

‘Intellectual challenge is as necessary as breathing’: An Interview with Laurence Wright

Interviewer – Brian Pearce

Professor Laurence Wright is Director of the Institute for the Study of English in Africa at Rhodes University. In 2009, he will have completed 25 years of research, teaching and scholarship at Rhodes University and this interview marks the occasion. A Rhodes Scholar and a Commonwealth Scholar, he studied at the universities of Rhodes, Warwick and Oxford. He is also Honorary Life President of the Shakespeare Society of Southern Africa. He has published widely in literary studies and is the Managing Editor of two academic journals as well as of the poetry magazine *New Coin*. He currently serves on the Council of the English Academy and is a co-opted member of the English National Language Body. He has taken a broad interest in the role of English in this country, ranging from language policy and teacher education matters, to archival research and the role of the humanities in public life. I thought that it would be worthwhile to interview him as his knowledge of literature is substantial, while his incisive and engaging thoughts on a range of topics are worth hearing. The interview was conducted intermittently by email between July and October, 2008.

Professor Wright, you are the Honorary Life President of the Shakespeare Society of Southern Africa. Can you tell me when your interest in Shakespeare began?

Probably when a Scottish maths teacher, a Mrs Cleland, was sent as a stand-in to look after our English class for a few lessons because our regular teacher was off work. This was at Gifford High in Bulawayo, Rhodesia, during UDI, in Form 3. Instead of teaching us anything, she asked us to memorise and recite ‘tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow’ from *Macbeth*. The rhythms and diction sank in. No context, we never read the play, though she probably did tell us something of the story. I doubt whether I really understood the language; in fact I'm sure I didn't. But it stuck. I studied *Hamlet* either for 'O' level or 'M' level, or both. We were shown the Olivier film. I remember being gripped by several particular scenes: the ghost on the battlements, Claudius interrupted at prayer and, oddly enough, Hamlet's body being trailed up the long flight of steps in that lingering coda so typical of Olivier's filmic approach. I mustn't give the impression that I was madly enthusiastic about Shakespeare. I wasn't, though I can remember a feeling of awe and vague anticipation when told that we were actually going to study Shakespeare. Very grown up. Did these people actually think we could understand Shakespeare? Wow! It seemed like a vote of confidence. Much earlier, long before school, I can recall my parents listening to Shakespeare recordings over the radio on Sunday afternoons while I

played on the floor. They followed the speeches in separate copies of the text; a complete works of some sort, and volumes drawn from a small red, cloth-bound series with gold lettering on the spines, housed in a glass-fronted cabinet in the sitting room. I can still remember the kerfuffle when the broadcast performance didn't match one or other of the texts, the mad scramble to find 'the place'. So Shakespeare was there.

Do you recall when you first became enthusiastic about Shakespeare?

Well, although I introduced it, 'enthusiastic' is probably not the right word here. Enthusiasm in people is largely a function of good health, a positive up-bringing, and a general zest for life. Enthusiasm expresses itself in what used to be called 'animal spirits,' attaching to whatever subject or practice arbitrarily snags our interest and attention. This is not a deflection of your question, but a round-about way of saying that the human intellect perches rather precariously on biological and cultural inheritances, and depending on their background and life experiences people find themselves drawn to very different interests and obsessions. I wouldn't describe myself as a Shakespeare enthusiast. There have been significant moments when his caliber as a word-artist, or as a dramatist, or as a thinker have struck home. Of major importance was the experience of listening to the Shakespeare lectures of Guy Butler as an undergraduate at Rhodes. It was not so much the content that caught my attention, as his way of reading; often a series of slow meditative recursions which brought out the richness of the poetry and the meaning as one and the same thing. This was quite the opposite of that awkward experience one often has of listening to Shakespeare spoken from the stage, knowing full well that the actor doesn't really understand what he or she is saying, neither the meaning of the words nor the emotional implications of the situation. When Guy read, you understood, and the shadow of those speeches lingered permanently in the memory. Much later, as a graduate student at the University of Warwick I wrote a dissertation on Shakespeare's last plays, focusing on *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest*. There was very little supervision offered because this option took the place of writing long essays on taught papers, and I was left to my own devices. This was when I learned to read Shakespeare's language in detail, following syntactic structures and patterns of stress and intonation, looking at rhetorical figures and pursuing their implications until they yielded the larger meanings of the play. I learned a bit about iconography (this was as a result of suggestions by my supervisor, Martin Wright – no relation) and I marinated in the work of Irwin Panofsky and Ernst Gombrich.

At the same time it was possible to hitch-hike to London, or catch a bus to Stratford, and watch Shakespeare either standing at the back of the theatre or way up in the gods, say, at the Old Vic. It was there that I saw Gielgud as Prospero – this would be 1973 – surrounded by an ensemble of luridly-coloured latex foam creatures called forth during

the masque-like episodes; and at Stratford Richard Pasco in the *Henriad*, which was pitched to speak for the people of Britain against the Heath government at the time of the miners' strike. For all this, I would still reject the label 'Shakespeare enthusiast', because I was always thoroughly preoccupied with a great many other writers: Lawrence and Dickens (this was the fag-end of the Leavis hegemony), Donne, Wordsworth and T.S. Eliot, George Eliot and Henry James. In fact I produced a D.Phil at Oxford on Victorian non-fictional prose writers; Newman, Carlyle, Ruskin, Matthew Arnold, John Stuart Mill, Darwin, Oscar Wilde and so on. It was the interface between letters, social issues, and the individual that drove my interest. Now I have come to understand that you really only begin to see how extraordinary Shakespeare is once you have immersed yourself in other writers and can make comparisons. How any poor child at school is supposed to know that Shakespeare is a pretty amazing artist when most often he is set in the company of relative dross, and the child in question has probably only read six mediocre books altogether, is beyond me. But read Dostoevsky and Tolstoy and Conrad, bits of Goethe, George Eliot, the big fellows, and then turn to Shakespeare – that is when his stature really dawns.

This doesn't mean that I don't read and enjoy contemporary fiction and poetry. I try to read what our South African poets are writing, and some of it is powerful, skilled and moving. But I don't think we have produced a writer up there with the best, except bits of J.M. Coetzee, say *The Life and Times of Michael K* and *Disgrace*. I admire Christopher Okigbo, Sydney Clouts, Dambudzo Marachera, and Bessie Head, but many other African writers I find myself reading out of sociological and historical interest, rather than just for the pleasure of the writing. I also have some eccentric tastes shared by few: Sir Thomas Browne, the philosophy of Schopenhauer, Emerson's essays, philosophical biographies, the writings of Walter Pater. I admire Emily Dickenson and some other American poets, Whitman, Plath (in bits) and especially Wallace Stevens. Saul Bellow has written some fine novels. The point is that if you make literature your means of exploring the experience of being alive – and there is no fiat that says you have to – at some stage you will probably come to recognise that more of your sense of humanity's dimensions and possibilities was first uncovered in Shakespeare than in any other writer. That isn't to say that there aren't very good things in a huge number of writers that you won't find in Shakespeare.

This is all very interesting and I'd like to come back to some of these writers you mention later. But I notice you haven't mentioned any other Elizabethan writers, particularly Marlowe. Marlowe was born in the same year as Shakespeare and at the time of his death was the more established dramatist. If by some mischance of history, both writers had died at twenty nine, do you think Guy Butler might rather have founded the "Marlowe Society of Southern Africa"?

Marlowe was devastatingly unfortunate to have worked at the same moment as Shakespeare. As it is, he can never step out of his young competitor's long shadow. I think Jonathan Bate was correct that triumphing over Marlowe, trouncing him as an artist, became an important factor in Shakespeare's early development. Guy Butler admired both Marlowe and Webster very much. In each of them you can find tones and textures of thought, and moral attitudes, utterly foreign to Shakespeare's outlook, especially cynicism. Shakespeare has to be one of the least cynical of people. I am reminded of Paroles' line from *All's Well That Ends Well*: 'There's place and means for every man alive' (4.3.431) – something like that pervades Shakespeare's output. A very generous, open attitude.

I admire Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy*, a once-off wonder of a play and a progenitor of *Hamlet*, but the expanded understanding of human beings on view in Shakespeare's work makes Kyd seem primitive, bold pioneer though he was. It is not that, in turning from what's on view in Kyd or Marlowe to Shakespeare's vision, 'human nature changed' (Virginia Woolf's famous phrase – 1966, 320); rather that Shakespeare *saw* more of human nature, saw in the Conradian sense (remember his claim that the artist's task is 'to make you hear, to make you feel -- it is, before all, to make you *see*' – 2004: 3) and was able to put what he saw into an artistic and theatrical vocabulary which he developed far beyond the state in which he received it. Of course, rather than Marlowe, the artist one really has to feel sympathy for is Jonson. Had there been no Shakespeare, Jonson might have been the playwright remembered as the highlight of his age. I'm especially fond of some of his lesser-known plays like *The Devil is an Ass* or *The Silent Woman*. But even so, I doubt that Jonson would have become the first 'globalised' artist in the way Shakespeare has, let alone Marlowe.

One thing that strikes me about many of the writers you've mentioned – Arnold, Wilde, Lawrence, Eliot – is that they seem to have been interested in philosophical and social issues beyond the immediate ones of their own societies. Do you think that this is true too of the South African writers you've mentioned?

No, I think not. African and South African literature, with the exception of J.M. Coetzee and, perhaps, Athol Fugard, is intensely introverted, bound up in various forms of African crisis and pathology. Marquez in South America writes of intensely local matters in local idioms, but he is addressing the world. One effect of colonialism, from which we have not yet recovered, has been to foster what South Africans would call a laager mentality in many of our writers. They seem trapped in a makeshift boma when really it is the broad open savannahs, wetlands and jungles of world literature that we should be responding to and challenging. (I'm not sure quite why this 'game industry' strain of

language is emerging here; perhaps from a sense that African literature is claustrophobic.) I would prefer to see African literature engaged in agonistic struggle with other literatures and ideologies, or quietly confident in its own self-understandings, instead of being constrained by what has become the conventional discourse of Africa. Oddly, that is why the gentle romances of Alexander McCall Smith have found universal appeal. Many have argued that he writes of a Botswana that doesn't exist, that he is an outsider, that he doesn't appreciate the 'real' dynamics of Africa. This may be true – Botswana is far from the model democracy it appears. But he is creating an imaginary world that speaks to recognisable aspects of Botswana and the Batswana people while telling stories that move and entertain in Scandinavia, Canada and South America, as well as Africa. Light literature can make a powerful impact on people. Mma Ramotswe is fast becoming the most recognised 'African' after Nelson Mandela! At least in part, this is because McCall Smith understands that beyond inflections of climate and culture, human beings the world over actually *are* the same species. Literature affects us exactly because biologically we are one; yet the challenges that face us take on such different social and political guises, which is what makes disparate literatures interesting. I'm not a believer in the conventional wisdom about African solutions for African problems: today there are world solutions for African problems, but Africans have to find, adapt and apply them. This can be achieved without abandoning what is valuably African. The same is true for every country and continent. The challenge is to recognise and preserve what is valuable in the cultural heritage, while sloughing off what is nugatory or baneful. Literature can help us tell the difference.

It is now ten years since President Mbeki called for an 'African Renaissance'. Do you think that this led to a greater understanding and interest by South Africans in the European Renaissance, or was it a concept that was more exclusively African?

A lot of very complex issues are fudged over or elided in the notion of an African Renaissance. First of all, Mbeki's call was a resurrection of a very old initiative going back to people like Edward Blyden and J.E. Casely-Hayford in nineteenth century West Africa. Blyden's *Christianity, Islam and the Negro Race* took a very positive view of classical and western civilization, with the *exception* of the Renaissance, because the European racial attitudes which emerged in the literature and politics of that period were demeaning to Africans and the diaspora. He enjoyed Shakespeare, but not the ugly racial attitudes which find expression in the plays. But Mbeki's Renaissance was – and we have very much to use the past tense here – an awkward hybrid, in my view, never properly thought through. Sometimes it seemed to advocate a careful scrutinising of traditional African thought-ways and practices with a view to their incorporation into modern South Africa; at others it was a call for Africa to rise to the challenge of modernity, which implies a radical departure from tradition. Sometimes it sounded like a justification for

neo-liberal nostrums unrelated to the realities of Africa. Oddly enough, the effort reminds me of that elusive search for synthesis which informs some of Guy Butler's poetry – now there's an odd collocation! Personally, I think Mbeki was on the right track, but there's nothing particularly or exceptionally 'African' in what he was proposing, except insofar as he wanted Africans to do it. All cultures have a heritage going back into the mists of time – I'm not talking here about ephemeral sub-cultures – and this heritage is a mixed bag of myth and knowledge, some of which is conducive to human flourishing, some utterly deleterious. At the same time these cultures have to respond to the challenge of global modernity, that gradual interlinking of the human community through trade, communication and conflict which has been under way since Shakespeare's time. There is no hiding place.

This tension between traditionalism and modernity plays itself out, sometimes very painfully, in the lives and communities of many individual Africans. But so it does, with different emphases, in Europeans, Americans, Chinese and even Australians. I say 'even Australians' because they have the most deeply colonial society on the planet (though they would not willingly admit it) and have the ongoing challenge of inventing Australian-ness within a complex heritage of European, Polynesian and Eastern thought-ways. We in South Africa also have our work cut out to sift through the cultural repertoires we have inherited from African, Portuguese, Indian, Malay, German, English, Chinese, Dutch and Afrikaans sources, to name only the most obvious, with all their religious and political baggage. A key process here is the dialectical interchange between culture and civilisation (if one can use the latter term without pejorative connotations). As the arrow of time moves on, small-scale cultural inheritances fade and retreat, step by step, to become a private but shareable inner resource, different for each person and every community, a presence *within* the large-scale externalized mechanisms of civilisation. These mechanisms tend, if we are not careful, to take over the rhythm and meaning of our lives. We become dedicated to keeping that global machine going (do you remember E.M. Forster's short story, "The Machine Stops"?), and the cultural resources of our various identities shrink until they become merely an inner tap-root, vital to our sense of who we are, but disturbingly unrelated to the surface of modern life. Africa is undergoing that "boundless grinding collision of the New with the Old" of which Carlyle spoke (1829, 82); in our case a shift from small-scale pastoral societies, with their moralities of surveillance and group cohesion, to the modern, liberal, 'open society' (see Popper 1966), with its individualism, internalized morality (conscience it is called in some European epistemologies) and goal-driven, egoistic behaviour. Neither pole is inherently better than the other; but it takes thought and reflection, using powerful tools (like books!) to better understand our place in this scenario, which has no intrinsic end in sight. South Africa is nowhere near resolving the tension. Viewed in the context of this global process, Mbeki's 'African Renaissance' was merely the sound of a squib going off in a thunder storm,

noisy and startling in its local context, but drowned out by more powerful global forces. Nevertheless, he was right to resurrect the idea, and will be remembered for it, whatever the long-term verdict on his presidency turns out to be.

Related to the whole question of the African Renaissance is the area of study known as IKS, or Indigenous Knowledge Systems, an area of research which is being promoted vigorously by the NRF. Do you see research in this area as leading to new knowledge in the study of literature, given that so much in the way of such knowledge is based on oral tradition?

Let me take the last part first. Yes, indeed, IKS can lead to new literature and new literary innovations. But the procedure is by no means simple. For instance, the reason that Jeff Peires has been so successful with his writings on Eastern Cape history stems from the fact that he has been scrupulous in combining intimate first-hand knowledge of language and culture with meticulous archival research. Oral tradition is complex and deceptive for dabblers. Sometimes its use can border on the bogus. For example, E.A. Ritter's *Shaka Zulu*, which in the middle of the last century went a long way towards consolidating lurid white myths about Shaka, even impacting on Bill Faure's notorious SABC television series in the 80s, made large claims to be grounded in oral history, but much of the work is fabrication of the most noxious kind. (The book to read is Dan Wylie's *Savage Delight*.) But this does not mean that the oral repertoire in the hands of its contemporary ethnic custodians is automatically reliable. One has only to consider the tangle of contradictory oral testimony which Wylie attempts to sort through in his 'non-biography' of Shaka (*Myth of Iron*) to realize that reliance on oral records and memories can never be naïve or unthinking, without running major risks. So IKS can be a source of literary inspiration, but it can also pitch the unwary into a minefield of controversy. Or think of the recent spat over Zakes Mda's borrowings from Peires in his novel *The Heart of Redness*.¹ No-one can fail to recognise Mda's overt reliance on sequences in *The Dead Will Arise*, as well as whole chunks of language from the book, once it has been pointed out. Intertextuality is really not the issue. Intertextuality usually transforms the host text itself rather than slumping onto it like an easy chair, which is what *Heart of Redness* does. The fact that Mda invents the twentieth century mirror-story, and adds a measure of fabulation to the nineteenth century layer is also beside the point. He is perfectly at liberty to structure his story the way he has, or any other way. *Heart of Redness* is his creation. But he would have done better to signal the linguistic game more clearly in his acknowledgments. Peires comes out of the *fracas* very well.

Now to the first part of your statement, concerning a presumptive relation between IKS and the African Renaissance. IKS points in contrary directions, like Mbeki's African Renaissance. On the one hand, it is about cultural heritage, about recuperating valuable

technologies and ways of thought that may be in danger of being lost, and doing so simply because they are interesting and meaningful. Indigenous knowledge in this sense is a contribution to the collective heritage of humanity. But IKS research is also promoted because it might lead to discoveries and recoveries which are valuable for twenty-first century modernity. Here indigenous knowledge is wrenched from its informing matrix, studied and commodified, then fed into the cosmopolitan markets of global society. With care, the 'owners' of this traditional knowledge may even get to share in the profits – let's hope so. This fundamental ambiguity is regularly down-played in IKS discourse, because it raises questions which destabilize the entire project. If indigenous knowledge is studied for its own intrinsic interest, what purchase does such work have on contemporary needs and challenges? Such knowledge arose and was fostered because of its relevance to the needs of traditional societies. In our case these were mostly small-scale pastoral societies, whose politics were those of clan, herd and season. The ethical thinking, the mores and the problem-horizon of such societies were appropriate to their context. It is by no means obvious that ethical notions – such as the treasured *ubuntu* – can be transferred meaningfully to large-scale urban societies and remain cogent. Any materialist philosophy must reject such an assumption outright, and the literature of the metropolis from the nineteenth century on, full of angst, anomie and despair, piles on the evidence against it. (I'm thinking here particularly of Dostoevsky.) This is not to say that high ethical behaviors are not found in cities; just that they are differently inflected to meet the demands of this very different *habitus*. To import *ländliche* life-ways into the Wasteland is to risk either absurdity or comedy, which may be fruitful from a literary point of view, but tends to be violently at odds with the pragmatic orientation of everyday ethics in big cities. So if twenty-first century thought gets by quite well without the traditionalist challenge – and remember that the critiques with which western societies habitually *enfilade* themselves are far more incisive than anything traditionalist societies can muster – then IKS and the African Renaissance will inevitably appear to be much more about exploitation than resuscitation or nostalgia. But serious IKS research is in its early stages in South Africa, and we must wait to see the results over time.

One of the crucial issues in IKS research is the question of intellectual property rights. Who does history and knowledge belong to? You were involved in the production of Chris Mann's play, "Thuthula", which draws on isiXhosa history, and you wrote a Preface to the published edition. To what extent did this play provide a "test case" for the relationship between oral history and the concerns of a contemporary dramatist?

The issue depends on relationships and the care and respect with which the cultural resources of people are treated. To illustrate – when rehearsals began for *Thuthula* at the 2003 National Arts Festival (Janet Buckland was directing), Chris Mann and I were summoned to a meeting with a local representative of the Rharhabe Royal House, very

upset at the prospect of a possible travesty of Xhosa history being enacted on the Festival's Main Programme. We responded by inviting a delegation from the Royal House to attend dress rehearsals, where they experienced the Thuthula romance in the form of a verse drama, with the surrounding history firmly in place. They were unashamedly delighted with the play, and in fact asked Chris to take it on tour nationally, something that was financially impossible. The production sustained a level, not of reverence, but of basic respect towards its material and by implication towards the descendants of those represented on stage. We discovered afterwards we had caught residual 'flak' from Brett Bailey's show *The Prophet* at the 1999 Festival, based on the Nongqawuse story (see Bailey 2003). Brett's style there combined ritual, magical realism, shock tactics and what can only be described as an Afro-gothic atmosphere to produce a wonderful theatrical event, but there was a perceived flouting of cultural sensitivities and decorum which didn't go down well with traditionalists. The problem, if it is a problem, is irresolvable. Freedom of expression is a right. Without that freedom, humanity stifles itself. But this is something very difficult for the guardians of traditional societies to accept, for what they are attempting to protect are the relics of small-scale closed communities which place a premium on conformity. Perhaps it boils down to whom you accept as your neighbor – are you mentally facing an abstract audience of rootless, decontextualised theatre-goers, or real people who live with you in the same community, whose likes and dislikes you understand to a degree. All societies live with these tensions.

You have always taken a keen interest in theatre, promoting theatre companies, writing reviews and articles on productions, in addition to your research in literature. Yet literary critics in South Africa are often curiously uninterested in the theatre. Why do you think this is?

Precisely because they are *literary* critics. Very little strong text-based theatre is produced in South Africa today. The emphasis is on improvised or workshopped pieces, often with a physical theatre or multi-media focus. Mostly the work is developed by performers and directors rather than theatrical writers, and verbal language is supplanted by different means of symbolic representation. The impact is visceral, and any verbal language is external to the piece, generated by artists and critics striving to describe its genesis and artistic provenance. The reasons for this development (and it's a world-wide phenomenon in western-influenced theatre) are both good and bad, it seems to me. On the one hand, artists are seeking something new, a fresh vision of human possibility which is not yet articulate, or fully available, and therefore shuns verbal expression. (This may be a round-about way of saying that there are few strong thinkers in South African theatre.) But the less salutary reason is that South African reality is so tense and conflicted that the spurious harmony of the inarticulate gives the artist some cover, a little camouflage. Only

the satirists are fully verbal at present, and satire always tends to dominate at times of change and uncertainty. The last really powerful piece of text-based South African theatre for me was John Kani's *Nothing But The Truth*, and that is a long time ago. Let's hope a powerful South African writer is waiting in the wings who can take us beyond theatricalised history and legend. Reza de Wet is still a possibility. And we miss Yael Farber.

What do you see as the future of literary studies in South Africa? Are we moving towards such high levels of specialization that eventually there will be a kind of fragmentation of the discipline?

Literary studies are in decline in our universities, as is the case all over the world. The commanding position they once laid claim to, during the 50s and 60s of the last century in particular, has evaporated. Aside from unseemly squabbles, literary studies have no public impact in South Africa. *Literature*, on the other hand, is quite healthy – perhaps not as dominant as it was when books were the sexy medium they remain for educated minorities, but they still hold their own against all comers for those who acquire the reading habit. Causes? Well, the discipline lost focus when literary history fragmented into historicisms of various kinds, when literary study became confused with sociology, when formalism became an end rather than a means, and when the distinctiveness of literary study merged into the intellectual goulash of media studies. So I would not lay the blame at the door of specialization. Quite the reverse. In South Africa we have very few specialists in anything literary. People are so interdisciplinary that they fit nowhere. And when a South African does achieve some degree of academic recognition in literary studies, such is the legacy of colonialism in our academic thinking that the first impulse is to take their knowledge and energy somewhere else, usually to Britain or the United States. The empire still rules with benign implacability. Those countries are full of academic expertise drawn from all over the world, fine scholars living the disengaged life of the peripatetic academic. I suppose the salaries are a draw card; some are fearful of the future in South Africa (this is especially true of fervent academic revolutionaries – a swingeing radical manifesto of some sort is frequently the prelude to bugging off); others are so bound by literary thinking that they have no idea that imaginative literature is there to illuminate the lives of people – the point Dr Johnson made so well.² That is the biggest cause of the decline in literary studies: literary academics are just talking to themselves, they have forgotten that literature is for life – the life of the individual and the life of society.

While specialization is a positive benefit at postgraduate level, it has perhaps been less helpful in developing undergraduate courses. Academics tend to organize courses around their own research interests with the result that important areas of English Literature are

not as well covered in the syllabus as they might be. For example, one major university English department does not teach English Literature prior to 1800 at undergraduate level. However, we could find a situation in our schools where English teachers do not have any direct knowledge of writers like Chaucer, or Shakespeare, or Milton. Could this be a possible danger?

Danger? It's a positive disaster! Today, if you want to teach a text such as Ndebele's *The Cry of Winnie Mandela* you have to start by explaining who Homer was. How would you approach *The Island* (Fugard, Kani and Ntshona) without an understanding of *Antigone* (see Fugard 1995)? A few distinctions need to be made. It is probably easier to make an international research reputation if you work on African or South African material. This is simply because our libraries and archives are stuffed to the gills with rich, unknown and under-researched material. And it seems to me so obvious that undergraduate education must include a solid grounding in African and South African literature, even through the medium of translation. That is fundamental. But literature should also open a window on the world, as the saying goes. We should never pretend that African literature in English is a self-sufficient, independent literary system, adequate for the education of ourselves and our young people. We need citizens who are intellectually prepared to raid the full range of world literature, in search of understanding. Thanks to the burgeoning scope of the electronic resources available, it is simply not true that you can't do original research on pre-nineteenth century European or Middle-Eastern writers from a South African base. To keep South Africa on the intellectual map, to prevent it declining into an African back-water, we need to sustain research expertise across the board, even if it means that not every university can offer research-level expertise for every period. Such expertise should exist somewhere in the country. Otherwise our undergraduate teaching suffers, we are unable to attract international scholars, and we revert to the status of colonial transmission universities. In such institutions, metropolitan knowledge is passed on to undergraduates whose subsequent intellectual and social development is deliberately focused away from South Africa. Several South African departments pride themselves mainly on the extent to which their graduates succeed in that mystical academic realm known as 'overseas'.

We need instead to be aiming for intensive local cross-disciplinary graduate education programmes, even for students who are completing higher degrees by research. Textual studies, art history, politics and philosophy: these are fundamental. Especially philosophy. We would never have suffered the ludicrous spectacle of some departments thinking they could ground literary study in 'theory', as happened in the mid-80s, if philosophy had been a normal part of the academic menu, at least at graduate level. My current passion for Schopenhauer stems in part from a recognition that unless you tackle him and his dialogue with Kant and Plato, then you can't really understand Wittgenstein,

either early or late; the same applies, for slightly different reasons, to Hegel, Fichte and Marx. This is quite apart from his massive influence on the Russian novelists, on Hardy and Thomas Mann, on Wagner and Conrad – especially the latter – and much contemporary theorizing of ‘the body’.

The richness of undergraduate programmes needs to be enhanced. Staple disciplines such as prosody and narratology should not be neglected. It is possible to introduce undergraduates carefully to selected issues in the history of ideas while studying specific works. Those universities which, in the 90s, decided to opt for the so-called ‘programme approach’ to undergraduate education (and many of them are currently back-tracking) should be deeply embarrassed, because the move exposes a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of undergraduate education – in other words, these universities had evidently already lost their way in that they no longer understood the rationale for formative undergraduate degrees. The misunderstanding probably originates, as you imply, in the impulse of teachers to impose their own research interests on the undergraduate curriculum, a very short-sighted strategy. The teacher’s interests should never be more powerful than the material.

So my general answer to your question is that we need strong, research-informed teaching both in African *and* in world literature in English. The latter should include Chaucer, Milton and Spenser – they are fundamental to understanding *English* English Literature – but also chunks of European literature in translation, and some exposure to classical literature. Writers who are any good never fetter their minds by deciding they will only read work from *this* geographical area or *that* historical period: to even attempt this would be to misunderstand the trans-temporal technology of the book. Yet this is what our passion for limitation imposes on our students. And you are perfectly correct that weak undergraduate teaching transposes itself directly into dull, uninspiring literature teaching in schools.

Talking of schools, you have published widely on South African language policy and language-in-education. What has been the impact of our national language policy on the country?

To date, not very much. The arena in which it could have substantial impact is education, but apart from the occasional challenge to Afrikaans hegemony in a few schools, little has happened. The reason for this is that those behind South Africa’s Language Policy and Plan fail to understand that ‘transformation by policy document’ can’t work in this field. Language change and variation are driven by real social needs, not by ideological preferences. If we are to make progress, then the emphasis has to shift from policy to practical language cultivation measures – teacher training, text-book provision, teacher

education, translation. And even then, it is silly to try and attempt the impossible. Those who interpret the constitutional demand for language equity as requiring that all eleven official languages should be used at tertiary and research levels are supremely misguided. Even at the height of the Nationalist dispensation, and with millions of Rands being poured into the development of Afrikaans, the language was falling behind simply in the matter of terminological development. It's a question of numbers. International English continues to be developed through the spontaneous language needs of millions worldwide, who are using the language to work in, think in, and cooperate in. No artificial body of language developers can keep up with this uncontrolled intellectual energy. Secondly, you have to contemplate the desired outcome. Where is the advantage in someone learning Chemistry in Zulu when he or she ends up looking for work in a pharmaceutical firm in Cape Town which operates in English?³

The biggest challenge is in the schools, especially deep-rural schools. People sometimes claim that English will always be an artificial 'classroom language' in such schools, poorly taught, seldom used at home or in the community. It is argued that rural children in particular progress better in their home language, and that their academic results improve. But these advantages are temporary. Of course pupils perform better when they can utilize the linguistic capital they bring with them to formal education – their first or home language. Then comes the challenge of higher-order conceptual development, the gradual move from basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS, in the jargon) towards higher levels of cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP). If the teacher isn't herself fully *au fait* in the home language at these conceptual levels (and this involves much more than the imparting of terminology), then the learners are no better off than they would be struggling in English. Given that textbooks are still available only in English – fifteen years after independence! – and that most supporting materials in the environment are likely to be in English (foreign television programmes, non-fiction works, podcast material, videos etc.), the argument for mother tongue education beyond the initial phase remains shaky. Our national language-in-education policy of additive multilingualism is a very wise approach in itself. But I doubt whether mother-tongue education from the FET phase onwards will thrive, even under the most advantageous educational circumstances. For the foreseeable future, the central economy of South Africa can only function in English. All parents know this. Any movement which advocates mainstream mother-tongue education in the senior phase, especially when claiming to speak on behalf of rural children, runs the risk of permanently marginalizing the rural poor, and weakens national cohesion. For me, this is simply not on. There are bright kids out there, in Pofadder and Lusikisiki, whose aim is to be actuaries and surgeons, lawyers and stock-brokers. The opportunities must be available.

The long-term answers lie in the large-scale, expensive, utterly professional training and education of teachers, and a re-capturing of the education management system from national level right through to what goes on (or rather, does not go on) in the district offices. Efforts are being made. South Africa's indigenous languages are a rich cultural resource, they belong in the education system, but the only way they will really thrive is when African language intellectuals take the initiative, using both translations and original work, to create the cultural and artistic *habitus* in which young people can thrive intellectually and imaginatively, using indigenous languages. This is generally not yet happening, though I am quite proud of what Rhodes's Xhosa section is achieving in terms of indigenising the internet and email, and supporting language development in pharmacy and law. We need more such initiatives.

As a final question, it's 25 years since you began your teaching, research and scholarship at Rhodes University. In that time you must have seen many changes in higher education, yet in the midst of these changes, Rhodes has managed to retain its character and tradition, as well as its reputation. How do you see the future?

Identities are always changing. Plutarch has the story of Theseus's ship, a form of the paradox of identity. The Athenians wanted to preserve the vessel which brought their hero safely home from his voyage to Crete, where he slew the Minotaur and rescued several fellow citizens. So they replaced each plank as it decayed. Does it remain the same vessel? At what point is it no longer Theseus's ship? Universities are full of ghosts; ghosts of teachers, administrators and students who are no longer there, rubbing shoulders with the wandering shades of scholars and scientists from different periods and parts of the world, who may never have been present physically, but whose thoughts and initiatives are alive in the institution. Fortunately university campuses are also perennially full of youth and freshness, splendid ignorance and mental vitality, which makes them vivifying places in which to work. Most universities are like the proverbial curate's egg – good in parts. I've been very happy at Rhodes. There have been times when we've made bad political choices and others when we've been ahead of the game. All large organizations are silly and purblind at times. But currently it's difficult to argue against the best pass rate, the best through-put rate, and the best research output per academic staff member in the country. I know enough about other universities to know that if I still had children to educate, this is where I'd send them. The way forward for South African universities is to reduce the amount of time academics spend in meetings, cut the administrative load on them, and demand robust and consistent research output from all academic staff. I don't believe this guff about some people preferring to teach. Why then were they appointed? A university is a place where knowledge is moved forward. Teaching is better when it is done conscientiously by active researchers. Yes, our universities do need to transform, if by that you mean they need to improve. More

intellectual ambition, deeper insight, fuller and more telling expression – more self-confidence. Staff equity will continue to be a challenge, because the financial attractions of commerce and industry remain paramount for this generation. But there will always be those for whom intellectual challenge is as necessary as breathing (if you will accept the hyperbole), and they will be drawn to academic life as long as our universities really are places where intellect is treasured and intelligence can travel freely, with the brakes off, in the service of humanity. That is what universities are for.

NOTES

1. See Offenburger 2008 and Mda 2008.
2. ‘Books without the knowledge of life are useless (I have heard him say); for what should books teach but the art of *living*’ (Piozzi 206).
3. This is not to imply that indigenous languages don’t have a very important pedagogical part to play across the disciplines at tertiary level, but this is generally a supplementary role. The challenge for African languages is to develop a vigorous, book-based intellectual culture which captures the public imagination.

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