In memoriam:
Annemarie Heywood
Died, March 2016

Richard Aitken*

It has been some weeks since Annemarie’s passing; news of her death was slow to reach me, living as I do on the very opposite side of the sub-continent. I have been greatly moved by this news, and I here reflect on my own feelings about why I have been so affected.

My office in that department of English studies at the then University of Namibia lay across the corridor from Annemarie’s office. Thus it was that we had a great deal of contact, brushing past each other on almost every day of the week over a period of about eight years. However, it is not the quotidian, occasional contact that remains in memory; much more important were the very intense discussions, and occasional formal meetings, when we could find ourselves engaged on resonant subjects. Annemarie gave herself fully to conversation, yet was always reserved in revealing personal background and the particular origins or provenance of strands of her thought. It was for me testimony to the searching depth of our exchanges that I could so often find myself trying to sort out mind-testing ideas in contrast with her thoughts – in so far as I understood her intellectual framework – as I worked through intellectual principles and administrative problems. On reflection, it now seems to me that all the conversational relationships we engaged in those years, never lacking in depth and intensity, were shot through by a sense of equivocation and doubt infecting our own professional lives. Perhaps this derived from the unfolding political context in which we professed to enact the great university project in that country as it agonisingly plodded its way painfully to national independence out of the milieu of dreadful violence and the incipient contours of a civil war. The Academy, where I joined Annemarie in the Department, came under the aegis of the University of South Africa; it would later transmute itself into the University of Namibia with its own charter. However, The Academy was in considerable measure conceived ideologically as institutional opposition to the United Nations Institute for Namibia. We could not be intellectual innocents under those conditions and the ambitious project we mounted in English studies was circumscribed by that.

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So many of our conversations that Annemarie and I engaged in return to me in memory. On one occasion, coffee cup in hand, she stood in my doorway and asked me what I thought the difference was between our use of the words ‘language’ and ‘discourse’? It was a big question to be confronted with out of the blue on a weekday morning between classes. In no way did she intend this as an intellectual test of my mettle – it simply came out of her reading activity of that morning and she sought an interlocutor to exchange thoughts with. I recall we spent possibly the next two hours over two or three cups of coffee raking over her question. I do not remember much detail from our exchange, except that warm bond of mutuality that derives from a conversation that really does feel as if it grapples with the social and political world around us. In my opening gambit in response to her question, I possibly opined that our use of the word ‘language’ referred to the technical, conventionalised semantic and syntactical aspects of the sequence of words we transact, especially as one linguistic system was contrasted with another – in our cross-cultural and multilingual environment we were always ready to talk about this. ‘Discourse’, I may have found myself saying, indicated an interest in the way language can create and promote dominance and subordination in individual and social relations; in other words, when we use the word ‘discourse’ as opposed to ‘language’, I may have found myself saying we signal an interest in the ways in which language plays its part in establishing power relations. I may also have said something along these lines: the ‘discourse’ of the totality of our linguistic world that we inherit speaks our lives for us. Thus, in using the word ‘discourse’ (as opposed to ‘language’), we immediately and implicitly set out to circumscribe our own understanding of personal and individual agency – to put it loosely, do we speak our sentences, or do sentences speak us and shape who we are as they unfold? The essence of this thought is that discourse precedes perception – we see as the linguistic system we have inherited teaches us to see. Perhaps in the end, our belief in our purposeful self-directed agency is forlorn, and that is why we have an interest in ‘discourse’.

Annemarie had a depth of reading experience that made her sceptical about unbounded confidence in individual human being’s ability to shape the world in their own image; and yet, for her personal, individual agency was not fatally circumscribed by social and political context. Whatever my answers to Annemarie’s question on that far-off morning, I think I must have aimed my responses at what I imagined to be the points of vulnerability in her world view – please understand, we were all, I think, alert to the undercurrents of adversarial gender relations in that department. It so often seemed to me she restrained (because of a deeply felt sense of collegial responsibility) feelings of tired exasperation with the male colleagues she had to deal with every day! Of course, I hasten to add that adversarial intentions were also probably motivated in me owing to the fact that I often felt her reading experience was so much more expansive than my own. In spite of a beautiful generosity of spirit to those she engaged with in her conversations, discussion with her was for me always a matter of ‘living by one’s wits’. Annemarie spoke from positions that were systematically and elegantly thought out. I believe we all learnt in her presence to guard vigilantly against wayward and reckless comments.
So, in the unfolding hours of that morning’s conversation, where did we drift? Memory for detail in the conversations of long ago is sadly fragile and fugitive, even if the force of generalised world views of those we speak with are remembered with clarity. Annemarie was deeply imbued with a conviction about what her own and our teaching could and would accomplish, a conviction perhaps at odds with abstractly held positions about human agency. Perhaps this contradiction really stands testimony to her superbly grasped understanding of what any educational enterprise entails that is fully cognisant of the social context in which it is enacted; unbridled hope and scepticism must jostle with each other if teachers are to understand their roles clearly.

In her introduction to her Senior Poetry Anthology (London, Macmillan, 1983) which was a core text for our teaching, she quotes D.H. Lawrence with affirming and self-identifying approval:

The essential quality of poetry is that it makes a new effort of attention and ‘discovers’ a new world within the known world. Man, and the animals, and the flowers, all live within a strange and forever surging chaos. The chaos we have got used to we call cosmos. The unspeakable inner chaos of which we are composed we call consciousness, and mind, and even civilisation. But it is ultimately chaos lit up by visions, or not lit up by visions. Just as the rainbow may or may not light up the storm. (Heywood, 1983; p vii)

The sheer power of the redemptive agency of poetry that acts fundamentally in a chaotic world, as enunciated by Lawrence, might also be attributed as a cardinal value in Annemarie’s thinking – this expresses an aspect of her indomitable optimism. Our own conversational relationship was taking shape in those years at a time when I think I was probably drifting intellectually in quite the opposite direction: I was growing enamoured with determinist frames of mind and I think I was beginning to believe that our individual students sitting in those lecture halls would never allow their literary studies to enable them to ‘discover a new world within the known world’. It was amazing to be aware of her teaching: it was so evident that to her transformation was the objective and this was to be achieved intellectually.

The anthology I name here is beautiful for the sheer catholicity of the poetic world it encompasses; there are poems from several continents and many ages. I have again searched the anthology for clues to the innermost being of the person of the anthologist I so admired. I think there are indeed traces of her distinctive and personal intellectual world in the choices she made although this is not entirely obvious in the editorially supplied commentary on the selection to aid students. In the anthology, she includes Gabriel Okara’s exquisite poem

One Night at Victoria Beach

The wind comes rushing from the sea
the waves curling like mambas strike
the sands and recoiling hiss in rage
washing the Aladuras’ feet pressing hard
on the sand with eyes fixed hard
on what only hearts can see, they shouting
pray, the Aladuras\(^1\) pray; and coming
from booths behind, compelling highlife
forces ears; and car lights startle pairs
arm in arm passing washer-words back
and forth like haggling sellers and buyers —

Still they pray, the Aladuras pray
with hand pressed against their hearts
and their white robes pressed against
their bodies by the wind; and drinking
palmwine and beer, the people boast
at bars at the beach. Still they pray.

They pray, the Aladuras pray
to what only hearts can see while dead
fishermen long dead with bones rolling
nibbled clean by nibbling fishes, follow
four dead cowries shining like stars
into deep sea where fishes sit in judgment;
and living fishermen in dark huts
sit round dim lights with Babalawo\(^2\)
throwing their dead souls in four cowries
on sand, trying to see tomorrow.

Still they pray, the Aladuras pray
to what only hearts can see behind
the curling waves and the sea, the stars
and the subduing unanimity of the sky
and their white bones beneath the sand.

And standing dead on dead sands,
I felt my knees touch living sands —
but the rushing wind killed the budding word.
(Heywood, 1983; pp 202f.)

I regret never having discussed the poem with Annemarie. Did the theological scepticism
that concludes the poem reflect her own religious agnosticism? The speaking voice of
the poem is always generous to the urgent quest for transcendental verities, yet also
clamours for empirical certainty in a hard, physical world where fishermen die and bones
decay. What certainty can prevail, for all the conviction of passionate prayer, against the
ineluctable certainty that we shall die and decay? I remember a moment which seemed
to capture an aspect of her thinking so well: a lecturer of the University’s Sociology
Department called Hans Guibeb had died and a student of his (and Annemarie’s) called
Chuma Mayumbelo was called on to offer an obituary. What she said was short, elegant

\(^1\) Aladura means “praying people” in Yoruba. In present times, we might see similarities with the followers of Shembe.

\(^2\) This literally means ‘father of the mysteries’ in the Yoruba language; it is a spiritual title that denotes a Priest of Ifá.
and the quintessence of decorum in its terse form. “That’s what an obituary should be like, just like a little bouquet of flowers but in words”, Annemarie said to me later, “and it should be free from sententious effusion of a religious kind”. It was a moment that expressed a part of her so well.

Annemarie had a contrasted and straddled appreciation for, on the one hand, all that anthropologists have found in the rich world of ancient African ritual and religious practice, and on the other hand, the colder material and agnostic scepticism that we know in contemporary times to find fault with all religious conviction. I think the Okara poem did mirror such a duality in Annemarie’s mind. We did not often speak of religious ideas, yet for some reason I recall inferring in her agnostic views. Against this, her philosophical premises in her approach to literary studies and teaching derived, quite substantially in my view, from an immense knowledge of modern anthropology. I recall her speaking of Mircea Eliade and works such as Rites and Symbols of Initiation: the Mysteries of Birth and Rebirth (1958) and the much earlier (though later translated) Arnold van Gennep’s The Rites of Passage (1908, English translation 1960). There was also, I think, in the foundations of her mind, the definitive work by Victor Turner, The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure (1969) in which he explores so beautifully ways in which rites of transition — or rites of passage — allow people from one position within hierarchical social structures to pass through a ‘liminal’ phase in which the accretions of social structure are shorn from them in order that they might learn something about the essential human bonds between all people of their society. Turner uses the words ‘liminality’ and ‘communitas’ to indicate the amorphous, unstructured phase within rites of passage that are in contradistinction to hierarchically structured ‘community’ from which people are removed for a time. Turner describes the humanising impulse in rites of passage in which people learn during ‘liminal’ phases about the irrevocable human bonds between people regardless of their place in structured society. In evoking Annemarie’s life, I think that possibly these concepts provided for her homologies, or correspondences, with the universally elevating tasks she believed literature to have.

Our teaching in an English studies department took place in a social and political context utterly riven with multiple layers of hierarchically assigned position. Race, ethnicity, linguistic background and gender, as we know only too well, were the dominant elements that saturated our minds, and which we knew to be overwhelmingly determining of what people thought they could accomplish with their intellectual talents. In spite of her general scepticism about the scope of individual human agency, Annemarie held to hugely optimistic views of the transforming powers of literary studies, not only to discover new worlds within the old but to forge new ideas of the universal humanity between us all. It was as if in entering her classroom one was invited to enter a ‘liminal’ phase in a rite of passage in a self-wrought transition of self-identity. The overriding literary task for her was to find ways in which people might connect with each other very deeply in spite of the life-truncating limitations of social hierarchy. I wonder now, not discussed between us at the time, whether or not I capture the sense of a paradox in her thinking: from what did her optimism derive and was this an aspect of her
complexity? For all her unbounded optimism, there could be in her a much more
sombre, fatalistic view of the social world in which society corrodes individual hope. She
was not immune from dark moods.

I do not wish to pretend that I knew Annemarie’s mind in any comprehensive way. It is
some twenty-five years since I last saw her and all I wish to do here is enter a dialogue
for a short while with the person she remains in my memory. The fact that I am urged to
do so is testimony to the formative and striking presence she has for me in
remembrance. This is, in a sense, as any eulogy is, as much about the author as it is
about the subject.

There is one departmental administrative moment I recall still with a remembered sense
of trepidation. In the early years of my tenure there, I came to be more and more
troubled by very high failure rates in English studies. I remember proposing at a depart-
mental meeting that as a matter principle and thenceforward, we should reverse the
proportions of those who failed and those who passed their exams. (I neatly excluded
from the argument anything an external examiner might say!) In other words, from then
onwards, two-thirds would pass, no less, and we might allow one-third to fail, not the
other way round as had been the custom hitherto. It was clearly a presumptuous
challenge to my colleagues and most certainly to Annemarie. This provocation was flung
down long before I really could develop a fully fleshed-out, intellectual justification for
such a challenge. I must have seemed an impetuous and callow youth to Annemarie! I
was moved recently by a very perceptive eulogistic comment from Professor Brian
Harlech-Jones in a recent widely forwarded e-mail (16th April 2016):

Annemarie was a complex and private person who, among others, had the
great virtues of sharp intellect, commitment to quality, and integrity. Once a
student asked her, in a tone of complaint, why she set such high standards, and
she replied (something like this), ‘Would you want to be a graduate of an
institution that required less of you?’ That reply said a lot about Annemarie!

I too heard her say such things. And yet I thought then, and still do, that a discourse of
‘standards’ possibly was a diversion from the challenges we as teachers should be
facing. It was not, as I think I must have said for I am half-guessing discussion of long
ago, merely a matter of properly coming to grips with the woefully inadequate levels of
literacy students brought with them as first-year students — not to be blamed on them —
nor a matter of the cultural discontinuities in the mental frameworks of students; it surely
was beholden of us as teachers to acknowledge, describe and illuminate the extra-
ordinary epistemological accomplishments of almost all our students, even if these did
not gain forceful expression in the kinds of syntax and linguistic formulation that might
easily stack up against a set of reified of ‘standards’ of our own conventional educational
worlds. High failure rates served, as I thought at that time, to internalise in our students’
culpability for failure and thus inure them to this as a condition of their lives, thus
excusing us teachers from scrutiny of educational systems in our daily practice. We were,
mostly, teachers who used English as a language we had grown up with, and we were
teaching people who had come to the language as young adults. Somehow, we should
try to get a grip institutionally on some notion of deferred promise. All education, at its
multiple sequential levels in various institutions, is a ‘work in progress’. The notion of ‘curriculum’ in this demand I made at that time had to be more experimental.

Please understand, some of my formulation here may be anachronistic and I clearly recall struggling with words and thoughts; everything I said was incoate. However, I think I capture the gist of some of the things I must have said.

I hasten to add that I do not think that English was the language of Annemarie’s childhood. She knew as the reality of her own life what it was to be a linguistic migrant and it was with this personal authority she made demands of her students.

I only half remember the hectic discussion that ensued at that and subsequent meetings. Yet I do recall that I was trying to push the enterprise we deemed to be English studies out into what must have seemed to be a menacing sea of relativism. I remember feelings of some fear in anticipation of what Annemarie might say, and how she might quite easily demolish all my relativizing arguments — she had after all a formidable philosophical mind and was extremely well read in so many fields. Yet she did not do that; intellectually she was just so very inquisitive about other people’s arguments and fundamentally compassionate and gracious. For that, I honour her greatly and I believed that we continued to have a rich conversational relationship even though I must have seemed to have taken aim at something very dear to her as a respected educator.

In her *The Cassinga Event: An Investigation of the Records*, (Windhoek, National Archives of Namibia, 1994) Annemarie showed herself to be a very fine researcher, succinctly bringing skilled organizational powers to bear on historical records. The brutal event she documents was for her symptomatic of a long history of subjugation, a sense of which was always with her.

For all her social and historical awareness, she remains for me most of all a great teacher in English studies, and she is a colleague who has an enduring presence in my mind. At the beginning of the 90s, I entirely left the academic world for industry and business, never to return. Annemarie was one of those luminous former colleagues who caused and peopled my nostalgia.

In spite of what I say about what I think was Annemarie’s religious agnosticism in relation to the Okara poem she anthologized, I look in conclusion for words that have the resonance of ages past—Annemarie deserves no less:

Anna Maria:

requiem aeternam dona eis, Domine

Annemarie Johanna Heywood (nee Gaerdes), died on 13th March 2016 in The Roman Catholic Hospital, Windhoek, aged 89.