

17. “We are witnesses”(24): for Denis Goldberg

by Geoffrey V. Davis

‘Dead White Males’ is the title of a very successful comedy by the Australian playwright David Williamson which had its opening performance in 1995 at the theatre of the Sydney Opera House. The promising title refers in particular to Shakespeare who, in a true ‘coup de theatre,’ is shot dead on the open stage in the first scene of this very witty play. The phrase ‘Dead white males’ can, however, just as easily refer to the numerous other long dead white male authors who have for centuries populated and dominated the English-speaking literary scene. For students of English literature a particular disadvantage is the regrettable fact that all the supposedly most important authors in their subject are long dead and therefore no longer accessible, except, of course, in the pages of their books.

In the study of so-called post-colonial literature, that is, roughly formulated, the literature which has been created since the independence of the former British colonies by authors from Australia and Canada, New Zealand and the Caribbean, India and Africa, this problem appears only rarely. Most of the important authors are not only alive, but are involved publicly and often in a very lively manner in the debate about western literary and social problems of our time. And, above all else, they are there. The student who timidly asked me at a literature conference in Aachen if she could speak to the Caribbean author Caryl Phillips could be helped. He was there, I said, he was very friendly, and he would certainly be prepared to answer a few questions if she could just overcome her understandable nervousness. It then happened straight away. As a result the student wrote an excellent paper about the novels of one of the most

interesting contemporary writers in the Anglophone world. However exciting the subject, we couldn't do the same for Shakespeare.

For students, and of course also for the teachers, this presence of the authors, this personal accessibility is of inestimable value. In the lectures and seminars which we hold as lecturers in post-colonial literature, we have therefore always made an effort to invite authors – not only the well-known ones, whose works we would study in any case, but also the younger ones who are taking new roads and whose books are yet to be discovered. How often, on returning from such gatherings, has one not brought back a whole list of new literature recommendations which can later become parts of courses. And how often are there surprises – such as at the reading by two representatives of the 'First Nations' of Canada, Tomson Highway and Drew Hayden Taylor, in Mainz, for example, where Highway, who was born in a tent, snowed in, far from any town, in northern Manitoba, unexpectedly began by sitting down at a grand piano and speaking about the significance of Schubert and Mahler. Highway, who had also studied at the Royal College of Music in London where he was trained to become a concert pianist, was, as a result of his unusual life history, able to open up for the student audience a view onto a hybrid conception of art which productively united the unknown indigenous traditions with the conventional western forms of art.

In the context of Anglophone post-colonial cultures and literatures South Africa plays an important role. In schools and in the English Studies courses at universities this was not always so. When, after a journey through South Africa at the end of the 1970s, I tried to win over a well-known German school book publisher to the idea of an anthology of texts about Apartheid society for use in schools, I totally failed. I was told that the teachers in German schools had enough to do with Great Britain and the USA, without having to involve themselves with fringe areas. Fortunately another publisher and also other teachers later proved willing to take on the task.

When we began to run courses in South African literature at the Rhine-Westphalian Technical University (RWTH) in Aachen, we also had the opportunity of inviting South African authors to lectures and readings. And they came one after the other. Over the years our students were lucky enough to meet authors who were very different

in their literary products, but who presented a total picture of South African literature and had something unique to tell.

They were authors like Andre Brink, whose novel *A Dry White Season* and in particular its filming with Donald Sutherland and Marlon Brando elucidate in a memorable way the horrors of a society in which numerous opponents of the system like Steve Biko were imprisoned without trial and died in police custody.

Lewis Nkosi spoke in 1988 on the 12th anniversary of the Soweto uprising, sharp tongued and spirited as ever, on the theme 'Crises and Conflicts in the new Literatures in English'.

Don Mattera visited us too, after he had written his moving autobiography *Gone with the Twilight – A Story of Sophiatown* in which he told the story of his life in that famous mixed race quarter of Johannesburg. It was also the centre of the city's black culture at the time of Apartheid, until, as a result of the racist legislation, it was razed to the ground and its black inhabitants forcibly resettled to Soweto. And what a stirring time Mattera had lived through! From member of a violent gang to political activist and distinguished poet.

The satirist Christopher Hope came as well; he knew how to castigate Apartheid society like almost nobody else. I can recall his pithy remark that it was actually very easy to be a satirist in South Africa since the government always delivered the relevant texts itself.

There were poets like Sipho Sepamla who read from his banned poetry collection *The Soweto I Love* which had been published in England, and James Matthews from Cape Town who, in a studio of Deutsche Welle in Cologne with a glass of wine in one hand and a rose in the other, read from his self-published volume *Cry Rage!*, the first volume of poetry to be banned in South Africa.

There were dramatists like Maishe Maponya and Matsemela Manaka, whose theatre groups 'Bahumutsi' and 'Soyikwa' toured the Federal Republic several times and with the help of lecturers, teachers, theatre people and members of Anti-Apartheid organisations, performed plays like 'The Hungry Earth' or 'Egoli', some of which were banned in South Africa, but often won awards abroad, on large and small stages, and in schools and universities.

At times there were also women authors like Sindiwe Magona and Gillian Slovo. Magona presented passages from her autobiographical first book addressed *To My Children's Children*, at the same time

explaining to the listeners how, rebellious as she was, she had as a young woman resolved ‘in spite of the government, despite the government, to spite the government’ to get on in life. She succeeded impressively – she would later work at the UNO in New York.

Gillian Slovo came over on a reading tour when her novel ‘Red Dust’ was translated into German. She spoke about her novel, which dealt with the effects of the hearings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in a small town, but also about the story of her own, very famous, family. Her father, Joe Slovo, was the general secretary of the South African Communist Party and co-founder of the armed organisation of the ANC; her mother, the literary scholar and political activist Ruth First, was killed by a letter bomb. After the end of Apartheid Gillian Slovo, with admirable courage, returned to South Africa, where she was able to interview the person who was officially tasked with sending the letter bomb.

At the time of Apartheid and also afterwards, when people were beginning to work through what had been experienced, reports and literary creations by such South African contemporary witnesses about their own lives proved to be particularly suited to enabling students to understand the reality of Apartheid society and its results in a way that no-one could have done better.

When I was running courses at Essen University on South African themes in the summer term of 2006, Denis Goldberg came to us via the organisation EXILE-Culture Coordination, to speak on the theme ‘The Transformation of South Africa and the Legacy of the Past.’ We could have wished for no better witness to events. In preparation for the seminar, I had recounted something of his life and his engagement for charitable purposes, to clarify what an extraordinary meeting it would be. It was not necessary. The room was full to overflowing. We experienced Denis in top form; the students were inspired by his lecture.

With an authority which he had gained from the hardships of his life, and discernment resulting from his political analysis, Denis first delivered an impressive report on Apartheid society, in which he made clear that the separation of the races in South Africa was anchored in law. It had not developed historically, it was intended. He emphasized that it was mainly about a cheap work force which promised big profits. He spoke about the countless people who were imprisoned

year after year because of violations of the pass laws. He showed how people in South Africa at that time spent their whole lives trying to get round the laws and found very pointed formulations to describe the everyday experience of oppression: 'Hormones don't obey laws' he quipped, for example, about the laws which forbade relations between members of different races. 'How does a child give social meaning to black and white?' he asked.

He reminded his listeners about the demonstration at Sharpeville in 1960, which was broken up brutally by the police, cost 69 people their lives, and abruptly altered the attitude of the outside world to South Africa. The country was isolated, the regime banned the liberation movements and their leaders went underground. How else could blacks have protested, asked Denis, when they were not represented in parliament? The armed struggle which began after 1960 was, in his view, a legitimate means of resistance. It had been legitimate to attack facilities like police stations since the police functioned anyhow as an army of occupation and such actions carried a powerful symbolic force. Where 'every white employer became an agent of the state,' he perceived as a white man the privileges which arose from this as wrong, and he determined to dispense with them. He became, as he said humorously, a 'maker of weapons which at first didn't work'.

Denis also told of his long stay in prison. Dryly he declared, 'Life in prison was not particularly pleasant.' The prisoners had survived because they always resisted in prison, and demanded respect as human beings. He remembered how they had even made complaints against the prison authorities because they were denied newspapers – they raised complaints in the knowledge that they would lose. The cynical remark of the judge was that prison was not simply a five-star hotel without the keys. (Sixteen years after his imprisonment he was finally allowed newspapers and was able to learn from them how powerful the resistance had become in the meantime.) And in the end, he declared, they had beaten the government anyway.

At the end Denis came to speak about the legacy of the past which the post-Apartheid society had to deal with. He emphasized with his particular sense of reality that it is necessary to develop a new view of the world in order to pursue an independent policy in the globalized world. He pointed out the importance of improvements in the living conditions in the townships, describing the great progress in building

homes and the problems of supplying water. He deplored the inefficiency of government officials, the shortage of qualified management personnel, the fact that ‘many people still see the government as the enemy.’ It was necessary, he emphasized, to understand the gigantic dimensions of the task which lay ahead.

Denis Goldberg has experienced very many negative things in his life, but he has achieved a great deal that is positive through his commitment and involvement. He always emphasized the importance of having the courage of one’s convictions and the need to re-establish human dignity. Human dignity and the courage of his convictions have always been the hallmarks of his deeds – this comes to the fore nowhere better than in the sentence with which, as he reminded his listeners in Essen, he famously reacted to the life sentence which he received along with Nelson Mandela and the other freedom fighters. The verdict ‘life’ was for him ‘the greatest pun’ – it had meted out to him a life sentence, but also life itself.

The readiness of Denis Goldberg and all the other South African contemporary witnesses whom I have talked of here to bear witness to their lives and their times is of invaluable worth to the generations who follow. In her foreword to ‘To My Children’s Children,’ one of them, Sindiwe Magona, (25) writes:

‘When I am old, wrinkled and grey, what shall I tell you, my great-granddaughter? What memories will stay with me of days of yesteryear? Of my childhood, what shall I remember? What of my young womanhood, my wifehood, and motherhood? Work has been a big part of my life. Of that, what memories will linger, what nightmares haunt me forever? How will you know who you are if I do not or cannot tell you the story of your past?’

(24) ‘We are witnesses’ is the title of a painting by the then young artist Matsemela Manaka which was exhibited in a travelling exhibition of black art from South Africa (‘Soweto: Flames of Resistance’) in Denmark and Germany at the beginning of the eighties.

(25) Sindiwe Magona’s autobiography was published in 1990.

Geoffrey Davis was Professor of Post Colonial Literature in Aachen and at present lectures in Innsbruck besides being co-editor of a book series on post colonial literature and culture, and of a journal of African Studies. He knows Denis through numerous presentations in Germany and through his professional work on South Africa and Apartheid.

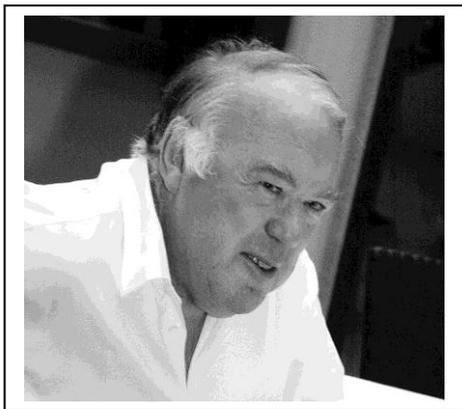


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