

Document and imagination

O. R. DATHORNE

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THE NOVEL IS THE ONLY literary art-form that has been totally imported in Africa and imposed over and above development from an indigenous pattern. Drama and poetry there were, always oral and sometimes functional, playing their part on ceremonial and festival occasions. In pre-literate Africa no such function existed for the novel — there was no need for it to perform. It is not surprising, therefore, that with the advent of literacy, it is the novel which has most interested the new writers.

The novel, by its nature, establishes a terrain of private communication and response, and it does this partly by a visual process. In Africa it completed the artistic view of the world, and in a larger and more important sense it would seem to have incorporated into this view the aesthetic of an oral tradition to which it never truly belonged. A European conception, articulated by an indigenous African exposition, is resulting in the product which is today regarded as the African novel — it is a process from flat, bald statement to elaborate experiment.

FREQUENTLY THE STATEMENT is of a purely socio-anthropological nature. This means that not only is character and environment inhibited, but the whole conception and execution of language is severely restricted the energy of the narrative flow restrained. WOLE SOYINKA pointed this out as the important difference between CAMARA LAYE'S *L'Enfant Noir* and his later *Le Regard du Roi*. But although Camara Laye's first book, if a novel, inhabits a limbo between the realism of biography and the ultra-realism of creative fiction, there are moments when it fulfils itself and can stand up to aesthetic appraisal. For instance, the description of the meeting with Kondén Diara evokes not only the vivid picture of a frightening ordeal, but creates with subtle strokes a world of childish fantasy where a confrontation with fear looms large. The meeting and love of Marie is different from the infertile, heavy monotony of a great deal of the

book. Even in translation the poetry comes over:

Whenever I think about our friendship, and I often think about it, dream about it — I am always dreaming about it — it seems to me that there was nothing, in all those years, to surpass it; nothing in all those years of exile, that meant more to me. And it was not because I was lacking in affection; my aunts, and my uncles too, gave me all their affection; but I was at the age when the heart cannot rest until it has found some object to cherish, when it can brook no shackles but its own, more powerful and demanding than any others. But are we not always at this age, are we not always consumed by longing? Is our heart ever at rest?

One might feel impatient with the cloying sentimentality of some of what is said, but the overall tone, the introspective concern, enables some parts of the book to rise above the pedestrian limitations of mere autobiographical documentary.

There is of course no experiment here, though there is relief: the element in this book which separates fact from fiction. A less successful expression of childhood memories can be found in WILLIAM CONTON'S *The African*, in PRINCE MODUPE'S *I was a Savage*, in COLE'S *Kossoh Town Boy*, in EZEKIEL MPHAHLELE'S *Down Second Avenue*, to name only a few books which use a reflective flashback to bring the reader imaginatively nearer to themes. Of these only *The African* can be truly regarded as a novel. One can agree with Davidson Nicol that the description of childhood memories constitutes a "significant area of African writing" but having said this, one ought to add that few writers have attempted to make it contribute to the general technique and total effect of the novel. MPHAHLELE'S approach in his autobiography is a slick snap-shot treatment that might have done well in a novel:

Looking back to those first thirteen years of my life — as much of it as I can remember — I cannot help thinking that it was time wasted. I had nobody to shape them into a definite pattern. Searching through the confused threads of that pattern a few things keep imposing themselves on my whole judgment. My grandmother; the mountain; the tropical darkness which glow-worms seemed to try in vain to scatter; long black tropical snakes; the brutal Leshoana river carrying on its broad back trees, cattle, boulders; world of torrential rains; the

solid shimmering heat beating down on yearning earth; the romantic picture of a woman with a child on her back and an earthen pot on her head, silhouetted against the mirage.

In CONTON'S novel it takes on a patriotic falsetto. When the hero sets out for England he is given a large uncut diamond by his father as a keepsake.

He states:

Now, as I write, part of that same stone, still uncut and undistinguished in appearance is before me, the material possession I hold dear. In it I see hidden the glorious flame of Africa's spirit, the richness of her wealth, and the sharp edge of her energy. It has become for me the penetrating star of African freedom, a light by which to rouse a sleeping giant.

The failure is the writer's inability to strike a sincere pose; the attitude of the memory and its relevance for the reader.

IN THE NOVEL FORM the reference to childhood is best handled when juxtaposed with some contrasting element from later life. "I remember," "That was when," "Years before" are all words which conjure up a world of associations. The writer is therefore obliged to use what follows sparingly; his recollections ought not to sprawl — he must be selective. He can reflect on what he is saying, but should never preach from the lofty detachment of the present. What is mystical cannot be rationalised, and MONGO BETI for instance in *Mission Terminée* recalls with just that proper measure of withdrawal and awe:

Another time, I was on holiday at my maternal uncle's, and had gone rambling in the forest with some other boys, when we heard a very queer bird-call, repeated again and again. I knew that bird; it was the one we call the Ghost's Daughter, or some such name, and it wasn't the first time I had run into it. Its call came from a thicket quite close to us; it began very suddenly, a deathly sad noise; dripping with nostalgia, just as if it had been laid on specially for us — as if it was somehow connected with us.

It was a smooth, unwavering melody, rather like a river in its reaches below a weir: every note was low-pitched, with a calm implacable fatalism in its timbre that penetrated to my inmost soul (rather like the soap enemas I was given in my sickly childhood), and long-drawn-out emphasis on the final note of each phrase. It sounded as though this bird knew

O. R. DATHORNE, Guyana-born novelist, lectures in English at the University of Ibadan, and is reviews-editor of *Black Orpheus*.

very well that its song symbolised some person's destiny; and also so detached was the tone, so emotionally indifferent that the knowledge left it totally unmoved. It was simply an anonymous messenger.

This is nostalgia translated into literary terms, evocative flashes of meaning, a sympathetic response to the pathos of situation.

IN GENERAL THE AFRICAN novel shows few examples of this kind of economic artistry. One is tempted to feel that perhaps a reason why the African novel has parted company with mainstreams writing in Europe is that the parent tradition in Africa — oral expression — was the pooling of the communal imagination in a vast emotional reservoir. The artist in traditional Africa has always been anonymous and the African novelist who attempts to describe his childhood is attempting two things — he is writing in a new form and he is expressing it in a new idiom.

THE OLD *versus* new school which expresses this dilemma in art has become almost a kind of caricature of itself. It began perhaps as a bastard off-shoot of *négritude* and developed an indigenous form and growth. Like all moulds it has little room for inventiveness; it inhibits the individuality of the author and provides him with a ready-made plot, wooden characters and a stage-set environment. There is nothing that redeems the heavy monotony of CHINUA ACHEBE's *Things Fall Apart*; with *No Longer at Ease* there is at least some attempt at humour. This too is the reason for the failure in both of NZEKUWU's novels. In his first, *Wand of Noble Wood*, the familiar story of the divided man — in this case Pete Obiesie — one finds, for instance, an overlong description of the formal payment by the hero's family of the bride-price, the wand is described at great length and even the ceremonial importance of the kola-nut comes in for detailed treatment. A reviewer described the book as "almost a manual of popular anthropology." This is of course what makes it fail. But are we perhaps asking too much of writers who seem tribally contained? Perhaps it is inevitable that an off-shoot of the African novel should reach this stage of wooden exposition.

In an earlier novel, *Chaka*, translated from Southern Sotho, THOMAS MOFOLO was to explore the similar predicament of man; but in this novel the hero's plight is more universalised. He is divided within himself on the value of ideals:

But he was still only a man, he was not quarrelsome, and did not know what it was to be the aggressor. But after seeing his own father's sons trying to kill him without a cause and his father himself taking their part, he had fled away, and when he was in the desert his inner nature died, and this was the spirit with which he now returned: "I will kill without a cause him whom I wish to kill, be he guilty or be the innocent, for this is the law upon earth. I will hearken to the entreaties of none." His personal tragedy is therefore separated from any sociological associations and this

gives significance to the predicament. Mofolo's novel is "anthropological" in a much wider sense of the term; he uses his historical backcloth as the merest of outlines and fills it in with a rich texture of developed characters. The "anthropological" novel can concern itself with the individual in society or the individual within history; in either case the treatment must be personalised.

In JAMES NGUGI's first novel, there is ever-documented presentation of Kenya during the emergency and the effect it has on a family. In his second novel, *The River Between*, he is concerned with individuals' conflict. It is a way of moving closer to universality and truth, away from the externals of society. In this second novel, its hero, Waiyaki, reflects upon his aspirations and his limitations:

Waiyaki knew that he did not want to be that messiah. But now he wanted an opportunity to shout what was beginning to oppress his mind. He would tell the people — "Unite." That would be early next year. For a moment he dreamt the dream. It was a momentary vision that flashed across his mind and seemed to light the dark corners of his soul. It was the vision of a people who could trust one another, who would sit side by side, singing the song of love which harmonized with music from the birds, and all their hearts would beat to the rhythm of the throbbing river. The children would play there, jumping from rock on to rock, splashing the water which reached fathers and mothers sitting in the shade around, talking, watching. Birds sang as they hovered from tree to tree, while farther out in the forest beasts of the land circled all around.

He dreams of a return to the language of myth and the deeds of legend, when men and gods shared the world and there was a correspondence between human and animal activity.

Négritude, THE DIVIDED-MAN THEME, the emergency in Kenya, black and white relationship in South Africa are all concerned with the same thing — the expression of this newness. But none can simply be documented in the novels — they have to be expressed through recognisable characterisation and credible incident; it is necessary, in other words, to be concerned with the real and to express it imaginatively. And realism is its own yardstick — the expression of reality in literature; it cannot be reality. For real experience there can be no substitute since it is what we live through; realism convinces us that what we are living through in an art-form is real within the limitations of that art-form. From this viewpoint AMOS TUTUOLA is a realist; this has never been sufficiently emphasised. His characters do not assert nightmarish attitudes — they are most completely themselves within a fusion of ancient legend and modern news-report. In their progress from bush to town Tutuola's characters vacillate between the terrors of a supernatural they fear and the surprises of an urban confusion which they cannot understand. They do not have the studied intentionality of Achebe, but a dichotomy between a peculiar vision and

shattered sometimes fragmentary values. For instance, as the hero and wife carry along their wonder-child in *The Palm Wine Drinkard*, Tutuola writes:

As we were travelling about in the bush on that night, my wife was feeling overloading of this baby and if we put him on a scale by that time, he would weigh at least 28 lb.

The wonder-baby, the bush at night, the scale, twenty-eight pounds, are the predicament. It is stated so simply that it might almost escape one. There is no attempt to externalise it; it is just there. That is why Tutuola has been misunderstood by both European and Nigerian readers: Tutuola, better than any other writer in English-speaking Africa, has described the tensions of his society, its conflicts, its loyalties, the inner demands of a superstition that people cherish and the external demands of a materialism to which they must conform.

THESE TENSIONS CAN BE satirically dramatised; for instance in OYONO's *Une Vie de Boy*, young Houndi had only become a convert as a child because the missionaries shared out candy. Sunday services were very popular because the priest pronounced African words so badly that they took on an obscene meaning. There is also frequent ridicule against missionaries in all of BETI's books, even in his early one, *Ville Cruelle*, the ensuing conversation takes place in a bar. Someone asks Banda:

"Tell us frankly, you wanted to be a priest? You really wanted to? You were willing to give up women, God's finest gift?" "Shut up, you" someone yelled. "Where did you get that one from about priests giving up women? That's a laugh."

But *Une Vie de Boy* attempts a larger canvass than the mere satirising of Christianity. Toundi's veneration of the white man and his ways and the gradual way in which he is stripped of this illusion, represents the freeing of the black mind from the psychology of colonialism. It is on terms of equality that Kalisia mixes with whites, and when the cook tells the young steward about it, it is a kind of emancipation for him:

"The whites are wild about her backside. . . Kalisia who had had her fill of whites, lived for a long time with a Negro from the coast, you know, those who have a salty skin. Then she lived with other whites, with other blacks, and with still others who were neither quite black nor white."

The treatment of colour in lighthearted manner reduces it to the level of absurdity, a thorough disenchantment with the values of colonialism.

WHEN BLACK SOUTH AFRICANS began to be published abroad, they took advantage of this to write more freely. An early novel of PETER ABRAHAMS, *Mine Boy*, describes the country/town bewilderment of Xuma. But the town is not seen as conferring any special benefit on him or on the black man. It is a retrogressive step for "the city makes you strange to your people," as Leah warns him on arrival. But although Abrahams is describing the hard life of the

mines and the living conditions, he is no documentarian. Someone writing at the turn of the century about conditions in the South African mines said this:

The housing accommodation consists, for the most part, of compounds. These are usually barracks built in a hollow square, with means of egress facing the inside of the square, except for the main gateway. When in the compounds the "boys" are practically under confinement, while undesirable visitors are usually kept out. At any rate there is control over their goings and comings.

This is the kind of prose which seems later to have crept into the African novel — the flat, informed account. Abrahams who is a true novelist, handling the same subject-matter brings short sentences, associative words, select descriptive flashes and reflection in his description of another part of Johannesburg:

Malay Camp. A row of streets crossing another row of streets. Mostly narrow streets. Mostly dirty streets. Mostly dark streets. A row of houses crossing another row of houses. And so it went on. Streets crossing streets. Houses crossing houses.

Leaning dark houses that hid life and death and love and hate and would not show anything to the passing stranger. Puddles of dirty muddy water on the sandy pavements. Little children playing in these puddles. Groups of men gambling on street corners. Groups of children walking down the streets carefully studying the gutters and vying with each other to pounce upon dirty edibles, and fighting each other for them. Prostitutes on street corners and pimps calling after them.

And from somewhere, the low monotonous wail of a broken-down piano thumping out an unchanging rhythm, and the sound of thudding feet dancing to it. Shouts and screams and curses. Fighting and thieving and lying.

But above it all, the real Malay Camp. The warmth in the air even on a cold night. The warmth of living bodies; of living, breathing, moving people. A warmth that was richer than the air and the earth and the sun. Richer than all things. The warmth of life, throbbing. Of hearts pounding. Of silence and of sound. Of movement and of lack of movement. A warm, thick, dark blanket of life. That was Malay Camp. Something nameless and living. A stream of dark life.

There is of course an enormous difference between the two. Whereas Peter Abrahams is creating, the first writer is merely reporting — illustrative of the difference between imaginative experiment and bare document in the African novel. ●

