

Hein Willemse *Tydskrif vir letterkunde*: Beyond the bounds

Prof Odile Nacoulma, President of the University of Ouagadougou;
Mr Meshack Mogwera, South African Charge d’Affaires to Burkina Faso;
Ladies and Gentlemen¹

Thank you for this opportunity to say a couple of words at this occasion. I want to thank my host, Prof Amadou Bissiri, the director of L’Unité de Formation et de Recherche/ Lettres et Arts et Communication for his invitation to be present at this launch. It is indeed a great honour.

Amadou and I met several years ago at a conference in the south of France. In many ways it was a fortuitous meeting. Over a session of storytelling in the hamlet of Tille we got to know one another better and I sensed that we shared similar views on our field of study, namely literature in Africa and the standing of literary scholarship on the continent. We kept in touch and later I invited him to join me as a consulting editor on the board of a journal I was editing. This new team was to provide direction and advice on the identity of South Africa’s and probably Africa’s oldest surviving literary journal.

For you to understand this change in identity I need to give you some background to the journal and its literary politics. Young aspiring Afrikaans authors established it or rather its forerunner in 1936 as an annual review. In 1951 that review was converted into a quarterly under a new title *Tydskrif vir letterkunde* (Journal for Literature), the title that it still carries today. It would not be unfair to suggest that those early writers wrote feverishly under the guiding light of an emergent Afrikaner nationalism. The journal charted the early literary development of the Afrikaans language; it chronicled the publication of increasingly confident poets and writers. In short: it served the political and social environment that spawned it well. It survived while several other similar literary journals have faltered and closed down. Its strength laid in its ability to respond to changes, the unremitting commitment of its editorial committees and its independence, even if its initial editorial policies were ethno-nationalistic and inward looking.

By the time that I was approached to edit the journal, I believed that it had outgrown its potential within the local literary environment. As the journal’s new editor I neither shared the historico-literary assumptions of the previous editors nor their

social backgrounds or political interests. After 70 years of sustained publication, it was time to re-invent the journal as a Journal for African literature – in the continental sense of the word. It was a new course of editorial direction. We had to broaden our focus to publish in more languages. We had to consider seriously the importance of translation and the accessibility of African literatures and we had to draw on the brightest minds of African scholarship, those teaching and writing at African universities and in the Diaspora. It was at this time of great internal change in the life of the journal that I invited Amadou Bissiri to join our team of consulting editors.

Allow me a few comments on the situation regarding literary journals and literary scholarship in South Africa. As late as 2007 very few South African literary scholars have a comprehensive view of all literary traditions in that country, that is in a country where some of the different literary traditions date back to the early 19th century; and some may even date their traditions much earlier. By the 1990s South Africans were entering an era of nation-building in many spheres of public and cultural life, i.e. actively seeking out and exploring those factors of our society that constitute us as a nation. One would have expected some comparative South African programmes, actively researching the commonalities of our literatures. Yet our worlds of literary scholarship remain content in their linguistic and literary insularity. The reasons for this turn of events are manifold and these need not detain us here, save to say that if the state of consciousness of “South African literature” among South African literary scholars is depressing their understanding of literary studies on the African continent is dire. I even doubt it if the majority of literary scholars see themselves as participants in literary studies in Africa or if they see their respective traditions as part of African literature. That may be indicative of the depths of our miseducation in South Africa.

It is against this background that you should see the change in editorial direction of *Tydskrif vir letterkunde*, that is placing Afrikaans literature and South African literature in the context of African literature and simultaneously providing a space for continued research into indigenous, ethnic, national as well as comparative African literary research. Underlying the journal’s current philosophy is the need for the exploration of African literatures within a Pan-African context; to explore the development of indigenous languages, to highlight indigenous academic scholarship and to bridge the divides brought about by language, distance, political systems and the like. At the same time the cultivation of the widest possible spectrum and the promotion of excellence in literary scholarship are non-negotiable. We actively pursue multilingualism as a strategy and hence our need for translation. Not only does this imply the translation of literary works, in our case, it refers primarily to the translation of scholarly work – as in this special issue where scholarship in French was translated into English. This strategy proved to be most rewarding. Over the past several years, I have come under the distinct impression of the variety, depth and originality of African scholarship.

My experience with the Burkina Faso special edition is no different. Everyone who has read the collection of papers brought together in this issue would agree that we have here some of the finest literary studies, a relatively comprehensive overview of Burkinabè scholarship covering a wide range of perspectives; subject matter and orientations – as Salaka Sanou has demonstrated in his introduction to the special issue. The individual contributors have produced work that we regard as important. I want to commend them publicly for their efforts.

Often language is misused to divide people. Often it is misused as a cultural fortress, but it can be used most progressively as a bridge to reach beyond the known certainties and the traditional boundaries. When Bissiri and Sanou proposed this special issue on Burkina Faso in *Tydskrif vir letterkunde* they intentionally reached beyond the borders: beyond the borders of the French language and beyond the bounds of local Burkinabè scholarship. For us in South Africa, and dare I say, for most of what is often called Anglophone Africa, Burkinabè literature as an entity is entirely unknown. It is an ignorance brought about by geographical distance and linguistic difference and academic insularity. This project presented in French and English (with some sections in Afrikaans) has made it very difficult for those scholars to plead ignorance and to deny Burkinabè literature its place in the firmament of African literature.

Ouagadougou and Burkina Faso have special places in the history of South Africa. More than twenty years ago at a particularly volatile time in South African history the then banned African National Congress met Afrikaner cultural and academic personalities for the first time openly in Dakar, Senegal. As part of their excursion, they met and they laid the foundation for a monument to the South African liberation struggle in Ouagadougou. They met the late President Sankara and he lectured them on the need for democracy. If that occasion brought Burkina firmly to the fore in the minds of South Africans, this current project tells us about a different aspect of the Burkinabè people. Through the individual efforts of the various contributors to this special issue we now know a lot more about Burkina Faso's cultural and literary expressions. Ouagadougou is no longer an exotic city in a country far across the equator or a footnote in our political history, or the site of Africa's most important film festival or the source of the formidable Quédraogo national soccer team. We now know that through its literature and its cultural expressions that Burkina has a soul. It is this soul that the contributors, most importantly largely local experts, have explored, interpreted and contested. They have made the soul of this country accessible to our readers in South Africa and through the Internet, potentially accessible to generations of future scholars globally.

I wish to thank everyone of the contributors and translators for participating on the project and especially Amadou Bissiri and Salaka Sanou for taking upon them the task of the initial sourcing, selecting and editing of the journal. Many papers were

submitted and quite a number of them were turned down in a rigorous peer review procedure in order for us to ensure that we publish only the best papers available. Anyone involved in academe would know that the writing and production of an article, a book or a journal is never an easy undertaking. It is always a team effort. Amadou and Salaka had to suffer my persistent and irregular demands on their time. In all those instances – even through several university vacations – their energy never slacked and their commitment never wavered. Especially Amadou bore the continuous demands on his time stoically and with good grace. If I may say so Madam President, the University of Ouagadougou can justifiably be proud of all their contributors and especially the sustained commitment of the two Burkinabè editors and the result of their efforts.

This project is a good example of scholarly co-operation. I thought that we as editors learned a lot from one another about our expectations, requirements and possibilities. If it were not for the rapid communications of our era and a common working language, a project like this would have taken much longer than the almost three years it already took to bring it to fruition. If this is an example of co-operation, I am certain that greater opportunities lie ahead for co-operation between my university and yours. I am sure that as this completed project has shown, it is possible to break down linguistic, geographical and other barriers to allow colleagues in expanding the co-operation between institutions such as *Tydskrif vir letterkunde* and our universities.

My thanks to Roger Coulibaly – without his interpretation during this ceremony I would have been mute.

Barka – thank you.

Note

1. This is an adapted text of a speech presented at the launch of *Burkina Faso: Emergent Literature and Artistic Creation*, a special issue of *Tydskrif vir letterkunde* at the University of Ouagadougou, Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso on 30th May 2007.