Yambo Ouologuem, Postcolonial Writer, Islamic Militant (review)

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Yambo Ouologuem, Postcolonial Writer, Islamic Militant, ed. Christopher Wise. Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1999. 258 pp. 0-89410-861-1. US$55.

During the 1970s, when African literature was sinking roots in European and North American academic institutions, Yambo Ouologuem was a pivotal figure. *Le devoir de violence* had burst onto the scene, announcing a radical shift in literary sensibility, an alternative to the rather flat realist or the "sincere" autobiographical modes of self-expression then prevalent. Sincere, by all evidence, is something Ouologuem was not. The text and its author were quickly embroiled in rounds of polemic concerning its possible plagiarism.

The novel ultimately kept its annunciatory promise. We need only think of the subsequent works of Sony Labou Tansi, V. Y. Mudimbe, or indeed Calixthe Beyala, to realize how far African writing in French has leapt from the early years—if, that is, literary leaps and bounds can be measured in terms of innovation and experiment. Though Ouologuem was not the *sine qua non* of this development, his text cleared terrain for others to cultivate, or in Wise's words, he helped swab the deck.

Then, of course, a strange thing happened. After another provocative but less successful work, *Lettre à la France nègre,* and a decent piece of pornography, for readers with those tastes, Ouologuem dropped from the (European) face of the earth. It turned out he had simply returned to Africa, translating into actual fact the metaphor of *retour aux sources* that dominates the literary but not necessarily geographical logic of African intellectuals. From the French perspective, there was something very Rimbaud-like in this renunciation and almost angelic departure. As Christopher Wise's personal chapters in the book under review amply demonstrate, such a reading of Ouologuem's trajectory is profoundly Eurocentric, though once again, there is room for considerable ambiguity when it comes to almost anything dealing with this fascinating figure.

Wise's book contains the key elements of that critical history, sometimes in their original form, sometimes re-edited. [On this point, see the exchange of letters between Miller and Wise in *RAL* 31.1 (2000):

229-31.—G.L.] Those that did not fit in (among them, Eileen Julien's "Rape, Repression and Narrative Form" and my "Text, Identity and Difference") are signposted; the gamut of response is fully covered, from positive to negative, as well as the interstitial spaces between. More to the point, Thomas Hale's and Wise's own insertion of the "Islamic-Sahelian" dimension into the debate are brought into accessible form. In other words, the first three parts of the book constitute an essential source for study of the reception of Ouologuem and fully justify its acquisition by any serious library. It is, however, the concluding accounts of Wise's own research in the field which make this volume indispensable for future discussion of Ouologuem and open the path for innovative *in vivo* research into African writing.

I recall when I first heard rumor, over coffee with Tom Hale at some nondescript conference, of Wise's discovery that Ouologuem had not left us for a better world, but was alive and, if not necessarily well, at least kicking near Mopti at the edge of the Dogon country in the bend of the Niger River (a map, incidentally, would have been useful). Like many readers, I had pretty much let the matter of Ouologuem drop, with occasional regret, since every time I returned with my students to the pages of *Le devoir de violence,* I recognized we were in the hands of a master stylist of French, his borrowing, stealing, lifting and re-voicing notwithstanding. What if, in fact, there was life after scriptural death? The question was even more intriguing because the alternative version of Ouologuem's putative death was the equally engaging allegation of insanity, or at least folly, itself a standard trope of posthumous literary prestige.

As Wise is the first to admit, serendipity alone allowed him to prospect this arduous soil, though each of the circumstantial links he followed inscribes some sense into his reading. A chance encounter with a Peul sheikh living in Ouagadougou led him to travel with a borrowed *quatre-quatre* across the boundary of Burkina Faso and up to Mali where he eventually met and had an exchange of sorts with Ouologuem, who is now an Islamic militant, as Wise's subtitle has it, adhering to the Tidjaniya branch of Sufi mysticism and the presumed author of religious pamphlets in Arabic.

Wise's subtitle also brandishes an ubiquitous buzzword of our times, *postcolonial.* In this setting as well as most others, the term should be read more diversely than it has, at least in my opinion. The bugaboo of contemporary Africa is that its political boundaries derive from externally negotiated settlement, not to say brute European military force, rather than any natural ethnolinguistic arrangement. Ouologuem's "postcoloniality" indeed reflects that top level of layering. What, after all, was this son of the Dogon aristocracy doing in France in the first place, one among thousands of emissaries the co-opted African elite sent off to France, a scenario described to a T in Cheikh Amadou Kane's *L'aventure ambiguë,* another classic of those times? Ouologuem's aristocratic origins are fraught with a supplemental degree of postcoloniality, since his noble family had sided with the Peul colonizers of the Dogon, and his particular species of hybridity, another buzzword whose semantic range it is useful to expand,

embraces that doubled identity and status, one that preserves him from some of the opprobrium his eccentric behavior on the ground continues to display. In fact, Ouologuem's present crusade, perhaps even more compelling than his understandable hatred for all things French, is against another colonizing and racist force: "Mauritanian" oppression of black Africans, one with millennial roots.

This is a crude representation of Wise's account, which I heartily invite readers to consult for themselves. One achievement of Africanist thought over the decades since *Le devoir de violence* appeared has been to begin setting texts in their proper African linguistic and cultural environment, even when written in English or French. There are very few monolingual African writers. As time goes by and knowledge accrues, there are ever increasing frames within which to read African literature, and inevitable revision of past perspective. So for the record, let me state I take Wise's point that Ouologuem was not quite the "apostate" from Islam that I and other made him out to be a decade ago, though it remains that however we flip the picture, Ouologuem "disowns" his French writing. In any event, this revision of perspective enables Wise's persuasive exposition of the Islamic, or more precisely Tidjaniya hermeneutics underlying *Le devoir de violence*.

The closer our focus gets, the more we understand. In my opinion, the "shot" of Ouologuem tirading in the village square (in the French as much as the English sense of *tirade*) is as important an achievement as the carefully distanced critical argumentation reprinted in the earlier parts of the book. In the requisite "Note on Contributors" to this text, Christopher Wise is billed as professor of global literature. Whatever else globalization might mean, I trust it will include experience of the local such as this wise pilgrimage relates.

—*George Lang*