

Joyce Johnson, *Bessie Head: The Road of Peace of Mind: A Critical Appreciation* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2008)

Bessie Head (1937-1986) was a South African-born writer who spent most of her adult life in Botswana, and whose writing – largely fiction – has been kept in print by Heinemann African Writers Series primarily on account of continued university prescription. She has been the subject of numerous journal articles and doctoral theses as well as several book-length studies, both monographs and essay collections. Some of her correspondence has also been published.

As suggested by the subtitle of this most recent study, 'A Critical Appreciation', Joyce Johnson offers a close reading, affording a chapter to each of Head's six works of fiction. These are dealt with in chronological order. In her chapter on the short stories that make up *The Collector of Treasures*, Johnson discusses each story in a separate section. (She excludes from her discussion the short stories and sketches that accompany Head's first long fiction, the novella 'The Cardinals', as well as the oral narratives Head collected from her local Botswanan community, and that form a part basis for *The Collector of Treasures*.) Johnson's methodology suggests that she intends the book primarily for a student audience coming to Head for the first time.

Johnson presents her close readings through a set of analytical plot summaries that often dwell on the extensive implications of names, metaphors and symbols in Head's forging of meaning, as well as on her interweaving of elements from various discursive styles and narrative forms (oral tradition, the European novel, romance, the gothic, popular song, and so on). She focuses, usually at the end of each chapter, on the continuities in theme and style from one fictional work to another, and provides a short conclusion in which she stresses a thesis developed through the book: given that Head's main preoccupation, for Johnson, was to negotiate 'the conflict ... between art and life', her ultimate choice was to follow the 'creative imagination' rather than to base her work on political commitments. A major interest for Johnson is Head's deployment of imagery and techniques from a European literary tradition, as part of an effort – she argues – to reconcile the discordant demands made by her two worlds, Africa and Europe. Although she often refers to Head's historical and political context, Johnson's focus on the aesthetic directs and largely dominates her analysis. For instance, she sees the titular words of Head's first long fiction as referring to the 'cardinal' or 'fundamental principles or constituents' of Head's preferred 'aspects of composition', rather than to the four cardinal points of a new cosmology. Furthermore, although she shows interest in the natural imagery of the novel *Maru*, and notes that its title is Tswana for 'the elements', she connects the two books through an understanding of the 'elements' of fiction rather than through any significance they might have in Head's imagining of a new world.

In its methodology and its arguments, the book thus has different aims – aims I take to be simpler and less ambitious – from those of the two most interesting book-length studies of Head so far: Maria Olausson's *Forceful Creation in Harsh Terrain* (1997) which addresses the relation between place and identity in Head's writing and

Book review: *Bessie Head: The Road of Peace of Mind* by Joyce Johnson. 1
Dorothy Driver.

Transnational Literature Volume 1 no. 1 November 2008.
<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>

TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

uses Julia Kristeva's theorizations of the stranger to focus some of her remarks; and Desirée Lewis's *Living on a Horizon* (2007) which addresses the ways in which Head challenged the racial and patriarchal codes of her time and re-imagined a world hospitable to the social values she held dear. However, this should not suggest Johnson's book is without interest or scholarly value, even to those who already know Head's writing well. As in the case of the several essays on Head that Johnson published between 1985 and 1990 in *Kunapipi*, *Wasafiri* and *World Literature Written in English*, with their quiet but detailed attention to the religious and mythic references in Head's fiction, her present study adds considerably to our understanding of Head's literary context.

As regards this context, Johnson's initial interest is Head's relation to the British nineteenth century novel. Here she partly takes her lead from an early remark of Head's about women as literary pioneers as well as – in Head's words – 'brilliant thinkers ... on a par with men', and partly from Head's use of the name Charlotte Smith for a character – and aspirant writer – in her first long fiction. Johnson thereupon finds concordances between Head and, variously, the Brontës, Maria Edgeworth, George Eliot and others. The focus is primarily on Head's interest in female social marginality and women's access to power, but Johnson also relates Head's general aesthetic to this British female tradition, or to what the critic Katie Trumpener calls (as quoted in Johnson) its 'emphasis on the coexistence of cultures, economies and ways of life'.

Johnson also pays on the whole greater attention than have other critics to Head's use of literary symbols and stances derived from different generations of British poets (Wordsworth, Coleridge, Lawrence, Yeats), finding hitherto unexamined correspondences between her thinking on culture and that of Matthew Arnold. Going further afield, she stresses – as other critics have done – Head's indebtedness to Brecht's didactic mode, but adds that Head was influenced by Brecht's unsentimental recognition of ordinary people's brutalization under political and economic suppression.

Seeing Head in a European literary context, rather than solely an African one, helps Johnson emphasise Head's interest in balance, fusion and reconciliation, which she regards as an important aspect of her writing. That Head made no apology for her love for – for instance – D.H. Lawrence and W.B. Yeats sets her apart from a younger generation of African writers and readers who turned their backs on Europe. Though Johnson notes the political implications of Head's perceived influences, she does not expand on the subject.

Johnson's claims about Head's 'internationalism' are not limited to Europe, however. Her study is further enriched by several references to Asian and Polynesian symbolism which, even if they were not actual influences, enrich our understanding of Head's thinking. Johnson turns also to some of the African sources for Head's thinking and – as suggested above – to some of the use she made of local 'folk' traditions. She provides interesting commentary, for instance, on Head's reading in African history and anthropology. However, her study of sources and connections should be supplemented with Lewis's *Living on a Horizon*, which came out too recently for Johnson to have benefited from it: while Lewis's only specific reference to British literature is to D.H.

Book review: *Bessie Head: The Road of Peace of Mind* by Joyce Johnson. 2

Dorothy Driver.

Transnational Literature Volume 1 no. 1 November 2008.

<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>

Lawrence, she traces more fully than does Johnson Head's indebtedness to Hindu mythology and religion, and indeed sees Head's Romanticism as informed by Eastern mysticism rather than the British Romantics. She also dwells more extensively on Brecht than Johnson does, and closely examines Head's relation to Boris Pasternak.

Johnson's focus on what she sees as the aesthetic as opposed to the political could be provocative in the context of contemporary postcolonial critique, but she keeps her register low-keyed, as if drawing on common sense rather than formulating a polemical position. This lack of critical self-consciousness about an informing ideology in the end limits the academic usefulness of the book, at least at postgraduate level. On the other hand, Johnson does not pretend to provide authoritative or final readings, but instead – again quietly – notes of Head's fiction that 'no one explanation can fit, and a particular one will ignore other possible readings'. Her carefully measured and well moderated readings will be useful to many students of Head, and will offer scholars directions to pursue more fully, including the question of how Head herself serves various critical interests.

Dorothy Driver

Book review: *Bessie Head: The Road of Peace of Mind* by Joyce Johnson. 3
Dorothy Driver.
Transnational Literature Volume 1 no. 1 November 2008.
<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>