

Language As A Cultural Barrier In South African Literature Post-2000

Paige Sisley

Justin Cartwright's White Lightning (2002) and Damon Galgut's The Imposter (2008) address white South Africans' complicity in apartheid from a decidedly post-apartheid perspective. Like J.M. Coetzee's powerful and controversial novel Disgrace (1999), each of these more recent novels narrates a middle-aged white South African man's return to pastoral space as a retreat from such political realities to a traditional Afrikaans genre, the plassroman, or farm novel. By revisiting this genre in the decades following the end of official apartheid, Cartwright and Galgut go beyond merely refreshing an outdated literary mode. By engaging with language and its inherent limitations – the focus of Paige Sisley's engaging essay – both authors effectively confront a set of cultural mores responsible both for some beautiful literature (about a beautiful landscape) and for some of the most systematically heinous crimes ever committed against humanity. The main characters' relations to the land and to people, and to non-human animals include ambivalence, ownership, and terror. As Paige argues in her essay, language itself reinforces these problematic relations by announcing difference more loudly than belonging. Though both characters claim to be seeking some kind of cultural understanding that will enable them simultaneously to atone for apartheid and emerge from the wilderness prepared to participate in the New South Africa, they struggle to transgress the barriers that have been erected between themselves and the world.

-Dr. Travis Mason

Language is a communicative tool used among a particular group of people as a mode of common expression and understanding. Once argued by ancient Greek philosophers to have been born of human rationale, post-Darwinian science purports that language and reason evolve parallel to one another as humans progress toward an increasingly sophisticated social structure. In the context of the new millennium and its flourish of post-colonial literature, however, it may be argued that language functions as the very cultural border that this genre of writing aims to transcend. Specifically, a close reading of South African literature post-2000 – Damon Galgut's *The Imposter*¹ (2008) and Justin Cartwright's *White Lightning*² (2002) in particular – demonstrates the way in which language enunciates, rather than overcomes, the inherent differences between man and fellow man, man and nature and, most troublingly, man and himself.³ By analyzing the failed relationships and unsuccessful artistic attempts of each novel's protagonist, it becomes apparent that language “is a process of signification through which statements of culture or *on* culture differentiate, discriminates, and authorize the production of fields of force reference, applicability, and capacity.”⁴ For both characters, it is language, or a lack thereof, that creates and maintains a barrier between the self and its attainment of cultural understanding. The plight of each novel's protagonist is reconfirmed by the limitations of the texts themselves which must be considered as commodified mediums of language in their own right.

As society urgently ushers its members towards modernity, technology rapidly dissolving, or at least disregarding, physical borders and rendering the notion of a “global village” reality, humans must move beyond a traditional millennium, society has entered

an era of multi-ethnicity and eco-consciousness which requires one to better understand and more fully embrace both one's fellow man and natural habitat. An effort to assume such personal responsibility is evident in both Galgut's anti-hero, Adam Napier,⁵ and Cartwright's protagonist, James Kronk,⁶ whose stories unfold against the tumultuous backdrop of post-apartheid South Africa.

In *the Imposter*, Adam ambiguously finds himself living in the arid Karoo after losing his job and home. The novel narrates his attempt to locate himself within this geographical settings, as well as within a moral framework, through his interactions with Canning, a forgotten schoolmate that Adam encounters by chance in the parking lot of a hardware store, with Canning's wife, Baby, and with Gondwana, the game reserve that his friend plans to transform into a golf course. Meanwhile, *White Lightning's* Kronk struggles to know himself⁷ by developing a relationship with an impoverished African family and with a baboon named Piet, who comes into his possession as part and parcel of a farm that he purchases on the edge of Cape Town. Although each character can be argued to have what are often, though vaguely, referred to as good intentions, it is indisputable that both fail – as artists and as human beings – to effectively know others or nature. Neither, therefore, is able to achieve his end goal of self-realization. This inability may be attributed to the fact that both Adam and Kronk perceive the people and environment surrounding them as means to an end rather than as ends in and of themselves. Such ignorance, best characterized by a failure to develop an effective mode of communication, inevitably results in the futility of their supposed efforts.

In order to assess the characters' use or non-use of language, one ought to consider the novels and their authors themselves since each text is the product of a successful artistic effort; both perform in the public arena, functioning to some degree within the public's conception of literature and language. As Bill Ashcroft observes in his essay "Constitutive Grasphonomy," the written text "has its existence in something more than the marks on the page, namely in the participations of social beings whom we call writers and readers, who constitute the writings as communication of a particular kind."⁸ By each publishing his own work, both Galgut and Cartwright have contributed to the literary conversation which, existing for and within the social sphere, inevitably influences society. While one may not have the opportunity to travel to South Africa, for example, one may – funds permitting – purchase either piece of South African literature in order to gain knowledge of, and thus access to, the troubled country. But, as literary criticism asks again and again, "Can writing in one language convey the reality of a different culture? And can a reader fully understand a different cultural reality being communicated in the text?"⁹ Answering these questions, among others, will be the primary aim of this paper.

In the first chapter of *The Impostor*, Galgut refrains from geographically locating his characters. Though the novel's opening establishes that Adam and his friends are toward a destination, the author does not name it. Rather, Galgut dislocates the characters, and consequently the reader as well, when Adam complains that he is not sure if they are headed in the right direction because all road signs "are mentioning some other place with a name [he's] never heard of."¹⁰ He and his friends appear to be lost amid

uncharted territories, unable to confidently navigate their way due to geographical namelessness. But as their waitress points out, the city is simply awaiting a new sign because the mayor is in the process of changing all of its place names. Following the demise of apartheid, South Africa is quite literally in the midst of an identity crisis, within which Galgut has effectively positioned both his characters and readers by indicating the absence of language.

Furthermore, Galgut frequently employs Afrikaans terminology in order to estrange his non-South African readers from the text, using the word “stop” to signify an outdoor porch¹¹ before he has even determined the story’s South African context (as he does in the next chapter). Galgut continues to use Afrikaans words throughout *The Impostor*, among them “braai” for barbecue,¹² “bakkie” for pickup truck,¹³ “koppie” for cliff,¹⁴ and “kloof” for valley.¹⁵ These words are italicized, usefully indicating to the reader that they belong to a foreign dialect. Their definitions, though, would not be readily available in an English dictionary. One must wonder why Galgut insists on using Afrikaans, despite its many accurate English equivalents, when he has – obviously aware of the paying readership’s mother tongue – chosen to write an English novel. It can only be assumed that he is purposefully using language to alienate his audience.

Galgut does not limit his use of language-as-border to operating in a strictly geographical or linguistic sense; he also draws distinct lines of temporal difference by alternating between past and present tense. While *The Impostor’s* narrator remains omniscient throughout the text, the novel’s first and last sections – aptly titled “Before” and “After” – are written in perfect past tense while the middle employs an active present tense. The shifting nature of Galgut’s prose serves as a subtle but persistent reminder of just how sensitive language is; the author is able to create a world of distance by means of a mere syllabic suffix.

In regard to the discussion of time and language, Ashcroft argues that “languages exist [...] neither before the fact nor after the fact but *in the fact*.”¹⁶ Put more simply, while past tense may indicate that an event has already happened, or future tenses may suggest an event that *will* happen, the (re)telling is always situated in the present. Perhaps this is what Cartwright is aiming to communicate with his ambiguous use of tense. Unlike Galgut, however, he does not make obvious distinctions for the reader. Many episodes in *White Lightning* are written in the wrong – for lack of a better word – tense. Kronk’s memories are sometimes recorded in the active present such as in the novel’s second chapter and his specific recollection of a trip to Mozambique,¹⁷ while the first chapter documents unfolding events – namely the death of his mother – in past tense, as if they have already happened.

White Lightning also points to the disparities between languages. On the first page, Kronk recounts,

A French acquaintance of mine had said to me of death, ‘*C’est la vide*’ and I had laughed in an inappropriate manner thinking he had

said, '*C'est la vie*', imagining a little Gallic *jeu de mots*, a bitter-sweet Frenchness, dark tobacco and paper tablecloths.¹⁸

Cartwright here employs the same tool of italicization to indicate a foreign language and, like Galgut, refrains from providing the English translation for his readers. So as not to be accused of doing the same, I will provide it: "*C'est la vide*" means "it is emptiness" while "*c'est la vie*" is a joyous phrase that translates into English as "such is life." Though the verbal distinction is slight, the semantic difference is vast; meaning balances tippy-toe on a single letter, indicating the instability of language.

As seen above, Cartwright's linguistic diversity is not limited to English and Afrikaans also includes French – he describes Kronk as "un homme serieux" on page 39;¹⁹ Latin = he references to Virgil's "otium"²⁰ and "amoentias";²¹ and even Hebrew – Kronk describes his daily swim as his "own *mikva*."²² Unlike Adam, though, Kronk often explains these alien expressions in English terms, demonstrating a genuine interest in the litheness of language.

This passion is evident elsewhere throughout the text. On page nine, Kronk describes how the marketing director of a resort by which he is employed states that "'we are all dreamers'" where "'Dreamers' comes out as 'treemiss' – *we are all treemiss* – which sounds like middle English."²³ Following this exchange, Kronk is quick to point out how "prepositions and other niceties have had to be sacrificed to global English,"²⁴ returning the discussion of language to a post-colonial context in which the English language is considered to be "a tool of power," domination and elitist identity, and of communication across continents."²⁵ But more on this in a moment.

Kronk further explores the significance of grammar in a post-colonial context during his run-in with Zwelakhe's father who, clutching his arm, laments, "We have suffered. We are suffereing"²⁶ Kronk ponders this statement's gamut of potential implications by considering possible grammatical variations: "*We are about to suffer. We shall suffer. We shall have suffered. We shall have been suffering. We should have suffered, conjunctive. We should have been suffering.*"²⁷ Through this gradation of grammatical shifting, Kronk seems to interpret the father's words by internalizing them. Since it can – and, for the sake of this paper, will – be argued that Kronk has developed a monetary relationship with Zwelakhe's family due to an inescapable sense of guilt for apartheid, this passage expounds verbally the personal sense of remorse that Kronk has assumed for its injustices. This is his most successful effort to understand someone or something outside of himself, beyond that possessive pronoun "I," but it occurs on a limited internal level; the father cannot hear his thoughts and Kronk does not voice them. This silence allows for the violent episode that follows. Furthermore, Kronk is only able to relate to Zwelakhe's father by claiming ownership over his words, assimilating them to his own overwhelming sense of guilt and privatizing them as unspoken thought. Again, a severe lack of language has prohibited mutual understanding and one must wonder whether anything would have changed even *if* this egotistical grammar lesson has been voiced aloud.

Regardless, Kronk's conflation of language with money and ownership problematizes a reading of his character as wholly sympathetic. When the marketer shows Kronk a sign that reads, "MY PRIVATE PARADISE" and asks what it means to him, Kronk assures, "Don't worry, I get it. Ownership."²⁸ Moreover, Kronk does not establish a relationship with Piet or the Xhosa-speaking family based on understanding or even a deep-seated desire to establish understanding, but on the grounds of ownership. Kronk is a "man of property"²⁹ after all, and he does own both: Piet as a clause of the real estate deal and Zwelakhe's family through its financial dependence upon him. Kronk does not even try to develop a common mode of communication with either party; money is their language, establishing their relationship as that of the needy and the provider, owner and owned. "I have cut Daisy and the children off from their own lives," Kronk reflects, "but the child is ill and needs his medicines."³⁰

Due to Cartwright's persistent use of difficult English words (take, for example, "semaphoring" and "garroted"),³¹ it may further be argued that Cartwright is not only interested in establishing barriers of understanding between speakers of disparate languages, but also among those who speak the same language. Such lines of miscommunication are sometimes made obvious: "Don't stunt yourself," the marketing director tells Kronk, who wonders if he had meant "stint."³²

In "Cultural Diversity and Cultural Differences," Homi Bhabha states that "the problem of the cultural emerges only at the signifiatory boundaries of cultures, where meanings and values are (mis)read or signs are misappropriated."³³ This boundary between speaker and hearer or intention and interpretation is significant in both novels. The plot of the *The Impostor* is, it is revealed, largely founded upon one presumably drunken conversation that occurred between Canning Adam while the two men were in high school. Adam's advice to Canning – the suggestion that he disregard his father's constant criticism and wait for the opportunity to seek revenge – has had a profound impact upon his friend, ultimately resulting in the destruction of Gondwana, though Adam does not remember the conversation. Meanwhile, Zwelakhe's death can be convincingly attributed, as it is by Kronk and the farm's staff. The latter assume Zwelakhe's virus to be air borne and easily contagious, despite Kronk's assurance that this is not the case. Whether the staff simply does not understand or the message has not been replayed, a miscommunication is likely to blame for the sudden, nonsensical tragedy. Thus, each novel explores the potentially devastating consequences of language and how – whether written or spoken, indelible or fleeting – words are often a vehicle for change.

Or perhaps language can be better described as a tool of appropriation. Hegel once incorrectly wrote, as Mike Marais quotes in "Nature and Exile in Justin Cartwright's *White Lightning*," that "a person has [...] the right of putting such end in itself."³⁴ While such a statement is preposterous, Hegel may be forgiven for his beliefs because he lived before Darwin. Adam and Kronk, on the other hand, may not.

English has long been the mother tongue of oppression and appropriation. Though it was the Dutch who infiltrated South African soil, pillaging the pre-existing society in

order to erect their own institutions of Africa's predominantly international language. Evidently, it is the language employed by artists such as Galgut, Cartwright and their protagonists.

In *The Impostor*, Adam longs to be a poet because he views verse as a way in which to appropriate space³⁵ and time³⁶ by "fixing that essential Beauty in place."³⁷ Yet poetry – described by William Wordsworth as "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" – also has its limitations. In fact, Galgut writes, "Poetry was language free from habit. *Poetry was beyond him.*"³⁸ It is poetry's very necessity for boundlessness that prevents Adam from attaining literary success. He is so fixed in his way of being that language remains just beyond his reach, and object he can see but cannot touch. Adam is an ironic name, then, for a man who can never seem to find the right words, considering that it is a Biblical allusion to the man responsible for naming each creature.

It is also strange that the omniscient voice of *The Impostor* is composed in such skilled poetic prose, inspiring the reader's curiosity about Adam's poetry. Galgut's refusal to reveal Adam's attempts at writing serves to emphasize the boundaries of literature, confirming the author's total control over what is, and is not, communicated to the reader. One must wonder, also, how the sculpture that Blom creates with Adam's unwanted peacock feather is a more successful "poem" than Adam's, though it is not technically a poem at all but rather *escapes* words – nay, silences them.³⁹ Perhaps it is because Blom has chosen to incorporate nature into his art while Adam merely aims to capture it, attempting to bend the natural world to his strict and metered will. Such greed is also evident in his relationship with Baby, his promiscuous lover, who chastises him, saying, "it's childish to believe the world stands still, when all the time it's turning and turning."⁴⁰

Kronk undertakes a similar artistic endeavor in *White Lightning*. Having developed a friendship – though only decisively so according to Kronk – with a baboon named Piet, Kronk decides to revive his failed career as a filmmaker by writing a screenplay about a man and his baboon companion. Like Adam, Kronk is interested in making art that imitates life but his failure to effectively understand or communicate with nature also prevents him from achieving such an accomplishment. While Adam's situation is understandable on the grounds that there is no language with which one can speak – verbally *or* bodily – with land, Kronk's inadequacy is less excusable. It is true that Piet is a non-human and is not, therefore, equipped with the human construction of spoken language but this is where the species boundary ends. To borrow Mary Midgely's argument, quoted by Travis Mason in his essay "Dog Gambit: Shifting the Species Boundary in J.M. Coetzee's Recent Fiction," "humans are not just *like* animals, but they *are* animals."⁴¹ Men may be privileged by language but surely this is not the extent of his ability to interact with other animals – human or otherwise. As Mason points out, man and his non-human counterparts share the fact of a common ancestry, a need to interact with the environment, a capacity to adapt to change and, finally, the ability to develop complex social bonds. Yet it seems that Kronk can only relate to the baboon by means of personification. He interprets every glance and gesture as though that of a human, ascribing Piet with "coquettish" eyes at one point⁴² and describing how the baboon picks

up shells on the beach “with the seriousness of a French housewife at the market.”⁴³ This tendency is in accordance with his father’s successful treatises, which analyze the humanistic qualities of animals – manuscripts that, halfway through the novel, Kronk discovers his father has plagiarized. This newfound knowledge of verbal theft complicates the novel’s prevalent use of intertextuality, displacing the reader by abolishing an authentic source of origin⁴⁴ in the same manner that Galgut displaces his reader via geographical namelessness. Cartwright’s intention to do so is implicit in Piet’s name, traditionally given to black servants by their white masters, as it “implicates him in a South African colonial discourse of [white rule] which renders him absent.”⁴⁵

While this disconnect can be attributed to the language barrier that exists between linguistic and non-linguistic species, such an explanation cannot account for Kronk’s failed relationships with Zwelakhe and his family; with his dead friend, Sephos; his ex-wife, Eleanor; his deceased son, Matt; his ex-girlfriend, Valerie; with his ex-friend, Pennington; with his late mother; or with his ex-lover, Ulla. Kronk’s futile endeavors are mirrored by Adam’s similarly unsuccessful union with the Gondwana reserve, which has no language, as argued above, Galgut and Cartwright are intent on distinguishing a barrier not only between language and non-language but also among disparate languages and, most troublingly, within individual dialects as well. This dilemma is paralleled by each protagonist’s fruitless attempts to secure understanding between himself and nature, himself and other, and himself and his self.

As finely written examples of contemporary South African literature, both *The Impostor* and *White Lightning* serve to delimit language on many levels: internal and external, spoken and written, local and foreign and intention and interpretation. In a country that has previously been and, according to these novels, still is plagued by violent manifestations of difference, man must begin to take responsibility for the disparities permitted by his own ignorance. If man ever hopes to achieve harmony with fellow man, nature, and, ultimately, himself, he must seek a common mode of communication so that the limits of his world are no longer determined by the limits of his language.⁴⁶

Notes

¹Damon Galgut. *The Impostor*. (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart), 2009.

²Justin Cartwright. *White Lightning*. (London: Hodder & Stoughton), 2002.

³It is here acceptable to use the gender specific term “man” in order to represent humanity because this paper is concerned with two male protagonists and their specific relationships with the world.

⁴JHomi.K. Bhabha. “Cultural Diversity and Cultural Differences.” *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*. Ed. Ashcroft, Bill et al. (New York: Routledge, 1995), 206.

⁵Adam Napier will henceforth be referred to as Kronk in order to remain faithful to the novel which does not, in fact, divulge his first name until its closing epilogue.

⁶On the other hand, James Kronk will henceforth be referred to as Kronk in order to remain faithful to the novel which does not, in fact divulge his first name until its closing epilogue.

⁷Mike Marais. “‘We know bugger-all about baboons’: Nature and Exile in Justin Cartwright’s *White Lightning*.” 5.2008, 77.

- ⁸Bill Ashcroft. "Constitutive Graphonomy." *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*. Ed. Ashcroft, Bill et al. (New York: Routledge, 1995), 298.
- ⁹Ashcroft, 298.
- ¹⁰Galgut, 5.
- ¹¹Cartwright, 8.
- ¹²Galgut, 18.
- ¹³*Ibid.*, 61
- ¹⁴*Ibid.*, 67
- ¹⁵Ashcroft, 302. Author's emphasis.
- ¹⁶Cartwright, 89.
- ¹⁷*Ibid.*, 1. Author's emphasis.
- ¹⁸*Ibid.*, 39.
- ¹⁹*Ibid.*, 142.
- ²⁰*Ibid.*,
- ²¹*Ibid.*, 190.
- ²²*Ibid.*, 9.
- ²³*Ibid.*, 9.
- ²⁴Braj, B. Kachru. "The Alchemy of English." *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*. Ed. Ashcroft, Bill (New York: Routledge, 1995), 291.
- ²⁵Cartwright, 236.
- ²⁶*Ibid.*, 236. Author's emphasis.
- ²⁷*Ibid.*, 11.
- ²⁸*Ibid.*, 175.
- ²⁹*Ibid.*, 223.
- ³⁰*Ibid.*, 142.
- ³¹*Ibid.*, 11.
- ³²Bhabha, 206.
- ³³Marais, 70.
- ³⁴Galgut 25.
- ³⁵*Ibid.*, 41.
- ³⁶*Ibid.*, 150.
- ³⁷*Ibid.*, 41.
- ³⁸*Ibid.*, 148.
- ³⁹*Ibid.*, 153.
- ⁴⁰Travis Mason. "Dog Gambit: Shifting the Species Boundary in J.M. Coetzee's Recent Fiction." *Mosaic: Special Issue: The Animal, Part 1* 39.4 (2006) 131.
- ⁴¹Cartwright, 220.
- ⁴²*Ibid.*, 172.
- ⁴³Marais, 78.
- ⁴⁴*Ibid.*, 9.
- ⁴⁵Cartwright, 243.