Text, Identity, and Difference: Yambo Ouologuem's *Le Devoir de Violence* and Ayi Kwei Armah's *Two Thousand Seasons*

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Elective or not, the affinity between Ouologuem's *Le Devoir de violence* and Armah's *Two Thousand Seasons* has struck various critics, as has their common ancestry with André Schwartz-Bart's *Le Dernier des justes.*[1] Ouologuem's use of Schwartz-Bart verges upon plagiarism, though it is but one of his manifold allusions to and brazen borrowings from other texts. Armah responded more to *Le Devoir de violence* than to *Le Dernier des justes* and, apparently, intended his text as a repudiation of the negativity of the former, though he had no qualms about imitating its sensationalism or rivaling its prurience.[2]

In what follows I intend to leave Schwartz-Bart mostly aside, all the while asking my readers to reserve a place for him in their minds: not because he is prerequisite to the two African works, but because his text offers a trace of the otherness which pervades them and with which each deals in its own way. For at the crux of *Le Devoir de violence* and *Two Thousand Seasons* is a profound preoccupation with the other, with the outside oppressor and with the effects of that extreme alienation in which the self itself has become other.

This is in no way intended to impugn the "authenticity" or "originality" of the African works. Indeed, I shall be arguing, first, that originality and

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authenticity are in themselves very dubious terms and, second, that these texts are paradigmatic, representative of two types within the field or literary system we label African literature.

The typology I am proposing is potentially a powerful one. It cuts across genre boundaries to establish classifications for hybrid texts which fall into no accepted categories,[3] and it leads directly to the distinction between what I call *founding* texts (examples of which are *The Bible* and *The Koran,* as well as the myriad traditional cosmologies recorded and unrecorded throughout Africa) and those which are *confounding,* which resist the assimilation of text to history, secular or sacred, and tend toward the disruption of textual identity itself. The former are by far the most important in Africa and the world alike, but the principle of "confusion" is by no means negligible.[4] For evidence of it in African culture we need only to think of the numerous trickster tales in which amorality reigns supreme.[5]

Put in somewhat less formal terms, this distinction is between texts based upon solidarity, collectivity and identity, and those which undermine isotopic configurations in general. I do not mean to claim that Armah is ideological and Ouologuem is not. There is, as the Malian seems to imply at the conclusion of *Le Devoir de violence,* no escape from ideology into the certainties of logic or grammar, no exit from rhetoric into apodictic, unmotivated discourse. Nor is discourse which denies the validity of discourse itself innocent, as Ouologuem's "plagiarism" demonstrates. There is no guarantee that because one is deconstructing one cannot be deconstructed in turn.

The play of self and other is not a novel criterion against which to read texts, but it is especially relevant here for a number of reasons. In the Hegelian dialect of master and slave, the self/other paradigm is important not only because it defines identity, but because it prepares the way to liberation. Hence, its significance in the colonial or post-colonial context of contemporary Africa. Not that its import is limited to the Third World. The dialect of self and other has a primordial role within contemporary philosophy and psychology in Europe, a background with which many, especially francophone, African writers are conversant. Sometimes it may appear that the self is nothing other than a Western invention, an exquisite fiction few can resist, but that not many from outside the West would have embraced without the extenuating circumstances of colonialism, imperialism and racism. It would be too easy to accept this version of

things. The extremes to which Jean-Paul Sartre pushed the left Hegelian dialectic of consciousness had a great impact on French-reading intellectuals world-wide, Frantz Fanon among them. Fanon was present at lectures of both Sartre and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, more than passingly interested in forging his own philosophy of liberation, and, when his clinical practice in Algeria led him back to the conflict of self and other as the source of psychic trauma among colonized intellectuals, he was drawn to the message of *La Critique de la raison dialectique,* in particular its emphasis upon the group or *ensemble* as the foundation of revolutionary praxis and upon the positive role collective acts of self-conscious violence could play in the discovery of authenticity.[6] It would be unfair to ascribe too much of Fanon to Sartre, or of Sartre to Fanon, but V. Y. Mudimbe's conclusion that Sartre's insights "illuminate the trends and situations of African scholarship," is perhaps not overstated.[7] Sartre's landmark preface to Senghor's 1948 *Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre et malgache de langue française* indeed had great influence. It offered a brilliant, poetic response to what had become an obvious flaw in the argumentation of Négritude.

> La négritude est pour se détruire, elle est passage et non aboutissement, moyen et non fin dernière. Dans le moment que les Orphée noirs embrassent le plus étroitement cette Eurydice ils sentent qu'elle s'évanouit entre leurs bras.[8]

Though Sartre merely substituted one dialectical sequence for another, a class-oriented for a culture-based one, there was a prophetic quality to his critique. In the ensuing four decades almost all French-speaking African intellectuals have had to confront and resolve not only the issues raised by Négritude, but the issue of Négritude itself. The tactics many have used largely derive from Fanon or Sartre, especially the refusal of "cultural" perspectives.[9]

It should be clear that the mega-text of Négritude, if I may be allowed this hypostatization, is a "founding" text, paratactic in its principles ("coordinating without conjuncting")[10] and tending to affirm its own identity as well as its congruence with history. It is a text turning on the axis of self and other. The primary works of Négritude, not only those of Senghor, but that exemplary founding text by Aimé Césaire, *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal,* illustrate this paratactic principle: "self with is coordinated" (i.e., opposed)

with other, but is not conjuncted (i.e., explicitly linked with), precisely because the mutual dependency thereby implied is unacceptable.[11]

Of course the contrast between self and other is also a motif of many European ideological forms: pastoralism, exoticism, primitivism, orientalism. In his recent *Blank Darkness: Africanist Discourse in French,* Christopher L. Miller delineated the role of *altérité* in mainstream French texts and related it to desire. Edward W. Said, in his *Orientalism* and later works, addressed the issue in somewhat different terms.[12] But there is a crucial distinction between the self/other paradigm in metropolitan cultures and in the African or other Third World contexts: the European self is ensconced in the seat of power, however alienated the artist there may feel. His vision of the other, perforce deformed by his own premises, is not a source of psychic disruption. It is a diversion, one with sexual implications, something which relieves his claustrophobia. The African writer may well found his perception of the other on projections and his own false premises, but his other is within, or threatens to become so. The power of definition is the ultimate one, and that power belongs to the dominant discourse.

Since the demise of French colonialism, several works have dealt with the image of Africa in French literature and, to greater or lesser degrees, unmasked colonial prejudice.[13] It is perhaps too soon to expect an analogous exercise of imagology by African critics—the unveiling of African prejudice toward the West. When such does appear, it will likely be demonstrated that African writers have systematically stereotyped the West. Who has not, including Western writers themselves? Western pastoralism, beginning with Theocritus, is but the first of a long series of ideologies constructed around axiological polarities. The racism Europe perpetrated upon Africa was practiced, for centuries, upon itself. Witness Madame de Staël, who canonized, though she did not initiate, the practice of differentiating North and South, Teutonic and Latin, a dress rehearsal, as it were, for the Africanist discourse Miller describes and to which Négritude was a mimic response. If we follow Umberto Eco and define ideology as a crystallization of connotative chains which can be recognized by their polarity, the positive and negative valences attributed to strings of antimonies which are themselves organized around opposition between self and other, then both these Western forms and Négritude itself are ideologies par excellence and their poles are evident: north/south, intellect/emotion, Teutonic/Latin in early comparative lit-

erature theory; white/black, culture/nature, reason/emotion, machine/soil in European racism; black/white, natural/unnatural, rhythmic/arhythmic, passionate/frigid, synthetic/analytic in Négritude.[14]

Yet despite their underlying similarity, European paradigms of self and other and those contesting them in Africa have different bases. The other in primitivist, orientalist, and Africanist discourse in Europe is a figure of desire and envy, when not of disdain. In a sense he or she is already a possession, and thus external. The other in Europeanist discourse in Africa is a possessor, an oppressor and, paradoxically, within: his power resides within the text and must be conjured away. This is particularly true in Europhone writing. Whence the despair which is common to both *Le Devoir de violence* and *Two Thousand Seasons*, one rooted in alienation and taking the shape of a deviant inner penchant toward dualism and hierarchy, an alienation which is easy to exploit given its propensity to ideology. For Ouologuem, this penchant assumes the guise of the dichotomy between the Saif dynasty and the lumpen blacks, the *négraille*; for Armah it takes that of the abandonment of equality and reciprocity among the Akan and their ultimate acquiescence to the alien principle of kingship.

Contrary to what a facile reading of Armah's text might suggest, he puts the burden of blame for two thousand seasons of bondage upon the Akan themselves, not upon the external oppressors, the Arabs and Europeans (here virtually indistinguishable, both Destroyers). In the words the young prophetess Anoa spoke before the dispersion and diaspora:

> You have forgotten the way of our life, the living way. Your ears have stopped themselves to the voice of reciprocity. . . . Slavery—do you know what that is? Ah, you will know it. Two thousand seasons, a thousand going into it, a second thousand crawling maimed from it. . . .[15]

Non-reciprocity breeds hierarchy and inequality both in personal relationships, those between man and wife, potentially egalitarian but iniquitous in practice, and in the structure of the community, which adopted the alien institution of kingship in response to captivity, enslavement, and marginalization. There is something of a logical confusion here, however. Armah portrays oppression as, on the one hand, arising from a moral flaw within the Akan (here standing in for Africans as a whole), and as, on the

other, caused by the presence and power of the Destroyers (for which read both the colonizers and their co-opted neo-colonial elites). It is not the role of art to be logical. Armah's attribution of a kind of original sin to the Akan at the same time he denounces those history sent to punish deviation from the true way is certainly no more illogical than that underlying Christianity and is common, I would argue, to founding texts as a whole: for how is an identity to be established without castigating that which is alien and simultaneously claiming an aboriginal source or essence? There is a dilemma implicit in this dual focus: does essence, the kind which founds a group, a race, or any collectivity come from within or without? Is identity essence, or is it *une prise-de-position*? Is a collectivity best defined against those who threaten it, or in terms of its intrinsic qualities, and whence come those qualities, from what root or germ? It is the function of the founding text to surpass such latent contradictions with a unifying vision of origin and identity, and it is the illusion of textual integrity which lends that vision credence.

In *Le Devoir de violence* such founding texts are portrayed as invariable instruments of oppression, rhetorical tools of the Saif dynasty whose control over the *négraille* remains unbroken from mythic times through the grand empires to colonialism and thereafter. In Ouologuem's view, moreover, such founding texts are predicated upon the principle of identity and difference and the "connecting link" between them. There is no better example of his denunciation of the rhetoric of identity and difference than his ferocious satire of the *marchand-confectionneur d'idéologie* Fritz Schroénius, a barely veiled namesake of the German ethnologist Leo Frobenius, author of the first important European study of African civilization, *Kulturgeschichte Afrikas.*[16] Schroénius' promulgation of African cultural essence not only serves his own interests as trafficker in artefacts, but those of Saif, who exploits them both to refurbish his treasury and to disarm the lumpen blacks with a dazzling image of their importance while at the same time diverting attention from his own despotism. In his words:

> Il a fallu que l'impérialisme blanc s'infiltrât là, avec sa violence, son matérialisme colonisateur, pour que ce peuple si civilisé brusquement dégringolât à l'état sauvage, se vît taxé de cannibalisme, de primitivisme, alors qu'au contraire. . . . la grandeur des em-

> pires du Moyen Age constituait le visage vrai de l'Afrique, sage, belle, riche, ordonnée, non violente et puissante tout autant qu'humaniste—berceau même de la civilisation égyptienne.[17]

Schroénius' discourse is a pastiche of the late Cheik Anta Diop, who held, in his *Nations nègres et culture,* that African civilization was fundamentally Egyptian (and Egyptian, African).[18] But, as current events show, Ouologuem is on target about the myth of the mediaeval African empires and its utility to contemporary despots, for he demonstrates that such a rhetoric of self and other is treacherous to those subsumed within that discourse.

There are many other contrasts between Ouologuem and Armah. The latter has by all evidence attempted to demarcate himself from the former and has therefore cast the Malian into the role of other as well. It is to some extent true, as Wole Soyinka suggested in *Myth, Literature and the African World,* that Armah represents if not an advance upon Ouologuem then at least a sequel to his thought. *Two Thousand Years* is text as therapy, as founding gesture of a psychic state in which the cleavages and fragmentation residual to colonialism are transcended. As such it is close to what Soyinka called "visionary reconstruction of the past for the purposes of a social direction."[19] Soyinka was unhappy with Ouologuem's ambiguity and found in Armah alone sufficient clarity of vision and commitment to "humanistic perspectives as inspirational alternatives to existing society." While recognizing the superior *engagement* of Armah, I would like to suggest that overcoming the power of the other and transmuting the despair which results from the other's hold does not require a "positive" social program. It is equally possible that such a program, one predicated upon identity and difference, may itself be detrimental.

It is a bias of much contemporary African literature and criticism that commitment is concomitant to future creativity, be the specific program in question mytho-poetic, as for Soyinka, myth-political, as for Ngugi, or Marxist.[20] *Le Devoir de violence* is prima facie evidence that this presupposition does not hold. However uncomfortable some may feel with Ouologuem's Nietzschean implications about politics or culture, his strategy is an effective literary one. Armah may well pose an alternative to Ouologuem's assault on the prospects for original innocence in Africa; his is by no means a superior resolution to the problem in literary terms. Indeed,

implicated as it is with the quest for pure origins and "definite creation" *Le Devoir de violence* discounts the very grounds for, *Two Thousand Seasons* stands in a problematic relation to the former.

Prior to *Two Thousand Seasons,* Armah's oeuvre was a quintessential expression of despair, existential in tone and comparable as such to Sartre's *La Nausée* and its antecedent, Rilke's *Die Auszeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge,* though also addressing a specifically African dilemma: the inability of creative individuals to reconcile with the fragmented and materialistic neo-colonial society which had become theirs, and the subsequent descent into despondency and psychosis. In *Two Thousand Seasons* this despair persists, but has been attributed both to deviation from the true way and to an outside source, the Destroyers, symbolized by the white sands which soak up the vital currents of the Niger and Volta as they flow north toward the desert. Alienation within this work is a function of white usurpation of black primal force or, alternatively, of black internalization of the principles of whiteness: hierarchy, reification, destruction, and the severing of bonds which relate human to human and humans to the world.

It would be unfair to reduce a work as complex and original as Armah's to a schematic diagram or to a mere instance of influence (interestingly enough, from the French, a language Armah has gone to great lengths to display his knowledge of in *Fragments* and *Why Are We So Blest?*). Still, it is significant that he has, in the first place, reintroduced the principal motifs of Négritude and, in the second, fused them into a program which is Fanonist in essence, though more the Fanon of *Peau noire, masques blancs,* who was concerned with the psychic effects of cultural alienation, than that of *Les Damnés de la terre,* who affirmed that the only effective catharsis would be violent and political. Fanon exerted an immense influence on many Third World intellectuals, but notably on Armah, whose earlier works lend themselves readily to Fanon's view of disorientation among the oppressed. A text which endeavors to dispel the paralyzing power of the oppressor's world view with an alternative myth of origin, *Two Thousand Seasons* is also a rehabilitation of the axiological polarities which Senghor, in particular, expostulated.[21] It is indicative of the degree to which Armah has willingly polarized his novel that white represents not only European, but also Arab, Moslem culture.

Therapeutic in its intent and sharply polarized in its axiology, *Two Thousand Seasons* also marks a portentous narratological innovation within

Armah's oeuvre, from the first or third person singular voices of *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born, Fragments,* and *Why Are We So Blest?* to the first person plural and vocative. This shift confused many readers upon publication and has been explained as a harkening back to the art of the griot, the African public poet who sings of the collective fate, and, given Armah's concern with disease and cure, to the faith-healer's invocations.[22] The early Armah portrayed the failure of various writers, artists, seers, and creative individuals to fuse with the people and then demonstrated their resulting despair, thematically close, because of the very failure to escape European modes, to the existential anguish of a Rilke or Sartre. The Armah of *Two Thousand Seasons* instead posits himself as a seer who has mastered his despair and who summons his reader to a visionary and purgative mission: "The linking of those gone, ourselves here, those coming; our flowing not along any meretricious channel but along our living way, the way" (xiii). This invocation is reflected in the shift from the descriptive to the vocative mode and the new importance given myth, as opposed to the phenomenological description which pervaded the earlier works. I do not agree, therefore, with those who feel that the "sluggish, somnambulistic" quality of Armah reaches an apotheosis in the 1973 text. Armah is after all not necessarily bigger, but different game. The abandonment of the phenomenological mode was intended to signal the desertion of the ideological mode to which it was attached.

To abandon one ideology does not mean escaping all ideology. Both Négritude and Armah's personal variation on the values which underlie it certainly demonstrate ideological structure in the sense I defined it above. Both are typical founding texts, predicated upon the play of identity and difference, self and other, origin and return to sources. This is not to claim, I repeat, that some texts are ideological and others not, only that certain kinds are more overtly so. Founding texts play upon a general quality of texts, the illusion of inner coherence, and an analogous quality of language, the mirage of representation. But what all texts partake of, founding texts take as their essence. Their aim is to attribute pattern to history and a paradigmatic role within history to the collectivity they espouse, to assert a congruence between the text itself, the myths it conveys, and the singular history of the group who is its subject.

Let us adduce, then, the alternative textual sort offered by *Le Devoir de violence.* Not that many African writers have followed in Ouologuem's footsteps, not even Ouologuem himself.[23] His is a haunting and troubling

work, for which there are various reasons, his abjuration of grounds for any ethical response to colonialism among them, as well as the abundance of scatology, blasphemy, and obscenity. An even more perturbing factor for some is the scandal which erupted shortly after the publishing success of the book in France, a *cause célèbre* too infamous to recount in detail here.[24] The tendency has been to look the other way, as if Ouologuem offended propriety not only by his blasphemous attack on African despotism (grist to the mill of Eurocentric prejudice about African political mores), but in the very essence of his work, which through the lens of humanism appears utterly without redeeming value, lifted as it has been from a spectrum of sources and therefore lacking any center, originality, or authenticity.

First, let us address the issue of blasphemy, paramount in the initial pages, especially for a Moslem (as, we should remember, the majority of Ouologuem's compatriots are). It is revealing that European critics have taken as plagiarism the word-for-word parallel between the work's opening lines and those of Schwartz-Bart's *Le Dernier des justes.* But these lines have more to do with parody than plagiarism. The subtle insertion of Islamic imprecations into, if not a Zionist then at least a Jewish diaspora text, has not been widely remarked upon, but their appearance and the mockery they imply sets the tone for the first third of the narration, vacillating between further parody of griot accounts and ridicule of the *Koran: Dieu rafraîchisse sa couche; Dieu ait son âme; la malédiction de Dieu sur lui.*[25] Most Western readers would be disturbed, offended, or smug that it is a Bishop who reconciles with the despot Saif in the final passages. Many pious African Moslems would not reach either the violations of incest and seraglio taboo or the pornographic sequences of "L'extase et l'agonie." The date 1202 would have tipped them off immediately that Ouologuem was writing in French for a (post-)Christian audience. If they did continue, they would discover that in this one regard Ouologuem is in agreement with Armah: Islam is a scourge on Africa. Christopher Miller's revisionist version of Ouologuem's use of European texts, though valuable, ignores Ouologuem's allusion to Islamic texts, par for Western scholarship.[26] Plagiarism and parody are Ouologuem's main means of dealing with the West, but blasphemy is his preferred mode of transcribing Africa, Islamic or animist, nationalist or marxist. Blasphemy is, like plagiarism, a deliberate violation of codes, the use of the sacred in a secular context.

A blasphemous work by any standards, *Le Devoir de violence* also suffers from an apparent structural flaw: it lacks a coherent center. I say "apparent" because this very lack of center, upon repeated readings, seems to be a source of strength, of which Ouologuem himself may not have been totally aware. According to Miller, *Le Devoir de violence* is neither copy nor original; it is a rejection of the norms of European logic and discourse, a "triumphantly hopeless gesture." Hopeless or not, the text is radically de-centered not only in its inner movement (which is centrifugal), its ethical prescriptions (resolutely negative), and its sources, lifted as they are from a plethora of minor or paraliterary European loci, some Islamic, some African (such as Camara Laye's *Le Regard du roi*).[27] Nor is the African Marxist tradition spared: Sembene Ousmane is glancingly referred to in the passages about railroad organization when the consummate tyrant Saif arranges to sell his lackeys off to the railroads and all the peasants agree (compare this to parallel scenes in Ousmane's *Les Petits bouts de Dieu*). I, for one, am also curious about the "ancient Arabian, medieval, old Portuguese and old Spanish manuscripts" Ouologuem alleges to have incorporated into his work.[28] We in the West have missed an essential point. Ouologuem's plagiarism of Schwartz-Bart, Maupassant, Graham Greene, and Lord knows how many other writers aside, who were the *African* writers Ouologuem targeted?

Specific reference in the early passages and the outcome of the plot make clear that Ouologuem had in mind a tendency he dubbed "black romanticism," the weakness of African leaders and their literary counterparts for *schroéniusologie*: the predilection for high-flown theories of the African soul all the while much more so sordid political realities prevail—a little like the castles in the air Kierkegaard accused Hegel of constructing in the face of human squalor or the Leibnitzian right-mindedness Voltaire took to task. "Véridique ou fabulée, la légende de Saif Isaac El Héit hante de nos jours encore le romantisme nègre, et la politique des notables en maintes républiques" (14). It would be too easy to read this diatribe as pertaining solely to types like Idi Amin Dada or the late Emperor Jean-Bodel Bokassa. It is more to the point to see this attack on Schroéniusology as one upon Négritude in the first place, and all logics of identity in the second. They are, Ouologuem asserts, tools in the hands of tyrants.

In Africa the mainstream tradition is predicated upon social or political solidarity, moral orthodoxy and aesthetic conservatism, but there have

been exceptions. I have mentioned the numerous trickster tales in which amorality wins out. But think, too, of the sense of perversity within the Yoruba pantheon Soyinka describes in *Myth, Literature and the African World,*[19] or, as far as aesthetic conservatism goes, of the extraordinary inventions of the Kota peoples of Gabon and the Congo in response to European matériel. Ouologuem resisted the "orthodox" position within African literature. There can be, he reminds us, no unifying vision of what is inevitably manifold and conflictive. All discourse is ideological. None is salutary, including that of the most ardent defenders of African identity.

The change of voice I noted above in *Two Thousand Seasons* is very different from the proliferation of voice we find in *Le Devoir de violence.* The former pursues a coherent discursive goal, an explanatory vision of origin, of fall, and reintegration, the fateful cycle prophesied by Anoa. The vocative and first person narrative seeks to bind the reader to the narrator and his vision of the collective fate. Narrator here is more than merely reliable: he is apodictic. Ouologuem's text has no such axis. It moves from legend to griot accounts, from third person depiction of historical intrigue and back again to dramatic discourse. The multiplicity of voice precludes a credible point of view, and the text is open to all discourse. One could therefore argue that despite Armah's attempt to surpass Ouologuem's negativity by recourse to a cogent myth of foundation, it is of a lesser "power." There is no place within his own system for Ouologuem. On the other hand, *Two Thousand Seasons* could be inserted into *Le Devoir de violence* as a sub-text, one of the delusive myths of black romanticism whose function is to obfuscate the exploited—though, and this is important, Ouologuem does not try to lure his reader into the fallacy that authentic consciousness exists, let alone that it might enable the exploited to throw off oppression. All the voices in *Le Devoir de violence* are bogus, from the mock Arab historians to the griots, from the black romantics to Schroénius, from the lovers (hetero- or homosexual) to the conspirators, even the voices of Saif and Abbé Henry in the concluding dialogue and, finally, that of Ouologuem himself, whose text is not even his own. Yet this disparity of voice and Ouologuem's own mendacity are perfectly attuned to the falsification which is the theme of the work and to the series of forgeries upon which it is constructed. We have here a rare, almost breath-taking integration of form and content, style and matter, theme and expression, motif and literary method. We

also have a work which abjures all hope, and this is what has made it so disturbing and such an anomaly within the canon of contemporary African literature. The world of *Le Devoir de violence* is one of empty gesture, brutal and irreconcilable conflict between men and women and classes and civilizations—and the text itself is one such empty gesture, one grounded in no more authenticity than the psychic energy of the author or of the reader whom Ouologuem abused without shame.

In contrast to Armah, the healer, Ouologuem is the practitioner of "literary magic for the purpose of self inoculation" that Soyinka found in him,[30] but one whose gesture purges himself and potentially his readers of what he identifies as the very grounds of despair and delusion: the debilitating belief that history has a meaning and that motivation can be authentic. Here Ouologuem, as well, is indebted to European existentialism. Armah's Fanonist perspective relates back to Sartre's call for collective solidarity through annealing violence. How ironic in this regard that Ouologuem, usually thought of as a paragon of gratuitous violence, actually has more affinity on philosophical grounds with Albert Camus, who rejected Sartre's (and Fanon's) project of revolutionary solidarity through collective violence. In *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* Camus argued: "Absurde n'est pas ce qui n'a pas de sens. La nature n'a pas de sens. Mais elle n'est pas absurde. Elle *est*. L'absurde provient des choses qui se détruisent et s'engendrent." What is it in things that "engender and destroy each other" if not the reciprocal assumption that there is a relation between knowing subjects, the "connecting link" in the strange game in the last pages of *Le Devoir de violence*.

> Les Chinois ont un jeu: le trait d'union. Ils capturent deux oiseaux qu'ils attachent ensemble. Pas de trop près. Grâce à un lien mince, mais solide et long. Si long que les oiseaux, rejetés en l'air, s'envolent, montent en flèche et, se croyant libres, se grisent de battements d'ailes, de grand air, mais soudain: crac! Tiraillés. . . . Les Chinois trouvent ça drôle, hautement comique et raffiné. . . . Quand la Providence se garde de les empaler aux branches, avant la fin du jeu, l'un d'eux meurt. Seul. Ou avec l'autre. Tous les deux. Ensemble. Etranglés, éborgés. (194)

Ouologuem seems to imply that what links the birds together (the fowl of what I have termed self and other, identity and difference, black and

white) is both contingent, insofar as it is part of a game, and necessary, for the bond, once we are in the game, cannot be severed. There is no hope, as long as we are fowl. And if we are born spectators, like Saif, it is our role to impose the rules of this terrifying game.

If Armah reflected at all on this passage when he read *Le Devoir de violence*, he probably had a clear idea of his own about that tether between the birds. He would understand it as symbolizing the colonial bond which must be broken before the birds can fly free. Let us therefore not identify too closely Armah's above "linking of those gone, ourselves here, those coming," with the *trait-d'union* to which Ouologuem attributes violence and despair. Armah's linking is what I have called paratactic. Coordination and conjunction are its operative principles and the identities of the entities so juxtaposed is independent of whatever binds them. To pursue the metaphor: in syntactic texts, like Ouologuem's, psychic, ideational, or ideological entities cannot be determined without recourse to the relations which define them—from which it can follow that the identity of all entities is questioned, relationships being perforce rhetorical and political.

I submit that the primary ordering principle of African literature both traditional and contemporary is indeed the paratactic one, based upon union, solidarity, and collectivity, especially as defined against an external other. Ouologuem offers an exception. He demonstrates that all connection is inescapably implicated in the play of opposition and that opposition itself is the curse of consciousness.

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NOTES

1. The germ of this text was presented at the 12th Annual African Literature Association conference at Michigan State University in April, 1986.

2. Robert Fraser, *The Novels of Ayi Kwei Armah* (London: Heinemann, 1980) 65–71.

3. Neither *Le Devoir de violence* nor *Two Thousand Seasons* can be called true novels. Asked to describe his work, Ouologuem was reduced not to a loss but, typically, a surfeit of words: "a fresco, an epic, a legend, and a novel" (Interview with Linda Kuehl, "Yambo Ouologuem on Violence, Truth and Black History," *Commonweal*, 11 June 1971, 311–14). Likewise, Armah bridges centuries of racial history and to do so resorts to emblematic or "heroic" characterization, cosmological legend and mimicry of traditional story-telling. This is not the place to take up the thorny issue of whether genre resides within critical

metalanguage or within the literary system itself, either immanently or as an effect of modeling text upon text. My remarks are intended to allow for both possibilities.

4. From *confundare*, to pour together. A related term is *satire*, from *satura*, smorgasbord. The underlying principle is heterogeneity.

5. Robert D. Pelton, *The Trickster in West Africa* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1980). Denise Paulme, *La Mère dévorante: Essai sur la morphologie des contes africains* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976).

6. David Caute, *Fanon* (London: Fontana, 1970). J. P. Sartre, *Critique de la raison dialectique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1960). As Caute observes, Sorel is not without influence in such thought.

7. V. Y. Mudimbe, "African Gnosis, Philosophy and the Order of Knowledge: An Introduction," *African Studies Review* 28, 2/3 (June/September 1985): 170. I have argued elsewhere that Sartre and Fanon were both caught up in a rhetoric which was not "African" in origin, but rather derived from the *dispositio* of the European academic dissertation—which does not prevent it from being relevant to African events. George Lang, "Comment naît une nation," *Actes du VIIIe Congrès de l'Association Internationale de Littérature Comparée* (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1980) 337–41.

8. Sartre, "Orphée noir," in Senghor, *Anthologie . . .* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1948) I.

9. Guy Ossito Midiohouan's "Critique littéraire et nationalisme en African noire d'expression française," presented at the African Literature Association's conference in April 1986 at Michigan State University, is a thorough working out of this line of thought.

10. See the definition of parataxis in *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*: "the coordination of grammatical elements such as phrases of clauses, without the use of coordinating elements such as conjunctions."

11. It is apparent, I presume, that this kind of taxonomy is an echo of the shift from basically "paradigmatic" approaches to "syntagmatic" ones that Paul de Man spoke of and recommended in *Allegories of Reading* (New Haven: Yale U P, 1979) 7–8.

12. Christopher L. Miller, *Blank Darkness* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1985); Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1979). I have attempted a definition of these tendencies in my forthcoming "Le Primitivisme," in *Dictionnaire internationale des termes littéraires*. Sous la direction scientifique de Robert Escarpit (Maison des Sciences de l'Homme, Université de Bordeaux III).

13. Léon Fanoudh-Siefer, *Le Mythe du nègre et de l'Afrique noire dans la littérature française de 1800 à la deuxième guerre mondiale* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969); Marine Astier-Loufti, *Littérature et colonialisme: L'expansion coloniale vue dans la littérature romanesque française, 1871–1914* (Paris: Mouton, 1971); Léon-François Hoffman, *Le Nègre romantique: personnage littéraire et obsession collective* (Paris: Payot, 1973).

14. Eco called the positive and negative connotations at the "head" of each string the "axiological super-connotations" (*ipercomnotazione assiologica*) and defined ideology from a semiotic point of view as "an ossified message which has become the signifying unit of a rhetorical sub-code" (*un messagio sclerotizzato che è diventato unità significante di un sottocodice retorico*). Umberto Eco, *Le Forme del contenuto* (Milano: Bombiano, 1971) 50 and 151.

15. Ayi Kwei Armah, *Two Thousand Seasons* (Chicago: Third World, 1979) 26–27. Hereafter cited by page number in this edition.

16. *Leo Frobenius, 1873–1973: An Anthology*. Foreword by L. S. Senghor, ed. Eike Haberland (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner, 1973).

17. Yambo Ouologuem, *Le Devoir de violence* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1968) 111. Henceforth referred to by page number in this edition.

18. Diop, *Nations nègres et culture* (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1965).

19. Soyinka, *Myth, Literature and the African World* (Cambridge: Cambridge U P, 1976) 106.

20. Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Homecoming* (London: Heinemann, 1972) and *Decolonizing the Mind* (London: James Currey, 1986); Georg M. Gugelberger, ed. *Marxism and African Literature* (Trenton, N. J.: Africa World, 1986).

21. Senghor's texts are most accessible in *Libertés I, II* (Paris: Seuil, 1964/1971).

22. Fraser, *The Novels of Ayi Kwei Armah*, 68–71.

23. Adèle King cites the case of Boubacar Boris Diop's *Le Temps de Tamango*, "perhaps the first example African metafiction," as deriving from Ouologuem. "Le Temps de Tamango: Eighteen Hundred Years of Solitude," *Komparatistische Hefte* 12 (1985): 77.

24. The notes to Miller's chapter on Ouologuem, *Blank Darkness*, 216–44, provide a running bibliographical account.

25. *Alif lam ra*, the sacred letters of Suras 10–15 (those of Jonah, Hud, Joseph, Thunder, Abraham, and the Rocky Tract) are echoed irreverently throughout these earlier passages, as is Koranic style and reference to Arab historians.

26. It is evidence of our mutual ignorance that "Judeo-Christian" and "Islamic" scholars have virtually no knowledge of each other, though Africa is the quintessential site at which this dialogue should occur. There is a vast range of West African response to Islam. For Senegal alone, see Mbye B. Cham, "Islam in Senegalese Literature and Film," *Africa* 55, 4 (1985): 447–64.

27. Clarence's journey to the south is parodied in the following: "Mon repas a été drogué . . . J'obéis à une mécanique intérieure, à une dictée impérieuser. Le Sud. Le Sud" (119).

28. See the interview with Linda Kuehl, *Commonweal*, 11 June 1971, 311–14.

29. Soyinka, 1–36.

30. Soyinka, 101.