



Hein Willemse Editorial

Tydskrif vir Letterkunde:
A continuous record of 75 years

When the founders of the Afrikaanse Skrywerskring (Afrikaans Writers' Circle) held their founding meeting in Johannesburg on 10th September 1934, the complete Afrikaans translation of the Bible was only published the previous year and Afrikaans Literature was in its infancy. At the time the novelists Jochem van Bruggen, D. F. Malherbe, the Hobsons and C. J. Langenhoven were particularly popular. The best-known poets were Totius, A. G. Visser and C. M. van den Heever and earlier that year a debutant, the 21-year old W. E. G. Louw, introduced with *Die ryke dwaas* (The Rich Fool) an obviously individualist tendency to Afrikaans poetry. In 1936, the founding year of *Jaarboek van die Afrikaanse Skrywerskring* (Yearbook of the Afrikaans Writers' Circle), the forerunner of *Tydskrif vir Letterkunde* (Journal for Literature), South Africa, like much of the rest of the world, experienced the dire consequences of the Great Depression with thousands of people migrating from the rural areas to the cities. The Representation of Natives Act, Act 16 of 1936, was promulgated in that year, restricting the franchise of black people in the Cape Province – a prelude to a political and economic dispensation in South Africa that would dominate the remainder of the 20th century.

From the earliest issues of *Jaarboek* it was clear that the journal was to serve as a barometer of an emerging literature: cherishing literary ancestors, recording literary happenings, fostering international linkages, publishing young writers and developing an appropriate critical discourse. The place of *Jaarboek* and *Tydskrif vir Letterkunde* in the past 75 years can hardly be underestimated. The journal gives us a continuous record of early Afrikaans Literature onwards and its connectedness to an ever-changing social environment as well as the changing attitudes of writers and literary critics.

In the preceding three-quarters of a century each of the five previous editors – C. M. van den Heever (1936–57), Abel J. Coetzee (1957–66), Coenie Rudolph (1966–72), Elize Botha (1973–91), and Henning J. Pieterse (1992–2002) – has left his or her imprint on *Tydskrif vir Letterkunde*. What amounted to national or literary importance for one generation may have been suspect for a subsequent one; what was for one generation a sign of achievement, may have been insufferable onesidedness for another; whatever

one's personal views *Tydskrif vir Letterkunde* has been built with the toil of those who have gone before. Throughout the time of its existence several other South African literary journals had been established with much promise only to flounder a few issues later. *Tydskrif vir Letterkunde* continued to be published, mostly with little secure financial backing; although always produced with diligence by successive editors and editorial committees. This is the appropriate time to thank the sponsors and advertisers who have supported *Tydskrif vir Letterkunde* over all these decades. Today, mainly authors' page fees fund it. We therefore thank every researcher who publishes in the journal, for it is their research and financial contributions that ensure its continued existence.

Tydskrif vir Letterkunde may today appear somewhat different from what was initially envisaged. Since 2003 the journal was transformed into "A Journal for African Literature". This vision enables us to participate in the description, theorization and analysis of African literatures and cultural practices. In 1936, only four decades following the Berlin Conference where Africa was divided among several European powers, the concept "African Literature" did not yet exist. Indeed, Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1902), Edgar Rice Burroughs's *Tarzan's Quest* (1936) and the film *Darkest Africa* (1936), along with S. J. du Toit's *Di Koningin van Skeba* (The Queen of Sheba, 1898), deepened and even contributed to the establishment and distribution of colonialist perspectives on the Continent. The founders of *Jaarboek* were men of their age who, to the exclusion of everything else, focused on the immediate demands and needs of an emerging language and literature. They would have felt little obvious commonality with compatriots like Sol Plaatje and his autobiographical protest publication, *Native Life in South Africa* (1914) or his novel *Mhudi* (1930) or R. R. R. Dhlomo with his *African Tragedy* (1928) or Thomas Mofolo from the Basotholand Protectorate with his *Chaka* (1925). Neither would we have expected them to express kinship with the well-known Pan-Africanist from the British Gold Coast (today: Ghana), Joseph E. Casely-Hayford, the writer of *Ethiopians Unbound* (1911), who propagated the development of an African-based school curriculum and university.

For the greater part of its existence *Tydskrif vir Letterkunde* was positioned as an Afrikaans literary journal catering for local needs; today it has outgrown that initial vision. It is today a widely recognized academic journal indexed in some of the more significant international research indices and it draws its contributors from across the world as this anniversary issue testifies. Since 2003, research articles are published, besides Afrikaans, also in Dutch, English and French. Articles and special issues have provided us, ever since the change in vision, with amazing views of the riches of our contemporary continental environment. To be open to the continent, its people, traditions, cultural practices and languages enrich us all, or as a former member of the advisory council of *Tydskrif vir Letterkunde*, Es'kia Mphahlele (2002: 10), once said: "When we know who we are as South Africans and where we are going, which we

hope will lead to a clear sense of our relationship with the rest of Africa – real and ideal – we can move toward universal humanism.”

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As in the past, South African newspapers, including the academic media, journalists and writers face imminent publication control. *Tydskrif vir Letterkunde* unequivocally expresses itself against any regulation that restricts our freedom of expression. While we agree that the government should be permitted to classify information or, to use the euphemisms of the Protection of Information Bill, to categorise information as “sensitive” or “valuable”, we are emphatically opposed to any form of publication control that would erode the essence of our democracy. The proposed bill will cause tremendous damage to our fragile democracy since, firstly, the reason for its implementation is unclear and, secondly, there seems to be a connection between it and the print media exposures of maladministration in the past that have embarrassed the government. The emphasis on excessive secrecy reminds one of the apartheid state; at the same time it is against the spirit of an open and transparent democracy – a democracy for which many have sacrificed their lives.

The envisaged media appeals tribunal is obviously an attempt by the current government to gain oversight of the media, journalists and publications. We cannot allow this in a democracy. Our point of departure is that the right to freedom of thought, expression and information should be the default option. Only with the strictest exception should exclusions be allowed. In the long run, the proposed legislation will influence the right of journalists and researchers to access information and the maximum penalty of 25 years in prison for transgressors will certainly limit their freedom of speech. Let us say it bluntly: We demand the right to know; we do not want this Protection of Information Bill or the establishment of the media appeals tribunal. *Phantsi!*

When we say what we are saying with respect to the proposed legislation in South Africa we should not forget to strive for the optimal freedom of information and speech across the Africa continent and the Diaspora. In more than half of the countries on the continent press freedom is significantly restricted, and we know that where this basic right is constrained, human right abuses thrive. It is well known that media freedom does not really exist in countries such as Angola, Burundi, Cameroon, Central-African Republic, Chad, Côte d’Ivoire, Djibouti, DRC, Equatorial Guinea, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Gabon, Gambia, Madagascar, Rwanda, Somalia, Sudan, Swaziland, Togo, Zambia and Zimbabwe. Let us therefore proclaim it loudly: these restrictions subvert our potential as Africans and our fledgling democracies. Only a handful of countries such as Cape Verde, Ghana, Mali, Mauritius and São Tomé and Príncipe have established societies where their citizens have higher than average

standards of freedom of speech. We commit ourselves to the greatest possible levels of civil freedoms on our continent for it is clear that the protection of our fundamental freedoms is the lifeblood of enduring democracies; and those freedoms must be non-negotiable.

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Reference

Mphahlele, Es'kia. 2002. Alternative Institutions for Education for Africans in South Africa – 1990. In Es'kia Mphahlele, *Es'kia*. Kaapstad: Kwela Books in association with Stainbank & Associates, 3–14.