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Toward the Decolonization of African Literature, « that now-classic manifesto of African cultural nationalism »

Obioma Ofoego



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Article abstract

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*TOWARD THE DECOLONIZATION OF
AFRICAN LITERATURE,
« THAT NOW-CLASSIC MANIFESTO OF AFRICAN
CULTURAL NATIONALISM »*¹

– They are perfect for one another, observed one of the guests at the rumbustious ceremony, his upper lip curled with what could have been irony.

Résumé : Ce texte se propose d'analyser la problématique de la construction d'un sujet collectif (noir, africain, pan-africain), qui est au centre du manifeste littéraire *Toward the Decolonization of African Literature : African Fiction and Poetry and Their Critics* (1980), de la troïka *igbo* Chinweizu, Onwuchekwa Jemie et Ihechukwu Madubuike. Il s'agira de réfléchir sur la compatibilité entre l'ambition de ce projet et les stratégies prescriptives du manifeste, dont découle une esthétique « africaine ».

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In these few lines, we intend to reflect upon the marriage between the project of forging a problematic collective identity (racial, nationalist, pan-African), and the prescriptive strategies of the literary manifesto, as enacted in *Toward the Decolonization of African Literature*², by Chinweizu, Onwuchekwa Jemie and Ihechukwu Madubuike. Of particular interest to us, is the mechanism by which examples of a jealous aesthetic authenticity are produced : how do the particular and the general inform one another, in the forging of a collective « African » aesthetic ?

The manifesto is, of course, agonistic, and one of its constitutive procedures lies in the construction of oppo-

¹ Appiah (K.A.), *In My Father's House : Africa in the philosophy of Culture*. New York, Oxford : Oxford UP, 1992, 225 p. ; p. 56.

² Chinweizu, Jemie (O.) & Madubuike (I.), *Toward the Decolonization of African Literature*. Vol. 1 : *African Fiction and Poetry and Their Critics*. Enugu : Fourth Dimension Publishers, 1980, 320 p. (2nd ed. Washington : Howard UP, 1983 ; 3rd ed. London : KPI, 1985). All page references are to the first edition.

sing groups³. In *Toward*, the *Igbo* authors insist upon the problematic of authenticity, and its opposite, alienation, as present in African writing between 1950 and 1975. In the first three chapters, they focus on the constitution of two groups : an alienated coterie of Nigerian poets (their sins being : « old-fashioned, craggy, unmusical language ; obscure and inaccessible diction ; a plethora of imported imagery ; a divorce from African oral poetic traditions [...] » ; p. 165), and paternalist critics. The symbiosis between the two – a grubby, incestuous affair, it would seem – provides an insistent thread in counterpoint to which an « African » aesthetic is articulated.

Obvious rhetorical strategies in eager service of this demarcation include synecdoche (« the Adrian Roscoes » : this unfortunate critic is transformed into an emblem of stupidity, racism and imperialism ; p. 96) and metonymy (the rather cynical reduction of Soyinka to the « euromodernist » caricature they serendipitously offer ; p. 27) ; repetition of words and phrases (the almost comic polyp-ton of « obscurity » is but one instance among many ; p. 212) ; parodic distortions and « transcriptions », irreverently aimed at deconstructing the national canon (as with the transformation of Soyinka's poem « Malediction » into « simple English » – this would provoke a strident scholarly malediction of its own⁴ – or the conversion of Okigbo's « Heavensgate » into a Christian prayer ; p. 170-171, 189-190) ; and humour (the diagnosis of « Hopkins Disease » with regard to Manley-Hopkins' alleged domineering influence on contemporary Nigerian poetry⁵). Such strategies preclude ambiguity, and yield up the morsels under discussion – homogenised for digestive purposes – to the indiscriminate appetite of the gluttonous

³ For a useful discussion of the manifesto as genre, we rely on Abastado (Cl.), « Introduction à l'analyse des manifestes », in *Littérature*, n°39, (Paris : Larousse), oct. 1980, p. 3-11. Appiah's sophisticated critique of African cultural nativism – *In My Father's House*, *op. cit.* – remains an important reference point.

⁴ Soyinka (W.), « Neo-Tarzanism : The Poetics of Pseudo-Tradition », first published as a response to the troika's article « Toward the Decolonization of African Literature » in the same issue of *Transition*, n°48, 1975.

⁵ For a fine example of wit and irreverence outside the manifesto, I strongly recommend Chinweizu's collection *Energy Crisis and Other Poems*. New York / London / Lagos : Nok Publishers, 1978, 68 p.

reader. And, importantly, they are preserved in methodology : a tendency towards vague historical presentation (as with the link adumbrated between the Renaissance and the European novel's genesis), and hypostasising, which risks the very « evacuation of specificity »⁶ their attacks on « universalism » purport to combat (« Orature, being auditory, places high value on lucidity, normal syntax and precise and apt imagery » ; « the traditional poem » ; p. 247, 185).

For if a central project towards which the manifesto claims to contribute, is : « the creation of a unified community of writers, critics, disseminators and consumers of African literature, a community unified in their experience of the African tradition of orature and literature [...] » (p. 295-296), it remains to be positively articulated what both the « African tradition » and its experience constitute ; in other words, what is the relationship between project and empirical data⁷ ? The collapsing together of race and culture in the quest for a collective identity – not once do they define their usage of the complex relationships between nation, tradition, Africa, race, and the corollary exclusivist aesthetic they prescribe – entails, to a certain extent, the passing off of their own reflection as the measure of all things. And it is the disclosure of the surreptitious violence of this narcissism which reveals the tensions inherent in prescriptive claims to representative status. The significance of this leap, at once creative and profoundly unimaginative⁸, can better be articulated by considering the entire machinery (political critique, episte-

⁶ Appiah (K.A.), *In My Father's House ...*, *op. cit.*, p. 72.

⁷ The second volume – described in the introduction as « an anthology of exemplary works in prose and verse, fiction and non-fiction, from both the literature and orature of the pan-African world, [...] models of memorable thoughts and utterances from the entire pan-African world » – has not been forthcoming, despite the same introduction suggesting it had already been completed. (Volume II : « is a collection of works » ; « These examples [...] *have been gathered* [...] » ; p. 2-3 ; my italics). Indeed, in the third edition, the « Volume I » is dropped from the front cover : what are the implications for the proposed symbiosis between prescription and exemplification ?

⁸ A move encouraged by the influence of the Black Arts movement in the U.S.A., where all three studied and taught in the 1970s. Biographical details can be had at the start of *TDAL*. See also Appiah (K. A.), *In My Father's House ...*, *op. cit.*, p. 56.

mology of reading) marshalled by the troika, where each cog dutifully performs a specific function.

The trio attempt a re-ordering of the hierarchy between « orature » (« poems, plays, stories, etc. in oral form [...] » ; p. 2) and literature. Throughout *Toward*, they insist on the deflation of the written word, as an antidote to its aggressive displacement of the cultural importance of orature : « The fashionable idolatry of the written medium, insofar as it leads to automatic and habitual disparagement of the oral medium, is unwarranted » (p. 83). Concomitantly, in a nod to orature, literature is conflated with all the publicly communicated, written matter of a society (p. 1), theoretical discussions as to genre being rejected as self-indulgent European chatter. What is publicly communicated, we soon discover, commands its own aesthetic criteria – and these criteria are, alone, authentically African : lucidity, accessibility, simplicity of expression, mellifluousness, vigour, musicality. And the voice of the manifesto itself seeks to express these characteristics. There is to be no contradiction between the manifesto's demand for rupture, and the conventional expression needed to maximise communication, for the troika's « we » purports to be representative of the majority, an « African public » : the temporality implicitly instated by their intervention is that of a return to continuity. And it is this self-arrogated representative status that permits them the extraordinary claim, despite the frequent vehemence of their prescriptive procedure, that : « the role of the critics is secondary. Their proper role is that of a helper, not legislator, to writers and audience. Their authority exists insofar as they remain representative of the society for which the writers produce » (p. 285).

These aesthetic prescriptions baptised in the name of a « tradition » ought, I think, to be read as filiated to Chinweizu's *The West and the Rest of Us* : « a critical investigation into the purposes and styles of western imperialist expansion during the past five hundred years »⁹. Of particular relevance is his chapter on the relationship between the African academy and society. Under the revealing title « Africa's Universities : Roadblocks to Cultural Renais-

⁹ Chinweizu, *The West and the Rest of Us : White Slavers, Black Predators and the African Elite*. New York : Vintage Books, Random House, 1975, 520 p. ; p. xi.

sance », Chinweizu details both the colonial genealogy of certain universities (notably Nsukka), as well as the mechanism of external financing which continues to govern research in « independent » Nigeria. As Appiah has noted, the existence of a europhone elite and a noneurophone populace, the subsequent identification of formal literature to the alien (for it is only available to an elite), and the existence of a body of cultural production that has more immediate access to the citizen with less formal education – all are readily mobilised by a rhetoric seeking to forge a nationalist subject. It is this very nexus of emotive, collective rhetoric and critique of academy, as buttressed by « politico-linguistic geography »¹⁰, which informs the premises of the troika's intellectual endeavour, and preordains their aesthetic choices¹¹. Thus, in the « scandalous Leeds-Ibadan connection », in which an expropriated Nigerian university department is seen to publish poetry deliberately concocted to stifle nationalist consciousness in privatist exoticism, neo-colonialism, alienation, individualism, and an aesthetics of « euromodernism » converge (p. 199-200). We earlier spoke of counterpoint: it is of course nothing of the sort. For instead of modulations, transpositions, inversions of a subject in various voices, we are in the monotonous register of the *aut-aut*.

In a book published in 1978¹², Ali Mazrui discusses the relationship between cultural revivalism and the African academy. He equates the scholarly exigencies of the Western university ethos, inherited by the African univer-

¹⁰ See Appiah (K.A.), *In My Father's House...*, *op. cit.*, ch. 3.

¹¹ Langston Hughes' admirable aim, writes Jemie, unlike the « elitist, anti-democratic modernists », was « to unite the academy and the street – to write in such a way that both the minimally educated and the maximally schooled would find themselves maximally rewarded in reading his work » (Jemie (O.), *Langston Hughes : An Introduction to the Poetry*. New York: Columbia UP, 1976, 234 p. ; p. 195-196). Madubuike, in his review of Jemie's book, observes that this union is the condition *sine qua non* of « authentic literature » (Madubuike (I.), Review of <*Langston Hughes : An Introduction to the Poetry* by Onwuchekwa Jemie. New York: Columbia UP, 1977>, *Journal of Black Studies*, (Sage Publications, Inc.), vol. 10, n°1 (Sep., 1979), p. 131-133).

¹² Mazrui (A.A.), *Political Values and the Educated Class in Africa*. London / Ibadan / Nairobi / Lusaka : Heinemann, 1978, 392 p. ; see ch. 11.

sity, with its neo-scientific pretensions to objectivity as predicated on the individual autonomy of the scholar. For the contemporary African intellectual, however, this alliance risks a languid slide into social disengagement :

On one side is the individual scholar and on the other the universe of international scholarship. What is often missing is the intermediate category of the particular society within which the scholar operates. The university is therefore either sub-social in its commitment or supra-social – but seldom adequately social¹³.

Contrary appeals to what Mazrui names « derationalisation », then, are the clarion calls of cultural revival, and a rebuff to scholarly equanimity. Both this posture, and its attendant limitations, undergird *Toward*. The imbrication of the polemical and the pedagogical (explicitly stated as an operating principle¹⁴), affective rhetoric and analysis, and the perpetual risk of ignoble farrago, is necessitated, as Appiah has shown, by the inevitable under-determination of authenticity's proofs. The perils of entrapment within the Western problematic of identity and difference are arguably a spectral presence in other works by the trio¹⁵. But it is the manifesto which exacerbates these tensions, and permits us, through the adumbration of its (albeit protean) generic features, to disclose them.

A final word. I do not wish to flout the importance of certain basic points of *Toward*: the undressing of Eurocentric particularism disguised in universalism's robes ; the desirability of formulating theories of African literature from past and contemporary African cultural production ; the calls for institutional (university) reform ; the

¹³ Mazrui (A.A.), *Political Values and the Educated Class in Africa*, *op. cit.*, p. 211.

¹⁴ « Given the task in hand, and the necessity for rooting out imperialist rot and planting fresh African seeds, this book is unabashedly polemical and pedagogical » (p. 1).

¹⁵ The clearest example is Madubuike's book on African onomastics, in which the overwhelming use of Igbo names may be considered too fragile a basis on which to justify their paradigmatic status : « My studies have enabled me to distil some of these common traits, noticeable and prevalent in the ways Africans give or choose names for their newborns. These common traits have empowered me to use the Igbo society as a paradigm for the African system of naming » (Madubuike (I.), *A Handbook of African Names*. Washington D.C. : Three Continents Press, 1976, 233 p. ; p. 2.

dangers of obsequious imitation. Nor, more importantly, do I wish to undermine what was, it seems to me, an existential imperative to express – positively – a collective racial subjectivity in a work of scholarship. (It is significant that, despite the well-known, important differences between the trio and Soyinka, neither side disputed the worth of articulating a black aesthetic, or an « African world-view »¹⁶.) However, perhaps it is with Abiola Irele's more or less contemporary lecture « In Praise of Alienation »¹⁷ that we may best discern the motivations – and the limitations – of the troika's project. Irele, already sensitive to the existential, subjective importance of the collective racial subject offered by Negritude in its many facets, offers a nuanced negotiation of psychological, emotive subjectivity, and irreversible objective circumstance. The cautious endowment of alienation with a positive meaning is a move unavailable to the Igbo authors, whose project's irreconcilable dictates, and the vehicle of its expression, force them into strategies to shield authenticity from ambiguity.

■ Obioma OFOEGO

¹⁶ See Soyinka (W.), « Neo-Tarzanism : The Poetics of Pseudo-Tradition », *art. cit.*, p. 42 ; *Myth, Literature and the African World*. Cambridge : Cambridge UP, 1976, 168 p. ; p. 49. I wonder if Appiah's dismissal of this affective aspect in his evocation of « the banalities of nativism », and the « monolithic notion [sic] of Negritude », is not too peremptory (Appiah (K.A.), *In My Father's House...*, *op. cit.*, p. 71 ; p. 61).

¹⁷ First published as *In Praise of Alienation : An Inaugural Lecture*. Ibadan : New Horn Press, 1982.