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Text, Metatext and History: A Congolese Perspective

In his concluding words to *The Invention of Africa*, the Zairean writer and philosopher Valentin Mudimbe, sums up with an uncanny note of personal passion, an underlying theme that can be traced in both his fictional and philosophical writing. It is a theme which underpins his incisive inquiry into African *gnosés* and epistemology. He says:

I believe that the geography of African *gnosés* also points out the passion of a subject-object who refuses to vanish. He or she has gone from the situation in which he or she was perceived as a simple functional object to the freedom of thinking of himself or herself as the starting point of absolute discourse. (1988, 200)

The positing of the subject-object dialectic is not new and, since the early Negritude poets, African scholars and writers have, in one form or another, been dealing with the problematics of establishing Africa as their historical and epistemological point of departure. Post-modernist thinking has of course greatly contributed towards a de-centering process and, in theory at least, opened the way for the possibility of re-centering marginal literatures. However, if one considers the real situation of writers and writing in Africa, something of an *impasse* seems to have been reached. On the one hand it is true that increasing attention is given to writing from the so-called third world, by means of prestigious literary awards and, working at another level but equally influentially, radio competitions for theatre and short stories. One thinks here for example of the *concours théâtral* run by Radio France Internationale, which has contributed in no small way to putting certain African writers on the map. However, on the other hand, merely widening the parameters of the establishment to include hitherto "outsiders" does not necessarily transform or even seriously question the foundations of that institution.

Indeed, it is clear that in practice the established canon continues to maintain a dominant, central position. One could for example, look at the status and function of powerful Western publishing houses with respect to African writing. At another level, it is quite revealing to look at the part played by the Preface

in legitimising the text and integrating it into a pre-established system.¹ In fact, literary prizes, book prefaces, editorial policies, are subtle, or at times not so subtle means, as Mudimbe puts it, of integrating the Other with the Same, all the while confirming the ultimate authority of the Same.

Like many other thought systems, literary theory represents a cultural position. There is no *degré zéro*. The reader-critic who approaches a text, in terms of its *littérarité* or its relation to history, from a supposedly objective standpoint is in fact a product of an epistemological system which does not necessarily correspond to that of the writer. *A priori* there is of course nothing wrong in this. On the contrary, the multiple reading of a text is enriching and is an important aspect of the reader's active participation in the creative process. However, all too often, the concern to find the meaning of a text is determined by culturally specific factors that have appropriated universal status. Fundamental to the whole question of the reception of African writing are those forces that determine the world patterns of power, that is economic forces. Since its relatively recent appearance on the world literary scene, the reception of African written literatures has been determined to a large extent by their marketability, which is in turn subject to reading tastes and critical norms that are appropriate to other cultural and intellectual traditions.

To escape from the *impasse* clearly requires more than the mere revision or displacement of the canon. While writers and literary theorists are unlikely to influence in any significant way world economic hegemonies, the on-going process of re-evaluating theory and the pragmatics of writing undoubtedly contributes towards modifying reader expectations, hopefully beyond the rarefied air of academic institutions. The problem then is what the radical questioning of the norm means in the context of African writing and more particularly, Francophone writing from Central Africa.

Contemporary literary theory, at least as it is understood and practised in the West, has developed into a science with its own norms and techniques and its own set of specialised practitioners. Around the text, the object of investigation, develops a complex body of critical metatextual theory, which becomes itself an object of further critical debate, establishing what is today a genre in itself. While theories and models reveal laws which regulate our world and reassure us with a sense of pattern and order, this is of course illusory, and particularly so in the domain of aesthetics, where the work of art represents a subjective trans-formation of objective reality. Indeed, all theoretical models are reductionist and can explain only those elements which comply with parameters that, by nition, cannot be all inclusive. More importantly, the very act of engaging with or seeking to modify the model necessitates working from within that theoretical

system, thereby implicitly accepting the pre-established parameters that ne that same system.

This is a problem with which Mudimbe engages, albeit within a wider philosophical framework. His investigation into the history of dominance and self-realization with respect to African gnosis offers some useful insights for comparative literature studies. In particular Mudimbe focusses on the problematics of positing oneself as the starting point of absolute discourse. In a sense, his works quoted in introduction to this paper suggest an apparent truism, that authentic experience creates its own norms. Elsewhere, in *Odeur du père*, he speaks of scientific thought as a perpetual "devenir," the "capacité de pouvoir assumer, dans la virginité d'une parole et la folie d'un espoir, l'activité et la force de la subjectivité face à l'histoire" (1982, 202). Applied to creative writing, this notion suggests that the text itself contains its own nition. It establishes its own methods or criteria in terms of which it is to be read. Taking as the basis of investigation a corpus of contemporary Congolese novelists, it can be shown that, within the text, the writer engages with the poetics of writing and establishes an intertextual metatext which ignores the conventional distinction between criticism and creative writing. This without falling prey to the anxiety of reading or textual self-destruction. In general, and of course generalisations are hazardous, the writers in question here are more concerned with the problematics of communication with a perceived "audience," be those readers real or virtual, than with issues surrounding the unreadability of the text.

Congolese writing offers many examples of the intertextual construct of theory, whereby a metatext develops as narrative. Of particular interest is the ironic thought mode, a technique or strategy by which the *locuteur* can be seen to rework within the text the experientially perceived phenomenon of ambiguity or paradox, thereby demonstrating the virtuality of meaning and escaping the strictures of choice and reductionist systems. Importantly, this conscious reflection upon the dynamics of writing does not create a closed dialogue between the writer and the text. Nor is it a gratuitous or self-indulgent intellectual game. The writing is posited in, even determined by, historical contextuality. The pervading yet implicit recognition of the culture-history dialectic is evidence of the writer's engagement with history in order to transcend history.

A significant factor of this process is the reader-writer relationship. The South African writer, Njabulo Ndebele, has argued that the validity of the creative act requires a dual response on the part of the reader, that of recognition and also of transformation, which is seen to be a process of discovery, learning and understanding (37-57). It can be argued that a clear understanding of the reader-writer dynamic is a prerequisite to an investigation into the way in which the text creates its own metatext, in terms of a particular historical context.

As a writing strategy, the ironic mode is most obviously a powerful means by which the writer engages with social or political injustices. The author-narrator

1. With respect to Francophone African writing in particular, see Bokiba.

occupies a constantly shifting terrain, measuring reality against an implicit vision of the ideal. The Congolese writers are striking examples of this: Emmanuel Dongala, Sony Labou Tansi, Henri Lopes, Tchicaya U Tam'Si and many others whose voice has not been heard outside of the Congo, make a stinging indictment of corruption and social injustice in the Republic of the Congo during the 1970s and 1980s. Their fictional world is seldom if ever divorced from the real world, whose historical and geographical situation is easily, and intentionally so, verifiable. However, there is a danger in interpreting this symbiotic relationship between the text and history only in the narrow sense of committed writing, which has been identified by certain critics, concerned with establishing what constitutes African writing, as a *ning* characteristic. Certainly the ironic mode underscores the text-history relationship but it is more than a mere vehicle for social or political criticism. It reflects a specific gnosis. It is the expression of a particular understanding of being and of the world.

The ironic vision is by its very nature multi-dimensional, and therefore ambiguous, and this ambiguity is an important key to many African texts, particularly contemporary writing which is often considered difficult or even hermetic. Perhaps the best example of this is the work of the Congolese poet, dramatist, and novelist, Tchicaya U Tam'Si, who is widely recognised to be one of the greatest writers that Africa has produced. In fact, the reception of U Tam'Si's poetry is a pertinent example of how culturally determined critical models fail to illuminate writing from another cultural context. U Tam'Si's elliptic, enigmatic imagery is frequently qualified as "surrealist" yet, read in its true linguistic and epistemological context, his metaphor is far removed from the arbitrary associations by means of which surrealist imagery functions. It is highly integrated and firmly rooted in a cultural and historical context. Moreover, his imagery is dialectically structured on a constant interplay of opposing, quite contradictory meanings. Of specific interest for the problematics of reading and interpretation, this ambiguity represents a recurrent feature whose significance extends beyond mere questions of style.

U Tam'Si offers many intertextual clues to the understanding of his writing, an example of which can be taken from his prose. Characteristically, an apparently insignificant remark conveys a wealth of meaning. In the first of his four novels, *Les Cancrélats*, a relatively minor character, Funzi reflects: "Identifier une chose c'est limiter ses possibilités" (151). Funzi is focussing upon the dilemma of trying to discover a meaning, which implies a choice, often an arbitrary choice, and the necessary discarding of other possible meanings. She is saying not only that meaning or identity are multi-dimensional, but that the ambiguity of truth is to be welcomed. This notion is reflected in the writing of U Tam'Si's compatriots. We have for example *le double* in Sylvain Bemba's novels and theatre, the carnivalesque in Sony Labou Tansi's prose and the theme of metamorphosis in Emmanuel Dongala's latest novel, *Feu des origines*. In each

case, ambiguity has an epistemological function which, in the context of the *oeuvre* as a whole, indicates the parameters within which the text is to be read and which illuminate it.

A specific example will illustrate this point. A key image informing U Tam'Si's poetry and prose, thereby illustrating incidentally the remarkable coherence of his creative work, is that of the Christ figure. It is also a profoundly paradoxical, and contradictory image. In U Tam'Si's early poetry, Christ represents the teaching of the colonial church which used the figure of Christ the Martyr to deceive the African peoples. "Le Christ est un fétiche à clous" (38) he says in *Le mauvais sang*, thereby denouncing the way in which the sacred concept of sacrificial blood has been manipulated. Christ is a false martyr — he should not have allowed himself to be sacrificed. He should have revolted, just as the African people should have revolted against foreign domination.

Le christ m'a trahi
en se laissant trouer la peau
qui voulait qu'on fit la preuve de sa mort. (U Tam'Si 1978, 74)

At the same time, the Christ figure represents redemption by suffering and the total commitment of self to an ideal or to a cause. Christ is associated with Lumumba, who is depicted as the Messiah who will unite the Congo and who, like Christ, is betrayed by his own people. In U Tam'Si's prose too, the notion of the suffering Christ is developed with particular force in the person of Gaston, a central figure of *Ces fruits si doux de l'arbre à pain*, the last of the four novels which make up his epic-like narrative. Here elements of Christian teaching intermingle with the language of the initiatory path, so echoing traditional concepts of suffering and spiritual growth.

This rapid and inevitably simplified overview of a complex image that functions at many different levels serves, however, to illustrate a fundamentally important concept for understanding U Tam'Si's *oeuvre*. In terms of its own *lecture* or readability which the text itself establishes, ambiguity is not an expression of confusion, or an agnostic position of non-commitment, but rather meaning itself. U Tam'Si is demonstrating that truth is intrinsically paradoxical and eternally virtual. Understanding is acquired progressively, through a series of approximations and the acceptance of apparently irreconcilable contradictions.

The means by which the author establishes intertextually appropriate paradigms of reading are of course various. At times one of the fictional characters, like Funzi, gives the clue. At other times the author's voice intervenes to point the way to the reader. This author-reader dynamic is important and it can be argued that it is closely related to the dynamics of oral composition (see O'Grady). Very often, a subtle change of tone signals the author's voice overlaying that of the protagonist. This can be briefly illustrated by reference to Sylvain Bemba's *Le soleil est parti à M'Pemba*. A French engineer, newly arrived in the country,

describes the future of the Congo in terms of a parable. His description represents also an *art poétique* that illuminates Bemba's own writing:

Sache qu'un pays qui se construit a besoin absolument de faire un pagne unique avec tous les morceaux du tissu des légendes les plus intéressantes de ses populations. Penser ensemble au récit embelli d'un passé idéalisé est la meilleure manière d'édifier l'avenir. (153)

At other times, an implicit statement of poetic intention may be demonstrated *in praxis*, so that linguistic strategies represent a critical metatext, working within the text itself. Again a single example will illustrate this. Sony Labou Tansi is well-known for his vigorous, innovative prose, invariably described as unconventional if not shocking. Yet the neologisms and the elliptical syntactical structures are not aimed at destroying the French language. This self-conscious effort to distance himself from a pre-determined norm is in fact a denial of the existence of a norm. The will to *défranciser* is also an affirmation of another identity, the centering of another world view.

Speaking in an interview, U Tam'Si said of his poetry: "Les clés sont là." Like the majority of African writers, U Tam'Si was constantly called upon to explain, or justify, his position as a writer, his choice of language, his metaphor. His many published interviews provide an important body of extraneous readings for the reader-critic. Indeed, it is significant to see how often in the world of African writing, the writer assumes the role of critic and literary theorist. While there is a school of opinion which, in support of the autonomy of the text, distrusts what writers say about their own work, it must be recognized that African writers, like all those who find themselves "outside" of the canon, occupy a special position in respect of the literary establishment. For example, it is unlikely that Ionesco or Todorov have ever had to defend their decision to write in French to the extent that Francophone and Anglophone African writers have been confronted with their choice of language, if indeed it was a choice. Be that as it may, writers who are obliged to defend or explain the "otherness" of their creative work are peculiarly sensitive to, even self-conscious of, the processes of writing. Their position is explained and defended explicitly, in interviews or published articles, thereby establishing a legitimate body of critical *épistèmes*.

For the reader-critic whose own epistemological system differs from that of the writer, it must be recognized that the re-defining of the critical canon creates great demands. Mudimbe's notion of the perpetual *devenir* assumes, amongst other things, a commitment on the part of the reader to leave behind his or her established patterns of reading and to enter through the text into an empathetic relationship with the author, not as a person but as the *émetteur* of the text. Furthermore, it will be a relationship of equality, where there are no pre-existing

privileged positions, since the authentic reader, to borrow Sartre's expression, will recognise that all pre-established systems are dispensable.

In *Le Chercheur d'Afriques*, another Congolese writer, Henri Lopes addresses the reader-critic through André, the young Congolese with green eyes, suggesting in poetic terms the need for the deconstruction of reading norms. The son of a Congolese woman and a Frenchman posted to the Congo during the pre-independence period, André goes to France to trace his origins. In the last paragraph of the novel the narrator-author, whose presence has been discretely dissimulated behind the protagonist, clearly intervenes to address the reader directly: "Il faut beaucoup de fantaisie et un grain de folie pour retrouver le sens de cette histoire. Sans ce dérèglement rythmé, tu n'atteindras jamais le chemin de mon éblouissement.... Tourne encore quelques pages, va, va, va..." (297).

Whether the intertextual treatment of critical and theoretical questions that has been illustrated here can ever be constituted into a literary theory is of course open to question. It is often pointed out that, while much is written about African writing, by both African writers and academics, so far no coherent or rigorous theory has been established. Yet the posing of the problem assumes that the notion of a literary theory is a *sine qua non*. What many African writers seem to be advocating implicitly is methods of reading and by extension, critical analysis, that evolve from the text. Theoretical discourse which depends upon pre-established systems will necessarily be reductionist. By contrast, a careful reading of the text itself will reveal a metatext which represents the transcending or englobing of the text by means of a shared act of discovery.

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