Authors and Gatekeeping

The printer's colophon...antedates the writer's signature on the book. When the authorities take action against books, it is their publishers who suffer the greatest material loss; printers rather than authors were the target of the great repressions of the sixteenth century. Nevertheless, printers and publishers have never put themselves forward as rivals to the authority of the state. That, significantly, is a role they have allowed their authors to play.¹

Studies of literary output within a repressive environment tend to place the spotlight on freedom of expression. The metaphors used commonly refer to the silencing of voices, to (in)visibility, to exclusion and marginalisation, and to chains, handcuffs and ties. In the South African context, images of resistance also frequently recur. These studies seldom consider the authors of non-literary texts, such as the serious non-fiction produced by university presses. They also seldom examine the role of the publishers and their gatekeeping mechanisms in either giving voice to or silencing authors.

This chapter thus develops an author profile, which raises questions about exclusion and gatekeeping at the university presses. The rest of this chapter will examine the publishing experiences of two specific groups of authors who fall outside of this norm: black authors, and radical authors. The focus thus falls on gatekeeping practices at the university presses, including their peer review policies and practices, as well as their compliance with the censorship regime, and the question of whether or not they resorted to self-censorship.

An Author Profile

There are few models for how to develop an authors’ profile for a publishing house. De Glas suggests a set of criteria: an author's attachment or loyalty to a publishing house; the number of titles produced by each author; the profitability of an author; and the author's contribution to the prestige of the publishing house.² However, it is difficult to use such measures to analyse a

scholarly publishing list, in contrast to the trade fiction lists examined by De Glas. For one thing, few, if any, scholarly authors show any loyalty to a specific university press when publishing; as a result, there is little continuity of attachment of academic authors. Similarly, the second attribute may in fact be negative in the context of scholarly publishing: an author is expected not to publish all his or her works with a single press. The third measure is not always relevant in the context of non-profit or cost-recovery publishing, rather than a commercial enterprise built upon profit. The fourth is of clear relevance, but on the whole the most prestigious authors tended not to publish with the local university presses. The most prolific authors, moreover, are not necessarily the same as the most prestigious authors.

Bourdieu’s distinction between commercial and non-commercial publishers helps to highlight certain aspects relating to authorship. He makes a distinction between those publishers that are willing to take a risk with new authors, because they emphasise long-term gains, and those that prefer to publish established, best-seller authors, for mass consumption and short-term gain.3 Scholarly publishers and oppositional publishers are more likely to fall on the side of long-term gain, even if in their case the focus is academic merit or political change, rather than literary merit or commercial gain. But Bourdieu’s distinction does not hold up when applied to authorship, as university presses tend to prefer established academics as authors, because their works are more likely to stand the test of time. University press books are written by producers and for producers, i.e. for elite consumption, as is the case for scholarly publishing generally. In contrast, radical anti-apartheid publications were written for a wider, mass audience (which was defined politically rather than demographically or by class). Thus, the gatekeeping practices of university presses tend to work in favour of more established authors, and against the publication of young, untested authors. There is a definite leaning towards a conservative, cautious approach in selecting authors and their works. For literary publishing, it has been suggested that, “the imbalance due to a preponderance of older productive authors (who had long given the list its prestige) served to mask the fact that few young authors, who might introduce new idioms or stylistic influences, were being recruited.”4 More broadly, concerns have been expressed about the ageing cohort of scholarly authors at South African universities.5

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4 De Glas, ‘Authors’ oeuvres,’ p. 391.