Introduction

Literature and Human Rights

In December 1998 the German Section of Amnesty International organized a conference on “The Future of Human Rights” to mark the 50th anniversary of the United Nations General Declaration of Human Rights. As their venue they chose a significant location – the Paulskirche in Frankfurt, regarded in the country as the “cradle of democracy” since it was there 150 years before, in 1848, that a German National Assembly had first formulated a catalogue of basic human rights embracing demands for freedom of speech and freedom of the press, freedom of teaching and research, freedom of assembly and equality before the law.

The highlight of the final session of that conference was a ceremony honouring human rights activists from across the world – from Algeria and Egypt, from Bolivia and Colombia, from Indonesia and India, from Russia and China, from Turkey and Togo, and from The Gambia. The evening before the presentation of the awards some of them had taken part in a round-table discussion in which they were interviewed about their activities on behalf of human rights. One young man, Andreas Kossi Ezuke from Togo, had been secretary of the Ligue togolaise de droits de l’homme from 1991 to 1996 and had then co-founded the Organisation alternative de paix. As a result of this political commitment he had been exposed to repressive measures by government, had subsequently been forced into exile and had been granted political asylum in Germany. Asked, as each of the activists was, about what had first motivated him to become involved in human rights issues, he responded memorably: “I went to university to study English and there I read Ngugi…”

Such an unusual admission that studying English literature could make a human rights activist of one was destined to startle many in the audience out of their comfortable European academic environment. It is thus to the admirable Mr
Ezuke that we owe the impetus for including a section on Literature and Human Rights in the programme of the Annual Conference of the Association for the Study of the New Literatures in English (ASNEL) held at the Universities of Aachen (Germany) and Liège (Belgium) in June 2000. The overall theme of the conference – “Towards a Transcultural Future: Literature and Society in a "Post-Colonial World"” – certainly seemed to provide ample scope for renewed consideration of a topic of fundamental importance, which, preoccupied as we have often been with more fashionable questions of literary theory, we have on occasion tended to lose sight of.

Such renewed interest in an aspect of postcolonial literary studies that risked being marginalized was prompted not only by the coincidence of attending an Amnesty International meeting in Frankfurt, however. We were, too, consciously linking back to the only previous occasion when the annual ASNEL conference had been hosted by the same two universities. Then, in 1988, the conference had addressed “Crisis and Conflict in the New Literatures in English.” With South Africa still an apartheid state and Australia celebrating the bicentennial of white settlement, the focus then had lain on questions of Literature and Liberation and on Reconstructions of History. Many speakers had addressed the contribution of literature to the liberation struggle; the nation of Australia had been “celebrated” from an Aboriginal perspective.

An unusually impressive assembly of writers had come together from around the world – authors whose primary texts provide many of us critics and academics with a raison d’être, if not indeed a living, but whose literary activities may well put their own lives at risk. One of those we had billed on the programme to hold a Keynote Address was Jack Mapanje from Malawi, scheduled to speak on “The Writer in an African State.” He would, as we well knew, be unable to attend in person since he had been imprisoned without trial by the government of Hastings Banda on 25 September 1987. His presence on the programme, however, was intended both as a reminder of his fate and as an invitation to join in the gathering worldwide protest against Banda’s action. This the conference-goers did, not only by signing a letter of protest which was subsequently sent to Malawi but also by themselves participating in a performance conceived and written for the conference by James Gibbs, who had himself lived and taught in Malawi.

The conference in 2000 provided a welcome opportunity for the organizers to invite Jack Mapanje, who had been released from prison in 1991 and was living in England, to be one of our keynote speakers. As convenors we were delighted when he readily agreed. It is probably no exaggeration to say that for those of us who attended both conferences his presence at the second was a deeply moving experience, at once testimony to the strength of a writer’s personality under great duress and confirmation that working for human rights can achieve the happiest of results. The editors of this volume are very pleased that it is in a position to com-
Communicate a sense of both occasions, including as it does the text of the performance of 1988, Mapanje’s spontaneous opening address in 2000, the interview he gave the German overseas broadcasting service, Deutsche Welle, and a paper by James Gibbs.

The tragic fate of another writer, Richard de Zoysa, not long after that first conference, in February 1990, had demonstrated how easily the brutal realities of conflictual politics can wipe out an individual life; but the 2000 conference was at least able to provide Rajiva Wijesinha with a forum at which to launch his poignant tribute to a committed writer who paid the highest price for the courage of his convictions and the determination to voice them publicly: Richard de Zoysa. His Life, Some Work...a Death (Colombo: Sabaragamuwa UP, 2000).

The definition of human rights adopted in this volume is very broad. It reflects the differing backgrounds (geographical, ethnic and experiential) of the contributors and the great variety of their concerns, which range from “Denotified Tribes” in India through the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission and to the ongoing discourse of the Treaty of Waitangi. The editors hope that the very scope and spectrum of the responses to the invitation to reflect on the question of “Literature and Human Rights” contained in this volume will stimulate further comparable sessions at future ASNEL conferences and elsewhere.

Mary Robinson, United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, was unfortunately unable to attend our conference but graciously sent us a goodwill message (see page xvi following). She was certainly present in spirit. We would like to use a comment Mrs Robinson made in another context to close our own introductory remarks and at the same time open this volume: “Despite the progress made in international standards and norms, cultural rights remain among the least understood of all human rights....”1 If the present volume, by offering a platform on which literature and human rights may perhaps sit comfortably with one another, can make some contribution, however modest, to promoting at least some increase in an understanding of the issues, we will feel that the gathering of June 2000 was not in vain.

THE EDITORS

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