

Lois Oppenheim, editor

*THREE DECADES OF THE FRENCH NEW NOVEL*,

translated from the French by Lois Oppenheim and Evelyne Costa de Beauregard

Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986. Pp. 213

Reviewed by Ben Stoltzfus

In the fall of 1982, a colloquium was held at New York University to honor the achievements of the French New Novel. *Three Decades of the French New Novel* is Lois Oppenheim's useful edited collection of the colloquium's essays and papers. It includes good translations into English of presentations that were originally given in French by Alain Robbe-Grillet, Claude Simon, Nathalie Sarraute, and Robert Pinget. Each author's essay is followed by one or more scholarly papers defining the significance of the writer's work and of the New Novel.

In an era of reader-response theory that devalues the author's creative role, I found the novelists' presentations both enlightening and informed--a valuable corrective to the notion that authorial intent is an outmoded concern. Valuable also are the dialogues generated by two roundtable discussions, one between the French New Novelists and their critics, and the second one with the participation of four American innovative novelists--John Barth, Jonathan Baumbach, Robert Coover, and John Hawkes--who may be viewed, more or less, as writing a type of metafiction that is similar to the stuff being published by their French counterparts. Although the papers given by the academics are less stimulating than the novelists', that is perhaps not surprising, and no doubt as it should be.

Here is a sampling of random statements. Robbe-Grillet: "The mobility of structures may be one of the most important things in modern art as a whole" (63). Simon: "In the same way that Valéry used to say that the world was threatened by two dangers, order and disorder, language could be said to be threatened by two dangers as well: on the one hand, that of being considered only as a vehicle of meaning and, on the other hand, that of being considered only as a structure, for it is always *simultaneously* both" (81-82). Sarraute: ". . . what Alain Robbe-Grillet writes and what I write are exactly the same, except entirely different. In my work, it is a stream of internal movements, and in his, it is an interplay of external stills" (128). "Tropisms are my characters and their unforeseeable development is, in my work, the plot" (129). Pinget: "Every work of art is more or less a dangerous game which may well be mortal" (149). And "I have attempted an approach to the dark face of language, in order to make it easier for unconscious values to break through and thus enlarge the field of my conscious activity" (150). Hawkes: "I discovered that the enemies of fiction are plot, character, setting, and theme" (202). Coover: "As for the reaction against realism and the traditional novel, I have the feeling that this has been a worldwide phenomenon, having to do with general intellectual and social currents, not just fiction itself" (201). Barth: "It is not the anecdote that is missing from the New Novel, let us say, but its character of innocence, the innocent anecdote" (203). Baumbach: "It strikes me that the very act of denying our relationship to the French has made that relationship more insistently evident. The connection between us is real. We have learned from their explorations; we have admired the audacity of their work" (209). I hope these excerpts will give some sense of the originality, flavor, and wit of the collection.

The colloquium at New York University was the first major gathering of New Novelists and their critics since the one held at Cerisy-la-Salle in 1971. It offered possibilities for retrospective thinking in evaluating the "nouveau roman." Indeed, the essays by Lois Oppenheim, Tom Bishop, Michel Rybalka, François Jost, Barney Rosset, Ralph Sarkonak, Monique Wittig, and Leon S. Roudiez make important contributions to the understanding of the four French authors in particular and to the New Novel in general. Space does not allow an in-depth commentary, but the variety, originality, and eclecticism of all the papers is well worth the purchase price.

The American writers who participated in the colloquium were interested not only in exploring the aesthetic and technical affinities of their French counterparts, but also in paying tribute to their colleagues from abroad. *Three Decades of the French New Novel* will remind readers of the two-volume edition by the Union Générale d'Éditions (10/18)

based on the 1971 Cerisy-la-Salle colloquium. However, instead of exploring the problems relating to the New Novel, such as the relationship of the "nouveau roman" to film, criticism, phenomenology, politics, and so forth, the New York colloquium delineates the present situation of the New Novel within a retrospective framework. It is an excellent addition to the library of all readers interested in the "nouveau roman," innovative fiction, and the "trans-Atlantic refraction"--the name Harry Levin once gave to French-American literary connections.

George M. Gugelberger

## *MARXISM AND AFRICAN LITERATURE*

London: James Currey, 1985. Pp. 226, £8.95

Reviewed by Gerald Moore

This is the first selection of essays on African literature written from any clearly stated and consistent ideological viewpoint. Criticism of African literature has remained curiously innocent of the fierce debates raging elsewhere. It has ranged between the conservative and somewhat Eurocentric contributions of critics like Dan Izevbaye of Nigeria or Eustace Palmer of Freetown, the black nationalism of Chinweizu and his collaborators (which is really a substitute for a proper ideology) and the lonely excursions into structuralism by Sunday Anozie.

In his introduction, Professor Gugelberger writes of the maturing of the radical alternative in criticism with the work of Ngugi, Okot p'Bitek, Peter Nazareth and others appearing over the past decade. Within African universities, significant contributions to Marxist criticism are being made by scholars like Claude Aké, Onafume Onoge, Grant Kamenju, Biodun Jeyifo, and Tunde Fatunde. The time is therefore ripe for a volume which pulls together some of this work for the first time and which situates it historically both in the developing stream of Marxist interpretation and in that of African literary criticism.

These tasks are performed respectively in Professor Gugelberger's introduction and in his essay on "Marxist Literary Debates and Their Continuity in African Literary Criticism." He highlights the relevance of Brecht's critical writings to this debate. These are probably still too little known in Africa, having only recently come in for proper attention in Europe, where they have been overshadowed by Brecht's huge contribution to modern theatre practice. Their neglect in Africa is evidenced by Grant Kamenju's essay on '*Petals of Blood* as a mirror of the African Revolution;' This verges most closely of any here upon "crude Marxism" and it is notable that Kamenju's references to Marxist authority are confined to Marx himself and to Lenin's *Materialism and Empirico-Criticism*, both a little "old hat" so far as contemporary intellectual debate is concerned. Interestingly, Kamenju singles out for praise a passage in *Petals of Blood* (1976) which is condemned by Peter Nazareth in his own essay on the book for thrusting highly improbable and uncharacteristic thoughts into the mind of the old guerilla fighter Abdulla; Nazareth points out that this is one of several places in a generally impressive novel where Ngugi has intruded into the book to make sure that the reader gets the right ideological message. This suggests that Ngugi is not as confident as he should be that the book contains its own powerfully integrated meaning; a meaning which, as with all true works of art, cannot be filleted and preached directly to the reader without damage to the fabric of the work itself. This is a mistake that Ngugi never makes in *A Grain of Wheat* (1967), a less ambitious but more completely achieved work of art.

If Ngugi wa Thing'o is something of a socialist hero for many of these authors, Wole Soyinka emerges as something of a bugbear. In one of the most profound and carefully-argued essays, Geoffrey Hunt demonstrates the romantic individualism which lies at the