

THE MOMENTS OF 'VOORSLAG' AND 'SESTIGER' IN OUR LITERARY HISTORY

by

Ntongela Masilela

Always historicize! . . . But, as the traditional dialectic teaches us, the historicizing operation can follow two distinct paths, which only ultimately meet in the same place: the path of the object and the path of the subject, the historical origins of the things themselves and that more intangible historicity of the concepts and categories by which we attempt to understand those things.

-Fredric Jameson, THE POLITICAL UNCONSCIOUS, p. 9.

Since this presentation has been requested by the Conference Organizers, especially Robert Kriger, as a statement to facilitate a discussion, rather than as an exposition defining a particular literary problematic and in relation to which develop a thorough thesis or definitive statement, it will be short and elliptical and throwing out ideas for consideration.

In many ways, to consider the literary moments of 'Voorslag' and 'Sestigers' from the perspective of today, that is, from the perspective informed of the political certainty that the victory of the democratic forces in South Africa is just around the corner, though complicated and complex, is to consider the theoretical constructs and cultural forms in the writing of a particular era of our literary history. How can one possibly theorize the cultural processes and cultural formation of South African literary history! The structure of South African literary history in the twentieth century is characterised by disconnections, discontinuities, abrupt breaks and seemingly irreconcilable ruptures. It is not difficult to see that the political determinants of this tragic process in our cultural history are largely and wholly determined, in their form and effect, by the political philosophy and ideology of Apartheid. Unquestionably, among the many horrendous consequences of the ideology of Apartheid, one of them in the cultural sphere is the desiccation and dislocation of the landscape of our literary history. Just limiting ourselves for the moment only in the literary sphere, the effects of Apartheid politics in this domain, makes it all the more historically imperative that this ideology, whose resemblance to Nazi ideology is apparent to all, ought, should and must be destroyed, and should be buried together with its carrier, capitalism. From all this, one question I pose for discussion is, can one speak of a South African national culture or South African national literature within the context of Apartheid, or can they both only come into being in a post-

revolutionary and democratic South Africa. What are the possible cultural coordinates of a unified national literature or a unified national culture? What could possibly be the political determinants of this unity?

From the perspective of today in 1987, when dusk has irreversibly descended on the Apartheid State and when the light of a democratic South Africa is dawning and shining brighter and brighter as we approach closer and closer its center of great illumination, it is more than apparent that the 'Voorslag' literary school, in the main, consisting of Laurens van der Post, William Plomer and Roy Campbell, has left us two undeniable and perhaps unsurpassable, interconnected legacies: in William Plomer, through Turbott Wolfe, we find a consolidation of a particular literary tradition and literary consciousness, founded by Olive Schreiner with *The Story of an African Farm*; in Laurens van der Post, through *The Lost World of the Kalahari*, we discover the first comprehensive attempt to trace the formative structure and processes of our national culture, or perhaps one should cautiously say, an attempt to theorize the ancestral forms of the national components that are necessary for the construction of a South African national culture. The importance of Roy Campbell in our literary history lies not so much in the mutative change he may have effected in South African literary relationship, as that his writings are a crucial component of the literary geography of Modernism. It is through his poetry that we can assess Africa's contribution to this century's greatest literary movement. Perhaps Roy Campbell represents Africa's first active participation in an international literary movement. But our great misfortune is that Campbell participated in the component represented by English literary Modernism, which was politically reactionary and culturally consciously anti-avant-garde. Wyndham Lewis, D.H. Lawrence, T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound were leading members of this reactionary literary Modernism, which can be contrasted to the revolutionary literary Modernism of Cesar Vallejo, Pablo Neruda and Juan Marinello in Latin America, or that of Mayakovsky, Paul Eluard and Nazim Hikmet in Europe. As a consequence of Roy Campbell's participation in reactionary Modernism, that is, in its proto-fascistic tendencies, he was unable to make any kind of historically and critically informed evaluation, judgement and assessment of cultural politics in South Africa. Campbell's autobiography, *Light on a Dark Horse*, is a product of this cultural catastrophe and political disaster. His psychotic hatred of his black compatriots is utterly astonishing and profoundly depressing. Elsewhere I have indicated the magnitude of this colossal mishap.(1) Alan Paton's recent statement, in an essay commemorating the hundred-year anniversary of the publication of *The Story of an African Farm* (1983), that Campbell's cultural politics were insignificant is incomprehensible, which merely indicates Paton's own limited and confused perspective on South African literary history.(2) What Fredrick Jameson has said of Wyndham Lewis equally applies to Roy Campbell within our South African cultural context: "A consistent perversity made of him at one and the same time the exemplary

practitioner of one of the most powerful of all modernistic styles and an aggressive ideological critic and adversary of modernism itself in all its forms."(3) To write a literary history of South Africa with such a figure as its central component is truly a fascinating, even perhaps enhancing, political and cultural challenge.

Given the remarkable cultural and literary mutations being effected in South Africa today because of the political challenges being mouted against the status quo and the Apartheid State, it is more politically responsible for us South Africans in exile to examine, even if schematic, the historical structure of our cultural politics, than to effect a form of practical criticism. The really new forms of cultural and literary production in our country can be witnessed in the recently published double-issue of *TriQuarterly* called, *From South Africa: New Writing, Photographs and Art*.(4) Hence, from the perspective of the present, a book like *The Lost World of the Kalahari* is much more significant than *Turbott Wolfe* or *Campbell's Collected Poetry* . The significance of the former book over the others is not immanently determinable by the form of its textuality, but rather, externally determined by the political forces mapping a new cultural space of South African literary history. Tomorrow, *The Lost World of the Kalahari* may exhaust its significance when the present necessities giving it paramount importance would have dialectical moved on to a different historical plane. Then, the other two qualitatively superior books, *Collected Poetry* and *Plomer's Turbott Wolfe* , would display their immanent brilliance. Paradoxically, the literary brilliance of *Turbott Wolfe* raises one of the fundamental issues of our literary history: that is, what accounts for the literary hegemony of the women writers in the genre of the novel, far exceeding their male counterparts in quality and productiveness, notwithstanding the recent postmodernist challenge mounted by J.M. Coetzee: why is the literary line from Olive Schreiner through Nadine Gordimer to Bessie Head muscular tougher and robust than anything mounted by the literary line from William Plomer through Mphahlele and Alan Paton to Andre Brink: in other words, why, we for all intents and purposes, are living in a literary moment which with all justification could be called *The Literary Era of Nadine Gordimer*. Can this designation, of the pre-revolutionary period, survive the revolutionary storm gathering just beyond the horizon? Will the moment of the revolutionary storm be known in history as *The Literary Era of Mazisi Kunene*? But these are a set of questions for another occasion.

From the perspective of the cultural and literary struggles being waged back at home today, undoubtedly the book of the moment when we want to use the 'Voorslag' writers in our present political struggles, taken as a truism that political struggles and cultural struggles are inseparable and indissoluble, is *Laurens van der Post's The Lost World of the Kalahari* . Internationally, this book indicates a different qualitative nature of Modernism than that signalled by

Roy Campbell, in that it is related to its ancestral cousin, *People of the Puszta*, the very great book by the equally great Hungarian poet, Gyula Illyes. This tremendous book of 1936 has many parallels with our national book of 1958. It would be culturally beneficial for our cultural history to draw the sociological and literary contrasts drawing these two exemplary books together. What do these two books respectively, reveal about the literary imagination of the Hungarian nation and the literary imagination of the South African state, state and not nation. Such a comparative contrast would reveal to us in South Africa a magnificent literary structure of the Hungarian cultural imagination in a form of a historical question: why does Hungary seem to have produced a consistently high quality of poetry in the twentieth century: can the Spanish poetic tradition and the Russian poetic tradition, both of which come closest to challenging the commanding position of the Hungarian poetic tradition, represented by figures stretching from Endre Ady through Attila Jozsef and Gyula Illyes to Sandor Wöeres. Cannot an understanding of these critical issues at the international level affect nationally the writing of our own literary history?

Nationally, *The Lost World of the Kalahari* designates a certain pattern of literary relationships which constitute among themselves the regulative principles of the literary history of the 1950s. The most fundamental among these, is that Laurens van der Post's book together with a series of essays written in the 1950s by A.C. Jordan and post-humously collected together in the book of 1973, *Towards an African Literature: The Emergence of Literary Form in Xhosa*, unknown to each other, conceptualized and attempted to theorize a new intellectual domain in our cultural history. The convergence between these cultural and literary projects of these two writers had more to do with the necessities of our dialectical history and their Utopian aims, than the accidents of birth and skin colour which seem to have been the unifying forces of the 'Voorslag' writers' collective, though different, literary projects. With the passage of time, it may turn out that the relationship between A.C. Jordan and Laurens van der Post had been more decisive in the forging and formation of a national culture that makes possible for the peoples of South Africa to pass through the coming firestorm and thunderstorm to the other side totally intact, than the dynamic between the author of *Venture into the Interior*, Roy Campbell and William Plomer.

Both A.C. Jordan and Laurens van der Post, separate from each other and unknown to each other, undertook the monumental task of, respectively, tabulating the historical forms of a particular sedimentation of our national literature and scrutinizing the structural modes of a particular formation of our national culture. Each of them, in their singularly individual ways, attempted to theorize the constitutive components of our unified national culture. A.C. Jordan examined the origins and ancestral lineages of Xhosa literature from Ntsikana to S.E.K. Mqhayi as to their central importance for our national literature. On the

other hand, Van der Post forcefully argued for the fundamental importance of the Khoi Khoi culture and San culture for South African national culture. Elsewhere, I have argued for the interrelatedness of these historical projects.(5) In the main, then, the great importance of the `Voorslag' literary generation lies in their defining a hierarchical structure of our national culture.

In contrast to this literary generation of the 1920s, the literary generation of the 1960s encountered a different set of historical conundrums and cultural issues. In broad categories, it could be said that if the `Voorslag' writers in the main concerned themselves with establishing the structural components of our national culture at the very moment when the ideology of Apartheid was emerging and beginning to exercise its hegemony over various liberalisms (aligned with English imperialism) which previously were dominant, then the `Sestigers' writers were preoccupied with the role of language in a national culture and the patterns of writing literary history at the very moment when Apartheid ideology was beginning to disintegrate. These cultural formulations or cultural struggles were in fact hidden forms of political struggles. In South Africa cultural struggles are in fact political struggles. What really concerned Roy Campbell, William Plomer and Laurens van der Post was a serious political problem formulated in cultural terms: namely, the retreat of English imperial and political domination of South Africa and the emergence of Afrikaaner white nationalistic political interests. It was this structural trough or faultline in the political State reverberating in the cultural spheres, which was their main concern. Collectively, Roy Campbell being the exception since he was moving towards protofascism, utilized what they perceived to be the internationalism and universalism of liberalism in their fight against the particularism and nationalism of Apartheid. Their attempt to articulate a unified structure of our national culture was a rearguard political action, all the more noteworthy and commendable. It is not accidental that when they lost this political and cultural battle against Apartheid, they all went to self-imposed exile in England and Spain by way of Japan.

On the other hand, equally, the `Sestigers' writers, constituted in the main by Andre Brink, Breyten Breytenbach and Etienne Le Roux, have been preoccupied with a central political problem couched in cultural terms: namely, how to prevent or forestall the disappearance of the Afrikaans language as the ideology of Apartheid begins to ebb and as the days of Afrikaaner state control and hegemony in South Africa are numbered. Their recent cultural and literary writings is a desperate attempt to save the Afrikaans language from the collapsing mad-house of Afrikanerdom and fascism of Apartheid ideology. This is a noble task, since all of us South Africans want this great language to be saved and be used to democratically enrich our cultural landscape, rather than as an instrument of oppression as is presently happening in our troubled homeland. It in this desperate attempt to save the Afrikaans language that has made Andre

Brink to write a very questionable, in fact very bad, literary history of our country in the *Mapmakers: Writing in a State of Siege*. Though I have expressed myself elsewhere on this matter, I will say a few words below.(6)

The first fundamental point that should and must always be raised whenever the Sestigers literary phenomenon is at the center of any literary and cultural discussion, is that it is a direct product and beneficiary of one of the cruelest cultural crimes ever committed in our literary history, namely the total elimination and complete excision from our cultural landscape of the Sophiatown Renaissance of the Drum writers by the repressive state apparatuses of Apartheid, following the Sharpeville Massacre of 1960. This cultural genocide, in fact, this unending hemorrhage, caused black South African literary landscape to become a graveside. This lasted approximately sixteen years, that is, until the Soweto Rebellion of 1976 made possible the emergence of the Staffrider literary generation. The magnitude of the tragedy is all the more enormous when it is recalled and recognized that the Sophiatown Renaissance was the most brilliant literary movement of the 1950s. It is the State that eliminated the Drum writers, thereby facilitating the coming into literary hegemony of the Sestigers writers. There was never any intellectual confrontation between the two literary schools, which undoubtedly would have enriched our cultural texture in many immeasurable ways. When the Sestigers literary school came to dominance in the early 1960s, riding as they did then on the back of the Apartheid State, they were totally unconcerned that a cultural catastrophe had befallen their black compatriots, caused by the very monster they were then mounting. Why were the Sestigers writers utterly oblivious of this tragedy? One day posterity will have to provide us with the answers. For the moment, it is not surprising at all that Lewis Nkosi, in his book, *Home and Exile and Other Selections*, expresses utter contempt, in fact, one could say, unmitigated hatred for the Sestigers literary phenomenon. Today also, one of its then leading members Breyten Breytenbach, in one of his recent books, *The True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist*, has violently disowned this literary school as lacking originality and intellectual depth. It is the absence of historical awareness on the part of Sestigers writers in relation to the structural form of our cultural history, especially as to their obliviousness to the cultural tragedy that had befallen their black compatriots, that has made the writing of literary history on this particular moment a difficult enterprise.

Andre Brink's book, *Mapmakers*, which is a collection of self-congratulatory essays on the supposed genius of the Sestigers writers, has undoubtedly to be one of the most disastrous books ever written on our cultural and literary history. Its catalogue of failures and misapprehensions is too vast for all of them to be enumerated in this sketch. I must register self-criticism here. In an essay written a year ago called, "The White South African Writer in our National Situation",

which is to appear in the April 1988 double-issue of the recently launched journal, *Matatu*, I was too kindly disposed towards this book. Though I did then indicate my strong disagreements with many of its critical perspectives, on second reflection, I feel now that my criticism was not strong enough. What prevents me in the present context from making even harsher criticism is the role of Andre Brink early this year surrounding the *Standtpunte* journal. His role concerning this magazine makes clear that he has totally broken with *Afrikanerdom*. In this book of 1983, he mainly saw himself as a ". . . dissidence within *Afrikanerdom* . . ." (7, p. 14) In its many directionless wanderings over our cultural landscape, with its many references from Eugene Marais through Uys Krige to Breytenbach, it passes over in silence on the matter of the Sophiatown Renaissance, which should have been a critical point of self-reference on the part of Andre Brink, not only because it was a literary movement preceding his own, but also because it would have given him a much richer cultural plane from to penetratively gaze at the genealogical structure of our literary history.

There are many other things unacceptable and untenable in Andre Brink's book: among the most shocking, is the tendency to write of the history of *Afrikanerdom* as if it were the representative history of all the nations which comprise the totality of South Africa today. Brink is capable of writing such an astonishing sentence as the following: "It took four great events during the next three and a half centuries to forge the national consciousness which today determines the concept of *Afrikanerdom*: ..." (p.14) Now, this is totally false understanding of our political history, because it is not national consciousness, but rather, white nationalism, racism, white supremacy, the ideology of Apartheid and cultural chauvinism, which determine the concept of *Afrikanerdom* today. *Afrikanerdom* can never, and I repeat can never, be a vessel of any kind of national consciousness. This is equally true of the Inkatha movement, for it is also a cultural madhouse of Zulu nationalism. Is it accidental that Inkatha and *Afrikanerdom* are on the brink of forging a rapprochement against the democratic forces as the revolutionary storm is approaching and gathering momentum? Only organisations like the African National Congress and the United Democratic Front can be the democratic vessels embodying the national consciousness and the national aspirations of the peoples of South Africa. Here we see again, as we saw earlier in relation to the 'Voorslag' literary generation, that cultural struggles in South Africa are fundamentally political struggles. *Afrikanerdom* is nothing but the cultural pillar of Apartheid, as much as the Broederbond is the ideological pillar of this neo-fascist philosophy. When the day of reckoning arrives, which is just around the corner, that is, when the total destruction of capitalism and Apartheid will be on peoples' agenda, it will then be absolutely clear that *Afrikanerdom* has never been and will never be a vessel of national consciousness. Brink's understanding of the "four great events" in the making of

the chauvinism of Afrikanerdom is historically very questionable. But time and space prevents us from articulating their questionable nature.

One could go on cataloguing a series of misapprehensions which this book generously exemplifies. For instance, there is not even a single appreciation or, for that matter, confrontation with a black South African writer or a literary period and literary school of black writers. Why is this so? Just compare this eerie silence, which in many ways is frightening, with the great literary and cultural essays of Nadine Gordimer theorizing the intellectual configurations of our literary and cultural history. On reading *Mapmakers*, one sometimes has the impression that Afrikaans literature exists in a State called Cosmopolitanism, and not our beloved South Africa, which today is undergoing a traumatic crisis. At the most, Andre Brink relates Afrikaans literature to white South African English literature, and there is no mention at all, at all, of black South African literature whether written in the European languages or in the African languages. A clue to this whole cultural mess lies in a revealing sentence on page 107: "That is why most Afrikaans writers have found it impossible to write in anything but Afrikaans. English still proved too "European", often as remote from the realities of African experience as Dutch or German, whereas wholly indigenous languages like Zulu or Xhosa lacked the European dimension which, for white writes, continued to form a vital part of their experience." How should one understand and interpret such an astonishing sentence?

On the question of language itself, especially on the origins and gestation of the Afrikaans language, Andre Brink leaves much to be desired. It is interesting here to compare his position with that of Breyten Breytenbach. For Brink the Afrikaans language is the sole creation of the Afrikaner nation, and it represents its true genius. On the other hand, for Breytenbach this language is a product of a multi-national creation: "Afrikaans is a Creole language. (For this contention I'll be eaten alive by Afrikaans linguists and historians). . . The language, however, was born in the mouths of those - imported slaves, local populations - who had no command of no European tongue and who needed to communicate in a lingua franca among themselves; who had to be able also to understand the Master. Not for nothing was it referred to as 'kitchen Dutch' for so long. In its structural simplifications it was influenced by the language spoken by the Malays; in its vocabulary by those of Khoi-khoi and Blacks." (p. 353) Andre Brink, who calls Verwoerd a "great theoretician" (p. 139), one can safely assume, would find such judgement totally disagreeable.

The differences between these two former literary siblings of the Sestigers literary school go deeper and wider than can possibly be formulated and postulated in this short sketch. Their contrastive historical appraisal of the literary moment of Sestigers is remarkable though not surprising. Breytenbach has been

unsparing in his condemnation of this literary period: "Similarly I have felt for some time now that the attention paid to the contestation of Afrikanerdom, within limits of loyalty and fealty, by the so-named Sestigers (writers of the 1960s), the self aggrandizement and the bloated self-importance of these authors, have helped entrench the reactionary forces in the country. This happened first of all because the debate around and by the Sestigers obscured the far more important political issues of the time (suppression of Black parties, impoverishment of the majority, militarization and `securization' of the country, the start of aggressive military foreign policy), including the wiping out of a decade of Black writing which was of greater significance for the future than the `existentialist' deviations of the youngish Afrikaners . . ." (p.355) It is clear from this long quotation that Breytenbach was criticising Andre Brink, for Brink has written: "The generation of the Sestigers broadened the base of contestation in Afrikaans literature. ... It was a movement - inasmuch as the work of a small group of such widely divergent temperaments and talents can be termed a movement - with purely literary origins, starting as a revolt against hackneyed themes and outworn structures in Afrikaans fiction." (p.26) These two statements make it clear that the literary stars of the Sestigers phenomenon have moved in different directions to occupy conflicting positions in the African political sky.

Breyten Breytenbach has moved deeper into the black political sky. In fact, his book, *The True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist*, together with Ngugi wa Thiongo's *Detained* and Wole Soyinka's *The Man Died*, has founded a new African literary genre: namely a new form of prison literature. Elsewhere I have attempted to sketch the historical and political relationships which constitute the unity of these three books.(9) Probably what makes Breytenbach's book very controversial is its unrelenting criticism and attack on the African National Congress and the South African Communist Party. For us, who are members of the former organization, there is nothing scandalous about this assault, for our developing revolution is a democratic process open to all forums of discussions, especially when initiated by its sons and daughters. Though I have indicated elsewhere that these criticisms are on the whole historically unfounded, they nonetheless constitute a salutary warning. It is not accidental that these criticisms were launched from Paris, which today is the capital of intellectual reaction. It was here that in 1977 Marxism was defeated and expelled from the intellectual forums of French culture by the combined forces of structuralism and post-structuralism. It is here also that postmodernism has found philosophical justification at the hands of Jean-Francois Lyotard and Jean Baudrillard. This defeat of historical materialism has had profound effects on French intellectuals as well as on emigre intellectuals, like Breyten Breytenbach, who are resident in Paris. This defeat facilitated the emergence of anarchism in French intellectual circles: the late Jean-Paul Sartre abandoned Marxism for anarchism, also the late Michel Foucault abandoned poststructuralism for anarchism, and our own

Breyten Breytenbach abandoned the socialism of literaterian provenance for full-blown anarchism. In many ways, his criticism reflects the crisis of French intellectual culture. But, it does not follow therefore, that we should minimize the importance of his reservations about the ways in which our political destiny is being pursued. It only means that it should be mediated through the circumstance of its geographical location and intellectual affiliations. The present position of Breyten Breytenbach confirms what this sketch has sought to indicate, that unavoidably and inevitably cultural struggles in South Africa are invariably and simultaneously political struggles. The cultural arch of our intellectual history from the liberalism of Laurens van der Post to the anarchism of Breyten Breytenbach is profoundly dialectical with the presentness of its context.

We are not the driftwood of distant oceans.
Our kinsmen are a thousand centuries old.
Only a few nations begat a civilization
Not of gold, not of things, but of people.

-Mazisi Kunene, "A Note to All Surviving Africans".

(Presented on December 12th, 1987 in Bad Boll: Second Conference on South African English Literature.)

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

1) See my essay, "The White South African Writer in Our National Situation", to appear in double-issue of *Matatu* in April 1988 on South African Literature. (MATATU: Zeitschrift für afrikanische Kultur und Gesellschaft, Göttingen).

2) Alan Paton, "Trooper Peter Halket of Mashonaland", in Olive Schreiner and After, David Philip, Cape Town, 1983.

3) Fredric Jameson, *Fables of Aggression: Wyndham Lewis, the Modernist as Fascist*, University of California Press, 1979, p. 3.

4) A double-issue of *Tri-Quarterly* devoted to South African culture, mainly concerning literary matters. *Tri-Quarterly*, no. 69, Spring/Summer 1987.

5) In an essay, "Daniel P. Kunene: A Singular South African Scholar".

6) See note 1.

7) Andre Brink, *Mapmakers: Writing in a State of Siege*, Faber and Faber,

London, 1983.

8) Breyten Breytenbach, *The True Confessions of an Albine Terrorist*, Faber and Faber, London, 1984.

9) In an essay, "The Historical Lessons of Prison Experience in African Literature: Ngugi wa Thiongo, Breyten Breytenbach, and Wole Soyinka".