



University and Literature in South Africa: Who Produces Symbolic Value?



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Many readers may groan inwardly at the title of this paper, fearing that I am about to wash dirty linen in public. I will no doubt give ample confirmation for such forebodings, but my professed aim is to throw some sociological light on the argument on values and literary evaluation in South Africa, and on the place of English departments in the literary life of South Africa. An examination of one's own interests or biases before making value judgements would, after all, be expected of most humanists or social scientists, yet one of the characteristic functions of English departments has been to mystify or conceal rather than reveal this interest, to behave with missionary righteousness (if not always with missionary zeal). What I want to explore is the way symbolic value is produced or denied in the literary field generally, and in South Africa in particular.

Before proceeding, I should make three methodological notes. The first is the immense use (and no doubt at points misuse) of the work of Pierre Bourdieu¹. The second is that what follows should be read as 'autocritique' rather than as an attack on colleagues (inviting targets though they may be). The third is that in a discussion of 'values' or 'strategies' there is no attempt to accuse people of Machiavellian cunning or bad faith -- the point is that interests, conventions, mental habits, Bourdieu's *habitus*, make of the socially determined "second nature".

ENGLISH DEPARTMENTS IN SOUTH AFRICA: A HISTORICAL NOTE

If I offer a partial, tendentious historical outline of English departments in South Africa, it is because I believe that we are at present in a bad way, though I won't justify this judgement in detail. When Pringle wrote his poems, or when Smuts wrote his study of Whitman, they, though not in English departments, were very much in the forefront of literary and philosophical developments. In the 1920s and 1930s some literature departments, staffed by Oxbridge graduates were methodologically close to new developments. After World War II, the growth of universities with the return of the ex-servicemen gave the English-language universities a central place in political and cultural life. Without going into the 1950s in detail, one can point out that the Nationalist victory in 1948 and the series of political measures that followed put literary intellectuals in the forefront of opposition based on linguistic and national ties with

England, and on liberal issues such as press and academic freedom.

The double shock of the early 1960s, with the political upheaval symbolised by Sharpeville and the loss of the Commonwealth tie, is dramatically recorded demographically in the exodus of university teachers in subjects such as English and history. The effects of this on departments here have still adequately to be measured, whether in the narrow demographic career aspect, or in what this exodus said to those who stayed behind about their role here. (One can bemoan the fact that many of the best teachers left, but must add that this scarcely provided an example of political, intellectual, or moral commitment.)

The last twenty years have seen our departments, withdrawn into an official stance of political neutralism ('Academic Freedom'), separated officially from the metropolitan centre (London/Oxbridge) itself losing or having lost its central role to New York or Paris, reduced to a ritualisation of past practice. (Who does not have a memory of practical criticism exercises whose critical impetus or comparative purpose had long since faded being reproduced tutorial after tutorial, year after year?) There are signs that some members have accepted a new role, yet most teachers in South African English departments seem, like their compatriots generally, to have regressed from provincialism to colonialism, a distinction to which I shall return.

THE PRODUCTION OF SYMBOLIC VALUE

There is no aspect of the university teaching of English in which the official discussion is as confused as in the discussion of values. English departments claim to defend, protect and propagate values, yet this may mean any or all of the following:

- (1) Reading great books makes us and our students 'better' (presumably more moral) human beings;
- (2) Our students will see the light of eternal British culture and thus the terrible conditions they live in here and now;
- (3) We give the power of discrimination, a power which can be turned dazzlingly onto the surrounding society.

I leave the reader to meditate on the value and the validity of these claims, but want in particular to insist on the avoidance in this paper of values of discussing what gives a book symbolic value in the first place, what makes it 'literature'. In universities, the book taught has become a sacred object defended by a circular argument: this book is a good book because we teach it and we teach it because it is a good book.

Such a definition ignores of course that it is not literature departments that give symbolic value, that it is not the academic *imprimatur* (a word I have heard used) that gives value, but a process of struggle for the dominant position in the literary field, with a constant process of an *avant-garde* trying to establish itself against the powers already in place. If and when the *avant-garde* succeeds, it in turn becomes a dominant or the dominant power to be dislodged or shifted. The entry of the work

into the groves of academe usually marks the end or neutralisation of this process through time: frozen as 'culture' or sacred object, the struggle for position and the disruptive force of the book forgotten, the book remains minimally subject to investments or bear-raids by later critics ('revaluations').

The summary dismissal of academic claims to arbitrate value needs detailed expansion, but I will just give a few examples. How many university teachers of English have not justified their work with a reference to Matthew Arnold's passage on "touchstones". If Arnold seems oblivious to the Dickensian novel, or the novel generally, to what would now be generally accepted as the major artistic form of his time, then it is not in spite of, but because of his touchstones, for they are a means for him to jockey for a privileged literary position, to be the poet a reader, touchstones at hand, will appreciate. If in South Africa over the last ten years, Fugard and Gordimer and Coetzee have established themselves it is because they represent a move to replace the liberal protest form (practised to some extent by the younger Gordimer) by new forms, not because they have or have not been given academic sanction. The academic attempt to create an alternative system, to make of Manson, say, literature, without going through the process of struggle and resistance in the literary field, is destined to fail, to remain an academic oddity.

The most influential and pernicious academic version of the academic's central role in literary evaluation was no doubt FR Leavis's view of his and *Scrutiny's* role in the sacralisation of modern British literature, or the colonial version of that view. Leavis and his collaborators, in reaction against Shaw, Bennett, and Wells, supported Eliot, Pound and Lawrence, the new *avant-garde* or sections of it. The support was no doubt useful, and may have helped establish Eliot and Lawrence in the universities earlier than would otherwise have been the case, but it was by no means decisive or even very early support, and from this to the belief that Leavis 'made' Eliot, Pound and Lawrence (or EM Forster or Empson or Robert Graves) the jump is clear. When Leavis tried to 'make' an academic poet like Bottrall, or unmake Dickens or Auden, his failure was clear. Had *Scrutiny* continued, this crisis would have become clear, and the journal become simply reactionary, or worse, old fashioned.

The academic belief in academic power to assign or deny value is the virtual equivalent of believing that babies are brought by storks, so its tenacity must be assigned to the self-gratifying or self-deceptive power it has, to a belief (which has a clear commercial equivalent) that it is not literature that has value but the critic's benediction that gives it value.

If literary departments are generally hesitant to accept the value determined elsewhere until overtaken by events because of their investment in the literary past, South African literary intellectuals have often been doubly bearish: on the present, because they have invested in the past; and on South Africa because they have invested in England. If we can define being provincial as the misunderstanding of the totality of forces operating in a literary field, and thus a subsequent over-

valuation of a particular aspect or figure, the role of provincial may be strategically exploitable and thus played out to the full. (Julien Sorel is the obvious literary example, and much British writing in the 1950s such as *Lucky Jim* adopted similar tactics.)

Yet South African academics have often with time become more colonial (or late-colonial) than provincial in that they want to freeze the mother country in some ideal past (whether 14th, 17th, or 18th century or 1950 scarcely matters), thus providing the intellectual equivalent of a more general social and political phenomenon. The English department encouragement of this often takes the form of what Australians, who are rather more liberated, call the 'colonial cringe', the sense that we are very unlucky not to be in England -- an attitude that finds its logical extension in our shipping abroad of our graduates for training and, in some cases, export, as though they were raw goods for finishing. It is scarcely surprising that the attitude of these teachers to local literary production is a mixture of cynicism and *Schadenfreude*, an assertion of their imaginary power to deny symbolic value, and a revelation of their powerlessness to affect the field positively.

LOCAL PRODUCERS AND THE UNIVERSITY

The difficulties of a provincial *avant-garde* are perhaps inherent in the term itself, but there have been aggravating circumstances in South Africa. A failure in many cases to obtain sufficient international recognition, the lack of any strong local challenge, the weaknesses of reviewing and the 'little magazines', and the tendency to coteries are all symptoms of this malaise, if not the causes. Perhaps it has been the very weaknesses that have led to the desire for local academic consecration -- in a healthier situation writers might see the universities as embalming-houses or graveyards rather than palaces.

A more recent and more sharply posed problem has been that of black writers and whether or not they can or want to be judged by 'Western standards'. This question eventually becomes one of whether we have one or several national literatures. Now while one can argue that there are in South Africa several literary fields with various 'vertical' linguistic, ethnic, ideological, or national allegiances and influences, 'horizontally' the various groups' struggle to occupy or dominate one literary scene. In the struggle, it is quite natural that black writers will deny the need for a kind of intellectual capital they do not have, thus attempting to justify a particular kind of realism (and a particular kind of fantasy), a certain use of political comment, and so on. It is quite natural for writers (not only white) with a greater intellectual and symbolic capital to call for different approaches, for more literary *distanciation*, for a greater awareness of literary tradition. It is natural for those who are banned, or in exile, who have been imprisoned, or suffered for political convictions, to assert that this symbolic capital assigns legitimacy in the literary field. And, finally, it is natural for the government to pay its tribute to the power of literature by trying to impose its order so as to make of literature a force for the reproduction of the existing order,

to react against intellectuals who challenge it.

If I have outlined these groupings (and a full account would have to go into far more 'vertical' and 'horizontal' detail) it is not to say that one of them must be chosen or is better, but to argue that there is everything to be gained from all of these literary groups playing their roles (the same thing as acting out their natures or 'being themselves') as fully and intensely as possible, of struggling as hard as possible for domination. Eliot and DH Lawrence (or, in a different context, Eliot and Wallace Stevens) in their time are opposed by almost every belief and literary strategy, yet (or, rather, *thus*) accede to the "sad eternity of academic debate" invoked by Bourdieu.

WHAT IS THE CRITIC TO DO?

Provincial Osmonds fingering their sacred objects we have, alas, always with us; but the university teacher has a practical critical role to play if he can bear to live in his time and place. That role should be less that of anxious broker or lay preacher worried about values, than of engaged commentator and actor trying to describe and animate the literary field, to make the necessary debates and polemics as lively and fruitful as possible. Many teachers have been doing just that for a long time, and will be surprised at such obvious and misplaced exhortations, such tardy realisations, such a 'ravaging, raging and uprooting' for such a whimpering finale. Others may object that this is less 'autocritique' than hit-and-run criticism, and though I hope I have not wounded anybody unintentionally, if this paper can be received by the profession in general in South Africa with the indifference or amusement merited by issues we can safely put behind us, it was necessary, and things are much better than I thought.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. For Bourdieu's work translated into English, see the useful bibliography in *Media, Culture and Society*, 1980, No 2, 295-96; much of the argument here follows "The production of belief: contribution to an economy of symbolic goods", in the same issue, 261-93; I must also acknowledge the insights of many colleagues and teachers who have argued with me about English departments in South Africa, notably Tony Morphet and John Coetzee
2. See Watson S. 1980: *Liberal Ideology and Some English South African Novelists*, unpublished MA Thesis, UCT

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