

FOREWORD

The papers published in this volume were delivered at a conference on Commonwealth literature held at the University of Liège from 2nd to 5th April 1974 on the theme "Commonwealth Literature and the Modern World." One of the purposes of the conference was to promote an exchange of views between members of the European branch of ACLALS (Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies) and other European scholars who have begun to study and teach Commonwealth literature. It was not a purely European concern, however. The conference was attended by the Guyanese novelist Wilson Harris, the South African novelist Dan Jacobson and the Caribbean poet Wayne Brown, and critics came from Africa, Canada, the West Indies and the United States.

Commonwealth literature is *par excellence* a field of comparative studies. As Professor Jeffares suggested in the opening address, no culture exists in a vacuum, and the study of a particular literature or writer calls for comparison with what is being or has been written in other regions of the Commonwealth and with the English literary tradition itself. Professor Jeffares's argument centres on the reception given Commonwealth literature *in* the modern world and raises the essential and often debated question of critical standards within and outside the Commonwealth. His plea, taken up by Christopher Heywood in his discussion of the criticism of African novels, is for open, non-parochial critical assessments that would avoid both the traps of literary fashion and the partiality of much well-intentioned academic criticism. The unconscious prejudices inherent in the complacently "humanistic" approach of this kind of criticism are exposed by Wilson Harris, who warns against the danger of polarizing literatures into established or "complete" entities and their so-called "colonial" by-products. The task of the creative imagination, Mr Harris implies, is to unmask the self-deceptively "generous" postures in contemporary attitudes which may thwart the free development of truly original art whether in the metropolis or in its former dependencies.

The majority of papers deal with the other aspect of the theme, namely the individual writer's response to the modern world. Some are concerned with the "common ground" (alluded to by Professor Jeffares) that is present in the seemingly disparate experience of people in different ages and in the many parts of the Commonwealth. The three papers on Wilson Harris are all comparative studies and point to a potential dialogue between his creative imagination and that of earlier writers. From a somewhat similar dialogue between "old worlds and new," or old and new literatures that may

present opposite visions of the world but share in a community of language, Professor Robertson discovers the emergence of "the third alternative," a distinctive element in Commonwealth literature. The descriptions of a divided or cruel world found in the work of such writers as Hal Porter, Janet Frame, V. S. Naipaul and the Nigerian poets (on all of whom contributions were offered) seem to be far removed from any such possibility as that discussed by Professor Robertson, but it is quite plain that many writers in the Commonwealth are indeed working towards the creation of this "third alternative."

Apart from critical essays, this volume also contains poems by Wayne Brown, some of which have never been published before. Some of the materials analysed are not readily available: Professor Lindfors discusses talks given by Wole Soyinka on the Nigerian radio; Tim Couzens gives an account of works that he has only recently discovered by the South African writer H. I. E. Dhlomo, and Reinhard Sander contributes a complete bibliography of Wilson Harris's early, uncollected writings.

We regret the non-appearance of Dan Jacobson's contribution to the conference. Mr. Jacobson gave a reading of his fine short story "Beggar My Neighbour," which captures so fully the pitfalls and emotional tensions into which the white South African liberal is betrayed. Mr. Jacobson followed his reading with an informal account of "the story behind the story." After relating the anecdote (of an incident in his home town) that had given him the initial situation, he explained why he came to discard successive drafts (involving new episodes, more complex handling of character and implication and shifts of narrative viewpoint) until by trial and error he arrived at the form in which the story was published. Mr. Jacobson's modesty and geniality in laying bare his "craft"—his patient construction of a "house" that in its final form would *not* "collapse" as soon as its author turned his back—endearred him to the audience and gave a special pleasure to the morning.

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