

trained activists who both draw their themes and techniques from the indigenous Nigerian dramas and also adapt the techniques and ideas of imported texts. Included for study are the better-known new generation Nigerian playwrights Ola Rotimi, Zulu Sofola, Kole Omotoso, Femi Osofisan, Tess Onwueme, Olu Obafemi, Tunde Fatunde, Akanji Nasiru, and Segun Oyekunle. Dunton writes with sympathetic insight and probing analysis on the efforts being made by a good number of these drama activists to wean their art from the university campuses and create independent, experimental theatres in their search to address the broader Nigerian public. In the course of showing how this led to the birth of semi-professionalism or professionally commercialized companies located in the big cities, the author creates a fine theatre history. He not only discusses the educational background, careers, and the ideas about art held by each playwright but also analyzes each writer's published works in relation to critical comments on and audience response to actual productions.

One could have wished that some of the equally talented and up-and-coming but largely neglected figures such as Ken Saro-Wiwa, Bode Osanyin, Esiaba Irobi, Emeka Nwabueze, Sola Osofisan, and Femi Akintunde—neglected only in terms of being less featured in published literature—were included. Nonetheless, the book is appealing in a number of ways. It relies on information corroborated with theatre practitioners both within and outside Nigeria, and on Dunton's direct acquaintance with some of the playwrights as well. Concise chapters each devoted in turn to one of the ten playwrights, detailed notes, a long bibliography that includes many local sources, and an accurate index are some of the book's other noteworthy features that should appeal to the international readership interested in the contemporary English-language drama of Nigeria.

Despite the lacuna deriving from the absence of a concluding chapter, *Make Man Talk True: Nigerian Drama in English Since 1970* is a crucial addition to the field of African theatre scholarship. Highly informative, full of intelligent judgement, heightened textual analysis, up to date, compact, and elegantly expressed, the book is highly recommended to all scholars and students of African drama and the general reader alike.

ODE S. OGEDE

Michael Schmidt. *Reading Modern Poetry*. London and New York: Routledge, 1989. pp. 128. \$62.50; \$17.50 pb.

It would be both easy and tempting for a North American reviewer to dismiss this book. Michael Schmidt sets sail on the wide, stormy seas of modern poetry in an extremely light craft: 128 pages from stem to stern, with no ballast of footnotes, no auxiliary theoretical engine, and a

captain who admits that his credentials may be suspect: "I am a publisher, magazine editor and teacher, not a critic" (13).

Schmidt's status as critical amateur (in the finest sense of the word) poses some navigational problems for him. He skirts theoretical shoals with dubious success—"I took my task to be a descriptive, not a theoretical one" (13)—and he justifies his course in relation to Larkin and Graham by asserting that he "found no theory useful apart from a conventional theory of tradition and canon" which could accommodate both poets. Period. No information given about which theories he tried, or about what, exactly, their limitations were. He shows similar reticence about disclosing what principles govern his preference for Isaac Rosenberg over Wilfred Owen: "Though I would sooner take Owen to a desert island, I would argue that Rosenberg is the truer, and in some respects the nobler, poet" (113). Schmidt doesn't tell which respects he has in mind; and for this North American reader his use of the peek-a-boo subjunctive that gives with one hand ("I would argue") and takes away with the other (he doesn't) is all too characteristic of the old British belletristic coyness. Also, Schmidt runs afoul of several North American landmarks, including the Hartford Rock ("Instinct warns me that the poems . . . conceal a vacancy," (109)) and the Nantucket Dolphin (Lowell's "written text became unstable as a result of the adjustments and compromises with audiences that he found himself making," (16)). Consulting even a few up-to-date charts would have saved him from such embarrassing collisions.

Annoying as these limitations are, the reader who perseveres encounters some remarkably worthwhile stretches of smooth sailing. Schmidt's sense of what contemporary poets can learn from masters as various as Spenser (45-48) and Pound (117-20) is deeply perceptive and persuasive. His treatment of the "language of concealment" (19) in contemporary poetry shows a subtle awareness of its sources in problematical modern attitudes about first-person utterance, and of its effects of systematic disorientation "in which semantic nuance is deliberately disturbed and short-circuited so that context redefines words very precisely" (63). He shrewdly recognizes the nature and implications of Ashbery's achievement (62, 88), perceives and appreciates what Heaney calls the "dance" of form in poetry (96), and makes persuasive, useful distinctions between the patterns of speech and the rhythmic patterning of idiomatic poetry (59-64).

The book succeeds, as well, as a far broader cultural commentary. Schmidt's background in editing and publishing has given him a fine sense of the conditions under which modern poetry is written and read. He charts the pernicious effects of political environments that subvert poetry to a cause, of academic environments that sanction only what is conventional (whereas poetry "should take the reader beyond that subjectivity of response at which teachers may feel inclined to stop," (92)), and of social environments that breed an impoverishment of the

imagination. Indeed, some of his most impassioned writing directs itself towards (and against) the constricted horizons of much contemporary British poetry. He laments the conditions that made Christopher Middleton "an exile in Texas, France, Germany, Anatolia, anywhere but Britain" (107), notes how Gunn and Tomlinson found America "much more congenial and supportive" (104) than an England where "poetry that talks barefaced" (28) has been largely supplanted by poetry that hides behind its ironies, and concludes that "There is a failure of transcendence, even of hunger for transcendence" (29).

What conditions will foster a more ambitious and satisfying poetry? Answering this question turns out to be the main burden of Schmidt's book; and it is here that his enterprise shows its true colours as an essay in cultural reform in the manner of Matthew Arnold's essays on poetry and tradition, and with a similar commitment and scope. Like Arnold's discourse, Schmidt's is directed at both poets and readers. He aims to encourage the formation of a community of writers and readers whose standards and ambitions transcend the narrow immediacy of contemporary interest. "Inherent in the publishing industry and in the current educational system," Schmidt argues, "is a loss of historical perspective" (101). This perspective is crucial to the practice and the reception of poetry.

Poems—and here Schmidt sounds as much like Eliot as like Arnold—"find their place in tradition and are not entirely comprehensible outside it" (95). The poet's primary obligation is to the language, in its most specialized and expressive usage: "The sense of a poem is the product of the poet's experience of language (itself inseparable from the poet's experience of life, but also from his experience of other poetry)" (95). Good poets must first become good readers, steeped in the resonances of the language. Tradition is a subtle echo-chamber; and the acquired pleasures of enjambements, cadences, or diction are not trivial but "are the energizing force of poetry, the precisions which set the art of poetry apart from other verbal arts" (56).

Poets acquire a sense of tradition through their own intense efforts, the "great labour" of which Eliot wrote. But they also depend on a sense of tradition in their readers. This awareness—which Eliot's brahmin modernism kept him from privileging—is the informing spirit of *Reading Modern Poetry*. Schmidt recognizes that writers need readers of the highest order, "committed readers willing to call them to account" (104-05). His book's most persistent concern is with the art of reading. Like great writing, great reading is a vocation which "involves self-effacement, a craving for what extends understanding of the medium of language, and an aversion to usages . . . which blur and impoverish expression" (83). Schmidt's professional experience of the contemporary publishing market lends urgency to his championing of such reading, since he knows that the reader's most fundamental needs are too often met only in libraries and second-hand bookshops. Schmidt

has as a publisher tried to redress this situation as far as he could, basing editorial decisions on "my sense that readers have lacked certain crucial resources" (102). The writing of this book represents his attempt to exert a broader influence on the reading of poetry, to help foster a generation of great readers.

Who is the greatest reader of our century? Schmidt's choice might surprise a North American who had trouble seeing past the book's quirky British tone and manner to its humane breadth of spirit. Ezra Pound, Schmidt proposes, embodies—and demands—the most exemplary reading: "Pound insists on reading—on hearing—the past and the alien in its own terms, and he refuses to acclimatize or assimilate them into a false contemporary coherence" (120). In the end, then, *Reading Modern Poetry* impresses because it is informed with that quality that it aims to cultivate in contemporary readers of poetry: an "exertion toward the other," in the apt words of Christopher Middleton that Schmidt cites (107). The craft of his little book carries us to a renewed awareness of the dimensions of that other vessel, both contemporary and timeless: "And then went down to the ship, / Set keel to breakers, forth on the godly sea."

JOHN REIBETANZ

Richard Rodriguez. *Days of Obligation: An Argument with my Mexican Father*. New York: Viking, 1992. \$25.99

To begin to intervene in the rigid mental geographies that shape us as national subjects, imagine for a moment the map of the Americas as it might appear in a schoolroom in Argentina, stretching from Tierra del Fuego at the top to Ellesmere Island at the bottom. Inverting the hourglass of the continents opens the play of ironic recognition: Canadians, for example, may no longer see ourselves as the snowy roof of the western hemisphere; we become something other as the tropes of national identity are exposed as arbitrary. Such occidental tourism has the uncanny effect of rescripting geography as history, reframing cartography as colonial text, the gravitational trickle of the sand through this figurative hourglass coming to figure the Spanish conception of what became the southwestern United States. The historical palimpsest of California is both Richard Rodriguez's subject and the ideological space in which *Days of Obligation* is written: "living Californians—such was the genius of Spain—must yet compose a litany of sorts to get from one end of town to the other. 'Take the San Bernardino to the San Gabriel turnoff,' for example" (121). Reading the United States against the grain of its linear, progressive, amnesiac narratives, Rodriguez summons the angels, makes revenant the dead, exhorts memory to uncover how *La Ciudad de Nuestra Señora la Reina de los Angeles de Porciuncula* became, in one hundred years, L.A.