

## Reading Through The Applause

C. L. Innes and Bernth Lindfors (eds.), *Critical Perspectives on Chinua Achebe* Washington, D.C.: Three Continents Press, 1978, pp. 315, paperback.

Throw away your tattered photocopies! For *Critical Perspectives on Chinua Achebe* represents a seductive and totally logical alternative to scattered references (if not to scattered scholarship). It is undoubtedly correct to claim, as the editors of this volume in the Critical Perspectives series do, that I now have before me "the best and most illuminating" articles on Achebe's writing, brought together so that "interested readers, students and teachers might have easy access to them and become aware of the variety of perspectives and approaches that critics have brought to Achebe's works". Thankfully, too, I note that this volume makes no claims to be anything other than what it is: a useful collection of previously published material (chosen with a level eye for range and depth) from journals such as *African Literature Today*, *Research in African Literatures* and *Critique*, along with extracts from some book-length studies. The editorial nature of the enterprise is emphasised by the retention of the original print-layouts of the articles. So now I have a collection (rather than a scatter); a composite and quantitative advance.

The volume contains the following material: an Editors' Introduction, five General Essays, five articles on differing aspects of *Things Fall Apart*, two on *No Longer At Ease*, five papers on *Arrow of God*, three on *A Man of the People*, a single article on Achebe's poetry (from Philip Rogers), and the obligatory (yet genuinely useful) Bibliography. I would not want to quarrel with this arrangement—there has been little significant writing on the short stories, *Girls At War*—as a representative response within the current trend of Achebe criticism. More than that, the articles chosen are (by almost any criteria) the cream of present scholarship in this area. The editors, too, see it that way. Here is their discussion of the range of critical approaches represented:

... some have focussed on narrative technique (Iyasere, Carroll), some on particular images and symbols (Jabbi, Ramadan and Weinstock), some on the historical and cultural context (Brown, Obiechina, Wren, Lindfors), some on the comparisons with English poets suggested by the titles (Stock, Wilson). Character ... has been a recurring topic for debate in critical discussions. Point of view and the problem of judging Achebe's attitude towards his narrator have been the central concerns for readers and critics of the two novels set in contemporary Nigeria. Although early reviews and commentaries tended to identify Achebe with Obi and Odili and take their statements at face value, the need to see them ironically has been shown convincingly by such critics as Felicity Riddy, Arthur Ravenscroft, Gareth Griffiths and David Carroll. Language, style and Achebe's use of proverbs are topics which have engaged critics of all four novels. ... Kolawole Ogungbesan's "Politics and the African Writer" ... represents those who have argued against Achebe's critical theory and for the separation of literature and politics ...

and so on. These, then, are the current critical concerns and in *Critical Perspectives on Chinua Achebe* they find often eloquent and sometimes incisive expression. Bernth Lindfors' article "The Palm-Oil With Which Achebe's Words Are Eaten" has become a seminal work in one area of linguistic analysis of Achebe's narrative. "Cultural Norms and Modes of Perception", from Lloyd W. Brown, demonstrates

that text-analysis can fruitfully involve far more than a description of 'character', 'plot', 'image', 'theme' and 'setting'. One also finds A. G. Stock's magnificent summation of Yeats' world-view (yet that of Achebe seems more elusive), while David Carroll's analysis of *A Man of the People* is both wide-ranging and enlightening. These segments are, for me, the high points of this collection.

Leaving the question of whether these are the 'best' articles on Achebe resolved in the positive, there remains a strong sense of intellectual unease. I find an insidious tendency to applaud Achebe's work, to collude with the object of criticism in a conspiracy of eloquence rather than reading it 'against the grain' of authorial intention; rather than showing the works in their contradictory perspective. In many of the papers the critical dice are already heavily loaded. The editors, in their introduction, write of revealing "the complexity and richness of Achebe's vision and artistry" (what is complexity? richness? vision? artistry?). I find Achebe described as "a highly-skilled craftsman" (Mahood) and as a novelist whose fiction "never fails to transcend the local and particular" while it enters "realms of universal significance" (Lindfors). This tendency towards Achebe-idolatry is unfortunate for a number of reasons. It takes the critics' (and the students') attention away from the texts, in favour of author-evaluation. It pays little or no regard to the fact that these texts are the product of more than the author (a notion of individual 'genius' is intuitively smothering the historical/ideological/intertextual position of the works). It makes use of loose terminology (covering unchallenged assumptions) that mystifies both the identity of the texts and the practice of criticising them. It replaces incisive insights with easy praise.

Reading through this collection I have the feeling that insufficient theoretical rigour has been brought to the criticism of Achebe's works. The elements of critical applause ('complexity', 'highly-skilled' and so on) are added to the debate in an often gratuitous manner as if the central question is 'how good is Achebe?' rather than the more productive 'what is the identity/significance of his works?'. Vague, and sometimes romantically rhetorical debate often tends to subvert the critical endeavour. C. L. Innes, for example, writes of "the poetry of the African World" (what is that?) possibly becoming the "life-giving rain on the parched tongue of the English tradition". Does African Literature, then, exist to feed the needs of an English tradition? And what has this to do with "Language, Poetry and Doctrine in *Things Fall Apart*"? Ahiola Irele, rightly regarded as one of the more perceptive critics in the field, nevertheless contributes to this general limitation when (working within an essentially outdated theoretical position of 'realism' as mirror) he writes of the "real world of the novel" and, with neo-Aristotelian fervour that certainly reduces the text's performance, criticises *No Longer at Ease* for having, potentially, a tragic theme but a hero (Obi) who is "simply not the stuff of which a tragic character is made". Ignoring, or not knowing of, modern criticism in the area of literature and ideology, one critic comments on "the accuracy of Achebe's vision" of Nigerian events. What is 'accurate'? Where is the 'vision', inside or outside the text? In place of a relatively naive structure of relationships—running from *life to author imitating life to work "reflecting" authors intentions to reader: critic struggling to grasp them*—we clearly need to develop more fruitful models of approach in this field of criticism. Indeed it is to the editors' undoubted credit that they perceive this need. They hope to "provide a basis for the continuation of debates" while suggesting "areas which remain problematic, the issues which need further definition and exploration." This collection of articles certainly does both.

From where are new models of approach to come? Several theoretical texts would

provide not immediately transferable models but, at the very least, indications of potentially more productive avenues that could be added to (or, in some areas, preferably replace) those evidenced in this collection. In the field of levels of meaning and reception: Roman Ingarden's *The Literary Work of Art* and *The Cognition of the Literary Work of Art*. In terms of literature and history, the generic response: *The Historical Novel* from Georg Lukacs. In the area of authorial ideology and text performance: Terry Eagleton's *Criticism and Ideology*. On the question of narrative stance: Franz Stanzel's *Narrative Situations in the Novel*. In the field of narrative coding and the signifying of meaning: Roland Barthes' *S/Z* and Jonathan Culler's *Structuralist Poetics*. A handling of theoretical models suggested by works such as these would tend to question the rather impressionistic nature of present critical approaches to Achebe's work. More positively, when one then wrote 'complex', 'real', 'accurate', or 'highly-skilled' the terms (*if used at all*) would not be applause but meaningful criticism.

Responding to the editors' comments regarding areas needing further exploration, several important 'spaces' (in the present arena of criticism) can be suggested. There is the question of temporal and spatial organisation in Achebe's texts. I think, here, of the circular/axis patterning of *Things Fall Apart* (the centre cannot hold) where there is a significant correlation between the outlines of space, the timing of Okonkwo's movements, and the ideological 'fulcrum' of the text's value-system. The possibilities of this area of criticism have been made evident by Garry Gillard's work at Murdoch University ("Formal Aspects of Fictive Narrative in Africa"). Another fascinating area currently obvious by its absence is that of text-ideology (a discussion that would go beyond, and beneath, the rather sterile debate on the nature of commitment) where one could usefully examine and question the ideological values (a liberal humanism?) affirmed by Achebe's works. It seems symptomatic of present criticism that Ngugi's important question:

Which do you change first in a society—its politico-economic base (new foundations for a new house of a different nature) or the morality of individual men and women?

comes at the end of his article in this collection rather than at the beginning. Aspects of length and brevity, genre options (the historical novel or the 'realist' novel), Achebe's handling of action, the question of fictive closure, significant contradictions within individual texts and across the corpus of works, the measurable absences of Achebe's texts (covered by irony?), the changing response following the Nigerian Civil War: these areas, and many more, ask for our attention.

One word of warning: treat this collection gently. The cover of my paperback edition has already come adrift. I will resist the obvious pun, for *Critical Perspectives on Chinua Achebe* deserves better than that.

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## The Queen's Prayer and Other Poems

Broughton Gingell, *The Queen's Prayer and Other Poems*, Salisbury: Longman (Rhodesia), 1977, pp. 55, paperback.

To march towards great figures  
Sungathered on the crags,  
Quite shadowless— (p. 10)

These lines at the end of the poem "To meet the Arab Kings" seem to sum up many of the poems in this anthology. The reflections on, and responses to a variety of experiences in the Middle East and Africa, particularly Zimbabwe (Rhodesia) by Broughton Gingell, show that he is an observant, thoughtful and caring person, who is grappling with some of the very basic questions about life. As Archbishop Patrick Chakaipa of Salisbury, Rhodesia, says in his introduction: "The philosophy which Mr. Gingell has aimed at communicating in this collection of poetry ... is that human resolution is effective through faith; that each man's spirit must aim at realising his values, and thus at achieving his own Jerusalem."

Gingell is obviously aware of much loneliness and darkness in life but his response is not to despair; rather it is to struggle and search, to "lift our faces to our futures" (p. 14) and find signs of hope and assurance. He suggests that life may be full of shadows; indeed, these poems contain numerous references to them:

I must be pleased to walk within my world;  
But all I see are shadows in the sand (p. 1).

Before my face the shadows all kneel down  
In phantom supplication (p. 2).

We drive through shadows to the frontiers of our bands (p. 4).

He refers to the "whistling shadows" (p. 4) of the shining city we seek and feels "a crown of shadows" (p. 10) but is not dismayed:

And in the shadows do I stand triumphantly (p. 15).

Despite great feelings of loneliness and the overwhelming nature of the shadows, his faith rises as "man's sky-searching voice" (p. 16) in a "search for the loves of light and darkness" (p. 18) seeks "glimpses of serenity" (p. 49).

Loosened with love, spirits glide to reach  
And tap the faces of Eternity (p. 18).

Gingell is aware of the "Spirits of Zimbabwe" (p. 34) and seeks inspiration from the "Warriors, kinsmen of an unknown race." He is obviously inspired also by Blake:

William Blake and his brother angels  
Are the greatest soldiers and heralds of God (p. 11).

In the Rhodesian context he could look to Arthur Shearly Cripps, the missionary and mystic, who has also found great inspiration in the African bush and the events of his day. Gingell reflects too, on the great Zimbabwe Ruins, carvings by Job

**Buried in dense fog**

Critical Perspectives on  
Chinua Achebe

Edited by C.L. Innes and Bernth  
Lindfors. Heinemann Education-  
al Books Price: £2.90.

**U**NDoubtedly there is an unwritten, but well established law which demands that literary criticism, to be taken seriously, must be written in language no self-respecting reader would burden himself to comprehend, least of all, to enjoy. Small wonder the only people likely to take literary criticism seriously are literary critics themselves, or more likely, those aspiring to that rather esoteric circle.

If it is not necessarily true that all literary critics are failed writers, there may well be an argument to the converse: that many a failed writer has donned the academic cap and gown of a literary critic. In any event, the essays contained in these two volumes seldom rise above the dense fog of academic language, which is, perhaps, criticism of the set formula whereby something is judged academically acceptable, rather than a point blank dismissal or acceptance of what is being said.

Certainly no African writer's work has been discussed from as many angles as Chinua Achebe's; and in *Critical Perspectives on Chinua Achebe*, what one is in for (but only if one is genuinely serious) can be surmised from titles such as 'Cultural Norms and Modes of Perception in Chinua Achebe's Fiction,' or 'Language and Action in the Novels of Chinua Achebe.'

Few of the essays contained here are as down-to-earth as Kolawole Ogungbesan's *Politics and the African Writer*. Not that Ogungbesan's writing is any less heavily weighted, but at least he's sufficiently strong in opinion, and indeed anger at times, as not to read like the kind of dissertations one associates with university work.

**Going to Heaven**

Going to Heaven by Wilson  
Katiyo. Rex Collings, London,  
Price £4.95

Rex Collings, London,  
Price £4.95

**W**ILSON Katiyo's second novel continues the story of Alexio Shonga, a young Zimbabwean man. Like many fellow Zimbabweans have done over the past years, Alexio finds himself in the situation where he decides to escape across the Rhodesian border to Zambia. He continues his journey from there to England to finish his education. His wife and daughter have been killed by Rhodesian security forces, his home village burnt down and his relatives moved to the 'protected' villages. He himself is in danger as he was, at one time, a member of the liberation army.

With this background of misery and suffering the reader is given an insight into Alexio's reactions to the new difficulties of his life in England. He is Black in a White society and his encounters and interactions with

people are influenced by his awareness of this. Not only is there the problem of adaptation to the new society, but Alexio also has to cope with his worries about home and face doubts about the relevance of his studies to the cause of his people.

Katiyo writes convincingly and touchingly about the events, people and situation in Zimbabwe. The account of the course Alexio's life takes in England seems somewhat superficial. Nevertheless the contrast shown between the two different kinds of life Alexio finds himself in is enough to help us understand his difficulties and reactions.

*Going to Heaven* clearly expresses Wilson's attainment of the promise shown in his first book, *A Son of the Soil*. Beautifully written, the traumatic experiences in the flawed heaven of England are conveyed in a simple if racy style which compels the reader's attention. Wilson has arrived, but Alexio, sadly, still has a long way to go in his uphill struggle for survival. ■

**Vacuous dialogue**

The Path of Treachery: From  
Dialogue to Shuttle Diplomacy in  
Southern Africa.

Artcolor Productions Limited,  
Lagos 1979

**T**HE immorality and evil nature of apartheid has never been disputed. It epitomises man's gross inhumanity to man. But how can it be combatted? There are those who believe in 'dialogue' and those who regard this approach as futile. The OAU's stance on this question is unequivocal: since all avenues for peaceful development have been blocked there is no room for 'dialogue'. But the main question, to fight or not to

pared to stake almost everything to restore the Black man's dignity. The latter do not believe in 'dialogue'. The former favour it because they believe that their commercial interests will be best protected if the Whites remained in charge.

Ogunsade's book is a good chronicle of how 'dialogue' has not only failed to deliver the goods, but how in several aspects it is an insult added to injury. This is beautifully expressed in an open letter to the late Kofi Busia who, as Prime Minister of Ghana between 1969 and 1972, advocated 'dialogue'. The writer, F.G. Mante is quoted to have told the Ghanaian leader:

'You have said time and again that one would be surprised how much one could achieve by sitting down and