



A979/Dd.

Sol Plaatjie

— Liberal, Marxist or what?

— 1984 Memorial Lecture
challenge

THE 1984 Sol Plaatjie Memorial Lecture was delivered on September 14, at UNIBO and represented a refreshingly new approach by Dr. Njabulo Ndebele of the National University of Lesotho on both past and present definitions of Sol Plaatjie as man and author.

The lecture centred on two interrelated themes. First the speaker was concerned with dispelling certain myths about Plaatjie as a political figure and secondly, a reevaluation was given of the state of African literature in South Africa particularly in relation to other art forms like music and drama.

LIBERAL PRESS

Dr. Ndebele's first critique centred on the image, created at the turn of the century by a fairly liberally sympathetic press (Pretoria News, September 1910) who portrayed Plaatjie to be favourable to the view that "Africans were acceptable as people on condition that they threw away their purported backwardness and accepted civilisation". Moreover the image created was seen as an attempt to symbolize Plaatjie not as a threat to the fundamental structures of South African society but as an example of "what Africans might be — given a little more of the white man's civilisation". According to Ndebele, Plaatjie was portrayed as someone who was "really not a threat to the white man" but on the side of "civilisation" and in the same ideological camp as American Education Booker T. Washington.

MYTH

These basically are the myths and supporting assumptions that Dr. Ndebele intends to dispel. In a characteristic candid style he describes the myth thus: "In short, isn't Plaatjie wonderful? Isn't he just like us, white liberals? And so, if you can accept us, couldn't you accept him too? He's got blood like us. He is a new Native in our image: intelligent, articulate, educated, yet, a "good Native" really, who in the final analysis, knows his place".

Why and how is the image created and cultivated? The answer, according to Dr. Ndebele, lies in the very structure of liberal ideology itself. At one level the ideology is — despite protestations to the contrary — intimately tied up with the social structure within which it is located. However since it tends by and large to locate itself somewhere outside this structure and historical circumstance — hence its purported "objectivity" and "universality" — it fails very often to take itself as problematic. The result is that it performs the function of "containment". That is it must capture Plaatjie and contain him within the parameters of its own ideological image thus rendering him harmless. It is for this reason, Dr. Ndebele argues, that ideology "seeks to domesticate its potential allies by defining them in its own image". This necessarily leads to a failure to see Plaatjie as someone other than how the liberal ideological framework would have us see him.

CLASS ANALYSIS?

What the ideology fails to do, then, is to see Plaatjie's analysis of South Africa as fundamentally a class analysis in so far as he touched not the surface structure of the country but the "real dynamic of the South African formation". This dynamic is deeply rooted in the material and economic foundations of the country. Dr. Ndebele supports his argument with reference to Plaatjie's *Native Life in South*

Africa and notes that Plaatjie "explodes the image created of him" and "demonstrates that he possesses the capability to fly away" from the dominant social groups' "image of the uneducated Native".

Dr. Ndebele also notes how the liberal press of the day further cultivates the liberal image trying to associate Plaatjie with the African-American educator in the South of the United States — Booker T. Washington. Plaatjie on the other hand implicitly associated himself with W.E.B. Du Bois. The observation is significant since Washington approach to political change was one of "tactical accommodation" within prevailing structures. For Du Bois this was "adjustment and submission" — or what Dr. Ndebele calls "radical adjustment". Plaatjie is "firmly placed in the genuine history of the struggle for liberation in South Africa".

AFRICAN LITERATURE

It is from this base that Dr. Ndebele questions the state of African literature, particularly fiction, in South Africa and finds it wanting in terms of finding a real basis amongst the popular oppressed masses. This, he maintains, is in stark contrast to success of such art forms as drama and mbaqanqa music which, it is argued, has naturally developed and is "grounded in popular experience". African literature on the other hand is one big step from popular experience of the masses. While admitting that African writers do in fact write about political experience this is largely done "for the masses" but not "with the masses". In short "they are writing from above rather than from below".

EDUCATION

An explanation for this is located in the "nature of the writer's word itself". Central to this argument is that the acquisition of such skills as reading and writing requires a "conscious act of education, while the African art and drama forms relied almost entirely on natural development. The net result of this is that because of the retarding effects of colonial education only a small élite of Africans employed the written word as a cultural medium and became, therefore, "a minority social class whose material interests were largely identical to the colonial interests". This has led to a delay in the written word evolving an authentic popular culture.

PROVOCATIVE

Although exploratory in unravelling a complex social process Dr. Ndebele's analysis was filled with a refreshing and provocative approach to a theme that has too often been reduced to vague platitudes and endless eulogies to Sol Plaatjie without locating the man beyond his ethnic "Twananess" and placing him and his art form firmly within a broader black Africanism.

Njabulo Ndebele, Head of the Department of English at the National University of Lesotho, presented a stimulating and provocative Sol Plaatjie Memorial lecture towards the end of last year. Michael Lawrence gives a brief overview of the lecture.

Dr NJABULO SIMAKAHLE NDEBELE
B.A.(UBLS) MA (CAMBRIDGE) D PHIL (DENVER)

Dr Ndebele was born on 4 July 1948 in Johannesburg and is married with two children. He is at present Head of the Department of English at the National University of Lesotho.

Dr Ndebele obtained the Doctor of Philosophy degree from the University of Denver, USA; his dissertation, "Fools" and Other Stories, in English Literature and Creative Writing was nominated joint winner of the 1983 NOMA AWARD for the best book published in Africa in 1983. Besides teaching English at Secondary, High school and University level, Dr Njabulo Ndebele is a Fellow in the Department of English at the University of Denver. His publications include poetry in South African literary journals, in book-length anthologies and short stories.

As a student at the University of Botswana Lesotho and Swaziland (now National University of Lesotho) he was President of the Students' Representative Council. At the National University of Lesotho he has served on several academic committees such as Senate, the Standing Committee on Staff Discipline and the Development Committee. He is currently elected Academic Staff Representative in the University Council and a Faculty of Humanities' Representative on the Library Board and Bookshop Committees.

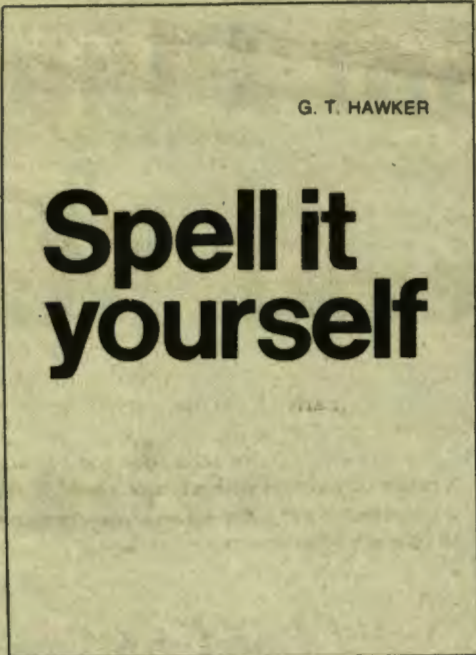


"Mmutlha
I'm confused.
Are you a
hare, a rabbit
or what?"

Readers interested in receiving the complete lecture should write to: The Director, Institute of African Studies, UNIBO, Pte Bag X2046, Mafikeng, 8670.



An Oxford Spelling Book



G. T. HAWKER

Spell it yourself

SPELLING SCHEMES

- think carefully before you buy

The Riverside Spelling Program

AN OXFORD SPELLING BOOK
Downes, A. O.U.P., 1983
(R67.75 pack of ten)

THE RIVERSIDE SPELLING PROGRAMME
Wallace, E.E. Riverside Publishing House, 1984, R30.20

SPELL IT YOURSELF
Hawker, G.T O.U.P., 1981, R7.95

THE first consideration in reviewing these three schemes for use in schools in Bophuthatswana is their cost!

The Riverside Spelling Program is probably the most expensive and if it is to be used to full

advantage any school would be forced to spend thousands on initial introduction and then vast sums on an annual basis. Before introducing the scheme, teachers would have to be trained in its use and follow the course as designed, and in its entirety.

The scheme would be worthless if introduced at one level and not followed through to the next; it would be worthless if treated casually and carelessly at one level and then with every attention being given to every aspect of the course at the next.

Too often worksheets and workbooks, the basis for this scheme, are either not marked or poorly marked and considering the costs of these items alone this makes *The Riverside Spelling Program* an expensive scheme on which to embark. Further, it has been written with American children in mind and much of it does not relate to the experiences, or needs, of children in Bophuthatswana.

An Oxford Spelling Book has much of value as a reference book for teachers but again it is an expensive scheme to introduce being priced at close to R70.00 for packs containing 10 pupils' books. The scheme would have to be carefully

followed to be fully worthwhile and it requires a fairly high level of pupil reading ability.

Spell it yourself is perhaps the book that has most to offer teachers and pupils in this part of the world. The instructions for the use of the book are easy to follow and are not contained in a separate booklet resulting in additional expense. The book in itself is not a Spelling List but a word reference book containing a wealth of information. Once more, the child using this book would have to be able to read well if the book is to be of benefit.

Given that English is being taught as a second, or third, language in our schools, I question the value of embarking on complicated and expensive spelling schemes. Our first aim should be to teach children to read fluently, with as much reading material being provided as possible. Teachers should, from the start of any language programme, build up lists of words from readers and from the children's own experiences and

Schonell has produced a highly effective spelling course which has been tried and tested over many years in primary schools worldwide. It is relatively inexpensive and simple to introduce in any classroom. The Schonell course takes care to present words for use, and learning, which are graded according to the child's spelling ability at any given stage. There is back up material which may, or may not, be used. There is room for any imaginative teacher to use the words in the lists in a variety of ways. With the locally written *An English Sentence Dictionary* by W.L. Holderness as an additional aid to a scheme like Schonell's, I see no sense in introducing complicated and costly schemes which cannot easily be adapted to our situation.

For purely reference purposes, for both teachers and pupils, I would suggest that limited numbers of *Spell it yourself* be purchased by schools.

A.M.S.T.



SPOTLIGHT ON ENGLISH
James, B
Keaney, L, and
White, D. O.U.P., 1983

Spotlight on English is a series of four books for the upper primary or middle school. Each of the four books follows a set pattern: There is an intense concentration on developing a balanced programme of English skills in five main areas — comprehension, reading, writing, oracy and language improvement.

The four books are obviously the work of Australian teachers — we are introduced to Australian idioms and expressions — and sadly this seems to be one of the main weaknesses of this series.

The Australian view-point is stressed in much of the material and if one did not have any information or knowledge of this vast continent one would imagine it as a suburb of London or as another (urban) area of the British Isles. There are no mention of aborigines or of the countryside and from this aspect it would be difficult to recommend *'Spotlight on English'* to students in Africa; there seems to be little that is familiar. However, there is still much good material available for comprehensions and practical application of English skills. Local teachers would be well advised to choose relevant sections and concentrate on these for reinforcement. The books are not designed for thematic work.

— P.D.

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