

Why Do We Write in French?

Sylvain Bemba

The Traitor here reveals his original situation, which is (virtual) treachery.

In so doing he "betrays" us, since this situation is also ours, but it is in showing ourselves that we betray, insofar as we claim to be entirely on one side or entirely on the other. As for him, he does not betray, because he does not cease making explicit the awkwardness of his position: his double affiliation and his double exclusion.

Francis Jeanson

He was not a philosopher. Philosophers are violent people who, for want of an army at their disposal, make the world to submit to their control by enclosing it in a system.

Robert Musil

The controversy currently surrounding national literatures in foreign languages can be summed up by the famous statement: "to be or not to be, that is the question." But how is one to be oneself without having been that other whom one cannot deny (in the Marxist sense) since one sings as one grows? How, whatever effort one makes to deny one's father, can one fail to be presently what one is by separating oneself from the story of one's own birth or from the birth of one's own story?*

The Ambivalence of Languages

These questions – where what is chiefly at stake is the choice, by African writers, of a writing vehicle – clearly indicate the ambivalence of all language, which on the one hand reflects the most intimate thing that human beings carry within themselves, the precious maternal legacy that constitutes their identity, and on the other represents an instrument that can be refashioned for one's own use. It is this utilitarian aspect – Claude Imbert would say "outilitarian," a pun on "outil," tool – which the upholders of linguistic "purity" strive to undermine, as if the basic problem lay in choosing, in terms of exclusion, between one's mother and writing.

The sometimes tragic dialogue between the Philosopher and the Traitor springs from what has been called the clash of cultures, which Claude Roy considers to be "the shock suffered by a closed, or relatively inward-looking culture turned in upon itself, when opening up suddenly to another culture (a shock it inflicts in its turn on the culture it 'assimilates')." These lines by a leading French writer and literary critic were contained in the introduction which he devoted to the work of Akutagawa and in which he stressed how much, after European penetration, "the difficulty of being Japanese increased fantastically." Roy saw "some fleeing it, plunging headlong into a frantic 'westernization' ... and others taking refuge instead in a deliberate archaism, seeking the haven of an unchanging and perhaps imaginary Japan of yesteryear." Roy describes Akutagawa (who ended up killing himself in 1927) in terms that most southern intellectuals would recognize as applying to themselves: "the man torn, divided, rent apart, the man double and contradictory."¹ No, truly, it is not easy to come to terms with oneself as a bicultural man, even if homo duplex is above all basically an unavoidable truth, a biological fact.

Exemplary Severance

Participating in two cultures while exposing oneself to a double rejection of one's work, such is the dramatic situation of the African writer. Only one escape route is available to him: the solution of exemplary severance as proposed recently by the famous Kenyan writer Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o in a profession of faith published in Le Monde Diplomatique for August 1987 under the title "the subversive strength of African languages: decolonising the spirit" in which Thiong'o announces that he has decided that he will henceforth write only in Gĩkũyũ, his mother tongue, or in Swahili. What is hinted at here is that this choice could immediately be generalized and transposed to the whole of Africa, whereas in actual fact one would have to be able to match the four exemplary aspects of Ngũgĩ's development: being taught in primary school in one's mother tongue, a written language; having access to an audience of people capable of reading this language; benefiting from a combination of circumstances enabling one to write, at the request of a group of peasants and workers, a play in one's mother tongue; and after being thrown into jail as a result

(thus putting the seal on one's break with the political establishment of one's country), writing a novel in one's mother tongue. By way of example Zaire, Burundi, and Rwanda could be ranked in the first two instances like certain English-speaking countries of Africa, but Zaire has become in the opinion of its leaders the second francophone country in the world; in spite of an exceptionally favorable linguistic situation (a single language covering the whole national territory) neither Rwanda nor Burundi possess a literature of noteworthy exemplarity. In the Congo in 1967 the political youth of the country asked Guy Menga to write for them, on the occasion of the First Cultural Week, a play in French, the official language of the country. The success in Africa of "Kola M'Bala's Cooking-Pot" is well known: would it have been any greater if the play had been written in Lingala or Kituba, the two widely-spoken national languages of the country? There cannot be much doubt about that. As for the Ngũgĩ's fourth aspect, it can be illustrated in several countries, particularly in Nigeria. Wole Soyinka, the Nobel Prize-winning author of *This Man is Dead*, a novel about his prison experience, manages to get us to share his emotions, his daily fears, and his courageous struggle, without cutting the umbilical cord with the chance language that has become his traveling companion, and he is no less acclaimed as an African writer completely immersed in Yoruba myths and the Yoruba imagination.

A Mechanistic Point of View

Ngũgĩ remains in his guts and in his soul a writer admirably, furiously and completely committed to the defense of the weak, the humiliated and the oppressed. In spite of my unbounded respect for his struggle, I think that his views on colonial alienation deal in a mechanistic way with the problem of cultural metabolism which has been further complicated by the most recent discoveries about the behavior of "humankind the unknown." It is by no means certain that genetic manipulations or commonplace brainwashing can be carried out on former colonized individuals to free them by a kind of reverse residue method of their old selves without mutilating them in some way, for their identity is not a piece of statistical data but a dynamic creation of humankind continued by the species. And then this cultural dualism should be tracked not only

through language but – to remain logical with oneself to the last – should also be detected in religions and forms of medicine for example; we are familiar with the serious psychic damage caused by the rash sacrifice on the altar of a poorly understood modernity of ancestor worship or traditional healing practices.

To return to purely literary arguments, it is rather simplistic to believe that African languages have the subversive power that people are keen to attribute to them. Is it a matter of a postulate applicable only to Africa, a magical land of magical thought, a continent where a thing and its cause merge like the object and the sign that designates it. If committed literature possessed such an absolute power it would be first in the West that governments would fall endlessly like ninepins. But Ngũgĩ does not bother himself with any of these considerations in order to sweep aside with a flick of his hand the African literary production of our time; for him it is essentially a matter of a "hybrid tradition amongst many others, a tradition of transition, a minority tradition that can only be called 'Afro-European' literature." And he defines the latter as follows: "literature written by Africans in European languages in the era of imperialism."² One awaits with interest his definition of Latin-American literature according to the same aesthetic canons of Aryan "purity."

This bickering would be less shrill if it were not the product of what Pierre Bourdieu calls "the opening blow struck by Saussure when he separated 'external linguistics' from 'internal linguistics' and, keeping the title 'linguistics' for the latter, excluded all research linking language to ethnology, the political history of those who speak it, by separating the linguistic instrument from the social conditions of its production and use."³ We have seen only too well how this tendency to exclusion has manifested itself in the obscuring of the "purely political process of unification culminating in a defined unit of 'speaking subjects' finding itself with little choice but to accept the official language."⁴ These "speaking subjects" use it gratifyingly because it guarantees them a status and social roles enhanced by the prestige associated with the triumphant colonial administration to the detriment of values conveyed by traditional education. That is what Bourdieu calls "the dialectical relationship between school and the labor market or, more precisely, between the unification of the educational (and linguistic) market and the institution of educational qualifications endowed with a national value."⁵

Unworried Writers

The Congolese writers reject any attempt to make them feel guilty all the more energetically because of their strong attachment to a respect for the real, the real here taking the form of two factors, the one external and the other internal. They cannot alone change matters in an environment where the weight of psycho-political pressures is everywhere felt (the impatience of the traveler using any form of transportation does not make the vehicle go any faster). In any event the Congo's linguistic landscape is not set in stone: it can be said, to use a familiar expression, that things are moving and can be seen to be moving. The process of giving greater status to the national languages has been underway for several years now and bears witness to a growing awareness on the part of the country's rulers of the importance of a linguistic policy that conforms more closely to the objectives of national independence.

*Feeling themselves in perfect harmony with the traditional reciters of folktales who are their close colleagues, the Congolese writers know that a part of their imagination is steeped in the oral literature from which they often have derived their themes and even their narrative techniques (cf. *Les Aventures de Moni-Mambou*). At a recent colloquium on African literatures held in Rome, Sony Labou Tansi drew plaudits for Mounga-Senga, a Congolese poet who writes in his mother tongue: Sony revealed that he had himself written a few works in Kongo for which he was seeking a publisher. For his part Guy Menga intends publishing a long poem in Lari. The universities have been teaching several Congolese languages for a while now. The amount of air-time devoted to radio broadcasts in Lingala and Kituba, languages described in 1981 by a symposium of leading figures in the cultural field as "the most advanced forms of our linguistic unity," is substantial. The most popular radio broadcaster is not a French-speaking journalist but Georges Embana, who tells stories in Lingala that have earned him a large following in neighboring Zaire as well as in his native Congo.*

An Enriching Cohabitation

What elsewhere can take on the air of a war of languages is experienced in the Congo as a doubly enriching act of cohabitation at the cultural level. If social evolution is irreversible, the languages which, as is well

known, are not the same as the superstructure, belong to the inalienable capital of a country, a truth that must not however be allowed to conceal another, that the world is changing. The removal of certain images from the past, a consequence of the slow erosion of ancestral values, is an objective fact, but ancient culture has its laws, its rhythms, and its returns that follow a cycle which is much longer than that of the ebb and flow of the tides; it is always moving away, and yet at the same time both the present and future are permeated with it.

To sum up, Congolese literature in French is less a literature of transition than a literature on the cusp of a certain representation of the world destined sooner or later to disappear and on the cusp of another representation the waters of which, swollen by various currents of modernity, deposit on the shore their syncretic alluvia to enrich the land that must be cleared in order to ensure the literary harvests of tomorrow.

When Théophile Obenga – as quoted in Tati Loutard's anthology – says that "the words are theirs, the ideas are ours" he is fairly close to the famous Saussurian distinction between the langue which has a general social significance and the parole invested in by individuals to express their being, the parole with which they can play the great game of life, or rather as artists score it to make the world sing with their dreams.

Translated from the French by John Fletcher

Notes

- * © Notre Librairie, nos. 92-93 (March-May 1988), "Littérature congolaise."
1. Akutagawa, *Rashomon et autres contes*, with an introduction by Claude Roy (Paris, 1969), p. 7.
 2. "The national character of a literature is above all the content of a people's consciousness, the aspects of psychology (depth or surface psychology). That is what makes a literature belong to or reflect the life of this or that people. Looking at it thus from this point of view, Cuban literature, for example, although it uses the Spanish language, keeps its national character, which is different from the Spanish national character because it bears the load of the human content specific to the Cuban people ..." (interview with Jean-Baptiste Tati Loutard, 16 October 1978).
 3. "Ce que parler veut dire," *L'Economie des échanges linguistiques* (Paris, 1982), pp. 8 and 9.
 4. *Ibid.*, p. 26.
 5. *Ibid.*, p. 33.