

Doing Literature Now

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For over 35 years SAVAL-LASA's *Journal of Literary Studies*, ably assisted and directed by Andries Oliphant, devoted itself to examining literary texts. In the waxing and waning of theories it did a remarkable job reading and discussing a plethora of writings in English and Afrikaans. Thus, to honour Andries's work with a much-deserved *Festschrift* seems to me not only fitting but also a timely juncture to address anew the purpose of literary studies, a scholarly field split in South Africa between an English-speaking tradition of literary criticism and a Continental European lineage of critical thought more aptly named *literatuurwetenskap*, knowledge of and about literature. From within the legacy of the latter, I want to mark this commemorative occasion with a moment of reflection in the spirit of J.M. Coetzee's 2003 essay "The Humanities in Africa," particularly at a time when the humanities and with it their most important support structure, literary studies, are facing a global stress test. Poignantly noted by Coetzee's protagonist Elizabeth Costello, the humanities are not only "in Africa but in the wider world too [in] an embattled situation" (2003, 119). Once "the core of the university," she muses as "an outsider, but if she were asked to name the core of the university today, its core discipline, she would say it was moneymaking" (125). Diminishing registrations and lack of financial support for literature-language departments worldwide testify to the sad state of a field in competition nowadays with, among others, cultural, gender, queer, women's, environmental, postcolonial, decolonial, critical race, and translation studies. In addition, current theory fatigue in the humanities largely hinders rigorous questioning of what it means to do literature. Such questioning, however, is vital at a time when in the grip of the digital revolution under the sway of technoscience we find ourselves at institutional and intellectual crossroads.



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Literature, the “things”/objects we are concerned with and what that entails, and what it is when we “do” literature is the question; at stake are the spaces of its occurrence and the places of its study, something never clearly defined. What I, with Maurice Blanchot, call the “space of literature,” *writing* creatively in verse, prose or dramatic dialogue and *reading* knowledgably (*wetenskaplik*), has always been a contested space. Overshadowed by philosophy, the porously bordered site has always welcomed ideas born from the social sciences like psychology, politics,¹ ethnography and, of course, sociology proper. In addition, the famous “linguistic,” “cultural” and “affective turns” in literary studies have pivoted specific thematic foci that generated useful new perspectives on reading a wide variety of texts. Nevertheless, strangely absent until recently have been footprints from the (hard) natural sciences, technology and particularly economics, though recent ecocriticism looking at the exploitation of nature in the Anthropocene tends to reference the “hard sciences.” In addition, growing awareness of writing as technique and itself subject to changing technologies remedies shortcomings typically incurred in past *lit.crit.* readings. Whatever the case, different reading practices, always guided by earlier ones and embedded in a specific cultural-linguistic context, try to respond to literature’s social and spiritual dimension, something literary studies usually recognises. Rarely, though, does it consider economics and with it the material conditions for literature, thus undervaluing the technological and economic impact of print on storytelling, book production, dissemination, and circulation in educational and non-educational (leisure) markets, particularly in multilingual, pluricultural South Africa. We have not yet fully sounded the places and sites of textual production in this country, let alone the conditions under which imaginative fiction and non-fiction are being produced by whatever traditional and non-traditional (digital) media.

We need to ask how literature, that body of poetry and prose we consider exceptional now—and have so considered in the past—is being disseminated, consumed, and taught. Given South Africa’s uniqueness of multiple languages, differing traditions and distinct cultural and political experiences, I ask: Where lie the contact zones between the various language-literatures? What happens in the interplay between reaction, relection and initiation of cultural and societal processes in the various storytelling communities during metropolitan European control (e.g. Olive Schreiner, Roy Campbell, but also Afrikaans writers always acutely aware of French, German and Dutch literary movements, not to mention isiXhosa writers and other indigenous language authors emerging from sites like the Lovedale Mission School) and afterwards in the long struggle for a national cultural heritage as evidenced by, among others, Sol Plaatje, Thomas Mofolo, or N. P. van Wyk Louw?

How is South Africa’s cultural heterogeneity on the way to re-imagining and refiguring local histories, geographies and society sedimented in work especially by non-English

1 As Deleuze and Guattari (1987, 140) remind us, language is integral to questions of the polis, of the social field: “For language is a political affair before it is an affair for linguistics; even the evaluation of degrees of grammaticality is a political matter.”

mother-tongue authors who adopted and adapted Shakespeare's language like Es'kia Mphahlele, Njabulo Ndebele, Zakes Mda or poets such as Oskar Mtshali, Mongane Wally Serote, or Sipho Sepamla, not to mention dual language writers like Breyten Breytenbach, André Brink and Antjie Krog who translate their own texts? How does their exceptional lingual dexterity as dual language speakers affect their writing? What role is played by the complex negotiation between languages in intralingual translation (rewording within the same language for greater transcultural understanding) and interlingual translation (translation between different languages)? How does thinking within your language-world, your familiar poetical and critical tradition, affect dialogue with a foreign text? How in the linguistic transfer are the verbal and syntactical components of each language stretched, condensed, invented, or even compromised? What compositional aesthetics lure us to engage with poems and/or stories in the first place? And which aesthetic do we find more acceptable? How do literary texts in their various forms weave their spell to seduce us to enter their world as demonstrated for instance by Coetzee's Elizabeth Costello? On reading the novelist Paul West's descriptions of excessive "obscene" violence that sickened her (2003, 158), she can't help but admit she was beguiled: "He made her read, excited her to read" (179). What is it that makes us read (watch)? How do stories work? What do they tell us? What makes for a good story? And when it comes to criticism: What kind of argument do what kind of critical/*wetenskaplike* texts present? What processes are enfolded in doing literature and how does a reader-critic unfold the text before her? These are just some questions arising from engaging South African literary studies.

For me, to "do literature now" means engaging at least two different yet interrelated approaches to so-called creative writing: one is directed at exploring its material and ideational condition of possibility, helped where necessary by those neighbouring "knowledges" mentioned earlier. This approach entails a historical probing whereas the other focuses on "critical reading," in the words of Blanchot (1982, 203), by "the reader, now the specialist," who "interrogates the work in order to know how it was fashioned." This requires lateral and deep reading beyond instrumental information gathering. Whereas the one will tell us about different aesthetic forms dependent on and arising from materially different lived experiences, as exemplified for instance in Walter Benjamin's famous 1936 essay "The Storyteller: Reflections on the Work of Nikolai Leskov," the other attends to narrative sense-making. Ostensibly discussing the work of the nineteenth-century Russian novelist and short-story writer Leskov, Benjamin entwines the two approaches, demonstrating how literature makes legible experience "which is passed on from mouth to mouth," constituting "the source from which all storytellers have drawn" (Benjamin 1973, 84). Lodged in the lifeworld of home and work or travel and trade, the originary oral tale morphs into printed novel form, thereby losing its essential quality of counsel. Yet without Gutenberg's invention of mechanical movable type printing in the 1440s, there would have been in the words of Canadian communication theorist Marshall McLuhan (1962) no "Making of Typographic Man" who made possible what literary historian and Stanford professor of English Ian Watt (1957) called *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding*. In short,

literature works the ear and the eye; its arc encompasses and extends the audible qualities of voice exemplified in rhyme, rhythm, and metre—from the epic to praise poetry, Wordsworth and rap—to its visible manifestation as text and margin laid out on page or screen. Not only is the most popular of all literary forms, the novel, indelibly entangled in technology, but all verbal art, all storytelling bears traces of their producer’s symbiotic relationship by which the compositional aesthetics of a medium embeds itself in the message, creating its sense and purpose.

Most of all, “doing literature” means learning to read, to engage with the realm of natural languages (as opposed to formal language like the numerical system of mathematics) in which neither exact verifiability nor falsification exist. Instead, all representations in natural language (e.g., English, Afrikaans, isiZulu, Urdu, French, German, etc.) are already interpretations. That is to say, the use of a natural language always already carries specific, conventional ways of seeing the world and “doing things with words.” Attentive reading means not so much “to obtain communication from the work, but to ‘make’ the work communicate itself” (Blanchot 1982, 198), savouring the words, sounding them in their semantic field, essaying their power, tracing how they are linked syntactically to form varying patterns that capture the vicissitudes of life, real and imagined, and finally following the creation of fictional worlds and the construction of their sense (meaningfulness).

The “[n]ew gurus” imported from France to America in the 1970s “desperately needed” (Rorty 2006, 64) to inject new thought into literary studies and thereby, (unwittingly) inaugurating “Theory,”² left us plenty of approaches to reading. To name but a few: Derrida, deeply indebted to phenomenology, especially Heidegger, taught us to “deconstruct” what Hegelian infused *Geistesgeschichte* (History of the spirit) had constructed; Foucault drew our attention to historically shaped “discursive formations” in a series of disconnected “epistemes” exerting powerful truths, and Deleuze made us aware, among others, of sensations, (emotional) “flows” and Spinozian affects. Besides these “new” albeit now dead “gurus,” who provided us with their critical vocabulary while teaching us what to look out for when reading, were also the psychiatrists Freud and his contrarian Lacan, the Marxists Lukács, Althusser, Gramsci, Raymond Williams and Adorno, the anthropologists Levi-Strauss, Bourdieu, and Levinas, whose moral consciousness made us aware of the ethics of reading, and not to forget what I call the “reading technicians” like the linguists de Saussure, Pierce and Benveniste, the hermeneuts Gadamer and Ricoeur, and finally Maurice Blanchot, the thinker who most eloquently opens the sensuous and “hazardous experience of the book” (1982, 203) for us.

Name-calling is not the purpose of this list of, admittedly, Eurocentric “white male” thinkers, to whom must be added Judith Butler with her work on language’s

2 The linkage between “Theory” and the much older French-German reflexion on literary studies I discuss in detail in “Theory Policing or the Critic as Cop: Revisiting Said’s *The World, the Text, and the Critic*” (Nethersole 2018).

“performativity” drawn from J.L. Austen’s *How to Do Things with Words*. The list, rather, is intended to serve as a resource for approaches to and methodologies of reading, all of which are accessible on the internet. Many have been tried and tested, too, in *JSL*. However, “[i]nstead of the partial analysis offered by the various schools of national or systematically theoretical approaches, I propose finally,” with Said (1990, 15), “the contrapuntal lines of a global analysis, in which texts and worldly institutions are seen working together” to make visible the interdependence between various literatures as well as the dependence of the metropolitan text upon that of the periphery. But irrespective of the literary scholar’s choice, there needs to be forensic reading for aesthetic form, actant/character, plot, style, genre, theme, etc. at the outset before any theoretical precept is utilised for the analysis of cultural or existential meaning in support of establishing the aesthetic/ethical/political (separately or combined) significance of a text.

The purpose of doing literature is manifold; it encompasses Blanchot’s existentially crucial meditation on poetry and art as “experience because it is experimental: because it is a search—an investigation which is not undetermined but is, rather, determined by its indeterminacy, and involves the whole of life” (1982, 87). In a similar vein, fictional novelist Elizabeth Costello believes books can “teach us about ourselves” (Coetzee 2003, 128) since they have as their “starting point [...] human society” (130). And expressing deep concern for their prospect of survival, she claims: “If the humanities want to survive, surely it is those energies and the craving for guidance that they must respond to: a craving that is, in the end, a quest for salvation” (127). In sharp contrast to Costello’s advice for “practitioners of the humanities” to pursue “[l]arger, more inclusive visions of what human life can be” and thus “to improve the lot of mankind” (132), Michael Hardt (2010) invokes economic demands when responding to “US education and the crisis.” There he sides with education in the humanities because “[i]n the biopolitical economy mass intelligence—even and especially linguistic, conceptual, and social capacities—are what drive economic innovation” (Hardt 2010).

Without question we need attentive, slow, rummaging reading together with deliberate meditation upon literary works that give us a lens through which to see the world that today is in the grip of numerical language. Overwhelmed by statistical data and information overload, critical thought schooled in reading literature is needed to deal with the upheavals of late modernity characterised by deep ambivalences that are manifest in phenomena such as excessive individualisation, speed, digitalisation, economisation and re-nationalisation, all of which defy science’s cherished predictability. At the intersection of technology, information and medical-biological sciences the “soft” sciences, especially literary studies, deliver a vitally important tool for focusing on the synchronic and diachronic relations between media, culture and society. Doing literature now beyond the cheap kindling of social media means recognising language as an instrument of power and using it to intervene in the universe of numbers that tends to eliminate reflection and to block any genuine questioning of its own development. No matter the objective, for me the purpose of

literatuurwetenskap remains, in the words of Said (1990, 16), “opposing and alleviating coercive domination, transforming the present by trying rationally and analytically to shift some of its burdens, [and] situating the works of various literatures with reference to each other and to their historical modes of being.”

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