

Myth, Literature and the African World

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the wishes of the majority of Umuaro, he has failed to divine the historic factors at work. His timing is so tactless that he brings disaster on himself, handing over a rich social harvest from Umuaro to the proselytising Christians. We are left with a hanging prediction that Ulu has set his course for the exact fate of the god of Aninta, figuratively at least. Ezeulu, not Ulu, is cast as the summation of the life-force of Umuaro; without him, the god is reduced to an empty shell.

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**Ideology and the social vision
(2): The secular ideal**

A certain Lothrop Stoddard prophesied as follows (the year was 1920):

Certainly, all white men, whether professing christians or not, should welcome the success of missionary efforts in Africa. The degrading fetishism and demonology which sum up the native pagan cults cannot stand, and all Negroes will some day be either christians or moslems.¹

Africa minus the Sahara North is still a very large continent, populated by myriad races and cultures. With its millions of inhabitants it must be the largest metaphysical vacuum ever conjured up for the purpose of racist propaganda. Mongo Beti is perhaps the most assiduous writer to have taken up the challenge of Mr Stoddard, dealing expertly and authentically with the claims of Christianity as a filler of spiritual holes. His weapon is a deceptive generosity which disguises, until the last moment, a destructive logic, incontestible in its consistent exposition of cause and effect. His priests are never complete villains but are revealed to be complete fools. Even where he has presented the representative of the Christian Church as a figure of inner doubts on the way to eventual enlightenment, it is only a refinement of Mongo Beti's delectable hypocrisy – his exactions will be doubly cruel and thorough. Thus, in *King Lazarus* the Rev. Father le Guen, stiff-necked to the last, merely loses

¹ Quoted in Charles DeGraft-Johnson, *The Rising Tide of Colour against White World Supremacy*, Chapman and Hall, London, 1926, p. 96.

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his position and is left with the consolation of commiserating with himself as a victim of colonial administrative intrigues. The only reprisal from the victims of his spiritual assault is to witness the reversion of his prize convert to the joys of polygamy. The poor Christ of Bomba is an equally stubborn prelate. He is even more manic in his encounters with 'heathen' practices but by contrast, is revealed as a man tortured by increasing doubts. His inner reflections promise a conversion, some hope for the salvation of the man is awakened in the breast of the reader. But Mongo Beti is not about to redeem his gull. The ramifications of a venereal denouement cover the Father Superior with the stench of failure. Beti's thesis reads: the Church is, by its very nature (doctrine and practice), a contagion; Mongo Beti's expositions are masterly erosions of the Christian myth.

The virtues of Mongo Beti's works tempt detailed elaborations but he is strictly outside our frame of reference. His task is the demolition of pretenders to cultural and spiritual superiority, not a re-statement of the values of past or present in integrated perspectives of a future potential. This latter process need not be overt or didactic; it need only translate the inherent or stated viable values of a social situation into a contemporary or future outlook, engaging the reader's collaboration through sympathetic characters and value judgements operated by a contrasting habit of the mind. Iconoclasm by itself may embody a social vision, and the question is certainly raised by Oulougouem's uncompromising work, *Bound to Violence*.²

But first, a problem which cannot be honestly ignored. The charges of plagiarism in Oulougouem's work appear to be well substantiated; it would be futile to deny this. The literary question remains, however, whether or not we are confronted with an original contribution to

² Yambo Oulougouem, *Bound to Violence*, translated by Ralph Manheim, Secker & Warburg, London, 1971.

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literature, in spite of the borrowings. The *drama* of the novel is original; this, I believe, has not been disputed. The stylistic 'griot' propulsive energy and the creative vision are unquestionably Oulougouem's. It has been claimed that the thematic structure has been borrowed also from a previous Prix Renaudot winner; by this I mean the disposition of theme into the transmitting media of events, place and temporal relations. I have not read the other work so this question is one which I cannot resolve. There are also moral and philosophical questions. The former can be resolved quite simply: it would have been preferable if Yambo Oulougouem had acknowledged his sources. The philosophical aspect concerns the principle of ownership of the written word. This was the line which I rather expected Oulougouem to adopt in his response to the charges, not from any interest in the results but in anticipation of a debate which, given the French penchant for speculative philosophy, would certainly have resulted in obscuring the original issues and left Oulougouem's readers to carry on regarding his work as literature, until given evidence to the contrary. Which is precisely what I propose to do.

The charge of plagiarism was, however, not the only reaction produced by the work. It is not surprising, given the nature of the political alliances which dominate the world at present, to find that the intelligentsia of the black world are in ideological disagreement over the question whether enforced cultural and political exocentricity, as a retarding factor in the authentic history and development of Black Africa, should be recognised as appertaining only to the European world. The existence of the school of thought which thinks *not* is our present concern, nor is its expression among African writers and intellectuals as new as is commonly supposed. Yambo Oulougouem unquestionably triggered off the critical alarm in the opposing school, but what he has done with his fictional re-creation of history is no more nor less than

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a Cheik Anta Diop or Chancellor Williams has done for decades in their several essays on African civilisation. The researches and findings of Diop, Williams, Frobenius and other historians and ethno-scientists made *Le Devoir de Violence* inevitable and salutary – Oulouguem's savage satire on Sh(F)robeniosology notwithstanding. The outcry of sections of black American militancy over this aspect of the book is simply misguided.

Le Devoir de Violence (I shall use the original in preference to the English version of the title) marks a studied repudiation of historic blinkers. It re-writes the chapter of Arab-Islamic colonisation of Black Africa, but moves beyond history and fiction to raise questions of the very structure of racial heritage. Accepted history is held against an exhumed reality; the resulting dialectic can only lead to a reassessment of contemporary society and its cultural equipment for racial advance. This intellectual dimension of the writing places it amongst the literature of prognostic enquiry, in spite of the negative approach. The question is implicitly assertive: if 'Negro art (and culture, history) found a patent of nobility in the folklore of mercantile intellectualism', what constituted the authentic nobility of Negro art? The tapestry of repudiation comes alive before our eyes, as if a light is played upon it, activating shadow after shadow with its blood-red illumination. A neutral, tight-lipped humour fitfully relieves the oppression, varying from the mordant and sardonic to cosmic belly-laughs; great passages of history are set in motion by a public split in the trousers of the great. The Bible, the Koran, the historic solemnity of the griot are reduced to the histrionics of wanton boys masquerading as humans. Oulouguem leaps frenetically from the cliché 'café au lait' joke to the sadistic guffaw with the lofty indifference of a ringmaster manipulating his whirl of freaks at the touch of a foot-pedal, halting long enough to treat his audience to a little

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perversion act, then moving on to the next exhibit. Is there a touch of self-hate in Oulouguem's 'dispassionate' recital? The intensity of contempt for the victims is clearly intended to reflect the alienation of the torturers from the concept of the victims as human, to reflect their religious-imperial justification for acts of barbarism, yet beneath this device lurks, one suspects, the discomfort of the author himself. The epithets are spat through gritted teeth; the antidote for victim-identification appears to be a deflective masochism – Oulouguem has been accused of an alienation technique; the opposite seems truer – such a level of inventive degradation suggests that Oulouguem is practising some form of literary magic for the purpose of self-inoculation.

Oulouguem has also carried the devaluation technique (through proximity and non-differentiation) to its conceivable limits. The method is invariably iconoclastic; nothing survives in it, not even love or (to keep our demands modest in a work of this nature) mutual physical attraction. Kassoumi's love for Tambira (both serfs) is not permitted to remain long in the natural order of things. Custom dictates that he resort to the burning of 'nail parings, three eyelashes, seven head hairs, seven pubic hairs etc., etc.' to sprinkle on the bride's nuptial viands; while for himself crushed lion-penises, cocks' testicles and goat sperm provide the fare. The obscenity of the seigneur's right of the first night prolongs the reductive cynicism of the event (the novel's first *human* event) by its own ceremonial burnings of 'incense, sublimate of camphor, aloes, Indian musk and amber' in a mockery of defloration. Slave and master are made to undergo these humiliations with complete equanimity; the law of the absurd and the obscene, narratively imposed until now, becomes fully sublimated in the first human realist portraiture. This is the first moment that the semblance of an individuated character (and contact) has emerged from the tapestry, but its function is merely

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confirm and reinforce the pattern of the established
m; from here on, further human delineation will
immerse each product of Nakem's history in the gory
degradation of its past, and most deeply, our would-be
central character, fruit of the obscene rites of the union
of serfs – Raymond Spartacus Kassoumi.

In preparation for the summative European pilgrim-
age of the young Kassoumi, art, religion and cultural
concepts are brought together in contemporary time for
a final iconoclastic collision, elaborating Oulougouem's
cynical observation noted earlier in the midst of mayhem:
'the blessed union of knowledge and morality is fragile'.
Kassoumi's quest for knowledge (and liberation) is fore-
doomed; he will neither escape his Nakem past nor its
present transposition to the 'Shrobeniusology' of distant
Europe. The avenues of possible salvation through reli-
gion are firmly closed, even to the extent of assailing
their modern defenders with that most lethal weapon,
parody. For instance, the metempsychotic delirium of
the wife-murderer Sankolo reads suspiciously like a
sex-orgiastic parody of Hamidou Kane's transcendent-
alist apologia for Islamic spirituality. Recourse to an
indigenous metaphysics, a 'cosmological religiosity' or
'inner landscape' has become impossible, because it is
deprived of identity by the intellectual conmanship of
Europe's anthropologists. The pathway in that direction
is clotted up with the superficial debris of intellectual
excavations. The Shrobenious invasion of Nakem is
stretched to represent the tradition of falsification, coup-
pled with a levelling down of the Aryan myth, the
symbolic blonde beast brought to rut in the degenerate
earth of black Nakem, naturally enough in the context
of the highest quest conceivable to German civilisation –
the quest for *Kultur*! But even as the concepts of Aryan
self-reversal are mouthed, ostensibly to compensate for
the long heresy of Eurocentric belittlement of black
Africa, they are brought flatly down within sordid motiva-

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tions – entrepreneurial greed and opportunism even
in the service of *Kultur*! The idea that the revolutionary
potential of Nakem's serfdom will approach this source
for intellectual sustenance compounds the sham. Study
for young Kassoumi has become a 'fanatical cult', the
'instrument of his liberation'. But the quality of all
possible knowledge is falsified in advance; worse, the
foundation of his elevation, his mother's sordid sacrifice,
hangs over any eventual achievement like a miasma.
Oulougouem excels himself: not only does the mother
prostitute herself to the sorcerer for her sons' success,
she is subsequently raped by Saif's two gorillas then
murdered (or commits suicide) in the slaves' latrine, up
to the neck in excrement. Kassoumi's father lovingly
sucks the worms from her nostrils!

How ironic that the novel's only episode of consciously
rendered affectionate relationship should be homo-
sexual, and yet how appropriate to Oulougouem's mis-
anthropic vision! It raises questions, certainly. The
tender narrative of Raymond Spartacus' affair with the
Strasbourg, Lambert, is such a drastic departure
from the rest of the narrative, containing so little of the
earlier brutality or cynical undermining, that it reads
like a heightened James Baldwin. It is not only tender,
it is *sympathetic* and sincere despite the occasions when
the author, recalled to himself, appears to feel obliged
to liken Kassoumi's love to that of a whipped dog, or
acknowledges in Lambert an 'obscure desire to get even,
to avenge himself, to wound his nigger'. Such insertions
are both rare and even self-conscious, betraying a suspi-
cious desire to complicate, to keep some level of dialectic
tension going at all costs by exploiting the racial context.
The mercenary calculation of Raymond Spartacus at the
start is made ambivalent even in the very first night of
copulation. Nothing wrong with that, but what we en-
counter is not lust, in keeping with Nakem's history of
pederasty, sodomy, sexual sadism, etc., but tenderness.

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Yet nothing till now has suggested Kassoumi's homosexual leanings. The morning request for payment for his services sounds pathetic rather than commercial, and of course he soon graduates to the status of a kept 'mistress' in what is clearly no longer a commercial arrangement but one of love. Long after Spartacus has ceased to need Lambert financially, the affair is continued by both. The significance of this episode is certainly elusive, since its treatment removes it from the pale of suggestive criticism or subjective contempt either of European decadence or of the individuals. Such solemn cadences, extolling the anal salvation of the lonely in the inhuman and indifferent society of Europe belong to the fictional prose of Baldwin and Genêt, and cannot be integrated into the mould of iconoclastic literature. Neither, incidentally, can the Victorian melodrama of brother-bedsister-in-brothel fable. This reads at first like an attempted parody, but it then becomes the instrument of crucial revelations of homeland for Spartacus (and a further confirmation of his whipped character). The extension of the melodrama into the neurotic reality of the milieu – the razor blade in the bidet soap which ends Kadidia's life a bare week later – only mildly restores the earlier consistency, being a predictable extension of the violent destiny of the Nakemians. But then, a short while later, the incongruously tender homosexual interlude!

If there is any doubt that *Le Devoir de Violence* owes much in its conception to a desire to counter the Islamic apologia of Hamidou Kane, the duplication of the hero's pilgrimage to Europe dispels much of it and the final duet of the Bishop and the Saif, a confrontation in the idiom of grim political exegesis which corresponds to Hamidou Kane's mystic exegesis of death, removes the last of it. But the reaches of *Le Devoir de Violence* are far wider; the work does not specifically address itself to the Islamic myth. It is a fiercely partisan book on behalf of an immense historic vacuum, the vacuum this time

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being Oulougouem's creation, not Stoddard's. And the charge of (unlocated) racism is departicularised by the author's uniform manipulation of the rhetorical style of the legendary heroes and their associative civilisations: Judaic, medieval, Arab-Islamic, Christian-European. The neat juxtaposition of incongruous prayers and pietistic lore with events of cunning, duplicity and barbarism may seem an obvious literary device but, since the characters themselves appear perfectly at home in this tradition of florid diplomacy (French, Arabic, and so on) the author's organising hand is hardly felt. Statesmanship and strategies are snared and rendered indistinguishable from the mere rhodomontade of the discourse of duplicity, a medieval variant of Newspeak. A culture which has claimed indigenous antiquity in such parts of Africa as have submitted to its undeniable attractions is confidently proven to be imperialist; worse, it is demonstrated to be essentially hostile and negative to the indigenous culture. As a purely sociological event, such a work was bound to create violent passions. Reinterpretations of history or contemporary reality for the purpose of racial self-retrieval do generate extremes of emotion, most of all among claimants to intellectual objectivity. Oulougouem's verdict is a painful one – a sanguinary account of the principal rival to the Christian mission in Africa cannot be anything but provocative. Oulougouem pronounces the Moslem incursion into black Africa to be corrupt, vicious, decadent, elitist and insensitive. At the least such a work functions as a wide swab in the deck-clearing operation for the commencement of racial retrieval. The thoroughness of its approach – total and uncompromising rejection – can only lead to the question already posed: what was the authentic genius of the African world before the destructive alien intrusion? And the question can today be confidently asked, backed as it is by findings from the labour of ethnoscience. Stoddard's thesis is predictably exposed as

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fallacious; the alternative candidate for stuffing up the cultural black hole of the continent is yet another rubble-maker of cultural edifices.

It is true that Oulouguem takes no interest in presenting to the reader the values destroyed in this process. The positive does not engage his re-creative attention, and what glimpse we obtain of the indigenous reality is presented within the undifferentiated context of the oppressed and the oppressor, the feudal overlord and slave – undifferentiated, that is, from the later political relations of Arab and European colonialism. Oulouguem speaks indeed of a 'black colonialism'.³ The premise for this expression is suspect, and it has affected Oulouguem's concepts of the pre-colonial reality of African society. A social condition in which Semites (though black and pre-Islamic) are overlords and negro-Africans the slaves still leaves the basic curiosity about black historic reality unsatisfied. Not until Ayi Kwei Armah's *Two Thousand Seasons* (East African Publishing House, 1973) is this aspect attempted; but even there its validity is not predicated on objective truths so much as on the fulfilment of one of the social functions of literature: the visionary reconstruction of the past for the purposes of a social direction. In Armah's work, there is no ambivalence of intent, nor of historic reconstruction.

The Eurocentric burden of black Africa attains complete identification, in Armah's work, with Arab-Islamic colonialism. Arab slavers are referred to as *white* men, not only in the narrative, but more importantly as the characteristic definition by those Africans whose subjugation and liberation-struggle make up the story. Armah's images reinforce this general perspective on the Arab presence: the employment of the white desert as symbol of an insatiable suction on life, yielding in return only bones and emptiness, this white image of death is married with the other predatory whiteness: white mag-

³ Interview published in JONALA 9/10.

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gots swarming from over the seas, the European slavers. The theologies of both groups of intruders are interpreted through parallel life-denying metaphors, both cultures are equated with systems to which human depravity is not only natural but essential. The anti-humanism of the mass enslavement of other beings is not even left to speak for itself; Armah is anxious that the theological collaboration in this orgy of bestialisation is not missed. As if in stung response to Lothrop Stoddard, Armah declares:

We have not found that lying trick to our taste, the trick of making up sure knowledge of things possible to think of, things possible to wonder about but impossible to know in any such ultimate way. We are not stunted in spirit, we are not Europeans, we are not christians that we should invent fables a child would laugh at and harden our eyes to preach them daylight and night as truth. We are not so warped in soul, we are not Arabs, we are not muslims to fabricate a desert god chanting madness in the wilderness, and call our creature creator. That is not our way. (*Two Thousand Seasons*, p. 4)

Once again we must attempt to place this unusual vehemence against its full background. The quest for and the consequent assertion of the black cultural psyche began as a result of the deliberate propagation of untruths by others, both for racist motives and to disguise their incapacity to penetrate the complex verities of black existence. Cheikh Anta Diop and Chancellor Williams go so far as to accuse their European counterparts not only of a deliberate falsification of history (as interpreted), but of the suppression and falsification of historic evidence. Diop's re-interpretation of the evidence for the history of civilisation goes so far as to question the origin of European and Northern culture and replace it in the South, in the Negro cradle. (Diop simplifies the division

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of the races into two – the Southern, black; and the Northern, white, Arab or European.) The sentient individual for his own part must be constantly recollected as one who has experienced histories which he is aware are not his own, and whose sense of identity is unstable, consisting in effect of the process of coming to terms with the history of others in conflict with his own repressed cultural and ethnic being. It is an active sense of identity; and where the ethno-scientist stops is where the re-creative energy takes over: both activities are aspects of and complement each other. The reverse, it must be remembered, is also true. The Eurocentric ethnologist has been complemented for centuries by European literature from Elizabethan imagination to the Rider Haggards and the Kiplings, not to mention the image-manufacturers of Euro-American cinema. It has not all been a crude and obvious misrepresentation; not only has some of it been well-intended but some has actually originated from among black scholars and writers. Thus, Bolaji Idowu in his otherwise excellent work, *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief* (Longman, 1962) makes a point of proving that the Yoruba do believe in a Supreme Deity, with this dominating inference – that this constitutes proof of the high stage of development of the Yoruba people. Such a criterion of development is, need one add, entirely Eurocentric.

The proliferation of such myths, and their implicit acceptance even today on the African continent must be seen and understood as the background to the works under discussion. Failure to see the process of racial retrieval in one comprehensive whole, to see the process of anti-colonialism as one which ends with far greater ramifications for society *in depth* than the rejection of *one* self-assertive set of values, suggests a lack of faith in, or a half-hearted attempt to re-discover and re-examine the matrix of society that preceded the violent distortions. A rejection of the Eurocentric incubus which has

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preoccupied African creative writing almost exclusively for half a century cannot fail, in an intelligent people, to answer more questions than it began by posing. Political revolutions of a race-retrieving nature such as the overthrow of the Sultanate autocracy in Zanzibar by an indigenous African nationalist movement have consequences far beyond those of similar violent changes in political authority in other areas. That the Afro-Shirazi Party under Sheik Karume later became as suspiciously repressive as the alien imperialism it overthrew is another matter entirely, an unfortunate fact of political change which is not confined to Africa. What really concerns us here is that political events such as those which took place in Zanzibar or the Sudan are components of the same mould of thought and expression as the literature of the now restive modern product of centuries of alien historic impositions. The long ignominious silence of African leaders over the now resolved Anyanya insurrection in the Sudan is, alas, the misleading yardstick by which the majority judge the truth of such expressions of the authentic will to identity. Missing always is that temper of comprehension which recognises in the various adaptive modes of expression aspects of the same crucial struggle for a re-statement of self and society. Cheikh Anta Diop, Sheikh Karume, Oulougouem, Ayi Kwei Armah, Anyanya? A puzzled headshake signifying – No Connection. But how can the intellectual be blamed when national leaders have trivialised the essential with catch-all diversionary slogans such as 'authenticité'! Ayi Kwei Armah does not neglect to portray the opportunistic existence of such 'kings' in his contribution to the search for a social direction.

It is Armah's attention to such critical details as the false prophets of retrieval that rescues the work from its less defensible excesses. For when all the excuses have been made and the *historic inevitability* of this genre of writing fully accepted, there still remains a feeling of

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discomfort over the actual language of confrontation and the dramatic devices in which the victims of the author's ire are trapped. In contrast to Oulouguem, however, Armah's work is intensely committed to the substitution of another view of *active* history, with re-creating humanistic perspectives as inspirational alternatives to existing society. His vision consciously conforms to no inherited or imposed religious doctrine and attendant ethics, frees itself of borrowed philosophies in its search for a unifying, harmonising ideal for a distinctive humanity. Because it is not possible to suspend the awareness of these integrated goals in the narrative, the recession of the idiom of humanism becomes particularly oppressive on occasion. There is a gleefulness, a reckless ascendancy of the vengeance motif in passages such as these:

Came a Rhamadan, the predators' season of hypocritical self-denial. Followed the time they call the Idd, time of the new moon of their new year. After a month of public piety and abstention the predators again threw themselves into their accustomed orgies of food, of drugs and of sex. Of these orgies we remember the greatest, and for those particular predators the last. . . (*Two Thousand Seasons*, p. 31)

Hussein, twin brother of Hassan the Syphilitic. Hussein had long since given up the attempt to find a way for his phallus into any woman's genitals. His tongue was always his truest pathfinder. So after moving with the others in the forgetfulness of a momentary genital enthusiasm he had returned to eating buttered dates into his bursting paunch, buttered dates mined from three women's holes in turn. By the third round the circuit was making Hussein dizzy. The third woman therefore held Hussein's head in a tender caress. The second in a gesture full of love stuck a smooth, solid,

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well-honed knife into Hussein's neck, in a soft space between the cowries of his spine. The first woman stroked the disjointed head with affection, pressing it firmly down so the first hoarse cry from the throat came out a muffled sound of happy lechery. Then the first woman raised the head gently, to give the warm blood way in its quiet flowing from the predator's open mouth. . . (p. 34)

This is how Hassan died: at the height of his oblivious joy a seventh woman unknown to him but known to the other six brought a horn holed at its small end as well as the large, and inserted the small end into the Arab's rectum. Hassan was overjoyed. A torrent of thanks and praises was pouring out of his mouth, directed toward the slaveowner benefactor god who had so thoughtfully provided such exquisite means to the completion of his pleasure when he felt something extra reach the lining of his rectum. It was honey, mixed with lamp oil, the mixture heated past boiling. Hassan's unforeseen benefactress poured an overflowing measure of the sweet liquid into his arse. (p. 38)

In the depravities of the Arab invaders of Africa, in the horrendous means of eliminating which the author devises for them, evolving these from their favourite perversions in a kind of sexual justice, the humane sensibility tends to recoil a little. Their brothers, the white maggots from over the seas, fare no better. The one Armah calls the predators, the other, destroyers; both predatory birds are decked in the same feathers. Through the eyes of the indigenes, the askaris, the harem guards, the middlemen, the fugitives, we encounter all aliens as inhuman exploiters only; there is no redeeming grace, no event is permitted to establish the exception.

In spite of this, *Two Thousand Seasons* is not a racist

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tract; the central theme is far too positive and dedicated and its ferocious onslaught on alien contamination soon falls into place as a preparatory exercise for the liberation of the mind. A clean receptive mind is a prerequisite for its ideological message, and there is no question that this work is designed for the particular audience of Armah's own race. What he offers them now is 'the way', 'our way'. True, beyond the method of contrasts, beyond the utilisation of fertility and regeneration in contrast with the barren insatiability of the desert, beyond its summation in the oft-recurring word 'reciprocity' and its attributive 'connectedness', the Way is not very distinctly specified. But we learn that it is the way of life while others are the way of death. Nor is the goal of the Way attainable by mere passive understanding; it is mandated upon the destruction for all time of the agencies of opposition. This is the primary mission. The bare cleared earth, a restored, receptive virginity, is in conformity with Armah's own progressive device. Indeed, Armah appears to have undertaken this preliminary literary destruction of the identified opposition as a parallel activity to the novel's schematism. But except for the occasional utterances of its seers – the elderly Isanusi and Adewa the virgin mystic – the Way remains a hazy and undefined ideology; it is the action that defines it, and the guiding principles debated by the protagonists.

Progressively, the blotted-out areas of ethical harmony, long obliterated by the impositions of alien structures, are filled out. Ayi Kwei Armah asserts a past whose social philosophy was a natural egalitarianism, unravelling events which produced later accretions of the materialist ethic in order to reinforce the unnaturalness, the abnormality of the latter. The actions of his protagonists are aimed at the retrieval of that past, but again Armah insists that this past is not a nostalgic or sentimental one. It is presented as a state embodying a rational ideal. Armah goes even farther; actions and motivations are

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deliberately contrived to place such longings (for a nostalgic past) in a context of betrayal of the larger aim; as self-delusion, self-destruction and general mindlessness. In the same way as the materialist retrogression of the modern African polity is an implied target of the author's savage attack, so also is the romanticism of Negritude assailed in associative portrayals.

The members of an initiation group betrayed to a white (European) slaver by their own king have freed themselves from the boat while it is still in coastal waters. They escape, take to the forest and engage in guerilla warfare against the 'destroyers'. In the process they also free other groups who are then offered the choice of returning to their homes or joining with their rescuers in the liberation struggle. Armah's warning is that their real enemy, the eternal middlemen among their own kind, are merely waiting to sell them off again. Those who fail to recognise this reality encounter their fate, as predicted. The physical action becomes a parable for the crippling nostalgia which drags society back into an unreal past. It is one of the strongest themes of the book. And such hankerings are contrasted with a concerted, purposed preparation for a return to Anoa, the original home of the fugitive band; the physical road to Anoa is thus rendered separate from the ideological road. Monarchy is quietly undermined by its historical reconstruction: the past of kings is not the real past; the kings stand revealed as part of the historical rupture, stooges brought into existence through the agency of the incoming marauders who needed puppet figures of arbitrary authority to bargain with for slaves and trade monopolies, mercenaries who could be armed and supported and set upon neighbouring peoples and their own subjects alike. The universally applicable ideal is constantly verified by recourse to such known historic instances. The frame of absurdity is used to shatter anti-social notions, such as the sanctity of property:

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For the first time among us one man tried to turn the land into something cut apart and owned. It was asked what next the greedy would think to own – the air? (p. 100)

For the modern African who has watched the principle of communal land-ownership crumble before the rapacious march of development monopoly, the process seems after all reversible. But Armah is nothing if not realistic:

An unknown avenger sent him hurrying to face the wrath of his ancestors, but that was not the end of the greed of kings. (pp. 100-1)

There are of course serious weaknesses in the book. The long seer-run overture occasionally creaks, and Armah's prose style appears unequal to the task of capturing action and rendering it totally convincing. This weakness often tends to make the book read like an adventure story. But his protagonists remain convincing visionaries of society, mostly because Armah makes no concessions in this unusual book, not even to the rhetoric of revolution to which lesser writers so readily succumb. Its vision is secular and humane, despising alike the flatulence of religious piety and its proselytising aggressiveness, insisting on a strict selectivity from the past in the designing of the future. There is evident impatience with the state of racial enervation which is Armah's interpretation of the unquestioning submission to imposed history, religion and culture and the consequent exteriorised self-definition. Most remarkable of all in a book which is hardly squeamish in its depiction of violence, is Armah's insistence on a revolutionary integrity, a refusal to be trapped into promoting the increasingly fashionable rhetoric of violence for its own sake. The foundation of this physical caution is laid in the matrix of a philosophy that he elicits from a now

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familiarised past and makes a condition for a tenable future. This humanistic recourse to proportion and the principle of totalism in the book's summation rationalises the nature of struggle. Violence, death, destruction and sacrifice are acceptable, but the part, the motion or the act cannot be elevated above the whole:

We do not utter praise of arms. The praise of arms is the praise of things, and what shall we call the soul crawling so low, soul so hollow it finds fulfilment in the praising of mere things? It is not things we praise in our utterance, not arms we praise but the living relationship itself of those united in the use of all things against the white sway of death, for creation's life... Whatever thing, whatever relationship, whatever consciousness takes us along paths closer to our way, whatever goes against the white destroyers' empire, that thing is beautiful, that relationship only is truthful, that consciousness alone has satisfaction for the still living mind. (p. 320)

The secular vision in African creative writing is particularly aggressive wherever it combines the re-creation of a pre-colonial African world-view with eliciting its transposable elements into a modern potential. The process may be explicit, as in Armah's *Two Thousand Seasons*, or, as in Sembene, may rely on the reader's capacity for projection. The shared knowledge of what now exists and the prior assumption of a readership subjectively attuned to the significations of posed comparisons is part of the armoury of the novel which, depending on the moralities of the conflicts and events, does away with the need for utopian presentations. Assuming an unsympathetic readership, it remains a threat, a potent one, because its justifying paradigm has been woven from the authentic heritage of that society. The greater the realism, the more dangerous it appears

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to be: when, as in Sembene, the subject is a recent historic actuality, the author can expect classification as a security risk. Sometimes, because of the static appearance of the novel's social moralities, it is dismissed as harmless – Armah's earlier work *The Beautiful Ones are Not Yet Born* (Heinemann, 1969) may be placed in this category. Despite its criticism of social values and their pursuit at a particularly delicate period of his country's post-colonial history, its excoriation of internal social corruption, because expanded into nearly meta-physical dimensions may, beyond banal protests at such 'unflattering portraits' of a young nation, awaken no anxiety in the establishment such as might arise from a directly contradicting social vision. The vision is there nevertheless, and is perhaps more subtly subversive than in his latter explicit work, *Two Thousand Seasons*. The vision of *The Beautiful Ones* is perhaps no more than an aspiration, a pious hope symbolised in that final image of the novel – 'a single flower, solitary, unexplainable, very beautiful' in the centre of the inscription on the back of a mammy-waggon which reads: THE BEAUTYFUL ONES ARE NOT YET BORN. This pessimistic suggestion bears the possibility of its own hopeful contradiction, an accurate summation of society only too well understood by Armah and expressed in the main action of the book through the solitary, beleaguered representative of moral possibilities, the central character (and his friend, the Teacher). There is also the hopeful portent inherent in the physical and moral collapse of the 'unbeautiful' ones as history revenges itself on them. Without miring ourselves in Armah's appropriately scatological metaphor, there is a readiness of association which transfers the image of the flower to an excremental genesis, personalising its symbolism in the character of the unnamed hero.

After that work Ayi Kwei Armah had to attempt to give birth to the 'beautiful' in the creative progression of *Two Thousand Seasons*. Ousmane Sembene performs a simi-

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lar midwife role in his *God's Bits of Wood* (Heinemann, 1970), a powerful reconstruction of a strike by African railway workers in 1947. It is a work which reaches beyond mere narrative in its meticulous delineation of human strengths and weaknesses, heroism and communal solidarity, and it attains epic levels. As with all good epics, humanity is re-created. The social community acquires archetypal dimensions and heroes become deities. Even Penda the prostitute is apotheosised.

The remote, enigmatic Bakayako is a Promethean creation, a replacement for outworn deities who have the misfortune to lose their relevance in a colonial world. Amoral in the mundane sense of the word, Bakayako appears to be sculpted out of pure intellect and omniscience. Not merely because the established Islamic Voice in the community is shown to be treacherous and reactionary but because Bakayako is portrayed as understanding and controlling the future (or at least the path towards it) he supersedes all existing moral authority and forges, through his inflexible will, the unique community of the Railway Line into a force that robs the other deity, the Colonial Super-reality, of its power. Of course the portraiture of Bakayako is somewhat romanticised – necessarily so. He is a man of mystery, irresistible to women and dominating to all. To the precocious child Ad'jibid'ji he is perfection, manifestly superior to all humanity around him. And he represents a gifted world that she only vaguely feels. He tends to the poetic, and his perception of the world takes from his own innate grandeur: 'She looks like the bronze masks of a goddess of Ife' he remarks of the girl whose heart he is about to break. Thus, the world and his people are constantly transformed with his own reflective glow. But Bayayoko is not a cloud-treading deity; his strength lies in a realistic location among the flesh and blood of an embattled humanity. The touches of traditional mores and

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relationships are subtle but telling; they are never permitted to harbour a suspicion of the exotic but emerge naturally from the actualities that surround him. Thus, at the crucial rally in Dakar, just before he mounts the platform, an old woman comes up to him and asks if he still has a mother. Bakayoko says he has none. 'From today on, then' she says simply, 'I will be your mother . . . If you stay in Dakar, my son, come to live with me. There will always be a place for you.'

We are made conscious of a new society in the process of coming to birth. Sembene's ideology is implicit, he does not allow its rhetorical intrusion, but makes it organic to the process of birth. The strategy of struggle determines the one ideological resolution, translate it how one will. An egalitarian discipline has been enforced upon the community by the goals and the ordeals of the strike, by the knowledge of colonial indignity with its imposition of an inferior status on the indigene, its wage-discrimination and inadequate social facilities. In spite of the talk of books, the widening of foreign knowledge and the usual paraphernalia which accompany the process of external indoctrination, the emphasis of social regeneration is carefully laid on the intrinsic ethical properties of existing society, their adaptation and universal relations. Key events are brought into being by this adaptive process, making both of revolution and the emerging social structures a growth process which can be described as truly indigenous. So the trial of Diara the strike-breaker develops, both in its origination and its resolution, into a process of education for the entire community.

The agonising of Tiemoko, secretary of the strike committee in Bamako is symbolic of the whole process. His meticulous preparation, coupled with his doubts over the trial of the elderly Diara is pathetic and even comic, but it is much like the anguish of birth. The earlier measures against strike-breakers have proved

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inadequate; commando squads for administering beatings to the recalcitrant seem temporary and artificial; Tiemoko instinctively gropes towards the seminal. He finds it in the missing practices of his people, guided towards this appreciation by an adherence to traditional codes of conduct in which he finds no contradiction to Bakayoko's selective lessons from external wisdoms. 'It is not necessary to be right to argue,' he intones like a litany, 'but to win it is necessary both to be right and never to falter.' The phrase is from his foreign catalogue, but simultaneously he refused to depart from norms which represent for him a traditional foundation of communal cohesion:

Look, Sadio, your father is my father's brother; you are my cousin. Your honour is also mine; your family's shame is my family's, and the same of our whole country, the dishonour of all our families together. That is why we cannot beat your father.
(*God's Bits of Wood*, p. 120)

This refusal, however, is later revealed not to be a nepotist compromise; it derives from the appropriateness of the nature of punishment to the notion of the human being as inseparable from his social context, not as a cipher in a revolutionary formula. Diara's son indeed considers the alternative punishment far more severe than the beating. 'I'd rather die' he declares. For his part Tiemoko, who has set the entire process in motion and brings it to a conclusion, declares to Bakayoko's father (and we believe him):

If it was my own father, I would do it Fa Keita; I swear it on the tomb of my ancestors! And if it were you, Ibrahim Bakayoko would do the same thing.
(p. 123)

When at last he has convinced his colleagues on the committee of the appropriateness of this methods, he