

## Letters to the Editor

Albert S. Gérard

In his contribution to *Rethinking South African Literary History*, Professor Malvern van Wyk Smith, speaking of what he describes as one of CENSAL's 'grandiose plans for a unified cross-cultural and multilingual historiography of southern African literature', observes:

One of its few products or possibly inspirations (the sequence is unclear) was a history of 'South African Literature to World War II', by A.J. Coetzee, Tim Couzens and Stephen Gray, included in Albert S. Gérard's (1986) *European-Language Writing in Sub-Saharan Africa* (pp. 73f)

I may perhaps help solve this very minor conundrum in what could somewhat awkwardly be called the history of South African literary historiography.

The research for the Xhosa, Sotho and Zulu chapters of my *Four African Literatures* (1971) was effected in the sixties. Already in 1969, the New York publisher Thomas Crowell had invited me to produce a 'brief' historical account of the continent's literature. I enthusiastically set to work on a manuscript which, by 1973, had reached more than 700 typed pages! It included a large section on South Africa, which is, I believe, the very first 'conspectual history' (Van Wyk Smith's phrase) of South African literature, including African-Language writing. With the economic crisis of the mid-seventies looming, Crowell found this unwieldy manuscript unmanageable: it is now resting quietly in my archives at the university of Bayreuth.

In April 1974, I had the opportunity to address the Liège conference of the European branch of the ACLALS (Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies) with a paper titled 'Towards a History of South African Literature'<sup>7</sup>, in which I brought forward the idea of an integrated, multiracial, plurilingual approach to the country's 'national' literary history. I further developed my views at a conference on 'Literature in the Conditions of Southern Africa' that was held at the University of York

<sup>7</sup> The article is printed in Hena Maes-Jelinek (ed) 1975 *Commonwealth Literature and the Modern World* and published by Didier in Brussels (pp. 79-88). An expanded version appears in my *Contexts of African Literature* which was published by Rodopi in Amsterdam/Atlanta (pp. 105-119).

the following year. The notion seemed egregiously commonsensical to me but it surprised South African participants, among whom I distinctly recall André de Villiers congratulating me because, he said, 'you are so right'.

Being an inveterate bookworm I had little personal contact with South African scholars. It was perhaps as a consequence of reading the Liège paper that C.F. Swanepoel came to visit me some time in the late seventies. This was the beginning of a long-lasting friendship.

At a conference organised by FILLM (Fédération des Langues et Littératures Modernes) in Sydney in August 1975, I met Henry Remak, who was presiding over the destiny of the impressive series, 'History of Literature in European Languages', published under the auspices of the ICLA (International Comparative Literature Association). He agreed to my proposal to include a volume or two about Sub-Saharan Africa. There were two conditions: only European languages were to be considered and the whole was to be written by an international team of scholars. This was henceforth known as the HALEL project, to which Van Wyk Smith is referring<sup>8</sup>. As due respect for chronology is the historian's basic duty, one of the first sections of the work was to deal with South Africa, and I recall that the Co-ordinating Committee that supervises the series had to dismiss irrelevant ideological objections raised by the representative of one of the organisations which financed the project!

I was fortunate in enlisting the co-operation of three keen, at the time junior, South African scholars: Stephen Gray (whom I first met personally at an African Literature Association conference in Wisconsin in 1977) for literature in English by white writers, Ampie Coetzee for Afrikaans literature and Tim Couzens for 'non-white' writing in English<sup>9</sup>.

The two massive volumes reached print in 1986. As to my research on vernacular writing in the RSA, its results had been incorporated *African Language Literatures: An Introduction to the Literary History of Sub-Saharan Africa*, which had been issued in Washington and London in 1981.

Clearly, the integrated historical account of Afrikaans and English literatures in *European-Language Writing in Sub-Saharan Africa* (pp. 173-213) is not a 'product' of what Malvern van Wyk Smith rather contemptuously describes as the 'project' of 'the ill-fated CENSAL, a

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<sup>8</sup> I have told this story in French in 'Cartographie de l'Afrique littéraire. Le Projet HALEL' which appeared in *Neohelicon* 10,1 9-20 and published in 1983 (Reprinted in my *Afrique plurielle. Etudes de littérature comparée*; published by Rodopi at Amsterdam/Atlanta (pp. 161-176.)

<sup>9</sup> Stephen Gray described their close, inordinately fruitful collaboration in 'The Praxis of Comparative Theory: On Writing the History of Southern African Literature' which appeared in *SAVAL Conference Papers* VI:67-81 and published in 1986.

tentacle of the HSRC octopus'. Whether it was one of its possible 'inspirations' is not for me to say. As far as I remember, I did not meet Charles Malan until the 11th ICLA conference in Paris, in August 1985