

AFRICAN LITERATURE IN THE AGE OF CRITICISM

“Literature” comes from “letter.” The contrary would be truer to history. For it is certain that almost everywhere literature—I mean words whose aim was to last a little longer than those which merely escape the speaker’s lips—preceded the alphabet. Before he thought of using signs to represent things or the sounds—themselves conventional—that designated the things, man tried to fix his experience, his wisdom and his emotions in series of sounds to which particular rhythms, alliterations and symmetries conferred relative stability by giving them a hold on the memory.

There are peoples without writing, but there are probably none without proverbs or cradle songs or incantations, chants to accompany the rhythm of work or dancing, or versified genealogies of gods or chieftains. This lore is learned by heart, which is the most personal and the most fragile form of learning. On the other hand, when his discourse is not subjected to such constraints, the narrator does not try to give his recitations a strictly unchanging form. On the contrary, he embroiders, invents, improvises, multiplies incidents and characters, increases

Translated by Mary Burnet.

Introduction

a repertory of exploits and ruses, a double troop of heroes and rascals, whose known or new adventures, whose glory or chastisement, the spellbound audience impatiently awaits. However, the audience does demand that the narrator restore any episodes he may have omitted, that he correct any repartee he may have changed; and it will not permit him to alter the heroes' physical aspect or their character.

African literatures are full of such immemorial riches, which nevertheless depend on uncertain memory. Never written down, they are often at the mercy of one individual's death or forgetfulness. They can be communicated only through recitation. To them have been added, as elsewhere, other kinds of works, of which the novel, a recent comer, is the most significant. Everywhere these later works have presumed the existence of writing and its consequences, among them the possibility—then, very soon, with the multiplication of texts by printing, the widespread availability—of a new solitary pleasure: reading and reflecting on what has been written. To pause and reflect became almost inevitable. An intentness of mind, a detachment, a taking of one's distance with regard to the work, then accompany the chance for discussion, meditation or a deeper understanding of the message. They tend to take the place of the enthusiasm, the trance or the piety that anticipate the text and re-create it when it is chanted, mimed, and listened to in an atmosphere of communion, of group fervor.

A third phase begins when literature becomes its own object. Like Minerva's owl, which does not fly off until nightfall, the critical essay does not appear until after the other types of literary creation. Things could hardly have been otherwise, since it makes of them—without, in the end, excepting itself—the object and base of its analyses. At this stage, the problem is less one of creation than of understanding and explaining creation, of uncovering its secret motives, of describing its steps, and, finally, of making the meaning clear. The exegete seeks to explain the relations of the work with its author, with the esthetics in vogue, with the state of the language, with the society in which the work was born. He tries to elucidate the mystery through which it was conceived, to find out how it developed, what it reveals and where it leads. An undertaking of this kind has always heralded the maturity of a literature.

When it succeeds it furnishes, through the very fact of this success, proof that the literature from which it sprang is adult. By the same sign, this literature loses its innocence.

As it becomes conscious of itself and the values it expresses, each literature sets out to examine the others by the same sort of spectral analysis it is applying to itself. Among its writers, it produces interpreters who study the works of others, the genesis of their art, their favorite themes, the traits of their style. Scholiasts arise who set about to dissipate (or darken) the least of mysteries. From this point on, the literatures of geographical or cultural antipodes cease to seem to each other like so many tumults of disconcerting values, hard to reconcile, stemming from choices that were made long ago and whose consequences have led to an enormous buildup of mutual divergences. On the contrary, they open themselves out for discussion and exchange. They allow the critic to perceive a pleasing variety, to see how complementary were the ambitions which drove the writers to make their strange confessions, true or false, spellbound, trembling or impassive, naive to the point of complacency or disguised as abstract systems, puzzles. Thus a real ecumenical humanism may arise that brings them together—the only kind of humanism which sooner or later does not turn out to be contradictory, or, as the Spaniards so aptly say, ensimismado: shut up, preserved, sunk into itself, perhaps ready to dry up.

*The works collected in the *Mélanges africains* ("African Miscellany") published under the editorship of Professor Thomas Melone, seem to me, from this point of view, to constitute a remarkable step in the development of the literature of that continent. So far as I know, before the appearance of this collection, with its diversity and its level of scholarship, there did not exist any proof as powerful as that which it furnishes, through its homogeneous and massive quality, that a new stage had just been reached. The impact of these studies comes from the fact that they were written in Black Africa by Black critics about Black works or realities. I shall add: without any other claim to negritude than this very integrity.*

The authors of the studies define without separating. Far from closing breaches, they broaden the roads of access. They hope to make others understand and to sensitize them. The works

Introduction

by themselves, which arose out of cultures that are still enigmatic, ordinarily run the risk of shocking reticences and logics that ignore one another. All too often they remain distant, unintelligible or, worse still, difficult, indifferent, disappointing—works by other people for other people. Critical study brings them nearer. In spite of results that might have been presumed to be mutually exclusive, the analysis of esthetic constraints and rebellions, of relations with customs and institutions and of the interplay of impulses and structures fosters a return to the universal of culture, and relates forms and messages which, without such analysis, would probably have remained merely baffling or picturesque—in other words, would have been almost completely refused.

Such is the usual fate of works of art, whether they have writing for a vehicle or whether, as in the case of music and painting, their nature permits them to do without it. Such is the service they receive from critical elucidation. I imagine that without this latter Shakespeare's tragedy, in the temples of Lhasa, would seem to be a degrading frenzy, and I hardly see how Racine's feigned propriety could mean anything in Chicago. Exegesis opens the door to discussion, that is, confrontation, and soon to understanding, for in the end we are all travelers aboard the same planet.

I shall stress a second point: the dawn of criticism is blessed by the gods. The finding of significant constants, the discovery of hidden connections, the tracing of lines of force are here accurate, almost inevitably so. The number of works dealt with is small, and, above all, they are the first: so they have received, if not the better part, at least the more evident part. In Homer and the epic, the poet expresses emotions that are constant and deep. What is more, he expresses them in a way that is unavoidably new. Goaded by necessity, as one goes from fertile fields to land that is poorer and poorer, his successors, throughout the whole history of a literature, are gradually reduced to using imagery that is already old, to colonizing literary Kamchatkas and to pursuing novelty further and further and further, so that they soon arrive at the limits of the conceivable, among nightmares and giddiness, where all that is human exhausts itself. The proliferation of works is accompanied by skimpiness, by a growing and vain complexity. Criticism, which is subject

to the same laws, must follow these works and lose itself in their multitude and their labyrinths.

Sometimes I fear that European literature and criticism are threatened by this combined danger of subtlety and overabundance. Even this is too optimistic. Distances and duration have so shrunk on this earth that the contrasts among esthetics are fading to the point of disappearance, and in the field of letters, at least, the notion of a historical lag hardly makes sense any more. Today the literatures of the world are synchronized and contiguous. Any innovation that jolts one of them immediately rebounds on all the others. The time has probably come for them to face the consequences of an unheard-of situation, dangerous for their health and their respective originality but also full of promise. What they must do is to discover—which, in this context, means at the same time to affirm—some kind of planetary connivance, of fidelity to the universal, to the unanimous; to embark on multiple quests for and illustrations of the human denominator, a simple, unformulated “essential,” which is only felt, and which is consequently mysterious and undemanding—and inaccessible too—and which, in the midst of the current din, would give to artistic, literary and philosophical, if not religious, creation the new start they need.

True, this is only a dream or a pious hope. But on this occasion—and to end more modestly with a personal confidence—it seems to me that I have just added to those I already realised one more reason to assure myself that, even if by some impossible chance biology should one day appear to justify it to some degree on a scientific level, all racism would remain hateful to me.

Diogenes, in any case, is far from denying its vocation of militant humanism in publishing several of the studies made by the Yaoundé team.