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THE LANGUAGE OF LITERATURE IN EAST AFRICA

"Words cut more painfully than sticks" cries Lawino in her anguish. But only when the right words are applied directly to the flesh of life. I take it we are concerned here with literature published in English, whatever the original language of conception or composition, and the search for these 'right words' in English has presented special problems for the East African writer. In mastering these problems, he has come up with solutions rather different from those adopted in Western or Southern Africa. It is on the nature of those solutions that I want to concentrate.

In the search for an authentic *tone* in English, Okot's *Song of Lawino* (1966) seems to me to make one turning-point. But not a turning-point whose significance was immediately recognized by all other East African writers. His influence has worked more subtly and more slowly than that. And Okot was only one of those finding a path to distinctive English expression in those years. To see what *Lawino* is turning away from, I want to look at a few other recent attempts to render the quality of East African life through the medium of English. The first example is more or less contemporary with the English version of Okot's poem, having been performed in 1967 and published in 1968. This is Robert Serumaga's "Play", which offers quite an ingenious plot-line, perhaps a little derivative of Eliot's *Cocktail Party* and *Family Reunion*, but is unable to resolve the problem of giving an acceptable voice to the hero. One speech will suffice, I think, to show what I mean:

Mutimukulu:

I suppose I am constrained to allow two strangers into my house tonight. But my misfortune may be only a temporary

one, and your presumption, in the end, your own undoing. In the meantime, however, I will allow you to drink and keep me company.

Not only is this a 'high-falutin' way of talking, but the failure of language is compounded by the author's failure to give us any idea of who or what Mutimukulu is. So much of the play is taken up by situational development that there is practically no self-revelation by any of the characters. The somewhat gnomic utterances of the Old Man are the feature most reminiscent of Eliot's Sir Henry Harcourt-Reilly:

"Anniversaries call forth brooding presences. I should be surprised if we were the only guests tonight". And they don't help either, because they simply stand between us and any perception of the Old Man as a person.

If Mutimukulu and the Old Man fail through an excess of formality and a lack of the specific, I believe an opposite kind of failure can be discerned in a work published a few years later, Charles Mangua's *Son of Woman* (1971). In his search for an idiom to convey the urban slum-life of Nairobi, Mangua appears to have turned to the South African *Drum* style of writing, with its constant use of the historic present, intrusive, American slang and ceaseless insistence on *l'homme moyen sensuel* in both writer and reader. The deliberate Philistinism of such writing, perpetually harping on 'booze', 'dames' and 'dough', makes it almost incapable of handling ideas, other than in the somewhat sentimental tone of repentance and reform at the end of the novel. All we are presented with is a string of events and the somewhat monotonous exposure of all the 'lays' enjoyed by narrator-hero. A few examples of his style will suffice. In the following paragraph I have italicized some of the words which seem to locate the trouble with this way of writing:

He was the type that thought his hat was more important than his head. *A punk*. They must have been nuts to promote him ... I couldn't stomach the *blighter* and I didn't beat about the bush in letting him know it ... In my dingy office the most intelligent companions were evil smelling cheating, *bums* bothering me for jobs ... My fiancée left me high and dry and got married to a butcher! My *ass!* ... Whenever I imagined him acting husband in bed I'd go to the *john* and leak.

Having adopted this jiving tone, Mangua sticks to it with considerable

fluency and vitality, but it never really seems to be his. The trouble is that this style was already derivative when it got to Johannesburg, and the extra journey to Nairobi doesn't make it any less so. Apart from the names of a few local streets and markets, there is not enough specific ballast to remind us that the hero is not walking down 44th Street in the 1940's:

I walk across the street and start walking towards Queensway. I brush shoulders with a swell piece of female wearing these tights and say "Hi, lady" but she hasn't got the courtesy to say "Hi". It doesn't worry me one little jot. Females are very unpredictable creatures except when they are predictable and that is rare. If you don't agree with me you don't know women.

No, 'a swell piece of female' just won't do. I'm not surprised that she didn't say "Hi". Even just a few Swahili or Kikuyu expressions and epithets, a few distinctive turns of speech - whether left in the original or rendered literally into English, might give us the feeling that Mangua is experiencing the life of Nairobi directly, not at second or third hand, by courtesy of writers like Damon Runyon and Raymond Chandler. One last example will perhaps clinch the point. At a critical juncture towards the end of the novel, the hero Dodge exclaims:

"I am not trying to do you any goddam favour for Chrissake." This language is at an infinite remove from the actual exchange which might have taken place, supposing that exchange to be at least imaginatively real. The language used between Dodge and Tonyia would have been Gikuyu, and this weary American 'private eye' slang cannot give us any sense of what that exchange, at the gates of an African prison, might have been.

After gallant failure, let us look at success. The prose of Ngugi wa Thion'go's novels has always had certain qualities of strength, simplicity and occasional rhythmic beauty. In his first two novels, however, that very simplicity could, and occasionally did, pall. The reader found himself longing that the pen would occasionally take a slightly longer flight and attempt a little more in its passage. The development between these early novels and *A Grain of Wheat* (1967) is perhaps greater than that exhibited by any other African writer over a similar period of time. Ngugi is still perceptibly the same novelist, but has gained strength and depth in every aspect of his art. Here is an early passage in that novel, the encounter between Mugo and Githua, which

can be quite fairly compared to Mangua as an attempt to render in English the quality, tempo and significance of a vernacular exchange on a cold highland morning:

Mugo walked, his head slightly bowed, staring at the ground as if ashamed of looking about him. He was reliving the encounter with Warui when suddenly he heard someone calling his name. He started, stopped, and stared at Githua, who was hobbling towards him on crutches. When he reached Mugo he stood attention, lifted his town hat, and cried out:

'In the name of blackman's freedom, I salute you.' Then he bowed several times in mock deference.

'Is it - is it well with you?' Mugo asked, not knowing how to react. By this time two or three children had collected and were laughing at Githua's antics. Githua did not answer at once. His shirt was torn, its collar gleamed black with dirt. His left trouser leg was folded and fixed with a pin to cover the stump. Rather unexpectedly he gripped Mugo by the hand:

'How are you man! How are you man! Glad to see you going to the shamba early. Uhuru na Kazi. Ha! Ha! Ha! Even on Sundays. I tell you before the Emergency, I was like you; before the whiteman did this to me with bullets, I could work with both hands, man. It makes my heart dance with delight to see your spirit, Uhuru na Kazi. Chief, I salute you.'

Mungo tried to pull out his hand. His heart beat and he could not find words. The laughter from the children increased his agitation. Githua's voice suddenly changed:

'The Emergency destroyed us', he said in a tearful voice and abruptly went away.

A close examination of this passage will show us, I think, that Ngugi has succeeded simply because he has imagined his scene so vividly. His eyes are not fastened on the reader, keeping him stimulated by constant, slightly desperate references to 'tits' and 'lays', but on the scene itself. Mugo's unease and insecurity, already powerfully evoked in the opening page with the hanging drop of blackish water and in the earlier encounter with Warui, are made almost terrifyingly intense by the sudden irruption of this figure, mentally and physically blasted by the Rebellion, with his abrupt switches from mad gaiety to despair. I am saying that the problem of language seems to resolve itself when it is subjected to the pressure of a vision sufficiently sharp and urgent; and perhaps only then.

This example also makes it apparent that success does not necessarily involve the use of distinctively African turns of speech, transliterated into English. A village setting has, of course, the advantage over a city one that a mere description of people's actions will continually remind

the reader that he is participating in a distinctive way of life. This observation can be reinforced by turning to another East African writer, Grace Ogot, who treats of both traditional rural (even pre-colonial) themes, and others developed amid the paraphernalia of the modern city. In her collection of short stories *Land Without Thunder* (1968) these themes are juxtaposed and we may study what modification of her earlier Luo style Mrs. Ogot makes when she comes to treat of the problems of a young African secretary in Nairobi fending off her lecherous employers. Here first is a passage from the very effective title-story about a haunted fisherman whose cousins have drowned in the Kavirondo Gulf. Here his anxious young wife goes to draw water at dawn:

That morning when Apiyo went to fetch water she studied the pond carefully before dipping her pot in the water to fill it. The reflection of her face stared back at her, moving rhythmically with the gentle tide. She drew water with the little calabash, filled her mouth and then spat it towards the sunrise.

"Thu! may we have peace in the family, today and forever, may Owila's health be assured".

She filled her waterpot and hurried home.

Perhaps the only obvious 'vernacular' feature here is the single word 'Thu'. The whole scene is described in a bare, simple, straightforward English. But *what* is described locates the action for us in a very distinct way. The whole passage is charged with the sense of a traditional world in which every act or object has potentialities for good or evil; nothing happens by chance and much misfortune can be avoided by knowledge and care. Hence Apiyo, already acutely worried about her husband,

'studies the pond carefully' before deciding where and how to break its surface. The reflection of her face is a reassurance and so is the gentle movement of the pond - in implied contrast to the angry lake which has just swallowed three men of the clan. Then comes the more specifically ritual act of spitting towards the rising sun and breathing a prayer for communal well-being. All these acts precede the drawing of the water, ostensibly the sole purpose of her expedition.

Because Grace Ogot's style is, at its best, a clear glass through which we look at different kinds of action and different worlds of experience, she can apply it likewise to a scene of more acute loneliness and

disorientation in the city, where another young girl, recently raped by her employer, seeks to hide her misery from the world:

Elizabeth drew the curtains to shut out the city and its people from her. She felt out of step with the sophisticated life in towns. She wondered whether she would ever get used to it. A sudden aching longing for her home in the country, the close-knit family life she had shared there, and the security she had felt, gripped her. She took her toilet bag and walked slowly to the washroom - She entered the incinerator room, pulled out her blood-stained nylon pants that Ochola had sent her for Easter, and wrapped them tightly in a brown paper bag. She pressed the incinerator open, and dropped the pants in the fire and let it close. She stood there sobbing quietly as the pale smoke reluctantly curled up towards the sky.

Here too is a kind of ritual, however desolate and sad. The pants are almost a burnt offering to a god who will not be appeased. And the very surroundings - the hard impersonality of the apartment-block, the wash-room, the incinerator - speak of that implacability which leads eventually to the girl's suicide.

Another approach to language in the urban novel can be seen in Leonard Kibera's *Voices in the Dark* (1970). Kibera uses the semi-dramatic device of framing his action in the nightly conversations of two Nairobi beggars, both crippled as forest fighters during the Rebellion, and typifying in their present abandoned poverty the lot of all those for whom independence has meant only a new and more total despair. The dramatic features don't end there; the note of fantastic elaboration in the beggars' dialogue inevitably raises associations with Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, though I am not necessarily imputing any direct influence to that play. The point is that Kibera has avoided arousing naturalistic expectations by telling us very plainly in the opening pages of his novel that it is not a naturalistic work. Thus he has won for himself a certain freedom in his approach to English dialogue. His beggars have a certain representative function, underlined by their role as a kind of dramatic chorus on the fictional action which unfolds between their nocturnal threnodies. The following exchange with a drunken policeman will show something of this fantastic quality:

I mean I hear a man's boots ironing the ground of our back lane. Kimura, am I dreaming or is it my stomach wrestling with empty sand?

No, you may be starving but you are not dreaming. Can't you hear him

click handcuffs and advance upon us with a raised truncheon? Just sit still and memorize all the slander he pours upon us ...

And sure enough a police constable breaks upon them. He is visibly drunk and staggering. His arms swing for support against the two walls like a blinded bat exposed to daylight as he stops suddenly and says,

"Stop thief! Are you drunk Pharisees sharing spoils in the dark or are you taxpayers?" ...

"We are patriots. What kind of summons is this that trespasses judgement on two freedom fighters without the proper procedure?" Itungu says under his breath,

"We will sue you."

"Well put neighbour, but not so fast. *We* at least are human. We will submit the honourable constable to a few interrogations first."

But the policeman can no longer stand on his feet. He sinks to the ground and says,

"In my father's house there are many clauses. And to tell you the truth I can no longer tell which supports which."

It is in fact this policeman who brings them news of the novel's ostensible hero Gerald Timundu, and thereby links this scene to the main action. But Kimura and Irungu are on a different level of reality from the characters in this main action, whose revolutionary rhetoric fails to carry conviction. "*We* at least are human." These words of Kimura's echo through the book, and the play they are composing with their shattered lives is an authentic tragedy, with its own climax in the final pages.

But it is in poetry, rather than descriptive or conversational prose, that the challenge to the East African writer using English is most intense. The poet cannot aim at the translucence of the 'plain glass' style, a style which strips the language of its associations so that we may gaze straight through it at what is described. He must not only strip the language of irrelevant associations and distracting echoes (how many English readers study African poetry with one ear cocked for what is familiar and identifiable?); he must also fill it with new associative power — otherwise his work will entirely lack one of the most persistent features of traditional African orature, its allusiveness, its centrality within a dense pattern of cultural references. The range of solutions open to an East African writer is narrowed by the fact that English has never really developed there as a distinctive regional dialect, with its own wealth of idioms, grammatical short cuts and fully-

integrated loan-words. The contrast with West African English may be high-lighted by considering the range of English speech deployed by Wole Soyinka in a play like *The Road*; a range extending from the relative (though idiosyncratic) formalism of the Professor to the thug's jargon - of say Tokyo Kid and the rich pidgin of Samson in a speech like this:

All right all right, come down all of you. What is all that rubbish? No waste of time you hear? Lef' your load, I say lef' your dirty bundle ... All right I sorry I mo know say na your picken. Make you all waka this side. If una wan look make you so look for other side. You foolish people, wetin you day stop look now? Black man too useless, unless una get rubbish for look you no dey satisfy ... God punish you, you wretched woman, why you day carry your picken look that kind thing? You tink na cowboy cinema?... Foolish woman! Na another man calamity you fit take look cinema.

It is in finding an alternative solution to the problem of a language for poetry that I believe the influence of Okot P'Bitek to have been decisive. The English of *The Song of Lawino* (1966) is an English put to the service of Lwo poetry. It is almost another kind of clear glass, but what we see when we look through it is not merely the description of distinctively African actions; it is the whole associative world Lwo song itself, embedded in its context of harvest dances, celebrations of victory and war, laments for the dead and those who have forsaken the clan. If the 'echo-minded' English reader can find occasional satisfaction for himself in the early poetry of such writers as Gabriel Ckara, Christopher Okigbo, J.P. Clark or Wole Soyinka, he will find none here. But those familiar with the rich song-culture of the Acoli will be continually at home:

When a woman has brought
 Death in a bundle,
 With which to kill people,
 And Death has felt the insides of the victims
 And found them clean,
 It bounces back
 And destroys the bringer!
 It refuses to be returned,
 It refuses all sacrifices.
 It says
 'I was not brought
 To eat a goat,
 I do not want a ram,
 Nor a bull.'

Death in a bundle
 Kills the children of the bringer ...
 Which white man's medicine
 Can stop the hand of Death in the bundle?
 Which one can blunt
 The sharp edges of Death's sword?
 If in a hunt
 The spears of the men
 Strike tree trunks and earth
 And they return home
 Silent,
 None blowing a horn,
 If in the homestead
 Young wives stay young,
 Their breasts refuse to fall
 And their tummies are forever
 Well back,
 Because they are hard
 Like the *leva* rocks.

The impression here that we are hearing the poet sing another music is all the more remarkable because there is no attempt at the impossible feat of imitating the great tonal leaps, the hard whip-like consonants of the original Lwo. The success of the poems stems, I believe, from the circumstances of its original composition. Okot has perfectly imagined and expressed his theme in Lwo; he has realised his vision of Lawino and her angry despair, undistracted by the problems of rendering it in English. The subsequent transliteration was no doubt painful (the poet complains that he has 'clipped a bit of the eagle's wings') but it brought into East African poetry in English qualities of vigour, wholeness and authenticity that were not there before, and that have benefited in some degree all his successors. And the benefit to Okot himself is shown in the power and ease with which he subsequently handles the same poetic language in *Song of Prisoner* (1971), which I regard as the finest of all his poems to date.

But one should not ignore the fact that two other Ugandan writers were working their way towards rather similar solutions in the late 60's. Okot's fellow Acoli, Taban lo Liyong, was undoubtedly helped towards the discovery of a 'voice' in English by his attempts to render the central mythology of the Nilotic peoples into that language (*Eating Chiefs*, 1970). No precise chronology of his poetry is available, but the

notable advance in authority between his first published collection, *Frantz Fanon's Uneven Ribs* (1971), and *Another Nigger Dead* (1972), certainly suggests a direct benefit from the sort of work he had been doing in Luo cultures after his return from the U.S.A. In his search for an English which will carry a certain formal weight without lapsing into heaviness, Taban produces a language which is almost abstract; a series of counters subject entirely to his own rearrangement:

When girls are beautiful they deserve to love;
 When they are intelligent, they deserve to rule;
 So thought *Rwot Lei* over his only child, mind-roving Nyilak.
 An order stern he meted out to her:
 'To remain single you will ever be,
 To mix with men, you will never do.
 And when I die, to assume the throne.'
 She promised she would follow:
 (a mere act of mind without commerce with pathos),
 A Luo adage says: 'Girls slip away like fish.'
 Shall we see an exception?

The success of this passage is remarkable, yet I think it is successful. Grammatical vagaries like the juxtaposition of the infinitive 'to remain' with the root 'be' in line 5; Miltonic portentousness in 'An order stern he meted out to her'; the colloquial liveliness of the last two lines; all these add together to produce a style which can move quickly between the humour of the narrator, the human weakness of Nyilak and the primeval authority (somewhat blindly wielded) of the chief. Perhaps only more extensive quotation than I have room for here would adequately demonstrate these qualities in what looks at first a very arbitrary arrangement of the language. But I want to look now at the same kind of abstract qualities, tied together by parallelism and symmetry, in a poem from *Another Nigger Dead* called 'the filed man laughed':

The filed man laughed and said
 nationalization is the answer
 a reporter jested
 what is the question
 the filed man laughed and said
 neocolonialism is the problem
 and a boy asked
 whence comes neocolonialism

the filed man laughed and said
 from the West of course
 And a cynic said
 we are lucky for we've no neocolonialists
 the filed man laughed and said
 you are right how wonderful
 but the cynic declared
 westerners from the east are friends indeed
 the filed man laughed and said
 from the east friendship only flows.

This is a tightly economical poem (I have quoted only the opening) which never overdoes its ironic effects. Even 'the filed man' contains an ambiguity; he is perhaps 'filed' in the sense that he is docketed and predictable, but the word refuses to shed its other implication that he has somehow been filed down into less than a man - a cypher.

The language of *Another Nigger Dead* depends less than Okot's on building up a new field of associative force, because this is a poetry of statement rather than of dramatic appeal, passionate anger and bitter recollection, like Okot's major works. A great sustained movement, the long swell of a single emotion; like 'My Name Blew Like a Horn Among the Payira' or 'Let Them Prepare the Malakwang Dish' in *Lawino*; or 'Undergrowth' in *Song of Prisoner*, would be beyond the scope of this dry but effective style. More full-blooded; indeed, reminiscent of Amos Tutuola in the exuberance of its language, is a poem like Okello Oculi's *Orphan* (1968). There is quality of hyperbole, a perilous piling up of insults or attributes until the whole lot threatens to topple over, which seems to be one of the common qualities of indigenous African literature (or orature) that least often survives the transition to English. Whether this stems from a fear of impropriety, the more tangible fear of the censor's pencil, or other factors I don't presume to say. But, although exuberance is a word one could certainly attach, for example, to Soyinka's own dramatic writing, a glance at his translation of D.O. Fagunwa's *Forest of a Thousand Daemons*, with its stupendous verbal combats, will make clear that there is still a pitch of hyperbole not attempted by Soyinka himself. Among East African writers, Okello Oculi has gone further than any other in rendering some of this hyperbole into English:

That woman looks like a stump;
 She eats as if her teeth were in her stomach,
 As if she is throwing the food past her head,
 She closes her anus with her heels
 At a beer party in other's homes
 But has *Ocean* bird's eyes
 LAnd steams from between her backside
 LWhen she had food in her house.
 That woman whose womb was made slippery
 By people's sons in youth
 And now loathes other women's children
 In her barrenness;

Okello's pile of words does occasionally become unwieldy, and I'd be far from calling *Orphan* altogether a successful poem, because of this unevenness of achievement. Here is an example of something which really doesn't come across in English:

Like the widow worried about suitors'
 Tastes, on her husband's deathbed;
 Afraid of the real face of the flash
 Of pangs in our spirit at the sight of
 Suffering.

Likewise, the prose in his novel *Prostitute* (1968) is always threatening to run out of control. Yet he expresses here the musings of a passionate, unhappy woman, bitter about her own ignorance and exploitation, far better than Ekwensi does in the rather stilted, second-hand prose of *Jagua Nana*:

You mistake my caress for passion's streams nosing for passageways in the ridges of your mass. You are mistaken. It is the torrents in me, very violent torrents in a rage forming and reforming walls and boulders of waves in the propelling surge downstream. The waves are swirling and writhing pulsating madness, wanting and raving beneath my surface to rip and bash at your ridges. When you add a citation of your qualifications and your damned status my nails too begin to tremble from the vibrations within ... Your qualification qualifies me into the edges of those pits that flow day and night with fermented and stale urines and washings off clothes, slum clothes. Your car key you wave at me to unlock my body with unlocks the tiny door to my dungeon in the slum, opens the gates to the arena infested with red-eyed vampire bedbugs.

With this tirade I will close, for fear of lapsing into anti-climax. I don't wish to venture any prophecies about the future development of

East African writing in English. Perhaps there will be little more to come, and creativity will pass increasingly to the already sturdy literatures in Kiswahili, Luganda, Lwo, Jalu, Gikuyu and other languages. Perhaps some of the distinctive qualities I have referred to here will disappear. Furthermore, I don't wish to exaggerate this distinction, because it is clear that elsewhere in Africa writers like Kofi Awoonor and Mazisi Kunene have derived the same kind of initial impetus *into* English from the study of Ewe and Zulu poetry that Okot, Taban or Okello have derived from their own indigenous languages. Nevertheless, I believe that the status of spoken English in East Africa was and remains different from the relatively complex and ancient pattern of English dialects developed on the West Coast, extending from Freetown to the Cameroons. It would be surprising if this difference of status had not sooner or later asserted itself in the way English is handled by the African writers of today.