Albert Gérard
AFRICAN LANGUAGE LITERATURES: AN INTRODUCTION TO THE LITERARY HISTORY OF SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA
London: Longman, 1981. Pp. 398.
Reviewed by Gerald Moore

Professor Gérard's survey is unique in its focus and its scope. As the main title implies, the book is concerned with all those works of printed literature which have appeared in the many and various languages of Africa, or more specifically sub-Saharan Africa. In respect of much of this material, it follows in the footsteps of Janheinz Jahn's *Bibliography of Neo-African Writing from Africa, America and the Caribbean* (1965) and his later *Bibliography of Creative African Writing* (1971). But whereas Jahn confined himself to the sufficiently vast problem of providing a comprehensive reference work, Professor Gérard has aimed at giving a readable account of each major African literary language of the area, the history and development of its literature, followed by a description of the major texts within it. The sheer bulk of the material will come as a surprise to many readers (Gérard reckons that it is roughly equal to that produced in all the European languages of the area put together). So too will the antiquity of writing as an activity in substantial areas of Africa. The survey begins, appropriately, with the Ge'ez literature of Ethiopia which can be traced back to inscriptions dating from the reign of king Ezana (1320-1340 A.D.), who was the first Ethiopian monarch converted to Christianity by Greek missionaries from Alexandria. The antiquity of writing in Ethiopia matches the antiquity of Christianity as a majority religion in the Ethiopian highlands, where it survived through the centuries which saw the triumph of Islam throughout the Middle East. By beginning his book here rather than in the more familiar Arabized areas of the Western Sudan and the East-African coast, Gérard gives a strongly African focus to his study. Written literature, in his account, emerges as something which has its own pattern of development and sometimes its own roots within the continent, rather than as a kind of overspill of Western or Arab traditions. By the time the reader comes to his accounts of early Hausa and Swahili writings, that focus has been well established, so the reader is prepared to recognize the autonomy of these literatures.

Until the twentieth century, the poets and chroniclers of Hausaland and of the East-African coast wrote entirely in the *ajami* script, using the Arabic alphabet to transcribe their respective languages. There was also, of course, a fair amount of writing in Arabic itself, whose status in Islamic Africa can be closely compared with that of Latin in medieval Europe, just as the Roman alphabet was there used in later centuries to transcribe the emerging European vernaculars.

The comparison between Africa and Europe can be carried further, and Gérard begins to do this in the central chapter seven of his book, where he examines the enduring effects of colonial policies upon the emergence of written African literatures. The Latin powers, with their policy of assimilating at least a small urban elite, remained hostile throughout their tenure to the study, transcription, or printing of the indigenous languages. In colonies where the dominant power was Protestant, from South Africa right up to Sierra Leone, the study, transcription, and printing of the principal local languages was one of the first tasks imposed on themselves by the missionaries. And once that machinery existed, it could in turn be exploited by African historians, collectors of folk tradition and, in due course, novelists, poets, and dramatists. Thus we find in Southern Africa a tradition of writing in the main Bantu languages which is almost a century old. Moving further north, we find the more recent but flourishing literatures in Gikuyu, Luo, Yoruba, Twi and Krio, to name but a few; alongside which we see the emergence of new generations of writers in Swahili and Hausa, now using the Roman script and turning to forms new to their languages, such as plays, novels and short stories.

Looking more deeply into this contrast between Latin and (broadly) Teutonic colonial policies, it may be relevant to point out that Old English was the earliest and most advanced written vernacular in Western Europe, to be followed by Icelandic. By the time King Alfred wrote his translation of Orosius in 870 A.D., a distinctive Old English prose style was already

in evidence. If the assimilationist policies of the Latin powers can be directly traced back to the imperial policies of Rome itself, it may be no coincidence that those areas of Europe where the Roman imperial legacy was eclipsed or was never established are the very ones which duly produced the Reformation, with its emphasis on vernacular teaching, praying, and preaching; and which later extended the same policies to their overseas empires. Two areas of Africa which had mingled colonial experiences help to reinforce this line of argument. Although Germany lost her African Colonies in 1914-1918, German scholars and missionaries had already made giant strides in the study of African languages and there can be little doubt that areas like Togo and Cameroun would have had well-established literatures in their own languages had German rule continued for another forty years or so. Likewise, although France tried to impose rigid assimilationist policies on Madagascar after her seizure of the island in 1896, the tradition of writing and teaching in Madagascan languages had been so well established by English missionaries during the previous century that assimilation never really took root there as it did in, say, Senegal or Benin or Ivory Coast.

It may seem farfetched to suggest that events which unfolded in Europe some 1,500 years ago continue to leave their stamp upon African literature today, but such appears to be the case. It is not the least merit of Professor Gérard's valuable survey that it prompts reflections like these, as well as offering a wealth of information about literary developments in the many languages studied.

One significant development of recent years has been the decision of an internationally well-known writer like Ngugi wa Thion'go to compose and publish his works initially in the Gikuyu language. This example may well be followed by others, since it avoids the stark choice between cultivating a popular local audience (as was done in the past by the Yoruba novelist D. O. Fagunwa or the Swahili poet Shaaban Robert) and eschewing that local fame in favor of international acclaim. The next few years will tell whether Ngugi's example will prove infectious to the generation of writers now arising.

Daniel R. Schwarz
CONRAD: THE LATER FICTION
London: Macmillan Press, 1982. Pp. 171 + xv.
Reviewed by William Bonney

Recent Conrad scholarship continues to manifest, on occasion, the contrast in methods that was inaugurated nearly twenty years ago when the work of J. Hillis Miller and Edward W. Said on Conrad was published. In its theoretical and synthetic approach, the work of these men departed from the novel-by-novel, chapter-by-chapter format that had been used earlier by scholars in pioneering, "revaluative" attempts to establish a canon and a hierarchy of quality with regard to Conrad's voluminous literary output. Although the time when such attempts would be of value has long since vanished, the enervatingly mechanical critical format that was typically used in these discussions persists inappropriately in the present; and it is indeed unfortunate that Daniel R. Schwarz chooses just such an approach for his latest book on Conrad.

Schwarz perhaps justifies his tedious methods by means of the claim that he is "concerned less with arguing a particular thesis than with examining each work according to its intellectual and aesthetic assumptions" (p. xi). However, whatever merit this concern may have in the abstract is quickly undone by a simple glance at the book's footnotes and bibliography, for this is a study that has been written in apparent ignorance of most any scholarship that might provide a useful context for discussions of intellectual and aesthetic issues; and, furthermore, it is a study of Conrad that has been composed in apparent ignorance of most important Conrad scholarship. Indeed, it is as if Schwarz's superannuated critical methods dictate his pervasive neglect of other scholars' work, since the overall approach used in his book resembles the flaccid "new-critical" discussions that characterize advanced undergraduate essays on literature. But such superficiality in a work that clearly has scholarly pretensions is inexcusable.

As a result, Schwarz's book exists dimly in an evanescent realm that would probably make Conrad smile, bounded, on the one hand, by Cliff's notes, and, on the other hand, by the