

the seven novels he has produced since 1947, six share the theory that violence is the universal solution to social injustice. In all his works, but particularly in *Chambacú, corral de negros* (1963; Chambacú, a Black Ghetto) and *Changó, el gran putas* (1983; Changó, the Great SOB) he has defended the African identity of millions of Caribbean peoples but without rejecting Hispanic heritage. In *A Saint Is Born in Chimá*, characters, background, and lore are again Afro-Hispanic. The plot is itself the gradual development of a myth that will soon enrich the cultural identity of a people. A cripple, Domingo Vidal, is rescued unscathed from a fire, and this is believed by the people of Chimá to be a miracle. He progressively gains a popularity that soon borders on fanaticism. Some simple deeds he performs amount in the mind of the Chimaleros to actual miracles. The spontaneous fervor the people feel for this redeemer is contrasted in the novel with religion and with political systems, which govern by force and fear. A Jesus-like figure, Domingo Vidal dies of natural causes at age 33, but by then he has already given the wretched existence of the villagers a new meaning. Authorities fail to realize that the Chimá "saint" symbolized the people's need for self-pride and psychic liberation to help alleviate social injustice. The Chimaleros demand that their saint be canonized, upon which the Church accuses them of plain idolatry. Authorities send troops to intimidate the restive villagers and the Church orders Vidal's corpse unearthed and then quartered. Interpreting this deed as assassination, the locals revolt. Fanaticism is the new strength they have gained, and upon the flight of the armed forces in the face of a collective uprising, the oppressed come to a sudden realization of their own power.

Zapata Olivella uses folklore, religion, economics and psychology to illustrate how a revolutionary myth evolves. Domingo Vidal, the cripple-redeemer, is a figure both biblical and semi-African, with additional overtones of Jesus Christ and Karl Marx. At the end of the novel, with the military in defeat, the reader is left to ponder an outcome that could easily happen in any Chimá in the world.

The excellent translation by Kooreman well conveys the simple language of the believers as well as the subtly ironic tone of the author. In spite of the building tension and the unexpected ending, the novel carries a clear, if grim, message of optimism: social justice is entirely possible in this world, but armed resistance will be the way to impose it.

Wole Soyinka

ISARA: A VOYAGE AROUND "ESSAY"

New York: Random House, 1989. Pp. 262. \$18.95

Reviewed by Derek Wright

Isara: A Voyage Around "Essay" is a fictionalized family memoir in which Soyinka, using mainly approximate and invented names, delves back into the life of his and his generation ten years before his own birth, and pursues their

story up to the outbreak of World War Two. From his father's letters and notebooks, and from school reports and committee minutes, he reconstructs the lives of "Essay" (the father's nickname) and his circle as the "representative protagonists" of that whole Western-educated generation which was at the forefront of the independence movement before and during the Second World War. The former children of Isara who style themselves "ex-Iles," indicating that they are simultaneously graduates of Ilesa Teacher Training Seminary and cultural exiles as a result of the Western ideas absorbed from it, are the provincial schoolmasters, business men, bureaucrats, lawyers, and trade unionists who, for better or worse, took up the white man's political and economic burdens during this epochal period. These cultural intermediaries—dandified, disputatious, aficionados of European art and politics—are the familiar stereotypes of the Christianized colonial world, regarded by their own parents as "the next thing to oyinbos" (white men) and by the colonial regime as "very well-to-do modern and professional Nigerians," and Soyinka recreates with some deft touches their comic traumas and dilemmas as they become increasingly sequestered from an indigenous way of life that they can neither reject nor replace.

The world of the book is a halfway house full of strange contradictions. A local business tycoon seeks the advice of a medium on profits and commissions while the schoolteacher-father consults the local oracle to find out if he will be successful in his career and, though persisting with European treatment of his wife's mysterious malady (pneumonia), confuses her with mischievous tongue-in-cheek comparisons of his father's ju-ju to the secret rituals of western surgery. The grandfather, Pa Josiah, is an opportunistic Christian who, for political reasons, has had himself baptized and sends his son off to a Christian seminary to learn and to keep him informed about the ways of the white man. At the same time he maintains several wives, continues secretly to frequent cult meetings, and adheres to traditional cures. He provides magic talismans to hang over a native-medicines store, schemes to lure his sick daughter-in-law to his village to practice his fetish-magic upon her, and when his son is appointed to his first headmaster's post he "prepares the necessary protection" to guard him from the secret charms of enemies. Meanwhile, the new Odemo of Isara is a far cry from the stereotype of the titled elder steeped in mystic tradition. He is a highly educated Lagos trade unionist and shrewd modern politician who knows that the nationalist cause is served not by disregarding positions of ancient power, but by filling them with enlightened people: he uses the support of the colonial power to maneuver himself into a titled position from which he is then able to challenge and eventually unseat it.

The "voyage around 'Essay'" is a circuitous and ever-expanding one. After first doubling back into its immediate subject's boyhood and adolescence, it then opens out in the last third of the book as the collective protagonists are caught up in broad public movements and events: nationalism, war, and the indigenization of public services and utilities in preparation for independence. The local "kingmakers" who invest titled power in the unionist belong to the same class of people who carry Azikiwe into office as the leader of the national independence struggle. There are "purist" traditionalists and reactionaries enough who resist the process of expansive modernization, but a heavy price is

paid for their insularity in underdevelopment, depopulation, unemployment, unsanitary conditions and disease. When "Essay" consults the oracle about his career he is told to "find Asabula," and that same day arrives home to find waiting for him a letter from a new American penfriend, postmarked "Ashtabula, Ohio." Years later, when the penfriend turns up unexpectedly in Isara at the height of the kingship crisis, the teacher greets him with the words "Welcome to Ashtabula," and the significance is clear: his native world is now itself part of the larger modern order represented by the Ohian Ashtabula. The oracle's instruction to Isara, through the schoolmaster, is an injunction to find a niche in that order, to discover its place in the world, until which time it will be more than a disease-infested wilderness. Thus the "voyage" is a journey home, but to discover that "home" is now the world: in this circular journey the circle is always expanding, the perspectives widening. As the farsighted Pa Josiah says to his son, "We all pray that our children go farther than we did."

Isara is not without its flaws. The humor of nicknames is at times pedantic and confusing, some of the circle's debates suffer from an ego-preening sterility, and the glossary of Yoruba words is erratic. But the book's sprawling narrative teems with life and its exuberant portrait-gallery of entrepreneurs, eccentrics, and rogues is done with great craft and care. *Isara* is a beautiful and evocative portrait of a society in transition, a loving reimagining of things past.

Geoffrey Davis, ed.

CRISIS AND CREATIVITY IN THE NEW LITERATURES IN ENGLISH: CANADA

Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1990. Pp. 253. \$35.00

Reviewed by Alex Knoenagel

In 1988, the universities of Aachen and Liège jointly organized a conference with the title "Crisis and Conflict in the New Literatures in English." Some of the papers relating to Canadian literature as well as some Canadian prose and poetry have now been published under the title *Crisis and Creativity*. This change of title is quite intriguing since it suggests a conflict-free climate of creativity as the environment of Canadian literature, and thus conforms to one of the conventional stereotypes about Canadian life and culture.

The essays collected in the book suggest, however, that "Conflict and Creativity" might have been a more appropriate title. Several of the essays deal with the literary treatment of conflicts in Canadian life—such as the feelings of suppression experienced by women and visible minorities, and the attempts to recover an original history against the prescripts of direct or indirect colonial masters—but the fact that these conflicts are being successfully thematized in creative literature suggests that the crisis diagnosed by the organizers of the conference is, at least as far as Canadian culture is concerned, being overcome by creativity.