English South African Literature in the Last Ten Years: A Survey of Research Developments

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Engelse Suid-Afrikaanse Letterkunde gedurende die afgelope tien jaar: 'n Oorsig van navorsingsontwikkelings

Opsomming

Dit wil voorkom of aanvaarbaarheid en belangstelling vir die studie van Engelse Suid-Afrikaanse letterkunde aan die departemente vir Engels by Suid-Afrikaanse universiteite gedurende die afgelope tien jaar toegeneem het. Dit blyk veral uit die sakelyste van konferensieprogramme en die akademiële debat wat tans aan die gang is oor kurrikulumontwikkeling binne departemente vir Engels, waar Suid-Afrikaanse werke toenames gebruik word by onderrig op voor- en nagraadse vlak. Hierdie nuwe ontwikkeling in die studie van Engels in die algemeen, impliseer dat heelwat navorsing onderneem word om te vereker dat hierdie sub-dissipline aan die vereiste standaard voldoen en om die status en prestige wat dit toekom, daaraan te verleen.

Daar is tans navorsing aan die gang op die gebiede van bibliografie, historiografie, letterkundige teorie en die redigering van aanvanklike tekste, terwyl daar ook voortgegaan word met die opbou van 'n sekondêre kritiese apparaat wat van nut sal wees met die interpretasie en waardebepaling van tekste. Alhoewel daar nog geen navorsingscentrum vir Engelse Suid-Afrikaanse letterkunde studies bestaan nie, en daar ook geen leerstoel vir hierdie sub-dissipline aan enige universiteit bestaan nie, word daar by verskeie universiteite gelde bewillig vir die byeenbring van hulpbronne en die ontwikkeling van navorsingsprogramme in oorel die biblioteke, navorsingsentra en oorsese studieprogramme.

Die belangrijkste probleem tans met Engelse Suid-Afrikaanse letterkundige studies is die klassefikasie daarvan. Die ou ortodokske opvatting, dat hierdie veld slegs 'n aanhangsel is van Engelse letterkunde in die bree, het geleidelik plek gemaak vir die beskouing dat dit 'n deel is van die letterkunde van die Britse Gemenebes (of die “New Literatures in English”), of 'n deel van Afrika-letterkunde. As gevolg van vergelykende studies het daar ook 'n beskouing ontwikkel dat dit 'n integrale deel vorm van die veeltalige multikultuur van Suidelike Afrika self. Gesien binne hierdie drie verschillende kontekste die Engelse Suid-Afrikaanse letterkunde 'n unieke en uitdagende belang wat nou maar eers begin ontgin word by akademiële departemente van Engels en elders.
English South African Literature in the Last Ten Years: A Survey of Research Developments

South African literature in English has only recently begun to show the signs of coming into its own. This is largely the result of various breakthroughs in research in approximately the last ten years, and has been aided by some direct university support.

The preconditions for a literature to come into its own are large and various; they entail the funding and accommodating of research, the workers to perform investigation, the publication of findings, the reception of such findings in what one might call the market — the teacher and his or her students sitting across a table in a seminar situation — and the feedback from colleagues and compatriots which is part of the ferment of the maturing of literary research in academic circles.

Typically, in the discipline of English studies at university level, the ferment occurs at conferences, the idea-trading centres of our profession. To give you a simple index of how English South African literature has recently sprung into prominence, here is how it has rated on the conference agendas of our professional body, the Association of University English Teachers of Southern Africa. At the founding meeting of AUETSA at the University of Cape Town, in January, 1977, amidst 18 lengthy papers only 3 were devoted to English South African literature, and those were restricted to 20 minutes each, squashed into one siesta-time panel. In Bloemfontein, in January, 1978, 5 full papers out of the total 18 were on South African topics. At the University of Durban-Westville, in July, 1979, something of a putsch occurred, thanks to the zeal of some younger academics with an impressive strategic skill — 11 out of 23 was the score, and by some accounts a highly articulate academic war had broken out. By the conference of July, 1980, at the University of the Witswatersrand, that battleline had receded somewhat — out of 20 full papers delivered, 4 were on English South African and African literature. At the last June, 1992, conference at the University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg, the proportions had swung to a remarkable 17 out of 28. Presumably, in the future, that frontier will go back and forth without much significance, but the point to be made here is that, in the world of our peers, English South African literature has taken its place for critical scrutiny only as recently — and dramatically — as this.

Those outside English studies in South Africa might be aghast that this wrangle for a place on the agenda was so retarded, but this is hardly a time for acrimony about how slow to move with the times English departments in South Africa can be. Rather, the more interesting deduction to be made from these figures is that it is a valuable novelty that a few dozen researchers within South Africa, prominent and responsible members of the university community, now consider the subject to have status, to be worthy of the argumentation of academic enterprise, to be readable and teachable; in short, to have arrived. The time-honoured ideological battlelines have also, hopefully, given way to debate and to renewal, a kind of peaceful synthesis — we can all learn from one another.

Yet there was a certain kind of glory to the campaign, though so decisively was it won that perhaps we have not quite begun to take stock of some of its implications. It is this new dilemma which is worth discussing now. The subject has suddenly proved itself viable, and we are caught by surprise, unprepared. The actual history of why this birth of English South African literature as a sub-discipline of English studies was so delayed is partly responsible; we should not oversimplify it in our enthusiasm. There is a danger that, in including English South African literature on the English syllabus, this could merely become a kind of token patriotism, without truly scholarly roots and an appropriate methodology. The background to the battle will not go away automatically, either.

English departments in South Africa have been the inheritors of a full, rich, and live tradition of British literature of the past and present — one of the fullest and richest in the history of Western man — and we would be foolish to underestimate its multifaceted greatness. The discipline of English studies, however, is a recent one. At, for example, the intellectual centres of the world of that time, Oxford and Cambridge, English as a subject worthy of university status became established only post-World War One. Sixty years, compared to the coming into their own of disciplines like Philosophy, or Physics, or Theology, is a short time; it is a tribute to the suppiness and energy of English studies that in a mere two generations they have diversified and proliferated into the schools of criticism, the journals, publications and special areas that are all operative and thriving currently. The field has professionalised so rapidly that the explosion of knowledge in English studies, particularly since World War Two, in Britain, Europe, the U.S. and elsewhere, has meant that it is now a discipline too large and diversified for any one man or woman to follow as a whole. In our maturity we have been forced to become specialists contemplating infinite possibilities; the day of the universal scholar with a hold on the whole of it is, unfortunately, pretty well done, and departments of English have had to become teams of various specialists. Linguistics, the study of performance, cultural theory and poetics, pedagogical applications — those are a few of the categories within the discipline which are now widely accepted areas of specialisation of their own. Within this diversification, the problem of smaller English literatures overseas has also become prominent as a related issue, say, since the 1950s. This is worth examining in some depth, for the problem is a difficult one to explain, and it might well cast some light on the situation of English studies in South Africa in general.

The tussle for the status of English South African literature in South African universities is an old one, as old as our universities themselves. Roderick Noble, our first professor of English and a council member of the University of the Cape of Good Hope when it was founded in 1874, was for many years the sole editor of The Cape Monthly Magazine, which actively promoted South African writing. He was also, incidentally, a professor of Physical Science, thus combining the two cultures. Then there was Professor John Purves, of the Transvaal University College in Pretoria, who...
wrote in the Cape Times, on 31 May, 1910, the day the Union of South Africa was commemorated — the day on which South African literature technically came into being under that name.

The literature of South Africa has not yet attained, like that of Canada and Australia, to the dignity of a formal history. The number of books published yearly in the four Provinces of the Union form a paity and inconceivable total compared with the records of the other Dominions, and South Africa cannot as yet be said to have developed a literary consciousness. Yet the books that have come out of South Africa and the books South Africa has inspired are neither few nor wholly insignificant, while the literary associations of the sub-continent are probably richer than those of any other of the great Colonial territories.¹

Purves likewise launched a literary review, The South African Bookman, which included all South African writers even in translation, and he compiled a poetry anthology, The South African Book of English Verse (1915), which included South African poets and was a standard text for over a decade. His vision was of a literature that was far more organically whole than we like to believe today. His division within South African literature was between 'vernacular' literature indigenous to Africa, which he saw as feeding an inspiration into the "immigrant literature of South Africa (which) begins with Van Riebeek..." ("South African Literature", p.21). Would that we, as literary analysts, had maintained Purves' theory, seeing no divisive cleavages across language lines and maintaining that all South African literature was an interrelated whole.

But literary theory, more often than not, follows the socio-political milieu in which it is located, rather than its own best precepts. What at the birth of a nation was designed to be one all-embracing total culture, in fact became fragmented through the long generations. Purves' challenge to keep the literature intact was largely disregarded by the English-speaking writers themselves, because most of them knew how valuable their language could be in escaping the backwaters of the colonial world. By non-English-speaking writers many British attempts at rapprochement were seen as a neocolonial effort at a new kind of domination, although it was precisely this period which gave rise to our most linguistically versatile writers — C Louis Leipoldt, Stephen Black and Sol T Plaatje, for example, and even though Purves' model left more than enough room for developments both in Afrokans and in the autochthonous languages — in fact, his sense of openness and all-inclusiveness acts as a challenge still today.

But what ensued in literary history, rather than a synthesizing process of literary enrichment, was a cultural battle for supremacies. In South Africa, since 1910, it has been the habit to settle into monolingual isolation rather than to work towards what might ultimately be viewed as a mixed culture. Now the language groups each fight their own battles, seeing them as attempts to achieve independent maturities; their success or failure in this respect seems directly related to their political and social status within the wide land. But this status is not necessarily an index of the inherent worth of any particular text, or of its potential value as a document of history.

Between 1910 and 1961, then, all our literature was technically 'Commonwealth literature.' It is a supreme irony of the dilemma of English Studies in South Africa that for that half-century when we had the chance to entrench our sub-discipline, we chose little more than to admire and emulate the metropolitan culture, and now that a substantial part of the motherland's academic life has swung round into accrediting 'Commonwealth literature', we no longer qualify. We do still qualify for historical reasons, however, and so-called 'Commonwealth' courses overseas do commonly include English South African writing today.

This entry for South African literature does need some clarification, for here we are using old terms to define new concepts — by 'Commonwealth' literature the literature of the English-speaking world is meant, excluding that of Britain — the motherland which no longer has the image-making power, the influential trend-setting power it had formerly — and excluding that of the United States, now substantial enough to be considered as an independent sub-discipline. The New Literatures in English are written in some sixty countries around the world, in each of which English co-exists with one or more other languages, and in many of which it is not the national language of power. This New Literature is the literature of a quarter of the world's population, and that same community is increasingly devising approaches to problem-solving in the area of historiography and cultural analysis. We are neither ahead nor behind in this field, but our problems are nevertheless typical of the post-colonial era in many respects.

Yet within South Africa the English part of the cultural mix lost its chance to join in the early stages of the devising of a New Literature poetics. This is not an airy assertion, but a matter of historical record — there are dates, places and occasions at which the English departments of South Africa declined to accept the challenge of innovation. This we can record only with regret. Specifically, the place is New York and the date 27 December, 1964 — when the Modern Language Association tabled a paper by RG Howarth, the Aderne Professor of English at the University of Cape Town, called 'Literary Sisters of the South'.² His title is derived from, and is a tribute to, Rudyard Kipling, who had made a preliminary comparison between the literatures of South Africa, Australia and New Zealand. In Howarth's paper, the chief critical problem was how to evolve comparative theory which, at one extreme, would not oversimplify likenesses of social movement and their literary by-products and, at the other, could nevertheless erect a framework within which precontact, colonial, national and independent and/or post-colonial literary movements could be defined and tested. Howarth's paper is occasionally cited as the real launching of New Literature studies, and it was at Pennsylvania State University that 'Commonwealth' syllabuses opened up that year.

Howarth himself had previously developed a course in Creative Writing and South African literary studies at the University of Cape Town, conducted on a volunteer basis, which he described in detail at a conference here in Johannesburg at the University of the Witwatersrand as early as July, 1956. This was the Conference of Writers, Publishers, Editors and University Teachers of English at which Guy Butler, more recently professor of English at Rhodes University, among others, tried to bring to a head the issue of the status of English South African studies on university syllabuses.

Coincidental with this was another Howarth innovation — the introduction of U.S. literary studies, which have been comfortably absorbed into the mainstream of British studies without any apparently significant changes of belief or intention in English departments. One might remark that as the coca-colonization of the academy has proceeded since then, so has it been only in terms of how like the British tradition U.S. literature is; attempts to see it as a potentially opposed or contrasting discipline, as derived from a different milieu, from a diverging momentum of historical development, and so on, have generally resisted. South African academics have moved in and annexed what they want of it, in the finest colonial tradition, and assumed this act creates no fresh literary problems.

But if the pause that refreshes need not disturb the routine of the working day, the liquor our English departments hesitated to touch in 1956 was our own home brew. Howarth summarised the motivation for including English South African literature in the syllabus boldly, as follows:

At the least, extra-British writing may serve to illustrate and demonstrate a well-known educational maxim: "Proceed from the known to the unknown", from South Africa to England, to the other Commonwealth countries, to America. By laying a basis of reference, as it were, the South African student will be more fully enabled to appreciate literature in general and to obtain the perspective which is so essential in critical judgment as well as in political and national opinion. This statement could not be improved upon, even today, and Howarth's opinion that "indigenous literature rightfully claims a place in an English Literature course" (p.50) remains with us. Howarth even concluded that "soon Lecturers in South African literature will be appointed to or in the universities" (p.53) — though this has happened to some extent, it is only through the backdoor. Howarth's terms were absolute and, as it happens, they could be resisted absolutely. In the twenty-eight years since the issue was first raised so prominently we have to note that any progress made has been made in the face of the combined policy-makers of South Africa's departments of English; not one of them has, as yet, made an appointment in this area.

Now, the search for excellence, and the maintaining and improving of standards — those are our goals in academic life at all times, but the question always must be — what excellence, and what standards? Instead of choosing to invest some small portion of their effort, time and money into the tackling of research problems related to South Africa from a unique point of vantage, departments of English elected to stay purist. This attitude has indeed produced some remarkable scholarship, and still does — one thinks of Professor WH Gardner's editing of Gerard Manley Hopkins, of Professor AC Partridge's many studies of the English language — Professor Partridge, what excellence, and what standards? Instead of choosing to invest some small portion of their effort, time and money into the tackling of research problems related to South Africa from a unique point of vantage, departments of English elected to stay purist. This attitude has indeed produced some remarkable scholarship, and still does — one thinks of Professor WH Gardner's editing of Gerard Manley Hopkins, of Professor AC Partridge's many studies of the English language — Professor Partridge, who also devoted a considerable proportion of his energies to writing histories of South African literature as well — and so on. But in the lingering colonialism of this period it seems that the main manner in which a South African academic could gain stature was to take the chip off his shoulder and stand on it; that is, to fail to admit that South African centres of learning were becoming increasingly detached from the standards and excellences of overseas scholarship. As far as English South African studies is concerned, this means that until at least the mid-1970s departments of English offered virtually no masters or doctoral programmes. The researchers of the last decade who have taken to the field have, almost without exception, been trained overseas, in the United Kingdom or the United States most usually. Still today, no South African further degree in that area is as prestigious or as geared to appropriate methodologies or research techniques. In short, the New Literatures still seem like news to us.

The second area in which English South African studies could fruitfully be classified is within African literature. This means taking the field of the total continent as one varied and vital whole, and seeing the literature produced by South Africa as part of that whole — in other words, seeing no useful major distinction between African literature north and south of the Limpopo. Here, again, the story of the English departments of South Africa is one of lost opportunities, of meetings that could have put us excitingly in the forefront of academic research being overlooked, even ignored. If English departments in South Africa have become isolated from developments in literature in and about the rest of Africa, that is the course we chose. The opportunity to take part in the expansion of the field was offered, but English South Africa knowingly opted out of it.

Again, this remark can be pinned down to a date and a place. In June, 1962, the editor of Contrast, the quarterly literary magazine, who was then Philip Segal, subsequently a professor of English at the University of the Witwatersrand, was invited to represent South Africa as an observer at the Conference of African Writers of English Expression held at Makerere College, as it then was, in Kampala, Uganda, organised by the Mbart Writers' and Artists' Club of Ibadan and the Congress for Cultural Freedom. In 1963 Segal reported back on his visit in Contrast, outlining virtually all of the problem areas which have engaged scholars of African literature since then; South African scholars cannot claim that they were kept uninformed.

For 1963-64, the University of Ibadan itself, partly as an attempt to work through such problems in the arena of teaching and criticism, introduced into its English syllabus an optional course in the historical and sociological background of African literature, covering such topics as:

- the study of traditional and oral literature (in translation where necessary); the place of folktales, myths and legends in African society and their use in literature; the function of the artist... in society; the influence on literary activity of colonialism and the rise of nationalism; a comparison of such activity in Africa with trends in the Caribbean and in French-speaking West Africa.

The Ibadan syllabus also included a study of present-day writers, and the list consists of the following: Peter Abrahams, Chinua Achebe, Harry Bloom, Cyprian Ek wensi, Nadine Gordimer, Doris Lessing, Ezekiel Mphahlele, Onuora Nzekwe, Alan Paton and Amos Tutuola, together with expatriate writers such as Joyce Cary and

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This movement has developed outside the Department of English and the new department is to be autonomous from it, not as a supplement but as an alternative to it. This same kind of dilemma has been fought out over and over again outside South Africa, and has resulted in some cases in the dismantling of Departments of English altogether; it has become commonplace to talk of departments of World Literature, or of Schools of Humanities, within which English studies are incorporated, or of Departments of African Literature which include English literature within them. This movement is completely in line with political developments from colonialism through independence to post-colonial status. Yet, even if this same socio-political movement is not at work on Departments of English within South Africa itself, that is not to say that we can be wholly detached from it. If movements elsewhere in all their complexity have succeeded in creating a new sub-discipline within English studies, in which we are all inextricably involved, surely the challenge to syllabus renewal and to research programmes cannot be seen as somewhat irrelevant.

The challenge has been ignored, but not entirely. In the last decade Rhodes University has developed an English in Africa course, which offers African and South African literature as an equally-weighted option to more traditional courses, the University of Cape Town and quite a few others include African sections in standard courses, and African and South African literature are reasonably frequently offered as options at honours level, and so on. But the protracted delay has cost us dearly in terms of manpower, research and the maintenance of status. In the 1960s South African scholars who wished to pursue their directions in African studies braintrained into Africa, or established themselves further abroad. The African Literature Association, the professional body of literary Africanists, is in the U S; the home of African scholarly publishing is firmly the United Kingdom. We can sustain only one journal on the subject, English in Africa, and no South African centre has as yet entered the field; and the same new generation of academics who include African literary studies within their English activities has been trained abroad. Within South Africa there is one inter-disciplinary studies centre, the African Studies Institute at the University of the Witwatersrand, and one Institute for the Study of English in Africa at Rhodes University, but the main emphasis of these is not the literature. When Professor Segal stood at the threshold meeting at which African literary studies were virtually born, he chose to adopt a hopeful, tentative, wait-and-see attitude, and we have waited and not seen.

To give some idea of precisely what we have waited for and not seen occurring, and why. In university circles a mere collection of books or records is not considered a Literature, and rightly so. In a sense, like justice, literature needs to be seen to be done before it qualifies for consideration in the corridors of academia. A literature is not merely a prescribable number of what, by some kind of consensus, are great works. In our world a literature implies the far larger nexus of its own recording and publishing industry, including newspapers, magazines, journals and reviews, its own self-referring use of language, its mutual understanding of a set of infolded norms and values, its own context of myth about the past and present, its sense of settling in to keep doing a job which has continually to be done, and — most important of all — its own community of readership or audience, which receives the work and feeds back into it reciprocally. In English South African literature we now even have the National English Literary Museum and Documentation Centre in Grahamstown, which grew out of a university project, known familiarly as NELM, which, like NALM, the Afrikaans equivalent, is both a repository and a stimulus to further research.

The university’s role in this aggrandisement need not be crucial, need not be there at all, in theory, and most people involved in the making and reception of literature traditionally have a horror of being too ‘academic’; the term is a synonym for dry, factual, n- picking, ivory-towerish — all humiliating reflections on our image in the public eye. Yet, in the twentieth century, universities have frequently gone to great lengths to interfed with the community, particularly in the research sphere, and it is this theoretical wing’s possible participation in the literature-making process that should be a focus of our concern. As far as African literature is concerned, the university/writer association has been conspicuously successful: figures like Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Ngugi wa Thiong’o, Okot p’bitek and Mphahlele have all been associated with one or another campus as educators as well as authors, mostly with professorial status. Professor DJ Opperman would be a local equivalent. Post-graduate research centres, like the African and Afro-American Studies and Research Center at the University of Austin, Texas, which has far larger holdings in African literature than any South African university, have in turn interacted with writers and critics of writers to create what the university can quite reasonably create — the reading in the secondary category which serves as study aids to the primary texts. This includes bibliographical information, resource guides, biographical studies, reader’s guides, encyclopedias and other reference works. But this participation also means that to a large degree universities have become the major patrons of developing arts.

The university-related process takes place in no predetermined order, and is subject to constant revision and reappraisal, but it is in the midst of this activity that the symposia, the critical surveys, and the writing of literary history is located. This activity needs funding, both in the financial sense and in the psychological sense — funding of material and publication, and funding in the sense that a university senate agrees that staff hours should be dedicated to pursuing such an activity. Departments of Afrikaans-Nederlands and Black African Literature have for several generations enjoyed such patronage, and the results are the professional standing and advanced nature of these disciplines — the point is almost too obvious to make.

To give an insight into the awesome scale and the size of just one of the challenges in a venture like this, here are some details of a project nicknamed HALEL, which was born at a conference of the International Comparative Literature Association in Sydney, Australia, in 1975. HALEL is the acronym for the History of African Literature in European Languages in Sub-Saharan Africa — that is, the history of all the literature in Africa in just the imported languages, which includes English and Nederlands-Afrikaans in South Africa. Due out in 1983/4, this project has involved 63 scholars...
from, literally, the six continents, and needless to say with all sexes, colours and religious affiliations, who have accumulated, under the general editorship of Professor Albert S Gérard of the University of Liège, the first comparative survey. Funding for this project is by UNESCO and the publishers are to be the Hungarian Academy of Sciences in Budapest. To say the very least of this, African literature studies are hardly still a parochial affair. It is we who are the parish, to the extent of 108 pages out of a grand total of 2,524. A history of the autochthonous languages would probably be as large, and the complete comparative evaluation could not but take place within that even wider ambit.

If the assessment of our literature within the total African literature is, for us, awarding it a too-panoramic context, a context in which we might be likely to hand our readers over to yet another kind of co-opinion and be affirmed without much trace, there is another, third context within which our studies could proceed, and perhaps it is the most immediately challenging and urgent of the three. This context is the area of South Africa alone, but a South Africa, if we could imagine it for a moment, as a land not divided into Departments of English, Afrikaans-Nederlands and Black African Languages. We should obviously have to retain those departments to teach language and literature, and to execute their other pedagogical functions, but let us suppose that this three-way split was amalgamated for a few percent of their time, say, in an institute, and their task there was to devise fresh the department we should have had all along — the Department of South African Literature, or, should there be anyone who wishes to be scrupulously pedantic, the Department of South African Literatures.

The extent of the literature of the Republic of South Africa was mapped out on a schematic basis by Professor Gérard himself, in 1974, at a conference of the European branch of the Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies in Liège, Belgium, in a paper entitled 'Towards a History of South African Literature'. Gérard states the problems facing anyone trying to write a history of the whole literature according to a new stocktaking. The task would need to interfile, in effect, standard literary histories like Dekker's, Antonissen's and Kannemeyer's with the history of the other literatures, still as yet largely unwritten. His paper showed in tabular form the language compartments within which diachronic histories of parts of the whole could be rewritten, and he stated that as a result of its rich diversity "a fully informed and competent account of South African literature could only arise as the outcome of carefully allocated and organised team-work."6

In the eight years since then, some little progress has been made in some areas of this new field, and the signs are that the eighties will go down as the decade in which scholarship in South African literature first began systematically to be tackled comparatively. However, Gérard's overall project of writing the symbolic history that would involve the literary experience of South Africa in Afrikaans, English (white and black), Xhosa, Zulu, Northern and Southern Sotho, Tswana, Venda — to name only some of the languages that are in production today, and to leave out the abandoned ones that go right back to Latin and Sanskrit is not really in sight. What in a monolingual country is a matter of normal activity — the writing of historical summaries — becomes suddenly unimaginable in a country which comprises so many language groups, not to mention other complicating factors like the socio-political framework in general, which militates against rapprochement in the literary sphere. In a land which does not practise team-work as a normal activity, the togetherness of its various literary historians becomes unlikely.

Nevertheless, it has begun, thanks to the very establishment designed for that purpose — the Centre for South African Literature Research of the Human Sciences Research Council. CENSAL will, this year, be publishing the first of its annual surveys of the literary production of the previous year. Taking the writing of literary history on a year by year basis like this, as it is occurring, is an ingenious approach to the larger problem, and reduces it to manageable size. One can only predict that, as each year goes by, the team-work that CENSAL employs will devise in the literary arena itself a workable procedure for applying the translingual comparison in action, not just as a blueprint, but as a creative exercise in assessment and in opinion-making. Charles Malan, the editor of the first volume and co-ordinator of the project — a brave man — has spelt out his aims in the work, and an Afrikaans version of his mandate and principles appears in the latest Standpunte as 'Die Suid-Afrikaanse Letterkunde en sy Sosiale Konteks aan die Begin van die Jare Tagtig'.7 To say that this declaration of intention is seminal would be an understatement, and anyway many seminal texts have been written about the possibilities of historiography in South Africa. Let us say, however, that this is the first seminal text to have the full backing of a research institution, the HSRC, which, if not an actual university, is at least university-related. But it is also time, in order to achieve Gérard's grand aim, for some other strategies and literary-critical plannings. In a sense one truly has to go into reverse before jumping further forward. Because the snarl-up of conflicting literary ideologies pervades much scholarship in this area, in a debilitating and counter-productive way, the step back had better be to a drastically new starting position. If we are to be of ultimate value as historiographers, there are some assumptions that must go, some inhibitions that must be removed, some common areas cleared. It is on the following points that some problems can perhaps be identified, and the solutions to them begun to be found.

Right at the start, the very name 'South African Literature' reveals an assumption that is unhelpful — it implies some of the barrier-laying that such a project should try to avert. The socio-political unit of a country is not necessarily the exact unit of a literature. Besides, South African Literature in the world at large means primarily the work about the apartheid society — it means, say, Amax's Mine Boy (1946), Paton's Cry, the Beloved Country (1948), Mphaphule's Down Second Avenue (1959), the novels of Gordimer, the plays of Athol Fugard, and the latest from André P Brink. To scholars outside South Africa these writers all have their obvious, but not very important, predecessors: Pauline Smith the novelist of the 1920s is one, Plaatje the oral historian in the 1910s another, and Olive Schreiner, the literary prodigy of the 1880s onwards, is supposedly where it all began. There it is: a neat and sealed parcel, a new appendix to metropolitan literature, produced by the colour bar, not too robust but very

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vocal, a ‘literature’ about which studies may be repeated, reasserting the little tradition within the great one.

But this very patterning makes assumptions about literature and the way it generates itself which are contestable. It is true that ‘South Africa’ as a name has been loosely used about the subcontinent for a long time, although actually to label Schreiner a South African in her early work is to force matters — she was a Cape writer before 1910. She herself referred to her homeland as Africa. Then there are works like Doris Lessing’s *The Grass Is Singing* (1950), influenced by Schreiner and integrally related to the fiction of the 1940s and 50s within South Africa, and Lessing was then a Rhodesian. More recently there is the case of a writer like Bessie Head, who lives in exile across the border in Botswana — is she now arbitrarily classified as a Botswanan writer because of an international frontier which helps the bibliographer, but which makes little sense to the desert, the locusts, the drought and the flow of literary ideas? Incontrovertibly Head’s fiction, although located in Botswana society post-independence, derives from the South Africa she left, and is aimed back at it from a new position. To deny the Lessing and the Head connections — these are only two examples — is to simplify a very subtle literary reality, to suppose that writers’ visions are narrower than the writers themselves intend them to be. Let us call it ‘Southern African Literature’ and be done.

In this search for a workable strategy there are other chronic problems. Although we may appreciate and admire the global manifestation of English and be aware of how very far English does take us around the world, a purist approach that stresses the past in terms of the past. Each generation, it seems, is compelled to rediscover the past in terms of its own needs. Tracking back through the newspapers, archives and Africana collections to reconstruct that past now becomes an urgent necessity, particularly at a time when we feel we are in transition. The process of rediscovery of the old could truly revolutionise our view of the function of Southern African literature. The task of the present, then, is to tackle our unique multiculture, not only year by year, but as a whole from scratch. The field for researchers is wide open.

In conclusion, we may feel that, viewed in these three contexts, the literature of South Africa poses some of the most absorbing and challenging general research problems. Merely identifying the problems in the first place is taking a significant step towards research development. If the last ten years has begun the task, may the next ten years continue it. I am optimistic for the future of English South African studies, but only with this proviso — that the interrelatedness of language and of all literature be paid special attention and English learns once again to see itself in relation to other disciplines. Then, research within that small corner of that English department can regain some of the energy, direction and the applicability that makes literary studies in general so rewarding. Hopefully, such a course could also feed back into the discipline of English in South Africa some of those findings, for the consideration and sheer pleasure of all.