Soyinka is Yoruba in literary background as well as heritage. This in no way diminishes [my italics, C.B.] his mastery of western dramatic technique or his understanding of western culture and theatre practice. (17)

A survey of the bibliographical references suggests quite strongly that this study, although published in 1989, was completed much earlier. There is practically no mention of research done after 1980 – eg, Kötrick’s Apídán Theatre,2 which is central to the topic. There is, however, a mention of the 1984 premiere of Soyinka’s Play of Giants at the Yale Repertory Theatre, so one is left wondering at the highly erratic use of secondary literature.

In sum one could perhaps recommend this book as a first introduction to a high school theatre producer venturing into the complex world of Soyinka’s drama; to the undergraduate student interested in obtaining a first, very general orientation into Yoruba anglophone drama other than by Soyinka; and to the professional scholar for the occasional useful production review reference on Rotimi’s work.

Christopher Balme (München)


This massive volume, the result of the 1988 Annual Conference on Commonwealth Literature and Language studies in German-speaking countries held concurrently at Aachen (Germany) and Liège (Belgium), proves the excitement that can arise from multiple cultural approaches to literature. The book deserves to be read widely both for its wide scope of coverage and the depth of insights it reveals about the creative imagination of many peoples of the English-speaking world.

That the occasion assembled not only critics but also artists from around the world is attested in the first part of the book. Here, Mudrooroo Narogin (Colin Johnson) unfolds the linguistic delights of Aboriginal temper, while Fay Zwicky explores the white immigrant Australian’s identity crisis; and Wilson Harris, Edward Brathwaite, Michael Gilkes and David Dabydeen highlight the many layers of the troubled African–Caribbean cultural heritage. The section is concluded with an essay by Cilla McQueen dissecting the rural–urban dichotomies that precipitate the exiled imagination of many New Zealanders.

The editors state in their introduction that they were guided in organizing the book’s essays by “the original headings under which the papers were grouped” at the conference (ix–x). Theses sub-themes reflect the multiplicity of the issues covered: “Literature and Language,” “Literature and Liberation,” “Multiculturalism and Ethnicity,” “Reconstructions of History,” and “Gender as Politics.” Interestingly, despite the diversity of the issues – the regions covered include Africa, India, Australia, New Zealand, the Caribbean, and Britain – the selection has much coherence. In a sense, the value of each of the book’s thirty-nine individual essays is ultimately in direct proportion to how each author stands in heeding the call

2 Kacke Götrick, Apídán Theatre and Modern Drama: A Study in a Traditional Yoruba Theatre and its Influence on Modern Drama by Yoruba Playwrights (Stockholm, 1984).
of the distinguished Belgian critic Albert Gérard, stated in the lead essay in the first section, that the primary goal of “Commonwealth Literature scholarship” should be “the promotion of intellectual awareness and understanding” (96).

Not unexpectedly, the book’s most fascinating moments occur not in the articles addressing general issues regarding cross-culturalism but in those that examine individual writers’ texts. The book’s interest lies both in the array of eminent scholars and the varied critical approaches they parade. For example, there is Taban lo Liyong’s eccentric, relaxed, humorous and even perverse reading of Armah’s novels in which he urges readers to take the Ghanaian novelist’s rebellious and anti-establishment temper more seriously. Alongside it is Joseph Swann’s very tight and accurate map of the changing faces of history in Achebe’s fiction. Adrian Roscoe seizes on the raw pieces of liberation in the poetry of the Malawian writer Edison Mpina but Charles Sarvan uses a novel by the Zambian Dominic Mulaisho ably to demonstrate bad politics in fiction: i.e., the phenomenon whereby the writer shows not only “an instance of evasion, stemming from an inability and or unwillingness to confront reality but of the active falsification of history” (239).

Many of the essays are movingly imaginative, such as Wendy Wood’s paper on gender issues in the novels of Christina Stead and Chantal Zabus’s on the African “worlds” lying beneath the English superstructure of some Nigerian novels. Peter Marsden conducts a sensitive battle with the critics of the Australian poet Les Murray, and Gerhard Stilz writes vividly on Ahmed Ali, as does Don Grant, who illuminates our perception of Australian autobiographies.

Regrettably, some of the pieces tax the reader’s patience either by their lack of focus, by the superficiality of treatment, by a repetitiveness imposed by the narrow confines of topics – or some combination of all these and other defects resulting in bad writing. Consider, for example, papers on the use of English by Indians, on the problems of East African writers, and on Randolph Stow and David Malouf. Christian Mair’s formal analysis of the uses made of the creole language in the early novels of V.S. Naipaul and Sam Selvon is competent but it lacks a political thrust and fails to show how the works considered have anticipated the ongoing struggle of Caribbean writers to employ creole as a weapon for cultural self-assertion. The same might also be said of Anjuli Gupta’s essay in which she vacillates between a directionlessness and making a poignant lament about what she regards as Indian writers’ inability to make creative use of English in a way to rival the inspired appropriation of that language by African and Caribbean writers. As, indeed, the two other contributions on India by Ganesh Devy and Aleid Fokkema indirectly make clear, Gupta’s argument fails to take into consideration both India’s specific cultural context and the exalted position now occupied by writers like Salman Rushdie.

Foremost among the most interesting general articles are: “The BBC became a Glutton for Punishment” by James Gibbs, which uncovers an informative mass of archival material relating to the role played by the BBC in nurturing the creativity of the Nigerian Novel prize winner Wole Soyinka when he was a fledgling writer living in England during the Fifties; Alastair Niven’s “Black British Writing: the Struggle for Recognition,” an essay that makes a strong case for the study of the writings of “non-European origin” in British institutions of learning; and Christopher Balme’s astute survey-essay on the theatre of the Aboriginal writer Jack Davis.

With more than twenty of its thirty-nine essays first rate, Crisis and Creativity deserves to be on every scholar’s shelf. And yet, its massive price clearly puts it beyond the reach of the