

some might argue that Australian literature has already claimed many of these riches.

The fourth part promises "Subversive re-readings," and opens with George Papaellinas's essay whose provocative title demands attention: "Exoticism is just a boutique form of xenophobia." He speaks of NESBians (Non-English-Speaking-Background) and concludes that praise of their work sometimes focusses more on the authors' "ethnic" origins than on the work itself. But as the writers speak their minds in varying ways, they all seem to agree on their Australianness. As Safransky points out in her essay, by the year 2000 over half the Australian population will be NESBians. Even if the mythical society of Anglo-Celtic Literary Cultural Guardians wants to exclude these new and varied voices, which is doubtful, the A-CLCGians will never succeed. The NESBians will be heard, are being heard in fact.

The final section is called "Re-writings," and includes a piece by B. Wongar called "Miklouho-Maclay and his dingo," which is more about ecology than literature. This should not be questioned, for his fiction always carries an ecological subtext. Interesting that the editors placed his essay at the end, for in it B. Wongar does not address multicultural issues at all, even though he may well be the quintessential multicultural writer: a Yugoslavian with an Aboriginal pen name who writes about Aboriginal life and mythology.

That is perhaps the major virtue of *Striking Chords*. It does not confine itself to a single chord. As its title suggests, no one chord among the composition of Australia's fifth world dominates. Certainly other virtues are the bibliographies, which cover primary sources, anthologies, journals, and secondary sources. Ironically, the bibliographical abundance might belie the fact that this writing has been ignored.

ROBERT L. ROSS

Susan VanZanten Gallagher. *A Story of South Africa: J. M. Coetzee's Fiction in Context*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1991. pp. xiii, 258. \$29.95.

This is a serious book that verges on the earnest. The author discusses J. M. Coetzee's fiction in the light of current critical attitudes towards history (and the writing of it), critical practice, and the obligations of the writer. This entails a summary of relevant theoretical attitudes, followed by a quick run through significant elements in South African history and Afrikaner "mythology," as well as a detailed discussion, in the six central chapters, of each of Coetzee's novels.

There is no thesis linking the chapters, other than Gallagher's constant attempt to place Coetzee's fiction "in context." This plan inevitably involves the constant elements of South African history, both current and distant, together with the deeply ingrained cultural attitudes that

derive from that history: what Gallagher sees as the myths or mythology of Afrikaner history and nationalism.

Her second chapter is entitled "Naming the Other: History, Language and Authority," and offers a consistent context for her treatment of Coetzee's work: the belief that much white South African writing, and particularly writing by Afrikaners, sets out to establish the authoritative position and experience of white settlers, and to silence the voice of "non-whites" by regarding them as Others. In these white texts, the non-white Others are presented as less than human, or at least felt to have less than pressingly human concerns and attitudes. By silencing the black Others in their texts, white South African writers seek to validate their own experiences, and to maintain in the imaginative world of fiction the same dominance over Others as they do in the day-to-day world of politics and action. Not only do such writers silence, and thus continue to subjugate, the black Others, but also they legitimize their own myths of a heroic and righteous people surviving in the midst of threatening and barbaric hordes.

There is nothing particularly startling in this position. It is, after all, part of the common currency of postcolonial theory. And Coetzee's fiction clearly takes as its starting point many postmodern concerns about language, the authority of authors, the validity of storytelling, and the need to offer alternative histories from a range of perspectives. Even if one did not readily discern all these elements in some of his early novels, it would be difficult to make any sort of sense out of *Foe* without perceiving it to be an extensive exercise in giving voice to the silenced and exploring the perspective of the overlooked.

It is here that *A Story of South Africa* can become leaden. It is useful to examine the degree to which Coetzee rewrites or parodies (Gallagher would say "subverts") official history and received opinion. Much of the zest in his writing comes from his majestic control of the absurd or grotesque in his presentation of blinkered authority and self-satisfied certainty. A detailed analysis of the conventional elements that go into his nightmare plots and crazed narratives is useful to most readers, and especially to those who enjoy the general sense of parody and pastiche but are unaware of the wealth of custom or received wisdom that is being parodied. Nevertheless, the study approaches these topics with deadly seriousness, and more than a hint of obviousness.

Gallagher is good at pointing out all the conventions and "myths" that underlie Coetzee's texts. This is particularly true in her treatment of the echoes of Pauline Smith in *The Life & Times of Michael K*, her linking of the protagonist's actions to the motif of the return to the land in Afrikaner writing, and her analysis of the parallels in the novel between the wrongs suffered by the protagonist and the Afrikaner mythology of wrongs suffered by women and children in the British concentration camps of the Boer War—a consequence of the British policy of scorched earth to deal with Afrikaner guerrillas.

Lightness of touch, on the other hand, is not one of her strengths. Here she is in the opening paragraph of her chapter on "Naming the Other":

His fiction takes its place within a social context in which race is a key determining material condition. The unjust economic, political, and educational policies of the South African system of apartheid are well known. However, Coetzee's fiction also takes its place within a cultural context governed by a number of significant discursive practices, which embody strategies of power and subjection, inclusion and exclusion, voices and silences. (23)

Compare this dutiful prose with that of Coetzee himself. Gallagher quotes from his essay on "The Great South African Novel" to bolster her argument. He is discussing the fact that "even into our day" the Afrikaans novel is "haunted . . . by the idea of the *plaas* (*farm*), . . . that stands somewhere in the not too distant past of every Afrikaner." He continues:

the novel thus presents an "official" view of South Africa as a settled land, a land whose soil belongs to its farmers and title-holders, a land that is someone's property. The profound feel for the land for which the *aardsheid* [earthiness] of the Afrikaans language equips the Afrikaans novel goes hand in hand with a proprietorial attitude towards the earth; and this proprietorial attitude has made of the black man a temporary sojourner, a displaced person, not only in the white man's laws but in the white man's imaginative life. (42)

After such lucidity, what further explication by *another* critic is necessary?

Gallagher's commentary can be extraordinarily heavy handed. Here is a comment on *Waiting for the Barbarians*, which shows a sure grasp of the obvious:

Seen in the light of the conditions of its production and reception, this novel represents Coetzee's contribution to the international discourse on torture in South Africa [Gallagher has spent some time documenting that its existence caused an international furor in the 1970s]. Coetzee exposes how torture and other South African myths function in the creation of Others. The themes and the techniques of *Waiting for the Barbarians* suggest that a complete binary opposition of self and Other is both oppressive and false. (118)

And here is her explanation (in case the reader has missed the point) of the marvellously bureaucratic Coetzeean prose (in the same novel) with which the death of a prisoner under interrogation is reported:

The stilted syntax in which the only active subject is "the prisoner" obscures the actions of the Security Police and hides their responsibility for the death. But when the magistrate examines the corpse, he finds crushed lips, broken teeth, and one empty bloody eye-socket. The testimony of the body belies the testimony of the word as given in the official record. (119)

It would be unfair to dwell on woodenness of this kind. *A Story of South Africa* is both serious and thorough—its attempt at inclusiveness is one of the reasons for its moments of earnestness—and does detail a useful

context for the reading of Coetzee's novels. What a pity that the flavour of his writing is not a factor in Gallagher's discussion of cultural, historical, and theoretical context.

ROWLAND SMITH

Alison Light. *Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism Between the Wars*. London: Routledge, 1991. pp. xiv, 281. \$15.95.

Alison Light's *Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism Between the Wars* presents a matrix of revealing strengths and weaknesses. I use the metaphor of the matrix to avoid the sense that these strengths and weaknesses are somehow hierarchical or separable; each dimension of the book serves only to foreground the other, to define the matrix as a whole. Principally, Light's discussion of four women writers—Ivy Compton-Burnett, Agatha Christie, Jan Struther and her character Mrs. Miniver, and Daphne du Maurier—supports the following thesis: "It is the women of an expanding middle class between the wars who were best able to represent Englishness in both its most modern and reactionary forms" (10-11). Secondly, however, this book confronts the political climate which prevails in academic criticism at the present time. Here I have arranged these two elements of *Forever England* hierarchically in deference to Light's explicit concentration on the first element, since the latter effect is more an incidental occurrence than an announced objective. However, it is the interplay of these two levels of discourse, the said and the unsaid, which gives a clearer picture of Light's book and of some of the potential pitfalls inherent in the writing of criticism in the present politically charged academic climate.

Light's preface declares that "devoutly theoreticist readers will search in vain for the exemplification of a particular theory or paradigm" (ix). This claim brings out in relief the terrain on which *Forever England* treads most firmly and confidently. The discussions of the four writers demonstrate "that other history, history from inside" (5). Light maintains that "the place of private life and what it represented became the subject of new kinds of national and public interest and found new literary forms" (5). The literary forms she investigates range from the uniform world of Compton-Burnett's family novels to the journalistic entries of *Mrs. Miniver*. The chapter on *Mrs. Miniver* is the strongest; it best incorporates Light's conceptualizations of conservatism and feminism through a useful reinterpretation of the too-often homogenized notion of the "middle class."

Light's innovative approach displays a profound understanding of the historical context and an equally incisive knowledge of the currents in feminist theory (as her compendious notes and bibliography attest); it also brings her to some unexpected conclusions on the subjects of