

first it was mostly a matter of theme, subject matter, and concern with the role of European languages in Africa, but soon the Ibadan group was asking how they could make use of oral literature, ritual, myth, belief, and of new popular forms that had developed at the intersection of the West and Africa.

Paradoxically, the radical, revolutionary, internationalist, even the anti-rationalist, primitive side of modernism seemed to welcome such an Africanization in which verbal rhythms replaced traditional English metrics, African rituals sat side by side with supposed Greek rituals in drama, and a Yoruba world view became an allegorical subtext like the myths that Eliot and Joyce had used to structure their major works. Lawrence and Yeats would not have thought the Ibadan group "primitive" enough; only Soyinka appears to have believed in the rediscovered African rituals. So cultural politics come into the story, but not in either the crude cultural nationalism Wren expected to find, or even in a more "mediated" sophisticated politics of representation. Rather, an outdated provincial European artistic tradition in exile updated itself, and became part of the modern world, while indigenizing itself as it absorbed and learned how to use native arts and culture, in the process transforming itself into a self-generating local tradition. At the end of the day nothing specifically Nigerian seems essential to Nigerian English literature—any more than anything is essentially American in American literature—except that it be written by a Nigerian. Those magical years made such freedom possible.

BRUCE KING

Trinh T. Minh-ha. *When the Moon Waxes Red: Representation, Gender and Cultural Politics*. London: Routledge, 1991. pp. ix, 251. \$45.00; \$14.95 pb.

Trinh T. Minh-ha is one of the foremost theorists of decolonization currently working in the area of cross-cultural identity. A leading "documentary" filmmaker, Trinh supplements her creative work with writings that clarify and expand upon the issues raised by her films. In fact, one of her major concerns is to deconstruct the binary opposition between art and criticism. Relentlessly, in this her second book of essays (following the much acclaimed *Woman, Native, Other*), she challenges the West's tendency to compartmentalize human experience, proposing instead the notion of a fluid subjectivity—one that can move freely across established boundaries and adopt various, even contradictory, roles. She describes her ideal subject as a "permanent sojourner" who continually displaces identity and introduces difference (24), not so much an individual as a text that is always provisional and transitional.

Grounded in French post-structuralist thought (particularly Barthes and Cixous but also Walter Benjamin), these essays nonetheless repeat this thought with a difference, superimposing upon it an Eastern sensi-

bility that both displaces and transforms. This process is most evident in Trinh's development of an Asian reading of the moon as her controlling metaphor for the machinations of the self. A frequently denigrated figure in the West, the moon here turns the inferior status into a virtue in that the moon-self, in acting as a host for Others, reflects them only in accordance with the waxing and waning of ideologies, asserting an uncontainable and unowned desire that avoids the reifying extremes of "de-individualized individualism and of reductionist collectivism" (2). Like the colour red (Trinh's other controlling metaphor), this subject has no monolithic essential core; rather, it extends across the spectrum from inner awareness to outward revolution, from dainty pink to crimson. Each self, like each red, is impure, full of contradictions—strategically emptying, reversing, and displacing each subject position it encounters during its unending journey, denying the peripheral space the West offers it and embracing the whole world as foreign land while retaining consciousness of its roots and developing sensitivity to other minorities.

It is the virtue of this book that Trinh not only reveals her keen understanding of post-structuralist theory, but also her ability to apply it judiciously, avoiding the reductivism that has plagued many contemporary critics. This ability to utilize the best in current theory and to avoid being circumscribed by it is nowhere more evident than in her insistence that art itself be nonconformist, "confronting the limits of centralized conscious knowledge, hence . . . demystifying while politicizing the artistic experience" (6). Refusing the binary of aesthetics and politics, she calls for a letting go of intention but not of intervention. For her, art does not speak in a particular language but instead offers the foreign, meaningless sounds of lived experience, letting them surface uncensored to "reveal language in its nakedness—its very void" (83). Anti-commodification and anti-spectacle, indirect and non-literal, this art requires the reader to be a co-creator who self-reflexively questions his/her own point of view, fracturing his/her own identity as well as that of the text itself as she/he focusses on its cracks and gaps, rather than on a single story or message.

The essay, "The Plural Void: Barthes and Asia" makes explicit Trinh's agreement with the French theorist's emphasis on meaninglessness and the "unreality of language" (212), an emphasis which makes writing an unnamable that merely "unfolds the 'goings and comings of a desire'" (218) and places the writer in a state of "absolute subjectivity . . . [that] allow[s] the detail to rise of its own accord into affective consciousness" (222). Attacking the superficial unity of reality and visibility, this theory of writing leads Trinh to call for a disengagement from established novelistic conventions, a displacement of stereotypes, an address to more local audiences, and a utilization of forms closer to speech (especially autobiography with its potential for radical subjectivity). Similarly, in film, cinematic practices must be interrogated and disruptive devices

(cuts, pauses, silences) employed so that repetitions do not reproduce the same but rupture the camera's tendency to valorize the natural world (in effect, the dominant ideology).

Lest Trinh's Barthesian tendencies be construed as an idealization typical of a universalizing late capitalism that further entrenches the status quo, the interventionist character of her project becomes clear in her discussion of women's writing, particularly in the essay, "L'Innécriture: Unwriting/Inmost Writing," which appears in the very centre of the book. Here she claims that the Barthesian aesthetic (read through Hélène Cixous's work) will urge women's writing beyond a mere reaction to male subjectivity and lead it to a fruitful exploitation of the doubleness created by domination. Such a writing will be a writing of the body rather than self-expression, a text of screams and silences that features (quoting Cixous) "a wrenching, a launching of self, a diving" (140) and that creates a space which is "fluid, distended, overabundant" and unclassifiable, with a centre "everywhere and a periphery nowhere" (142). The result will be an avoidance of the reductive impulse to establish an equivalency with men and a bypassing of male predilections for erasure of difference and specialization.

Trinh's version of French post-structuralist theory, then, has a decided and specific political character. It can be read beside the various strategies put forward by other women theorists of the subject, such as those collected in *De/Colonizing the Subject: The Politics of Gender in Women's Autobiography* (edited by Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, 1992). Trinh's familiarity with the upper echelons of academe has not erased her position of marginality and Otherness but only supplemented it. Perhaps her greatest contribution is not only to critique academe but to transform it in ways that make it more empowering.

JOHN LEBLANC

Werner Sollors, ed. *The Return of Thematic Criticism*. Harvard English Studies 18. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1993. \$34.50, \$15.95 pb.

Did "thematic criticism" ever depart? Werner Sollors notes in an excellent introduction that with the transition from modernism to postmodernism, thematics seemingly disappeared only to re-appear under a new guise. Themes such as "love," "death," and "initiation" have been extended to "regionalism," "motifs," and "the absurd," and then into further subdivisions. Thus, "initiation" has been redefined within the postmodern context of "sexuality," and then further categorized as male and female, heterosexual and homosexual. Moreover, at this point, the subjects of "pure" literature have been transformed into a study of society and its values, or into the experience of reading as a form of personal consciousness. Given this context, the philosophical problem of literature that Sollors and his contributors address, in effect, is whether the cognitive values of a specific "theme" predetermine the