Criticism of South African Literature

Polemic

Before I say how interesting I think Kelwyn Sole's article is in the first number of WIP I should like to say something about "small journals" and the role of literary critics. "Small journals" like WIP and Africa Perspective are in many ways more important than established, "respectable" journals because they are part, hopefully, of a debate. Sole points to the flexible, living role of the oral artist when he writes about "The artist, that is, the person who creates, adds to or changes a piece of oral literature in a concrete situation." This same idea can be extended to the critic also. We are not here to write deathless criticism. I hope that any ideas expressed in this article might be built on or superseded tomorrow. The individualistic tendencies of present-day criticism are destructive and we should aim for a "community of scholars", co-operative as well as critical. Our duty should be to the body of knowledge concerning South African literature. Consequently, I would hope my own literary criticism will not survive "for all time", I hope that it will be replaced. If we do not build into our criticism the idea of continuous improvement our criticism will have failed. Whereas most literary criticism now has a built-in, often unacknowledged, predilection for stasis, where literary works are isolated (from context, from historical change), regarded as of all time and all place, it seems to me that our criticism must regard a work of art in a living and changing context and our criticism itself must also be living and changing.

Only with Mike Kirkwood's article recently published, and with

Kelwyn Sole's article do we have the beginnings of a conceptual framework in terms of which we can study South African literature. The latter article also testifies to the value of the interpenetration of theory and practical research.

For literary criticism in South Africa is in a bad way. We have a lot of criticism lectured and seminared every day on foreign literature. Values are taught which belong in English Public Schools, home of the ruling clique of England. These people do not deal with South African problems, they deal often with foreign problems (I have no doubt the words "provincial" and "regionalism" will be thrown at me some time - I can live quite happily with that! Apart from anything else it will be a misunderstanding of what I am on about).

A quote from an article by a visiting researcher to South Africa at the height of the 1976 "troubles" makes interesting reading in this context.

> "In the Department of English at Cape Town no African or South African writers at all are studied in the first three years. In the final,Honours year - to which only a small percentage of the undergraduates proceed - African literature as a whole occupies a mere six hours of one course on Twentieth Century literature - and this is merely one of thirteen optional courses. When I asked the Professor whether this was not rather a small amount of time to so allocate he remarked,looking out over the African city almost literally burning at his feet (there was constant rioting during my visit) that this seemed to him 'about right'; since all literature was relevant to life as a whole he saw no need at all for students to read literature written in or about South Africa. No comment seems needed."

In January, 1977, the inaugural conference of the new "union" of English lecturers took place. The consequent newsletter reports the key debate.

> "It revealed that South African university teachers of English are still much concerned with the debate between text and context,i.e. the study of the text *as essentially autonomous as against the belief that* the text is part of wider cultural,historical and social structures which require equal attention. The two most unequivocal statements of these views came from Prof.Gillham and Prof.Horn (Dept. of German,UCT) in the second session of the conference,after Prof. Butler had opened the discussion with a brief sketch of the oscillating fortunes of these two approaches in the university teaching of English since 1948. Prof.Gillham offered a closely reasoned and dispassionate statement of the classical "prac.crit." approach,expressing his concern "to re-instate criteria that are in danger of being attenuated." He expressed his conviction that "really great works of art have the habit of providing their own relevant

knowledge;...the work will itself suggest the criteria by which it should be judged".
Prof.Horn put the cat firmly among the pigeons by arguing for the interpretation of literature in terms of the complex social,political,and other relevant contexts in which it has been produced - the classical Marxist position. From the discussion that followed it became clear that although many delegates felt that Prof. Gillham's views should be qualified by several of those put forward by Prof.Horn,the latter had spoilt his case by a reading of certain poems,notably Sydney Clouts's "Within",which did considerable violation to the text. In the course of the following two days speakers and *delegates found themselves repeatedly returning to the* above issues. Professors Harvey and Thompson (Stellenbosch),speaking respectively on 'Inappropriate Critical Criteria' and 'The testing of Critical Skills', extended Prof.Gillham's views,the former insisting on "the quality of the artist's moral seriousness and his ability to make us aware of it",the latter arguing that an English examination should aim solely to test the candidate's acquisition of critical discernment and judgement as revealed in his ability to do close analysis. On the other hand,several speakers,such as Mr.Stephen Gray (RAU) and Dr.A.E.Voss (Pietermaritzburg),participating in a symposium on South African literature,and Dr.John Coetzee (UCT),developing a linguistic structuralist approach,spoke forcefully in support of critical methods which might lead away from what they regarded as the unsatisfactory and even sterile confines of a "great tradition" based ultimately on subjective moral evaluation.
Inevitably,much of the three days' discussion centred on the problem of how to include African and South African literature into the syllabi of English departments,if at all. On the one hand Prof.Whittock (UCT) challenged the aficionados of "S.A.Lit." to produce literature of quality about which it could be possible to be enthusiastic and articulate; on the other hand Dr.Voss proposed a study of such literature not in terms of moral evaluation,but in terms of genre and the history of ideas."

Yeah for Peter Horn! Yeah for Tony Voss! Yeah for Stephen Gray! Boo to Professor Whittock. And as for the silent majority who voiced their criticism of Professor Horn in their scrutiny of the texts I wonder how many of them misread what he had to say, had the faintest idea what he was talking about. We must conclude that South African literary criticism is in the Stone Age. Kelwyn Sole's article at last allows us to have a real debate and in future to ignore the inanities of the ignorant.

In the June 1977 issue of Standpunte Stephen Gray has argued "the need for a history of South African English literature". I couldn't agree more. But the primary research has only just started. The kind of statement Andre Brink makes in his introduction to the

selection from several poets called A World of their Own petrifies me.

> "South African English fiction had to wait for, among others, Doris Lessing and Nadine Gordimer to follow the lead suggested by that remarkable woman Olive Schreiner and, to a lesser extent perhaps, by Alan Paton and Pauline Smith, in order to turn local realism, into aesthetic statements (too 'aesthetic' at times?!) of universal significance."

This statement is staggeringly ahistorical. (Unconsciously, it is the liberal school of literary criticism. I'm sure even that school could do a bit better if it put its mind to it.)

[redacted]

Towards a Comprehensive Theory

Kelwyn Sole's paper suggests "a possible conceptual framework" for the study of South African literature. It has, I believe, great advantages over prevailing literary criticism (which, as I have shown, is often unstatedly based on liberal ideology). It is a framework which can take account of and explain large general movements and which at the same time allows for minute analysis and differentiation.

Above all, the theory takes into account and explains CHANGE in literature. This is something that solely textual literary criticism cannot do, for textual criticism is largely isolationist in effect (it doesn't matter when, where or by whom a work is composed) and employs an implicit static metaphor (the work must be a "self-contained unity"). This textual criticism is usually heavily prescriptive also. Sole's theory, however, takes account of the fact that there are contradictions within society, that these contradictions may be reflected, consciously or unconsciously, within a literary work - a writer might be struggling with a societal contradiction within himself, or he might be the ideological exponent of one side of the contradiction. (Already here we have two different categories which may require different critical criteria which the simplistic unitary textual criticism approach cannot take account of). Such an approach also requires a much more historical awareness of social forces than simplistic liberal moral formulations such as "the individual versus society" (where the individual is almost invariably sympathised with by the liberal critic against the conformist society - in the wider level, of course, the class base of so many novelists has led to the content and form of the novels allowing the similarly class-based critic to identify with them and therefore to regard his evaluations as universal).

Moreover, Sole's approach is a subtle one, subtle in the sense that it takes account of infinite complexity. On the one hand, it can explain major movements and changes (in Sole's words it can "undertake a more accurate periodisation" - a phrase which I sympathise with but would like to qualify later): major literary changes, for instance, can be specifically related to the articulation of modes of production. It is only on a very wide level of generalisation (so wide as to be virtually meaningless) that Brink can equate Schreiner and Gordimer. Brink ignores, as so many critics do, differences (Why, for instance, was Schreiner anti-Rhodes? Surely not simply because she had inherited a tradition of (liberal) ideas. If this were so, why would she be partly pro-Boer? No, it is presumably because she identified with a complex of interests which Rhodes threatened. Schreiner must surely be seen in relation to Cape mercantile interests - from which emerged, as Stanley Trapido has shown, a liberal, assimilationist ideology - and her African Farm must be seen within the complex web of a particular agricultural and mercantile mode). An example of a literary work relating to a larger historical movement could be the following: the heyday of white liberalism was the Twenties and Thirties (perhaps, as Belinda Bozzoli has shown, due partly to the rise after the First World War of secondary industry) and so Paton's Cry, the Beloved Country, far from being particularly new, is the result and culmination of a period leading up to it. It is only literary critics, with their parochial outlook, who will avoid seeing that it is people like Rheinalt-Jones, Pim, Loram and Hoernlé who were the novel's intellectual predecessors. Furthermore, during this period when white liberals were specifically concerned with the co-option of the black elite (cf. the Joint Councils, the role of Ray Phillips), the black writers show the marked influence of this ideology. It is gradual disillusion with this liberal alliance which finally leads to the black consciousness movement among black writers of the Seventies (again this "black nationalism" is not totally new - it has strains from the Congress Youth League of the Forties, Anton Lembede, the P.A.C. of the Fifties, and way back to "Africa for Africans", Joseph Booth and Ethiopianism).

On the other hand, the subtlety of Sole's approach also allows for complex explanations on the micro-level (including minute textual readings!) As Sole points out, many black writers have been petty-bourgeois in origin. The petty-bourgeoisie, often a

mediate group between black and white, because of the ambiguity of its situation is often opportunistic in action. Its position frequently changes, sometimes minutely, sometimes substantially. On some issues, alliance with certain whites may be expedient (furthering bourgeois aspirations); at other times, identification with the black masses ("We are all Africans") might yield better fruits. So each work, each argument, each phrase of a product of this class must be subtly weighed in terms of the historical situation at that moment. Such an approach is thus infinitely flexible - it is not the crude stance which some critics deliberately misrepresent it as.

This approach also avoids the naïve view of purely textual criticism that takes ideology simply at face value. It pays more attention to the social position of the writer. And by this I do not, as I have already shown, mean crude biography - I mean social biography in its most subtle and wide-ranging form. Let us take an example - the role of literacy and its effect on the comparative biographies of several black writers over an historical time-scale (the example will necessarily be over-simplified - I could substantiate it with more evidence).

Mhudi (1917-1920) is a novel written by a man who had very strong connections with a pre-literate society. He was also one of the early elite who is relatively privileged (in having access to the institutions of the new society) in that he was one of the few literate blacks at the time. In 1916 he described the effects an 1880's Setswana newspaper used to have on a rural audience

> "During the first week of each month the native peasants in Bechuanaland, and elsewhere, used to look forward to its arrival as eagerly as the white up-country farmers now await the arrival of the daily papers. How little did the writer dream when frequently called upon as a boy to read the news to groups of men sewing karosses under the shady trees outside the cattle fold, that journalism would afterwards mean his bread and cheese."

I have argued elsewhere that Mhudi draws quite strongly on oral forms and oral history as well as written forms. In some senses, the book was less likely to have been written later (as much of black society is less in touch with pre-literate society). When Plaatje started an English-Setswana newspaper in 1902 there were something like 230,000 literate blacks outside Natal. Many of these were Xhosas or Pedi etc. The possible audience for his newspaper was therefore limited - its circulation was about 600. The newspaper could therefore not have been started for solely profit motives - it was

presumably to represent certain ideological interests (the black petty-bourgeoisie).

By the time we get to the Thirties most black writers are urban-dwellers. Literacy had spread to 12,5% of the black population by 1931. The newspaper Bantu World, sustained a circulation of several thousand. Education and literacy, while thus spreading, was still somewhat elitist. The concerns of the newspapers reflected this. So did the literature of the time. But urbanisation had also cut much of this elite off from pre-literate society. Unlike Plaatje most of H.I.E.Dhlomo's ideas of history were drawn, not from oral sources, but from books (I think there is evidence to show that Sole is right in his footnote six when he doubts Dhlomo's intimate familiarity with oral traditions). Both forms (eg non-oral) and ideas (eg elitist) reflect this phase of African literature. Critics have frequently referred to the "flowering" of black literature in the Fifties. But it is a vague, imprecise concept (largely evaluative). One of the reasons for the success of Drum in the Fifties must have been the growth of literacy, where there was a greater, less elitist demand for reading material. Literacy was spreading to the working class. A racy, glossy, picture magazine (with its consequent demands for a certain "style" and perhaps certain forms - eg the short story) produces Can Themba, Casey Motsisi, Todd Matshikiza and others. And eventually King Kong?

But in 1960 Bantu World drops its elitist weekly stance and becomes the mass daily, World. (Drum consequently declines because it cannot compete news-wise etc.) The World achieves a circulation of over 100,000. The content demands of the audience are different. The transistor radio also has its effect. Mission education (relatively liberal, relatively elitist) gives way to Bantu education (relatively "mass", relatively rigid) with obvious effects! Recently, one has seen the emergence of some working-class writers.

The complex steps in this whole process will take several books to articulate it. But without a comprehension of this and other processes the subtleties of individual texts will be lost.

The "possible conceptual framework" which Sole articulates has other advantages. Chief among these is that it moves towards integrating black and white literature into an overall theory. In other words, it is a happy escape from racist categories (which many liberal critics fall into in their over-eagerness to please; and to which some "black power" critics also succumb - not to mention

prevailing white racist theories).

Here we have a problem of categorisation. Sole for instance, on page 14, refers to writers "of 'Coloured' descent". Couzens has often used the term "Black South African literature". In some senses these phrases are at best convenient evils and I know for a fact that Couzens has never been altogether happy with them. In some ways they do confirm racist ideologies. Of course, one need not deny that the hegemonic imposition of racist categories does lead to a "real existence" of such categories. In many ways "Coloured" writers have been exposed to different social origins from many black writers e.g. the A.P.O., the radical bourgeoisie, the Trotskyist tradition etc. Just as there are numerous conflicting interests among the blacks (Racist ideologies are, in other words, often self-fulfilling). But all cases cannot *be subsumed under these "racial" categories - eg I know of a* Coloured writer who largely identified with blacks, of a white writer who identifies with Coloureds and blacks). No, the approach advocated by Sole asks that each writer be located in terms of his approach, ideas of "white good, black bad", or vice-versa, are unacceptable. Nor should black, coloured, white literature be treated <u>separately</u>. South African literature, deriving from a common society, economy and body politic, must be seen as a unified field (without ignoring the contradictions within it).

There are a couple of phrases in Sole's article which worry me slightly. These are the idea of "periodisation" (page 20) and the use of "generation" (page 14). I am confident that Kelwyn Sole does not use these simplistically but I think he may have left the terms themselves slightly vague. My concern is that literature should not be seen as <u>developing in waves</u>. In other words, one generation does not replace another in simple fashion. Literature does not "develop" in *simple periods, eg 1920-1940. I think the whole process is much more* complex. "Periods" must take into account the <u>articulation of modes</u> in a particular relationship. In other words, within a generation, two or more modes may co-exist. Different writers within one generation may reflect this. Hence "periodisation" does not follow a simply sequential pattern, one generation does not wholly replace its predecessor. Quite simply, for instance, certain pre-capitalist modes (perhaps in certain areas etc.) *may continue to exist through* several temporal generations.

There is at least one other theme which seems to me to arise out of the kind of issues Sole has raised. I shall only briefly refer to it.

This is the rise of the idea of the "artist". There is a gradual division of labour amongst the black elite. Whereas Plaatje was called upon to be politician, journalist, social worker, as well as writer, because of the relative scarcity of such talent (not an evaluative judgement) within a literate society, there has developed since then a relative specialisation (this can be seen in many areas such as music and football with the steady development of full professionalism). Ideological views as to the role of the artist seem to change accordingly.

Tim Couzens