

Book Review

Crisis and Creativity in The New Literatures in English / Cross Cultures 1, ed. Geoffrey Davis and Henn Mass-Jolinek. Editions: Rodopi B.V. | Amsterdam & Atlanta, GA | ISBN 90-5183-135-8. Keizersgracht 302-304, 1016 EX Amsterdam, Holland. | pp. 529 | **Review by: Albert Russo**

This hefty hardbound volume, the first of a series, is a collection of essays that were read at the XIth Annual Conference on Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies in German-Speaking countries. The conference, held jointly at the Institut für Anglistik of the University of Aachen and at the Centre d'Enseignement et de Recherche en Etudes du Commonwealth of the University of Liège, took place from 16 to 19 June 1988 and involved over 300 participants, hailing from the four corners of the globe. That such a compilation of essays - all written in English - should come out from a Dutch press, is to be commended. The Book is divided in 6 parts and the headings themselves attest to the variety of the presentations: Writers, Literature and Language, Literature and Liberation, Multiculturalism and Ethnicity, Reconstructions of History and, lastly, Gender and Politics. Under the heading 'Writers', no less than 7 authors are featured, with a story by Mudrooroo Narogin (Colin Johnson), a leading Aboriginal writer and critic who teaches Aboriginal Studies at the University of Queensland, St. Lucia.; poems by Edward Kanau Brathwaite from Kingston, Jamaica; essays by the well-known Guyanese novelist Wilson Harris who speaks passionately and convincingly about the 'Middle Passage' legacy of the terrifying trans-Atlantic floating market-place in which the human animal was so merchandised that one can equate the experience with a pornography of the imagination and he asks to what degree the diseased intercourse between merchant and animate merchandise may not have subconsciously harbored a desire for genocide. Then, there is the critic and writer Michael Gilkes, from Barbados, who discusses the historical attempt by men to repress women, even as he celebrates her as a goddess in matters of sex, generating a dark fear of the Female and its aftereffects in the way women have been portrayed in literature. The Guyanese poet, David Dabydeen, whose first collection won the Commonwealth Poetry Prize and Cambridge University Quiller-Couch prize, vividly illustrates with examples of his own verse, the emergence of 'Nigger Talk' in England today, and shows why he refuses to write like Milton. In her essay, 'The Deracinated Writer', the Australian Fay Zwicky confronts in the problems of Australian nationalism, the native-born inhabitants, still trying to sort out their cultural values, the long repressed Aborigines and the post-war immigrants who have to find a language, learn to speak in a land with no easily identifiable conventions of conversation, no unified literary tradition and few social signposts. Albert Gerard, emeritus professor of Comparative and African Literature of the University of Liège quotes from an article which appeared in *The Economist* and which, I believe, is the cornerstone of this book: "... Peripheral cultures

often produce better writing than mother cultures do, and English writing ... is now being rescued from terminal boredom by writers from Australia and Canada, or Trinidad and Nigeria. This is happening not only in English: in 1987, France's top literary award, the Prix Goncourt, went to a Moroccan, Mr. Tahar Ben Jelloun; and for 30 years, most of the best novels in Spanish have come from Latin America." Gerard adds pointedly that literature written in local languages such as Bengali, Yoruba, Malay, Chinese or Swahili contributes significantly to the literary wealth and diversity of the Commonwealth while posing the problem of the choice of language, positing that the writers in English in, say India or Nigeria, though representing an élite group, are by no means representative of the country's population as a whole. Chantal Zabus refers to the current trend of 'indigenization of language' in the West African euphone novel and of the gradual minorization of English and its hegemony as a literary medium. In the same vein, S.A.K Mlacha speaks about the crisis and conflict in East African literature and shows how writers such as Ngugi wa Thiongo relinquish the colonizer's tongue for Gikuyu or Kiswahili and by adapting the ancestral language to our post-colonial era, contribute to the reevaluation of ethnic identity and pride, stressing what little future English retains in East African literature, a case which is no longer exceptional. Christian Mair raises the issue of using Creole in fiction, as exemplified by the Caribbean writers V.S. Naipaul and Samuel Selvon. He points out the difficulty of such an enterprise whereby the aforementioned writers are forced to develop shorthand notations because of their large non-Caribbean reading public and the constraints of Standard English, the danger being that shorthand notation might reinforce stereotyped views of Creole as reduced versions of genuine English among an uninitiated public.

Anjali Gupta tackles the problem of writing in English in contemporary India. She says that in spite of the efforts of élite Indians to 'nativize' English, their writings have remained more firmly entrenched and part of an upper-class Anglo-Indian and British cultural and linguistic tradition, than part of a popular Indian heritage. She concludes pessimistically that these writers suffer from a fear of experimentation and of appropriation, and asks whether it is not tantamount to the demise of creativity. Tabang Lo Liyong from Juba/Sudan discusses the work of the Ghanaian writer Ayi Kwei Armah. Armah, he says, writes in two moods, using both the style of the meticulous historian, denouncing at once the colonialists, whether European or Arab, and Nkrumah's excesses. There is also in his novels a fluent merger of English words in an African-language-based thought-stream whereby he shows his Africanness. In his article, "The changing face of history in Chinua Achebe's novels", Joseph Swann quotes the famous Nigerian writer: "I hold and have held from the very moment that I began to write that earnestness is appropriate to my situation ... because I have a deep-seated need to alter things within that situation, to find for myself a little more room than has been allowed me in the world. And so our world stands in just as much need of change today as it ever did in the past." James Gibbs throws some light into Wole Soyinka's dealings with the BBC between 1953 and 1959, while Adrian Roscoe delves into the poetry of the

Malawian Edison Mpina, describing it as 'Raw pieces of Liberation'. Arles Sarvan deals with the use and misuse of politics in fiction as illustrated in Zambian Mulaisho's novel 'The Smoke that thunders' and warns that Third-World writers might expect to be judged more stringently than others by the stance they adopt and by the purposes to which they 'adapt' history. Wendy Woodward who teaches at the University of the Western Cape in South Africa, analyses Christina Stead's novels which repeatedly depict oppression, whether it be of gender, class or age, while Peter H. Marsden explains why Australia's most eminent poet Les A. Murray is so controversial. Studying his poem 'The Liberated Plague', he mentions the recurring criticism that Murray cultivates an outdated devotion to the supposedly ageless values of the rural way of life, with all the inherent conservatism and concomitant intolerance of change which such a world view entails. Marc Delrez, on the other hand, compares the works of Australian authors Randolph Stow and David Malouf to illustrate what he calls 'the antipodean dialogue', i.e. the concept of unity that recalls the strain towards homogeneity generally typifying imperialistic attitudes, versus fragmentation which is an outright affirmation of difference. Don Grant speaks of the role of imagination and autobiography in recent Australian writing, questioning the degree of truthfulness in the latter and the subtle line that divides it from what is usually termed as fiction. Alistair Niven gives us an overview of Black British writing and the struggle for recognition, stating its marginality and the scant attention it is given in the media, with the exception of V.S. Naipaul, Salman Rushdie and a few other writers whose works have become bestsellers. Analysing Sri Lanka's 'ethnic' conflict in its literature in English, D.C.R.A. Goonetilleke concludes that the writers in English tend to stress the pathetic aspect of the current ethnic conflict between Sinhalese and Tamils, whereas the teledrama and film in Sinhala emphasise positive aspects such as good personal relations among individual Sinhalese and Tamils which makes for ethnic harmony. Ganesh N. Devy delves into the multicultural context of Indian literature in English, stressing that long before the Raj, Indian writers had acquired the skill of writing in alien languages and that bilingualism has a long tradition in India. Aleid Fokkema, on the other hand, confronts the romantic English ideas of Indianness with strong contemporary voices such as that of Salman Rushdie. Brian Osley argues that orphans and bastards play a distinctive role in New World literature. Nelson Wattie analyses the historical reconstructions in the New Zealand novels as they relate to the colonial Land Wars between the Maori and the British. Lucia Nankoe and Essa Reijmers analyse the evolution in the novels of Afro-Caribbean and Afro-American women writers and the double barriers that are represented by White supremacy and Black male chauvinism. Finally, Benedicte Corhay-Ledent evokes the case of the Female Exile in the works of Jean Rhys and Joan Riley, and Omar Sougou relates the experience of a contemporary African woman in Britain as depicted by Buchi Emecheta in her novel 'Second Class Citizen'. This book and its sister volume on contemporary Canadian literature and trends ought to become required reading wherever the New Literatures in English are being taught.

Embers under my skin by Albert Russo | Imago Press, East Edison, USA. | pp. 129 | ISBN: 935437-56-7. | **Review by: Lata Mishra**

Embers under my skin is Albert Russo's fine collection of poems, some of which have previously appeared in a variety of journals. Russo in this collection is the plain but sensitive voice of a conscious-stricken world citizen who is disillusioned with the contemporary life. Each poem of Russo delivers with decisive profoundness of intent, the poet's message to the world. The globetrotting nature of Russo plays a vital role in the evolution of his poetic art. His diction, cadence, images and tone are shaped by his vast experience of different cultures. Darkness pervades some of the most powerful poems, although there is always hope for something better. *History As Just Another Bad Dream* is a hair-raising description of human tragedy, the frenzied dance of death in Dafur, Rwanda, Cambodia, Israel and such nations. Images are subtle, controlled, apt and moving. They heighten the significance of the meanings of the poems by hinting at it in a cool and gentle manner:

the act of writing | is like a plunge in the void | when you are inspired
| it is smooth as a pebble | swept by clear water. (Creative Moods, 10).

As his photos in the book, so his poems, paint with deft strokes the vivifying portraits of real life, highlighting maladies of modern man and society. The poet feels the deep stir of beauty in all the world, affirmation of life and humanistic values. To him beauty lies in order:

I caught a glimpse of | the most beautiful female specimen | of the
human race | she was tall, haughty | and wore a golden sari | her hair
tumbled down | almost to her waist | like a glinting cascade... | she
disappeared like a vision | to the point that I still wonder | whether she
was real. (The seed that grew)

Love is expressed in the words:

skin against skin | and the magic operates | till the cells rebel | the
difference between | a sex maniac and a lover | body temperature...
(The Stages of Love)

Russo is almost always at his best when he halts on the verge of statement rather than where he is over explicit. Most of the poems are about ordinary people leading ordinary lives and the world may not be so beautiful, but still is worth loving and changing. Some of his poems are racially and politically charged. Sometimes the poet uses the technique of anaphora as a rhetorical device, that unites the disparate elements of the poem:

If you could just say hello to... | if you could outline a smile... | If you
could lend her a hand... | If you could only treat | woman as your
equal... (Man, Oh Man!)

The poet has a deep compassion for humanity and his poems strive to bring peace and tranquility to the mankind. The poems are alive with possibilities. Man can come out of the confusion and existential angst, if he reverts to primal values and emotions of love, compassion and empathy. Economic expression, evocative imagery, lucid style and mellifluous movement mark Albert Russo's poetry.