

## The Critical Situation and the Situation of Criticism



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Speaking from the floor during the 1980 Association of University English Teachers of South Africa (AUETSA) Conference in Johannesburg, Professor David Gillham of the University of Cape Town spoke in defense of what he called 'traditional' criticism. The irony of the situation seemed lost on the audience. What was being defended as traditional criticism was the *New Criticism* of Leavis and *Scrutiny*. Here was a statement by a person who had been among the early champions of New Criticism (or practical criticism) in South Africa. Having ridden the crest of a wave that made that critical perspective the dominant mode of inquiry in South African English departments to what many account the preeminent Chair of English in the country, he was now seeking a final legitimization of the mode in the epithet 'traditional'.

I am interested in the processes that lead to a *new* critical orientation becoming in time *traditional*; such transformations have the unintended effect of reminding us of what the processes typically conceal - that after all criticism has a history. The history of criticism in South Africa is a fascinating and important area for research. But this is not the appropriate occasion for such an undertaking, but anyway, for the present purposes, I am more concerned with our current situation than with a detailed account of how we got here. Some history, however, if only in crude summary, may make our present situation more fully explicable.

However 'traditional' it may now be, practical criticism has not always been the dominant critical orientation in South Africa - or anywhere else. In this country it began to make headway in the fifties, gained ascendancy in the sixties, and eventually came under attack in the seventies. The initial efforts to establish practical criticism in this country, and the acrimony that attended the efforts, are a matter of record.<sup>1</sup> There is nothing natural or ordinary or inevitable or even particularly traditional about current critical orthodoxy. Their acceptance of an approach which purports to escape or transcend

history blinds adherents of practical criticism to the simple - but highly significant - fact that its origins, development and, latterly, decline are rooted in a specific historical situation. Produced in a specific nexus of social-historical circumstances, practical criticism was imported to South Africa, where it has subtly adapted to the determinants of a particular ensemble of material, social and institutional forces.

There is an assertion partially concealed here which I should lay bare. Though it would require too detailed an account to demonstrate persuasively, I believe the course of practical criticism in South Africa - in its emphases, its practices, its canon, the issues it typically confronts, even in its pedagogic aims - is subtly but substantially different from what occurred in Britain. Although the existence of such differences should not be surprising, if true they undermine somewhat the comfort doubtless derived by many from the belief that they were doing exactly what was being done in the metropolitan centre.

Once we grant the historicity of practical criticism, its claims to being a uniquely privileged, universally valid mode of literary analysis become problematic. Subjected to the demystification which historicity involves, practical criticism stands open to inspection in such a way that both its powers and its limitations are laid bare. What we come to see, among other things, is that the defenders of practical criticism are merely upholding the *last* critical revolution against a more recent one.

The first serious threat to that *last* critical revolution arose not in the form of an alternative critical practice but at the institutional level of course content: not *how* literature should be taught but *what* literature should be taught. What claims to inclusion in the syllabus South African writing could legitimately make was an issue publicly, and heatedly, debated through the sixties and seventies. On the basis of the debate alone, the situation would appear to have been quite static: conference after conference featured the same positions, the same participants, even, if the truth be told, much the same papers. But behind the appearance of stasis, changes were taking place. Even in English departments whose Heads and leading figures railed against the inclusion of South African or other African literature, accommodations of one kind or another were effected, however grudgingly, in order to placate the noisy devotees of the new literatures: a token *Things Fall Apart* or *The Beadle* here, a portion of an option there. Slowly, incrementally, South African literature muscled its way into the interstices of the Great Tradition.

Over this period, however, much was changing in South Africa, and so too were the very terms of the debate. By the time the battle for inclusion was effectively won, the demands no longer involved simply content but method. This represents a more direct and therefore a greater threat to critical orthodoxy, and the adjustments, compromises, efforts at co-optation and so on have been fascinating to observe. What has happened, in rough outline, is this: As the conflict shifted levels from content to method, concessions were more readily made at the first level. Accordingly, while some adherents of practical criticism

have refused to compromise, at least in their own practice, others have embraced the new content while insistently maintaining the orthodox critical approach. Isabel Hofmeyr was the first to point out how South African English departments have hurriedly cobbled together a South African Great Tradition - Pringle, Schreiner, Plomer, Campbell and so on - constituted by those works and authors most readily assimilable to the analytical methods developed by the New Critics.<sup>2</sup> Not surprisingly, this is but a shadow of that other Great Tradition. Some seize on this obvious point as proof that they were right all along in seeking to exclude South African literature in the first place. What is in fact revealed is the partial, radically selective nature of practical criticism. Purporting to prepare people to read sensitively any literary work, practical criticism enables them to read only a drastically circumscribed set of texts and leaves them mute before all else. In a move that the clothiers to the emperor would relish, it then tells them the fault lies not in themselves but in all those other texts.<sup>3</sup> Instead of encouraging our students to attempt to come to terms with the cultural products of classes and cultures other than our own, we have trained them in a rhetoric of contempt. This invitation to snobbery is one of the more pernicious legacies of practical criticism.

The upshot of all that has gone on in recent years is not without irony. In English departments throughout the country, people are now doing what their noisy colleagues were pressing them to do just ten or twelve years ago - teaching South African literature, giving papers on South African writers, publishing articles on selected South African texts. All too late. Those colleagues, instead of waiting patiently to welcome them to the field, have moved on and are just as noisily as ever demanding still more.

Some may object at this point that I have sought to personalize my account by moving from the level of critical approaches as systems (formal or informal, tacit or explicit) of methods, assumptions and the like to anecdotes about noisy colleagues and strategies for dealing with them. Speaking in these terms is designed not simply to animate my account but to give due recognition to a salient fact. Critical approaches are not simply intellectual constructs existing in some purely abstract realm. *They are positions that people hold*, positions that serve particular interests and satisfy certain needs. The struggle now going on in our departments of English is not a clash of ideas, never mind a free exchange undertaken with all the tolerance and open-mindedness ascribed by our academic mythology to our pluralist, liberal institutions of higher learning. The entrenched positions, the polemics and rancour that have attended critical discussion South Africa over the past several years can not be dismissed as 'academic bad manners', as Guy Butler has called earlier disagreements.<sup>4</sup> They reveal how deeply seated are our commitments to critical approaches. Our critical stances are bound to and impinge on our most profoundly felt needs, desires, values and the beliefs; they correlate with our views of ourselves, of our professional lives and of the social world we inhabit.

If we are to understand the nature of that struggle and of the transformations taking place in our discipline, we must conduct our analysis at two levels. We must grasp, first, the kinds of pressures and trends that typically inform shifts in method and approach in all disciplines. Beyond that we must attempt to grasp the forces shaping transformations in literary studies in this time and in this place. The kind of 'paradigm shift'<sup>5</sup> we are witnessing is related structurally to other shifts in theoretical orientation, whether earlier shifts in literary studies or shifts in other intellectual disciplines. But the particular type, direction and speed of the shift we are witnessing are specific in many respects to the concrete circumstances of South Africa in the 1980s.

Grasping the structural regularities operating in shifts in orientation depends on our ability to answer two closely related questions. How, at one time, can a new method have the capacity to redirect and revitalize a discipline? And how, at a later point, does it lose its impetus and begin to falter? In describing paradigm shifts in science, Thomas Kuhn makes the point that successful theories have been sufficiently unprecedented to attract an enduring group of adherents away from alternative modes of enquiry, and they have been sufficiently open-ended to leave a number of interesting problems to solve. According to Kuhn, the commitment to problem-solving is the dominant characteristic of scientific inquiry.<sup>6</sup> Few literary scholars would be comfortable with the term 'problem-solving' as a description of their characteristic activity. But a closely analogous feature of literary studies enables us to translate Kuhn's insight into our own field. Successful theories make it possible to say new things about literary works, providing at the same time the means for saying them.

Innovatory critical theories indeed provide new things to say about literary production, but only, perforce, a limited number of things and a limited number of ways of saying them. Provided the new things and new ways are found worthwhile to enough members of the profession, the theory will bring about genuine renovation of literary studies. Once the major and more important minor works in the literary canon have been subjected to the norms and procedures of the theory, however, and once the method gains a level of familiarity such that it is no longer capable of surprising one with the insights it can achieve, the theory can bring about little more than increasingly arid and mechanical replications. E.D. Hirsch has commented on the demise of British and American New Critical 'close reading', noting that New Critical commentaries 'as they multiplied became more and more diversified, more and more remote, ingenious, abstract, and decadent.' He goes on to argue that 'the excitement and relevance (New Criticism) carried at first has declined into mechanical exercises which engage students only a little less than their teachers. For naturally, if every reading of a standard text merely becomes a new edition to a growing list, one very probable consequence will be a sense of futility, relativism, and skepticism. The only thing to be looked for is a new "approach" or a "novel and interesting perspective."'

In addition to the problems of exhaustion, replication, and decadence, one further recurring pattern in the gradual decline of

theoretical orientations can be isolated. Fredric Jameson writes that just as the pursuit and application of a new theoretical model opens up new areas for research, so in the very activity of application does it usually come to reveal problems it is incapable of resolving. According to Jameson, 'In the declining years of the model's history, a proportionally greater amount of time has to be spent in readjusting the model itself, in bringing it back into line with its object of study. Now research tends to become theoretical rather than practical, and to turn back upon its own presuppositions (the structure of the model itself), finding itself vexed by the false problems and dilemmas into which the inadequacy of the model seems increasingly to lead it.'<sup>8</sup>

In both cases--reaching the stage of exhaustion and replication, and the progressive laying bare of the theory's internal inconsistencies and inadequacies--the model has lost the richness, the fruitfulness and simply the newness to attract recruits on any significant scale. Those aspects of the theory which could at one time command commitment now exercise their attraction for the most part only on those who are already too deeply committed to change, who have invested so much of their time, their labour, their very careers in the orientation that abandonment is not a genuine option. Furthermore, it is important to keep in mind that however radically innovative a group's theory might initially be, the dynamic of the group will almost certainly become increasingly conservative over time. To an ever greater extent the theory will come to define the group and bind its members together, until finally it becomes the group's very *raison d'être*, so that to abandon it is to forsake the colleagues, mentors, and friends who have shared in erecting and furthering the theory. When one is thoroughly enmeshed in the set of social and professional relations that come to surround an orientation, one can opt out only at the cost of leaving others behind. At this late stage the group now begins to diminish through attrition rather than expand through recruitment.<sup>9</sup>

Many will bristle at the suggestion that practical criticism is in decline. I believe, however, that it is the case that English studies is no longer at the centre of university intellectual life in this country. I believe it is the case that our discipline, which not very long ago seemed so vibrant, so liberatory, so, if I may invoke the dreaded word, relevant, now appears to increasing numbers of our universities' most creative students to be remote, defensive and incapable of providing them with the means to understand and deal with the almost overwhelming pressures their society thrusts upon them. I believe it is the case that the method of practical criticism, which once united our profession and commanded almost universal adherence, no longer enlists unquestioning support and to a large extent survives because it is imposed by those in power on a significant minority who are increasingly skeptical of its claims to validity.

These, I believe, are facts of our current state of affairs. How we have arrived where we have can be explained in part by a feature of New Criticism generally, and in part by the particular circumstances of South Africa.

Those opposed to practical criticism have forgotten, or have failed to recognize, the enormous initial democratizing effect of practical criticism in liberating literary studies from the Classical education of the public schools and Oxbridge. No longer was literary studies the exclusive preserve of a class whose training in the Classics had as a large part of its function the marking off of an élite from everyone else. Now the act of possessing a literary text required only the sustained application of attentive sensitivity, an effort, in principle, available to anyone prepared to undertake it.

Devotees of practical criticism, on the other hand, have failed to recognise that the democratizing effect was severely circumscribed in scope and has led to the substitution of an élite of class background; that what appeared to be the democratization of literary studies was merely its bourgeoisification. An intellectual thrust that was once genuinely, if only partially, liberatory has become conservative. However much it is possible to construct an intellectually satisfying defence for conservative values, it remains true that within an intellectual discipline such a defence will inevitably attract far fewer converts than the earlier liberatory stance was able to do.

In the particular context of South Africa, the faltering of practical criticism must be seen as part of the general crisis of confidence in liberal thinking dating from the late sixties and early seventies. In its inability to influence significantly actual power relations, in its failure to grow into a broadly based mass-movement, even within the minority white electorate, in its remaining in a purely mediatory position between the holders of power and the powerless, in its implicit commitment to social control rather than genuine liberation, in its characteristic translation of economic, social and political matters into moral and individualist terms, liberalism revealed itself to be incapable not only of generating a reordering of South African society but even of making that society explicable. It could produce neither change nor an analysis of the structures and relations that made change so difficult.

Deriving from the same broadly humanist roots as liberalism, practical criticism found itself implicated in the perceived failure of the liberal programme. In a country in which problems and issues increasingly present themselves in broad social and economic terms, practical criticism is unable to posit conceptions of a higher order than the individual in either the production or reception of literature: the individual author, the individual text, the individual reader. To increasing numbers of people entering the field of literary studies, these conceptions are no longer adequate.

The position in which we find New Criticism in South Africa is in most respects similar to the state of affairs in Britain, in America and throughout the rest of the English-speaking world: challenges to New Critical orthodoxy from various alternative perspectives - structuralism, semiotics, reception aesthetics, feminist literary criticism and so on. Practitioners of all these various modes can be found in our English departments; however, just as the special circumstances of South Africa thirty

years ago lead to a particular adaptation of practical criticism gaining ascendancy, so circumstances today seem to be investing one of the newer modes with special appropriateness.

Whatever the merit of the various perspectives, (and I believe openminded and thorough examination shows each of them to have a great deal), the one that seems to be moving most strongly towards reorientating literary studies in this country, and the one that appears in quantity and quality of published research to be the most productive, comprises sociology of literature generally and Marxist literary criticism in particular. That this should be the case will be disquieting to many. We are unlikely, however, to make this state of affairs disappear simply by anethamatising sociology of literature and Marxist literary studies and all their adherents.

If a socially oriented, or any other, critical perspective, should eventually succeed in bringing about a new governing consensus regarding the aims and methods of literary studies in South Africa, we may be certain that its success will not be any more easily achieved than was the success of New Criticism. Like that earlier transformation, this one is likely to be protracted, complicated, difficult and unsettling. For those who can stand up to it, it will also be extremely exciting.

#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

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1. See, for instance, Butler, G. 1977: "Some Random Observations on the Teaching of English in S.A. Universities since 1948", *UCT Studies in English*, No 7, pp. 2-11
  2. "The State of South African Literary Criticism", *English in Africa*, Vol 6 No 2, 1979, pp. 39-50
  3. Here, for example, is Leavis on Tennyson and the Pre-Raphaelites: "They do not, in fact, lend themselves readily to the critical method of this book; and that it should be so is, I will risk suggesting, a reflection upon them rather than upon the method ..." *Revaluation*; rpt. Harmondsworth, Penguin, p. 13
  4. Butler, *op. cit.* p. 7
  5. The term, of course, is Thomas Kuhn's from *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Univ. of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1970. I take into account all the qualifications the concept requires; they are discussed at length by Kuhn in the Postscript to the 1970 edition and in several of his more recent works
  6. *Ibid.* pp. 10 & 205
  7. "Value and Knowledge in the Humanities" in Bloomfield, M.W. (ed.) 1972: *In Search of Literary Theory*. Cornell Univ. Press, Ithaca, p. 61
  8. *The Prison House of Language*. Princeton Univ. Press, 1972, p. v
  9. The preceding discussion of theory-change reproduces material from Visser, N. 1983: "Schools, Movements, and the Emergence and Decline of Critical Orientations", *Theoria*, 61, pp. 55-65
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