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The Cambridge History of South African Literature

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The sheer size of *The Cambridge History of South African Literature* bears witness to the challenges facing editors David Atwell and Derek Attridge in putting together this attempt to provide a substantive and reliable guide to the complex world that is South African Literature. The 890 pages weigh in at almost 1,8 kilograms in its hardcover edition, and they have enlisted the services of 41 academics as contributors. The majority of them are living and working in South Africa, but “outsiders,” too, have found a place in this memorable work. For those not familiar with the South African language world, it might be difficult to understand why this publication is both significant and problematic. The country has eleven official languages, now deemed to be of equal importance, and additional national/heritage languages. The latter includes the remnants of some of the different tongues spoken by the Bushmen or San people.

But the literary world is dominated by two languages: Afrikaans and English. The first is the product of Dutch being isolated from its roots, the profound influence of the vernacular of slaves and the “coloured” offspring of relationships between whites and blacks and resentment of the imposition of English by the new colonial power in the 19th century. It gave rise to an “Afrikaner” nationalism which profoundly expressed itself in the establishment of early equivalents of media houses. Literature flourished in an era where South Africa had two official languages, and the Afrikaans of its white speakers played a dominant role in society. English, an official language in the Cape and Natal colonies after 1806, and in the whole of the country after 1902, had always benefited from its international stature in respect of its literature. Similar to what took place elsewhere in the world, most writers from communities using the African languages preferred or

chose to write and publish in English. This, too, was influenced by the peculiarity of South African politics.

The editors decided to circumscribe South Africa as the literature belonging to the area known as the Republic of South Africa, choosing to ignore the neighbouring states. This might be logical in respect of those writers writing in English (even, to a less convincing extent, in Afrikaans). But it makes little sense to raise borders for languages such as Sotho and Tswana, and Swati, in an environment where there is so little space for their writers.

South African literature has always had a strong oral component, also informed by historical and political circumstances. The poetry of the long struggle against apartheid seldom reached the printed page. But other narratives existed long before and even today researchers take this into account, visiting deep rural areas where stories in the nine other official languages are still spun around the open fires in tales of the imagination which give account of the origins and nature of life on earth. At the same time the tradition of mine and labour poetry and songs is kept alive, even though the means of transport have changed and the existence of mobile phones makes it easier to call home. The praise poets or *imbongi* are also still alive and well, employed by politicians when the occasion arises, reminding us that the rapper has been with us in Africa since time immemorial.

A factor to be considered is the vision or perspective of the writers. Is there something called "Black writing", irrespective of the language in which it is written? And if it exists, would it be worth tracing its nature, acceptance and utilitarian value? Putting together a literary history against this background is clearly a daunting task. In their comprehensive introduction the editors discuss earlier efforts to try to do this. They point out that it inevitably resulted in an account of either English or Afrikaans literature, with the latter represented by the monumental contribution of J.C. Kannemeyer and the reworked *Perspektief en Profiel*.

There is no equivalent of Kannemeyer and/or *Perspektief en Profiel* for South African English literature. Maybe the editors could consider compiling such a literary history from the contributions in this publication, making it an affordable and manageable text. Integrating the history of the literature written in the Black languages is just as problematic. Judging from the separate chapters devoted to this in different parts, it seems as if the dilemma of choosing whether to write in English or not remains crucial. However, *The Cambridge History of South African Literature* provides a unique introduction for readers and researchers not familiar with the corpus of literary texts existing in the other nine official South African languages.

In Chapter 10 Catherine Woeber shows how the advent of the black voice (whether in language or in authorship) is inextricably linked to the mission presses and she shows how the influence of Morija and Lovedale extended deep into the continent. She also chronicles the rise of black journalism, opening perspectives on Natal and, of course, Bechuanaland and the Northern Cape Colony where Sol Plaatje's star would rise. Bhekizizwe Peterson's chapter on "Black writers and the historical novel: 1907-1948" opens a welcome window, where "Black" is primarily (but not exclusively) equated with writers in one of the non-Western languages. Ntongela Masilela charts the relationship between an African modernity, the New African movement and the Black languages, arguing that S.E.K.

Mqhayi's decision to produce his creative works "exclusively in Xhosa precipitated a fundamental literary revolution in South African literary history" (Attwel & Attridge 2012: 329). He concludes that the 21st century will belong to the African languages. Christiaan Swanepoel writes comprehensively about "Writing and publishing in African languages since 1948", displaying an astonishing grasp of what has been published. An interesting comparative observation he makes is that links with the literatures in Afrikaans and English should be considered, something that does not happen in his contribution.

If a comprehensive monograph about literature written in the Black languages can flow from this publication, it would be extremely useful, and might even lead to more translations into the two dominating language literatures. Leon de Kock touches on this in his chapter on "Questions of translation" and argues that if "a 'national' culture can be seen in South Africa, then, it exists in translation, in a literature of compulsive crossing over" (Attwel & Attridge 2012: 745). But as he demonstrates, very little manifestation of the development of such a culture does in fact exist of any. Peter D. McDonald offers his own lucid view on related aspects in "The book in South Africa." This is an insightful account of literary production in South Africa, providing interesting perspectives and raising ever so slightly the problem of the book [and literature] in a digital age. One, we know, is characterized by short attention spans and the search for instant gratification. A fascinating expansion of McDonald's article would be to provide some numbers related to literary production in South Africa. How many titles are printed in the different languages? What do sales look like? How do libraries assist in developing a culture of engaging with literature? How do publication figures relate to the number of speakers of any given language?

Scant attention and respect is paid to children's books, an important component of any literature, including the oral traditions. Afrikaans literature, for instance, was immensely enriched in its early years by the publication of indigenous folk-tales for young children. Gcina Mhlope's contribution in English, Zulu and Xhosa over the last two decades illustrates the possibility of crossing the traditional cultural-linguistic divide.

Something I also really missed in this publication is a substantive article on the role of magazines and literary journals in South African literature. Mention is made of the contribution of the early mission presses (in all the languages!), but only in Chapter 39 is fleeting attention paid to this important part of literary activity, in David Johnson's "Literary and cultural criticism in South Africa."

The editors have chosen to divide the work into six parts. The first encompasses the timeless and enduring oral traditions, followed by four chronological segments, and ending with a part filled with informative sections called "South African Literature: Continuities and contrasts." Maybe, just maybe, *The Cambridge History of South African Literature* would have been better served had the last part (or some selected chapters) appeared at the beginning. It would have provided a synopsis of sorts, offering a framework into which many of the subsequent articles would fit. This is supported by the fact that, in some instances, there are references to specific chapters in other parts of the book.

Comparative links in all but this last part are very broad and tenuous, either non-existent or, at best, speculative constructs on the part of the reader. Even though the

editors mention that all the contributors had the opportunity to peruse each other's work, there is only occasional evidence that this led to cross-reference. Given the duration of the project, this is not surprising, and this might also be the reason that the work often fails to reflect work published in the year or two preceding the publication of *The Cambridge History of South African Literature*. An example related to Part One immediately springs to mind: Harold Scheub's *The Uncoiling Python: South African Storytellers and Résistance*, published in 2010. Although Scheub's research contribution in respect of the structure of the oral narrative is given due recognition, the 2010 publication is a significant body of work, placing the oral texts against a socio-political background. Other examples can be provided, but this should not be seen as criticism of *The Cambridge History of South African Literature*. It simply demonstrates the enormity of the undertaking and the problems related to dead-lines when such a vast number of contributors are involved.

The structure of *The Cambridge History of South African Literature* follows a reassuring pattern. Every part or section commences with an introduction or overview of sorts, guiding the reader as to the justification for the specific division and what can be expected from the contributions. Strangely, these introductions are not reflected in the Contents. I imagine that the first part would be of immense interest to the majority of the readers. The first chapter on the work and legacy of Harold Bleek and Lucy Lloyd might be familiar terrain, but the rest of "Oratures, Oral Histories, Origins" will open doors to new worlds. Although the oral narrative in its poetic form has been part of Black literary tradition in South Africa for centuries, the 4 chapters illustrate how it has transformed its social function to deal with contemporary issues and politics, even in the post-apartheid years. To some extent it is sad that comparisons with narratives of the 19th century could not be drawn, but hopefully this section will regenerate wider interest.

Part Two is called "Exploration, Early Modernity and Enlightenment at the Cape, 1488-1820" and examines literature of the era of the early Portuguese seafarers rounding the Cape, the Dutch settlement in the Cape and the immediate interior after 1652, and the short period of British rule in the Cape after 1806, but before the arrival of large numbers of British Settlers in 1820. Malvern Van Wyk Smith's chapter on the enduring presence of the figure of Adamastor from Camões's *The Lusiads* in South African English poetry, and the reference to the Portuguese in Afrikaans literature, is exemplary in its comparative approach. It demonstrates that isolating a topic, trope or theme might be the only way to really capture the concept of a "South African" literature. Likewise, Ian Glenn gives a riveting account of eighteenth century travel writing (and the natural history and related literary historiography that informed the writing), proving once again that non-fiction can be as important as its counterpart in revealing a colonial critique and shaping the nature of writing to come.

Part Three is about the empire, the forms of resistance in the nineteenth century and the beginnings of a national awareness [albeit discordant]. The chronological division is drawn at 1910, the time of the establishment of the Union of South Africa. The years 1820-1910 are traumatic times in the life of the country trying to become itself. The editors suggest that there might be more common ground between the Dutch [and later Afrikaans] writing and the English than is commonly assumed, but the five chapters do not really support

this. Laura Chrisman's focus on the "imperial Romance" [interesting and thorough as it is] makes no attempt to trace how the "wild continent" was represented or accounted for in texts in other languages. Similarly Elleke Boehmer's (English) "Perspectives on the South African War" stands in isolation, although she can refer to Denys Reitz's *On Commando* for a view from the other side. H.P. van Coller's solid contribution about the beginnings of Afrikaans literature misses the opportunity to engage with Boehmer.

Part Four, "Modernism and Transnational Culture, 1910-1948", follows a predictable chronological division, but there is little evidence to persuade one that this relates to literature. A clearer moment would probably be the start of World War II, when new lines were drawn. In this section we encounter one of the truly comparative chapters: "Refracted modernisms: Roy Campbell, Herbert Dhlomo, N.P. van Wyk Louw". Tony Voss works across three systems, looking for (and finding) shared values. This is the type of approach one would have hoped to find more of in a publication which tries to break new ground.

Part Five, "Apartheid and its Aftermath, 1948 to the Present" is by far the longest: 13 chapters in 300 pages. This division is, again, problematic: Why was the section not divided into two, as 1994 offers the cleanest break of all in the country's history? This would also have offered the possibility of later developing a second volume of this history: *Literature in a new era*. Looking at Part Five, it is clear that even in a new dispensation academics still tend to look at and think of South African literature as one consisting of separate systems, seldom finding common ground. Titles of chapters are often misleading, as they inevitably focus on the theme or phenomenon in only one language. Some exceptions exist, for example Rita Barnard's "Rewriting the nation", but even here the voices outside Afrikaans and English remain silent. Of course this does not make these contributions without merit, quite the contrary, but it simply confirms the fact that very few researchers read or think past and beyond their own respective language-bound literature. Because so little is written about drama and theatre in the earlier parts, Loren Kruger's chapter "Theatre: regulation, resistance and recovery" is a gem. It is a mine of information, draws lines of comparison between theatrical events throughout the country and gives the genre and its performance its deserved and rightful place.

At the start of this review, I mentioned the importance of the last part of *The Cambridge History of South African Literature*, viz. "South African Literature: Continuities and contrasts". This is because of the comparative insights found in most of the seven chapters, and the occasional cross-reference to other sections of the book. Some of the chapters have already been referred to, but amongst those remaining there is a curious and interesting contribution about "South Africa in the global imaginary" by Andrew van der Vlies. There is real ironic delight when read together with Laura Chrisman's "The imperial romance". An impressive example of the comparative contributions I find in short supply, is the chapter by M.J. Daymond and Andries Visagie: "Confession and autobiography". Its value lies in the fact that it straddles the two dominating literature systems with ease and flair; it would have been even more exciting if we could get to know whether and how these voices exist in the other languages. This happens to some extent in Meg Samuelson's thorough "Writing Women", but whether the experimental

line in fiction (the title of Michael Green's article) runs through novels in the vernaculars remains unclear.

The last word belongs to David Johnson, who tracks how the concept of a South African literature developed over the last two centuries in "Literary and cultural criticism in South Africa", a chapter to which I have referred earlier. He also refers to studies about writers in the African languages and the contribution of the many literary magazines and journals, but remains sceptical [as almost everyone does] about how South African nationhood exists and how it can be found in literature.

Despite reservations raised about the nature and/or compilation of the publication, *The Cambridge History of South African Literature* is by far the most extensive and impressive publication about South African literature in its totality. It makes new demands on all those involved in reading the country, forcing us to also acquaint ourselves with voices in other languages. For this reason, the editors and the publishers deserve all our accolades and thanks.

By its very nature, a publication of this magnitude is expensive, but as the most reliable and authoritative text, the new standard reference work of its kind, it is well worth its price. I am not sure whether the soft cover edition of *The Cambridge History of South African Literature* can be found elsewhere, but in South Africa it can be ordered through Exclusive Books (exclusives.co.za) for R390-00, probably 25% or even less of the current hardcover price in the UK.

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