

ing open-minded readers that Barthes's apparently literary themes like textuality, figurative expression, the discourse of lovers, and autobiographical narrative, deserve serious consideration within the larger context of debates about identity, social oppression, the whole cultural sphere of meaning production. Too often, big questions about the value and function of literature and the arts are put in apologetic terms, as if they refer to or reflect "real" historical events without being given an actual role in shaping these events themselves. Literature and the arts and literary criticism, no matter how sophisticated, are disarmed from the outset as somehow of less real worth than socio-economic world historical events. Or else, they draw their intellectual substance from already accepted explanations of human action in neighbouring disciplines. Wiseman's approach is strong and non-apologetic; it is sustained indirectly from analogous projects in the world of English-speaking philosophy. In the work of Cavell, Rorty, Taylor, and earlier in Oakeshott, literary language becomes a form of life, a way of enacting institutional norms, or attuning our knowledge of each other, or creatively redescribing the contingency of the self. Feminist theory's attack on essentialism and monism is another major source of support for the project Wiseman outlines in Barthes.

But making the best case for Barthes does not prevent Barthes's readers from posing further questions. Throughout this difficult book, I was struck by the stark contrast between literature as liberation and literature as enslavement. The repetition of this theme seems at times to absorb and stunt some of the most complex transitions in Barthes's thinking. Must literature work so hard against the inherent oppressiveness of society that words in their stark singularity are forced to stand apart from their social context (27)? Is the algebraic movement of the signifier the achievement of pure freedom (32)? Is it really possible to drop all self-examination in the name of some infinite plurality of speaking voices (135)? Wiseman's analysis of Barthes's writing reveals the seriousness of his literary playfulness but also a quixotic tendency to tilt against spectres of entrapment.

GARY WIHL

Susheila Nasta, comp. and ed. *Critical Perspectives on Sam Selvon*. Washington, D.C.: Three Continents Press, 1988. pp. 285. \$25.00; \$15.00 pb.

Bringing together a variety of materials — articles, reviews, interviews, radio transcripts, and even pieces by Selvon himself — Susheila Nasta attempts to bring some order to the wide-ranging (and often contradictory) critical response evoked by Sam Selvon's writing during a literary career that spans some thirty years. Not content with

merely compiling a record of this response, Nasta has sensitively arranged her material, establishing a narrative of her own that is not only historical but cognizant of the critical debate that has framed the response to Selvon's work. In fact, with this overdue collection of material on Selvon, Nasta has added a strong voice to that debate itself.

Nasta's contribution to the assessment of Selvon's writing lies in her ability to outline clearly the basic contradiction that plagues much of the criticism on Selvon: the tendency to see his work on the one hand as a naïve naturalism and on the other as self-consciously preoccupied with literary form. Juxtaposing Frank Birbalsingh's labelling of Selvon's novels as "local colour" lacking in "studied technique" with Michel Fabre's declaration that *Moses Ascending* is a "novelist's novel," a postmodern metafiction, Nasta herself takes a position closer to Fabre's but replaces his more theoretical emphasis with one that is more sensitive to what she sees as the Caribbean's and Selvon's cosmopolitan character. In particular, she provides ample evidence that Selvon's self-conscious artistry is no mere preoccupation with technique but the creation of complex, hybrid literary forms that — through experiments with dialect, wide-ranging subject matter, and subtly shifting tones — comment upon as well as reflect the multi-layered identities of the Caribbean consciousness and its defiance of narrow definitions of cultural nationalism or literary style.

Another example of how Nasta carefully and pointedly juxtaposes her material can be found in the compilation's opening section, entitled "Orientations." Here, three important articles on Selvon's role in the emergence of a West Indian literature in the 1950s are brought together to reveal how simplistic or idealistic notions of the Caribbean "folk" and of Selvon as its poet laureate pale beside Gordon Rohlehr's analysis of the Caribbean milieu as a "bewildering web of relations in a semi-plural, multi-racial world," suggesting both the "fluid variety of the West Indian personality" and, in literature, a corresponding fluidity of form that oscillates "between the two extremes of [a] folk-urban continuum." Discussing Selvon's first novel, *A Brighter Sun*, Rohlehr points out how the author subtly has his protagonist alternate between the halting rural accent of his father and a fluent urban Creole — an external behaviour that is ingeniously analogous to the protagonist's struggle for manhood and for individuality that becomes a means of questioning manhood, identity, and existence itself. Un-cannily, Nasta reinforces this important concern by closing the "Orientations" section with Anson Gonzalez's radio script, a piece that focuses on Selvon's machismo figures as "little-boy-lost-playing-man."

The next section of the compilation, devoted to Selvon's own commentary on his work, continues this emphasis on the questioning of identity itself as Nasta offers not only interviews with Selvon but also

two personal pieces concerned with the metaphysics of exile. Set beside the more empirically oriented interviews — where Selvon emphasizes verisimilitude and accuracy of detail — these metaphysical pieces thwart the tendency to limit Selvon's scope to his undeniable ability at rendering surface characteristics. Instead, they point to the complexity of Selvon's own personality, a complexity that he himself confirms when he mentions influences as diverse as Richard Jeffreys and T. S. Eliot. Focusing on this theme of complexity throughout the compilation, Nasta is able, through juxtapositions such as this, to show that Selvon's emphasis on humour, the quotidian, and the broad, open-ended novel form that eschews belaboured revision is not a sign of artistic ineptitude but of a process of discovery and a moving towards a new consciousness or the awakening of a Caribbean consciousness that would allow for fuller self-development and self-expression.

Establishing this new, yet inherent, perspective on Selvon in the earlier sections of the compilation, Nasta allows that perspective to act as the framework for the more detailed analysis of Selvon's writings in the final two sections, those consisting of reviews and full-length critical articles. Consequently, V. S. Naipaul's penetrating assessment of the artistic shortcomings of Selvon's *An Island is a World* can itself be criticized. On the other hand, Louis James's favourable response to *Those Who Eat the Cascadura* achieves greater significance for that critic's ability to perceive the "inner structure" of the anecdotal fragments that are a salient feature of Selvon's novels. By placing these and other insights into a broader perspective, Nasta offers a means of bridging the artificial gap between the quotidian and the artistic and a way out of the binary opposition that has ruled the criticism of Selvon to date.

To her credit, Nasta, in her selection of full-length articles, offers many profitable avenues for the future direction of Selvon criticism. Some of the more noteworthy in this regard include Kenneth Ramchand's detailed analysis of language, symbol, and character in *A Brighter Sun*; Sandra Pouchet Paquet's treatment of *Turn Again Tiger* as an anti-romantic coming to terms with the legacy of colonial history; Michel Fabre's study of Selvon's extension of the calypso form; Harold Barratt's analysis of the complex psychology of the West Indian colonial in Selvon's work; and Jeremy Poynting's study of impersonation and identity in *Moses Migrating*. Among the reviews, David Wilson's description of Selvon's film script, *Pressure*, provides welcome attention to a neglected aspect of Selvon's literary career and it too points to Selvon's ability to see beyond simplistic solutions in its treatment of the West Indian living in London.

Ultimately, however, in spite of the individual merits of the pieces, it is Nasta's arrangement of them that is the highlight of this compila-

tion. Without resorting to theoretical jargon, her sensitive editing has made for a valuable addition to current debate on postcolonialism in that it reveals Selvon's continuing relevance to this issue, given what Nasta sees as his keen awareness of important postcolonial issues such as that of identity. In the light of this kind of relevance, it is surprising to see that in a work published in 1988, the bibliography stops at 1984. A quick check of the MLA listings reveals, however, that little has been published on Selvon since that date. With the arrival of this stimulating compilation, this oversight should now begin to be rectified.

JOHN LEBLANC

Yemi Ogunbiyi, ed. *Perspectives on Nigerian Literature: 1700 to the Present*. Vols. I and II. Lagos, Nigeria: Guardian Books, 1988. pp. 203 and 359. \$3.00 and \$4.50, respectively.

These volumes bring together between them seventy-nine articles selected from *The Guardian* newspaper's weekly literary column spread over the period of two years under Yemi Ogunbiyi's editorial advice. Yemi Ogunbiyi, better known for his work in *Drama and Theatre in Nigeria: A Critical Source Book* (1981), which a reviewer justifiably describes as "a welcome aid to Nigerian theatre scholarship,"¹ now includes in the present volumes essays on nearly all of Nigeria's important writers to date by some of Nigeria's most renowned scholars.

If the significance of *Drama and Theatre in Nigeria* lay primarily in the diligence with which papers scattered in journals around the world on Nigeria's performance traditions were for the first time so ably brought together and made accessible with a piquant introduction to students and all others interested in those aspects of Nigeria's culture, the weight of the present volumes lies in the declared objective of *The Guardian's* literary column, which was designed "to step in where the book publishing companies could not, and offer a series of critical appraisals of the work of Nigerian writers" for "an entire generation of Nigerian youths" growing up in times of economic slump and "severe decline of the book publishing industry" (viii). This original goal, to arrest ignorance among young Nigerians about their rich tradition should be commended, although the decision to publish the essays in book form with "very little effort . . . to further re-edit the material" is unfortunate, since the main shortcomings of the collections derive from the "freer journalistic slant of some of the articles" which are found not to have been able to combine a qualitative "sustained, intellectual" (xi) debate that was envisaged with the popular taste that is being cultivated for literature.