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## I 2

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Autobiography and *Bildungsroman*  
in African literature

This chapter offers some generalizations regarding the place of autobiography and *Bildungsroman* in African literature. Although there appears to be a radical opposition between the “factual” autobiography and the “fictive” *Bildungsroman*, there are considerable correspondences and convergences, at least in the African context, between the two in terms of context, content, and form. An autobiography refers to an account, typically in the first person, retrospectively documenting the life of a real person who serves as both narrator and protagonist. The term *Bildungsroman* refers to a so-called “novel of formation,” that is, a fictional account tracing, usually in the third person, the spiritual, moral, psychological, or social growth of a fictional protagonist, typically from childhood to maturity. For all their normative insistence on literal truthfulness, autobiographies are carefully constructed esthetic objects. As Philippe Lejeune succinctly observes, “the paradox of the literary autobiography, its essential double game, is to pretend to be at the same time a truthful discourse and a work of art.”<sup>1</sup> Under the guise of merely reproducing the story of a real-life character, the genre relies on a complex (and not always self-conscious) interplay among remembering, forgetting, revising, inventing, selecting, and arranging events. At the same time, even though the *Bildungsroman* – like any other work of art – normatively eschews literal truth claims, it nevertheless makes, under the guise of fiction, large truth claims about specific historical, political, and cultural contexts.

The two genres under examination seem invariably to enact, as part of their overall esthetic, broadly similar processes of temporal reversal by which the future comes, paradoxically, to be anterior to the past. Both genres seem, at some level, to begin at the end. Jacques Lacan provides an instructive explanation of counterintuitive temporality embodied in the notion of future anterior: “What is realised in my history is not the past definite of what was, since it is no more, or even the present perfect of what has been in what I am, but the future anterior of what I shall have been for what I am in the process of becoming.”<sup>2</sup> Notwithstanding any number of plot twists and turns, the

*Bildungsroman* invariably seems to require, in the end, the protagonist’s formation (or *Bildung*). The fact of eventual, if not inevitable, *Bildung* becomes anterior to, if not determinative of, the innumerable twists and turns that constitute the rest of the narrative.

Since an autobiography typically records the author’s growth or formation, it may be said to represent a kind of *Bildungsroman*. Autobiographies are life memories that proceed backwards in time (typically from triumphant presents to unlikely pasts) even though the stories they tell may seem to unfold, in linear sequence, from the past to present. According to Christopher L. Miller, the structure of the autobiography typically involves a “straightforward progression from childhood to adulthood, an unproblematic progression in which the distance between the narrator and the character of his childhood self diminishes, if incompletely.” But the appearance of straightforward progression is misleading because the narrative of an autobiography is necessarily retrospective. “The mature narrator,” Miller continues, “writing from the assurance of adulthood, describes his past as a path out of ignorance and into knowledge.”<sup>3</sup>

Autobiographies and *Bildungsromane* participate in the same conversations regarding the fundamental nature of African societies in the wake of the encounter with colonialism. One measure of the correspondence between the two genres is the fact that at least three of my examples seem, perhaps self-consciously, to blur category distinctions. J. M. Coetzee’s *Boyhood* recalls the early life of a pre-eminent writer, but the ostensible autobiography takes the form of a third-person novel of formation. Conversely, Tsitsi Dangarembga’s *Nervous Conditions* is a feminist *Bildungsroman* set in colonial Rhodesia, but the putatively fictional account of a girl’s formation takes the form of a first-person autobiography. Moreover, a measure of category confusion remains evident with regard to the classification of Camara Laye’s important but controversial classic, *The African Child* – a text documenting the formation of a young protagonist in colonial Africa. Some critics regard the work as a paradigmatic text in African autobiography.<sup>4</sup> Other critics regard the text as a work of fiction, a paradigmatic novel of postcolonial African formation.

With the notable exception of *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano*, all the texts I discuss were published during the second half of the twentieth century. These texts played important roles in the development of African literature as the continent struggled for independence from European colonial powers and then against the crisis constituted by colonialism’s oppressive legacies in postcolonial nation states, characterized by fundamental contradictions, inequalities, and dependencies brought about by colonial rule. Literature has been at the forefront of documenting and attempting to transcend the crisis of colonialism in Africa, so much so that as

Fredric Jameson suggests, hyperbolically perhaps, all these texts are “national allegories,” in which “the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society.”<sup>5</sup> Both autobiographies and *Bildungsromane* have provided important avenues for African writers to explore new ways of being in the colonial and postcolonial worlds. By telling stories of individual passages from childhood into adulthood, the authors critique the past and present and offer alternative futures.

First published in 1789, *Equiano* tells the remarkable story of a self-identified African who was allegedly captured as a child and sold to slavery in the New World. This revolutionary text represented the first instance in which a former slave wrote about his servitude, suffering, and eventual freedom. *Equiano* protests against slavery and seeks to give voice to voiceless millions. Published in 1953, Laye's *The African Child* is set approximately twenty years earlier in Kouroussa in French Guinea. It tells the story of the narrator-protagonist's transition from an ostensibly stable traditional existence to the apparently uncertain world of colonial modernity. His father is a gifted goldsmith, a respected traditional authority blessed with supernatural powers, most notably the gift of prescience. Early in the narrative (or should we perhaps more accurately say late in the narrative?), the narrator-protagonist recalls his emergence as his father's heir apparent. After disclosing important secrets pertaining to the “guiding spirit of the race,” the father informs the young son (or so the son, now a grown man, belatedly remembers): “I have told you all these things, little one, because you are my son, the eldest of my sons, and because I have nothing to hide from you.”<sup>6</sup> Even though the father is quick to proclaim his eldest his rightful heir, he expresses considerable doubt. The father worries that his son spends too much time attending the French school system; in fact, the father is said to have predicted his eldest son's gradual abandonment of tradition for modernity. By the end of the narrative (its conceptual beginnings), the father's fears prove prophetic. The narrator-protagonist leaves Kouroussa for further studies in France. Although he has undergone the ritual of initiation, his knowledge of the traditional world remains inadequate and incomplete.

In *Aké*, a 1981 autobiography, Wole Soyinka, one of the founding figures of modern African literature, returns to scenes of his childhood in late colonial Nigeria. He traces not simply his personal autobiography but also the emergence of anti-colonial nationalism led by aggrieved and overtaxed market women (including the author's mother). In *Weep Not, Child* (a 1964 novel), Ngugi wa Thiong'o, another of the founding figures of modern African literature, examines the volatile politics of late colonial Kenya. The novel tells the story of a family torn apart, on the one hand, by a militant

anti-colonial nationalism (leading one of its members to join a violent revolt) and, on the other, by the attractions of Western education (simultaneously leading another family member to attend an elite colonial high school).

I examine several South African writers confronting the horrors of apartheid. Three autobiographies by black South Africans – Bloke Modisane's *Blame Me on History*, E'skia Mphahlele's *Down Second Avenue*, and Mark Mathabane's 1986 autobiography, *Kaffir Boy* – are representative of a larger body of texts written between the 1960s and 1990s. The texts exposed the desperation and violence black people experienced under apartheid. They denounced the systematic disenfranchisement of the black majority by a white minority, as well as the injustices of the Group Areas Act (under which doctrine of racial separatism blacks were largely confined to overcrowded and deprived rural “homelands”), “Pass Laws” (which strictly regulated the influx of cheap black labor into white cities), “Bantu Education” policies (which, under the guise of acknowledging racial difference, consigned blacks to an inferior education and menial careers) and the anti-miscegenation laws (which prohibited interracial romantic relationships). Modisane and Mphahlele were originally based in the black township of Sophiatown, which was home to a community of like-minded writers. After overcoming extreme deprivation and violence as children, they educated themselves and worked as journalists for the tabloid publications *Drum* and *Golden City Post*. They were both eventually forced into exile by the increasingly repressive policies of the apartheid regime. Mathabane chronicles his remarkable rise from the squalor and violence of the black township of Alexandra to pursue university studies (through a tennis scholarship) in the United States. All three writers bear graphic witness to the horrors of racist oppression even as they each narrate the story of spectacular individual triumph.

A number of white writers provide a different perspective regarding apartheid. In *Boyhood*, Coetzee remembers growing up as a white boy in a small provincial town. Rian Malan's *My Traitor's Heart* (1990) is, in part, an investigative exposé of the volatility and violence that plagued South Africa in the late 1980s and early 1990s, on the verge of the formal dismantling of the apartheid state. The book is also autobiographical, chronicling the life and times of a conscientious white South African who had left the country in order to disavow its racist government. Disillusioned by life in exile, Malan returns home in order to confront the racist legacy of his own family.

Whether implicitly or explicitly, many of the male writers thus far summarized (most notably Sophiatown writers) are concerned with appropriate forms of masculinity in the context of oppression and violence. The experience of oppression takes the form of emasculation. Women writers contest

this male narrative of individual triumph and retrieval of manhood by documenting the experience of oppression from the perspective of women. Published in 1975, *A Dakar Childhood* presents the autobiography of an ordinary woman in postcolonial Senegal. Part of a pioneering generation of educated women, Nafissatou Diallo was a successful working mother at the time of the autobiography. Even as she retraces the steps that led her to a successful professional middle-class life, she appears to lament the passing of the traditional Senegalese society. Following in Diallo's footsteps, another Senegal woman, Marietou M'baye, published the novel *The Abandoned Baobab* in 1981. Written under the pseudonym Ken Bugul, the novel chronicles the misadventures (but also the eventual redemption) of an assimilated African woman selected for a prestigious academic scholarship in Belgium.

Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* (1988) unfolds in the highly volatile polity of colonial Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) between the mid-1960s and the early 1970s. During that period, a minority white regime had declared independence from Britain, provoking violent resistance from the disenfranchised and dispossessed black majority. The novel tells the story of Tambu's (the narrator-protagonist's) apparently successful formation. Growing up in abject poverty in rural Rhodesia, under the authority of a domineering and sexist father, she remains determined to attend school. Subsequently, she moves to the city in order to be provided an education by an authoritarian and equally sexist benefactor, her uncle Babamukuru. The novel presents a narrative of (at least partial) triumph; it appears to tell the story of how Tambu and some of the women in her life (in particular her aunt Lucia) escape being trapped by "the poverty of blackness on one side and the weight of womanhood on the other."<sup>7</sup>

In an important study of the *Bildungsroman* in European culture, Franco Moretti argues that the genre codified a new paradigm under which, for the first time, youth came to constitute "the most meaningful part of life."<sup>8</sup> The protagonist in the eighteenth and nineteenth century European *Bildungsroman* was invariably a young man; his youthfulness was a decisive condition of formation. In relatively stable societies, youth is but the unremarkable and invisible prelude to mature adulthood: "Each individual's youth faithfully repeats that of his forebears, introducing him to a role that lives on unchanged: it is a 'pre-scribed' youth" (p. 4). However, in periods of radical transformation and social upheaval, youth takes center stage, supplanting adulthood. The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were a period of radical social transformation in Europe. Due to modernization, industrialization, urbanization, secularization, democratization, and so on, traditional values were dramatically being cast aside. It was a period of significant progress, but also upheaval and uncertainty, as Europe marched into modernity, "but

without possessing a *culture* of modernity."<sup>9</sup> In that context, Moretti asserts that youth achieved "symbolic centrality and the 'great narrative' of the *Bildungsroman* comes into being ... because Europe has to attach a meaning, not so much to youth, as to *modernity*." "Youth," he concludes, "is, so to speak, modernity's 'essence,' the sign of a world that seeks its meaning in the *future* rather than in the past."<sup>10</sup> Although Moretti addresses the historical European origins of the genre, his arguments apply with uncanny precision to the historical rise of the *Bildungsroman* in Africa. Like its European forebear, the emergence of the African *Bildungsroman* coincided with a period of radical transformation and social upheaval when, in the wake of colonialism, the traditional ways of being were seriously undermined, if not forever transformed. Like its European counterpart, the African *Bildungsroman* focuses on the formation of young protagonists in an uncertain world. In a sense, the genre marks the death of the father as a symbol of stable, unquestioned, traditional authority. As V. Y. Mudimbe contends, "[t]he father is tradition. He is what came before, and he incarnates the law of survival and the sign of the future. He thus enjoins: Fear not, son, this is the past of our people." Mudimbe underlines the weight of patriarchal authority: "The father's autobiography here becomes a kind of history. His word is accorded a permanence that follows us from place to place and across the years. It becomes the memory of the world. Hence the burden of the generations that is conveyed in the phrase, 'I am your father.'"<sup>11</sup>

With its focus on youth, the African *Bildungsroman* illustrates how, in the wake of colonialism, the father's authority is irreversibly undermined. In Ngugi's *Weep Not, Child*, for instance, the protagonist's father, Ngotho, purports to exercise patriarchal domination over his household. But colonial dispossession has compromised his traditional authority: For all his masculine bluster, he has been transformed into a landless and impoverished petty laborer for a white settler. The future of Gikuyu society belongs not to Ngotho and the static traditional values he embodies, but rather to his son, Njoroge: the young son who, at the instigation of his mother, opts to seek new values in Western education. Similarly, in Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*, Babamukuru ("the big father") seeks to reign uninterrupted as the patriarch of his extended traditional family in late colonial Rhodesia. But he finds himself increasingly unable to control the women in his life: his wife Maiguru (who after a life of submission comes to demand greater say in the running of the family), his sister-in-law, Lucia (an illiterate village woman who consistently defies Babamukuru before opting to pursue a Western education in the city), Nyasha (Babamukuru's defiant and rebellious young daughter), and Tambu (the young, initially naive and docile narrator-protagonist who, however, eventually comes to reject her uncle's values).

Even as he looks back nostalgically to a past in which daughters – and wives – did not talk back to their fathers, the future has passed Babamukuru by; it now belongs to the likes of Tambu, Nyasha, Maiguru, and Lucia.

Laye's *The African Child* tells the story of a young man who opts to pursue a colonial education in France, thereby rejecting the ways of his father. The narrative concludes without establishing a definite future for its narrator-protagonist, but it is clear that he will not be heir to his father's traditional throne. The book unfolds as a nostalgic homage to a rejected tradition; a remembrance, so to speak, of things past. But the narrator-protagonist falls short of even this limited goal. While he claims to remember various rituals in broad outline, he forgets and/or does not understand important details because, as he dramatically exclaims, "I left my father's house too soon" (p. 12). Elsewhere in the narrative, he pleads ignorance regarding the significance of a particular custom: "I was not old enough or curious enough to ask my elders and betters, and when finally I wanted to do so, I had left Africa behind" (p. 45). The narrator-protagonist's formulation suggests that what is being left behind is as much a cultural identity and a way of being in the world as a geographical entity. Although the narrator-protagonist claims not to know the significance of certain traditional practices, he nevertheless attributes to them secret meanings kept in "the ancestral depths of heart and memory." Such remarks have provoked charges of essentialism and exoticism in Laye's depiction of Africa.

Moretti's insights extend beyond the *Bildungsroman* to apply, with some modification, to autobiographies. Although they would seem to be adult narratives, autobiographies invariably look back to the *formative days of youth*. In the African context, autobiographies – as much as *Bildungsromane* – seem to enact, at least in some measure, the rebellion of the youth against both pre-colonial and colonial tradition. Many autobiographies depict a young protagonist rejecting or outgrowing the law of the father; whether the father is understood figuratively as the custodian of tradition or literally as a biological entity in a particular patriarchal setting. In the three black South African autobiographies, for instance, the traditional patriarchal authority of fathers has been severely compromised by the deprivations of apartheid. Mphahlele, Modisane, and Mathabane variously record how their respective fathers became violent drunks while pathetically trying to retain the semblance of control within their households, despite being emasculated by the oppression they suffered as blacks in a racist polity. Even as they empathize with their fathers' humiliations, sufferings, and deaths under apartheid, the three writers come resolutely to distance themselves from the traditional values these men stood for. The future of South Africa lies in the hands of the young, not their diseased and dying fathers. As

Mathabane explains, "*Kaffir Boy* is also about how, in order to escape from the clutches of apartheid, I had to reject the tribal traditions of my ancestors."<sup>12</sup> In many respects, *My Traitor's Heart* represents Maian's tortured effort to exorcise the ghosts of his racist forebears. From the other side of the apartheid divide, the son rejects the law of the racist father.

In his foundational study, Lejeune proposes, at least initially, a rather rigid but nevertheless instructive definition of autobiography: "retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality."<sup>13</sup> Autobiographies derive their fundamental authority from the evidence of personal experience. The inaugural slave narrative, *Equiano*, presents a paradigmatic example. From the outset, the author is at pains to emphasize that the book is a true account written by a real person concerning his existence. The text's full title is, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa, the African, Written by Himself*. Equiano conspicuously designates himself an African as well as the author. As part of what Lejeune terms the "autobiographical pact" with readers,<sup>14</sup> Equiano performs an elaborate process of self-credentialization and authentication. The text opens with an explanatory preface addressed to the British Parliament. Equiano intends to debunk the institution of slavery and lobby for its abolition by providing personal testimony about its horrors. The preface prefigures a narrative detailing his forced removal from the idyllic African village of his birth, his horrific suffering during transit to the New World and in slavery, his indefatigable will to survive, his dogged efforts to become literate despite formidable odds, his skill and industry as a seaman in the face of a racist universe, his determination to secure freedom despite the treachery of various masters, his Christian conversion, and, finally, his emergence as a vocal leader against slavery. Equiano concludes by reiterating the veracity of an account that was "written by one who was as unwilling as unable to adorn the plainness of truth by the colouring of imagination."<sup>15</sup> In a gesture at once self-effacing and self-authenticating, he insists on a radical separation between fiction and autobiography, humbly classifying his work as the latter and not the former.

Although not nearly as explicit and elaborate as Equiano, more recent African autobiographers also seem to rely on a similar authority of authentic experience. Diallo begins her autobiography with a foreword presenting readers her credentials: "I am not the heroine of a novel but an ordinary woman of this country, Senegal: a mother and working woman – a midwife and a child-welfare nurse."<sup>16</sup> Much like Equiano, she is at pains to emphasize the literal truthfulness of her account as well as her ordinariness. She asserts that she was motivated to record the memories of her childhood and

adolescence in the face of radical social change: "Senegal has changed in a generation. Perhaps it is worth reminding today's youngsters what we were like when we were their age" (p. ix). Under the guise of merely narrating one ordinary woman's life story, Diallo expresses nostalgia for a world gone by.

Much like Equiano's detailed personal testimony against the institution of slavery, Mphahlele's *Down Second Avenue*, Modisane's *Blame Me on History* and Mathabane's *Kaffir Boy* all rely on the authority of personal experience to critique apartheid. Born in the extremely deprived black townships of Sophiatown and Alexandra, the three writers bear first-hand witness to the injustices and hypocrisies of racial segregation and discrimination. They debunk the myth propounded by the apartheid state of separate but equal development among South African racial groups. Through the example of their remarkable successes as writers, intellectuals, and journalists, they bear witness to the courage and humanity of black South Africans in general. Their texts derive ultimate authority from the fact that the wrenching and heroic accounts they provide are not simply literally true but also personally experienced.

Both autobiographies and *Bildungsromane* enact a reversal of the linear progression of time. Autobiographies enact this reversal quite explicitly. Part of the "autobiographical pact," Lejeune argues, is the proposal by an author to present the reader with a "discourse on the self ... in which the question 'who am I?' is answered by a *narrative* that tells 'how I became who I am.'"<sup>17</sup> Thus, for example, we turn to the autobiographies of Coetzee and Soyinka in a bid to understand how they became two of the most accomplished and enigmatic African writers. As readers we seek each writer's primal moment(s), that is, the decisive event (or series of events) back in time that account for the prodigious literary talent we now confront. Coetzee and Soyinka oblige our readerly expectations by remembering, for our benefit, various scenes from their early childhood. In these recollections, the question "who am I now?" comes to precede and determine the question "who was I then?"; the latter exists largely as a memory (or construction) of the former. Putatively unremarkable childhood incidents and tendencies become meaningful only in the wake of remarkable future careers. We are reassured to learn that even as a young child, Soyinka displayed ample intellectual curiosity, and that he sought to attend school and attain literacy at an impossibly young age. We learn about an irrepressible spirit of curiosity that drove him, despite the threat of violent punishment by his father Essay, to follow a marching band to the seat of colonial power in Yorubaland. With the benefit of hindsight, Soyinka defines that visit as singularly important: "At the back of my mind ... was a feeling that I had somehow been the cause of the excitement of the previous night and had, in some way, become markedly different from

whatever I was before the march."<sup>18</sup> Subsequently, Soyinka remembers how, as a young child, incapable of fully understanding the political import of the events in question, he was nevertheless a keen observer of the stirrings of anti-colonial nationalism. Significantly, these events involve yet one more march, this time in the form of a protest led by market women, to the seat of colonial power. If, in his future, Soyinka was destined to become a fully conscious participant-observer who would document and protest the worst excesses of postcolonial African dictatorships, then that fact owes something to his childhood impulses – or so it retrospectively appears.

In *Boyhood* (as well as in the sequel *Youth*), Coetzee's pact with the reader is to provide some account of how he became who he is. As readers, we know Coetzee to be a superior literary talent, an extraordinarily learned intellectual, a vocal critic of oppressive regimes including the apartheid state and a restless thinker on questions of ethics. We are therefore interested to learn that he was born to a mixed family (with an English mother and an Afrikaner father), just as apartheid was being consolidated as the official state ideology. To what extent does the vexed double identity account for future literary complexity? We learn that, even as a young child in provincial South Africa, Coetzee was an intelligent high-achieving student and that the future anti-apartheid critic displayed intellectual curiosity and a contrarian spirit from his earliest days. At a time when the adults around him were uncritically reproducing the virulent anti-communism of the apartheid state, Coetzee embraced Russia. Even though the specific terms of that embrace appear naive in hindsight – he liked the sound of the letter R – it points to a future nonconformism. We learn that, despite being unable to articulate a coherent or consistent anti-racism, the young Coetzee distanced himself, almost instinctively, from the supremacy and prejudices of the adults around him. The seeds of his complex and unsettling ethical formation were seemingly sown early in the unlikely provincial scene of Worcester.

Instructively, primal scenes only attain primacy retrospectively, that is, in the time of future anterior. As Christopher Craft suggests, primal scenes invariably refer back to events that may or may not have happened in fact. If such events indeed happened, he continues, they were not and could not have been experienced as primal in the immediacy of their actual occurrence. Such designation could only take place well after the fact.<sup>19</sup> It is only well after the fact – as an accomplished writer remembering his childhood – that Soyinka can claim that an accidental march to the seat of colonial power had, somehow, fundamentally altered the course of his life. Similarly, it is only well after the fact – as a passionate anti-slavery campaigner – that Equiano posits the first few years of his life in Africa as formative. In a recent biography, Vincent Carretta challenges the historical basis of these claims.

He uncovers two archival sources (voluntary statements made by Equiano after emancipation) suggesting that Equiano may in fact have been born in South Carolina.<sup>20</sup> He also suggests that Equiano's descriptions of Africa suspiciously reproduce contemporary anthropological commonplaces. What is the status of autobiography if some of its founding claims may not have happened in fact? What would it mean to concede that the foundational anti-slavery text was to a large extent a work of imagination, rather than memory?

Modisane's *Blame Me on History* posits three moments of primal significance. These include his father's humiliation by a racist police officer, his own subsequent humiliation while working as a messenger, and the violent destruction of Sophiatown by the apartheid state. From the vantage point of a triumphant present, these moments are endowed with a narrative significance and coherence they may not have had originally. Modisane claims these traumatic events helped shape his future militancy and determination. Growing up in a traditional patriarchal family, Modisane had come to think of his father as an omnipotent authority. He was therefore shocked to witness his father groveling pathetically before an arrogant white officer while desperately seeking to evade arrest for living in Sophiatown in contravention of apartheid law. Modisane was outraged by the racism that justified his father's oppression. But he was also driven by this episode to call into question the father's oppressive power in the life of the family. Subsequently, as a middle-aged reporter, Modisane witnesses at first hand the violent destruction of Sophiatown by the apartheid state. For all its extreme poverty, deprivation, and violence, Sophiatown provided residents with a community of survival until its 1958 destruction. Modisane remembers the forced dislocation of thousands of dispossessed blacks to even more deprived rural "homelands" as a defining traumatic event: "Something in me died, a piece of me died, with the dying of Sophiatown."<sup>21</sup> Significantly, the autobiography begins with the destruction of Sophiatown, before going back in time to detail the circumstances of his childhood, and then forward in time to include the story of his final escape and exile.

Modisane also remembers the scene of his own humiliation: When working as a messenger, he was required to use the back door reserved for *kaffirs* (a term of contempt for indigenous Africans). Writing many years after the fact, he contends that this episode had been defining: "I wanted to rise above the messenger bicycle and the back door; what I did not realize was that I would never, in South Africa, be able to rise above the limitation imposed on me by my colour, more eloquently articulated by Dr. Verwoerd: Natives should not be allowed to rise above certain levels of labour" (p. 81). There would seem to be an instructive discrepancy between "memory" and "history": Verwoerd's

offensive speech occurred "in fact" seven years after the event (Modisane's epiphany) it is reported to have provoked. I am interested less in calling Modisane's credibility into question than underscoring the anteriority of the future in relation to the putative past in autobiographical discourse.

Unlike autobiographies, *Bildungsromane* seem to enact the reversal of linear temporality implicitly. Bugul's story in *The Abandoned Baobab* may be illustrative in this regard. She begins her life (her "prehistory" in the narrator's terms) in Ndoucoumane, a fictional traditional village, the authority of which is symbolized by a resilient baobab tree. Subsequently, she leaves the village to attend the French school system in which she excels scholastically. She is awarded a scholarship for further studies in Belgium. Her scholarship supposedly signals a new emerging spirit of cooperation between Africa and its erstwhile European colonizers. Despite having rather uncritically assimilated colonial values, Ken Bugul quickly feels out of place and marginalized as a black Muslim woman in an exclusionary and exploitative society. Her study plans go awry as she apparently surrenders to a life of drinking, drugs, and debauchery. On the verge of self-destruction, she learns important moral lessons outside the formal school system, eventually opting to go back home. The bulk of the novel is taken up by seemingly random accounts of drunkenness and debauchery. These incidents become meaningful, retrospectively, in terms of Ken's belated *Bildung* at the end of the novel.

The retrospective logic of *Bildungsromane* becomes readily apparent in Dangarembga's fictional autobiography, *Nervous Conditions*. In a pointed address to unidentified future readers, the narrator-protagonist, Tambu, seeks to establish a firm distinction between her present, fully-formed identity and her old, naive, self: "At the time though – and you must remember that I was very young then, very young and correct in my desire to admire and defer to all the superior people I found at the mission – at that time I liked missionaries" (p. 103). She goes on repeatedly to reiterate how she was young then, many years removed from the narrative present. Though she does not say how old she now is, she is no longer young. In this context, youth denotes less a particular age than a state of naivety or "pre-formation." Then, unlike now, she did not question such things as the existence of God. Then, unlike now, she was not "concerned that freedom fighters were referred to as terrorists" (p. 155). Then, unlike now, she was on the wrong side of Rhodesian history and politics – the side of the missionaries and colonialists. Remarkably, Tambu declines to specify the narrative "now," on the basis of which she retrospectively purports to recount the inadequacies and naivety of her former self. The future remains a mystery, even though it comes before and determines a particular version of the past. She does not disclose where she is, what she is doing, or indeed when now is.

I have emphasized the fact that *Bildungsroman* and autobiography marked the demise of the symbolic authority of the father in the colonial and post-colonial African imagination. Even texts that would seem to honor the father emerge, on closer scrutiny, to mark his passing. Diallo concludes *A Dakar Childhood* by paying homage to her father. But she pays belated tribute to a dead man on the eve of her departure from Senegal to France. In *The Abandoned Baobab*, a chastened Ken Bugul returns home and prostrates herself before the symbolic authority of the father. But she bows before a now withered baobab tree. In short, African autobiographies and *Bildungsromane* seem to portray an important milestone: the decisive transfer of authority from fathers to their sons and daughters. Although the youth rises up to take charge from its fathers, the future it projects is neither certain nor triumphant. Thus, for instance, Laye's *The African Child* concludes with an image of the narrator-protagonist clutching a map that will help him confront an unknown and uncertain fate in France. More ominously, Ngugi's *Weep Not, Child* concludes with Njoroge disillusioned, his vision for communal salvation through Western education defeated, his community ravaged by violence. Nyasha, one of the youth rebels in *Nervous Conditions* is, at the conclusion of the novel, afflicted by both anorexia and a nervous breakdown. In short, these texts seem to depict colonial and postcolonial African worlds as societies in uncertain transition. They bring to mind Antonio Gramsci's famous diagnosis of moments of transition: "The old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum there arises a great diversity of morbid symptoms."<sup>21</sup>

## NOTES

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3. Christopher L. Miller, *Theories of Africans: Francophone African Literature and Anthropology in Africa* (University of Chicago Press, 1990), p. 126.
4. James Olney, "The Value of Autobiography for Comparative Studies: African vs. Western Autobiography" in W.L. Andrews (ed.), *African American Autobiography: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1993), pp. 212–23.
5. Frederic Jameson, "Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism," *Social Text*, 15 (1986), 65–88.
6. Camara Laye, *The African Child*, trans. by James Kirkup (London: Collins, 1954), p. 19.
7. Tsitsi Dangarembga, *Nervous Conditions* (Seattle: Seal Press, 1988), p. 16.
8. Franco Moretti, *The Way of the World: The "Bildungsroman" in European Culture*, trans. by Albert Sbragia, new edn. (New York: Verso 2000), p. 3.

9. Moretti, *The Way of the World*, p. 5.
10. Moretti, *The Way of the World*, pp. 30, 5.
11. V.Y. Mudimbe, *The Idea of Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), p. 192.
12. Mark Mathabane, *Kaffir Boy: The True Story of a Black Youth's Coming of Age in Apartheid South Africa* (New York: Macmillan, 1986), p. xi.
13. Lejeune, *On Autobiography*, p. 120.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 124.
15. *Ibid.*, pp. 120, 124.
16. Nafissatou Diallo, *A Dakar Childhood*, trans. by Dorothy S. Blair (Harlow: Longman, 1982).
17. Lejeune, *On Autobiography*, p. 124.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 124.
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20. Vincent Carretta, *Equiano, the African: Biography of a Self-Made Man* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2005).
21. Bloke Modisane, *Blame Me on History* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1963), p. 5.
22. Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, ed. and trans. by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1971), p. 276.