

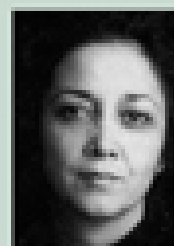


Kenyan Author
Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o
On the Genius of Language

plus
CAN POETRY RESPOND TO TORTURE?

WORLD LITERATURE TODAY

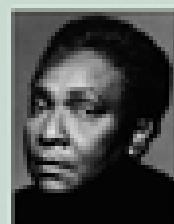
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Marc Villemain. *Monsieur Lévy*. Paris. Plon. 2003. 279 pages.
ISBN 2-259-19871-6

FRANCE HAS A LONG HISTORY of close relationships between writer-intellectuals and society. The socially engaged writer receives an homage through this first novel by Marc Villemain. Twenty years younger than his role model Bernard-Henri Lévy (popularly known as B-HL in Paris), the narrator comes to Paris from the provincial town of Carpentras and begins his education as a writer. His letters to Lévy exemplify his progression from the naïve worship of the engaged writer to an ironic appreciation of the role that the modern writer must play in manipulating the media. Lévy is expert at this and has often been criticized for being too slick and pretty before the camera.

The narrating voice of the aspiring writer distinguishes himself from Lévy. As opposed to Lévy, portrayed as the quick leopard in the jungle of Parisian politics, Marc the narrator is a lamb fearful of the confrontational politics of his mentor. The narrator pilfers an ashtray from the Café de Flore and begins his apprenticeship as a writer suspicious of the aristocracy of service exemplified by B-HL and his cadre of peers. Admiring Picasso for being an involved artist, he begins to wonder if he would appreciate B-HL more if only Lévy would come back from his mercy missions to Bangladesh, Bosnia, or Iran with a broken fingernail to indicate the personal cost of such commitment. The younger writer begins to prefer order to the open-ended liberal posture of B-HL toward freedom. He has become cynical about communication through such media as the Internet and would rather converse with an individual whose body is phenomenologically present for the interaction.

Writing is already a kind of involvement for the narrator. He helps found a journal in Toulouse and learns that politics is always already part of his métier as a writer. The alternate title for this novel was “the last judgment” and in effect provides insight into his own way of saying good-bye to B-HL. Meanwhile, Alain Finkielkraut and Philippe Sollers are contrasted with B-HL for their styles of being politically committed writers. B-HL’s distinction as being media conscious is examined as a modern phenomenon that has attracted many enemies to B-HL’s style. Since the left in France has become so fragmented that it now sports five different colors, rather than the red of the late 1960s, the leadership of B-HL in advocating liberal causes earns Marc’s admiration as a living proponent of the ethical examination of humanitarian engagement. Finally, Marc pays his debt to Lévy in this evenhanded tribute to the mentoring relationship from the perspective of the protégé.

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