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intellectual structures, which otherwise might have been impervious to change, it must be true that intellectual debate alone cannot institute significant changes in structures which are decided by social and political factors, in combination with intellectual ones. The question therefore arises, to what extent profound changes can legitimately be campaigned for in relation to a structure - the Department of English - where social and political pressures are not (yet) very dramatically in evidence.

No doubt, this is a powerful argument against the expectation of a revolutionary transformation of such a structure. All the same, pressure for change there certainly is, and it seems to me worthwhile to contribute my voice for change in one direction, rather than another. Social and political developments both inside and outside South Africa establish a context which stimulates intellectual challenge and debate, even with reference to so relatively sheltered a climate as that of the Department of English.

And so, within the last decade, challenges to ruling orthodoxies have been proclaimed with growing confidence and cogency. Epistemological and political issues have been raised: traditional assumptions have been revealed as the assumptions they are, rather than the nature of things they were taken to be: in face of this 'legitimation crisis', some concessions have been made to critical demands, some changes have slowly been allowed to penetrate. In brief, one could say that a theoretical dimension has been restored to the academic concern with literature, after a period dominated by empiricism, by the 'tyranny of the text'. Even so, such developments proceed at a conservatively 'organic' pace, far behind the momentum of history in the world at large... a 'lag' threatens to separate the one from the other, to the extent that the Department of English will become a quiet by-way from the world, a shady spot for the refreshment of the harassed (white, petty bourgeois) competitor (it seems to me that some students have an ideal image of the Department that is not too remote from this already). Quiet by-ways and shady spots, significant as they are for a fortunate minority as ideological refreshment, are, however, for a capitalism in crisis, something of a luxury: we can expect a dwindling pilgrimage to such shrines...until retrenchment or rationalisation knifes its way in.

Is this the way things have to go? I think that, for various reasons, Departments of English are in decline. No doubt, this is one reason why critical debate over the traditional ambiance of such Departments has recently grown more acute. This issue is a large one, and I want to focus upon one particular aspect of it in my next section: the nature of the ideas (or intellectual terms of reference) that dominate the research and teaching practices of Departments of English.

DEPARTMENTS OF ENGLISH: THE DOMINANT IDEAS

When I refer to ideas, I am not thinking of the total reference system within which Departments of English operate: for example, social and political ideas, ideas drawn from the general disposition of the academic polity. I am thinking specifically of
an aesthetic reference system. Here, it seems to me, there is one absolutely central and dominating concept at work. This is the concept of a universal (and hence timeless) aesthetic order. This order is empirically, rather than theoretically defined: it consists of literary texts, rather than of theoretical concepts about literature. At the same time, the texts that belong within this order are recognized as belonging in terms of certain concepts, or values. Here one is dealing with an interface between a universal aesthetic order (the concept of which had already been produced within Western metropolitan culture) and certain values by which it is recognized (for example, the values of a liberal humanism. These values are partly imported from the West, and partly produced locally by South African liberal elements).

The primary, or foundational concept is that of a universal aesthetic order. This is then built upon, interpreted or recognized, in the light of the values of liberal humanism. To this account we must add another factor: the practical or technical application of liberal humanist values and ideas to the recognition of the universal aesthetic order is achieved by means of a specific approach, or method. This method is 'practical criticism'. This triadic reference system is embraced by an anti-intellectualist empiricism. This means that anyone who is actually using this system of reference in the reading and evaluating of literature will deny that he/she is employing any system at all (if challenged). Such a person will have a sense of complete individual freedom and spontaneity in the use of this system: or, more accurately, will employ concepts of individual freedom and spontaneity to explain the nature of the aesthetic activity thus engaged in. What I have defined as a 'system' is simply, for such a person, the way things are, the natural affinities of things. Literary texts of a certain quality do constitute a universal aesthetic order; the values of liberal humanism are simply the recognition of values embedded in human nature...and so on. The 'system' only appears as a system (defining and excluding) to those who are outside it, opposed to it and by it, fighting its definitions and exclusions, and the practical effects of these. (Naturally, unconsciousness of the 'system' has changed somewhat, with the development of theoretical debate.)

It seems to me that those of us who would like to impel Departments of English towards major changes need to penetrate this opaque empiricism: to identify and publicise the system that operates within its ambiance: to expose the system as a system (defining and excluding). In particular, this applies to its primary concept of a universal (and hence timeless) aesthetic order: the basis of a secondary methodology of reading and discrimination. This is all the more of a priority, in that the question of aesthetic evaluation (a derivate of the concept of a universal aesthetic order) has bedevilled and bemused a great deal of debate outside of the dominant modes of discourse. The assumption of a universally valid aesthetic evaluation system has achieved much wider legitimacy than pertains simply to the conservatively dominant ideas of Departments of English.

In order to change radically the theoretical and practical ambiance of Departments of English, it is necessary to challenge
and displace the dominating conservative concept of the existence of a universal aesthetic order, to which specific texts are implicitly referred. This challenge involves a related one: a challenge to the idea that the principal activity involved in reading literary texts, in an academic or 'serious' context, is the evaluative placement of these texts within the universal order.

In place of aesthetic ideas which are referred to universality, to timelessness or to human nature (or to 'English literature', or to the 'Great Tradition'), we need to argue for completely different concepts of aesthetics, and of aesthetic evaluation. The challenging concepts need to be historical ones: ones, that is, that recognise the imbrication of aesthetic issues with social and political forces, and that effect this recognition not simply in a tokenistic or perfunctory way, but as a directive for the central momentum for research and teaching. We must attempt to replace universalist or essentialist terms of aesthetic reference with terms which are capable of assisting the work of sensitive and detailed historical, or social-contextual analysis.

I will now try to demonstrate why this is such an important issue. Up to this point in the argument, I have been concerned with the dominant ideas of Departments of English at quite a high level of abstraction. It is now necessary to consider these ideas more closely, and in particular the way in which they affect practice, by determining the parameters of research and teaching orientations.

THE DOMINANT IDEAS IN PRACTICE

Initially, perhaps, I should clarify a potentially confusing and distracting question. This is the question of aesthetic evaluation. I am not arguing for a non-evaluative approach to literature: I recognise aesthetic evaluation as an integral feature of all literary experience. Literature is never about neutral things: it is about ways of thinking, ways of 'seeing', ways (therefore) that are implicitly evaluative. Literary practices promote certain ways of conceptualising, of 'seeing' - and hence exclude other such ways. This is a condition of existence of all linguistic structures.

What is at issue, rather, is the way in which aesthetic evaluation is to be understood: to what purposes it is to be referred. In our Departments of English, it seems to me that aesthetic evaluation is referred, implicitly, to the existence of a universal (and hence timeless) aesthetic order. The processes of reading and evaluating literature are understood with reference to this order: they involve identifying and experiencing this order and placing such new texts within it as are judged worthy of such inclusion. Priorities in research and teaching are decided in this way.

On a point of clarification: reference to a universal - timeless aesthetic order is made implicitly, rather than in actuality: the order is implicit, rather than actual. It provides a way of understanding the process of aesthetic evaluation, in whatever
context this is enacted. Thus, for example, one may be engaged wholly with British literature. This does not contradict the orientation towards universality, however, for an order of British literature (for example, a Great Tradition) is implicitly identified as providing the evaluative framework for such an engagement and this order is understood as a sub-category of the universal order. What really matters is that the process of evaluation is enacted with reference to an order which has been raised to a plane of timelessness.

On a further point of clarification: orientation towards universality and timelessness does not mean that the historical context of literature is completely ignored. This would be an evident absurdity which I do not wish to impute even to the most conservatively entrenched literary attitudes. History is always to be reckoned with, in one way or another. With regard to literary scholarship, a heavy emphasis is placed upon research into historical minutiae. I hope I will not seem in contradiction if I say that one of the great virtues of the methodology of practical criticism - in the moment of this methodology's struggle against heavily historicist scholarship - is the way in which it restored the balance by emphasising the evaluative dynamic of reading. The point is that a scholarship focussed upon historical minutiae, in the manner suggested above, actually subverts the concept of a universal aesthetic order: it is in no way an historically active and critical scholarship, but a subservient scholarship.

The historical context of literature is not completely ignored - and truly valuable historical research is even sometimes undertaken - but the central evaluative process, that process which is the ultimate justification for elevating the engagement with literature to the status of an academic discipline, is not regarded as historical, the implicit reference rather is to universality (for example: 'human nature').

The aesthetic order of literature is universal-timeless, not because its historical terms of existence are altogether neglected, but because aesthetic evaluation places it beyond historical contingency. Certain literary texts become timeless, by being placed within an order elevated above future historical contingency.

On what basis is this selection and elevation of certain literary texts - which then become a universal and timeless order - possible? An essential condition of this process is the attribution of specific quantities of 'aesthetic value' to literary texts, as inherent properties of these texts. If value is a property of the text, then it must follow that value is a non-historical quality; it cannot be changed by time. What enables literature to be placed outside of historical specificity is its aesthetic property. It must follow, too, that the principle of aesthetic value is absolutely distinct from social and political terms of evaluation: otherwise the aesthetic status of literary texts would have no fixed basis of determination, but would be subject to the constant fluctuation and development of social and political forces.

An aesthetic property is, then, attributed to literature, which
is a non-historical property in the sense that social and political forces cannot intervene in it, to delimit and determine its nature. This property is the basis for conceptualising a universal aesthetic order, composed of literary texts in which this property is developed to a very high qualitative degree. (This does not rule out some dispute over the actual texts worthy of such a vocation; but dispute of this kind should not be confused with challenge to the idea of the order itself.)

Of course, the idea of this order is lent material credibility by the very long life that some literary texts have had: a life which is out of all proportion to the socio-political conditions in which the work was produced. This is particularly so in the context of Western civilisation, where literature, at least in its dominant cultural definition, is characteristically a written literature/a printed literature, and therefore has properties of material durability. The ages-long reputation and fascination that some literary texts have been able to sustain, and which helps give credibility to the concept of a universal aesthetic order, poses a problem which those of us interested in challenging the concept will have to provide some answer to. I shall return to this point a little later on.

On the other hand, those who believe in aesthetic value as an inherent property of literary texts also have a problem on their hands. How is it possible for any human practice which is essentially concerned with values, attitudes and ideas to have a non-historical property, a property above social and political intervention and orientation? How is it possible to justify the apparently contradictory position that so disputatious a realm as literature is attributed the capacity to sustain purely objective, permanent values? It seems to me that these questions can only be answered by means of some reference to 'human nature'. The aesthetic property of a literary text - its inherent, invariant value - can be explained with reference to an unmediated expression of human nature: people as they are, innocent of socio-political intervention and orientation!

As to the basis on which so innocent and pure a human practice was enabled to develop...? It seems that, in the end, we arrive at an idealist conception of the role of literature (defined, not in terms of the totality of all existing literary practices, but of a specially selected order) in human societies. The great writers are simply the watchdogs of innocent and universal human values: they are the recorders of innocent and universal human experience. They fulfil this role because they are more 'aware' of what being 'human' (in the above-mentioned sense) really means than are most of us.

So what comes out of all this? What is the actual practice of Departments of English - based on the above postulates - like? The backbone of all syllabuses, and the mainstay of most research projects is an unchanging grid of 'great writers', drawn from Britain and North America, and from the years between the late fourteenth century and the present. It's on this grid that you'll find the exponents of significant sub-categories of the universal aesthetic order that provides the over-arching rationale of Departments of English.
The early days of 'practical criticism' were at least associated with the exercising of some fresh and iconoclastic critical energies (for example, Leavis's 'demotion' of Milton, Spenser and others; Scrutiny's assault upon late-romantic aesthetics, and upon the ponderous historicist scholarship of the academic establishment); with the acclamation of the work of developing and highly controversial writers, disdained by the powers of orthodoxy; and with a momentously influential redrawing of the dominant literary map. Since that time, however, the methodology of 'practical criticism' has itself become a practice of orthodoxy, more concerned with upholding a rigidified conservatism than with significantly fresh 'revaluations'.

Indeed, what significant cultural projects are being undertaken within the ambiance of Departments of English? Let me once again refer you to the early days of 'practical criticism'. 'Practical criticism' was then a cultural project of great enterprise, cogency and boldness, a project which shaped itself as a response to powerful new socio-cultural developments within post-World War One Britain, in the (I think mistaken) terms of an opposition between 'minority culture' and 'mass civilisation'.

Today, in the South African context, 'practical criticism' is a methodology that has been dominant for many years. It is no longer associated with projects inspired by response to powerful new historical forces: indeed, in any immediate sense, it has withdrawn from any sort of cogent historical initiative and naturally enough: the concept of 'practical criticism' was the product of a specific historical conjuncture, and the deployment of this critical strategy at a remove from this conjuncture - are the major cultural issues of contemporary South Africa in any way related to those perceived as an opposition between 'minority culture' and 'mass civilisation' in post-World War One Britain? - dehistorises the concept and weakens the strategy.

In the early days, 'practical criticism' was intended as a mode of analysis of a range of literary and cultural forms far beyond the traditional preoccupation of academics. It was intended to provoke a critical engagement with newly pervasive mass-production cultural forms: advertising, journalism, film, 'lowbrow' fiction, etc. Nowadays, 'practical criticism' simply introduces students to the British/American sub-section of the static-universal literary grid, and induces them to a recognition of the aesthetic values therein contained. The imagined 'freedom' and 'spontaneity' in the exercise of individual judgement that this practice supposedly inspires appears as a sad caricature of these qualities, in that no real initiative is involved, and nothing outside of the formal requirements of the exercise in itself is really at stake.

The orientation of 'practical criticism' has not been seriously re-examined, in relation to the real cultural forces of the modern South African context: the literary and more broadly cultural forms that most urgently require analysis are substantially neglected within Departments of English. This is due to the dominance of universalist terms of reference.

So the same names dominate the syllabuses year after year, names that deserve this repetition ad nauseam, because of their honour-
able place in the universal-timeless aesthetic order. From Chaucer and Shakespeare to T.S. Eliot and Lawrence (with later authors being more fluctuant), the identical temporal sequence reinforces a lofty, cyclical notion of human nature caught in the toils of time and emotion, yet somehow always the same. The way of teaching these authors does, of course, change to some degree, and take the impact of challenge and debate; but students may be forgiven if they feel themselves to have entered a strangely reclusive world (some of them, no doubt, enjoy this).

Now I don't think that the continued dominance of ideas which have considerably degenerated from their original vitality is simply an intellectual issue. It is undoubtedly underpinned by social and political factors. There has been no really basic change because change has not appeared urgent or desirable to the socio-political and cultural collusion of forces that has been in control of the Humanities in the English-speaking Universities of South Africa for some considerable time. In my next section I want to glance at this aspect of things, by giving some attention to the colonialist dimension of the dominant ethos.

THE DOMINANT IDEAS AND THE COLONIAL IMAGE

I shall begin this section by returning, once more, to the concept to which I have already given a reiterated address: the concept of a universal aesthetic order. This time, I am concerned with the historical context of this concept: with the conditions within which it was established.

No doubt, for as long as there has been literature, literature has been valued by somebody or other. No doubt, different literary practices, forms and products have always been the subject of evaluative disputes, claims and counter-claims, attempts at making certain evaluative procedures and conclusions triumph over others. On occasion, those classes involved, as audience or public, with the reception of specific literary genres, may have come to a common consensus as to those authors most worthy of attention and encouragement. It may have then have seemed that the value commonly attributed to such authors, was the inherent property of the works of these authors, and not simply the result of a process of social discussion and evaluation - the result of the action of social forces upon the works, rather than a property of the works themselves.

However, the really systematic preoccupation with a universal, historically-transcendent aesthetic order, perhaps prepared by a lengthy historical process, only came into being in nineteenth century Europe. What were the conditions of this process of systematisation? One contributory factor must, I think, have been the growing social emphasis upon educational structures, and the consequent relocation of the site of the intensive evaluation of traditional cultural phenomena within academic institutions.

Another factor relevant to the British scene was the concern felt by the liberal intelligentsia of Victorian England at the
nature of the social and political forces brewing within the rapid development of an industrial capitalist culture. It now was clear to many members of this intelligentsia that religion, a traditionally conservative cultural force, was either declining in power or else inactive over large areas of social terrain. The intelligentsia itself felt the declining hold of religious faith, and, on the other hand, the developing proletarian masses of the industrial cities were substantially outside of existing networks of religious inculcation. The fear - expressed in the title of Arnold's well-known polemic, Culture and Anarchy - was that the whole fabric of the social order would be threatened by the significant absence of this legitimising ideological force: 'anarchy' would be unleashed (socialism?).

Literature began to receive a new injection of meaning in this context, and to take over the role once assigned to religion. Naturally, this does not mean that literature could immediately become a 'popular' force, by means of which the urban masses would be led out of a state of 'anarchy' into a condition of 'culture'. It is rather that the intelligentsia began to make literature play a role in its own outlook which could compensate for the stresses and misgivings of its predicaments. The hypostatization of a universal aesthetic order of literary texts arises in this connection. It replaces the overarching symbolism of religion with, perhaps, an order of symbolism more appropriate, more in tune (in being more capable of subtle definition and elaboration) with the secular individualism of the intelligentsia. Literature takes over where religion left off but only because of the security and permanence of values now vested in its ancientness of origin, and in the durability of reputation of its 'great' exemplars.

A further factor was that Victorian England was a dynamic imperialist power, concerned to extend its hegemony over the world, to 'universalise' its culture. The imperialist thrust requires cultural and ideological legitimation, and one of the forms of such legitimation is to elevate British literary culture to the status of one of the indisputable peaks of civilised achievement.

If we now turn to the 'colonial' academic scene, to the English-speaking Universities of South Africa, it is clear that Departments of English are organised in close alignment with the model supply by the metropolitan culture. The order of 'great works' promoted by these Departments is British/American, and African/South African/Afro-American/Caribbean and 'Third World' literature, though given some tolerance, is relegated to the minor placings (to be fair, this also happens with the more contentious contemporary British/American authors). It is taken for granted that the relevant orientation of a Department of English in South Africa is towards the West, towards Britain/The United States, rather than towards Africa. This is a clear case of colonial dependency.

Of course, such ideological dependency is supported by material conditions. The English-speaking Universities are (or have been) overwhelmingly intended for white students, whose racially-determined cultural self-definition has always been in terms of the West. The dominant liberal humanist perspectives of Humanities
Departments have done little to challenge this orientation, since liberal humanism shares the assumption of superiority and centrality of Western cultural forms in general, and of Western literatures in particular. Those select texts incorporated in a British/American order of 'great works' must have a vastly superior claim to the attention of South African students - and this means black, as well as white - than the productions of local authors, it is thought. They have priority on the grounds of quality. Naturally, the 'universal order' muscles in on anything contemporary or provincial-colonial (or ex-colonial)

Although the priorities of the academic scene - universalism before provinciality, timelessness before contemporaneity - have clearly a certain self-reproducing interior logic, given the dominant concept of aesthetic evaluation, we should not underestimate the social and political factors involved in the reproduction of such priorities. This is all the more evidently the case with regard to the historical moment we are living in now, where the perspectives of imperialist capitalism are in a state of ideological crisis, and in constant, open conflict with resurgent forces of the Third World, aligning their struggles for self-determination with socialist economic and political programmes. This is not a scenario either sympathetic or favourable to the concepts of liberal humanism, since these were developed in a context of an essentially reformist relation to the thrust of capitalism - projected in terms of a 'civilising' and 'humanising' strategy vis-à-vis imperialist and industrialist capitalism. Liberal humanism is critical of what it sees as anti-human excrescences within such capitalist structures, but absolutely eschews revolutionary strategies and perspectives. This becomes clear if we look at the way in which the liberal humanist intelligentsia occupies its place within the educational structure of the Apartheid state. It sees this structure as distorted by racialism, but believes in its capacity to rescue the essential civilising virtues of the academic apparatus of bourgeois culture, by means of its intellectual rejection of racialism. The liberal humanist intelligentsia constantly demonstrates that it has no real quarrel with the educational apparatuses of a bourgeois ethos.

The contemporary literatures of Africa, and the rest of the Third World, have been produced in the context of popular and populist struggles against imperialist capitalism, and the perspectives generated within these struggles have not been so easily appropriable by liberal humanism, in that such perspectives imply a more radical approach to bourgeois culture than liberal humanism cares to develop.

It seems that the reformist strategies of the liberal humanist intelligentsia have now lost whatever broad claims to credibility they may once have had. Only in academe has recognition of the new dispensation proved tardy.

If we look at the new literary genres to have emerged in the South Africa of the 1970s, we can appreciate how much ground liberal humanism has lost. Even within its own structures, it has been white-anted by the modernist novels of J.M. Coetzee. The emergence of these modernist novels in the 1970s indicates...
the penetration of academic structures that were once the bastions of liberalism by a radical loss of faith in this outlook, accompanied by a thorough-going demystification of its characteristic aesthetic and political postulates.

More significantly, perhaps, a new black township literature has emerged, whose aesthetic impetus is imbricated with Black Consciousness and populist precepts. Liberal criteria for the evaluation of aesthetic quality, grounded in the concept of a sensitive and humanist individualism, and backed by the authority of a universalist aesthetic order, have been treated with somewhat scant regard by the exponents of this new literature.

In the face of such notable contemporary signs of desertion or neglect of the liberal cause, the dominant forces within academe continue to hold - though with diminished assurance - to liberalist concepts and practices. Here it is important to note that the prominence given to the concept of a universal aesthetic order (sub-section British/American) does not simply denote colonialist dependence on metropolitan guidance. The British/American order of 'great works' is endorsed academically because it can easily be made compatible with a liberal humanist educative programme. That is, ultimately, the real significance of the appropriation of this aesthetic order to the South African context. This literary 'tradition' affords an unparalleled opportunity for the inculcation of liberal attitudes and values, given that the authors who compose it have been lifted out of their historical determinants and treated as 'free agents' (universalism, humanism, individualism and non-politicism are essential components of the liberal outlook). The great programme of Departments of English is - liberalise through literature!

The great irony of Departments of English is - non-politicism! Some of us may see this non-political liberalism as establishing a covert monopoly in the political-cultural and socio-cultural programming of literary studies.

Liberal humanism centres upon an ideal of free and unconstrained individual interaction: it believes in dialogue, where dialogue is the concept of an individual exchange of experiences and interests between individuals, with a view to the maximum possible harmonising of the diversity of experiences and interests thus exchanged. The great British and American literary traditions are given centrality in Departments of English in South Africa, because it is genuinely believed that these traditions provide powerful support for this liberal humanist programme. This belief is, of course, possible only because the texts that compose the traditions - the orders - have been largely extrapolated from the complex of social, political and cultural forces within which their original significance was determined, an extrapolation achieved through the concept of immanent aesthetic value.

But what is the larger reality of South African life within which this programme is being set to work? The real course of events has gone completely contrary to the liberal programme, to such an extent that there are no longer any experiential bases for the promulgation of a liberal culture, except in a few isolated incidences (of which the Humanities Departments of the English-
speaking Universities are part). In losing contact with larger, experiential realities, liberalism has also lost its fighting edge. It has become a defensive, enclaved position, steeped in tradition and backwardness.

The articulation of the Apartheid state has achieved the most complete segregation of classes and communities from each other as is compatible with the demands of capitalism (the dependence of capital upon supplies of labour-power). This segregation is effective at every level: economic, social, political, cultural, geographical, etc., etc. That is why there is no longer any experiential basis for the concept of 'dialogue' (except in transparently exploitative cases, such as between the ruling bloc and a thin, privileged stratum of the oppressed races), and viable strategies are determined by the effective, visible entities of class and community.

Ironically, segregation has not led to a rethinking of priorities on the part of Departments of English. Responsibility continues to be understood in terms of the liberal concept of 'dialogue': sensitive personal interchanges, focussed upon an appropriate body of literature. Segregation has, seemingly, insulated Departments of English from outside pressures, and enabled them to sustain their liberal programmes without radical re-orientation, due (in part) to the absence of vivid, experiential challenge.

No critique of our Departments of English would be adequate without a closer look at 'practical criticism' than I have so far engaged in, and in my next section I will turn to this aspect of the dominant literary practices.

PRACTICAL CRITICISM, THE PERSONALISATION OF LITERATURE AND THE INSULATION OF THE PERSONAL

In earlier work, I have concentrated upon making an epistemological critique of 'practical criticism'. On this occasion, I am rather concerned with developing a critique connected with some of the concrete socio-political issues raised immediately above.

While discussing the original moment of 'practical criticism', I stressed the concern of this methodology with cultural engagement. My argument in this section is that 'practical criticism' has become a form of disengagement, of the insulation of literature from the most pressing cultural activities of contemporary South Africa. To avoid misunderstanding, let me acknowledge immediately that the advocates of 'practical criticism' would defend the relevance of this practice, in the first place, at a personal level. 'Practical criticism' is about the sensitising of a personal response to literature. It may be assumed that this is always-everywhere a relevant concern. However, it is my contention that the way in which, in the academic context, 'practical criticism' focusses attention upon a personal relation to literature has lost all the vital and necessary connection it once had with larger realities, and with the mobilising of
effective cultural strategies in the face of these realities. Hence, 'practical criticism' now tends to produce an insulated personal experience of literature.

This development is, to a degree, implicit in the methodology from the first. For it is the (ironic) characteristic of the methodology of 'practical criticism' that in an age of the mass-production of commodities (and it was the mass-production of cultural commodities that 'practical criticism' was supposed to counter the deleterious effects of), its approach towards literature was entirely consumerist. Literary texts were treated as commodities: that is, they were interpreted as finished products, divorced from their conditions of production and reception. This dislocation of literary texts from their material circumstances - their total material reality - is, in the South African case, a seriously disabling propensity. Let us consider for a moment the natural environment presupposed by the 'practical criticism' methodology.

It's not really relevant whether you are conducting a reading à la 'practical criticism' by yourself, or as one in a group (except that, in the latter case, your complete freedom of expression must be guaranteed). You must have a text. You must have a reasonable degree of comfort and freedom from distraction. You are not really concerned with how the text got into your hands (or with how you got the text into your hands). The only thing that concerns you is an aesthetic evaluation of the text, an evaluation that involves two essential terms: your own literary sensibility, and the immanent qualities of the text itself.

You're a consumer evaluating a product, rather than an activist concerned with production! Furthermore, you're a consumer in a situation with peculiar constraints. You are not, for example, really interested in letting the producer know what you think of the product. Your evaluation is always post.textum, and, since your activity as a 'practical' critic consists of a series of isolated samplings, without any necessary connection or purpose, in terms of the products sampled, you can't be expected to make a significant impact upon the sphere of production. Your self-sensitisation develops at a remove from any practical effects.

If you are a student-consumer (and this applies to many teacher-consumers, too) you're in a perpetual state of mystification as to the material origin of the products you are evaluating. Where does the product come from, how was it made? You don't know. All you're concerned with is evaluating it, according to immanent criteria. (When I propose the question: 'How was it made?', I'm not thinking of an answer in terms of the total material-social reality that made the text possible.)

So it's evident that you're getting a training in consumerism. You're being made into - if not a useful - an exemplary member of a bourgeois society. Better mind your place! You are being denied a dynamic interaction with your society. All the dynamism is projected inward, into the sphere of personal sensibility. As far as practice goes, you are passive: passive-evaluative.

The passivity of the consumer-cum-critic is counter-posed by
the authoritarianism of the text-in-existence. The mere existence of literature is sufficient reason for the critic to engage in a 'practical' analysis of it: the quintessential relation is thus established. Why are you evaluating the text? Why, because it...exists. It is as though the existence of the text is simultaneous with its demand to be evaluated (priced?). The last thing such a methodology any longer implies is the seizing of a critical initiative, the shaping of a significant cultural project in relation to the practical world.

Furthermore, the critical consumer remains in a mystified relation to him/herself. By this I mean that no concepts are employed within the methodology of 'practical criticism' which acknowledge the significance of the material predicament of the 'practical' critic. The class origin, the political commitment—all the precise material forces that are brought to bear, in some way of another, in the activity of the critic—all such factors are left out of the account, the terms of reference are 'practical criticism'. The critic becomes, within these terms of reference, simply a more or less sensitive person: literature, and the critic's relation to it, are personalised, voided of material content. There is no incentive for the critic to encounter the social parameters of the type of exercise on which he/she is engaged.

Yet one assumption upon which the whole exercise depends is the assumption of security: security of the person, security of property, security of exchange. In a world of pure market forces, an image of the critic as consumer is at least comprehensible. But what are we to make of the assumption of security upon which the rationale of 'practical criticism' depends—in South Africa? 'Practical criticism' assumes the critic's secure possession of the text (any text). But what is the case in South Africa?

Here, many texts cannot reach the hands of the critic. It may well be that the author is banned/harassed/frightened/in jail/in exile: that the text is banned for possession/for distribution: that the publishers are unwilling/unable to publish: that the critic is afraid of being raided, etc., etc. In other words, an extensive and repressive 'security' apparatus is levelled against literary production. Quite apart from the extensive legislation already in existence for the surveillance and repression of literary production and reception, further legislation is in process of finalisation in relation to the press, which will enable the state to control the production of 'news' even more tightly than it already does, and to exert a close control over the whole membership of journalistic bodies.

It is perfectly clear that special conditions of literary production and reception obtain in South Africa, and that these conditions are not temporary or freakish, but are expressive of the larger realities of our social formation. And yet the approach of 'practical criticism', as it seems to me, and as I have attempted to diagnose above, is a peculiarly disabling strategy for encountering these conditions. 'Practical criticism' works closely in harmony with the concept of a universal aesthetic order, and suggests an ethos of tradition, permanence, security and freedom, an ethos untroubled by fundamental questions of social, political and cultural practice...an ethos, in other words, that
may be the ideal of liberal humanism, but that is far from being a practical reality.

WHAT WE NEED

What we need, then, is to free ourselves of the shackles of outmoded literary concepts and practices, by means of which the process of aesthetic evaluation is carried on in an atmosphere of securely traditionalised and hierarchised priorities - an atmosphere that induces a sense of time as including a lofty cyclicism (great authors linking together the recurrent tides of human experience) this is as near to timelessness (the same great authors affirming eternal truths year after year) as makes no matter.

Freed of these shackles, we need to determine new literary concepts and practices, by means of which we can engage - as a new priority - with the material reality in which our academic structures are enclosed (enclaved), and, in particular, with the real state of all literary practices in the Southern Africa of our own time, with regard to the economic, social, political and cultural aspects of this 'real state'. Only on the basis of such a re-orientation can the academic business of research into and teaching of literature regain some vitality and relevance, in a wider context than the self-perpetuation of academic rituals.

This implies a reversal of the present priorities: from universality and timelessness to the here and now; from the West to Africa and the Third World; from academic elitism to more reciprocal relations with writers and writers' groups, with 'production'; from a concentration upon the immanence of the text to one upon the material conditions of the production and reception of literature; from consumerism to activism; from non-politicism to politicisation (not with regard to content, but with regard to orientation); from idealism to materialism; from the aesthetics of the text to the aesthetics of critical practice. The final section of this paper will amplify this last suggestion.

THE RENOVATION OF CRITICISM IS THE DEATH OF AESTHETICS

An epistemological precondition of this reversal is that we jettison the belief in aesthetic value as an inherent property of literature. Literature has - or, literary practices have - no fixed necessary, no indwelling property of aesthetic value. Such an assertion may seem to go absurdly contrary to the appearance of things. As I have acknowledge earlier in this paper, some literary texts have sustained an immensely long life of high reputation and esteem: indeed, of high value. This lends credence to the idea that literature has some special property that is outside of time, and which enables literary artifacts to survive in the affections of mankind for longer than do either social structures or political systems.

To avoid misunderstanding, I must insist that it is far from my intention to develop a completely subjectivist account of the
relation between criticism and literature, or to deny the objec-
tive properties of literature. Clearly, such properties exist -
language, and linguistic discourses are not completely arbitrary
- and must set limits to the uses to which literary texts can be
put, and to the evaluative relations within which they can sub-
sist. However, these properties do not entirely define and en-
close literary texts, which are meaningless unless they are read
and heard, felt, interpreted and valued. It is this dependence
of the literary text on the process of reception that gives it
a necessary openness for the text cannot determine its reception
(although it sets certain limits). The reception of the text
depends upon factors outside of it, factors which represent the
material and experiential reality of the text's public. A text
is only valued if it can be made to signify something relevant
within the terms of reference - ideas, preoccupations, struggles,
practices - of this public.

In other words, the text has to be appropriated if it is to have
value. It has to be resituated by every new public that values
it, in accordance with that public's material reality, and its
cultural and ideological needs and strategies. A new author may
initiate new terms of cultural and ideological discourse - and
this explains why the experience of contemporary literature is
different from the experience of past literature - but, after
this moment of initiative, the active role in the creation of
value passes over to the text's mode of reception: it is the
public that determines value. It is this openness of the text
that enables some literary productions to acquire an aura of
timelessness and Universality, in that such openness - or depend-
ence upon reception - makes possible a wresting of the text from
its initial conditions of existence, and its reinterpretation/re-
valuation within conditions for which it was never intended.

Of course literary texts have certain properties: but once we
move into the sphere of evaluation, then we must recognise that
nothing is fixed: contention, debate and struggle remain endemic
to this sphere. The activity of evaluation is the activity of a
public which naturally gives priority to its own terms of refer-
ence and interests, and not to those of any imagined universal
and unchanging order. This is in fact the case under the present
dispensation, too. As I have already suggested, liberal humanist
interests dominate Departments of English, and promote, as a
fixed and unchangeable priority, research into and teaching of a
select 'order' of British and American texts. This order is
given priority because it can be made amenable to a liberal human-
ist programme: the literature is taught and researched in such
a way as to support such a programme (and other ways of relating
to this literature are marginalised). So the liberal humanist
dispensation does consult its own cultural and ideological inter-
est - only it disguises these (and from itself too) behind a
screen of timelessness and universality, or behind (what comes
to the same thing) immanent aesthetic value.

It seems to me that enough of us can now see through this screen
to make it a real embarrassment. We need to go further than ex-
posure of this specific screen, and denounce its underlying
principle: the principle of immanent aesthetic value. We need to
establish that it is only ourselves who are responsible for the
priorities and strategies of literary education: texts do not impose their values on us, we impose our values upon them.1

With regard to the specific literatures of the West that have traditionally been elevated to supreme academic status, we need to put them under review, considering them now in the light of the specific interests and values and strategies that they have been made to serve, within the medium of real, material history, and within the light of the interests, values and strategies that we – consciously and deliberatively – can make them serve. We make our own priorities: (liberal humanist) tradition has no necessary claim on us.

I believe that the demotion of universalist aesthetics from credibility will have as a consequence a re-orientation of Departments of English towards a more sustained and cohesive engagement with the state of literature in Southern Africa than is at present the case. Once the shelter of the timeless and the incontrovertible is removed, it becomes a matter of urgency to understand our own predicament in time, including our relation to all the literary, and more broadly cultural practices that are in progress, or that have historically shaped those that are now in progress.

I think that what Western literature is studied and taught academically here will require to be understood in the light of its historical contribution to South African culture. Only from a colonialist perspective can such a contribution be promulgated as the supreme one (here we touch on a cousinage-relation between liberal humanism and colonialism). Of major importance to us is the understanding of our own cultural world which has been produced here (including in this production the appropriation of 'foreign' elements).

The issues I have raised in this paper could be put in the form of a single question: In what way can our academic concern with literature in English best support the objective of the cultural liberation of South Africa?

FOOTNOTE

1 This expression is, unfortunately, ambiguous. Of course, literary texts do articulate values – social and political, as well as aesthetic – values. In this sense, texts do 'impose their values on us'. However, the way in which we receive these values is not determined by the texts themselves, we can evaluate these values, and decide what use we want to make of them, if any. We can recognise, for example, the articulation of certain values in the plays of Shakespeare: but this recognition imposes no necessary conclusions, in terms of evaluation, upon us. We decide for ourselves whether in what way we can make use of - value - these values. Our decisions are, of course, based upon the nature of the world in which we are ourselves living, and upon the nature of our relation to this world. This will dictate the forces that shape our evaluative procedures and decisions.

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