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# The Ghostly Dance: Writing in a new South Africa (Part 1)

Papers by

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# THE GHOSTLY DANCE OF BLOODLESS CATEGORIES

## Research in South African Literature

Tim Couzens

*(All papers in this publication were delivered at the Idasa/Afrikaanse Skrywersgilde conference, "Die Suid-Arikaanse Skrywer: 'n Blik van Binne en van Buite", held at Langebaan, 10-13 October 1990)*

Since the subject of "Literary Criticism in South Africa" is a vast one, I am going to narrow the topic to the idea of research in South African literature and I do not aim to be comprehensive in any way. Looking back over the last 20 years I am saddened by what we have missed, the opportunities lost. I shall dwell on the past in the hopes that it will teach us something about the present and future. I shall deal with six aspects of what I regret.

### Last post for the lost past

Fairly recently, I took a straw poll of students doing advanced work in South African literature on the assumption that they are among the better informed on such matters in our society. I asked them if they knew who Pixley Seme was, and whether they knew anything about him. Not one of them had ever heard of him.

Perhaps it is because the Dark Continent is so dark that we tend to lose things – little things – like our own history. Many people do complain that so much of our literary and other history has been kept from us. Why have we not been told? There are three sets of people to blame:

- the ruling class with its whole apparatus of repression, censorship and intimidation, headed by the government broadcasting media;
- the literary establishment who, for a variety of reasons, have failed to come to grips with and dissseminate this knowledge;
- the very people who complain that they are deprived of the knowledge, who, through a combination of anti-intellectualism, complacency, stupidity and, quite often, straight laziness, have not sought out the sources which are available to them.

The classic example of this last category of persons were the white Rhodesians taken by surprise when Robert Mugabe won the first Zimbabwean elections with such an overwhelming majority. A more recent instance was when people saw Nelson Mandela walk out of prison in a suit and shoes and not with a forked tail and cloven hooves. These are examples which happen to illustrate mainly white reactions, but the charge of laziness applies equally to black and white South Africans.

Perhaps it does not really matter who Pixley Seme was, but let us ask the question anyway. Who was Pixley Seme? He was the man who founded the ANC. He was born, of fairly humble origins, it seems, in Zululand in 1881. He made his way to North America and, through a combination of missionary help and his own efforts, he was educated at a school in Northern Massachusetts and at Columbia University and Oxford University. He returned to South Africa in 1910 to practise law, and the following year began the moves which culminated in the formation of the ANC in Bloemfontein in January 1912.

In 1906 he gave a prize-winning speech at Columbia University entitled "The Regeneration of Africa". It is obviously an important speech, an expression of his early ideas. He quoted his own poem:

*O Africa!*
*Like some great century plant that shall bloom*
*In ages hence, we watch thee; in our dream*
*See in thy swamps the Prospero of our stream;*
*Thy doors unlocked, where knowledge in her tomb*
*Hath lain innumerable years in gloom.*
*Then shalt thou, walking with that morning gleam*
*Shine as thy sister lands with equal beam.*

Our literary history is sparsely written up but there are works available and there is little excuse not to have read them. I would start with Brian Willan's magnificent biography of Solomon Plaatje (published by Ravan Press). I would go so far as to say that you won't understand a major part of South African literature until you have read it.

### Neglect of our cultural and intellectual history

There is another glaring gap in the present state of our literary criticism. This is the almost complete lack of knowledge of the cultural and intellectual history of Africa. Let me take one example – that of Pan-Africanism.

At the independence celebrations of Ghana in 1957 – an event crucial in itself for the culmination of the ideas of Pan-Africanism, as well as their spread – was the Jamaican historian C L James who had published in 1938 that great book *The Black Jacobins*. At the celebration James met "some Pan-African young men from South Africa". They told him that his book "had been of great service to them". When James asked how, they said that a copy of it was in the library of the black university (Fort Hare) in South Africa. They said they didn't know anything about it until a white professor there told them: "I suggest that you read *The Black Jacobins* in the library: you may find it useful."

*The Black Jacobins* is about the great slave revolution in the Caribbean island of San Domingo in the 1790s and how Toussaint L'Ouverture led his followers in a movement which culminated in full independence and the creation of the new state of Haiti.

At the time that James was writing in the 1930s he was, he tells us, working in close association with one of the most influential figures in Pan-Africanism, George Padmore. And James said of *The Black Jacobins*: "As will be seen all over and particularly in the last three pages, the book was written not with the Caribbean but with Africa in mind."

James's work was the culmination of many strands – the slave trade and the diaspora, for instance – and the work of many thinkers – Edward Blyden and the idea of "the African Personality", Dr Martin Delany (an Afro-American physician who first coined the term "Africa for the Africans"), Frederick Douglass, Booker Washington, W E B Du Bois, Marcus Garvey and so on.

It was in 1900, at the instigation of a West Indian barrister, Henry Sylvester Williams, that a Pan-African conference was held in London. It was here, according to Du Bois, that the

phrase "Pan-Africa" was put in the dictionaries for the first time. Du Bois had a hand in launching a series of Pan-African congresses in the decades that followed. The most important was the fifth Pan-African congress held in Manchester in 1945.

In pinning their faith to political action as the necessary measure for combating imperialism and accomplishing the social, economic and political emancipation of Africa, the congress participants forged the instruments for – "positive action", which were mentioned as strikes and boycotts, in order to press their claims on the colonial powers.

These ideas surely had an effect on Anton Lembede and the ANC Youth League, on those who drafted the ANC's 1949 "Programme of Action" which, in turn, led to the Defiance Campaign of 1952.

Not only does this have general relevance to South Africa literature, it has specific reference. Among the six people on the committee – which included George Padmore, Kwame Nkrumah and Jomo Kenyatta – was Peter Abrahams.

What saddens me, however, is that a key work like *The Black Jacobins*, which was being read in the Eastern Cape at least in the 1950s, is now virtually forgotten. And the currents and cross-currents of our past and its thought are submerged in a mass of ignorance and sloganeering.

In the future we might be in for a clash between the ANC and the PAC. I certainly hope not. But the more we understand it the better. And it might help to know that Pan-Africanism was a not insignificant strand in the history of the ANC and, indirectly perhaps, remains so. I think literature played a small but important part in the development of its ideas.

## The Spike Milligan scenario

Another of the things that saddens me is the tragic story of a blind old man stumbling along a railway track. It is particularly poignant because it is our own tragic story. The old man on the railway track is the middle of the story. Where the story really begins one can never be sure.

Perhaps it begins in the 19th century. Perhaps it really begins in 1949 when the ANC published its "Programme of Action". In his autobiography Chief Albert Luthuli called the document "a milestone in congress history", since it represented "a fundamental change of policy and method". Underlying it, he wrote, was the refusal "to be content forever with leavings from white South Africa's table – stated uncompromisingly and finally". Representations were done away with. Demonstrations on a countrywide scale, strike action, civil disobedience were "to replace words". The disobedience, though, was not directed against law, but against those discriminatory laws "not enforced by normality". The programme ultimately led to the Defiance Campaign of 1952 and transformed the ANC into a popular movement.

Perhaps it led, too, to our moment of truth in Natal in 1951. The old trade unionist and Mayor Daly of Durban, A W G Champion, was president of the Natal ANC. But the old firebrand had grown conservative with age and drew support from more conservative elements in Zulu society. He had his doubts about the Programme of Action. At the annual general meeting of the Natal region of the ANC, a group of Youth Leaguers led by the poet Herbert Dhlome and others persuaded Chief Luthuli to stand against Champion, and despite Champion's loading of the meeting Luthuli was elected.

If we look back now it was a moment of immense importance, of immense potential. Here was a man who could unite most fractions of Zulu society. Here was a man who went on, like his Zulu-speaking predecessors John Dube and Pixley Seme, to become the national president of the ANC. Here was a man who commanded respect, who believed in peace and justice.

What happened? His chieftainship, his traditional authority, was taken away from him in the 1950s. His national and political authority was taken away from him when he was banned. The government of the day played on the divisions which were created – and we are paying for it to this day in Natal. The man who could perhaps have spared us this devastation, either himself or through his successor, who could have united Zulu speakers behind the ANC, was left to stumble along the railway track, blind, to meet his oncoming death.

What has this to do with literary history and literary criticism? Or Spike Milligan?

There is little doubt that, in a couple of years time, you will be able to scour the length and breadth of this country and not find anyone who ever believed in or supported apartheid. Spike Milligan wrote his autobiography which he called *Hitler: My Part in his Downfall*. Already, many people are writing, whether in text form or in their heads, their own autobiographies and they are all called "Apartheid: My Part in its Downfall". But for all the rewriting of history, we are still paying for what we did to an old blind man, whose own autobiography should have taught us something different.

## Little s and Big S

There are dangers, however, in what I have already said. The recovery of history has as its purpose not just the creation of heroes.

If you read some recently discovered early letters of Pixley Seme you will get a glimpse of the courageous struggle of a young man to further his own education. It is an admirable struggle culminating in great achievement, eventually in the founding of the oldest surviving political organisation in this country. And for this there should be great honour.

But we should also remember that Seme almost destroyed the ANC through his autocratic and lethargic leadership when he became its fifth president in 1930. Of even greater import is the fact that he was removed from the lawyers' register by the Incorporated Law Society of the Transvaal in 1932.

He had been hired by black residents on the white-owned farm of Waverley in the Pretoria district to defend them while they were under threat of removal in terms of the 1923 Urban Areas Act. Seme lost the case, failed to lodge an appeal with the Supreme Court in time, and was accused by his previous clients of misusing the money paid to him. When the Supreme Court heard his case, Seme failed to appear and provided no defence.

Our heroes of the past have had their fingers in the till at the expense of "the people" – there is no reason to doubt that some of them will do so in the future.

If there are warning signs in our own past, there are similar warnings if we follow our Pan-Africanist studies. We should be able to see the excesses and stupidities of rampant nationalism. I fear we shall not. Already some of the first signs are creeping into the letters columns of the newspapers. When the need is felt to claim that an African was the first dentist, or mathematician, or whatever, any student of African history will know the theme, recognise the signs, hear the ironic echoes. This is at the level of popular belief, but it was not, in the days just before and after independence in Africa, confined to the ordinary people.

We should be reading the texts of the rest of Africa, but critically, as well as for inspiration. It might help to avoid the worst excesses of rampant nationalism.

The function of the biographer and the literary critic is to search, research, and keep researching. Their duty is to admire and applaud the struggles (with a little s) of people (with a little p). They should take fright when these are idealised into People with a big P and Struggle with a big S. It is our job to stick with the little esses.

## The case of Sherlock Holmes

One of the things that saddens me most is the opportunity we have missed to record fairly systematically the literature of a

revolution. It was fairly obvious, at least from the early 1970s, that a revolution was under way. Indeed I remember hearing the music group Dashiki at the Arts Festival at the University of the North in about 1973. They sang a song whose refrain was "Revolution Now". I am not quite sure whether we are at present in July or August of 1789 but I have little doubt we are somewhere there.

Who set out to record the literature of that revolution, as it happened, on the hoof? With a few notable exceptions, such as Kelwyn Sole, nobody. Where are the pamphlets, where are the interviews, where are transcripts of the wall slogans, where are records of the meetings? Nowhere. True, we can piece together bits and pieces through newspapers, court records, novels, Staffrider and so on. But we have lost forever much of the contemporaneity of the action. We have lost the chance to study fully the literature of our country's revolution.

There are many reasons why we missed it but I would like to put part of the blame on Louis Althusser. The blight of Althusseriansm, with its science of the text and its rigid authoritarianism, was imported into the country in the late 1970s, and students were sucked into its religious reading groups to the exclusion of all else.

The gauleiters of the academy forgot the lesson of the great thinker Sherlock Holmes: "It is a capital mistake to theorise before one has data."

## The life of the author

Now we come to the real reason why I am here. When Welma Odendaal phoned me to invite me to the conference every nerve in my body shouted, "Say no". I felt I had nothing to contribute and I was in no mood to pontificate on the fate of the country. When she asked me to speak on South African literary criticism every nerve in my body screamed, "Say no". I don't have anything worthwhile saying. When she said the conference was at Langebaan I said, "Yes". It gave me a chance to see the north-western Cape again.

Now I know most Capetonians think Langebaan is the north-western Cape but I'm also interested in two fairly obscure writers associated with that area, 500km north of here – Fred Cornell and W C Scully. And the positioning of this conference gives me an appropiate chance to talk about a further regret that I have. Although, as I'll show, it's an ambiguous regret.

Modern literary theory and criticism has contributed much to the discipline. In our present position its most important function is a healthy scepticism, especially in the areas of discourse and power.

But I do not find it fully satisfying. I have searched through it for human beings in amongst the wealth of jargon. It seems to have its blind spots. There are great dollops of the world and experience it chooses to ignore.

I suppose I am unredeemably old-fashioned but I do believe that there is a real world out there, however hard it is to apprehend. Namaqualand and Bushmanland always remind me how real it is.

Scully wrote a book called *Lodges in the Wilderness*. No doubt it is not worthy of academic consideration and no doubt it can be deconstructed most fearfully, but I find it, in a modest way, very moving. It is even more moving when you encounter the conditions he had to come to terms with.

We can declare the death of the author, but in so doing we write out of existence the ungraspable phantom of life. We can content ourselves with what one social scientist has called "the ghostly dance of bloodless categories", but in so doing we cut ourselves off from being. We can ignore Scully and we can ignore Cornell but, in so doing, we are in danger of cutting ourselves off from the organic life of our country. We can, like Caesar's assassins, participate in the death of the book.

Camus in *The Fall* wrote: "Do you know why we are more fair and just towards the dead? We are not obliged to them, we can take our time, we can fit in the paying of respects between a cocktail party and an affectionate mistress – in our spare time." This has some truth in it, but it is only partly true. I think most people who try to write biography, especially about someone who is dead, are not quite so casual.

They know the task is awesome, the responsibility great. They know they can only produce a very imperfect thing. Consequently they battle to do their subject justice, they worry about it, they accumulate all the evidence they can. Their struggle is not one of deconstruction but of reconstruction. I have written a number of biographies, including two very long ones, and I can honestly say I have never thought of my subjects as mere ragbags of linguistic codes. A literary biographer's task is not to kill a writer but to try to give back to that writer life.

What I am suggesting is quite simple really. It is to encourage people to be more adventurous in their literary criticism. Or, as Trader Horn says, "if you want facts you must travel for 'em". Not all answers lie in the realm of discourse alone. To understand a writer like Scully who was in Bushmanland and Namaqualand in the 1890s you have to accumulate all athe evidence you can. To understand the writing you must try to understand the history, the area, the people – by talking to them and so on.

In *Lodges in the Wilderness* Scully describes a journey he took through the desert from a place called Gamoep to a hill called Bantamberg. It is a fearsome journey. Scully does a pretty good job of describing it. But to undestand it fully, to go beyond the realm of mere discourse, you have to recreate that journey. Words on the page are no substitute for feet in the sand. Or as Keats wrote to his friend John Reynolds: "We read fine things but never feel them to the full until we have gone the same steps as the author."

There are dangers in the way literary criticism is likely to go. The in-phrases are Eurocentrism and Afrocentrism. I dislike them intensely, but let us use the concepts anyway. We are in the process of being assailed by the propagandists of Afrocentrism. As African nationalism increases, so this can only increase. We are, in the near future, in danger of studying only South African literature. In so doing we will become as Saddam Hussein or P W Botha, people who seldom venture beyond their immediate horizons.

On the other hand, Western literary criticism is nearing saturation point. The morass made of the writings of James Joyce by the thousands of literary critics trampling over the same territory makes the Battle of Paschendaele look like a women's mud-wrestling competition. We write our literary criticism about other literary critics writing about literary criticism. Some critics look only to America and Europe, others look only to Africa.

The kind of literary criticism I favour tries to use evidence of every available kind. It is open to the adventurous and the curious. I could be cynical and say I am glad that so many critics are presently obsessed with pure theory since it allows the few of us who plough our own furrows an emptier field. But it does sadden me, too.

Because those people are missing something by not hunting in the archives, scouring the newspapers, travelling the roads, shaking hands and talking eyeball to eyeball with real people. Because, believe it or not, this kind of research is, above all, FUN. And there is not enough fun in our literary criticism. I do not apologise for advocating humour and fun, because humour and fun are, by their very nature, anti-authoritarian and the natural enemies of nationalism.