.' (p.14) Yet the writers would appear to have failed because they petered out into an elitism which produced 'at best' la Guma and Mphahlele and 'at worst' an empty posturing. What went awry in the interim? Sole puts it down to a problematic break with their past and an elitism which deracinated them. I would tend to think that the break between the elitism and the mbaqanga parties is not as great as Sole suggests. If the writers had a finger in Houghton, they also had two feet in the mbaqanga world. For example, not 'only Themba' approximated the rhythm of 'township English', Matshikiza's musical columns and some of Motjuwadi's poetry has a lot of linguistic innovation and ingenuity. The extent of their appeal was and still is extensive, Gwala has expressed admiration for 'the high standard of journalism found during the days of Can Themba, Nat Nakasa and Henry Nxumalo', while the recent death of Casey Motsisi attracted a flood of articles and letters in the World.

In terms of efficacy I agree with Sole that whether they realised the aim of being a 'mouthpiece for the people remains a moot point.' But to understand this, one would have to look further afield than the contradiction implicit in petty bourgeois status and investigate the ideology and effects of a sensationalist press, communications and class relations, media imperialism and the effect of large scale commodity production (in newspapers) of literature.

In conclusion, I would just like to mention that throughout this article I have invoked European theorists; and their insights, whilst having relevance, do have a limited applicability. They are dealing with a centuries old tradition of 'high art' with massive critical accretions. Here one is often in the position of first having to find the work that in so many cases has been hidden from history and furthermore a lot of the material is popular stuff and often poor. So one has to evolve critical categories to deal with conditions in South Africa.

And here I am thinking of white literature. We need to know about colonial aesthetics, the aesthetics of violence and war (6) and many other areas. Mike Kirkwood has done some useful work in this respect (7). He has characterised the English speaking heritage of South Africa as Butlerism, which requires the tortuous acrobatic feat of being caught in an ideological frontier between black and Afrikaner, having one foot in Europe whilst still being a bystander. His article is a critique of the English culture theory and wants to move beyond Butlerism. And the time is long overdue that we begin formulating aesthetics beyond Butlerism.

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Footnotes

1. Compare these statements with some of the aesthetic beliefs still knocking around our universities.
'Recognizing that literature is the fine art of speech, (the students) will patiently study the choice of word and structure of line and sentence, that thus they more truly may grasp the thought of the writer, and the feeling which lives and pulses under and through the thought. They will try to find in word and tone some image of the 'living, thinking, feeling man,' to whose companionship they have joined themselves (it may be) over centuries...'
"On the Study of Literature", Opening Address in the Class of English Literature, Stellenbosch Gymnasium, 1879, from The Cape Monthly Magazine No.9, 1880.
Or 'One of the most marvellous facts in the history of the human race is this, that through all our intellectual revolutions, the throne of poetry, although repeatedly assailed, remains unshaken; new conditions of thought cannot transmute the essence nor impair the power of art.'
"Science, in its relations to Poetry", Address delivered as one of the course of University Lectures at the Public Library, from The Cape Monthly Magazine Vol XV, 1877.
2. As Gramsci has pointed out, the position of intellectuals is doubly difficult because they are wont to proclaim their independence and autonomy from any class. This problem is more applicable to white than black literature.
3. Terry Eagleton, Marxism and Literary Criticism, (London, 1976) p.33.
4. See David Craig, "Towards Laws of Literary Development" in Marxists on Literature, (Penguin, 1975) pp. 134-160.

5. Craig has pointed out that the appearances of new forms need not always be in this seemingly idealist matrix. He gives the example of the condition-of-England novel, which most would maintain utilitarianism leads to.

'But philosophers and novelists were reacting to the closing in of rigid systems - genteel taboos and prohibitions and the enclosures, factories, workhouses, and grid-plan towns...The two sorts of work are cognate. The ideology is in no sense prior.' op.cit. p.144

6. Walter Benjamin has spoken of the aesthetics of war. He says '(Mankind's) self-alienation has reached such a degree that it can experience its own self-destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order.' He also quotes Marinetti justifying the Ethiopian colonial war, 'War is beautiful because it establishes man's dominion over the subjugated machinery by means of gas masks, terrifying megaphones, flame throwers and tanks....War is beautiful because it enriches a flowering meadow with the fiery orchids of machine guns. War is beautiful because it combines the gunfire, the cannonades, the cease-fire, the scents, and the stench of putrefaction into a symphony. War is beautiful because it creates new architecture, like that of the big tanks, the geometrical flights, the smoke spirals from burning villages and many others....' quoted in 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' in Mass Communication and Society, (London, 1977).

These aesthetics of violence and war are useful in connection with a lot of South African literature, for example the host of novels on the 'Kaffir Wars' and the recent upsurge of 'terrorist' novels, the most recent of which, A Time of Madness, has been a best seller.

7. Mike Kirkwood, 'The Colonizer: a critique of the English South African culture theory.' in Poetry South Africa pp.102-133.