

Book Reviews

Bernth Lindfors. *Early Nigerian Literature*. New York: Africana Publishing Corporation, 1983. pp. 198. \$32.50.

Early Nigerian Literature has the virtue of all Lindfors's writing — it is useful to both the beginner and to all specialists. The opening chapter surveys the state and development of writing in English in Nigeria from the turn of the century, but especially from the date of three seminal publications which saw the phenomenon of modern Nigerian literature spring almost fully blown — Amos Tutuola's *Palm Wine Drinkard* (1952), Cyprian Ekwensi's *People of the City* (1954), and Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958). The chapter will refresh the memory of students and scholars who know the history of the development of this literature: it will, as well, provide a splendid context for those who come to the literature for the first time. There was a good deal of writing in English, by both Nigerian and expatriate authors, before the appearance of the three voices mentioned above and Professor Lindfors designates them. He notes as well the growth, as rapid as the full-length writing itself, of literary journals providing as it were forewarning of the larger growth to follow — *Black Orpheus*, *The Horn*, *Ibadan*, *Mews*, and *Nigerian Magazine*.

The main body of the book is comprised of ten chapters, eight of which are devoted to the early writing of authors who have, all but one, maintained the literary reputations forecast by their early writing, different as these writers are one from the other: Fagunwa (whose work was written in Yoruba but which is available in part at least through translation), an important influence on Amos Tutuola (whose "Earliest Long Narrative" is discussed in Chapter 3), C. O. D. Ekwensi's *First Stories*, Onuora Nzekwu (who after producing three novels, the last of which was published in 1966, has since been silent in literary affairs). Chapter 7 is a discussion of Achebe's undergraduate writing, Chapters 9 and 10 talk about the early writing and literary activity of Wole Soyinka and Chapter 11 is a biographical comment on Christopher Okigbo, the poet who

gave his life in the Biafran cause. Lindfors displays that Okigbo brought to the writing of poetry "the same quality he displayed in sports . . . agile, tricky, unpredictable, evasive, hard to pin down . . . a stubborn challenge to anyone venturing to confront him."

The other two chapters create a sense of the general literary environment of the 1950's describing the doings of writers who have yet not made their marks but who were busy enjoying themselves in literary activities and providing a sense of the literary scene in Ibadan, Lagos, the national and regional presses, and in literary magazines. Chapter 8, the shortest chapter at four pages, is a vignette, concerned with matters of taste and good manners related to a literary event and questions of women's rights, but is principally interesting for the illumination provided by Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka (in tones both characteristic and prophetic) "on certain social interactions at a male-dominated African university campus in the late 1950's."

What makes this book valuable is that the essays collected here from random sources are made readily available to users and provide detailed and minute observations on the influences to which aspiring writers were submitted and to which they submitted themselves, and the beginnings they made as they probed their interest and tested their talents.

The essays convey strongly a sense of the excitement of the period, an excitement coincident and deriving much of its energy from the creation of University College Ibadan and from the social and political ferment of the post World War II years when Independence with its high optimism was blowing in the wind.

Lindfors notes that "one of the major challenges confronting future scholars will be to penetrate this literature more deeply in search for common ground to define an essential Nigerian quality. Much of that puzzle still needs to be sorted out and pieced together." While he notes "that nothing quite so ambitious has been attempted here," the historical and biographical materials he relates, the thoroughness of the documentation he displays in the notes to each chapter go a considerable way to providing future scholars with the tools they will require.

University of Guelph

G. D. KILLAM

Abdul R. JanMohamed. *Manichean Aesthetics: The Politics of Literature in Colonial Africa*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1983. pp. 312. \$25.00.

What's in a literary criticism? Literary criticism by any other name would be different, for it would be shorn of invidiously

expected jargon and current modes of professional language. The critic's dilemma is that he writes in a language fixed for his time and his audience: written in any other language, literary criticism might smell more sweet and less sweeping; indeed, it might be considered unprofessionally generous. Perhaps all trades bear this paradox — that the more parochial they are in their expression the more genuine their credentials are judged.

Abdul JanMohamed's study of six modern African writers ironically bears reference to the manichean nature of criticism just as his study makes a claim for the manichean nature of colonialist literature. In the same breadth he has written a study that is perceptive in the aspects of the prism at which he wishes to peer, and a study that is straitened by its constructionist terminology. When he writes his individual examinations of the six authors he has chosen to illustrate his larger thesis, and loses himself in the discovery of their meanings, his work is a joy of intellectual pursuit and satisfaction of mystery. He conveys that rare distinction of a mind at home on his avenues of speculation; one feels that the critic has reached that totality of imagination which allows him to move counters and props to reveal layered complexities, and yet not distort the creative whole he is embracing. The specifics are what remain most meaningful in JanMohamed's work, and left to themselves they provide a greater impact than the explicit abstracts put forth in the concluding chapter.

JanMohamed's thesis is not startling, though he posits it as a novel and necessary attitude. He believes that modern African literature cannot be understood unless it is seen in its "generative ambience." In a reductionist summary his thesis may be stated in the following manner: colonialist and post-colonialist literature is infected by its history; removing the literature from the sociological subsequences of the European imperialist advent is to blind the viewer to the overt and covert meanings of the work, even works written after the departure of the imperialists. While this statement of literature as a circumference of culture is not as controversial or disputed as JanMohamed puts it, his critical analyses are superbly structured, and thus make original and convincing demonstrations of how history exploits its literary observers. JanMohamed's study is captivating in this pursuit of the whole via its parts; it is when he tries to force a unitary pattern on the related parts that the structure strains.

Trying always for the pattern beneath the covering weave, he has organized his material around several schema. Joyce Cary and Isak Dinesen are representative of the European and colonialist distortion in which master and slave are as continually necessary to each other as the historical accident of their first existence; Nadine

Gordimer and Alex La Guma represent two approaches to South African reality, in which denial is blindness, but blindness is a denial of the South African reality; Chinua Achebe and Ngugi wa Thiong'o show possible directions for inevitable journeys from technological innocence to modern warps of power. The schematology further divides into exemplary analyses of three white writers, three black writers. The titles of the chapters reinforce the thematic patterning: Cary is labelled "The Generation of Racial Romance"; La Guma bears the weight of "The Generation of Marginal Fiction"; Isak Dinesen is placed on the a-historical level of "The Generation of Mythic Consciousness"; while Achebe is lauded as "The Generation of Realism." In each of his studies, JanMohamed views the writer's work as a part of the whole consciousness of an age and place. He is difficult to refute in his claims that Cary, while a compassionate man in his personal dealings and reflections on human behaviour, was a prisoner of the colonialist ideology; similarly JanMohamed is illuminating in showing how Dinesen escaped from the dominance of history into mythological ontology, and thus was able to resolve the conflicts between her aristocratic need to dispense mercy and justice and her contemporaneous awareness of the arrogant pose she created for her persona. He is also fresh in his treatment of Alex La Guma, a difficult feat when measured against the obviousness of his conclusions. The same observation may be made about JanMohamed's comments on Achebe and Ngugi — the comments are vital and involved in a nexus of concomitant meanings, but the ends to which JanMohamed leads them are familiar posits. Only in the chapter on Nadine Gordimer does he break speculative ground; only in this chapter does he deal with the most recent primary work.

JanMohamed's work is an attempt to find an overall pattern in modern African literature. In positing that the European colonialist and the post-colonialist African cannot escape the manichean agony of a subconscious pattern of divided allegiances — to the avatars of innovation and tradition, technology and mythos, history and inexplicable change — he has mapped out a route of valid and exciting exploration. The light he offers proves provocative and shaping.

C. W. Post of Long Island University

MARTIN TUCKER

Paul A. Scanlon, ed. *Stories from Central & Southern Africa*. London: Heinemann, 1983. pp. 224. £1.95.

The greatest achievement of any writer of short stories or poetry is to capture that elusive, mysterious, and even disturbing essence of places and people, fixing on a fragment of time snatched from a

continuum, and elaborating on it so that the reader may enter fully into the milieu, the emotions, into *life* itself, preferably without tedious moralizing and with understanding. Those readers who have been immersed in the same milieu as the writer can usually identify with the author by what may crudely be termed gut feeling. Thus the initiated enjoy a regeneration of past experience while noviates enjoy novel experiences.

In the light of this highly personalized view of the role of an author, how does *Stories from Central & Southern Africa* measure up? Would I recommend it as a means of getting to know that part of Africa with its peoples and problems? Paul A. Scanlon, the compiler (who taught in Botswana and Swaziland) provides an Introduction in which he states his purpose as "An attempt to represent the diversity of peoples who live and write in this part of the continent: black, white, coloured; Indian, Jew, English, Afrikaner, Portuguese and the different African groups that compose the vast majority of the population" (p. 2). The main issues to which the authors address themselves are identified: apartheid; the disruptive influence of alien cultures, and, as a counterweight, the affirmation of traditional aspects of African societies. Scanlon then proceeds to comment on the individual stories from the pens of an interesting variety of authors including Es'kia (Zeke) Mphahlele, Dan Jacobson, Bessie Head, Nadine Gordimer, Ahmed Essop, Nathaniel (Nat) Nakasa — to mention but a few of the impressive array. Also included are translations of traditional African tales.

The commentary is a useful guide to the themes of the stories, Apartheid, of course, heads the list, with all its compulsively fascinating variety of human situations from the pens of Alan Paton ("Sunlight in Trebison Street"), Dan Jacobson ("Beggar My Neighbour"), and others who have lived through it all. However, there is a progression of stories which turn from apartheid to other aspects of life, whether within the system or outside it. This group includes Luis B. Honwana's "The Old Woman" and Dambudzo Marechera's "The Christmas Reunion" whose themes "transcend apartheid" (p. 6). Nadine Gordimer's "A Soldier's Embrace" illuminates "the heady days of black independence in a southern African country" (p. 5). Zeke Mphahlele's "In Corner B" and Mbulelo Mzamane's "The Soweto Bride" transport one into the world of "life in the black townships" (p. 8); Herman C. Bosman, "Dopper and Papist" and Pauline Smith, "The Sisters," bare the soul of the Afrikaner. Paul Zezela ("The Soldier Without an Ear"), and Bessie Head ("Witchcraft"), mull over the problems facing traditional Black societies. Finally, the folklore of these traditional societies enchant one with what Scanlon calls "reality of the archetypal sort" (p. 11) in translations of "The King of the Waters"

(A. C. Jordan), "Tselane and the Giant" (B. L. Leshoia), and "About a Girl who met a Dimo" (Sinsheela Curtis).

The majority of the short stories are illuminating. Anyone who has lived on the Reef (or even visited it) would sense the power of Nat Nakasa's "Johannesburg, Johannesburg," where the "mine boys . . . walked through town with blankets on their shoulders and loaves of bread under their armpits, to be housed in the hostels of the gold mines" (p. 69). A long way this, from Doris Lessing's "A Sunrise on the Veld," in which a buck is dragged down and devoured alive by predatory ants, and the realization that "All over the bush things like this happen; they happen all the time; this is how life goes on, by living things dying in anguish" (p. 138).

These stories tell one a great deal about life in Central and Southern Africa. Yet Scanlon has missed a few things in his Introduction. For instance, he sees Lessing's contribution as the story of a boy communing with nature, in which the accident of the wounded buck contributes to his growing up. But the ants, surely, is primeval Africa arising, asserting itself, and retreating: "... he could see trickles of ants disappearing into the grass. The whispering noise was faint and dry, like the rustling of a cast snakeskin" (p. 140). There is something awe inspiring here, like *Nkanyamba*, King of the Waters, the massive snake which came to claim his bride, in A. C. Jordan's translation of the Xhosa folk tale. One more example. Jack Cope's "Power" is also seen by the compiler as a commentary on growing up. It is, but not in the way in which Scanlon interprets it. The story involves a young lad who lives outside a city from whence the powerlines run, over the boy's house, and into the distance. (Scanlon correctly sees this as emphasizing "the expanses of nature" [p. 9].) A bird is caught in the lines and is eventually freed by a black man Gas Makabeni, who is an employee of the power company. The boy's gratitude is expressed very simply: "Thanks, Gas." There is nothing racial in this story. It is a story about people. Even more, the powerlines are a magnificent multi-faceted symbol. It conjures up a vision of the massive powerlines from the Cahora Bassa on the Zambezi, in Mozambique, stretching across the South African frontier to feed the ever-hungry Reef industrial complex. Thus much of the power of South Africa is controlled by many Makabenis. But the boy does not see Gas as a black man — he is a liberator of the bird which flies to freedom. The theme of human relations which override colour is strong here. There is another dimension to this skilful and imaginative story. One is reminded of Stephen Spender's "Pylons" in which, "[l]ike whips of anger / with lightning's danger / There runs the quick perspective of the future." And, lastly, while Scanlon may see Dan Jacobson's "Beggar My Neighbour" for the masterly commentary

on apartheid that it is, he seems to have missed the full significance of the black domestic servant taking sides with the white youth against the deprived black children. There are hidden dimensions to apartheid.

Yes, these short stories open windows on life in Central and Southern Africa, but they are best read against a knowledge of history and current conditions, otherwise something is lost in the telling. They are written in English, and Scanlon rightly raises the question of the capacity of that language to express black aspirations (p. 3). (Would that everyone could read "Tselane and the Giant," translated by B. L. Leshai, in Sesotho.) He points out that an African English is emerging. This is one of the exhilarating aspects of Black writing in South Africa. Scattered here and there in the stories are evocative, really untranslatable phrases and sentences which give an unmistakably authentic ring — witness Can Themba's "Kwashiorkor" and Dambudzo Marechera's "The Christmas Reunion." And when the central character in Mbulelo Mzama's "The Soweto Bride" says: "Kyk hier, Fana, julle kans ons nou nie disorganise nie ("Look here, Fana, you can't disorganize us now") — that's authentic Afrikaans — *tsotsi taal*, man!

DONOVAN WILLIAMS

Books Received

BAYLEY, JOHN, *Selected Essays*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984. pp vi, 217. \$39.50; \$14.95 pb.

BRANTLEY, RICHARD E., *Locke, Wesley, and the Method of English Romanticism*. Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1984. pp. xii, 300. \$30.00.

BUTLER, MARILYNN (ed.), *Burke, Paine, Godwin, and the Revolution Controversy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984. pp. xii, 260.

COPE, JACKSON J., *Dramaturgy of the Daemonic: Studies in Antigeneric Theatre from Ruzante to Grimaldi*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984. pp. xiv, 170. \$20.00.

DAYMOND, MARGARET, J. U. JACOBS and MARGARET LENTA (eds.), *Momentum: On Recent South African Writing*. Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 1984. pp. xvi, 320. R 18-00 pb.

DARROCH, VIVIAN, *Voice of Hearing*. Victoria, B.C.: Sono Nis Press, 1984. pp. 101. \$10.00.

GUSTAFSON, RALPH, *At the Ocean's Verge*. Redding Ridge, Conn.: Black Swan Books, 1984. pp. xiv, 158. \$20.00.

JONES, LEONIDAS M., *The Life of John Hamilton Reynolds*. Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1984. pp. xii, 371. \$35.00.

LEVENSON, MICHAEL H., *A Genealogy of Modernism: A Study of English Literary Doctrine 1908-1922*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984. pp. xiv, 250. \$29.95.

MARIANA, PAUL, *A Usable Past: Essays on Modern and Contemporary Poetry*. Amherst, Mass.: University of Massachusetts Press, 1984. pp. x, 270. \$24.00.

NDEBELE, NJABULO S., *Fools and other stories*. Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1983. pp. 280. R 6-95 pb.

PITT, DAVID G., *E. J. Pratt: The Truant Years 1882-1927*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984. pp. xxxii, 415. \$24.95; \$14.95 pb.

RABINOVITZ, RUBIN, *The Development of Samuel Beckett's Fiction*. Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1984. pp. xi, 233. \$17.50.

STANFORD, DONALD E., *The Selected Letters of Robert Bridges: With the Correspondence of Robert Bridges and Lionel Muirhead*. Volume 2. Newark: University of Delaware Press; London and Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1984. pp. 496 (pages 544 to 1039). \$80.00.