Review


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Denise Brahimi’s book, originally written in French, has recently been republished – in English translation – by UCT Press. This venture was encouraged and sponsored by the French Institute of South Africa, with the intention to foster French scholarship in southern Africa. The reason behind the decision to publish Brahimi’s monograph in English translation was based on the desire to facilitate access to research across language barriers, in this case: English/ Anglophone and French/ Francophone on the African continent. There is no doubt that the aim and rationale are laudable, but one could of course ask whether – given that there is an abundance of Gordimer scholarship published in English, in South Africa – there is a real interest in a French study on a South African writer. I must say that such a publishing enterprise is quite bold and unusual, and the viability of the project is yet to be tested. The book should – in my opinion – be of interest to scholars of comparative (literary) studies; it is interesting to see how Nadine Gordimer’s work has been received by a prominent French academic, who obviously also represents a broader (French) view of responding to a major foreign writer. Suddenly, all too familiar local reading practices are made ‘strange’, as new ways of appreciating the work of our 1991 Nobel Prize winner are offered for reflection.

As far as the French reading public is concerned, Brahimi’s choice of writer is not difficult to explain, for Gordimer is one of the four South African literary giants who have entered the French literary consciousness
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(Breytenbach, Brink, Coetzee, and Gordimer). Most of Gordimer’s works are available in French translation, which explains French critical interest in her work. As the primary readership is French, it is to be expected that Brahimi’s references would be mainly geared to satisfy a European horizon of expectation. There are numerous allusions to inter alia Proust, Balzac and Sartre, but – to her credit – Brahimi always strives to make links between Gordimer’s work and French literary/philosophical paradigms. This is the case, for example, in the subsection titled ‘Proust’s and Balzac’s Way’, in which she refers to Gordimer’s discretion about her private life as ‘Proustian’, while the writer’s conception of the novel as social saga is ‘Balzacian’. Such literary associations may be unfamiliar to many Anglophone critics, and would undoubtedly contribute to enriching local perceptions of an all too familiar writer.

Brahimi is at pains to address certain French prejudices regarding academic conventions, especially the one concerning a purely chronological approach to a writer’s work. In this book, she uses an unusual classification of Gordimer’s novels: while the first two chapters group Gordimer’s novels under ‘earlier’ and ‘later’, the next two chapters offer a thematic approach by grouping the novels according to the ‘co-existence of opposites’ based on race (black/white) and gender (male/female). The final chapter deals with ‘betrayal and irony’ in Gordimer’s short stories, a genre neglected by critics both locally and in France, for reasons that Brahimi does not engage in.

While addressing her primary/French audience, Brahimi shows great admiration for Gordimer’s work, attempting to place the South African writer within French frames of reference. She peppers her analysis with existentialist allusions to Camus and Sartre, who are also Gordimer’s intellectual masters. She lauds Gordimer’s elegant, understated and restrained fictional style, calling it ‘candid and discreet’ (5); at the same time, she is trying to alleviate what might come across as strange or paradoxical to a French audience, especially certain issues related to racial tensions: ‘In Gordimer’s world, paradoxes are commonplace; only her talent as a novelist can shed light on them. It is her talent, but also her discipline that prevent her from taking the easy way out and surrendering to lyricism, or what some might call inspiration’ (18). However, sometimes, Brahimi’s comments are strange and impenetrable for a South African audience, as in the following example: ‘[South Africa] is a country that is first and foremost a geographical region and a physical collection of sensations. These are strong sensations that produce a boundless emotional effect on man and which, by rights, should not be
reserved for any one group alone, as they are so far from human expropriation and ownership’ (28). Such statements can be interpreted as patronising over-generalisations, and are certainly not meant to be read by South Africans.

The book reads as a long essay that does not, *stricto sensu*, comply with academic conventions. While the book offers the translators’ bibliography and notes, it does not provide the reader with bibliographical references by the author, a most unusual practice among Anglophone academics! This monograph remains an unusual, but refreshing, contribution to Gordimer scholarship, especially for scholars involved in comparative studies.