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Interdisciplinarity as Reading: Truth Commission Journal and Notes

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Interdisciplinarity as Reading: Truth Commission Journal and Notes

Abstract

August 5, 1998: The Truth and Reconciliation Commission is holding an amnesty hearing at the Central Methodist Church in Johannesburg. The hearing is a continuation of one held in May, concerning the events now remembered as the Shell House incident.² In March 1994, security guards from the African National Congress headquarters at Shell House, an office building in the middle of Johannesburg, fired their guns at a large contingent of Zulu marchers, some armed with "traditional weapons": cow-hide shields, sticks, clubs, spears.³ Eight marchers died, and the guards have applied for amnesty. A witness, one of the marchers, is being quizzed on what happened. Mr. Mhlaba, in dark trousers and a bright blue team jacket, wearing glasses with a gold trim, is being questioned as to the meaning of the chant *amandla! ngawethu! uSuthu! uSuthu!*, which he is asked to utter, with accompanying gestures, before the members of the Amnesty Committee. Since official record-keeping is in the form of a transcript, the Chairman, Justice Hassen Mall, must summarize what he has witnessed: let it be noted that the witness chanted with raised fist, taking two steps forward and then one step back for each chant. The fist will have held a stick or a spear: *ubhoko, umkhonto*. The lawyer cross-examining Mhlaba on behalf of the guards has several questions in this regard. Isn't this a war chant? No, it is not a war chant; as he has said, it is the praise uttered, according to tradition, when you are going to see a king or a chief; the word *uSuthu* is part of the name *Mangosuthu*. The chant *amandla! ngawethu!* comes from Zulu tradition. It means power - to us. The lawyer, who professes to know nothing about Zulu culture or tradition, insists: isn't *uSuthu!* a cry of warriors going into battle? Mhlaba tries another tack: I have never heard of warriors going into war chanting. When you go into war you do not make a noise. If you make a noise, the enemy will know where you are coming from. The lawyer returns several times to the same line of questioning, as if to confirm a prearranged passage of reasoning: Zulu therefore warrior therefore killer therefore ANC guards acted in self-defense. The right cultural explanation will be his first premise. As "native informant," Mhlaba has only to provide it in order to vindicate the guards and implicate himself. I sit in a cold pew, earphones on, hearing both Mhlaba's testimony, which is in Zulu, and the simultaneous translation into English. There are a few others in the church, mostly black, most also wearing earphones. Also sitting there are two black policemen, who, in spite of their regulation blue caps and jackets, are visibly cold. It is a relief afterwards to reemerge into the warm winter sunlight.

Interdisciplinarity as Reading: Truth Commission Journal and Notes 1

Mark Sanders

I think I have shown that it is impossible for the South African courts to mete out substantial justice without the aid of good interpreters. Sol Plaatje, "The Essential Interpreter"

August 5, 1998: The Truth and Reconciliation Commission is holding an amnesty hearing at the Central Methodist Church in Johannesburg. The hearing is a continuation of one held in May, concerning the events now remembered as the Shell House incident.² In March 1994, security guards from the African National Congress headquarters at Shell House, an office building in the middle of Johannesburg, fired their guns at a large contingent of Zulu marchers, some armed with "traditional weapons": cow-hide shields, sticks, clubs, spears.³ Eight marchers died, and the guards have applied for amnesty. A witness, one of the marchers, is being quizzed on what happened. Mr. Mhlaba, in dark trousers and a bright blue team jacket, wearing glasses with a gold trim, is being questioned as to the meaning of the chant *amandla! ngawethu! uSuthu! uSuthu!*, which he is asked to utter, with accompanying gestures, before the members of the Amnesty Committee. Since official record-keeping is in the form of a transcript, the Chairman, Justice Hassen Mall, must summarize what he has witnessed: let it be noted that the witness chanted with raised fist, taking two steps forward and then one step back for each chant. The fist will have held a stick or a spear: *ubhoko, umkhonto*. The lawyer cross-examining Mhlaba on behalf of the guards has several questions in this regard. Isn't this a war chant? No, it is not a war chant; as he has said, it is the praise uttered, according to tradition, when you are going to see a king or a chief; the word *uSuthu* is part of the name Mangosuthu. The chant *amandla! ngawethu!* comes from Zulu tradition. It means power - to us. The lawyer, who professes to know nothing about Zulu culture or tradition, insists: isn't *uSuthu!* a cry of warriors going into battle? Mhlaba tries another tack: I have never heard of warriors going into war chanting. When you go into war you do not make a noise. If you make a noise, the enemy will know where you are coming from. The lawyer returns several times to the same line of questioning, as if to confirm a prearranged passage of reasoning: Zulu therefore warrior therefore killer therefore ANC guards acted in self-defense. The right cultural explanation will be his first premise. As "native informant," Mhlaba has only to provide it in order to vindicate the guards and implicate himself. I sit in a cold pew, earphones on, hearing both Mhlaba's testimony, which is in Zulu, and the simultaneous translation into English. There are a few others in the church, mostly black, most also wearing earphones. Also sitting there are two black policemen, who, in spite of their regulation blue caps and jackets, are visibly cold. It is a relief afterwards to reemerge into the warm winter sunlight.

1. This is an entry, adapted somewhat, from the journal I kept on a visit to South Africa two years ago. It is, I hope, a short cut to some notes on interdisciplinarity as reading; and, since other notes might have been made, also an invitation to reading. Without imagining the journal being reducible to an agenda, I will nevertheless set out mine. This is another short cut, an attempt, at the risk of being elliptical, at reducing scholarly preamble to a minimum: Mainstream thinking of interdisciplinarity from the vantage of literary studies is conservative. Although the question of interdisciplinarity has been discussed a great deal by literary scholars recently, literary studies does not readily accept any fundamental alteration of its shape and imperatives as a discipline, or to its traditional objects of study. It is instructive, in this context, to note the attention to reading as a model for responsibility in the January 1999 issue of *PMLA*, devoted to "Ethics and Literary Study." In the introduction to that issue, the nexus of literature and ethics is regarded as simply another paradigm for literary study. Implicit in this view is interdisciplinarity, in a narrow sense that yokes existing disciplines: literature and philosophy. The "literature-and-ethics movement" is seen as having, in the future, to be responsive to "a social and/or political ethics" (Buell 1999: 13-16), but no significant alteration to the respective entities is contemplated. They remain proper names; their self-possession is not put into question. My "position" is that it would be wrong to leave literature and ethics to *PMLA* and its half-baked notions of interdisciplinarity in which the propriety of disciplines is maintained.⁴ I have argued this at greater length in a recent article (Sanders 1999), and will not reiterate it here. Rather, as I do there, I want to present an alternative "ethics of reading" which I see emerging from what is happening before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. My strategy begins by providing a description of the reading - or listening - practices at the Commission's hearings. I will show how reading and listening actually involve a basic disappropriation: the parties involved are put out, put out of themselves, the identity of each conditioned

by a response to, and for, the other. This disappropriation in responsibility is integral to ethics, if ethics is to be thought as more than simply an application of rules. If, in a broad sense, interdisciplinarity involves the ethical - relating to the other - and this, in turn, is linked to the practice of reading, what takes place at the Truth Commission, and in post-apartheid South Africa more generally, gives us a chance to reflect upon disappropriation in reading and interdisciplinarity as a matter for ethics. As instances of "interdisciplinary reading," the hearings themselves set to work a complex conversation of literary and juridico-legal codes and practices. These codes and practices are unstable; I regularly find myself adding the prefix "quasi": quasi-literary, quasi-judicial, and so on. An attention to the hearings can radicalize our thinking of reading. Those of us whose tentative boundary crossings seldom amount to more than team-teaching or logging on to Medline or Lexis (R)-Nexis (R), such attention also can lead toward a more thorough-going thinking of interdisciplinarity. Instead of existing disciplines enduring untouched, new objects of study might be constantly produced; as Roland Barthes once wrote, "interdisciplinary study consists in creating a new object, which belongs to no one." (Barthes 1989: 72) In literary studies this would, I propose, amount to a generalization of the literary beyond literature in the narrow sense. One way of pursuing this generalization would be to shift our attention beyond poems and novels, as traditional disciplinary objects, to an attention to the activity of reading and its implications.

2. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission has been unusually sensitive to the literary, and to how it relates to its declared project of letting previously silenced voices be heard. Its final (or interim final) report, made public in October 1998, records how it recognized several different types of truth. For the purposes of my discussion, the two most important are "forensic" and "narrative" truth. (Truth 1998: 1:110) The Commission recognized that its quasi-therapeutic mandate of restoring the human dignity of "victims" by allowing them to give their own accounts of what was done to them could not be carried out unless the "personal" and "subjective" truth of those accounts was accepted. They were not to be cross-examined, as this would compromise their integrity: their honesty, but also the healed wholeness of personhood assumed to follow from having one's story officially sanctioned. In spite of its declared openness to narrative truth, however, the Commission ultimately treats stories of victims with suspicion. To it, they are, like any other statement made before a legal or quasilegal body, subject to verification or falsification.⁵ (Sanders 2000: 18-20) Narrative accounts are treated, ultimately, as forensic truth claims. This is, of course, more palpable at the amnesty hearings, at which witnesses are examined and cross-examined. In the Commission's report, "narrative truth" is connected with "oral tradition," in which, it says, story-telling is "particularly important." (Truth 1998: 1:112) This inchoate idea -the drafters of the report were not literary scholars or theorists - can be linked to the questioning of Mr. Mhlaba regarding Zulu "tradition." I make use of the transcript, subsequently made available on the worldwide web (Mhlaba 1998), to refresh my memory:

MR DORFLING [for the objectors to the amnesty application]: You were brought up in the Zulu culture, is that correct?

MR MHLABA: Yes

.....

MR DORFLING: What is the significance of this movement [which he has just demonstrated for the Amnesty Committee] and these utterances Mr Mhlaba? What does it mean?

MR MHLABA: It means that we, according to the Zulu tradition, when we are happy or celebrating [and going] to a function, it's always our tradition that we should do it step by step while shouting the praises.

The others of the law in this case are literature and culture, specifically elements of Zulu orality and cultural explanation: the praise-word *uSuthu* and its meaning. Literature and culture are keywords for a more basic, less easily nameable, disappropriation at work at the Commission, as it calls forth testimony, testimony that may ultimately not be verifiable. Given that the Commission is juridico-legal in character, even if quasi-judicial and quasi-legal, can it be said that such disappropriation is exemplary for the law?

3. What takes place between witness and questioner is reproduced for, and *in*, the one attending the hearing. One is given a headset, puts it on, turns to the appropriate translation channel, and can hear the witness, and the questioner, speaking in a language not his or her own. Although one hears the

echo, in the background, of the witness's actual words, the process of simultaneous translation means a radical disappropriation for each party: the witness speaks in Zulu, yet, as I hear him, he speaks in English. On another channel he might have been speaking Sotho or Afrikaans. Were I to appear before the Commission, I could be heard to speak several languages I do not understand. This speaking in tongues, in languages one does not or may not understand, is hazardous. One's voice has been taken and given to another in a new tongue. This risky disappropriation is enabled by technics of translation prone to vicissitudes of its own: "INTERPRETER: Excuse me, there are some technical problems." (Mhlaba 1998) However achieved, submission to this process remains integral to the operations of the Truth Commission and to the day-to-day transactions of a country transforming itself after apartheid. Even if it is only to sing *Nkosi Sikelel' i Afrika*, as Antjie Krog suggests, committing oneself to speak in a language not one's own, the language of another, a language one does not know, is part of the transformation. (1999: 285-286) The Commission's translation apparatus works in a way analogous to its hospitality, as a quasi-judicial body, to story-telling and "oral tradition." In both instances, setting to work a responsibility in which the other is acknowledged as other rather than assimilated to the "self," the Commission agrees, provisionally to hear, and speak, the language of the other.

4. Taking the place of the other--in Levinasian terms, taking on the responsibility for the responsibility of the other for the other (Levinas 1998: 117; cf. Keenan 1997: 22) - is basic to the operation of the Truth Commission. One aspect of this is to assume the unacknowledged responsibility of the perpetrator for the deeds of the past. The Commission functions as a national clearing house between victims and perpetrators, even if it does not often arrange actual meetings between them. The recognition of "narrative truth" and "oral tradition" puts responsibility for the responsibility of the other into a "cultural" register. Human rights dialog with *ubuntu* on a national scale, each transforming the other.⁶ At the Methodist Church hearing, things occur on a smaller scale, but present some of the same issues. The law encounters culture, and does not quite know what to do with it. Its habits of reading come up against the "literary," and it undergoes its own disappropriation. It has to come out of itself, insofar as it declares itself ignorant of Zulu custom, and asks to be instructed:

MR TIPP [for the amnesty applicants]: Mr Mhlaba I am regrettably not very well versed in Zulu tradition and Zulu culture, but perhaps you can tell us, "amandla aweto" [sic.], are you saying that that forms part of a Zulu traditional praise song or praise chant?

MR MHLABA: I would say, put it clearly, any person, they don't have to be a Zulu-speaking person, people normally shout "amandla aweto" [sic.], meaning power to us. This has originated from the Zulu tradition, so I would say that's the reason why we were shouting "power to us" and "we will win as one."

MR TIPP: And the cry or the chant "usotho" [sic.] is, as I understand it, typically a battle-cry, is that correct?

MR MHLABA: That's not true. "Usotho" [sic.] goes to explain that we are the Zulu nation. As you know, there is "mangosotho" [sic.], it's a tradition that we are following as Zulu people.

MR TIPP: Mr Mhlaba, isn't it so that when traditionally and historically that when Zulu warriors went to war, that the typical battle-cry that accompanies them as an expression of their pride and their military prowess, was "usotho" [sic.]?

MR MHLABA: I did not understand your word, you're talking about the soldiers of Kwa-Zulu, or the warriors of Kwa-Zulu?

MR TIPP: I'm speaking as best I can in historical and traditional terms of Zulu warriors, and that when Zulu warriors went to war, "usotho" [sic.] would be their principal chant expressing their pride and their military strength as they attacked. (Mhlaba 1998)

Its questions call forth a story, one told for the Commission by a succession of iterable signs - songs, chants, elements of dance - the meaning of which is radically altered by context (just as the Central Methodist Church is by the presence of the Commission). If its goal is to produce closure - the Zulu marchers were marching as to war - a verified fact that can be brought to the decision in the amnesty case of the ANC security guards, what it actually gets is something unverifiable. The questions from the lawyer not only feign ignorance, and incite a story - or cultural explanation - but bring forth a counter-

story: we make no noise when we go to war. Or, as the transcript of the simultaneous translation records it:

MR MHLABA: I never heard that when going to war the warriors would be singing songs or chanting slogans. I know that people prepare for the war and nobody will instruct them to be singing when going to war, because that would show the directions as to where they are from [to] their opponents if they start singing.

MR TIPP: We'll move on Mr Mhlaba from that. . . 7 (Mhlaba 1998)

There is more than one way of reading this exchange. One can read/hear the lawyer's questions as simply pursuing an interested agenda based on a hypothesis with cultural-essentialist overtones. One knows this badgering, the wilful misconstrual and motivated mistranslation, from the courts of colonialism and apartheid. Yet, on reflection, and with the transcript to revise the constructions of memory, one can bear witness to a less one-sided negotiation of conditions of disappropriation. In a complex performance of forensic irony, the lawyer begs that his ignorance be remedied. Despite the power at the body's disposal, to subpoena and to question, and the power of its officers and representatives (at amnesty hearings) to rule out counter-questions - "MR TIPP: Mr Mhlaba. . . I'm not asking you to ask questions, I'm asking you to answer them" (Mhlaba 1998) - in the moment of soliciting a story, that body is vulnerable. However energetically that vulnerability is disavowed, and however quick it is to recover its footing - "we'll move on. . . from that" - it has gone out of itself, and asked for the word which can transform it. This reading approaches national allegory: the ANC rules, but Zulu is the emerging dominant; as Njabulo Ndebele wryly observes, "the Xhosas are running the country and the Zulu language is running amok." (Ndebele 1999: 149) Mangosuthu Buthelezi acts as President for a day. And now there is talk again of the ANC merging with the Inkatha Freedom Party. In this new democracy, sovereign is hostage to subject, subject host to sovereign. But danger comes with disappropriation, and violence can ensue. In 1994, sensing their House under threat, the ANC guards open fire. The Truth Commission's hearing commemorates, and attempts to renegotiate, a ruined occasion for hospitality. Let us, however, leave this national allegory, and the tendency, which it feeds, to treat exotic massacres and inquiries as foreign matters.

5. To bring my point home, it will be necessary to attend again to the law. Thus far, I have written as if the law were parasitic upon literature, as if at its nub were an unacknowledged unverifiability called story-telling. But what if that were not the case? Or not *simply* the case? The law undoubtedly has its own reading practices, which involve the unverifiable, and hospitality, if provisional, to the unverifiable. This is one starting point for interdisciplinary critical legal studies; as Peter Goodrich writes, "law is a literature which denies its literary qualities." (Goodrich 1996: 112) But what if what we understand as the "literary" were, in fact, *also* parasitic upon forensic practices of reading? What if irony is not simply a "literary" challenge to the law, or even a challenge at all, but the way in which the law itself negotiates and re-negotiates the violence of disappropriation (not only that involved in the nameable crimes of killing, theft, rape, and so on, but also a more nebulous threat to its own self-possession)? There is, as Goodrich observes, some evidence for this in the shared history of law and rhetoric:

Ironically, the second classification of the legal genre [the first being confession, as a means of invoking the spiritual, of mediating the human relation to the divine] is, historically, that of dissimulation, of pretending not to have what one has. According to the barrister and scholar of rhetoric, Puttenham, the legal genre is to be defined also in terms of allegory, or of "the Courtly figure of *allegoria*." Citing a classical maxim, *qui nescit dissimulare nescit regnare*, he who knows how to dissimulate knows how to rule, Puttenham classifies the figures and tropes of secular law as belonging primarily to the art of deception. (Goodrich 1996: 127-128)

In classical terms, dissimulation is *eironeia*. What Goodrich, taking up Puttenham, describes as allegory can thus also be designated irony (a designation to which Goodrich's "ironically" can be heard as cryptically alluding). The irony in question is, more precisely, Socratic irony: dissembled ignorance, pretending not to have the knowledge one has. Reminding us of a difficult passage in Paul de Man's *Allegories of Reading*, where allegory is associated with irony as "permanent parabasis," Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has recently characterized deconstruction as "permanent parabasis or sustained interruption from a source relating 'otherwise' (*allegorein* = speaking otherwise) to the continuing unfolding of the main system of meaning." (Spivak 1999: 430) Spivak writes here of resistance within complicity. But, if ironic speaking-otherwise is the way in which law itself negotiates violence, and

"knows how to rule" despite threats to its own unfolding, signs can be found, in the basic structure of forensic questioning, not only of a subversive challenge to the law from within, but also of a vulnerability in reading and hearing necessary for a thoroughgoing interdisciplinarity basic to its functioning *as law*. If irony as speaking-otherwise is integral to the law, and what animates forensic space, it is also true that the capacity to set it to work is not evenly distributed. Although, in principle, all parties may speak otherwise, in practice not all have an equal opportunity to do so. Nevertheless, before the Truth Commission, Mhlaba (and other witnesses) can on occasion be heard to respond with irony to questions by lawyers, even to the extent of framing counter-questions. This fact is perhaps not an exception to, but a sign and function of, its quasi-juridical character, and thus of its inherent interdisciplinarity.⁸ If the Commission is exceptional, it is also exemplary. The point made by Goodrich and others who appeal for interdisciplinarity in critical legal studies is that the law does not acknowledge the self-othering, be it spiritual or rhetorical, integral to its functioning.⁹ "The interdisciplinary study of law," Goodrich writes, "is aimed at breaking down the closure of legal discourse and at critically articulating the internal relationships it constructs with other discourses." (Goodrich 1987: 212) Interdisciplinarity in jurisprudence is the project of acknowledging and articulating, theoretically and practically, law's own alterity: "the initial problem for jurisprudence, and for justice, is to recognize and lay out a space of the other within the law." (Goodrich 1995: 241) From the vantage of literary studies, however, it is just as essential to underline the fact that "literary" self-othering (allegory, irony, for instance) takes place *within* the operations of law, not separately from it. Literature has no rescue mission to perform. The literary is to be generalized if literary studies in the narrow sense is not to sit in smug judgement of law as that which, a grotesque caricature of the forbidding father, represses or negates literature, ruling sternly: No storytelling here! An attention to the Truth Commission's complex everyday reading and listening practices, which, in setting responsibility to work, demand that each party depart from him- or herself, may be a way toward actively disrupting, in the name of the "empirical," the unfolding of the system of meaning that generates the binary of law and literature. Doing so may allow us to think, more materially, what I have imperfectly called reading, the ethics of reading, and interdisciplinarity as reading. One can take the headphones off, and nod one's head, feigning listening, even as one hears nothing; or one can keep them on and submit to an apparatus which allows one to be at once host, guest, and hostage to the other.¹⁰

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Footnotes

1 First presented at the annual meeting of the American Comparative Literature Association, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut, USA, 25-27 February 2000. The theme of the conference was "Interdisciplinary Studies: In the Middle, Across, or in Between?"

2 The full transcripts of the Shell House hearings, 11-22 May and 3-4 August 1998, are available at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Website: www.truth.org.za/amntrans/am1998.htm#may and www.truth.org.za/amntrans/am1998.htm#aug (accessed 21 July 2000)

3 On "traditional weapons," see Sarkin and Varney. (1993)

4 The one exception in the *PMLA* issue is Derek Attridge's essay. (Attridge 1999) His rich account of the experience of reading begins and ends, however, with literature in the narrow sense.

5 Taking at face value the report's recognition of "narrative truth" and declared receptiveness to victims' stories, Anthea Jeffery (1999), in a book highly critical of the Truth Commission, makes the contrary argument - that such a policy compromised the Commission's mandate of forensic truth-finding; in part because, in practice, it meant the application of a lower standard of corroboration for the testimony of victims.

6 *Ubuntu*, a key concept in the post-apartheid juncture, is an ethics of reciprocity: in Zulu, *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* (a person is a person through other people) A responsibility-based ethics, it is seen by some commentators as being incompatible with a rights-based constitutional model, while others see its emphasis on human dignity as according with the claims of universal human rights. I discuss *ubuntu* and disappropriation in "Reading Lessons." (Sanders 1999)

7 The exchange is comparable in its implications to that between the shepherd, Johannes Lekotse, and Truth Commission questioner Ilan Lax, which is reproduced and analyzed in Antjie Krog's *Country of My Skull*. (Krog 1999: 278-290) See also my "Truth, Telling, Questioning" (Sanders 2000: 30-33)

8 To comment adequately upon the juridico-religious crossings constitutive of the Truth Commission, rendered concrete by its use of the Central Methodist Church and other places of worship as venues for public hearings, lies beyond the scope of these notes. For a thought-provoking analysis of some of these crossings, see Moosa. (2000)

9 Not all writers on the subject see existing legal systems as entertaining this necessary self-othering. One instance is William Conklin. (1998) Arguing that "legal discourse hides the social within it," and observing that "a dialogue [which] necessitates one responding to the response of the addressee. . . contrasts with juridical recognition as a secondary genre," he calls for the alternative of "institutional arrangements" that will bring about "a retrieved dialogic relation." (Conklin 1998: 237-247)

10 On the host, the guest, and the hostage, see Derrida and Dufourmantelle. (1997: 111)