

by Roland Hindmarsh

The purpose of this article is to give some evidence of the kind of understanding we can win through reading African prose writers, and of the misconceptions we can clear up in so doing; and to make some suggestions as to what authors and what books we might begin by reading. A good deal of the prose writing done by Africans is biographical, either directly or derivatively. One of the best known examples is Camara Laye's autobiography *The African Child*.¹ In it he tells the story of his childhood and youth until the time he leaves Guinea, his home country, to go to France for higher studies. The extract below, which must be about a time when he was six or seven years old, shows the warmth and charm of the book. At that time he lived in Kouroussa, a large up-country town, and the incident described is a visit to his relatives at Tindican, a small village to the west of Kouroussa.

Whenever I went to Tindican, it was always with my youngest uncle, who used to come and fetch me. He was younger than my mother and was not much more than an adolescent; and so I used to feel that he was still very close to my own age. He was very good-natured, and my mother did not have to tell him to look after me; he was naturally kind, and needed no telling. He would take me by the hand, and I would walk beside him; he, out of consideration for my extreme youth, would take much smaller steps, so that instead of taking two hours to reach Tindican, we would often take at least four. But I scarcely used to notice how long we were on the road, for there were all kinds of wonderful things to entertain us.

I say 'wonderful things', because Kouroussa is quite a large town and the life of the countryside and the fields is lost to us; and for a town child, such life is always wonderful. As we wandered along the road, we would startle out of their hiding places here a hare, there a wild boar, and birds would suddenly rise up with a great rattle of wings; sometimes, too, we would encounter a band of monkeys; and I would always feel a little shock of fright in my heart, as if I myself were more startled than the wild creatures that had been warned by our approach. Observing my rapturous delight, my uncle would collect pebbles and throw them far in front of us, or would beat the tall grasses

¹Collins (Fontana) 1954.

with a dead branch, the better to stir up the game. I used to imitate him, but never for very long; in the afternoon, the sun burns fiercely down upon the savannah; and I would soon come back to him and slip my hand into my uncle's. And we would wander quietly along again.

'I hope you're not feeling too tired?' my uncle would ask.

'No.'

'We can have a little rest if you like.'

He would choose a tree – a kapok tree or any tree that gave a sufficiency of shade – and we would sit down. He would tell me the latest news about the farm: calvings, the purchase of an ox, the clearing of land for a new field, or the misdemeanours of a wild boar; but it was the births in particular that excited my interest.

'One of the cows has calved,' he would say.

'Which one?' I would ask, for I knew each animal by name.

'The white one.'

'The one with horns like the crescent moon?'

'That's the one.'

'And what sort of calf is it?'

'A fine one, with a white star on its forehead.'

'A star?'

'Yes, a star.'

And for a little while I would think about that star, I would see it in my mind's eye. A calf with a star on his forehead: that meant he was to be the leader of the herd.

In *The African Child*, Camara Laye starts the reader off from within his home. We come to know his parents through a child's eyes: his father, a goldsmith owing his skill to the guiding spirit of his tribe, which appears in the form of a small black snake; his mother, gifted with power over animals and witch doctors, and through her clan totem safe from the crocodiles in the Niger in flood when she draws water there. We accept and understand: we feel his life from within. When he leaves his home town for the big school at the capital on the coast, we feel as if we are leaving home; when he sets out, at the end of the book, for France, we share his fears of a country which has become, for us too, strange and threatening.

One of the principal themes of African writing is the strain of living in transition between traditional tribal culture and the technological, bureaucratic nationalism that the colonial powers brought to Africa. There is no easy way of achieving a re-orientation, and every attempted re-orientation is itself felt to be transitional. Meanwhile the values and ethics of the former society crumble away, and leave a profound sense of unease. *No Longer At Ease*² is in fact the title of the second novel written by Chinua Achebe, who is generally considered to be the foremost writer of English prose in Nigeria.

²Heinemann (African Writers Series), 1960.

This novel, which is not autobiographical, is about a young man who has been sent to England to study for a degree on a bursary collected by members of his village in Eastern Nigeria. They want him to acquire Western know-how, so that he can come and serve their interests when he returns. The story begins with his return to Africa, and traces, partly in a tragi-comic vein that a number of other West African writers have used, his ensnarement in urban life in Nigeria, and the increasing confusion of his affairs, both professional and personal, until his ultimate breakdown. The theme of this novel is the extreme difficulty experienced by the 'been-to', the person who has studied or spent some time in Europe, in living a meaningful and harmonious life in his own country. The title is from T. S. Eliot's *The Journey of the Magi*:

We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,
 But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,
 With an alien people clutching their gods.
 I should be glad of another death.

When Obi Okonkwo, the central character in the story, returns to his village of Umuofia, his first reaction is one of pride:

Four years in England had filled Obi with a longing to be back in Umuofia. This feeling was sometimes so strong that he found himself ashamed of studying English for his degree. He spoke Ibo whenever he had the least opportunity of doing so. Nothing gave him greater pleasure than to find another Ibo-speaking student in a London bus. But when he had to speak in English with a Nigerian student from another tribe he lowered his voice. It was humiliating to have to speak to one's countryman in a foreign language, especially in the presence of the proud owners of that language. They would naturally assume that one had no language of one's own. He wished they were here today to see. Let them come to Umuofia now and listen to the talk of men who made a great art of conversation. Let them come and see men and women and children who knew how to live, whose joy of life had not yet been killed by those who claimed to teach other nations how to live.

But his homecoming was saddened by the sudden realization of how old and frail his mother and father had become. His father had been a catechist and was now retired:

His father too was all bones, although he did not look nearly as bad as his mother. It was clear to Obi that they did not have enough good food to eat. It was scandalous, he thought, that after nearly thirty years' service in the church, his father should retire on a salary of two pounds a month, a good slice of which went back to the same church by way of class fees and other contributions.

Obi is unable to tell his father that he no longer believes in God. He returns to Lagos and is appointed to an administrative post in

the Civil Service, as secretary to the Scholarship Commission. His immediate superior is Mr Green, whose sense of duty is so all-consuming that it baffles even a been-to like Obi. Partly through demands that are made on him by relatives, partly through his own fecklessness, partly though his insistence on marrying a girl who is an *osu* and will therefore, according to local belief, bring misfortune on his family for generations to come, Obi gets into difficulties and into debt. He begins taking bribes, a practice he had proudly resisted when he first returned from England, and is caught, tried and sentenced to prison. The book ends, with a fine sarcasm: 'Everybody wondered why. The learned judge, as we have seen, could not comprehend how an educated young man and so on and so forth. The British Council man, even the men of Umuofia, did not know. And we must presume that . . . Mr Green did not know either.'

The search for an orientation which is not a shifting compromise between the disintegrating tribal culture (*Things Fall Apart*³ is the title of Achebe's first novel, about the impact of Europe on Umuofia when Obi's grandfather was a man of substance there) and the encroaching materialism of the West, has taken a deeper form in *The Voice* by Gabriel Okara,⁴ another Nigerian, whose main writing so far is in poetry. Here is the beginning of the story, which is written in a haunting blend of poetical prose and African patterns of speech:

Some of the townsmen said Okolo's eyes were not right, his head was not correct. This they said was the result of his knowing too much book, walking too much in the bush, and others said it was due to his staying too long alone by the river.

So the town of Amatu talked and whispered; so the world talked and whispered. Okolo had no chest, they said. His chest was not strong and he had no shadow. Everything in this world that spoiled a man's name they said of him, all because he dared to search for *it*. He was in search of *it* with all his inside and with all his shadow.

Okolo started his search when he came out of school and returned home to his people. When he returned home to his people, words of the coming thing, rumours of the coming thing, were in the air flying like birds, swimming like fishes in the river. But Okolo did not join them in their joy because what was there was no longer there and things had no more roots. So he started his search for *it*. And this stopped the Elders from slapping their thighs in joy because of the coming thing.

Why should Okolo look for *it*, they wondered. Things have changed, the world has turned and they are now the Elders. No

³Heinemann (African Writers Series), 1958.

⁴André Deutsch, 1964.

one in the past has asked for *it*. Why should Okolo expect to find *it* now that they are the Elders? No, he must stop his search. He must not spoil their pleasure.

Okolo is brought up before Chief Izongo and is driven from the assembly. He takes refuge in a hut on the outskirts of the village, with Tuere, a girl whom the villagers have declared a witch. She understands his search but asks him:

'How or where do you think you will find *it* when everybody surface-water-things tell, when things have no more root? How do you expect to find *it* when fear has locked up the insides of the law and the insides of the high are filled up with nothing but yam? Stop looking for *it*. Stop suffering yourself.'

'I cannot stop,' Okolo with a whisper spoke. 'I cannot stop this thing. I must find *it*. It is there. I am the voice from the locked up insides which the Elders, not wanting the people to hear, want to stop me. Their insides are something bad and hard at me'

Okolo is driven out of the village, to continue his quest elsewhere. Searching for a way is a theme taken up too by Amos Tutuola in *Simbi and the Satyr of the Dark Jungle*,⁵ in which he draws on quest narratives from Nigerian myth and fable and mixes them with products of his own exuberant fantasy to make a weird, piquant, fu-fu of his own. A much more serious quest novel is Cheikh Hamidou Kane's *L'Aventure Ambiguë*.⁶ This is the most metaphysically profound novel I know that has come out of Africa. It is largely allegorical in treatment, dealing with character-types such as the chief, the knight, the madman, rather than with individuals. It is a set of discussions rather than a narrative, and sets the Western way of life against the Muslim African culture from which the author comes. There is no conclusion, but instead an interior journey in which honesty and courage make the pain of increasing self-awareness remain just bearable.

In Camara Laye, we can feel the strong bonds of family life and love, and the sensitive judgement of experience by a fine, generous mind. In Achebe's writings we have realism, control, economy; the shock of the West has produced a cultural and social trauma from which Nigerian society is still reeling unsteadily, though it is becoming more clearly aware of the extent of the damage. Okara and Hamidou Kane are both more concerned with the inner erudition – how are we to reach harmony and wholeness again. A more aggressive type of reaction to the West can be found in a large number of African writers whose main theme is protest, sometimes rather unintelligently presented. One of the more lucid of these is William Conton, a Gambian who is now Chief Education Officer in Sierra Leone.

⁵Faber and Faber.

⁶Paris. Bulliard, 1962.

His novel *The African*⁷ takes the familiar theme of the African who attends primary and secondary school in Africa, goes to Britain, manages to enter a university, becomes interested in politics and returns to help his native land. It is written in the first person, and is presumably partly autobiographical. The story begins in an imaginary West African country called Songhai, from which the central character sets out for Britain with another student. On the trip they have tried to break down the racial barriers, but without success; Songhai is still a colony. They arrive at Liverpool:

Liverpool next day was grey, cold, wet and foggy; and the promised land looked most uninspiring from the deck of the ship. Once ashore, however, the towering buildings, massed traffic and attractive shops kept us staring and gaping whilst waiting for our trains to various parts of the country. The sight of white people *en masse* was itself something which required some getting used to; but the thing that took us really aback was our first sight of a white man sweeping a gutter. He was a short seedy-looking, rather dirty man, with heavy working boots and stained well-worn clothes, but unmistakably a white man nevertheless; and actually standing right down in the gutter sweeping it, collecting the rubbish on a shovel and tipping it into a wheelbarrow. We stood in utter disbelief, at some little distance from him, expecting him at any moment either to vanish like a gremlin down the nearest drain, or else to turn dark brown . . .

'Thank God for bringing me here', breathed Appiah reverently, the first among us to recover his breath. 'I always suspected there was some good reason for my coming to Britain.'

And I think that summed up how most of us felt. We did not lose respect for the white man – very far from it. What we did lose however (and long overdue was the loss), was an illusion created by the role the white man plays in Africa: that he is a kind of demigod whose hands must never get dirty, who must not be allowed to carry anything heavier than a portfolio or wield any implement heavier than a pen. Without realizing it, we had come to think of the white man only in the role of missionary, civil servant or senior business executive, one who was always behind the desk, never in front of it.

One of the central issues of Conton's book is in fact race-relations – a problem which changes character and proportion with independence, but does not disappear for Africans in the world setting. For colour continues to serve as a convenient, facile focus of discord in human intercourse: Western culture is still shot through with a sense of its own superiority, and this tacit, half-conscious assumption that Western ways are better infuriate the non-Westerner, for they make real exchange impossible. African writers frequently ask us

⁷Heinemann (African Writers Series), 1960.

to make a much more fundamental re-appraisal of our social and communal ethics; and seeing ourselves in part through their eyes often leaves us wondering and uncertain, with a bitter taste lingering in the mouth. Family life in Britain is one such subject handled by Conton:

I could not help noticing, too, the individualism of the Britisher, and the looseness of his family ties and obligations, as compared with ours. We were brought up to have an intense pride in our family, and an intense loyalty to it; and to feel that pride and loyalty must extend to the most distant relative known to us A wedding, christening, funeral or initiation ceremony not attended by every member of the family who was not overseas would be unthinkable. In times of adversity, there were literally scores and scores of relatives to console one; in times of prosperity a similar number turned up to share both your joy and your material wealth. A man who merely disliked you cursed you; a man who hated you cursed your family. It was all really an elaborate and most effective system of social security; and through it the very great extremes of wealth and poverty which have brought suffering and injustice into the social life of so many European countries (and revolution and bloodshed to some) have thus far been avoided in Africa. We had a joke amongst ourselves in the hostel in Newcastle that the Englishman treats his dog as he should his nephew, and his nephew as merely another man's son.

Aren't we left, after reading these last sentences, with a considerable sense of unease too? The truth appears to be that we are, none of us, any longer at ease with the old dispensation. Perhaps the ancient saw of history is illustrating itself once again: the Western countries, all of whom have shared directly or indirectly in the experience of colonial power during the last century, have not merely been forced to political abandonment of their empire. They have lost confidence in their own identity; the defeat has taken place inwardly as well as outwardly. Western Christendom is being forced to search again for its own being. I believe that it will never find it, for we are moving towards one world so quickly that only a total view of Christian commitment will convince, will command assent, enthusiasm and sacrifice. The unease of the West and the unease of Africa – which is essentially that of the have-not nations everywhere – are the obverse of each other. We cannot find our own orientation without each other. African authors, writing out of an African experience, are more keenly and painfully aware of this than most Western writers. Much of modern authorship in the United Kingdom is pitifully limited in its vision or its aims. Here is a paragraph from the most profound treatment of this fundamental issue of the spirit I have yet read in English prose from Africa: *The Second Round*⁸ by Lenrie Peters. An African gynaecologist has returned to

⁸Heinemann (African Writers Series), 1965.

Sierra Leone from England and is profoundly disillusioned and disturbed; he takes to walking around and musing:

Europe was frightened because she too was at the middle way and could not see round the corner. The whole world was frightened. Not so much of science or of nuclear bombs. The fear was deep inside the spirit of Man. If Mephistophelean science should win the wager, then his soul was gone – and there was only deluge, chaos, worse than chaos. So the blind had finally abandoned the blind, each for himself. The problem was not unique to Africa; it was only in a different shade of black. What was different was that Africa had a chance to stem it. Perhaps a last chance to banish the fear.

A great deal of African writing is in fact asking, and trying to answer, two questions: who are we, and where are we going? The first of these questions is sometimes expressed in terms of the search for the African Personality. There was a time when West African (and Afro-Caribbean) writers in French attempted to create a new culturalism: *négritude*. In the spirit of this movement some bold, dynamic and colourful poetry was written by writers such as Leopold Sédar Senghor, David Diop and Birago Diop. The movement had something of the histrionic panache that marks some products of the French imagination; it never caught on in English-speaking areas, and has seeped away into the sand in areas where French is still the language of education. The problem of personal identity is not solved by fanfares of atavistic nostalgia; it demands a much more sober, patient approach. This approach, I would like to contend, is likely to have features such as we can find in the writings of Chinua Achebe, Gabriel Okara and Lenrie Peters.

In this article only a few African prose writers have been illustrated and their themes discussed. For those who would like to share with Africans the experience of living through their writers in a wide variety of literary forms, a brief initial reading list is set out below.

AFRICAN WRITING: AN INTRODUCTORY READING LIST

This reading list is meant for anyone wishing to read a few works by African writers. It is given in two parts. Part I gives a short description of six works selected to show something of the range of genre and theme to be found in African writing today. Part II amplifies and extends this initial selection:

Part I

Camara Laye: *The African Child*. Collins Fontana 1954. 3/6.

Autobiography. The author describes his childhood at Kouroussa in Guinea, where his father was a goldsmith; and then his time at secondary school at Conakry on the coast until his departure, at the age of c. 20, for France. The book is written with warmth and

sensitivity and has been very well translated from the French by James Kirkup.

Chinua Achebe: *Things Fall Apart*. Heinemann, African Writers Series 1958. 5/-

Novel. The setting is Eastern Nigeria, some distance from the coast, before the coming of Europeans. Okonkwo is an African villager who fails tragically, partly because he strives too much after success. His own failure is linked with the description of a settled society disrupted by the advent of white missionaries and colonial power.

Lenrie Peters: *The Second Round*. Heinemann, African Writers Series 1965. 5/-

Novel. This work shows the response of the educated West African to the social disorientation – ‘weightlessness’ – which he feels in post-independence Sierra Leone on his return from years of study and training as a gynaecologist in the United Kingdom. It is a searching and sophisticated response; a compound of disillusionment, nostalgia and dedication.

Lewis Nkosi: *The Rhythm of Violence*. O.U.P. Three Crowns Series 1964. 7/-

Play. This three-act play is set in South Africa, and its theme is racial tension. A black sabotage group has planned a bomb explosion during a public gathering but the brother of the group leader is tragically involved in the act through a white girl he has got to know in spite of racial segregation.

Gerald Moore and Ulli Beier (editors): *Modern Poetry from Africa*. Penguin African Library 1963. 3/6

Poetry anthology. 104 poems rigorously selected, from 29 authors, including good translations from 14 poets writing in French and Portuguese. The collection ranges from Senegal to Malagasy and has a helpful introduction.

Richard Rive (ed.): *Modern African Prose*. Heinemann, African Writers Series 1964. 5/-

Prose Anthology. A wide variety of styles and themes are represented and the authors come from all over Subsaharan Africa, with South Africa better represented than in the poetry anthology. Richard Rive is a novelist and short story writer living in Cape Town.

Part II

1. Autobiography

Ezekiel Mphahlele: *Down Second Avenue*. Faber 10/6

Alfred Hutchinson: *Road to Ghana*. Faber 18/6

2. Novels

Chinua Achebe. *No Longer at Ease*. Heinemann 5/-

James Ngugi. *Weep not, Child*. Heinemann 5/-

Cyprian Ekwenski: *Jagua Nana*. Panther 4/-

(continued on p. 136)

Christ that we preach today and it is to Christ that every non-Christian is converted. From this point of view his religious *status quo* is indeed immaterial; whether monotheist, polytheist or atheist, he is converted when he comes to believe in Christ and to share in the fellowship of the Triune God, and such conversion is always necessary.

It is salvation in Christ and the communion of his body which we call the Church that the missionaries came to preach in Africa and that we have equally to proclaim today. But this unique proclamation that constitutes the Christian message in all places and for all times has to be expressed in a form that can be understood. If there is no faith without preaching there is equally no conversion without a hearer and a hearer with a past, with his own old testament awaiting the good news of the new. The new is always the key, the old is always the lock. But key has no meaning without lock, and it is to the wealth of tradition, of natural intuition or original revelation or whatever it may be, embedded within the thought world and practice of each African people that the Christian message in Africa must provide the key. The wisdom of old Africa is as vital to the health of her new Church as was the old law of Israel to the beginning of Christ's kingdom. Man must enter the new community, not as a stripped nonentity, but as the bearer of gifts for the new Adam.

(Continued from p. 125)

3. Allegorical Novels

Cheikh Hamidou Kane: *L'Aventure Ambigue*. Julliard frs. 9.50

Gabriel Okara: *The Voice*. André Deutsch

Amos Tutuola: *The Palm Wine Drinkard*. Faber 15/-

4. Plays

John Pepper Clark: *Song of a Goat*. Mbari, Ibadan 5/-

Wole Soyinka: *The Lion and the Jewel*. O.U.P. 4/6

Wole Soyinka: *A Dance of the Forests*. O.U.P. 4/6

5. Traditional Oral Literature

Abayomi Fuja (ed.): *Fourteen Hundred Cowries*. O.U.P. 15/-

Alta Jablow (ed.): *An Anthology of West African Folklore*.

Thames & Hudson 25/-

6. Prose Anthology

Paul Edwards: *West African Narrative*. Nelson 10/-