

From One Mystification to Another:
"Negritude" and "Négraille" in
"Le Devoir de violence"

AT the time of its announcement, the Prix Renaudot 1968 made front-page news in most French papers. It would not have done so had not the prize winner, Yambo Ouologuem, been Black. That gave the event another dimension, and the prize-winning book, *Le Devoir de violence*,¹ went on to elicit extravagant comments. The author himself was hailed as "an exceptional being who no doubt, like Léopold Sédar Senghor, was one of the rare intellectuals of international stature presented to the world by Black Africa."² Disappointment came, however, when Ouologuem published his second book, *Lettre à la France Nègre*, a pamphlet in every way inferior to his novel.

The riot of journalistic praise for *Le Devoir de violence* was followed by serious articles in specialized reviews, which rightly stressed the originality of Ouologuem's work and attempted to place it within the context of African literature in French.³ Our own study takes that new critical and historical perspective into account.

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1 The Negritude Writers

It needs to be stressed that, some years ago, "African literature in French" was almost synonymous with "the poetry of Negritude," at least in the public's mind. This can no doubt be accounted for by the artistic success of the Negritude group and by the mediocrity of French African writing before they appeared on the literary scene. The first generation of French African writers emerged between 1920 and 1935, when a few authors such as Ahmadou Mapate Diagne (b. ca. 1895), an elementary school teacher, and Bakary Daillo (b. 1892), a Fulani shepherd educated in the army, produced a small number of literary works of little value. They obviously took for granted the policy of assimilation imposed by the French as a solution to African problems and sanctioned the idea that black people were inferior to whites.

The next generation of writers rejected and severely condemned assimilation, at least theoretically. They denounced it as simply another racist consequence of colonialism, with all its evils. Rejection of assimilation was, indeed, to be the first self-imposed task of the Negritude movement led by the well-known triad Damas-Césaire-Senghor in the years 1933 to 1935. The word "Negritude" as originally defined by Léopold Sédar Senghor (b. 1906) embraces "all the cultural values of the Black world."⁴ Senghor, moreover, makes a distinction between the *Negritude of origins*, that is, the African values of the precolonial era and *Present-day Negritude* or "The Negro-African people as an efficient instrument of liberation."

The original Negritude writers sought initially to define, assess, and develop precolonial African values in order to contribute to what Senghor calls "the civilization of the universal." To do this it was first necessary, as Walter A. E. Skurnik has pointed out, for the Negritude writers to recover their own identity:

The formative phase of "negritude," that of the search for dignity, was rooted in the destruction of an ideal: absorption

by French civilization. Along with other Africans being educated in France, Senghor had been taught that, as an African, his mind was a 'tabula rasa.' Hence he was, at first, ready and willing to be impregnated by French civilization. As Senghor later expressed it: "Our ambition was to become carbon copies of the colonizers: 'Black-skinned Frenchmen'." Africans were expected to be "soft wax in the fingers of the white God" and to seek salvation in the haven of French culture.⁵

In the historical context of the 1930s and 1940s the reaction of the Negritude writers was quite justified: they were addressing themselves primarily to a Western audience in order to remodel the latter's view of Africa and of the Negro. But the method used by Senghor and his Caribbean friends was questionable. When describing their cultural values they called upon history and ethnography more often than upon their own experience. They drew inspiration for their own works from the findings of European anthropologists, notably the German Leo Frobenius and the Frenchman Maurice Delafosse.⁶ This purely intellectual process, which was their "return to the origins, their revaluation of the African past," obviously has a mythical character in the romantic sense of the word. On the other hand, racism and assimilation were a genuine part of the Negritude poets' experience and contributed fruitfully to their literary output. The Caribbean writers, for instance, protested forcefully against their twofold alienation: the uprooting by which slavery cut them off from their African homeland and the French assimilation that made them cultural hybrids.

Whereas Léon Damas (b. 1912) and Aimé Césaire (b. 1913) protested against their inhuman condition, Senghor, from his very first collection of poems, *Chants d'ombre* (1945), conjured up an idyllic picture of Africa. To the image of a barbaric, uncivilized Africa created by the colonizer, he opposed, as if by way of compensation, an ideal Africa of his own making. If Senghor's image of Africa is understandable in its historical context, it is undoubtedly fictitious in various respects, such as the excessive faith in the ancestral tradition, its exclusive presentation of the positive side of precolonial African society, and a

kind of messianism that heralds a "universal civilization."

The most valuable achievement of Negritude is in the birth and growth, both in quality and volume, of Negro literature in the Caribbean and in Africa.⁷ The idealization of the African past was a source of inspiration mainly to poets. It left its mark on only a few novels, the first of which was *L'Enfant noir* (1953) by the Guinean writer Camara Laye (b. 1928), who describes the bucolic Africa of his childhood. Laye's vision of Africa, like that of most Negritude poets, arises from his escape into the past. He relies on his own memories to recreate an Africa that is no longer real but to which he remains deeply attached. This approach is fundamentally different from that of artists writing in English, who, instead of turning to the past, try to render their immediate experience. As early as 1963 Gerald Moore appropriately pointed out that essential difference:

We should expect a reduction of the mystique of Africa (which was to some extent a carryover from Caribbean poets who had never seen it), and a greater trend towards realism, towards the detailed observation of modern Africa and the direct recording of experience. And these are precisely the qualities which we find already in the work of men like Peters of Sierra Leone or Soyinka, Clark and Okara of Nigeria. To them, Africa is the living environment in which they have grown.⁸

As far as Negro writing in French is concerned, this trend of realistic observation first took shape in the Caribbean, particularly in Haiti, for historical reasons. Indeed, although Haiti has been independent since 1804, many Haitian intellectuals insist that their country is not free because it is still ruled dictatorially by a privileged class. In their writings, social, economic and political problems are defined with a realism still unknown in French-speaking Africa. This appears in the works of Jacques Roumain (b. 1907), Jacques Stephen (b. 1922), and Jean Brière (b. 1909), all of whom criticize the political exploitation indulged in by Black men. But beside the idealizing approach a realistic trend had also developed in French African writing, first apparent in *Karim* (1935) by the Senegalese Ous-

mane Socé (b. 1911). Though a disciple of Senghor, Socé in *Karim* deals with urban life in Senegal. Another Senegalese, Abdoulaye Sadji (1910–1961), author of *Nini, mulatresse du Senegal* (1947) and of *Maimouna* (1953), illustrates the same trend.

After those early attempts, realism in French African writing gained sudden impetus with the Cameroonian writers Mongo Beti (b. 1932) and Ferdinand Oyono (b. 1929), and with the Senegalese Sembène Ousmane (b. 1923). Their fiction is committed to anticolonialism, but their satire, mainly directed against their colonizers, does not spare the African either. This criticism of African society stands in contradiction with the Negritude outlook because it applies not only to those Africans who naively support colonialism but also to traditions that thwart individual development at the same time that they impede economic and political progress. Among those traditions presented as most harmful are some religious and magical beliefs, superstitions, polygamy, and parental authoritarianism. As Gerald Moore has shown, their criticism of African society brings those novelists nearer to their Nigerian fellow-writers:

In the last few years, however, a new school of realistic, satirical fiction has arisen, led by the Cameroonian novelists, Mongo Beti and Ferdinand Oyono. These writers refuse to idealise; their satire plays freely and fiercely around African and European alike. Although their novels to date deal with the death agonies of colonialism, there is no reason to suppose that they will soften their gaze when it rests upon independent Africa. It is far easier to see common ground here than between the respective poetries of French and English expression. A novelist like the Nigerian Chinua Achebe, who casts a cold eye on certain aspects of Lagos society in his book *No Longer at Ease* would have no difficulty in establishing a rapprochement with the Beti of *Le pauvre Christ de Bomba*, or the Oyono of *Une Vie de Boy*. Oyono, in particular, has seized upon the truth celebrated by E. M. Forster before him: that the distortion of black-white relationships imposed by a colonial situation afflicts both parties equally. If there is a "colonial European," there is also a "colonial African."⁹

The growth of French African literature coincided with the political awakening of the African countries: it reached its climax in 1960 when most of those countries became independent. After that date African writing in French was marked by a decline of Negritude, the last echoes of which are heard in *L'Aventure ambiguë* by the Senegalese Cheikh Hamidou Kane (b. 1928). In spite of its promising start, the literary activity of French-speaking Africa dwindled almost to extinction. After 1960 the African literary scene was clearly dominated by English writing, mainly from Nigeria, where the trend of realistic observation had been asserting itself since 1953. Since the 1950s, writers such as Cyprian Ekwensi (b. 1921), Chinua Achebe (b. 1931), Wole Soyinka (b. 1934), John Pepper Clark (b. 1935), and Gabriel Okara (b. 1921) have been casting critical eyes on the modern society of their country and denouncing the corruption that prevails in Africa.

The analysis and criticism of the situation following independence first found its way into French African writing after 1966 with the publication of Camara Laye's *Dramouss*. That novel, which in its first part takes up again the theme of *L'Enfant noir*, presents at the end a critical picture of the political situation in Guinea after independence. It prepared the way for *Le Devoir de violence* which belongs to the same trend of social and political criticism also illustrated in two Ivory Coast novels, *Violent était le vent* (1966), by Charles Nokan (b. 1937), and *Les Soleils des Indépendances* (1968), by Ahmadou Kourouma (b. ca. 1927).

2 "Le Devoir de violence": The Plot

In *Le Devoir de violence*, Ouologuem tells the "bloody history" of the niggertrash (Négraille) of Africa, epitomized in the chronicle of an imaginary West African empire called Nakem. The empire was founded centuries ago by a foreign immigrant,

"the Black Jew Abraham El Heit, issued from the marriage of a Negro with an Oriental Jewess." Abraham El Heit had come to Nakem with a gang of adventurers. Internecine wars, he found, had left the people divided into a number of small tribes ruled by Muslim overlords. A shrewd and calculating man, he gathered into an army all the discontented among the Nakem tribes: escaped slaves, rebellious peasants, and ordinary poor men. He defeated the feudal lords, laid down the foundations of the Nakem empire, and took on the title of Saif. After his death in 1498 his descendants strengthened the Saif dynasty by resorting to crime, murder, forced labor, and the slave trade, which remained current practice for centuries, reaching a climax at the end of the nineteenth century under the rule of Saif ben Isaac El Heit, the last representative of the dynasty. The first part of the novel, entitled "The Legend of the Giants," ends with his accession to the throne.

The second part, "The Ecstasy and the Agony," starts with the arrival of French colonizers in Nakem. Saif ben Issac El Heit puts up some military resistance but is soon defeated. He succeeds, however, in retaining his authority by signing a peace treaty with the French in 1900. Six months later he agrees to send his younger son, Madoubou, on an official visit to France. The young man receives from the French government and people all the honors due to a head of state and comes back to Nakem with numerous presents. Thus is the "cooperation" between France and Nakem consolidated.

The third part of the narrative, entitled "The Night of the Giants," deals mainly with the black slaves, with the fate of the Négraille during the colonial period. Schools are opened by missionaries and education becomes compulsory, but to protect the ruling aristocracy from cultural assimilation the Saif makes sure that only the sons of slaves are sent to school. To perpetuate his power he raises asps, using them to dispose of colonial agents, settlers, unfaithful servants, and prying slaves—in short, all those who might thwart his influence. At the same time, he makes a show of being on friendly terms with the French, who, incidentally, make him a knight of the Légion d'honneur in 1902. He takes advantage of the gullibility of the whites: for instance,

when ethnologist Fritz Shrobenius comes to Nakem, the Saif makes large profits by selling him counterfeit masks. As soon as World War I breaks out, he provides France with native infantry, thus earning the title of "Savior of France in Nakem" and a new decoration: the Saif is made a high officer of the Légion d'honneur. Meanwhile, the Négraille live in utter destitution. One man only is concerned with their plight: Bishop Henry, who nurses the sick, helps the peasants, and converts the people.

After World War I, life reverts to normal. In 1920 the first pupils at the missionary school receive their lower certificates, among them Raymond-Spartacus Kassoumi, son of one of the Saif's serfs. Whereas his brothers become clerks in the colonial administration, Raymond receives in 1924 a scholarship enabling him to study in France.

While in Paris, Raymond hears of his family's misfortunes from his sister Kadidia, whom he meets by chance in a brothel: his father has been sold, his fiancée killed by the Saif, and his brothers have been drugged and are now insane. Shortly afterward Kididia dies, the victim of a sadist. Raymond falls into moral degradation but after many trials eventually graduates as an architect. He marries a Frenchwoman and settles in Strasbourg, where he is overtaken by World War II. Enrolled in the French army, he fights on the Rhine and in Italy. He and his wife are reunited in 1945. Meanwhile, the political situation in Nakem has changed. Raymond returns to his country to find an electoral campaign in full swing. But the Saif, who has seen through the plans of the French to manipulate the elections to their own advantage, forestalls his enemies. To outwit both the French and the Négraille, he presents Raymond as sole candidate and has him elected deputy of Nakem. The novel ends with a tête-à-tête between the Saif and Bishop Henry, who unmasks the sovereign. Instead of slyly killing the Bishop, however, the Saif eventually throws his asp into the fire and goes on playing chess with his guest.

Though the plot of *Le Devoir de violence* deals with the history of Nakem and its rulers, its real protagonist is the Négraille. It is therefore necessary to define this term, which Ouologuem may have borrowed from Césaire's *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* (1939). To Ouologuem the Négraille are the African masses in their genuine condition, that is, in their original primitive state. They are the "population baptized in suffering" as opposed to the ruling classes. The Négraille are petrified in their magico-religious, fetishistic beliefs. That is why they have been easily kept in that state of primitiveness, first, by their puny Islamized chiefs, then by the Saifs, and finally by French cultural imperialism. Hence the continuity of their fate from the thirteenth century to the period of independence.

The original primitiveness of the Négraille shows, on the one hand, in their complete lack of moral insight and of cultural values and, on the other, in their strong inclination for anthropophagy, crime, rape, sexual frenzy, and endless tribal warfare. Ultimately, this primitiveness is to Ouologuem the very essence of Africa:

Cruel peoples whose speech is a kind of croaking—fierce killers, men of the jungle, living in a state of bestiality, mating with the first woman they find, tall in stature and horrible to look upon, hairy men with abnormally long nails, the Zulus, Jaga, and Masai feed on human flesh and go naked, armed with the shields, darts, and daggers. Savage in their customs and daily lives, they know no faith nor law nor king. In the early dawn they crawl out of their wretched forest huts and destroy everything before them with fire and sword, pillaging the remotest corners of the Nakem Empire and driving the populations of those regions from their homes with no other recourse but to throw themselves on the mercy of Saif or to perish of hunger, sickness, and privation. (p. 13-14)

According to Ouologuem, this original primitiveness makes the Négraille incapable of reaching political consciousness, which might drive them to revolt or even revolution. As Ouologuem sees it, Black Africa's Négraille is characterized by a state of debasement which in a way is ontological. They are

doomed to remain at the mercy of alien powers: the tyranny of the Saifs, Islam, French imperialism, and Christianity. Of these, Christianity alone, will be beneficent to the Négraille.

In the first part of the novel, "The Legend of the Giants," Ouologuem shows how Islam serves as a convenient alibi for the tyranny of the Saifs, who encourage "the religious discipline enforced by the five daily prayers recommended by Islam" and transform religion into pedagogical training in the service of the whole mystification. Ouologuem conveys his negative vision of Islam through his ironical use of ritual Muslim formulas interspersed in the narrative.

In reality the nobility, warriors in the days of the first Saifs (Glory to the Almighty God), had become intriguers for power: Amen. At the death of the accursed Saif (Blessed be the Eternal One!), conscious of their own need of stability (So be it!), they had flung the people into a bath of pseudo-spirituality, while enslaving them materially. (And praised.) (p. 23)

In the second part of the novel, Ouologuem shows that the Négraille, in addition to being oppressed by Muslim rulers, are also made to suffer under French imperialism. The meeting between the European colonizers and Nakem falls in with the general temper of the story and is also marked with violence. After turning the Négraille into fanatics, Saif ben Isaac El Heit makes use of their religious feeling to encourage their resistance to the French. He resorts to razzias, looting, and all sorts of exactions to recruit soldiers; but so do the French. The Négraille, thus forced to serve two masters and twice enslaved, fall into unprecedented degradation; yet they are so naive as to think they have been "saved" by the French when the latter win military victory over the Saif. Their delusion is proportionate to their ignorance:

The Empire was pacified, broken up into several zones which the Whites divided. Saved from slavery, the niggertrash welcomed the white man with joy, hoping he would make them forget the mighty Saif's meticulously organized cruelty. (p. 31)

Only to save face and to retain effective power over Nakem had the Saif signed a peace treaty with France. The journey of his son Madoubo to France brings together the two vilest sources of oppression imposed on the Négraille. In light of this rapprochement the title of the second part, "The Ecstasy and the Agony," acquires its full meaning.

While carrying on with his imaginative exploration of the Négraille in the third part of the novel, Ouologuem also presents a cruelly ironical criticism of Negritude in its two aspects, the *Negritude of origins* and the *Negritude of assimilation*. I have already mentioned the enthusiastic reception initially given by the Negritude writers to the work of the German ethnologist Leo Frobenius, who at the beginning of the twentieth century initiated the reassessment of African culture. In the novel, the German scholar is easily identified as Fritz Shrobenius, whom Ouologuem describes, however, as a mere "dealer and ideology-maker" and as a shrewd profiteer. Since he cannot find his way into Nakem society, Shrobenius spends his time filming hippopotamuses and caimans. As an ethnologist, he merely collects the false data given him by fake informants and by Saif ben Isaac himself:

Saif made up stories and the interpreter translated. Madoubo repeated in French, refining on the subtleties to the delight of Shrobenius, that human crayfish afflicted with a groping mania for resuscitating an African universe—cultural autonomy, he called it—which had lost all living reality; dressed with the flash elegance of a colonial on holiday, a great laughter, he was determined to find metaphysical meaning in everything, even in the shape of the palaver tree under which the notables met to chat. Gesticulating at every word, he displayed his love of Africa and his tempestuous knowledge with the assurance of a high school student who had slipped through the final examinations by the skin of his teeth. African life, he held, was pure art, intense religious symbolism, and a civilization once grandiose—but alas a victim of the white man's vicissitudes. Then, obliged to acknowledge the spiritual aridity of certain manifestations of social life, he fell into a somnolent stupor, no longer capable even of sadness. Having run out of inspiration, he

consoled himself by driving down to the Yame in the truck and filming the hippopotamuses and crocodiles. (p. 87)

In France, a poet, Guillaume Apollinaire, rather than an ethnologist, had first responded to the religious symbolism of Negro life and art. In the novel, Ouologuem ascribes this discovery to Vandame, a French governor in Nakem, who is indebted to the African witch doctor, Sankolo, who has been banished by the Saif. To win Vandame's confidence, Sankolo fabricates "a mixture of pure, symbolic, and religious art." Vandame, fascinated by this interpretation, eagerly passes on Sankolo's freakish theory to the inquisitive visitors, tourists, sociologists, and ethnologists who come flocking to Nakem. Always on the lookout for profits, the Saif exploits the white people's interest in this kind of art: he orders masks hastily carved after the ancient models and lets them be sold as antique works of art. Hence "Negro art [which] was forging its patent of nobility from the antics of mercantilist spirituality" becomes nothing more than a commodity produced to order to be consumed by foreigners eager for exoticism.

But the brunt of Ouologuem's bitter satire falls on German ethnologists. In Europe, where he has won a high reputation and "une haute chaire sorbonicale," Shrobenius, a composite satirical portrait of the European forerunners of Negritude, becomes a speculator in Negro art:

This salesman and manufacturer of ideology assumed the manner of a sphinx to impose his riddles, to justify his caprices and past turnabouts. And shrewd anthropologist that he was, he sold more than thirteen hundred pieces, deriving from the collection he had purchased from Saif and the carloads his disciples had obtained in Nakem free of charge, to the following purveyors of funds: the Musée de l'Homme in Paris, the museums of London, Basel, Munich, Hamburg, and New York. And on hundreds of other pieces he collected rental, reproduction, and exhibition fees. "We often hear," he perorated in the castle that Negro art had earned him, "of the universe of this, that, or the other Nakem ethnos. The universe of Nakem is a familiar setting, the inner landscape which the people bear

constantly within them, in which they find their true selves, from which they derive new strength. Thus the Nakem artist has no special universe. Or rather, his universe is a vast solitude; no: a series of solitudes" (p. 95)

A branch of ethnology, which Ouologuem calls "shrobenius-ology," is founded on those inaccuracies, as is a school of Africanists "clinging to the clouds of a magico-religious, cosmological and mythical symbolism." Consequently, if we are to take Ouologuem's word for it, the revaluation of Negro art, and by implication of African culture in general, is only the expression of a certain "Afrolatry." It follows that the *Negritude of origins* is pure fantasy with no bearing on reality. The satire is aimed at both Europeans and Africans.

Ouologuem also satirizes the *Negritude of assimilation*, that is, the Negro's desire to break free from his primitiveness by assimilating Western culture. This aspiration is personified in Raymond-Spartacus Kassoumi, or rather, in his old father, the serf who had hoped to "save" his children by sending them to the missionary school. Ouologuem renders with ironical pathos old Kassoumi's conversation with Bishop Henry:

He confessed to Henry, confided his unhappiness, told him all his troubles. He asked him for advice, compassion, help, and on the following days he prayed repeatedly, with more and more fervor. Worn with trouble and anxiety, he was still intent on steeping his children in white culture and so helping them to grow up among Blacks. He had formed habits of increasing piety, learned to abandon himself to the secret communion, so comforting to the wretched of the earth, of the pious soul with the Saviour, and had received a great blessing in return, for Henry had accepted his five children at the French mission school (p. 124)

Old Kassoumi believes that the French school will rescue his children from slavery and will make them important men in the Black community. His eldest son, Raymond, is the main victim of this cultural assimilation. The old man's urgent advice to him is reported with equal irony:

And you, Raymond, the first-born, become so brilliant and good that the mere sight of you will change the black night within us into bright day—may your success gleam like a sword and be more penetrating than an arrow. (p. 131)

Raymond hopes that, through his assimilation into French culture, he can save the Négraille from destitution. But he is soon undeceived: instead of commanding respect as he thought he would, he becomes an object of mockery for his schoolmates because he is the best pupil in the class; he is despised by the higher-caste boys. When he has obtained his elementary certificate, Raymond is once again subjected to the Saif's authority. He leads the idle life of a courtier; his knowledge is of no avail. He becomes the symbol of a half-educated elite, whose members labor under the delusion that they have risen to the highest offices but who are mere servants of the Muslim potentate.

Throughout his life Raymond will be a symbol of the perpetual slavery that is the fate of the Négraille. The cultural and psychological trauma he suffers, which originated in Nakem, is aggravated in France. To ingratiate himself with the whites, Raymond despises his own society; he thus loses his own identity and contributes nothing to Europe, from which he borrows indiscriminately. He becomes a mere verbalist, a typical alienated, deculturized, African intellectual:

The white man had crept into him and this white presence determined even the moves that he, a child of violence, would make against it. Despising Africa, he took giant strides to diminish the gulf that separated him from the splendors of white civilization. But a simultaneous grasp of twenty centuries of history, or of their residue, was still beyond his reach: where he should have discovered—may the Evil One be banished!—he accepted. And so, taking refuge beneath the dead tree of academic complacency, a magus of knowledge without hearth or home, living amidst the dead carcasses of words, Raymond Kassoumi, after a period of error, in which he took on the accent of a Paris wise guy, gave himself up to literary drivel, turning his learning into a demagogic ventriloquism and sinking under its weight. (p. 137)

In his determination to adjust to the white world Raymond worships learning for its own sake. Having failed in his first examinations, he loses his scholarship but refuses to go back to Nakem. When he at last gets his degree, together with the ridiculous title "Black pearl of French culture," he believes he is clever enough to frustrate the Saif's intrigues. He marries a Frenchwoman and receives French citizenship. He believes he has risen to eminence, but he is greatly mistaken. Back in Nakem, he becomes, as noted earlier, a mere instrument of the Saif's policy; the Saif has him elected as a deputy to exert closer control over him. The "weapon of his emancipation," which he thought he was creating by studying, by steeping himself in white culture, proves inefficient against the Saif. Raymond is thus incapable of saving his people and remains a real Négrailon, that is to say, a permanent slave.

By the end of the third part, "The Night of the Giants," the Négraille have been shown to be the very opposite of what Negritude stands for: a "stupefied and fanatical" people, "simple-minded and credulous," conspicuous for their "imbecile vocation" for servitude; they are obviously doomed to endless slavery and debasement, from which even their initiation into modern civilization cannot redeem them.

Only in the last part of the novel, entitled "Love," does a hope of salvation, rather clumsily embodied in Bishop Henry, appear in this gloomy, contemptuous book. The Bishop is the only uncorrupted character. The values he represents are unknown in the institutional Church, itself contaminated by will to power; they are the values of genuine Christianity, whose most eloquent manifestation is love. Henry is the only efficient defender of the Négraille who, without his help, could never rid themselves of their tyrant. A clever, courageous, and strong man, Henry lets the Saif understand that he knows the Saif's secret and compels ben Isaac to renounce his evil power. That is the significance of the novel's close. When the Saif is formally exposed, he throws his asp into the fire, and the long-awaited dawn is at last ready to break in Nakem.

In the conflict that brings them face to face, Bishop Henry and the Saif represent opposite values, an opposition given

concrete form in the game of chess at the close of the novel. Much has been said about the "enigmatic" or "mysterious" ending of *Le Devoir de violence*, but there is no real mystery; the symbols used in this part of the novel are clear enough. The Saif loses his power, and his defeat is conveyed symbolically: the asp hidden in the flute represents the secret apparatus he has devised to maintain his tyrannical power. The Bishop's victory symbolizes the triumph of Christian love over tyranny and the evil designs of the temporal powers. In other words, the death of the asp implies the end of absolute Muslim rule and the rise of the better values upheld by the Western world, a world alien to the Négraille. In Ouologuem's view there is nothing in the Négraille that might be creditable; they deserve only contempt. Salvation can only come from outside. The novel ends with the Bishop and the Saif "speaking the same language for the first time," the language of love as it is taught by the Christian religion.

Unfortunately, from an artistic standpoint, this last section, deliberately offered as a positive conclusion, comes as an anticlimax when compared with the rest of the novel. It is unconvincing; one is tempted to see it as a kind of *deus ex machina*, as if after describing so many scenes of violence, eroticism, horror, and barbarism, the author had suddenly decided to give his work a hopeful ending.

4 The Historical Theme

The undeniable originality of *Le Devoir de violence* as a novel has been described by Albert Gérard:

Escaping out of the French distinction of the literary genres as well as of the African tradition of the linear novel centered on one single character, it is first of all a vast historical fresco, or rather pseudo-historical, which gradually is focused on an anti-hero and ends as a novel of the classical model. That is

because Ouologuem's subject-matter is the black community as well as the African individual.¹⁰

Indeed, the "historical" theme of *Le Devoir de violence* is what makes it different from other African novels in French; it fits in with the oral tradition whose best interpreters are West African *griots*. By placing the Négraille at the center of his chronicle, the author relates the odyssey of a whole people who endured the same fate for centuries. Saif ben Isaac himself is more of a symbol than a real person: because of his hateful activity, his presence hangs threateningly over each Nakem family; he is the very embodiment of tyranny.

The most striking feature of the novel is its style, the originality of which can only be compared with that of Amos Tutuola (b. 1920) or perhaps Okot p'Bitek, both writing in English. While preserving the spontaneity of the oral tradition, Ouologuem's chronicle of oppression and debasement, of horror and violence, is told in a truly epic yet also sarcastic manner: his many parentheses, full of exclamations and Koranic formulas, give the sentences a broken, sinuous syntax which does not mar the novel's unity of tone. Unfortunately, those qualities are practically absent from the last part of the book, where the narrative rhythm becomes slow and heavy, and the tone pedantic.

The unique significance of *Le Devoir de violence* for the history of French African writing lies in the image it offers of the Black Continent, an image as far removed from the romanticism of Negritude as from the anticolonial realism of the novelists. The work is clearly intended to offer the Western reader an alternative picture, less complacent, less imbued with anti-European rancor, presented as more faithful to the reality of Africa. This has not escaped the attention of Hena Maes-Jelinek in her sensitive review of the novel. After recalling that, in Ouologuem's view, "colonialism was only an episode in the long and cruel history of Africa," she goes on to observe that

The author explodes one by one all the taboos that hide from the world the true image of Africa: Religion-Fetishist, Muslim, Christian-Negro Art, African Civilization, Ethnology. . . .

Ouologuem does not accuse; he de-mystifies by painting his own poignant vision of Africa.¹¹

Undoubtedly, Ouologuem as a novelist is entitled to "his own vision," and it is even his duty as an artist to present it as a "true image." But, by the same token, it is this African critic's privilege and duty to voice his doubts about the truth of this image, in the same way as it is his right to question the methods and assumptions of the Negritude writers. For Ouologuem, too, borrows from European scholars such theories as may suit his purpose. One of these is the notion that the Saifs are of Jewish origin. As Jacques Lanotte perceptively pointed out:

Following up Delafosse's thesis which argues that the Peuls are emigrated Jews from Cyrenaique, Ouologuem gives a cruelly ironical significance to the expression "negro king": Saif himself, the almighty tyrant, would be seen by the universal consciousness as a slave because he is a Jew. Thus the true significance of that bloody feudal system reveals itself to us in a startlingly new light.¹²

By deliberately selecting from the African past only those elements which may debase it, Ouologuem created a myth different from, but as dangerous as, the one he was seeking to destroy. In his assumption that the essence of Africa does indeed lie in its original primitiveness, he achieved a real tour de force by heaping up scenes that would not have been out of place in such films as *Ya bon Banania* and *Mata-Mata*, which until recently were a source of facile mirth for a certain European public. I have insisted enough on the savage and barbaric character of the Négraille. It is worth noting that such ethical values as motherly love or the sense of solidarity and the social harmony inherent in the clan system, as well as such cultural values as dance and music, are all absent from Ouologuem's Africa. The legendary modesty of Muslim society is completely ignored. Ouologuem's image of Black Africa is one of total permissiveness and generalized promiscuity. Do we have here "the true image of Africa"? The African reader does not hesitate to answer in the negative: Ouologuem's Africa is a myth born of what he himself

called in his *Lettre à la France nègre*, "la gymnastique opératoire de l'écriture."

This is all there is in the "historical" theme which is Ouologuem's main concern in *Le Devoir de violence*. His interpretation of the colonial period and of the whole historical development of West Africa is, to say the least, disconcerting. He seems to believe that the European colonization in no way modified the old social and political structures set up by the Muslim rulers. More than that, he insists that those African leaders used French colonizers as mere tools for the benefit of their own colonialism:

But to Nakem the colonial powers came too late, for with the help of the local notables a colonial overlord had established himself long since, and that colonial overlord was none other than Saif. All unsuspecting, the European conquerors played into his hands. Call it technical assistance. At that early date! (p. 24)

Ouologuem's vision stands in contradiction with the African reality. As everyone knows, European colonizers were using Black chiefs everywhere in Africa to help them establish their own administration. Decorated by the French in a spirit of derision, those notables assisted the colonizers in levying taxes, recruiting infantry, and instituting the forced labor system. Colonization was a procedure for the economic expansion of the European powers, who therefore did not object to the traditional chiefs retaining an exclusively moral authority over their clans. On the contrary, they exploited this ascendancy to ensure the efficiency of their administrative and commercial activities. The Black notables, who lost forever the economic control of their country, no longer wielded real power; they merely entertained the illusion that the colonizers, for whom they were a convenient instrument, acknowledged their authority. It was they who were serving the European colonizers.

As Yves Benot's comments clearly show, not all Western critics were taken in by Ouologuem's picture of Africa:

Everything is by no means false in this disconcerting picture; for the pre-colonial social structures have not all been destroyed at one blow by the new masters, but have rather been conserved, or strengthened, often enough in their more oppressive aspects. But it was only to the extent that the colonizer gained more profits in such a system, the oppression of which helped and strengthened the colonial domination, collaborating toward the exploitation of the land by the European imperialist powers. Those among the chiefs and the notables who did not give in were beaten and crushed by the colonizers who did so to preserve their interests, whether in the case of Alpha Yaya in Guinea, or the Achanti's king in the Gold Coast, or many others. And it is here that Ouologuem denies the reality of history or would make it read completely in reverse.¹³

More specifically, Ouologuem offers a highly personal interpretation of the French educational system in Africa: the Saif ordains that "only the sons of servile condition should be subjected to education by the French, compelled to attend mass and be baptized by the missionaries" (p. 60). But in reality, to secure the cooperation of the traditional chiefs the French colonial administration created the so-called Écoles d'otages generally reserved for the sons of African notables, so that while controlling their parents, the French were training their sons for public office in the colonial administration.

The most glaring illustration of Ouologuem's distorted presentation of history is no doubt Raymond Kassoumi's election as a deputy. When the Union Française was created, a number of Black students living in France were hurried back to the colonies to be elected as deputies. Sent out to deceive the African masses, they were mere pawns of the colonial power. In Nakem, however, it is the French who are duped by the Saif. Ouologuem has conveniently downgraded European colonization into a mere historical incident that had no serious impact on African society. When confronted with historical truth, Ouologuem's Africa is seen to be but an abstract composition bearing no resemblance to reality.

This inverted interpretation of history seems to have been dictated by Ouologuem's wish to create an authentic African

literature, for he considers that the works written before independence could not have been genuinely African:

I do not call the literature of Colonial times African literature. In my opinion it is more anti-Colonial literature; I see it as being mostly an answer to the situation raised by the presence of the White instead of being deeply rooted in Africa as such. So it is perhaps after Independence that one should expect an explosion of African literature.¹⁴

There is thus little doubt that Ouologuem's urge to create a truly African literature—free from the anticolonial complex as from the romanticism of Negritude and shaped by the most recent Western narrative techniques—made him choose a deliberately different approach from that of his predecessors. Yves Benot rightly pointed out that various non-African literary ingredients went into the making of *Le Devoir de violence*:

As has been made evident, this African novel has all the ingredients of the English black novel of the 1800s, that is, of a certain type of popular serial: a string of murders—all perfect crimes—poison, witchcraft, drugs, eroticism, and pederasty; not to mention the edifying sequence of the bondsman's son who rises to become a deputy. We have here an impressive anthology. A stylistic anthology also; a cursory reading evokes the musty odors of the assorted rejects of Kateb Yacine, Sartre, Gatti, and even Godard (the dialogue between the prostitute and Brice Parain)—not to mention the distorted echo of the négaille of Césaire's *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*, and many others, no doubt. As a result, the novel seems cloaked with a certain stylistic ostentation which can easily surprise and actually fascinate. From this point of view, it is a greenhouse product, wholly artificial. (Sankolo's account of his adventure as a *mort-vivant*, who is drugged and sold, pp. 114–115, is a passage of virtuosity which owes a great deal to Paris and hardly anything, it seems, to Africa.)

The literary influences that have entered into the service of Ouologuem's aesthetic purpose do not of themselves explain his approach to his subject. Political motives, namely, the bitter

disappointment experienced by many African intellectuals since the end of colonial domination, must also be taken into account. During the struggle for independence enthusiasm was at its highest; everyone aspired to a better world with plentiful opportunities for individual development. But those great expectations were ill-founded: the greater part of independent Black Africa has since swayed between anarchy and dictatorship; its history is already ridden by civil wars and military coups, while its politics is too often the product of clan nepotism and shameful corruption.

As early as the 1950s the disillusionment of idealistic intellectuals was openly expressed in the novels of Cyprian Ekwensi, since joined by other Nigerians such as Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka and by Aya Kwei Armah from Ghana. It is no doubt an indication of their growing maturity as intellectuals and citizens that writers from French-speaking Africa, among whom Camara Laye, Charles Nokan, and Ahmadou Kourouma are most notable, should at last criticize modern Africa society. Thanks to *Le Devoir de violence*, Yambo Ouologuem holds a prominent position in that group. However, no African critic who loves his people and is proud of them can agree with Ouologuem's view that the Black man's predicament today is the result of an ontological flaw, an innate collective proclivity to slavery and spoliation, or an inveterate inability to work out adequate solutions for his own problems. Clearly, between the utopian lyrical exaltation of Negritude and the contemptuous denunciation of the Négraille, the African novel in French has still to find the middle course of a nonmythical assessment of African reality.

NOTES

1. Yambo Ouologuem, *Le Devoir de violence* (Paris, 1968). Quotations are from Ralph Manheim's translation, *Bound to Violence* (New York, 1971).

2. *Le Monde*, Nov. 19, 1968.

3. See, among others, Albert Gérard, "Littérature francophone d'Afrique: Le temps de la relève," *Revue Nouvelle*, XLIX (1969), 198-204; Jacques Lanotte, "Un Renaudot africain: *Le Devoir de violence*," *Culture et Développement*, I (1969), 670-676; Sully Faik, "Yambo Ouologuem: *Le Devoir de violence*, Prix Renaudot 1968," *Congo-Afrique*, IX, No. 32 (1969), 91-101; Hena Maes-Jelinek, "Yambo Ouologuem," *African Literature Today*, CLXIV (1970), 54-55; and Yves Benot, "Le Devoir de violence de Yambo Ouologuem est-il un chef-d'oeuvre ou une mystification?" *La Pensée*, No. CXLIX (February, 1970), 127-131.

4. Léopold Sédar Senghor, "Rapport sur la doctrine et la propagande du parti," quoted by Lylian Kesteloot, *Les Écrivains noirs de langue française: Naissance d'une littérature* (Brussels, 1963), p. 110.

5. Walter A. E. Skurnik, "Léopold Sédar Senghor and African Socialism," *Journal of Modern African Studies*, III (1965), 349-450.

6. Frobenius's *Kulturgeschichte Afrikas* (1933) was available in French translation as *Histoire de la civilisation africaine* as early as 1937 (repr. 1952). See also Maurice Delafosse, *Les Noirs de l'Afrique* (Paris, 1922), *Civilisation négro-africaine* (Paris, 1925), *Les Nègres* (Paris, 1927), and *L'Ame nègre* (Paris, 1927).

7. For more information about Negritude, see especially, besides Lylian Kesteloot's book already mentioned, Albert Gérard, "Historical Origins and Literary Destiny of Negritude," *Diogenes*, No. XLVIII (1964), 14-38, and two excellent articles by Abiola Irele: "Negritude and Black Cultural Nationalism" and "Negritude Literature and Ideology," *Journal of Modern African Studies*, IV (1965), 321-348 and 499-526.

8. Gerald Moore, "Towards Realism in French African Writing," *Journal of Modern African Studies*, I (1963), 61-73.

9. *Ibid.*

10. Albert Gérard, "Littérature francophone d'Afrique: Le temps de la relève," *Revue Nouvelle*, XLIX (1969), 198-204.

11. Hena Maes-Jelinek, "Yambo Ouologuem," *African Literature Today*, CLXIV (1970), 54-55. Italics are mine.

12. Jacques Lanotte, "Un Renaudot africain: *Le Devoir de violence*," *Culture et Développement*, I (1969), 670-676.

13. Yves Benot, "Le Devoir de violence de Yambo Ouologuem est-il un chef-d'oeuvre ou une mystification?" *La Pensée*, No. CXLIX (February 1970), 127-131.

14. Yambo Ouologuem in an interview in *Cultural Events in Africa*, No. LXI (1969), 2.

15. Yves Benot, *op. cit.*