

Dealing with Evils: Essays on Writing from Africa.

Annie Gagiano. 2008. Stuttgart: Ibidem. Verlag ibidem. 239 pp. ISBN: 978-3-89821-867-2.

This collection of essays by one of South Africa's most admired postcolonial critics collects a range of discrepant engagements with literary texts as diverse as Hendrik's Khoisan *Dwaalstories* (retold by Eugene Marais, and originally published in 1921 in *Huisgenoot*), the eruptive postmodern ruminations of Dambudzo Marechera, the literary-archival projects of A.C. Jordan, and novels by Bessie Head, Wole Soyinka, Unity Dow, Damon Galgut, Mandla Langa, Mongane Serote and Nuruddin Farah. The essays – without exception – are persuasive, each combining a close reading of the intersection of text and context in order to demonstrate some of the ways in which African writers “lay claim to a shareable truth and sphere of experience and to a border-crossing aesthetic power” (x).

The variety of engagements is united by this conviction, which is quite at odds with the precepts of postmodernism: that the range of writers discussed engage evils – apartheid, colonialism, but also the tendrils of violence snaking through their own communities – with a discursive dexterity that permits them to elaborate meaningful portraits of social complexities, and through which the social and political imaginary can be invigorated. In a world of academic modesty that often masks a diminishing faith in the power of literature, Gagiano continues to stand out as a strident defender of African expressive cultures as contending meaningfully with power and its history. In relation to the *Dwaalstories*, for instance, she suggests that her focus might ‘be a small contribution to the reconfiguration of the past (even, perhaps) the present of South African society’ (7). Few critics continue to be this unabashed in the claims they make for

the potential impact of the literary and its interpretation.

It is impossible to do justice to the thirteen essays comprising this volume. Let me trace the argument in three, which should give some sense of the critical and ideological project of the collection.

In “Marechera Postmodernism”, Gagiano, like many critics before her, takes Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* as the “archetypical European modernist text” (28), which engages doubt at two levels: in relation to European epistemological supremacy and with respect to the legitimacy of European expansionism. She goes on to argue that even if we concede Conrad's acknowledgement of these limits, we have to recognize – with Achebe – that he reiterates the Manichean representational economy on which colonial racism depends. The modernist novel, then, staging itself as critique, in fact reinforces the very discursive and hence political dynamics it would seem to oppose. An African postmodernist, like Marechera, Gagiano suggests, scrambles – in a performance of Rabelaisian excess – the very symbolic economy on which the modernist novel (with its inherent contradictions) depends. Marechera's vitriolic play cuts across the ordering of the world through which a politics of subjugation is perpetuated, at the same time as it unravels the simplistic binaries intrinsic to nationalistic versions of African modernity. In order to apprehend the import of challenges such as Marechera's, she concludes “African scholars need to work hard to focus more attention on the intellectual contributions of the continent, whereas Western scholars need to make more effort not only to make the acquaintance, but to pay sufficient attention to African authors in order to respect and understand their insights and their art” (41).

In another essay, Gagiano identifies a particular feminist bravery in Unity Dow's *Screaming of the Innocent*, a novel that investi-

gates – using the detective mode – the social complexities of *muti* killing and dismemberment. Dow, a human and woman's rights activist and High Court judge in Botswana, traces the complex lineaments of predation that resulted in the killing and mutilation of a young Gaborone secondary school student in 1993. Generally shrouded in a conspiracy of silence, her novel exposes the realities of such murders, indicating the collusion of the powerful in maintaining the "superstitious awe" (79) that prevents the effective investigation of these cases. Never an expression of "tradition" in any real sense, these killings are instead acts of power – performed by the most powerful – in which the vulnerable (women and children) are cruelly harvested in the pursuit of material prosperity. Dow's novel is unflinching in its willingness to face up to the 'innocent's screams' (82).

Gagiano's analysis of Mongane Serote's *To Every Birth its Blood* (the essay is subtitled, "Painting the true colours of apartheid") is one of the most developed and interesting in her collection. The novel has, of course, been the subject of sustained critical debate, often dividing the formalists (who see a failure in its division into two parts employing quite different literary modes) from the historicists (who identify in the division the eruption of the historical realities of 1976 and the general recourse to a mass politics of resistance). Gagiano's analysis is the first that I have read which is not preoccupied with the division, but traces instead the continuities of the text: its emphasis on community and networks, its variegated representation of the experience of oppression and violent degradation, the dynamics of inclusivity born of subalternity, and the ways in which sectarian politics are resisted in favour of "non-partisanship" (126). Whereas debates about the novel have all staged, in one way or another, its politics and aesthetics as contrasting (as if the text at different points achieves either aesthetic co-

gency or political accuracy), Gagiano argues that the novel consistently achieves both "poetic and moral texturing" (130); that it succeeds in being both aesthetically compelling and politically insightful. This accomplishment makes *To Every Birth its Blood*, in Gagiano's estimation, "the most profound and adequate literary examination [of apartheid] yet written in English" (111).

Even rehearsing only three arguments in this rich collection gives some sense of its general approach. All of Gagiano's interventions are concerned to demonstrate the need to engage African texts in all of their (social, political and aesthetic) complexity without recourse to the simplistic binaries of literary modernism or the convenient categories of formalist critique. If anything limits her approach, though, it is her abiding sense of an *unadulterated* capacity of literature to "speak truth to power" (to quote Said's injunction to postcolonial intellectuals). Her version of literature – given this conviction – remains somewhat hydraulic, and it seems, as a consequence, occasionally oblivious to the ways in which modes of apparent 'resistance' are potentially complicit in the discourses they seem to oppose. Further, Gagiano's almost evangelical sense of 'truth' and symbolic 'redress' lead her to reiterate a rather binary juxtaposition of 'Africa' and the 'West', which seems at times reductive.

Despite this minor hesitation, Gagiano's literary and ideological convictions make the essays in *Dealing with Evils* impassioned, clear and memorable, and there is no doubt in my mind that each will become a touchstone in subsequent debates.

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