# *Book Reviews*

Derek Wright, *Ayi Kwei Armah's Africa: The Sources of His Fiction.* London: Hans Zell, 1989. pp. ix, 334. $60.00.

This is the second monograph on Ayi Kwei Armah, the Ghanaian novelist, short-story writer, and polemical essayist. It is much more substantial than its predecessor, Robert Fraser's *The Novels of Ayi Kwei Armah* (1980), an introductory guide replete with plot summary which deals only with Armah's five novels. Derek Wright, in contrast, assumes a readership familiar with African literature in general and with Armah's novels in particular. Five of his ten chapters, in decreasing order of length, are devoted to the novels; the chapter on *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1968) is longer than those on *Two Thousand Seasons* (1973) and *The Healers* (1978) combined. In addition, Wright provides background chapters on Armah's debt to Frantz Fanon and on the function of ritual in his novels, as well as separate accounts of the seldom studied short stories and essays. There is also a very useful bibliography, listing Armah's own writings up to 1986 and a considerable body of criticism, including over a dozen recent articles on Armah by Wright himself.

In the opening sentence of his introduction, Wright succinctly defines his methodology: "Armah is an African author and his Africanness is the main subject of this work" (1). In focusing on the African roots of Armah's fiction, Wright's book contrasts with earlier studies of Armah, which repeatedly sought out putative European and American sources or analogues for his novels: Sartre, Camus, Faulkner, Joyce, and Ibsen are among the many authors cited in such works. Armah himself, in his trenchant essay "Larsony or Fiction as Criticism of Fiction" (1976), declares that he has "never read even a single work by Joyce"; critics such as Charles Larson, the object of his denunciation here, deploy a "language of indebtedness and borrowing and influence" to imply that "Africa lacks original creativity . . . a normal Western racist assumption." In a later essay, "One Writer's Education" (1985), Armah writes of his sense of himself "not simply as an Akan, an Ewe, a Ghanaian and a West African,

but most strongly and significantly as an African." Following Armah's lead, Wright stresses the pervasive "Africanness" of Armah's fiction: its setting in specific African locations and its nourishment by a rich variety of African rituals, myths, and symbols.

At the same time, however, Wright takes pains to emphasize the individuality of each of Armah's novels. He rightly observes that Armah's vision of Africa "is articulated in five entirely different, independent fictional modes," identifying these respectively as "the classical-cum-allegorical, the semi-autobiographical *Bildungsroman*, the political polemic, the epic and the historical novel" (12). While one might wish to question some of these labels — *Fragments* (1970), for example, is hardly a conventional *Bildungsroman* — the emphasis on each novel's distinctiveness is important. Wright rejects the conventional approach that divides Armah's *oeuvre* into a triptych formed by the first three novels and a diptych formed by the "historical fictions," *Two Thousand Seasons* and *The Healers*; instead, he emphasizes Armah's rare talent for taking new directions in each of his works.

While acknowledging Armah's powers of invention, Wright does not claim that the novels are of equal worth. On the contrary, he perceives a steady decline in Armah's powers, which he identifies with the increasing influence of Fanon on Armah's fiction. Armah's indebtedness to Fanon, on whom he has published a laudatory essay, "Fanon the Awakener," is a well-worn topic, but Wright's chapter on Fanon and Armah contains some provocative ideas. Fanon, Wright contends, "furnishes Armah's fiction with two key images: the all-pervasive, saturative white monolith, and the doomed cycle which causes all energy and movement towards liberation to run itself into a circle of frustration" (43). Like Fanon, Wright contends, Armah moves from "social specifics" in his early novels to "the nebulous, polarized abstractions of whiteness and the Way." And *Two Thousand Seasons*, which Wright rightly regards as the nadir of Armah's work, is said to derive its "sentimental pluralism and vituperative gloating over defeated colonial enemies" from Fanon's "pan-Africanized combative phase" (50). Wright supports this contention by reference not only to the novels themselves but to the over twenty essays published by Armah at various periods, the first (in French) as early as 1960. The attention paid to Armah's non-fictional prose is one of the strengths of this book; the dazzling essay on "Larsony" is already well known, but Wright also analyses important pieces such as those on African socialism, African independence, African revolutionary theory and praxis, and a group of essays on problems of language, translation, and publishing in Africa. Armah's essays should, following the lead of Achebe, Soyinka, and Ngugi wa Thiong'o, be collected in book form.

Another significant part of Armah's work explored in Wright's book are the six short fictions published between 1965 and 1984. These stories, each published in a different magazine, have been largely overlooked by Armah's critics. Wright pays particular attention to two of them, "Contact" (1965) and "An African Fable" (1968), which he depicts as the precursors of, respectively, *Why Are We So Blest?* and *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born.* In the case of "Contact," set in the United States, in which a triangle composed of an African, Kobina, a white girl, Carin, and an Afro-American, Lowell, "looks like a trial sketch of Modin, Aimée and Solo" (25), the argument is persuasive. In the case of "An African Fable," however, there is an obvious problem in chronology. Both the story and the novel, *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, were published in 1968, and Armah states in "Larsony" that the novel was written between 1964 and 1967. Since Wright produces no evidence to show that the story was written earlier, his assertion that it "directly anticipates the first novel's philosophy of perception" (28) is implausible; the story might be better regarded as an outgrowth than as a source of the novel. Wright also claims that another short story, "The Offal Kind" (1969), "appeared in the same year" as *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1968); there is clearly some confusion in the argument here.

*The Healers*, Armah's last novel to date, was completed in 1975 and first published in 1978. Since then, the only fiction published by Armah is the short story "Halfway to Nirvana" (1984), which Wright discusses in his final chapter on "Current Work." The cry of its aptly named hero, Christian Mohamed Tumbo, "Vive la Sécheresse," makes a wonderfully ironic conclusion to this brief, coruscating satire. Wright also draws attention to one of Armah's recent essays, "The Lazy School of Criticism" (1985), which refers to "work on notes for several novels, short stories and essays" (308). Elsewhere, in "One Writer's Education," Armah has written of being "immobilized" by a recurring question: "of what use are skilfully arranged words when the really creative work — changing Africa's social realities for the better — remains inaccessible?" One might hope that "Halfway to Nirvana," which shows that this dilemma can be resolved, will be followed by a new wave of publications by Armah — and eventually by a second edition of Derek Wright's excellent critical study.

PETER SABOR