

should be regarded as a threat by oppressive governments. In "Red Music" Skvorecky challenges the theory that jazz or the blues are in themselves social or political protests; it is the context of slavery or dictatorship which makes it so. He maintains that "totalitarian ideologists loathe art, the product of a yearning for life, because . . . it evades control . . . thus creative energy becomes protest" (p. 10).

In "The Bass Saxophone" it is the context of the times that turns playing jazz into one of the few avenues of protest. The narrative is set against the background of Nazi-occupied Czechoslovakia and tells the story of a group of traveling musicians, sent from town to town to entertain the local Nazis during the war. When this motley crew arrive in the town of Kosteletz, they secretly conscript a young Czech to replace their bass saxophonist who is mysteriously unable to perform. The young man is a jazz buff and even though playing with these Germans would be tantamount to treason, he would give his eyeteeth to be able to jam with them and play the bass saxophone. At the rehearsal he soon discovers the limitations of the wartime repertoire and style. The musicians though technically proficient remind him of an orchestra; the oompapa music played with mechanical perfection is enough to destroy the soul. As the story unfolds the bass saxophone itself becomes a symbol of our challenge, of our possibility to protest no matter how fleeting the opportunity. Originally published in 1967 "The Bass Saxophone" is disturbingly prophetic given the ensuing political events in Czechoslovakia.

In "Emöke" jazz is not overtly the subject. It is a lyrical story in a Chekhovian vein, about a self-centered young man away on summer holiday and his attempt at seducing a mysterious woman by the name of Emöke. Emöke in a sense is the embodiment of music; she is sensuous and erotic and awakens those feelings in men. Like music, like the blues, she represents our longing for the spiritual and at the same time our sensual bond with the physical. "Emöke" reads like a piece of music. A sentence may go on for pages; a word, its synonym, another word defining the first from another perspective, more exact, more abstract, more philosophical, more precise, choosing, searching for a word or network of words which would more clearly bear witness to the experience.

Skvorecky's prose sings like a jazz improvisation. That this is not lost in the English is a tribute to the translator Kaca Polackova-Henley who was confronted with a mammoth task which for the most part was beautifully accomplished. There are however moments in "Emöke" when the reader trips over expressions made awkward by an unfortunate translation.

Both "Emöke" and "The Bass Saxophone" have a haunting and mysterious quality about them. They talk about the irretrievable, the lost opportunity, the helpless moments when life seems so arbitrary and we cannot intervene to change the course of events. Sometimes one cannot explain phenomena, the best one can do is describe them. Skvorecky describes them beautifully. With his wandering narrative technique he brings every action to its logical absurd conclusion, its inevitable destiny where dreams are petrified, passions are expended, and indifference sets in.

Although the three pieces of this book are truly comic in many ways, the grotesque assortment of humanity inextricably caught in the web of uncontrollable circumstances—uncontrollable out of personal or political necessity—they leave us in the end with the echo of a screaming bass saxophone and a feeling of immeasurable sadness.

C. Eileen Thalenberg

O. R. DATHORNE

African Literature in the Twentieth Century

London: Heinemann, 1975. Pp. 387.

Professor Dathorne's *African Literature in the Twentieth Century* is a work which deserves close attention for many reasons. Whatever else African literature may be taken to mean or include, it is certainly more than literature written in English and French. This fact has not always been reflected in previous works purporting to study African literature as a whole. Authors

of such books have tended to emphasize only creative writing in the European languages, usually English and French, in which they themselves as critics are competent. The result has been that African writers of English and French expression have enjoyed a considerable critical attention while their counterparts who write either in Portuguese or in the various indigenous languages of Africa have largely been neglected. It is therefore interesting to see in O. R. Dathorne a critic who is willing and able to face the real challenge of African literature as a continental body of writing.

A point of equal interest in Dathorne's study is his realization that modern African writing has its roots in Africa's oral literary culture. Accordingly, he has made considerable effort to place contemporary writing in Africa in the wider context of this oral art which preceded and even continues to flourish side by side with written literature. This is a practical demonstration of the sort of critical awareness for which scholars interested in examining African literature from the inside have always pleaded. The plea itself stems from the fact that no national or continental literature can be fully understood without reference to the cultural heritage which defines its true tradition. Dathorne's statement that "The literature in the written vernacular languages of Africa provides an imaginative link between unwritten indigenous literature and writing in European languages" (P. 1) accurately defines the nature of African literature and more specifically the sort of literary interaction which prevails in it.

It is, however, in his study of individual writers that the true nature of the book becomes very clear. The work is essentially a general literary history of African literature rather than a sustained critique of individual writers. Consequently, the discussion of individual writers is rather sketchy and occasionally certain works are dismissed in just a sentence. However, this interest in a panoramic approach does not necessarily mean that the author fails to make incisive observations about certain writers. His discussion of Cyprian Ekwensi is, for instance, very sound, for he succeeds in charting Ekwensi's literary development and in defining his place in contemporary African writing. Like most other critics of T. M. Aluko, Dathorne makes a questionable observation by regarding the writer as an artist who de-

bunks "the African tradition." Aluko is a writer who is yet to be properly evaluated. The critic's conclusions about him derive not really from his works, but from what can only be seen as a misplaced expectation namely that every African writer, exploring his traditional past, should adopt the posture of the Achebe school.

On the whole, one can only regard this book as timely and necessary especially for two categories of students of African literature: the student who is interested in the origin, development, and regional characteristics of African literature, and the foreign student of African literature who will require much background information in order to explore with confidence the world of modern creative writing in Africa.

Francis E. Ngwaba

JOHN BRAINE

The Pious Agent

London: Eyre Methuen, 1975.

Pp. 252.

The varied forms of metaphysical speculation, so well adapted to the literary exploration of the ironies and vagaries of existence, have often been exploited by the writer of spy thrillers. The concealed web of theatrical expedients woven by a secret intelligence has provided a "nice" analogical model for a hidden order governing men and their actions on the dark stage of life. That the conceptual ground of some fiction of this kind should be explicitly theological, as in works by Chesterton, Greene, and Burgess, for example, is therefore not surprising. John Braine's *The Pious Agent*, the tale of the ruthlessly efficient British Catholic agent, Xavier Flynn, is another such fiction. Unfortunately, it appears to fall far short of the standards set by the finest of its antecedents.