

Squeezing writers out: A deductivist stranglehold on the construction of “South African English literature”?

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This essay builds on a short response piece I wrote for a special issue of *English Studies in Africa*¹ in which papers and respondent essays were gathered together arising out of a colloquium held at the University of Johannesburg (UJ) in late 2009 on “post-transitional” South African “literature” in English. (“Literature” here gets the grimace of quote marks because it is not by any means a self-evident category, and because the UJ symposium, like other, similar, state-of-the-field deliberations, was set up precisely to decide where one might begin, and end, in deciding what exactly constituted South African “literature” after the transition.) In that response piece, called “Notes on the construction of South African English writing”, I asked the question what the construction of this “field” would look like if critics switched their literary-critical argumentation from a largely *deductive* mode to an *inductive* mode. I suggested that a strongly deductive trend had been apparent in many of the larger literary histories of this field since the late 1970s, and that the deductive mode (from general supposition to specific case rather than the other way around) had become especially dominant as the discursive turn took hold in South African literary-cultural criticism.

In the course of my argument, I made a distinction between “writerly” and “readerly” modes of operation in criticism, arguing that the discursive turn had brought with it an accentuated trend towards the readerly, which I defined as a pronounced emphasis on

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the critical-discursive framework(s) in which the literary work was *placed* by the critic, as against a more writerly mode, which implied a correspondingly stout emphasis on the writer's implicit or explicit design(s), form and meaning as embodied in the text. However, because the terms "readerly" and "writerly" have become over-determined by their strong association with Roland Barthes's somewhat different conception of "readerly" and "writerly" texts (Barthes 1974), I shall for the remainder of this essay speak rather of approaches that are critic-dominant ("readerly", in my earlier usage) as against approaches that are writer-dominant ("writerly"). By critic-dominant, then, I mean approaches in which the critic's assimilative, shaping conceptual design of the material before her, and of the field in which the work finds its place, take precedence over the primacy of the text(s) under discussion and over these texts' more detailed, writerly designs. By writer-dominant I mean approaches in which the literary-critical discussion/analysis is *led* by the vagaries and byways of the text – and the imaginative and implicitly critical constructions of the world instituted by the text itself. The resulting critical discussion, in such a case, may be more open-ended and resistant to closure.

Juggling acts

It should immediately be noted that these two categories have been conveniently prised apart here for the sake of definitional accuracy. It stands to reason that few critical approaches among the many doing the rounds in the literary academy in the field of South African writing are either completely critic-dominant or thoroughly writer-dominant, but intermixtures of the two. It also stands to reason that such intermixture should be regarded as healthy, even desirable. My concern, however, is that the percentages, shall we say, have become increasingly loaded in favour of the critic, at the cost of writers and their particular fields of operation.² Consider the

2. I base this sense on the experience, over many years, of editing a South African literary journal, acting as a referee for journals, and generally acting, in my capacity as a senior academic, as a reader of

following *mise-en-abyme* analogy: academic critics often juggle imaginative texts like so many balls in the air, showing dexterity and combinatorial finesse, and making entirely new shapes out of the airborne objects they so dexterously manipulate in their writing and speaking performances. Imagine, however, that within each separate ball so juggled, there is another, possibly more intricate, juggling act going on. This would be the very special performance of the writer of *that* text, the artist in *that* bubble. Her performance is likely to be, let's say, a novelistic or poetic or narrative or dramatic play that, in itself, may be quite mesmerising, if one cares to suspend the big stage-show and take a look at the more detailed, supposedly smaller picture, which will become commensurately bigger once you zoom in. This *mise-en-abyme* will continue, with

research proposals, conference applications, and the like. However, for data analysis that supports the conclusion that little criticism is occurring of SA writing in English in its greater diversity, see Barker (2006). Although Barker's analysis stops at 2004, the data he reveals about a small group of South African writers receiving the lion's share of critical attention (2004: Appendix, p. 75) is indicative of a trend that has not been significantly checked, I believe. Barker's data synthesis on published academic articles shows that an English South African canon, in statistical terms (number of articles published in peer-review journals) accrued around the following authors: J.M. Coetzee, Nadine Gordimer, Olive Schreiner, Pauline Smith, Bessie Head, and Alan Paton. In the time that this restricted focus was taking hold, contemporary theory was on the rise, such that articles on postmodernism, poststructuralism, various forms of feminism, and the like, appear as a major category on the rise in the 1980s and beyond (Barker 2006: 55). My sense is that the theory revolution in the SA academy – and what a great revolution it was! – also saw the beginnings of a deductivist trend which was carried forward, in the disciplinary domains of "English" studies and therefore South African literature studies (traditionally a subset of English studies), into Foucauldian "discourse" criticism, various forms of post-structuralist critique, and similarly various forms of more broadly cultural criticism. In all of these forms of criticism, the general (discourse theories, theories of the sign, of the body, of trends in cultural production) most commonly took precedence over the particular.

that writer herself juggling intertextual references, literary allusions, and an intricate play of meanings. Let's hold the *mise-en-abyme* at the first two levels. I would say that, to be critically judicious, you need a sense of both the meta-juggle of the critic (let's say, for example, Michael Chapman's highly contested book, *Southern African literatures*, or Sarah Nuttall's *Entanglements*, or my theory of the seam), as well as separate accounts of the distinctiveness of the individual works that make up the bigger shape. The test of those bigger shapes, in the metajuggle, I would add, is precisely to what extent the individual works support, by their weight presence and texture, the emergent critical narrative. Many of the howls of protest at Chapman's book, after it was first published in 1996, were from writers, individual writers who read this supposed history of the field in which, in their own phenomenal reality, they were participants, only to find that, here, in this authoritative history, they did not appear to exist! Chapman, I am certain, would counter that it is impossible to mention everyone in a general history – which is true – but that one must supplement the meta-critiques with more individualised critiques in which the singularity of particular acts of writing is acknowledged and celebrated. Here is Chapman, in fact, saying exactly that:

[W]e need to balance philosophical critique against the life of the individual human being. The latter's experience – in the experience of the novel, the poem or the play – justifies the scaffolding of literary criticism. Without the experiential text there is no place for literary studies as a discipline in the university. Without the courage to evaluate the literary text – why, how, is it compelling? – there is no commitment to the distinctive dimension of the aesthetic. Why then is literary studies so eager to downplay the significance of literature, to position itself as an outpost of other disciplines, in which the template of the sociologist or philosopher or cultural theorist is imposed upon the literary text? Perhaps literary studies has difficulty in doing anything else. There will always be a disjunction between what creative writers produce (their subject matter) and the more abstract language of critical discourse. My view is, nevertheless, that greater congruence is possible between the language of the author and the language of the critic.

(Chapman 2010: 11)

If such congruence is not found, that is, if the approach taken is consistently critic-dominant, then the danger is that the myriad voices of individual texts will remain muted inside the enclosed, tennis-ball space that they are allowed a kind of enforced solipsism within the public space of criticism and critical theory – while the meta-juggling act gets performed. Indeed, one might argue that such confinement, such muting of the writer’s individual, distinctive, possibly dissonant voice, is necessary for the felicity of the meta-critic’s exhibition of knowledge, qua metacritic. That is, when the accentuation of the trend I am describing becomes set in practice, and reputations are built on such an accentuatedly critic-dominant practice, the repression or muting of the writer’s voice – in its strong particularity – becomes a standard operating procedure, perhaps even a necessity.

A power struggle?

I believe that the trend suggested by Chapman of an avoidance, or “downplaying”, of literature, is in fact very marked in the current critical scene in South Africa, and my argument is that we should not have too many illusions about the fact that a power struggle is being waged between writers of creative or imaginative work on the one hand, and academic critics on the other. Further, it is my sense that the critic-writer (as a class) currently has the imaginative writer down on the ground, a knee pinned on her neck.³ The writer is

3. See Pierre Bourdieu (1993: 41):

The struggle in the field of cultural production over the imposition of the legitimate mode of cultural production is inseparable from the struggle within the dominant class (with the opposition between “artists” and “bourgeois” to impose the dominant principle of domination (that is to say – ultimately – the definition of human accomplishment). In this struggle, the artists and writers who are richest in specific capital and most concerned for their autonomy are considerably weakened by the fact that some of their competitors identify their interests with the dominant principles of hierarchisation and seek to impose them even within the field, with the support of the temporal powers.

squirming, struggling for breath. This is not something to celebrate. Unless, of course, you want a public sphere in which the imaginative realm of writing is a nice, domesticated zoo, or a glass menagerie, while the show is stolen by conference-hopping, microphone-strutting writer-critics who set the cultural agendas: this way of seeing things, that way of sorting the wheat from the chaff, these larger patterns, those articulations within the pattern. I know, I am one of these critics. Like many of my peers, I understand the power of the microphone, the sense of contextual mastery when audiences – themselves often mesmerised by the impossible multiplication of writers and books – listen to scholar-writers speaking in crisply articulated conceptual categories, defining, distinguishing, ranking, prioritising, differentiating and setting the scene, ultimately elaborating broadly based critical agendas that bring a measure of reassurance and relief. Here is direction! Here is insight! Here is a map of sorts.

In this process of critical elaboration there is, indeed, insight for all concerned. There is, assuredly, a kind of excitement that makes academic, or perhaps one should say scholarly, pursuit as conceptually provocative as it undoubtedly is. Here is the momentum, the force, that creates opportunities for funding, that launches well-resourced projects, and results in what we call knowledge-production. In addition, there are accolades to be won, awards, ceremonies, publications, ratings, further opportunities for funding, promotions, prestigious appointments, visiting professorships, global travel, all of it quite breathtaking, a wonderful career, when it gets done well, combined, perhaps, with sartorial personality, an idiosyncratic style, individual aplomb. The critic becomes a figure of renown, a “star” of sorts. She gets fêted, talked about, stirring controversy and filling expectant audiences with a keen sense of anticipation. What will she say today? Has she developed a new theory?

The most heteronomous cultural producers (that is those with least symbolic capital) can offer the least resistance to external demands, of whatever sort. To defend their own position, they have to produce weapons, which the dominant agents (within the field of power) can immediately turn against the cultural producers most attached to their autonomy.

All of which is to the good. Of course I am exaggerating slightly for effect, although not to the point of unrealistic hyperbole, for I am describing the arc of an ideal literary-cultural critic's career. Nonetheless, I feel compelled to ask, what becomes of the imaginative writer while this critical machinery hums and whirrs? Is she screaming for air inside a juggling ball inside the master-critic's attaché case as she strolls down the boulevard of yet another foreign city, on her way to yet another academic gathering where symbolic capital is to be seized. Seize the day, indeed. Another day, another conquest.

Is this an unfair exaggeration? Well, yes and no. Yes, because writers do have influence, in certain circumstances and under certain conditions; they are not always, nor entirely, trapped. No, because, to use a famous example, Franco Moretti, in his controversial pursuit of a methodology for describing the arc of "world literature", has frankly stated that there simply isn't the time to read everything that imaginative writers publish. Says Moretti:

[W]e know how to read texts, now let's learn how not to read them. Distant reading: where distance, let me repeat it, is *a condition of knowledge*: it allows you to focus on units that are much smaller or much larger than the text: devices, themes, tropes – or genres and systems. And if, between the very small and the very large, the text itself disappears, well, it is one of those cases when one can justifiably say, Less is more. If we want to understand the system in its entirety, we must accept losing something. We always pay a price for theoretical knowledge: reality is infinitely rich; concepts are abstract, are poor. But it's precisely this "poverty" that makes it possible to handle them, and therefore to know. This is why less is actually more.

(Moretti 2000: 57-58)

Moretti may have a point if one's aim is to describe the shape of "world literature" (a doubtful quest, surely), but it leaves imaginative writers, in their local habitation, dead in the water. And the only way for a species threatened with this level of annihilation to respond is by changing the game, wresting some control back from the master critics who strut the stage of "world literature" and advocate that we should actually stop reading primary imaginative

literature in any but the scantest of surveyor detail. The question, however, is how to do this? What means of power, what access to the sources of symbolic capital, do imaginative writers actually or potentially have?

Spaces of legitimation

Writers undoubtedly have their own universe of acclaim, their own spaces of symbolic contestation and capital accumulation. These are spaces where writers can win public legitimation for their practice – a form of recognition and acknowledgement which, for them, is like oxygen. I am thinking of the many literary festivals, book fairs, launches, public events, public conversations, richly endowed literary competitions that promise prize money to the winners, fan clubs, book clubs, Internet sites dedicated to writers, and so on. In addition, writers – especially poets but not exclusively bards – have traditionally been associated with oracular or extraordinarily acute powers of sight and insight captured, to some extent, in Coleridge’s extended sense of the term “imagination”, and in the traditional view that poets are gifted with oracular wisdom.⁴

But the valence of individual writers’ “imaginative power” has been deeply eroded by the discursive turn, by Barthes’s proclamation of the death of the author and the devastating raids on the notion of originality by legions of Foucauldian and other discourse warriors over the past 40 years or so, myself included. This was a

4. See the *Social Dynamics* special issue under the title, “Exceeding Public Spheres II” (*Social Dynamics* Vol. 36, No. 1), edited by Carolyn Hamilton, Lesley Cowling and Isabel Hofmeyr, arising from the 2007 Wits conference, “Paradoxes of the postcolonial sphere: South African democracy at the crossroads”, which contains a subsection of essays on “Public performers of wisdom and affect”. The essays, by David Attwell, Gerrit Olivier, Anthea Garman, Kwezi Mkhize, and Leon de Kock (framing essay) tease out the notion of writers as public performers and their role in the public sphere.

time in which critics and theorists, in the most elevated forums of critical symbolic appraisal, largely stole the march on writers, using their lofty perches in consecrated⁵ academic space to “place” and situate writers within larger discursive formations. “Originality”? No, such critics were wont to say. Or they would say: very rare. Every writer was written by a prior discourse, the elucidation of which was the discourse critic’s secret knowledge, the source of her elevated insight. This was an elevation which *subsumed* literature into a greater, more panoramic sociocritical view. One might say much the same of Marxist literary critics, who similarly adopted the greater purview of social class formation, and unpacked the ideological interpellations by which writing was informed, in order rightfully to “place” literature.

The socially legitimated academic spaces in which such placing, positioning and explications take place are generally convened by the academic major-domos, leaving the now rather isolated “imaginative” hacks so placed and discussed, mostly in their absence, to the mucklined streets of (mostly) local book fairs and the carnival atmosphere of arts festivals, there to seek acclaim among the beer-swillers and the wine-tasters. (Take, for example, the Klein Karoo arts festival, where hundreds of tons of beer are consumed, and the Franschoek literary festival, where wine is by no means a small part of the general appeal, along with personal appearances by attention-starved writers themselves). These spaces of *popular* legitimation – even if we extend the term to *elite*-popular as in classy intellectual wine-drinkers – are nonetheless worlds apart from the sense of gravitas, the formally consecrated realms of intellectual sanctification offered by universities with their neoclassical columns and Great Halls and socially ordained claims to higher knowledge. This is a higher knowledge that, in the realm of consensual social understanding, is decidedly more objective and more discerning than is available in most other spaces of social contestation, particularly the commercially propped-up tents of literary competitions and arts festivals. Indeed, this is why academic “experts” are so often borrowed, or commissioned, from within the universities or other

5. On the notion of consecration within the “market of symbolic goods”, see Bourdieu (1993: 121-123).

institutions of higher learning to adjudicate literary prizes – the experts mitigate, to some extent, the sense of commercial or personal slant in the judging. The literary prize managers “borrow” legitimacy from the universities and their agents, borrow the status of the literary judge to lend the prize a touch of elevated impartiality and discernment. (In cases where creative artists themselves are used as judges, they must have already have attained symbolic capital of a very high order, conferred upon them precisely by the institutionally validated intellectual arbiters, or in adjacent fields by dint of widespread social consecration in overlapping “fields” of social capital, as Bourdieu has taught us, before they are deemed sufficiently impartial and expert for the role.) Conversely, writers nowadays are likely to feel the greatest sense of consecration when taken up by a recognised or prestigious university in a writer’s residency or similar arrangement.

In these cases, the claims of the writer to more-than-cursory attention – the claim to valuable social capital – is significantly buttressed and enhanced by the explicit legitimation conferred by prestigious association with a reputable university or institute of higher learning or its agents acting in an autonomous capacity (the argument is further supported by the fact that this enhancement of symbolic capital will not accrue unless the institute of higher learning itself has a significant accumulation of such capital).

Writer-academic “copula” figures

This is nowhere more trenchantly illustrated than in the copula of influence that sometimes accrues to certain individuals who wear both the imaginative writer’s hat and the don’s professorial gown, and especially to those who wear both with an authoritative nod and a flamboyant swirl. These writer-academic personalities draw on both the institutional valorisation of the academic imprimatur and on the oracular calling of the inspired or imaginative writer. In South Africa, there have been some notable figures of this kind. If the tendency to combine the aura of “imaginative writer” with the power of consecrated scholar is pronounced in this country, as

elsewhere, it is partly because the financial returns of being a writer are particularly meagre, unless one achieves international bestseller status, which is so rare as to be almost entirely beyond the scope of most serious writers. So, we have seen eminences such as J.M. Coetzee, André P. Brink, Marlene van Niekerk, Etienne van Heerden, John Miles, Lewis Nkosi, N.P. van Wyk Louw, Stephen Gray, Richard Rive, Guy Butler, D.J. Opperman, T.T. Cloete, Njabulo Ndebele, Elleke Boehmer, Es'kia Mphahlele, Daniel Kunene, Antjie Krog (recently appropriated by the University of the Western Cape) and many others spend important time in the hybrid roles of writer-scholars, leveraging the power vested in their academic robes, to some extent, in the furtherance of their careers as creative writers. (I would argue, however, that, if anything, their careers as writers, in most cases, have more supported their academic careers than vice versa, which goes to the more general point I am making.) The above list gives a few examples of the more famous and revered of these “copula” figures. There are, one must add, a secondary legion of such writer-academics, more densely populated, and perhaps not quite so very eminent or broadly recognised as writers, but among whose ranks the members nevertheless span networks of influence covering both the academy and the non-academic public realm of criticism and status-bartering. One should not harbour illusions about the operations of power – the power of influence mediation and exchange of symbolic capital – that run through these networks of appraisal and counter-appraisal. Anyone who has fallen foul of a particular “gang” of writer-critics, and has felt the sting of bad press as a result (poisonous reviews in newspapers, journals and periodicals, supposedly “devastating” critiques in journals, such as Lionel Abrahams was subjected to in his time, among others), will testify to the febrile, and yet still quite destructive, operations of power in such networks. One is compelled to have recourse, sometimes, to that old cliché about the game being so vicious because the stakes are so small.

Zero-sum game

That is, indeed, the whole point. From a writer's point of view, this public infighting is a zero-sum game. It really doesn't get anyone anywhere except to act as a kind of purgative, and it will not really matter much in the ultimate, historical reckoning of literary works, if, that is, such a reckoning can still be counted on. The real goal should be to storm the academic citadel, or to take it from the inside, Trojan-Horse style, and restore the discussion of literature to its rightful tenor and depth.

One should not, however, overly emphasise the writer's interest in this alone. Everyone's interest is at stake. The loss implicit in a literary culture which teaches itself to stop reading literature in any real detail is much greater than mere loss of face for writers. I have argued in a previous essay⁶ that a more broadly cultural imaginary, out of which the ever-renewing forms of critical writing must necessarily emerge, depends to a large extent on the continued existence of a literary-critical archive. If we fail to note, record and assess the newer writers and their works, and the emerging constellations of imaginative worlding (to use Edward Said's term) contained therein, then this broader cultural imaginary could well become etiolated (cf. de Kock 2008). Our cultural and civil imaginary would eventually become reduced to a repetitive pageant of ideas and reruns of ideas orchestrated by an ensconced bloc of consecrated academic critics and their acolytes, their legions of PhD and MA students, all seeking to have their monographs published for the sake of promotion in an ever more competitive game; all seeking the purchase of symbolic capital in their own right. In a sense, the danger is a certain symbolic *over-capitalisation*, a levelling process in which it becomes all but impossible to distinguish excellence in the quality of critical intellection from proliferation and mass, and to keep in mind that Literature should be regarded as Base Camp for literary critics. The problem is exacerbated by the fact that "creative" texts must contend for critical attention with any number of other discursive

6. See "A history of restlessness: And now for the rest" (de Kock 2008).

and cultural assemblages and objects, from popular culture in all its forms to “texts” in the expanded sense (buildings, cities, other visual forms, oral recordings of cultural expression, etc.). Imaginative writers and their texts must also jostle for attention alongside the myriad extensions of critical theory, which as we all know does not need a primary imaginative text to make its point, or its many, deferred and unresolved points.

I am party to the trends I am questioning. My argument now does not gesture towards good practice as against bad practice. To the contrary, this is self-examination, and I feel it is best conducted in a comradely and perhaps introspective as well as outwardly critical manner. The problem is this: if everything we do in terms of research, from literary analysis to cultural analysis in the broadest sense, is important and necessary in a relative sense – and I would argue that, ideally, it should be – then how do we even begin to prioritise one kind of work above another?

Symbolic overcapitalisation

For example, imagine, for argument’s sake, that you are the editor of a journal called *Literary-Cultural Studies* in South Africa. You are editing the final issue of the journal, and although there are only five more slots available for critical articles, in terms of space, you have seven accepted papers. You have no choice but to reduce this number to five for economic reasons. The papers deal with 1) radio soap operas in Kenya and their influence on configurations of social power; 2) comic-book interventions in South Africa to combat the spread of HIV-Aids; 3) letters extracted from the archives of Indian migrant workers en route to Durban in the early twentieth century; 4) a study of cosmopolitanism in Johannesburg in 2010 with regard to the “migrant-vibrant” suburb of Yeoville; 5) a similar study with regard to popular readings, in various media, of the famous, semi-derelect circular skyscraper called Ponte at the bottom of Hillbrow, Johannesburg; 6) a literary analysis of Yvette Christiaan’s novel, *Unconfessed*; and 7) a critical account of the depiction of gender in Angelina Sithebe and Zukiswa Wanner’s recent novels.

How would you choose five from the seven, assuming that peer reviewers have found them all to be acceptable for publication? Imagine that there was no other option but to choose. There was no next issue – this was the last, celebratory issue, because the journal was finally closing down after 23 years and 46 issues, for financial reasons. All efforts to find new sponsorship had failed after the previous sponsor, the Academy of English Literature Studies in South Africa, fell into insolvency. Let us assume, for argument's sake, that your choice as editor is public, in that it must be defended before an editorial board. Would you dare to choose the two literary articles, dealing with Christiaan's novel and the fiction of Wanner and Sithebe, above, perhaps, the discussion of Kenyan radio soaps and the analysis of readings of Ponte? That would be a risky choice, exposing you to allegations of prejudice against the newer forms of critical writing that include a wide Afrocentric range as well as progressively unconventional (and less "old-fashioned") literary-cultural analysis. Neither would it be easy to ignore any of the other essays: the study of metropolitanisms (and, in particular, "Afropolitanism", a term favoured by influential Johannesburg-based scholar Achille Mbembe) is an interesting and attractive field, but one would also not want to ignore the recent publications of black, woman writers such as Christiaan, Wanner and Sithebe. You would have a serious editor's headache. Much better to beg for funding somewhere and publish *all* the articles. Much better to opt out of such a compromising choice, and to put out a congested final issue of the journal.

Plainly, the field that is variously signified by the disciplinary terms "English", "English Studies", "Literature Studies", and most broadly, "Literary-Cultural Studies", has come to be quite heavily overcapitalised. There is, in my view, too much symbolic capital at play for any kind of coherent or dedicated critical currency to emerge. Many critics would say, with a great amount of validity, that this is an excellent state of affairs. It speaks to the pluralism and expansiveness for which generations of scholars have campaigned over the years in the face of quite narrow agendas such as *Prac Crit* (I.A. Richards) or the Great Tradition (F.R. Leavis), and their various offshoots, not to mention the stuffiness of the Eurocentric, neocolonial canon of works associated with these hoary old

orthodoxies. Again, I must add that I played a role, along with many others, in tilting at such windmills, and that no one should advocate a simple return to the recondite literary practice we last saw in full flourish at South African universities in the 1970s. However, one does not need to have recourse to old-fogeyism to recognise that setting a dedicated critical agenda in the current critical milieu of symbolic overcapitalisation requires some hard choices if one is not to revert to the fallback position of doing a little bit of everything, and nothing in particular.

How does one even begin to choose a more defined vector in such a multivectoral plurality of approaches and possible subject matter? I would like to suggest two points in this regard: 1) if this is a question of survival – and I will argue below that it is – then one must necessarily fall back on the strength that is unique to one’s species, or the quality in one’s disciplinary species that is *sui generis* (I am using the terminology of evolutionary survival quite deliberately here); and 2) the choice is made simpler if one is able to declare a sense of solidarity with, and allegiance to, the *object* of one’s discipline as *either* literature in the imaginative guise primarily – Walt Whitman, Edgar Allen Poe, Henry James, Herman Charles Bosman, David Lodge, Peter Carey, Philip Roth, Wisława Szymborska, Cesar Vallejo, Fernando Pessoa, Douglas Livingstone, Toni Morrison, Jacob Dlamini – the endlessly alluring and nonfinite possibilities of reading in the literary-imaginative archive; *or* what I will (perhaps bluntly) summarise in the term cultural studies – cosmopolitanisms, oceanic studies, popular culture, film study, radio, television, gendered identities, embodiment, mass culture, and so on and so on (the list of possible topics is expanding as I write). Adjacent to these topics, too, are the many extensions of critical theory.

At this point, many critics would surely say “No!” Do not force a choice between such wonderful topics and the study of literature. The various sets are interconnected, they are intermeshed. Critical theory and “critical studies” in their many guises and voices can be shown to intersect with and feed into studies of imaginative writing. I agree, but I would still ask where the weight lies, and I would still ask whether, in such cases, the approach taken is writer-dominant or critic-dominant. If literature or imaginative writing is used

merely as one of many balls in a juggling act which foregrounds the critic-juggler's mastery of theory or cultural studies more than it fore-grounds the act(s) of imaginative writing in play, then I would say a choice has already been made. The choice, in such cases, has already swung against literature as the primary object of study. The primary object of study has been switched in the mesmeric act of juggling. And if a choice has been made, then a contrary choice, or one of a series of more modulated choices in the contrary direction, is also available.

Embracing the binary

Let us now be candid and embrace the binary, the mostly-this or mostly-that choice before us. Let us accept for a moment that binaries are perhaps not always the kneejerk heresy that they are so often made out to be, that they help us to see the starkness of certain choices before we begin to get really clever and differential in the execution of such choices. The situation, I would argue, is as follows: there is not enough disciplinary space, time, resources and energy to practice *both* literary studies and critical theory in such a way that either set is coherently realised. One sees the mandatory nature of this choice in the fact that some Departments of English in South Africa concentrate more on literature in their undergraduate teaching syllabuses, but the weight in their collective research agendas tends to fall more on the cultural studies critical theory side – that is choices are being made in these different domains of action. Many different people will make many different arguments in this regard, that is, if they were forced to choose, but here is my own argument: the choice, I believe, should be related to the question of what is unique or *sui generis* to the discipline in the first place. And, if one is still talking here about English departments or Afrikaans departments or African languages departments or Modern European Languages departments of literature (and language) studies rather than Cultural Studies Institutes, or more general research institutes such as WISER at Wits, STIAS at Stellenbosch, or HUMA at UCT, then the irreducible, unique

objects of the discipline are *literature* and *language*. (Let us leave aside for the moment the other argument that is lurking here, namely that a further choice must be made between language studies and literature studies; let us assume that a settlement has been made in this area, and that provision has been made for language teaching as well as literature teaching, in an imagined department of (let us say) English studies at a South African university.) I say the irreducible objects of a literature department are literature and language because the study of literature and language – compared with the study of cultural processes and artefacts more generally, as well as the study of critical and social theory – is something that no other discipline can do quite as expertly as literature and language experts can do (or should be able to do). That is “our” domain: literature and language. Other experts from several other disciplines can also do critical theory, can also do cultural studies (the cultural anthropologists are arguably more expert, more qualified, to do this), can also do political economy, sociology, history, discourse studies and cosmo-theory. But literature and language, *that* is where we can (or should be able to) speak with the greatest authority.

Other disciplines have other primary domains, and they are wary of assuming mastery in literature and language. They defer to “us” in this. And yet “we” barge into so many shared terrains, from sociology to history to philosophy to Freudian and Lacanian psychology to cultural anthropology to media studies to critical political economy; we barge in as if it’s a free-for-all. It is not. Disciplinary domains are closely guarded because each one has a special hoard of painstakingly accumulated symbolic capital. Of course, I am by no means saying that interdisciplinary or cross-disciplinary work should be barred, that an agent of literary studies should not borrow from any or all of these fields. We do so borrow and appropriate and we should continue to do so. But the question is one of balance and relative weighting. It is a question about maintaining a primary disciplinary allegiance – if only to have a base for continued propagation of one’s own species – from which to explore other disciplines. However, in my observation over recent years, one is no longer always sure whether “literature” academics – or academics housed in literature departments – do still adhere to a primary

allegiance to literature as the *object* of their discipline. Reading their published research outputs, and listening to their papers at conferences and seminars, I sometimes feel that the discipline has lost, or is in danger of losing, a more or less objective focus, a unique area of methodological and thematic expertise.

Disciplinary loss

This is all the more so at gatherings and conferences that turn around the core of an interdisciplinary concern such as transnationalism, for example, gatherings for which I myself have been directly responsible in my role as Head of School and, implicitly, director of research in the School of Literature and Language Studies at Wits University. I have found myself sitting at such gatherings and listening to wonderful expositions of historical methodology, cultural analysis, discourse analysis, descriptions of postnational and other fascinatingly liminal cultural spaces, finely honed expositions of transnational flows and circulations of ideas which are sometimes, but not always, tied to literature and textual objects. Despite the intellectual excitement inherent in such gatherings and collocations of ideas, such university-consecrated assemblies, I have also experienced in such spaces a distinct sense of *disciplinary loss*.

I mean this both in the sense that I have felt at a loss – I will frankly admit that I am out of my depth, unprepared by my many years of practising literature studies, for entirely new fields of interest in adjacent disciplines such as maritime studies and Indian history and Empire studies and their methodologies, to name but a few; I have also felt a sense of disciplinary loss in the sense of feeling acutely the actual loss of the disciplinary object of my field, namely a dedicated view of literature, not history primarily, not cultural studies primarily, not oceanic studies primarily, not Freudian psychoanalysis and other forms of modern thought primarily, but literature primarily. Shakespeare and Soyinka and Borges and Neruda and Okri and Amichai and Pamuk and Seth and Coetzee and Dickinson and Ngugi *primarily*. Gordimer and de Lillo

and Saramago and Tagore and Ghosh and McEwan and Chaucer and Goethe and Dante and Melville *primarily*. The legions of our own writers, our own imaginative literary artists, our own poets, in the first instance. Van Wyk Louw and Pringle and Delius and Madingoane and Butler and Serote and Marais and Langenhoven and Kunene and Breytenbach and Krog and Cussons and Eybers and Miller and Campbell and Motsapi. Literature, imaginative literature, the greatness of that, the unique-ness and fascination of that, primarily. Literature with a capital “L”, no less.

The difficulty in suggesting this in public forums in the current climate is that it does actually mean that critics must defer to imaginative writers more than they have become accustomed to doing in recent times. Let us remember that this is a material power struggle for position and influence between real people in real institutions. I would nonetheless argue to literary-cultural critics that there is a question of survival at stake here. If one dilutes one’s disciplinary base, then one also dilutes one’s territorial base. If many other kinds of scholars from many other fields can also learn to master the kind of juggling act you are performing, what will eventually distinguish you from them? And how will you come to define your practice as in any way different, in disciplinary terms, from theirs? This could, in theory, lead to a situation in which 1) the current disciplinary domain will be overrun and irrevocably changed – from “literature studies” to “general studies in culture, critical theory, and power”, let us say; 2) the study of imaginative writers and their writing will have to become a hobby rather than a professional pursuit; and 3) the competition for academic posts and symbolic capital more generally in this new and vaguely defined arena will become even more bewilderingly fierce than it currently is. But more than these possible results, the eventual loss, finally, of a serious study of literature, and of *our* literatures – South African literatures – in particular, would be, I suggest, catastrophic.

Why catastrophic? It seems almost amazing that one should have to ask this question, even rhetorically. But with literature often, explicitly or implicitly, being regarded as expendable as we sort and discriminate between meanings and representations in the vast, unlimited archives of almost everything, the question not only has to be asked, but explicitly answered, too. More specifically, the

question is the following: What is it that literature offers that is *indispensable* to our work? One could here marshal an entire history of poetics and discussions of literature as an object, from Aristotle to Kermode to Derrida and beyond, not forgetting Sydney's "Defense of poesy" (to teach *and* delight) and Coleridge's expansive definition of "imagination". For the purposes of this essay, however, I propose 1) to look at the notion of a civil imaginary,⁷ as proposed by Simon During in the collection *Nation and narration* (1990); and 2) to consider at some length the arguments of Derek Attridge in his book, *The singularity of literature* (2004), in support of my argument.

The civil imaginary

In his argument, During (1990: 139) refuses the position that nationalism is "an essentially nasty ideological formation", or that it is always necessarily complicit with oppressive power. Modernity, he writes, reproduces itself in nation states: "There are few signs of it happening otherwise" (p. 139). To reject nationalism absolutely, he writes, is to refuse to discriminate between nationalisms, and to accede to a way of thought "by which intellectuals ... cut themselves off from political action" (p. 139). During, a postcolonial scholar, writes specifically as a member of a "First World colony like Australia", where "nationalism can retain a link with freedom in allowing us to resist cultural and economic imperialism" (p. 139). He asks the important question, "what is one defending against the encroachments of cultural, economic, military imperialism if not a culture?" (p. 139). One is also "defending one's right to make particular and local appropriations of reason" (p. 140). Interestingly, During defines "reason" as a "self-reflective mode of *reading* what lies either present to hand or stored in the archive" (p. 140; my italics). In developing his argument about how such self-reflective reasoning – essentially, a "mode of reading" – should

7. I previously used this concept in an essay on the civilising mission in colonial and neocolonial South Africa. See de Kock [2001] 2004.

view literature vis-à-vis the nation, During seeks to render literature's role as far more complex than mechanistic assumptions about "national" literature automatically being complicit with nationalism might allow. (I would argue the same about literature not necessarily being quite as captive to larger discursive and social forces as critics would often seem to imply, and for literature's local agency, its local appropriations of reason, in relation to such larger forces.) In making this argument, During uncovers the idea of a "civil imaginary", whose origin he locates in writing in England in the eighteenth century. It is a term, he argues, that "names prose writings which provide representations of social existence from the beginning of the eighteenth century through the period of the classic realist novel and beyond" (p. 142). Writings, therefore, that provide representations of forms of sociality in the civil sphere – "the production of narratives, moral cruxes, a linguistic decorum [or lack of it, one would add, in the contemporary era], and character types which cover the social field of the post-1688 world" (p. 142). The civil imaginary (in the wake of the "Glorious Revolution" of 1688 and the beginnings of constitutional democracy as an alternative to a Catholic dynasty) "produces representations of manners, taste, behavior, utterances for imitation by individual lives" (p. 142), and its sphere is secular, that is, it is not dominated by caste or by classical and Renaissance *virtu* (p. 143). Importantly, its "prime value is a sociability which cannot be expressed in terms of moral laws". Instead, argues During, it "reproduces everyday life in the public domain, reducing the gap between the divine/moral order and actual behavior, thereby replacing the old science of casuistry by the modern domination of the life-world by style and civility" (p. 143).

During is here sketching a rupture, starting in the eighteenth century, in the dominance of casuistry and the subjection of differentiated civil experience to divine or moral causes – indeed, a fracture in the centuries-long subjection of errant subjectivity. The insurgency of a more wide-ranging representational ambit of subjectivity he is describing in the term "civil imaginary" was, I would argue, key to the development of modern forms of writing up to the present day: a body of writing and other representations which serves as a kind of reflective or transformative reference point for located individuals in a vast, civil world of differentiated

subjectivity and unrepentant individuality. Whether, now, such individuals choose to locate themselves nationally or trans-nationally or both is immaterial. What is material is that they are free to map their responses, feelings, perceptions and reactions on the basis of available mediations in the civil imaginary, to which they also contribute. They are – and if they are not, they should be – at liberty to resist any panoptic point of reference (such as Catholicism, for example, or state Communism, or any religious orthodoxy) in favour of free perceptual and epistemological roaming in the individually traversable streets of a vast and particularistic civil “city”, to appropriate de Certeau’s theory of walking in the city (2004). Within the archives of the civil imaginary, imaginative literature is not the only source of such mediatory spaces, but it is a huge and rich resource because it contains imaginative depth, and it allows recombinations of experience to be felt and imagined in affective texture and effective form. Literature (whether creative nonfiction, fiction, poetry, or any other form of *literary* writing) combines empathetically rendered repertoires of self and otherness that are not easily or normally available in such depth and with such range in more popular forms, perhaps, or in empirical and critical renderings of experience/knowledge.

The civil imaginary, I would argue, provides a matrix for reflexive reasoning, a kind of representational space in which to find or make an image of oneself and one’s environment. I am aware that such liberty is by no means universal in the contemporary world (cf. Google’s ongoing censorship wrangles with the Chinese government, an administration which certainly does not seem to enjoy the prospect of representational freedom on the Internet for its citizens). However, where broad representational freedom does exist, such as in South Africa⁸ (as distinct from, say, Zimbabwe), the civil imaginary represents a hard-won liberty both to enjoy or to endure, and to *re-present* freely, a “sociability which cannot be expressed in terms of moral laws”. Nor can it be expressed in terms of political laws such as those that apartheid imposed on South

8. This article was written before the ANC government’s proposed Protection of Information Bill and its mooted media tribunal, both of which, at the time of proofreading this article, were threatening such freedom in South Africa.

Africans for more than 40 years. It is a sociability which, I would add, cannot be expressed in terms of supervening agendas and deductivist schemas in which difference is adduced as mere exempla, without reciprocity and openness to otherness, whether that supervening general point of departure is religious, moralistic, nationalistic, philosophical, or theoretical, indeed, a *grand récit* of any kind. The civil imaginary, therefore, in all senses, “replaces the law of the father, the absolutist order, with autonomous subjects regulated by internalised representations” (During 1990: 143). The civil imaginary, I would argue, can be seen as lying at the heart of modern literature in its quest to offer a civil space of “local appropriations of reason” through a “self-reflective mode of reasoning” – a space in which senses of subjectivity, and negotiations of inter-subjectivity, can be thought through, and talked through, conceptually rendered and representationally grounded in experiential matrices (fictional or otherwise) that are *civil*, that is, relatively free of limiting agendas which would seek to provide a restrictive template of order and of pre-eminent understanding.

This, I would argue, is what literature offers that is indispensable to our more general work as critics. Literature in the imaginative sense is one of the most comprehensive sources (although not the only source) of representations of sociability and of lived experience, and of mediations of experience and otherness available to autonomous modern, transnational subjects who implicitly, in the postmodern sense, resist *grands récits* not grounded in civil space, that is, not freely and fully open to the porousness and connectivity of any number of phenomena, representations, impulses, insurgencies, deconstructions and reconstructions multiply available in the open and publicly accessible spaces of civil life, the civil imaginary.

The singularity of literature

I would argue, further, that a deductivist overemphasis in cultural criticism which increasingly appends literature mostly as exempla to a limited number of grand topics, runs the risk of becoming blind to what Derek Attridge calls the “singularity of literature” – a

singularity, I would argue, that is embedded in the irreducibly particularistic “local appropriations of reason” central to acts of representation in the civil imaginary. Such appropriations are most richly available in the actual detail, the textual matrices, of literature. In addition, as Attridge argues, literature provides a *performative enactment* of the experience of openness, or of opening, to forces of otherness. Such performative effectivity, in literature, is an experience of singularity – it occurs in no other way than in the event of reading. For me, Attridge’s thesis provides a compelling argument for regarding the experience of reading literature as critical to our disciplinary health. It goes without saying that to teach literature is to read it again, and to read it with one’s students.

For Attridge, then, “singularity” resides in the multifaceted *event* of reading acts of literature. The value of this event is not reducible to instrumental “uses” of literature, such as moral instruction, historical contextualisation, ideological persuasion, cathartic relief, cultural information or similarly useful “services”. The distinctiveness of literature is reducible neither to literary instrumentalism nor, contends Attridge, to arguments for aesthetics, for the beautiful and the true, because what is beautiful and true can be found in sources other than literature alone. Attridge seeks an explanation of the singularity of literature, rather, in the notion of responsiveness to that which, at any given moment, is *other* to a reader, outside of his or her habitual set of cultural understandings. In his argument, Attridge reminds his readers of the feeling writers of all kinds have when sitting at a keyboard, half knowing what they want to say but not fully knowing, “composing new sentences out of nothing, or rather out of a largely inchoate swirl of half-formulated thoughts and faint intimations” (2004: 17). The writer tries out phrases, repeats herself, deletes sentences, starts again. “Motivated by some obscure drive,” Attridge writes, “I sense that I am pushing at the limits of what I have hitherto been able to think” (p. 18). Such “pushing at the limits”, for Attridge, and the invitation or receptivity to what lies beyond such limits, is what he means by “other” and “otherness”. His question about literature, about its effectivity (as well as its affectivity) is not a question about what psychological, historical, ideological, sociological or cultural operations are necessarily involved in the course of literature’s work in the

world, but, more critically, how “something we might call ‘otherness’, or ‘alterity’, or ‘the other’, is made, or allowed, to impact upon the existing configurations of an individual’s mental world – which is to say, upon a particular cultural field as it is embodied in a single subjectivity” (p. 19). In this general sense, “otherness”, writes Attridge, “is that which is, at a given moment, outside the horizon provided by the culture for thinking, understanding, imagining, feeling, perceiving” (p. 19). The emergence of “newness” in literature as a manifestation of such alterity, for Attridge, is both an act of drawing on existing, available resources (of language, style, moral norms at a certain historical juncture, and so on), and a certain leap into something previously “unknown”, “a leap into new territory” (p. 20).

Also implicated in this arresting argument about literature’s singularity of effect, of shaping experience, is a distinction that Attridge makes between “culture” and “idioculture”. Attridge employs the term “idioculture” to refer to an “embodiment in a single individual of widespread cultural norms and modes of behaviour” (p. 21). A large part of such an idioculture may remain stable for some time, Attridge suggests, but “the complex as a whole is necessarily unstable and subject to constant change” (p. 21). One is therefore likely to share one’s idioculture with other groups, but “it is always a unique configuration” (p. 21). The fullest verbal representations of idiocultures, Attridge further postulates, “are probably to be found in fictional works” such as Joyce’s *Ulysses*, in which the idiocultures of two Dublin men, and a Dublin woman, on a particular day in 1904, are explored (pp. 21-22). The complexities inherent in such idiocultures, and their articulation in fiction, or in literature in general, are daunting, “something we can barely fathom” (p. 22), and certainly something to which “we” – writers and readers – do not have direct access. Importantly for Attridge, to fathom such complexity is to create and to accommodate the other. To create the other, he writes, is to “wrest from the realm of the familiar the hitherto unthought, to bring into existence by skillful and imaginative intellectual labour an entity that is irreducibly different from what is already in being” (p. 22). The other is “not knowable until by a creative act it is brought into the field of the same” (p. 31).

In addition, literary invention, which for Attridge implies the reformulation of existing norms, is not a static entity. Critically, it is only when “the event of this reformulation is experienced by the reader” (including the writer reading or articulating the words as they emerge), that one can speak of the literary (pp. 58-59). This is an event which “opens new possibilities of meaning and feeling”. The “event of *such opening*”, for Attridge, is *constitutive* of what we mean when we speak of the literary (p. 59; italics in original). In Attridge’s argument, singularity, too, is best defined as an event, “the event of singularizing which takes place in reception: it does not occur outside the responses of those who encounter and thereby constitute it” (p. 64). The “event of opening” to the singularity of reshaping found in literature is conditioned by what Attridge calls “creative reading”, which, importantly, not only means to “attempt to respond fully and responsibly to the alterity and singularity of the text”, but also to “work against the mind’s tendency to assimilate the other to the same” (p. 80). This means “attending to that which can barely be heard, registering what is unique about the shaping of language, thought, and feeling *in this particular work*” (p. 80; my italics). Such readings open the possibility of “surprise and wonder” (pp. 83-86). Reading is an act of responsiveness. For Attridge, “[t]he uniqueness to which the response must do justice is not an unchanging essence ... but the inventive otherness of the work as it emerges through my creative act of comprehension” (p. 91).

The singularity of literature should also be seen, Attridge suggests, in terms of its performative “eventness”. A text may have referential properties, and a reader may enjoy his or her encounter with “the concepts, feelings, historical or imagined entities ... to be found in any text, including a literary text” (p. 95). However, when one responds to a text *as literature*, “pleasure and profit” derive from the “experience of an *event of referring*, from a *staging of referentiality*”, rather from referentiality per se, and from the knowledge acquired by the reader (pp. 95-96; my italics).

Attridge argues, in Levinasian terms, for the otherness of literature in terms of responsibility. It is important, I feel, to note Attridge’s argument about the ethics of such responsibility. “[T]o respond responsibly to the otherness of a literary work is to do justice to it; treating literature as literature means being hospitable

and gene-rous” (p. 126). From the point of view of the “ethics of literature” (p. 128), “[r]esponding responsibly to a work of art means attempting to do justice to it as a singular other”, not simply “pigeon-holing” it but affirming the work’s inventiveness (p. 128). The otherness in literature is vulnerable, Attridge argues. “Literature, for all the force which it is capable of exercising, can do nothing without readers – responsible readers” (p. 131).

I would add that without “responsible” readers – that is, readers who are both responsive and attentive to that which cannot be framed in an a priori fashion – literature in a regional ecosystem as fragile as ours will droop and wither. There are already signs of a literature that is little read in the academy, and sporadically read outside the scholarly halls. This applies both to emerging literature in the post-postapartheid frame, and the stacked archives of existing literature, reaching back into the twentieth and nineteenth centuries – they both need frequent revisiting to remain alive, since such literary life arises only in the event of reading, which is an event of singularity each time it occurs. Attridge’s arguments about the effectivity of literature in the event of its reading, and the necessary otherness which such reading invites into cultural systems, as well as individual subjectivities, are important because they point to the life of literature in its most profound sense. If we lose that, we lose much more than just literature. We lose that which literature activates and capacitates within us as creative and ethical beings. Such a loss, on whatever scale, should not easily be countenanced, and yet the strong deductivist drift in South African literary-cultural criticism, as I have argued, appears to effect an implicitly blasé attitude to just such disciplinary and literary loss.

My question, then, is simple: Is this what we want? Do we in fact want to preserve a sense of literature that is diverse, differentiated, larger, perhaps, and more interesting, than the categories we already have in our possession? Do we even want to maintain the notion of a distinct regional literature, something we call “South African English writing?” If we don’t, then all is well, because, in its diverse particularity, it seems already to be disappearing, in any sustained detail, from the deliberative spaces that scholars convene. If we do, then we might want to reconsider the drift of our current critical practices.

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