

Letterkunde en Krisis: 'n Honderd Jaar Afrikaanse Letterkunde en Afrikaner-Nasionalisme - Taurus

Author: Ample Coetzee

Reviewed by: Vasu Reddy

Our literary tradition in South Africa is a fragmented one; as Breyten Breytenbach put it, "historically we are a cracked society."¹ However, *Letterkunde en Krisis*, Coetzee's preliminary enquiry into the rewriting of Afrikaans literary history, attempts to deconstruct, to bridge the gap as it were between history and the struggle for a unitary South Africa.

Challenging Kannemeyer's liberal humanist treatise in *Geskiedenis van die Afrikaanse Letterkunde* - undoubtedly the best standard work on Afrikaans literature to date, Coetzee's book (or should I say essay), which also appears in the essay collection *Rendering Things Visible* (1990), offers a trenchant dialectic critique of the crisis in Afrikaans literature. Coetzee's reading probes more questions than the "solution" he hopes to provide. Citing Gramsci's concept of crisis, Coetzee posits five dates which delineates important historic events in South Africa. To this end, his interest appears to be less in the texts' repertoire of symbols and metaphors, than the way in which the text can be manipulated to give voice to social and political concerns. To a very real extent, the significance of the dates cannot be over-emphasized.

During 1875-1922 the discovery of diamonds and British colonialism resulted in the Rand Rebellion. 1922-1948 saw the rise of Afrikaner nationalism. 1948-1961 was characterised by the formal construction of apartheid through the legalisation of racist laws. 1961-1976 saw the resistance of the PAC and the ANC. The period after 1976 was shaped by increased resistance from black and banned organisations, and the oligarchy's desire to combat militancy by focussing on its own military.

What problematises this issue is precisely the chronological priority that fails to show how Afrikaans, English and African literature can be located and integrated within Coetzee's program. Although I agree with Coetzee that compartmentalism needs to be abandoned; at the same time, I disagree that one can randomly locate texts in a given delineation, without taking into cognizance the different traditions that inform our society. For example, in Western thinking, literary history is divided into 'periods' and 'movements'. In Eastern thought, it is shaped by 'schools', 'styles' and 'dynasties', whilst in African

literature chronology has nothing to do with locating a text within a tradition. In the first place, Coetzee is very selective about the texts he chooses. The essential problem in including African literature in his discussion, may be seen as 'window-dressing'.

I should like to see what Coetzee makes of a more detailed study. It is easy and apt to say that historical allegiance is crucial to a biographer; but it is also true to say that historical facts should not overshadow one's project. And it is the case that some readers may find fault with Coetzee's book for being too simplistic and learned in some places. See, for example his discussion of the literary renaissance for blacks on pages 26-27 and his commentary on the apparent indifference of some Afrikaans poets to these changes.

Although his reading tends to posit itself as absolute, it nevertheless shifts the focus from the New Critical emphasis on the canonical text as an imaginative heteroclosm, to show how these texts are shaped and canonised by historical circumstances. In this regard, see Coetzee's discussion of the Hertzog Prize for Afrikaans literature on page 13.

To my mind, Coetzee's critique is superfluous, because the Marxist critic tends to favour economic status, thereby jettisoning the text to a purely reductionistic reading. Again, the need to include canonical texts in Coetzee's discussion would mean to "shift the emphasis from the pure and untouchable aesthetic text (as it may have been canonized and placed outside of history) to other aspects of the text." What are these other aspects? In fact, the lack of a suitable definition of what he claims to be "aesthetic" and "universal" seems to be a major weakness of this book.

At this juncture it is perhaps appropriate to take note of Barbara Masekela's vision of a South African literature: But I want to plead that we cannot reject the canon of literature that has come out of South Africa in the past 300 years or so, because it is our literature, it is South African literature. We cannot deny it, we cannot reject it, it is our legacy, it is our heritage and it is going to be our frame of reference until we build a new literature. And even when we have a new literature, it would still be a frame of reference because I am sure we will all try very hard in the future that we do not forget the past so that the past cannot repeat and should not repeat itself in South Africa.² (emphasis mine)

Of course, one cannot overlook the sincerity of Masekela's claim (which is more or less rigorously consistent with any Marxists' infatuation with history; yet my concern lies with the way in which one can reconcile her notion of using the canon as a "frame of reference" with Coetzee's more blatant "dismissal" of the canonical text. The crucial question is what exactly does this "frame of reference" entail?

For the most part, Coetzee seems to be evading this issue in his enterprise. Hence he stresses not *how* but *what* ought to be written about Afrikaans literary history, and is careful to distinguish his own speculative

views based on a limited body of evidence from the paroxysm that characterise the marginalised and oppressed. More important, in his discussion of Adam Small's oeuvre, "the first black and politicized poet writing from the coloured) world, whose drama, *Kanna Hy Ko Hystoe* (1965) has been canonised, Coetzee fails to show why this drama enjoys great respect in the Afrikaans literary establishment although his other works do not receive a similar accolade.

Of special importance is the fact that the "Sestigers" and "Tagtigers" created a literary revolt. As Coetzee points out, these writers, despite their generally apolitical stance, did allude to certain social and political issues; but found it difficult to be radical opponents of the regime. In this regard, particular mention needs to be made of Etienne van Heerden and Antjie Krog's acceptance of the Hertzog Prize, although these writers are popular for their rejection of the government and its policies. See for example an oversimplification on page 32, in his discussion of the Sestiger author's preoccupation with Europe. In another instance when he says that Karel Schoeman's *Na Die Geliefde Land* (1972) provides a negative scenario for change in South Africa because of the text's privileging of ideals and the individual, Coetzee might be promulgating a rigid formula for future writing. Likewise one needs to examine recent interviews by some critics to note their prescriptive orientation.

Indeed, one may single out Marlene van Niekerk's review, "Askoek en pampoenmoes..." in *Die Suid-Afrikaan* (December 1989), in which he literally undermines Betsie van Niekerk and Anlen Marais' integrity as writers, by describing their debut work as "catastrophes". It turns out that Van Niekerk set out to identify and to denounce the *Eurocentric angst* in their texts, and to encourage (if not to impose both writers to embrace, more fully, *Afrocentric* values and perspectives. But can boundaries be crossed without accommodation? This is perhaps an open question to Coetzee and his clan. Again, this is a matter worth mentioning since it brings into debate the question of criticism, which Coetzee's book so cogently illustrates. I should say with justification that the jacket design of *Letterkunde en Krisis* offers an apt visual image of the issues Coetzee raises. On the contrary, the title ought to have been *Kritiek en Krisis*. Clearly, the collapse of the Tower of Babel (or is it the tower of literature?) signifies the disintegration not only of Afrikaner nationalism; rather, it serve to undermine the very dogmatism of Coetzee's treatise. In this regard, one is prompted to recall his words of wisdom at the Victoria Falls Conference in 1989:

"In our deliberations on the historic role of Afrikaner literature as co-determiner of Afrikaner culture and the eventual rise of the ruling class, and on the role it may have to play in the future of South Africa, we should be careful not to tinker too much and not to be prescriptive. Perhaps the most that can happen, is that we can attempt the re-interpretation, "rewriting" of it very carefully - to fit into the context of a national culture."³ (emphasis added)

This affective attitude supposedly expresses the dual-image of many literary critics in this country. Is it still possible to have faith in critics who use one platform to 'charm' their audience, and another to contradict their initial deliberations? Such a critic should take heed of Njabulo Ndebele's advice of "protecting himself rather than his view".⁴ Nevertheless, this disdain has another side: although Coetzee questions the legitimacy of the traditional white, ruling class perspective on Afrikaans literature, how does his project differ from his predecessors, albeit it offers a materialist critique?

By its very nature, although Coetzee's book favours a decentred negotiation of specificity, the task of writing or (re)writing a literary history is challenging and, by any standards, complex. Moreover, a successful literary historian of South African literature will be someone who is well versed in the regional literatures of the country (and this includes English, Afrikaans and African literature), and someone who is willing to make such an enterprise a collective effort.

Soviet poet Yevgeny Yevtushenko, responding in a recent interview to the question of Western aid to the poor Soviet economy, states that there is no need for "charity, but ideas, joint ventures."⁵ The strategy behind Yevtushenko's thinking can be juxtaposed against Ndebele's vision of a representative South African literature. The need to embolden "commonalities", rather than "categories", coupled with the desire of critics to share the credit, ought to be a goal.

Although this seems to be a neo-romantic ideal, I should still suspect, in the present period of transition in South Africa, there will be critics who would want to seize the opportunity of writing a literary history by claiming authority over regional literatures which they barely understand.

Letterkunde en Krisis is, in fact, an extended argument against the traditional liberal humanist view of Afrikaans literary history. However, little is achieved in this project. Despite the irritating typographical and spelling errors in some places, Coetzee's thesis is perhaps best summed up in his valuable (though somewhat impacted) statement of Brink's *Kennis van Die Aand* (1973): "It does also often happen - and even Brink cannot always be exculpated - that the political reality, or atrocity, will be exploited for the sake of the literary". Call this Coetzee's Freudian slip, if you like...

Footnotes

1. Breytenbach, B. 1990. *Crossing Borders: Writers meet the ANC*. Bramley: Taurus.
2. Masekela, B. 1990. *Crossing Borders*. Bramley: Taurus.
3. Coetzee, A. 1990. *Crossing Borders*. Bramley: Taurus.
4. Ndebele, N. 1989. "The ethics of Intellectual Combat". *Current Writing* (1): 23-35.
5. Underwood, A. 1991. "Quest for the Magical Door." *Newsweek* (21 January 1991): 56 Bramley: Taurus, 1990. 62pp. Paperback.