

Conference of The English Academy of Southern Africa, 1969

The conference was held at Rhodes University in July 1969 and its theme was South African Writing in English. The proceedings which have been published¹ show that it was a conference of varied purposes: a stocktaking was held of what achievement could be said to exist in South African English (with a glance at the state of affairs in Nigerian and Afrikaans writing), a consideration was given to the sparse bibliographical and lexicographical aids to the study of the field, and various teachers and lecturers gave opinion as to the place, if any, that could be given to South African works in the sadly limited syllabi of schools and universities.

In many ways the papers given by school teachers in the Schools' Symposium are the most valuable. Inevitably the subject is broadened in this section to the general problem of encouraging the school child to read widely and with discrimination. The problems in these fields have always been severe but the feeling arises from the papers given that they are being tackled in an intelligent and vigorous manner, at least by those in position of educational authority. There is a fear however that it will be a long time before their approach will make itself felt at all levels. Perhaps the most valuable contribution in this section is that of the Chief Education Planner in the Department of Bantu Education, Mr. K. B. Hartsthorne; his paper on English Literature in Bantu Schools sadly demonstrates that for

ideological and cultural reasons South African writing is practically unusable in African schools. Nevertheless, more hearteningly, it appeared that some of the central classics of English literature, even if studied by means of simplified and abridged editions in the lower forms, are far more useful than is generally admitted. In his final note Hartsthorne states that Shakespeare, for all his linguistic difficulty, is, with his kingship, kinship, and magical beliefs, most relevant to the African. The present writer can support this view from his own experience, and it is a point which cannot be made too often.

At various times it emerged that the racial problems of South Africa and Africa complicated the universal problem of encouraging students to read. Professor N. Sabbegha, Head of Department of English at the University of Pretoria, discussed English South African writing set for Afrikaans students, and concluded that:

Upbringing and environment are responsible for preconceptions and preconditioned responses that may hamper both the understanding and the appreciation of what has to be read . . . I was taken aback when the wife of a colleague told me that one of her sons resented having to read Pauline Smith for examinations as he was convinced that Pauline Smith was poking fun at the pastoral type of Afrikaner, and more especially at his manner of speech . . . I experienced the embarrassment of having to reply to

a letter from a senior English teacher at an Afrikaans High School who deplored the prescribing of H. C. Bosman's *Mafeking Road* that year. 'The writer', he said, 'presents the Afrikaner as ignorant, uncivilized, dishonest, fond of drink, lazy and comfort-loving', but what distressed him most was 'that the writer had no respect even for the Afrikaner's religion'.²

For an English-speaking reader at least Pauline Smith and Bosman show an almost propagandist regard for the Afrikaner and his way of life. Professor Povey of the University of California, Los Angeles, touched in passing, on the same problem in his paper, 'Styles and Themes in the African Novel in English'. Discussing the style of Amos Tutuola's *The Palm-Wine Drunkard* he remarks:

We know that he had a minimal education and there is a sense in which it can be asserted that his style reflects incompetence, mere 'mistakes'. This was argued with asperity by Africans who claimed that Faber's publication with such minimal editorial correction was aimed at confirming 'international audiences in their superior belief of the African as a quaint and illiterate story teller'.³

Such cultural preconceptions, so completely unrelated to the problems raised in itself by a literary text can cause more harm to the writing and reading of literature in Africa as a whole possibly even than the censorship of governments. Povey significantly recalls that 'when Dylan Thomas called it "a fresh young English" in a review he also spoke the truth', and he goes on to argue that Tutuola's style represents a mine of future possibility for the idiom of the Nigerian novel.

The core of the papers represents an attempt to assess what already existed in the field. The first paper was that of Professor R. Sands. Head of the Department of English at the University of Natal, which was on the South African novel in English. If at times the paper is unduly flippant and arch, its effect is salutary and it was unfortunate that the remaining papers failed to reach its standard of critical astringency. Professor Sands pointed out that the English novel itself has perhaps not attained the splendours of the French or Russian novels; bearing this in mind he further demonstrated that the South African offshoot of the English novel was small and desperately minor. In this perspective the subject of his paper was shown as being very small beer indeed.

If this demonstration of the minor nature of South African writing in English is a demonstration of the obvious, it is an obviousness that Sands' fellow lecturers tended to obscure. In his evaluation he allowed for a certain amount of competent talent and offered three hostages to fortune. *The Beadle* by Pauline Smith, *The Story of a South African Farm* by Olive Schreiner and *Too Late the Phalarope* by Alan Paton. In the last two named novels even his critical faculty has been beguiled as they offer precious little apart from 'local colour', but it is possible he shied back from so radical a demolition. *The Beadle* remains the one novel in the field which could be included in a University course on purely literary grounds and Sands fails to give due credit to its economy of style and beautifully controlled emotion. Nevertheless his paper remains a lone effort to apply standards of real critical rigour to the field covered by the conference: for after him there comes a ruthless hunt for masterpieces. Mr. D. MacLennan of the Department of English, Rhodes University, in his paper, 'The South African Short Story' provides a valuable survey of a surprisingly vast field which would be invaluable to any prospective research student. The South African short story does contain a small amount of creditable work and it is well sign-posted. One does feel however that a vast critical apparatus including ideas drawn from the 'Death of God Theology', Kierkegaard and Hegelian Dialectics (odd bed-fellows) is like using a telescope to study a butterfly, but this is a circumstance found in other papers in a far more dangerous form.

If the prose writing is well served, it is unfortunately not the case with the verse. The need to find excellence when nothing of excellence is being produced causes some very strange contortions. Professor R. Beeton, Head of Department of English at the University of South Africa, in a paper entitled 'Concern and Evocation: Some Aspects of South African English Poetry since the War', is able to demonstrate little realized concern or genuine evocation in the examples he discusses. It is true that he discovers and directs the reader to a certain amount of pleasing minor verse but the reader becomes suspicious when he encounters a passage such as the following:

... Wopko Jensma, in the poem that follows, brutalizes his speech in order to arrest eloquence:

i got a gash in my head
blood spurts from it
i must cut my head off
i must hide myself
no one must see me do it
cause the blood is my guilt
i cant stop the blood
a force behind the blood
tears all bandages off
i tried it many times
in the dark of my room
i am very weak now
due to loss of blood
i only have my agony now
i must cut my head off
and replace it with
a shining conscience

'Conscience' has a coarse sting in it, and its shine an angry fluorescence. Whether here we can believe 'evil itself were beautiful' is much open to question. The whole thing is ugly, awkward, uncomfortable (though 'due to loss of blood' is an indication of its inverted rhetoric). But if beauty has not been created what has? Its power is not heroic, its pain is crudely actual... If not beauty, is it poetry? I think it is in the vigour that uses truncated phrasing to expose its concern, to image its horror. And there is in the thing its own understatement. No names have been called: a rude anguish has acted itself out. 'My country has given me flint for a soul' Sidney Clouts makes Roy Kloof declare in a much praised line; and yet, I suggest, how much greater the horror of Jensma's 'shining conscience', which reflects both the agony of its conception, and the opposite of its insight.⁴

From the remarks quoted above and others scattered in his paper we are to deduce that Beeton would give the poem a political connotation; although to do so he must have access to information extraneous to the poem itself because there is nothing in the text to suggest a political or any connotation at all. Indeed any critical reading of the poem leads to the conclusion that it is being held up for our esteem for precisely the virtues it lacks. The point is surely, as is admitted, that the poem is ugly, it does not realize or in any way criticize the unpleasant things; it simply

is them. At best it is a nightmare, a chunk, unfashioned and jagged, of what we are asked to take for pain thrown before the reader with no internal clue as to any real meaning. 'Guilt' is a little word but it needs much definition drawn from actual human living and as it rests before us it is expected to do the job of poetry. For this reason, among others, the reader is left quite unilluminated as to what a 'shining conscience' might be. The horror is there only in the nightmare and in the poverty of the poem. Effective as nightmares may be to their percipients they must be related to and understood and judged in terms of a broader context of human experience before they gain any significance as poetry.

The only poetry quoted by Beeton that will inspire the reader to further acquaintance with their author's other work are the poems quoted of Francis Sinclair and Oswald Mtshali. These at least have the virtues of *naïveté* and unpretentiousness that the other example lacks. If the paper of Beeton showed grave lapses in critical judgement, the one by Miss Harnett, of the Department of English, Rhodes University, entitled 'New Voices' must surely rank as one of the most extraordinary papers ever delivered to an academic gathering and is unworthy of detailed analysis. It is devoted to two poets, Elias Pater and Charles Cilliers, and is full of empty critical jargon devoted to abysmal poems of which careful reading reveals the unworthiness of the second glance that Harnett so elaborately asks.

The paper on South African Drama in English by Mr. M. Woodrow of the Department of English at the University of Pretoria has been published separately as a supplement in 1970 to English studies in Africa. It is entertaining and informative on an obscure subject. H. W. D. Manson was perhaps praised too greatly; on the other hand, his analysis of the work of Athol Fugard is well balanced. It is indeed a pity that no other mention of Fugard exists in the published proceedings, as the conference had the privilege of seeing a production of his play *Boesman and Lena*: not only was it the most effective production seen at the conference (there were poetry readings and the like), but is also convinced that a voice was being heard in the South African theatre both authoritative and powerful. Fugard has created a theatre based on South African experience and using the idioms of her speech which has already commanded attention in America and England and is of genuine theatrical and literary merit.

Other papers were delivered in order to place English writing in South Africa in the wider context of writing in Africa. Professor R. Antonissen, Head of the Department of Afrikaans at Rhodes University, contributed a paper entitled 'Facets of Contemporary Afrikaans Literature', and Professor J. Povey one on 'Styles and Themes in the African Novel in English'. The latter, except for a passing reference, is devoted entirely to the Nigerian Novel but as it is in Nigeria that the major efflorescence has occurred this is fair enough. Antonissen's paper is a survey of surprisingly large and interesting field and is both critical and scholarly. The portrait of modern Afrikaans writing that emerges is one of some turmoil, a great deal of experimental writing influenced by continental modes, and a penetrating desire to evaluate Afrikaans experience in terms of the general human predicament. Though one feels that Antonissen tends to exalt work that is merely precocious, it is in such an atmosphere as he describes that major works can be written. Sometimes, however, he suffers from an overly florid style already noted in other contributors:

Ingrid Jonker's poems in *Rook en Oker* (1963) and *Kantelson* (1966) are a ritual aimed at perpetuating without respite an interplay of reality and illusion, at creating an illusionary reality in order to make the world inhabitable for the deeply wounded self. It is a continuous double-play for love, seemingly lighthearted sometimes, but in fact always passionate and of terrifying gravity: a double-play for love unto death, when in the end the self loses its grip on the very illusion of love, and everything disintegrates. Everything topples over towards terror in a disrupted universe; in which also South Africa stands out sharply as a loveless and senseless lie.⁵

The sensitive unhappy verses of Miss Jonker are minor in their excellence and hardly ask for so dramatic an advertisement. Povey is equally scholarly and not florid. Briefly summed up his thesis represents a hope that a new and powerful Nigerian novel will involve as a synthesis of already existing forms. The major achievement of Achebe in dealing with village life before and during the coming of westernization has by its very finality left only the possibility of an imitation of ever-decreasing power. The novels of Ekwenzu while melodramatic and deeply influenced in style by Mickey Spillane in the present

writer's view, have opened up the field of modern Nigerian urban life which is rich in possibility. On the other hand Tutuola, illiterate as much of his style may be, has opened up for use the idiom of Nigerian English with its strong influence of vernacular tongues. These possibilities he sees as being synthesized into a new and vital novel.

Other papers are very much by way of being bits and pieces. Dr. R. M. Musicker, Deputy Librarian of Rhodes University, informs us of the desperately poor bibliographical resources available to the would-be student of South African English. Professor L. Lanham, head of the Department of Linguistics at the University of the Witwatersrand, in an informative and fascinating paper discusses 'South African English as an Index of Social Change', and demonstrates far more of the life and values of the English speaking South African than much of the literature discussed. It shows alarmingly how the adoption of a markedly South African accent among the youth shows a decline in 'goal expectancy' and a desire to appear 'tough' to their 'peer group'. Mr. M. Durham of the Department of Education Rhodes University, discusses the interesting results obtained by encouraging school pupils in verse rather than prose composition. The results he quotes are certainly impressive not only from the point of view of self-expression but also of merit. In their spontaneity they put to shame many of the works quoted and lauded at the conference.

Professor Butler, Head of the Department of English at Rhodes University, magisterially discusses the diaries of some 1820 settlers. The effect and interest of these neglected pieces is truly remarkable, their muse is largely unfettered and yet their experiences, simply and directly told, are moving. While these diaries may be of more interest to the historian and antiquarian than to the student of literature, their virtues already mentioned could profitably be enjoined to modern South African writers. Professor E. Callan of the University of Kalamazoo outlines the American interest in Butler's subject and makes a plea that more explanatory and linguistic keys of South African texts should be made available to facilitate American research.

At the end there is a summing up of the utility of South African English writing to a University syllabus. Sabbagha in a paper already noted explains the peculiar problems of presenting such writing to Afrikaans speaking students. Professor P. Segal of the University of the Witwaters-

rand and Professor J. Leighton of the Rand Afrikaans University took a very stern view. At universities we have only three years in which to acquaint students with English literature. It is a desperately short time, even in a single subject honours degree, and if Shakespeare and Milton do not infuse an enthusiasm for literature and a deeper perception of experience, an inferior work with 'local interest', will not do the trick. Leighton summed it up succinctly:

I know of no poet whose work surpasses the work of Spenser and Dryden (both of whom I omit for lack of space), and whose work could with justice replace the works of those whom I feel I must prescribe if I am to achieve my aim of providing a picture of some of the great moments in English Culture

as it is reflected in creative writing.⁶

They also felt that a University was perhaps not the place to stimulate creative writing or stimulate an indigenous literary culture. Segal felt such an attempt erroneous and artificial and remarked:

Neither Shakespeare nor Plomer nor Keats nor Pauline Smith went to a University. Departments of English are of a pretty recent foundation, yet, somehow, English literature got itself written.⁷

In some ways it was a sombre but correct conclusion. Nevertheless at the conference views were aired and information imparted; this can only be of value. Somehow South African English literature will have to get itself written.

REFERENCES

1. South African Writing in English and its place in School and University: Proceedings of the Conference of the English Academy of Southern Africa held at Rhodes University, Grahamstown, 7-11th July, 1969. *English Studies in Africa*, 1970, 13, 1-300. The poetry readings which the writer did not attend have also been published and are reviewed below, pp. XXXXX.
2. *IBID.*, 182.
3. *IBID.*, 209.
4. *IBID.*, 127-8 quoting from *Ophir*, 6. ix. 1968, 16, and *One Life*, Cape Town, Purnell, p. 11.
5. *Proceedings*, 199-200. Both volumes are published by the Afrikaans Pers Boekhandel, and a translation *Selected Poems* has been published by Jonathan Cape.
6. *IBID.*, 187.
7. *IBID.*, 179.

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Conference of the South African Institute of International Affairs, 1970

The conference was held in June 1970 at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg and was devoted to 'The Impact on International Relations of the Population Explosion'.

The subjects of discussion ranged widely, but of particular interest to readers of *Zambezia* was the provocative paper on the economic and other implications of population growth in Africa, given by Professor G. M. E. Leistner of the University of South Africa. He concluded that the most explosive factor is the increasing number of unemployed and relatively poor young men and the

tendency for political and social disputes to arrange themselves around tribal interests. On the one hand, in urban areas tribal differences tend to become obscured and so create the beginning of a real proletariat. On the other hand, differences between the relatively well-off African and his poorer compatriot tend to be blurred by the fact of the latter's participation, through family, and tribal loyalties, in the former's wealth. The political implications of these factors is being accentuated by the increasing individualization of the urban African and an 'excellent revolutionary potential' is being created.

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