

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.

It seems to me that in any fiction grounded on theology there are certain desiderata for eliciting the conviction of the informed and experienced reader: that the theology be presented accurately; that the theology be seen as significant; and that this significance and precision be incorporated with verisimilitude into the body of the fiction. The theological framework of Braine's thriller is summarized (with disarming facility) in a verse from the New Testament providing one of its epigraphs: "Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and unto God the things which are God's" (Matthew 22:21). The protagonist, a "pious agent," treats this directive as a straightforward strong disjunctive; he does not go beyond the Pharisaic self-deception of a theological legalism at once transparent and childish. Flynn murders and betrays for the state, while keeping the celestial ledger balanced by timely acts of contrition. The nescience of Flynn's religious views (since he has every intention to continue to murder and to lie for the state, his acts of contrition are invalid—a fact which even a schoolchild memorizing his catechism would know) may very well leave the informed reader slightly mystified at its banality. It may make the reader wonder why the author has chosen to present us with such an unconvincing tyro.

A precise and comprehensive notion of piety, secular and religious, has sufficient tragic irony built into it to allow, as other writers have shown since Aeschylus, for a more mature and better informed treatment of a profound theme. A reading of Pius XII's inaugural encyclical, *Summi Pontificatus*, published in the twilight of 1939, might also have suggested to the author that the theme of "piety" has been examined by Flynn's preceptors; and with what ironies, as history has shown, to our anguish and enlightenment. Braine's theological frame in *The Pious Agent*, in short, does not go beyond the propaedeutics of childhood.

Also, the literary form of the work, memoranda between agents and their departments, seems to me just a little worn, an analogue perhaps of the Bond-like clichés of gadgetry which mark the landscape. As with the form, so with the principal character. Flynn's final enlightenment has an impact of some significance, in my view, only if the reader has not gone beyond the oversimplifications of that might be termed theological boy-scoutism.

Flynn's theology, his character, and the literary form expressing that character strike me as far from convincing or significant. *The Pious Agent* has much to offer the reader who gleans his theology from thrillers alone. To others, I suspect, the work offers a faintly entertaining spectacle of the first few steps of an ill-informed spiritual novice. From the author of *The Crying Game*, one who declared, "I do have very strong political beliefs and in a sense can't separate them from my religious beliefs" (*Contemporary Novelists* [London: Macmillan, 1972], p. 167), one might have expected something more mature.

Camille R. LaBossière

#### STEFAN THEMERSON

*General Piesc or the Case of the Forgotten Mission*

London: Gaberbocchus, 1976.  
Pp. 54.

Stefan Themerson's *General Piesc* is an allegorical novella full of humor, irony, and sarcasm; a well-written and highly entertaining story. Although he is known for his philosophical and controversial works (See *IFR*, 1, No. 1 [1974], 70-71), Mr. Themerson's latest book is not problematical or demanding in any way—neither stylistically nor intellectually.

In less than fifty pages the author succeeds in narrating—but not explaining—a strange incident that happens to a retired Polish general who lives in London alone after his wife had run away with another man. The story begins with General Piesc winning a large sum of money (£ 129,740) in the Pools. Instead of enjoying life as people expected him to, he decides to accomplish a mission which he had been planning for twenty-five years. After he equips himself with a new mackintosh "with exceptionally large pockets," (p. 11) and a "gun loaded with one solitary bullet,"