

Reviews

Jean-Pierre Durix, *The Writer Written: The Artist and Creation in the New Literatures in English*, Greenwood Press, (Westport, CT, USA, 1987), 169 pp., \$29.95

The image of the artist and his role in society have evolved considerably in the last hundred years or so. The artist has gone through phases of distancing from, and identification with, society, of rebellion and participation. Are "poets" still in Shelley's words the "unacknowledged legislators of the world"? Does the old principle of *Dulce et Utile* still prevail? What is the function of art in our time, particularly in so-called new nations? What is the role of the artist, and does he perceive it in the same way as the society in which he originated and for which he may or may not write? All these are crucial questions which Jean-Pierre Durix tackles with specific reference to the artist in the New Literatures in English in his excellent book *The Writer Written*, a title that can be read on three different levels, since it conveys the artist's conception of his own role, the way in which, as protagonist, he is represented in fiction, and his portrait by the author of this book.

The introduction emphasizes very pertinently the link between the role of the artist and the particular conditions in which Commonwealth literatures developed. This is where this study differs from, say, Lee T. Lemon's *Portraits of the Artist in Contemporary Fiction*, very good on specific authors (Durrell, Lessing, Patrick White, Fowles and Barth) but who brings them together largely in the name of universality, whereas Jean-Pierre Durix refers to universality as a Western criterion and shows the specificity of literature and its background in each area of the Commonwealth. His approach, however, is comparative, emphasizing in a very subtle way the similarities (the basic fact of colonization, the use of English and the major stages of development) and the differences which arise not only from various social and political backgrounds but from the influence of a long native tradition or creole culture. So, while this study is thematic rather than historical in the traditional sense, both major trends and local preoccupations and complexities are clearly dealt with.

The book is divided into two parts. The first sums up the major issues inherent in the role of the artist and the conditions of creation in the Commonwealth. When discussing the position of representative artists towards these issues and providing illustrations of their contribution to, and transformation of, the traditional genres, Jean-Pierre Durix's wide knowledge and comparative approach combine to provide a clear synthesis of the problems the artists face

and of their most significant sources of inspiration. Thus in "The Artist as Teacher", the traditional *Utile* and the link between literature and morality acquire a wholly new complexion, particularly in societies where the artist must accommodate the old native culture and the new, rehabilitate the past or, as in the Caribbean, interpret the complexity of a dual or multiple origin. And so, we move on to the problem of roots, crucial everywhere in the Commonwealth but generating very different reactions, then to the question of "authenticity", largely illustrated by a discussion of Naipaul's work. The other three chapters are devoted to "The Artist and Society", "The Artist and Language", and "Creation and Myth". This first part thus offers a comprehensive and perceptive analysis of the main aspects of creation and the context in which it occurs, bringing out through a concise discussion of appropriately chosen works, the diversity, richness and originality of the New Literatures in English. Above all, it shows that English, whether imposed or deliberately adopted, has become an endlessly renewable and diversified creative medium.

The second part of the book complements the synthetic approach of the first by four detailed explications of works selected as significant "examples of metafiction". These are Patrick White's *The Vivisector*, Wilson Harris's *The Eye of the Scarecrow*, C.K. Stead's *All Visitor's Ashore* and Salmon Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*. Here again, the critic's sensitive and discriminating analysis of very different kinds of self-reflexiveness points to the way in which each artist's vision reveals his conception of art and of his own tormented role as a creator, often divided by his dual allegiance to community and personal obsessions. Each of these essays provides a substantial discussion of the author's mode of writing and his place in contemporary fiction. The chapter on *The Vivisector* emphasizes the creator's ambiguity and offers striking parallels between his works and actual paintings. *The Eye of the Scarecrow* is presented as Harris's most metafictional novel and its self-reflexiveness is discussed in connection with the significance of creation in the writer's work as a whole. C.K. Stead's originality is shown to lie in the New Zealand brand of his post-modernism. As for *Midnight's Children*, I have found the analysis of the narrator's role most illuminating and an illustration of the critic's searching exploration at its best.

Altogether, the workings of the imagination and the major factors pertaining to creation (historical, social, mythic, literary) are examined both concisely and penetratingly in this impressive book which fills a gap in Commonwealth studies. It is a *must* for students of the New Literatures in English.

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