

REVIEWS

YAMBO OUOLOGUEM

Yambo Ouologuem, *Le Devoir de violence*, Hena Maes-Jelinek, University of Liège, Editions di Seuil, 1968 (An English translation will be published in 1970 by Secker & Warburg followed by publication in African Writers Series, Heinemann 1971) 'But these colonising powers were already too late, seeing that, with the notables, the colonialist long since in power was no other than the Saif, whose game the European conqueror was playing without knowing it.' Like Orwell, who in *Burmese Days* exposed the essential weakness of colonial rule, the young Malian Yambo Ouologuem in his fascinating first novel, *Le Devoir de violence*, presents the white colonialist as a mere pawn of the native potentate. But for him, colonialism was only an episode in the long and cruel history of Africa, one which had little influence on the African people

while it lasted, though it eventually helped to give birth to a new type of African elite. 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 Civilisation, Ethnology. Similarly, the Blacks themselves, the Whites, the Arabs, the Jews, all are unmasked, their true role exposed. Ouologuem does not accuse; he de-mystifies by painting his own poignant vision of Africa. But however grim and terrible that vision is, yet it is also tender and deeply human.

The novel starts as an epic relating the feats of a dynasty of 'Saifs'. Actually, this epic is a symbolical fresco of African history, a search into the past which brings to light the horror and the shame of orgies of sensuality and violence. The long tribulation of the African people is re-enacted up to our days as a succession of razzias, civil wars, repressions. Throughout the centuries they are and remain a nation of slaves, sold and tortured at will by the Saif and his men. The story of the people runs parallel with the legend of the Saifs; the potentate and his serfs are the main protagonists of the novel. At once mythical and real, a descendant of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, the Saif combines the assets of Black, White and Jewish power; he is the very embodiment of oppression. Ironically, the founder of the modern lineage of Saifs was, like Christ, rescued by his mother from the murderous fear of a feudal Herod. Saif ben Isaac El Heit, the contemporary king, is worthy of his bloodthirsty ancestors: he asserts his power through cruelty and brings crime to perfection by devising a devilish game which consists in tormenting, then killing, his victims with asps. If he is sometimes generous, it is always out of self-interest. He is clever and sly, a master at playing fast and loose with the slaves, who see in him their defenders against invaders and col-

onialists, with the notables, who are forced to support him in exchange for privileges, with the whites, whose interests he appears to serve while secretly undermining their work. He frustrates the latter's efforts to abolish slavery as well as their endeavour to educate the notables and only sends the sons of slaves to their schools. But he is a magnificent figure, a great and terrible emperor, impressive and slightly mysterious. When his son is received officially in France with the words addressed by Louis the Fourteenth to an African prince: 'There is no longer any difference between you and me except from black to white', he and his subjects are in ecstasy at this recognition of equality, though it also heralds the agony of the Saif's Africa.

As the story shifts from myth to reality, everything is reduced to normal dimensions. The Saif is, after all, no more than a slave-trader, a Negro-Jew who stands himself for what is most despised by the rest of the world. The plight of his people is seen through the life story of two of his slaves, who fall deeply in love and give birth to Raymond-Spartacus, the man in whom African tradition and French civilisation will merge. Raymond and his family meet with all the trials current in African life: his mother is raped and killed by the witch-doctor, his father is sold and drugged to death, his brothers die of illness, and his sister is sold as a prostitute and bled to death by a sadist. A brilliant student, Raymond has been sent to France by the Saif, who was quick to perceive how he could use an educated 'slave'. When he hears of the annihilation of his family, Raymond sinks into despair and is finally rescued by a rich protector, himself alienated and anguished, but with whom he experiences a strange and healing love. He marries a Frenchwoman and comes back to his country, where he is welcomed as a saviour by the people, though the Saif remains the real master.

Yambo Ouologuem has succeeded in blending the legendary and the real without ever lapsing into pomposity or sentimentality. He makes no allowance either in his approach to his subject or in his style, now harrowing and bold, though never vulgar, now beautifully unadorned, particularly when he describes the march of the delirious *Zombie* through the forest. The novel is not flawless: its symbolism is sometimes obscure, and one or two scenes of eroticism and violence do not really enhance it. But from the introductory epic to the last scene, when Saif ben Isaac El Heit is shown at last to be fully human and allows the bishop to put an end to his murderous game, the narrative flows like the stream of life. The characters live and suffer and are like real living people. This is a work in which art takes precedence over commitment, in which the author relies on imagination alone to render the fear, cruelty and violence which he sees as the very texture of African life. Why 'the necessity of violence' then? Because we must do violence to ourselves to do away with all misconceptions and see things as they are. To think of colonialism as merely another form of oppression is to be free from its hold and to see Africa in its naked reality. For Ouologuem, the African is not yet emancipated. 'Perhaps,' one slave says, 'this is what a Negro's life is. To be a slave. Sold. Bought, sold again, educated.' In other words, slavery has been given a different form, Raymond-Spartacus knows well enough that he was called back to his country to be the Saif's instrument. But the history of Africa, of his own family, have made a revolutionary out of him, though his future remains an enigma as does the future of Africa. All this is implicit in the inconclusive ending, for the novel does not deliver a 'message'. It describes an Africa in quest of its true self and raises a tragic question.

Hena Maes-Jelinek