Kathleen Gyssels

*Marrane et marronne: La co-écriture réversible d’André et de Simone Schwarz-Bart.*
Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2015. 497 pp. (Cloth US$154.00)

Kathleen Gyssels is already one of the foremost commentators on the writings of André and Simone Schwarz-Bart, but this book exceeds her previous work in both its length and the breadth of its references (701 footnotes). Its title brings together the two main dimensions of the Schwarz-Barts’ thematics: “Marrane” in the Derridian sense of the secularized Jew, and “marronne” referring to the maroon culture of the French Caribbean (but also to writing that escapes set literary norms). “Réversible” designates what Gyssels sees as the characteristic dynamic instability of their writing, whereby opposites switch places or collapse into one another. “Co-écriture,” of course, refers to the couple as a dual writing subject, inspiring and influencing each other.

In fact, however, the book focuses more on André than on Simone, arguing that she would not have started writing without him (which is probably true) and that she thus does not deserve to have become better known than him (which does not necessarily follow). The book as a whole is a passionately committed defense of André, whom Gyssels sees as having been unjustly treated by critics and fellow writers. A lot of space is devoted to this: almost the whole of the introduction and a large part of the first chapter consist of Gyssels’s castigation of those who have in her view undervalued André and the far larger group of those who have not mentioned him at all but, in her view, should have; and the same theme recurs in subsequent chapters.

The book is not, therefore, an objective analytical approach to the Schwarz-Barts’ work. It contains some illuminating comment on the texts, such as the shared themes and images that recur in both Simone’s and André’s novels, intertextual links with other writers (although not all of these are convincing), representations of trauma, and the workings of “réversibilité.” But its rather rambling structure means that the reader often has to as it were dig these out from the surrounding commentary; an interesting psychoanalytic approach, for example (pp. 84–92), is sandwiched between the critics’ devaluing of André and a comparison—vaguely inspired by Lacan’s “point de capiton”—between writing and sewing, motivated by the fact that André as a boy worked in his father’s tailor’s shop; this latter also recurs at various points in the book, while the “point de capiton” is developed more fully much later, in Chapter 4.

This kind of personal, deliberately disorganized and openly partisan approach has its own attractions, of course; but it does at times lead Gyssels into tendentious or at least careless positions. She states as fact, for instance, the much contested assertion that Frantz Fanon converted to Islam not long...
before his death (p. 22); and her claim that Gabriel García Márquez’s *Cien años de soledad* is “*taillé dans le ‘patron’ du Dernier des justes*” is based solely, as far as I can see, on the fact that both novels portray the oppression of “*le petit peuple*” under dictatorships and that both novels’ descriptions of a massacre contain a similar phrase (pp. 278–80). The breadth of Gyssels’s reading—not only in French Caribbean and Jewish literature, but also in many different kinds of critical theory and contemporary thought—is quite extraordinary, and readers of her book will find useful references to an enormous range of different kinds of texts. But it is a pity that this knowledge is not harnessed more coherently to the book’s discussion of the Schwarz-Barts’ writing.

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