

Reaching for the Cosmos



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In his article "A Critique of the Dominant ideas in Departments of English in the English-speaking Universities of South Africa", Michael Vaughan writes

I have no doubt that the relative neglect of African/South African literature which characterises Departments of English in South Africa ... has social as well as aesthetic causes ... The question therefore arises to what extent profound changes can legitimately be campaigned for in relation to a structure -- the Department of English -- where social and political pressures are not (yet) very dramatically in evidence.

Vaughan's purpose is "to contribute (his) voice for change in one direction rather than another". Our purpose is to add our voices in support of his. Our campaign, however, has already been put into practice in our contribution to the courses that we offer in English teacher education at the University of the Witwatersrand.

Our political position, in a state of transition, is difficult to define. We see ourselves as broadly socialist and engaged in an ongoing process of struggling to emerge from a liberal-humanist background.

We believe that conservatism in University English Departments has two basic tenets. The first, explored by Vaughan in his article, relates to the choice of literature considered worthy of study, with its focus on the Great Tradition, and with practical criticism as its central method. The second tenet, ignored by Vaughan, but equally important, is a narrow conception which limits English studies to the study of Literature. This standpoint excludes, for example, the study of the Media, Writing and Language.

The University of the Witwatersrand has a pattern of teacher training which places methodology lecturers in their subject departments. Those of us responsible for training English teachers have our home in the English Department. Because we have a responsibility to train teachers to work in English Departments of South African high schools we are left by our home department to design, teach and administer appropriate courses. This autonomy frees us from many of the existing constraints within our home department, leaving us to face the conflicts which exist within our own team of English Education lecturers. What count as appropriate courses for teachers in training is strongly contested. The design of the course is such that students are offered the battleground. Neither language nor literature is presented as whole or monolithic. We hope that students are led to understand the fractures.

It is necessary to consider the work of school English Departments in relation to the above two conservative tenets. Literature teaching in schools is influenced by three traditions: "the elitist/academic idea of High Culture, the necessity for vocational training and the 'liberal' ideal for

educating the whole man". In every matriculation examination administered by government Departments of Education, British High Culture Literature predominates. In recent years the Transvaal Education Department has included some South African Literature in Standards 9 and 10. While we welcome these changes, we note with concern that the works chosen are exclusively by white writers and most of them offer very little challenge to the *status quo*. We believe that *Story of an African Farm* was chosen because it was perceived as 'safe'. Is *Cry the Beloved Country*, set in 1985, now also considered 'safe'? Clearly *Boesman and Lena* is not. What other explanation can there be for the burning of hundreds of copies of this play by the Cape Education Department?

The situation with prescribed texts in Black Education is even more critical. For example in 1979 *Leon Solves the Mystery* by Topsy Smith was set for Standard 8. This book is set in an English-type public school and is hardly recognisable as South African. In 1980, the same pupils had to study *The Mayor of Casterbridge* in their Standard 9 year and in 1981 *Scruffy* by Paul Gallico was set for matric. We deplore the policy underlying the choice of setworks for black South African pupils believing that the Department of Education and Training wishes to prevent their pupils from studying relevant literature.

High Culture Literature is no longer the sole reading diet in South African High Schools. Increasingly white schools are encouraging pupils to read popular American and British fiction written for young adults. Students have taken some of this literature into black schools but the lack of resources in these schools makes it unlikely that this literature will be easily available to pupils. Much of this popular literature deals with white bourgeois adolescent concerns, e.g. divorce, anorexia, drugs. Some of it, however, considers problems of race, class and sexism. All of it is unknown to student teachers; popular literature is not part of an undergraduate English curriculum. We include it as a part of our teacher training course. As yet, there are no South African fiction writers addressing themselves directly to South African adolescents.

The teaching of South African and African literature in schools is the exception rather than the norm. Network choice means that:

Young black people see models for their way of living and judging not in their own country but in a far off country unknown to them and inaccessible to them on account of distance, money, time and quite possibly the colour of their skins. This can lead to lack of interest in, and, more seriously, the undervaluing of their own civilisation and environment. Daffodils and red roses are what the poets write about, so why bother to look at the cosmos?²

But of course it is not only black pupils who would appreciate studying literature that reaches for the cosmos. All South African pupils need to study literature from their own continent.

In relation to the second tenet the work of school English Departments is not narrow in conception. The syllabus is not limited to the study of literature but includes language, writing, film studies, newspapers, drama and advertising. While these aspects of the syllabus are often studied uncritically, the syllabus in no way prescribes method. Teachers can choose to explore advertising, for example, as a set of techniques designed to sell products or they can explore society's values as revealed by the advertisements, along with a consideration of the economic structure that depends on advertising. Because method is left wide open by the syllabus, teachers

can choose to politicise the curriculum.

For some years themes discussed in English classrooms have raised social and moral issues. Peter Abbs shows how English teaching in British schools has used literary extracts to raise these issues in the classroom thus taking English in the direction of social studies. He is, however, opposed to a conception of English that places it within the humanities: history, sociology, politics, ethics. He is concerned to reconstitute English as a creative art believing that its proper home is with music, art and drama and that English teaching should nurture individual creativity. The back-to-the-arts-Abbsian school, strongly influenced by Leavis, is the counter movement to the Hoggart school in Britain. Abbs is opposed to "the politicisation of literature". We do not believe that literature is politically neutral and are concerned that our students studying to be English teachers come to understand the ideological biases which underlie differing practices and conceptions of English teaching.

The breadth of what is included in the school English curriculum allows us the freedom to offer a wide-ranging course in English Education. Rather than attempting to describe all aspects of our curriculum we have chosen to focus on the two strongly contested components of our course in an attempt to show that by engaging students in the process of contestation they experience the turbulence; they become part of the struggle.

Students are taught language in two concurrent courses. The first course, called traditional grammar, is a rule-based prescriptive course which insists on the correctness of the standard dialect. The second course, called Language Studies attempts to challenge conceptions of language as a whole, as given or static. Grammar in this course is seen as a theory of language where successive grammars attempt to answer questions not even asked by previous grammars. A grammar is a description of language and prescriptive approaches to language teaching are often at odds with the preferences of native speakers.

Instead of focussing on langue/competence only, students need to understand that language use (parole/performance) with all its variation offers a perspective on language teaching that ties it to its social context. A study of socio-linguistics contests the status of the standard dialect -- and students begin to explore the many dialects of English in South Africa. The existence (and persistence) of these dialects is related to social distance and is a reflection of political, social and cultural division maintained by a policy of apartheid.

An examination of Saussure leading to an understanding of the arbitrary nature of the sign helps students to understand that meanings are culturally produced and that dominant culture has greater control over these meanings. We explore in some detail the relationship between language and social control in the South African context. By examining language and politics, language and class, language and sex, monolithic notions of language are fractured. Language considered in relation to its functions and purposes is continually shifting. A language in use requires an understanding of communicative competence with appropriateness rather than correctness as its yardstick.

Contextualised in South Africa, the Language Studies course has clear links with the South African Literature course. Students asked to comment on the 'incorrect' uses of language in the following three extracts from South African poetry no longer dismiss these choices as poetic licence:

Mozambique did it
Zimbabwe did it
Why can't we did it too?
(Unpublished Open School Poet)



Eyes must once more embrace
The woe of my unfreeness
(D Mattera "Ordeal" in Azanian Love Song)

Listen Man, I'm in boep
For something
I hardly didn't do
(J Cronin "Pollsmoor Sketches" in Inside)

Having heard one of the writers declare that black writers in South Africa have decided to reject externally imposed standards of correctness and "to usurp the language as a tool" for their own purposes (Mattera Lecture, 1984), they are encouraged to begin to unpack the meanings of the language to discover these purposes and the appropriateness of the language for these purposes.

The South African Literature component of our course is the second area of contestation. The liberal humanist voice in the struggle is brought partly by students themselves who come as graduates from English Departments. For many students our South African Literature course is their first serious exposure to the literature of their own country.

At first many of them find that they are unable to appreciate or enjoy it. The problem is captured in these words by one of our students:

The first time I approached South African literature I was very sceptical in my evaluation of it. I had been schooled in a rather stereotyped form of literary criticism and applied these criteria to South African literature. It just did not work. At first the literature appeared to me to be rubbish. One has to home in on the author's perception of reality. It was only after extensive reading that I gradually got the 'feel' for South African literature. I think the reason for this is that one cannot apply the same literary assessment criteria to all literature (C Newman).

Where we manage to create in our students this sense of dislocation their assumptions of what counts as literature can be contested.

The South African Literature course combines literature of liberal individualism with literature that "Speaks the language of Black Consciousness and Populism" (Vaughan). *Cry the Beloved Country* and *The Story of an African Farm* are there but so are the poems of Cronin, Mattera and Serote. The course begins with a lecture on the socio-political background to South African literature since the Second World War. The lecture covers in detail events such as Sharpeville and the death of hundreds of innocent individuals -- mainly youngsters -- during the 1976 unrest. It also points out some of the tragic consequences of banning orders and detentions without trial. The lecture attempts to point out the link between social issues, 'political' events and South African literature.

One of our main concerns is to bring the conflict openly into the seminar room. Over the past few years we have been very fortunate in getting many well known writers to address our students and to read from their works. The writers have been drawn from both liberal individualist schools as well as from Black Consciousness and Populist schools. These writers have in-

cluded Sipho Sepamla, Alan Paton, Peter Wilhelm, Stephen Gray, Don Mattera and Jiggs. Our course has also included a variety of performances ranging from Johnny Clegg of Jaluka on the one hand to the Open School poets on the other.

Our visiting writers often engage in open confrontation with one another and with the students. Black writers, writing the literature of the oppressed, have challenged white South African writers for writing elitist literature. The white writers have fought back. Black writers have challenged white academics, questioning their right to set themselves up as experts on black writers. Words have been defined as AK47s. Some poets have said they do not write poems but utterances, political speeches and statements of love and hatred. Poetry has been defined as worthy in terms of its usefulness. ("Weeds are more powerful than roses" one poet remarked. "My poems are weeds"). Literature as a written form of communication only, has been challenged. Performance poetry, community poetry -- for funerals and commemoration days -- oral poetry, all need to be included in our understanding of what constitutes literature. Literature has been defined for our students as a compulsive cultural act, as a revolution. All of these views are contested. At heart of course is the sense of struggle. Many of the students retreat, frightened, into positions more conservative than they began with. Some of them join us in our struggle to emerge from our liberal humanist backgrounds. We hope that enough of them will take this struggle with them into the schools.

REFERENCES

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 2. Reid, J. 1982: *English Literature in South African Senior Schools: A Critique of Set Books*. Centre for African Studies in Association with the Centre for Intergroup Studies, Cape Town
 3. Abbs, P. 1982: *English Within the Arts*. Hodder and Staughton, London
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STATEMENT BY PAUL MATHEW ON REVIEW OF INSIDE

As a Jehovah's Witness I do not join any protest or resistance against existing order. My conscientious objection was not motivated thereby, nor has any of my writing ever expressed such protest. The reference to me on pages 58 & 59 of Vol 3 No 2, could be construed incorrectly in this regard. Firstly, the article is introduced by "May it not unteach us/to dream, to resist to fight". Secondly, Mr Gottshalk states that Mr Cronin's poems espouse the following values "Honesty in demythologizing and exposing the reality of oppression and exploitation. Rigor in describing tyrants and their tyranny ..." (p. 56). The last line of the review could be construed that I have the same values. I do not. Detention of Jehovah's Witnesses has not just been a phenomenon of West Germany and South Africa, but also the USA, Great Britain and many other lands. The universality of this is due to our utter Political neutrality. Any impression given to the contrary I would to hereby contradict. (Dated 6 November 1984).