Introduction

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The names of a small number of South African writers are familiar around the globe: they include Olive Schreiner, Alan Paton, Athol Fugard, Nadine Gordimer, André Brink, Wilbur Smith and J. M. Coetzee. Others, such as Zakes Mda, Damon Galgut, Njabulo Ndebele, Antjie Krog, Marlene van Niekerk, Ivan Vladislavić and Zoë Wicomb, have growing international reputations. Earlier periods recorded fame for writers whose stars have now faded, among them Sarah Gertrude Millin, Daphne Rooke and Laurens van der Post. Many South Africans have gone on to make names for themselves in other countries: among authors well known in the United Kingdom, for instance, are Dan Jacobson, Barbara Trapido, James McClure, Christopher Hope, Justin Cartwright and Tom Sharpe.

A roll-call of this sort, however, gives very little sense of the range and richness of South Africa's literary output. Several literary traditions, oral and written, have fed into the complex array of verbal productions charted in this volume, at times influencing or infiltrating one another, and at other times ignoring or challenging one another. From indigenous folk-tales to European elite art, these traditions have been constantly reworked and reinvented, creating an extensive body of literary art that continues to grow, despite the smallness of the home market and the very limited financial means of most potential readers. South Africa's fraught political history, with its continual inroads into the lives of ordinary people, has given rise to remarkable literary achievements while at the same time skewing the institutional processes whereby works of literature are produced and disseminated. The establishment of a democratic system of government and the ending of state-sponsored racism make it possible to offer a survey of the entire history of South African literature from a vantage point that was formerly unavailable. This is not to say that the present moment is a plateau of serenity; the challenges that face the reborn nation remain considerable, and South Africa's writers, while not averse to an occasional celebratory moment, continue to explore the

difficulties and dangers of twenty-first century life, at once intensely local and inescapably global.

Readers of *The Cambridge History of South African Literature* will therefore find South Africa's literary culture extraordinarily diverse in histories, voices and traditions. The source of the diversity is the country's social range and multilingualism. Since the disposition of the languages is fundamental to what follows, a brief description is in order. South Africa may not have as many languages as other postcolonial societies like India or, to restrict ourselves to the African continent, Nigeria, but what is unusual is the granting of official status to the eleven most commonly spoken languages in the country, a position inscribed in the post-apartheid Constitution in direct response to the situation prior to 1994, when only English and Afrikaans enjoyed this status.[1] The egalitarian vision behind the constitutional provision for the indigenous African languages will be slow to realise in practice, given the hegemonic status of English, but the legal position shared by the predominant languages reflects current political aspirations. In numerically descending order of their mother-tongue speakers, the official languages of South Africa are isiZulu, isiXhosa, Afrikaans, Sepedi, Setswana, English, Sesotho, Xitsonga, siSwati, Tshivenda and isiNdebele.[2] Whilst English is used as a second, third or even a fourth language by many speakers, it is currently dominant in education, commerce and government.

Since each of the languages has a literature – and in the case of the indigenous languages, an orature and a literature in symbiosis – the country's literary range is so extensive that it places the idea of a national literature in question. In this respect, South Africa's literature is an extension of its national culture. It is no accident that following the first democratic elections in 1994, the framers of the symbolism of state chose for the national motto – *!ke e:/xarra//ke*, 'people who are different joining together' – an ancient language (|Xam, from the Khoi-San group), which is no longer spoken. A consensus around the desire for indigeneity and authenticity could be secured more easily by using

1 See www.info.gov.za/documents/constitution/1996/96cons1.htm

2 The names given here for the African languages are those employed by the language users themselves. In some cases the prefix is dropped in the adjectival form (isiZulu becomes 'Zulu poetry', etc.). 'Sepedi' is widely used, although the Pan-South African Language Board (PanSALB) prefers 'Sesotho sa Leboa' (Northern Sotho), of which Sepedi is one dialect among others. Khoi-San will be used to refer collectively to the Khoi and San groups of languages, the hyphen indicating that they are historically differentiated. There are arguments for Khoe, Khoesan and Khoe-San, but these variants are less common. Other languages used in the country and acknowledged in the constitution are, in addition to the Khoi-San groups, sign language, Arabic, German, Greek, Gujarati, Hebrew, Hindi, Portuguese, Sanskrit, Tamil, Telegu and Urdu, and several local creoles and pidgins. See http://pansalb.org.za/index.html for further information.

a language which had no claim to being a *lingua franca*, although it has a greater claim than most to longevity in the country. With the literature, similarly, there is no overriding, definitive principle of unity, although there have been several attempts to find a metaphor in which a principle of unity-in-diversity might be instantiated.

The challenge of producing a collective description of South Africa's literary past has given rise to a series of particularly lively attempts over the past three decades, of which only the high points can be considered here.[3] In the late 1970s, Stephen Gray took the lead in offering both ontological and functional descriptions which remain useful points of reference. The whole field, he wrote in *South African Literature: An Introduction*, 'is like an archipelago. The islands with their peaks protrude in set positions, even if one does not readily see the connections between them and the surface' (p. 14). Referring to English-language writing, he continued: 'it is related to adjacent landmasses . . . the mainland of English literature; diminishingly, the British Commonwealth of literature; and increasingly, the continent of Africa which gives it its active nourishment' (p. 14). The archipelago metaphor is appealing because it enables one to imagine the distinctive qualities of each of the literatures while positing the unity of the underlying landmass to which each is attached; nevertheless, one suspects that its usefulness has something to do with its continuing to obscure rather than map the underlying unity. As if acknowledging this, Gray proposed that what was needed was the study of how each of the islands was shaped by the forces that linked them: 'what it is necessary to chart now is what tides and drifts and spins, what internal connections, have made them what they are' (p. 14).

The question Gray was wrestling with – the one that confronts all literary history in South Africa and, indeed, any multilingual society – is whether a literature should be defined by its relationship to a particular language, or whether the shaping influences cut across language barriers.[4] If the emphasis is to fall on immanent developments within the literature of a particular language, then certain satisfactions will follow: the opportunity to create

3 Literary-historiographical literature in South Africa has roots in the nineteenth century, and begins to express nationalist sentiment in the early twentieth (see Andries Walter Oliphant, 'Nonidentity and Reciprocity' and 'Fabrications and the Question of a National South African Literature').

4 Oliphant classifies past literary historiography into *monolingual*, *bilingual* and *multilingual* models. The bilingual is earliest and reflects the post-1910, Union position of the white colonial state seeking to unite English and Afrikaans. The monolingual is ethnic-nationalist and is expressed most forcefully in Afrikaans literary history, although it finds its way into English as well. Oliphant supports the multilingual position (associated with Gray, Albert Gérard, Michael Chapman, D. B. Ntuli and C. F. Swanepoel and others), which is also adopted here.

linear narratives as one author or generation follows another, in patterns of continuity and reaction. This version of literary history, with its roots in the traditions of literary criticism, is certainly valid and has produced some of the most useful accounts of South African literature: for example, A. C. Jordan's *Towards an African Literature* (1973) on literature in isiXhosa; Malvern van Wyk Smith's *Grounds of Contest* (1990) on literature in English; and J. C. Kannemeyer on Afrikaans literature in *Die Afrikaanse Literatuur, 1652–2004* (2005, with earlier editions).

When viewed from a wider, or world-historical, perspective, useful though it may be, single-language literary history seems essentially nostalgic. Its roots lie in the German romantic philosophy of Wilhelm von Humboldt and Johann Gottfried Herder and the view that national character is expressed in a national language. Albert Gérard, whose pioneering example is important to the present volume, believed that even in most European countries, let alone African ones, the single-language approach obscures a real plurality of national cultures and tends to be associated with powerful metropoles ('Towards a National History', p. 92). In the present context, he argued that 'the study of any "national literature" in Africa is bound to be effected on a translinguistic basis' (p. 97). *The Cambridge History of South African Literature*, though written in English for a wide international readership, is multilingual in the attention it gives to South Africa's literatures. It takes the view that the story of each of the country's literatures appears in a different light when viewed in the context of the others.[5] In taking this position as editors we do not see our task as especially revisionist; it is, rather, the fulfilment of a long-held aspiration.

In developing this position we find ourselves in agreement with literary historians in comparable postcolonial situations. Sisir Kumar Das, for example, in the multi-volume *A History of Indian Literature,* argues convincingly that the language–literature equation, valuable though it is, is not a *sufficient* condition for understanding literary history in a multilingual society. If the defining element in a national literature is said to be not just the relationships between languages and their literatures, but the relationships between *people and their forms of expression*, then the need to embrace multilingualism becomes obvious. Das argues that political unity, like language, is also a useful but insufficient

5 This is true of all the literatures, including those written in European languages. It is generally accepted that postcolonial literatures in the European languages (Caribbean, Australian, Canadian, New Zealand, South African) should be studied as constituents of their national literary cultures rather than as supplements to their European origins. This position assumes the influence of history, geography and the multilingualism of postcolonial nation-states. See Riemenschneider's collection, *The History and Historiography of Commonwealth Literature*, which includes a number of essays on this theme, including Jürgen Schäfer's, 'Nation or Language?'

criterion for defining the communality that informs literary history in national terms; what defines the idea of a unitary Indian literary history for Das are forms of communality which are essentially cultural. In this regard, he mentions several religious and literary traditions reaching back to the concept of *Bhāratavarsa* mentioned in the *Mahābharata*, in which a 'unified cultural zone' is defined and in which a number of the ancient languages of the subcontinent cross one another (pp. 1–4).

Does South Africa, notoriously divided against itself, have anything comparable to the traditions Das describes? It would seem not: if there are grounds for describing the relationships existing amongst the literatures of South Africa in national terms, they would have to be found elsewhere than in ancient, scripted tradition. But we could begin to delineate such grounds by mentioning the following three factors.

Firstly, there is undoubtedly a unifying history which has produced some powerful national narratives; it would be fair to say, a national mythology. To say this is not to assert a uniformity of experience, nor a consensus, not to mention a common identity, but it is to affirm that South Africans generally understand what they disagree about. A shared history has produced politicised discursive reflexes that are commonly understood. South Africa might be radically heterogeneous in linguistic and cultural terms, but a common history has been imposed on it, a history which is the product of its violent absorption into the modern world-system. Colonialism and then apartheid do not define all of South Africa's history, certainly not its cultural origins, but it is axiomatic that European expansion from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries set in train the processes that would lead to the development of the nation-state. In many postcolonial societies, particularly in Africa, national cultures are unevenly mapped on to nation-states; nevertheless, in South Africa's case the peculiarly aggressive form of modernity that was imposed on the region – racial capitalism abetted by the state in successive forms – has had the effect of creating pan-ethnic forms of association in the fields of labour, the economy, political life and cultural expression. We would agree with Michael Chapman that this spine of historical event provides the basic points of reference for a collective history of the country's many literatures.[6]

6 Literary historiography has raised the question of the instability of national borders, which are crossed by several languages and by patterns of economic migration. Michael Chapman goes as far as to include the literatures of all South Africa's neighbours in his *Southern African Literatures*. The decision we have taken is to focus on the juridical (and bibliographic) entity known as South Africa, which is marked by a particular historical experience, but we do take migrant cultures (such as Sotho orature) into account when they have become an established part of national life. We take comfort from the fact that boundary definitions around what constitutes English literature would be just as difficult to define.

Secondly, there is the question of translingual influence, which is a persistent feature of South Africa's cultural landscape. (To gauge the translingual influences on the English language alone, one need only spend a few hours perusing the *Dictionary of South African English on Historical Principles*.) In South African literary studies, however, it is not generally agreed that the multilingualism of the country's speech communities translates into the kind of cross-pollination that we might associate with literary influence. In 1996, two years after the democratic transition, Van Wyk Smith (the author of *Grounds of Contest*, mentioned earlier, and one of the contributors to the present volume) delivered a memorable critique of a rather premature and celebratory form of national multiculturalism. Taking his point of reference from Harold Bloom in coining the phrase 'the anxiety of non-influence', Van Wyk Smith argued that there was little literary substance to the forms of interracial and cross-linguistic influence that did exist in South Africa, certainly not much that would satisfy Bloom's criterion of influence, in which authors feel an intimate connection with the work of their predecessors. Where cross-cultural connections were apparent, they were merely a function of writers' 'exploring the same subject matter because they happen to have been written in the same part of the world' ('White Writing/Writing Black', p. 75).

In the era of rainbow-nation euphoria, this critique felt like a cold shower, although on its own terms it was well illustrated and persuasive. Now that the dust has settled on the 1990s, it seems that what was wrong with the argument was that its terms were too narrow: to argue that an immanent sense of tradition, as Bloom describes it, should be *the* measure of cross-cultural influence in a country where the languages are as knotted together as they are in South Africa, is to look for roses amongst the thickets of thorn trees and foreign scrub that make up South Africa's cultural scene. If cross-cultural influence is seldom discernible at the level of the individual author responding to a particular genius, it is unmistakeable in broader generic and rhetorical terms. Communally defined traditions *do* travel across the language barriers in South Africa: biblical allegory finds its way into African-nationalist historical fiction; Shakespearean tragedy shows up in radio drama in isiZulu; praise poetry migrates into imperial romance; oral tales migrate into modernist short stories; the Anglo-American lyric enters Soweto poetry, etc. – the list could be endlessly extended. These connections are not those of the private study but of colonial modernity's encounters in places like the mission school classroom, the colonial kitchen, the political meeting, the frontier courtroom, the shebeen, the apartheid jail, the rehearsal room, the radio studio, the suburban writers' group, the editorial desks of dozens of arts magazines and

publishers. Admittedly, the precise itineraries of these generic migrations are difficult to trace but such is the nature of the culture and the work that it demands of its literary historians.

Thirdly, a development from the foregoing, there are widespread practices of translingual writing and translation which reveal the extent to which multilingualism is constitutive of the field. By translingual writing we mean writing done by authors who work in more than one language and whose writing is informed by knowledge of several languages. Amongst their number are generations of leading authors: Sol T. Plaatje, Eugene Marais, Louis Leipoldt, the Dhlomo brothers, Herman Charles Bosman, André Brink, J. M. Coetzee, Antjie Krog. The category of translingual writing could be extended to include writing in which the reader is invited to hear, overhear, or imagine languages being spoken or written which are not actually the language of the text. Such writing, which seeks to capture social texture, is endemic in South African literature. In *White Writing*, Coetzee has explored what he calls processes of linguistic 'transfer' in which non-English speech (Afrikaans and isiZulu, in his examples from Pauline Smith and Alan Paton) is rendered in simplified forms of English in order to build ideological capital. But this is only one form of translingual practice in a diverse and complex field which includes Coetzee's own writing in English and Afrikaans (*In the Heart of the Country*). In each of the stories in Njabulo Ndebele's landmark collection of short fiction, *Fools*, we are expected to imagine multilingual conversations taking place in Charterston township; the text is thus already an act of translation.

Stephen Gray was therefore right when he identified cultural translation as a defining feature of the literature: 'the [South African] writer is always forced into a position of having to negotiate between extremes in crossing the language–colour barrier; he or she can only be a syncretist and hybridizer'; 'the basic act of writing is of carrying information across one or other socio-political barrier, literally of "trading"'; 'trading of literary forms – like the lullaby, the praise-poem, the elegy, and the letter – is shown to be part of the continuing business of a shared literary system that is bigger than the sum of its parts'. In this view, translation 'is more than the technical transposition of a work across from one language to another. It is an act of unblocking channels of communication to insist on the reciprocity of human feelings . . . the arrangement of the work foregrounds translation itself as a major, life-sustaining activity' ('Some Problems of Writing Historiography', pp. 20–1). Cultural translation is an important point of focus for South African criticism, theory and historiography; even if some of the humanist leanings

of Gray's description have been questioned (as they are in Leon de Kock's chapter on translation in this volume), his argument remains generally valid.

De Kock's own contributions to South Africa's literary historiography have been provocative. Taking his point of reference from Noël Mostert's monumental history of the Eastern Cape, *Frontiers* ('if there is a hemispheric seam to the world between the Occident and the Orient, it must be along the eastern seaboard of Africa', *Frontiers*, p. xv), De Kock proposed in 2001 that the *seam* is a defining metaphor because it identifies a site where incommensurate elements are stitched together. (De Kock's language is less benign when he writes of the seam as a scar requiring suturing, the nib of the pen being the suturing instrument.) The seam, he argues, is the place where 'difference and sameness are hitched together' – 'always uneasily' because the seam continues to mark the place of difference ('South Africa in the Global Imaginary', pp. 272–6). Here we have a more sceptical version of Gray's trading metaphor, but a similar concept. More recently (2005), De Kock has posed the question 'Does South African Literature Still Exist?', by which he means that the counterhegemonic, didactic version of literary studies that prevailed in the English-language academy during the apartheid period has become tired; he welcomes the passing of politicised versions of South African literary studies while ushering in their successor, a looser notion of 'literature *in* South Africa'. Despite the playfulness of De Kock's exaggerations, his rhetoric still reproduces the pressures of the local debate.

As De Kock implies, literary historiography in South Africa, like other areas of its national life, is bedeviled by the recent past. The debate over the relative merits of the language–literature equation as against a multilingual perspective is a case in point. As has been mentioned, for decades a multilingual, collective literary history has been the stated goal of many a literary historian and editor. Gérard went as far as to suggest that the fact that South Africa had not produced a 'polyethnic' literary history was indicative of the effects of apartheid on the country's intellectual life (*European-Language Writing*, p. 172). Once the era of formal apartheid came to an end, the project was attempted: Michael Chapman led the way with his encyclopedic work, *Southern African Literatures* (1996, 2003). Despite its scale and political credentials, it was to meet with opposition from conservative English quarters for its tendentiousness, and from non-English quarters for its apparent foreshortenings and implicit anglocentrism. This was followed by Christopher Heywood's *A History of South African Literature* (2004), a book which has not entered the debate in any serious sense because its historiography is too idiosyncratic and it is flawed by persistent factual errors. In their introduction to the recent *Columbia Guide*

to South African Literature in English since 1945 (2010), Cornwell, Klopper and MacKenzie go as far as to say that existing attempts to write 'integrative' histories – Gray, Chapman, Heywood – succeed only in demonstrating the failure of their intentions; they are 'an optimistic gesture in the optative mood – the expression of a political ideology rather than an objectively existent state of affairs' ('South African Literature in English', p. 3). For these editors, such gestures are merely reactive in their desperation to put behind them the racial and linguistic separatism of apartheid.

The historiography adopted by Cornwell and colleagues, which develops from the argument made by Van Wyk Smith, insists that properly literary history is only interested in what they call 'idiogenetic' processes, that is, the processes of 'formal exhaustion and renewal' that are internal to a particular tradition. The 'allogenetic', which is the history of 'social and political events and conditions', is regarded as falling outside of the domain of literary history. Their preference for the idiogenetic over the allogenetic, or internal over external causality, serves their purpose of justifying the *Columbia Guide*'s focus on English, but it would surely be in conflict with the sources informing their terms, which lie in the aesthetic theory of Marx and Engels. Dialectical theory would normally assume that literary history, like any interpretive narrative, would be comprised of *both* elements, just as Saussure would argue of language in general, which developed under the pressure of both internal and external events. Saussure was, of course, mainly interested in the systemic properties of language and chose to emphasise the internal for his own purposes, but his recognition of the nature of language change as involving both internal and external factors is clear. (His recognition of the effects of colonialism on language change is especially interesting in the present context; *Course in General Linguistics*, pp. 21–2.) Similarly, literary history and historiography need a dialectical position in which the parts can be seen in all their uniqueness but in the context of the whole. The various literatures in South Africa do speak to one another but when they *fail* to do so, this failure is no less significant as we seek to understand the complexity of the picture.

The position adopted in the *Cambridge History* is in broad agreement with Oliphant, who has theorised the demands of literary historiography from the point of view of 'the multilingual fact' of South Africa ('Nonidentity and Reciprocity', p. 241). Citing Ntuli and Swanepoel, he argues that the 'political developments which reversed the attitudes of separateness and exclusivity', and which have steered towards 'national unity and inclusiveness', will 'eventually render all segregationist approaches anachronistic' (p. 249). In this position, the theoretical complexity of the field is deferred to history itself:

South African modernity has consistently produced centrifugal forces which have undermined separatism. This historical fact translates into the pragmatism which recognises, in Oliphant's words, that 'the object of South African literary studies may therefore be defined as consisting of all the literatures in the languages spoken within the borders of South Africa as specified in the Constitution of 1996' (p. 252).

In a second essay on this theme, Oliphant asks whether the accommodating position just described is sufficient for the purpose of defining South African literature in properly *national* terms. His answer is no: 'a national literature does not exist in South Africa' because the country does not have a common national culture ('Fabrications', p. 22). On the face of it, Oliphant's conclusions in these two essays seem to contradict one another: on one hand, the object of South African literary studies is simply the literatures of all the languages spoken in the country; on the other hand, the adjective 'South African' has no force in pointing to a common, national identity. There is no contradiction if we accept the strictness of what Oliphant means by a national literature or culture. For him, a 'national' literature would involve, 'minimally', a 'single all-embracing narrative with a nationalist theme in which all the literatures are shown to have participated over time' (pp. 22–3). Such a narrative clearly does not exist in South Africa, as he correctly points out, certainly not at present, although as he suggests it may develop in future (p. 23). But is this strict definition of a national culture sustainable? As Oliphant recognises (p. 13), *nowhere* is the nation state, as the juridical and geopolitical entity, underpinned by a common national culture. The pragmatic definition of national literature which Oliphant proposes, which we have accepted, and which simply uses the plural, should not allow itself to be haunted by a chimera of cultural unity which is simply not currently a historical possibility.

How might we translate this broad, accommodating definition of what constitutes South African literary studies into practice? The solution is firstly, to cede authorship to a collective. With the best will in the world, a multilingual literary history is unlikely to be written by a single author, who is more likely to produce a monolingual account of a multilingual situation. The practice we have followed is proposed by Gérard, who speaking specifically of Ghanaian literary history but with all of Africa's literatures in mind, said,

> Literary history on a national scale can only be carried out by a team of . . . scholars, capable of providing a well-informed and correlated account of all creative writing produced in English and in the . . . African languages. The approach is bound to be multilingual and any satisfactory overall survey