Sue Thomas

Telling West Indian Lives: Life Narrative and the Reform of Plantation Slavery

Cultures 1804–1834. Basingstoke, U.K.: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014. xiii + 241 pp. (Cloth US\$104.00)

Sue Thomas's description of her book suggests that the project "draws renewed historical and literary attention to lived cultures of life story and narration, highlighting the formative influence of oral genres and soundscapes on written and dictated texts, varied genres of life narrative, and the ways in which extant written narratives circulated as part of, and shaped, reform projects" (pp. 168–69 and on the back cover). The potential of her analysis, however, exceeds what is indicated by her own summary, which lacks the specificity characteristic of her fine archival work (focusing on Anne Hart Gilbert and John Gilbert, William Dawes, and Robert Wedderburn, among others). Better put is the description in the book's conclusion of her guiding research questions, namely, "how to read the religious and historical otherness of eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century evangelical texts and how to develop a finely nuanced analytical language in which to discuss them" (p. 167). Therein lies a major tension in the book: while the text is rich with impressive historical analysis and archival data, it at times fails to keep a specific, focused argument at the fore. In this way, the attempt to arrive at a "finely nuanced analytical language" is at certain points realized and at others lost to the temptation of historicizing description.

The primary strengths of Thomas's project are the astute attention to genre and the insistence on reading narratives in the light of broader contextual frameworks. Among other examples, the discussions of various genres, including that of the "happy death" (pp. 84–85), trauma narrative (p. 86), "spiritual memoir" (pp. 88–94), and *Lebenslauf* or life course (pp. 129–31) are compelling cases studies that productively problematize the notion of a monolithic textual collective called "life narratives." Thomas also draws usefully on figures who "were neither planters nor slaves, who were vocal campaigners against the ethics and institutions of plantation slavery" (p. 168). In so doing, she complicates linear histories that have clear villains and heroes. This is most eloquently executed in her reading of the 1831 narrative *The History of Mary Prince, A West Indian Slave*, which comes in the final and most substantive chapter of the book. Thomas discusses not only Prince's narrative in relation to the supplemental material in the text and the ensuing legal battle but also the editorial efforts of the Anti-Slavery Society and the other projects of Prince's editor (Thomas Pringle) and amanuensis (Susanna Strickland). Such attention is not as carefully extended to some of the analytical discussions in the book,

however. In what may be partially due to a well-intentioned incorporation of scholarship from a wide array of fields (literary criticism, postcolonial theory, critical ethnography, history, and religious studies), Thomas is quick to make large claims that do not necessarily follow from the points that precede them. Such moments tend to center around the fraught and dubious issues related to authorial intentionality. For example, Thomas suggests that Mary Prince's application to join London's Fretter Lane Moravian congregation is evidence that "her conversion was more than nominal or instrumental in worldly terms, that Moravianism satisfied some of her spiritual and personal needs" (p. 121). Her application may be indicative of a great many things, but presuming the contents or motivations of her "spiritual and personal needs" seems speculative at best. Additionally, in her discussion of prophetic rhetoric in Prince's text, Thomas claims that "Prince implicitly invokes a range of Old Testament warnings of the stakes of [forgetting God]" (p. 122). However, it is, of course, *scholars* who make such connections, and *Telling West Indian Lives* would have benefited from closer attention to the role of scholars in shaping the identifications of those figures to which Thomas aims to attend.

The importance of the project as Thomas sees it is the frequent refrain heard in postcolonial literary studies: "we can begin as critics to understand some of the distinctiveness of her voice, to begin to hear the traces of her voice over and amid the 'crowded' 'writing' scene of [Prince's] narrative" (p. 165). She makes a similar move more broadly in relation to the book as a whole: "I have suggested how the agency of the narrators of the primary texts may be read and remembered, and worked to reconstruct the 'cognitive-political terrain of modernity' on which their identities were articulated" (p. 168). Such reconstruction work is a scholarly invention, full of current interests and projected backward across time and space, and we should talk about it as such rather than presuming that some version of "agency" can be recuperated or brought to light.

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