

The Rhetorics of Audience Consciousness: A Dialogic Approach to Reading
Donne in Zululand *

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My intentions in this paper are: to consider two separate but related problems I have encountered in the teaching of literature; to investigate the ways in which linguistics has helped me to address these problems; and to explore some theoretical implications for education and for literature in South Africa in the 1990s.

John Donne is a poet who is known, even in orthodox critical circles, as remote, difficult and esoteric. In 1949, for example, William Empson remarked, "I get an impression that the young feel [Donne] much more remote now than the young did twenty years ago, and I wish they didn't" (in Cruttwell 1970:36). About twenty years later Patrick Cruttwell observed how "the poetry of Donne, it would seem, satisfies none of the criteria by which, at the moment, poetry is being written and judged" (1970:38). Critically speaking, the problem of relevance is an ongoing one. For students at the University of Zululand it is exacerbated by temporal, spatial and cultural distance; as well as by what are at times overwhelming claims of the politically immediate. Levels of political violence in this country have increased rather than diminished since February 1990, and many students have been personally affected. In addition the tensions between Inkatha- and ANC-aligned factions on our campus influence even apparently unconnected issues, and contribute to the frequency of class boycotts. And yet the reference of Donne's work to what might be termed "universal" human experiences of love, faith and death makes the attempt to appreciate him a potentially rewarding one; and the attempt to teach him one that should not be sacrificed, even in the circumstances that I have described.

For me, a different but related problem has been to develop a mode of reading black South African poetry written during the 70s and 80s; poetry which is highly politicised and often antagonistic to orthodox literary criticism, and indeed to readers like me. (A title that springs immediately to mind is Christopher van Wyk's 'Beware of white ladies when spring is here'.) As a white middle-class liberal English-speaking teacher of predominantly black students, I have experienced a cultural distance in

some ways as great as that of my students from Donne. Although I have here couched the problem in personal terms, I believe it is by no means unique to me. Despite increasing numbers of black students entering the universities, and specifically the Humanities, white English-speaking academics still predominate in the domain of English studies.

One of the issues that underlies both problems is that of "value", or to be more specific, the perceived value of the literature in question. On the one hand, apart from the work of a few writers who are singled out for tolerance, the "black poetry of the 70s and 80s" is often still dismissed as being simply "bad". On the other hand, my own first introduction to Donne took place at an English South African university during the 70s, in the context of an implicit certainty regarding his place in the canon of British and American "great writers". Because the kinds of questions about "relevance" that are now forthcoming were thus neatly precluded, the approach I learned then offered precious little preparation for the kinds of experiences I have had trying to teach Donne to second-language African students.

If the problem of value is an awkward one, it is nevertheless not my intention to set practical criticism up as a straw dog, and then shoot it down, easy as this might be. Rather I wish to acknowledge and to analyse its weaknesses. One of the crucial inadequacies of practical criticism for a reading of poetry of any kind in Southern Africa of the 1990s is the questions it does not allow to be asked. By claiming that meaning and value inhere in the text, it disregards the context both of writer and of reader. As I have attempted to demonstrate, in a reading situation that is culturally heterogeneous we need a theory that takes context into account.

There are educational reasons, too, for making such demands of our literary theories. Given the insights of Michel Foucault on the relations between discourse and power, a university department that makes any claim to enlightenment has to recognise its accountability to its students. The form this accountability takes should not, indeed will not, be an adoption of student values and meaning systems. Rather it entails a recognition that they exist, and a conscious engagement and negotiation with them, given the expertise, sophistication and experience we as teachers have to offer. Two

implications are immediately apparent. On a practical level the syllabuses that we construct and the curricula we develop must take into account student perceptions, abilities and needs. (Perhaps one might claim they generally do so.) On a theoretical level, our teaching of literary texts must consciously move away from the position of received authority one easily finds oneself in, to an explicit incorporation of the cultural dialogics of reading.

The challenge that has faced me has been to find ways of getting Donne and radical black South African poets to "speak to" each another. Put simply, this has meant finding a theory that can deal both with Donne's "remoteness" and "difficulty" and the pressures of the present and the immediate. It is with these problems that I came to applied linguistics, and it is for these reasons that I have found so useful an approach which reads poems, indeed texts, as "speech acts" or "utterances".

In discussing the application of linguistics to literature, Seymour Chatman has focused largely on narrative. Yet his comments are sufficiently general to apply to poetry as well. He says of speech act theory,

This is not linguistics in the strict sense: it is not concerned with the grammatical composition of sentences in a language, but rather with their role in the communication situation, particularly in their function as actual acts by speakers. We owe the theory to the English philosopher John Austin (1975:219).

Susan Sniader Lanser points out an advantage of speech act theory: that "a concept of the text as message/object gives way to a more dynamic and fruitful notion of the text as a specific kind of communicative and aesthetic act" (1981:62). She goes on, a little later:

as Mary Louise Pratt notes, speech act theory offers "perhaps for the first time ... a description of literary discourse that answers the need for a contextually based approach to texts and that at the same time bridges the gap between literature and non-literature, and thus between linguistics and poetics." I would add that it bridges the gap between poetics and rhetoric as well (1981:67-68).

For my purposes, speech act theory has had two advantages. On the one hand it is a structural approach which diminishes the power of value as a determinant of interpretation. On the other it incorporates a theory of exchange which can cater, on an individual level, for processes of

intersubjectivity that invariably characterise the reading of literature, and, on a broader level, for the cultural dialogue that I have claimed is crucial in our situation.

In examining its application to the two problems specified above, one might start with a point made elegantly by Michael Toolan:

Any text ... that contains deictic information is thereby understood as oriented from the spatiotemporal position that those deictics imply (1988:67).

In the case of Donne, reading a poem as utterance involves identifying four parties participating in the address: the poet; the first-person speaker Donne typically writes who is "internal to" the situation of utterance; the listener who "hears" the address of this speaker; and the audience who "overhears" it. The issue of "audience" is a particularly important one in relation to Donne. His characterisation as a "coterie-poet" was made first by Leishman in 1951 (1962:15). In a more recent study of lyric, David Lindley has elucidated some of the influences of the coterie:

In the first place, poets writing for a known audience are, perhaps paradoxically, freer to play games with the first-person speaker of their poems than those who must offer themselves to a wider readership, since the recipients are aware of the 'real' poet, and need not anxiously decode the text in pursuit of irony or distance. Second, the freedom for play that this offers suits an aristocratic code, with its high valuation of a chameleon-like *sprezzatura* that can slip readily from role to role. Third, it means that the emphasis of such poetry is much less upon the declaration of self, much more upon the exhibition of an artful mastery of language and idea (1985:59).

The pressures of audience clearly influence the nature of Donne's poetry, in ways that I will investigate briefly later. More importantly, the critical concept of "audience" provides a bridge to current theories of literature, and in my view justifies the application of speech act theory in the analysis of his work. If Donne was a coterie poet, it was in large measure because his location in an oratorical and rhetorical tradition made him highly aware of the audiences who might receive his poetry. In regard to the literature of Donne's period, Gary Waller has taken up this point:

What has often been overlooked is that part of the poet's training was always to have his readers in mind we can see how rhetoric becomes at best a means of relating a poem to its audiences in order to manipulate, persuade, or cajole, to urge

participation or debate - in short, to 'move', in Sidney's key term (1986:54).

If one of the features of the oratorical tradition was a concern with audience, this concern translates, once the poetry is inscribed, into a concern with readership. Following through this line of argument leads Waller to the claim that the "systematic literary and rhetorical treatises of the age are merged with what we would today term discourse theory" (1986:58).

The application of this theory is no less pertinent to black poetry, since it can serve to highlight some of the pressures bearing upon poets writing in South Africa at present and in the recent past. On the one hand, however context-specific the speaker in black poems might seem, the distinction between the historical poet and the "I" who inhabits his or her poems is more than an analytic construct, because this "I" constitutes, for rhetorical purposes, an enactment or performance or dramatisation of responses and reactions to prevailing conditions. The concept of audience is, on the other hand, equally important. Many published poets have, during the 70s and 80s, been subjected to censorship and banning by state authorities who have read their poems. In addition, the quiet but continuing influence of longstanding African oral traditions has contributed to the recent emergence of a poetry that is performed rather than inscribed; poetry that combines both the power of the spoken word and its elusiveness from criminal prosecution. In a recent study, Jeremy Cronin has enumerated some of the contexts in which such poetic performance might occur:

To talk about this poetry, written over the last two or three years, we must contextualize it within the rolling wave of semi-insurrectionary uprisings, mass stayaways, political strikes, consumer boycotts, huge political funerals (involving anything up to seventy thousand mourners at a time), factory occupations, rent boycotts, school and university boycotts, mass rallies, and physical confrontation over barricades with security forces (1990:296).

To speak of the audiences of such poetry, then, is to speak of anyone who might be hearing, or overhearing, or eavesdropping upon, the poetic enunciation.

If the practical application of the theory can be measured in terms of the attention it pays to "audience", the potential sophistication of the theory

can be measured in terms of its attention to what I would call "audience consciousness". Using this theory allows an analysis of the dynamics of rhetoric and hence an approach to both political and aesthetic issues. In the case of Donne, one might refer to a distinction made by A.J. Smith when he remarked on the ways in which Donne treats poetry as "a communal not a private art" (1964:173). Although subjective experience is at the heart of Donne's poems, it remains located in the context of a reality accepted as such by both poet and reader. If the poet has recourse to this reality, he does so in the confidence that his audience will be able to follow him. It is this "intersubjectivity" that allows him to conduct the business of his poetry, which is, for Donne, the exercise of wit. However different may be the world of black protest poetry, its grounding in a reality taken for granted as shared is quite as strong.

Yet a recognition of audience consciousness entails more than an understanding the poet assumes with his or her audience, because, as I said above, it impacts upon the nature of the poetry. Given that Donne's typical practice is to use first-person address to an implied listener, it has been my contention elsewhere (1990) that audience consciousness shapes in immediate though varied ways the relations that exist amongst the four parties to the address. A sufficiently sensitive reading of the poem as utterance will, in the first place, register the ways in which "speakers" "within" the poem address themselves not only to "listeners" who share their deictic context or "situation of utterance", but also to a non-present audience "out there" who may be tolerant of or hostile towards what is being said. A consciousness of audience then couches the address that takes place between speaker and listener in highly self-conscious terms, by turning it into a performance or display before the audience overhearing it. On the one hand the speaker is striking poses or postures; on the other the listener may be responding or reacting not to the content of the address, but to the fact of its "public" nature. The ultimate consequence is the ways in which address can become reflexive: a contest of wills between the speaker and the poet who wrote him or her. Clearly recognitions of such a nature carry over into the domain of reader-response or reception aesthetics, because they involve the reader's siting of autonomy and hence authority with the speaker as opposed to the poet.

One is perhaps unlikely to go this far with undergraduate students. The point should however be clear that turning to linguistics for the theoretical resolution of practical problems in the teaching of literature by no means forecloses either literary or theoretical debate. In closing I would like to make two comments on the notion of "cultural dialogue", which comes, originally, from Bakhtin. Firstly, the comparison I have drawn in this paper between Donne and contemporary black South African poets might seem a rather "outlandish" one. One of the reasons I have made it is to attempt to break down the categories we typically apply to literature, and in terms of which such a judgement as "outlandish" might be made. In doing so I have given cognisance to my experiences of teaching and student experiences of learning literature in this country now. The experiential is important in itself. It is important also because it provides a basis from which to address the large divisions that have developed in the domain of literary studies: between mainstream and local texts, between resident and exilic or expatriot academics, between the purveyors of practical criticism and the proponents of theory. It has been an assumption underlying this paper that mainstream theory is valuable in South Africa in the 1990s to the extent that it addresses needs and problems that exist in our context. It seems to me one of the major achievements of postcolonialism, therefore, that it validates local responses to mainstream texts. The process works two ways. If we are enabled to bring our experiences to bear on the canon, then mainstream works can also be recuperated into the terms of a culture which is at least on the brink of becoming postcolonial.

Secondly, it has been part of my argument that university departments have to recognise their accountability to their students. The issue of accountability goes further. In South Africa today the Humanities as a whole are facing a crisis. The predilections of funders of tertiary education and employers of its "products" are almost overwhelmingly towards science, technology, engineering. Whether this ought to be the case is a moot point, and my feelings on the matter are by no means impartial. Yet it seems to me the urgent need is not so much to justify our activities, as to make explicit their value and potential application. The evaluations I have offered thus far of the approach outlined in this paper have been in terms of its practical application and in terms of its sophistication. One must go further. If divisions have developed in the domain of literary studies,

the divisions that exist in our society are immense. If my approach began as an attempt to address the "claims of the politically immediate", it has developed by means of an explicit incorporation into the reading process of the cultural heterogeneity of our context. And if it offers a model of cross-cultural interaction that might transfer into the domains of work and of relationships, then the case it can make for the Humanities is a strong one. In a society in which a man can be shot on a train for preaching in the wrong language, in a society characterised by economic, political, racial, and generational as well as linguistic divisions, the importance of "the human" can scarce be over-emphasised.

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The Expiration

John Donne

So, so, break off this last lamenting kiss,
Which sucks two souls, and vapours both away,
Turn thou ghost that way, and let me turn this,
And let ourselves benight our happiest day,
We asked none leave to love; nor will we owe
Any, so cheap a death, as saying, Go;

Go; and if that word have not quite killed thee,
Ease me with death, by bidding me go too.
Oh, if it have, let my word work on me,
And a just office on a murderer do.
Except it be too late, to kill me so,
Being double dead, going, and bidding, go.

Beware of White Ladies When Spring is Here

Christopher van Wyk

Beware of white ladies
in chemise dresses
and pretty sandals
that show their toes.
Beware of these ladies
when spring is here.
They have strange habits
of infesting our townships
with seeds of:
geraniums pansies poppies carnations.
They plant their seeds in our eroded slums
cultivating charity in our eroded hearts
making our slums look like floral Utopias.
Beware!
Beware of seeds and plants.
They take up your oxygen
and they take up your time
and let you wait for blossoms
and let you pray for rain
and you forget about equality
and blooming liberation
and that you too deserve chemise dresses
and pretty sandals that show your toes.
Beware of white ladies
when spring is here
for they want to make of you
a xerophyte.