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Illusions Perdues: *The New Ancestors* Revisited.

In this part of the Netherlands, the *NRC Handelsblad* usually arrives a day late, and so there can seem a certain staleness in its reporting of the news. Thus it happens that, taking up the paper in an Eliotic mood on Ash Wednesday to survey the Shrove Tuesday fare, I came on a commemoration of the twentieth anniversary of the Peace Corps, and a photograph (dating from 1963) of the Corps in action. In the picture a teacher (young, white, earnest, bespectacled, short-trimmed) is seen receiving from a class of young Ghanaians the answers which he will have painstakingly taught them. Obviously someone doing a good day's work, throwing back the frontiers of ignorance.

Fortuitously, the old photograph makes a good starting-point for a cool look at Dave Godfrey's novel, *The New Ancestors*, which won the Governor General's Award when it appeared in 1970. One of the main characters in the book, Michael Burdener, is a teacher, and the classroom and sportsfield scenes are among the most acutely observed in the book. Take, for example, the stilted non-language of one ambassador at the school speech-day:

We have, we are, a very sport thoughtful people, and knowing of the great love which your Redeemer has for the people of China, and sharing in the bonds of brotherly solidarity, the peoples of Yangchow have sent, through me, this equipments which you are seeing and which will be presented in a due time. (60)

(All page references are to the New Press paperback edition: Toronto, 1972.) This is as amusing as it is credible: Ling Huo is by no means the only ambassador to a small country to have problems with the official language. The reactions of the audience (who are quite fluent in English) are predictable:

It is impossible . . . to recapture the precise delicacy with which Ling

Huo garrottes the English language. Participles dangle between his legs, tenses roam from Algeria to Burundi searching for agreement, vowels slide four stories upward in memory of tonal ancestors, cartloads of *aaahhs* are dropped between each word and its neighbour. Even the smallboys have caught the mistakes and sit close to scorn.

We am.

We am?

We am Jam-jam. (60-61)

The American ambassador, who is also among the platform party, has to sit through it all in studious, Sphinx-like self-control, and when it is his turn to speak he quotes Senegalese riddles: new tricks to say old thoughts.

The school cricket match, presented near the beginning of the book, is important in many ways. For one thing, it allows the author to indulge in some brittle, Waugh-like irony at the incongruity of European institutions and African setting. For another, it is a reminder that the political and educational life in many third-world countries is an arena in which the Great Powers have been known to play off their ideologies against each other. More importantly for the book as a whole, the cricket game is a symbol of the selection of African experience which the author chooses to describe: he speaks of the organizational muddle everywhere, the European aspirations of a bourgeois élite (with their extraordinary, yet revealing, double-barrelled names, like Abruquah-Jones), the ultimate thwarting of all Western and Eastern plans by the indomitable forces of climate and local genius (in expatriate parlance, WAWA: West Africa Wins Again). The sportsground is a place where the long established cultural influences (symbolised by Father Skelly) can encounter the more recent ones (symbolised by Sergei Doltsky, the Russian biology teacher). The sportsground, finally, is a place where First Samuels—the Party hack, the fix-everything political agent, the master of the rent-a-crowd—can deploy his well organised spontaneous demonstrators, and so reassert the power of the Redeemer. With all this weight of symbolism, it is small wonder that Burdener calls his only son Cricket—the firstborn of his union with his African wife, Ama. The later death of the child in the Sahara is a symbol of the utter failure of his father's hopes, the shattering of his illusions, the source of a bitterness which turns all his lust to ashes.

The land of *The New Ancestors* is called the 'Lost Coast', but this will deceive few readers. The country described is transparently Ghana, the Ghana of the mid 60's, the Ghana of Nkrumah. It is tempting for anyone familiar with Ghanaian history and geography to

approach the book as a *roman à clés*. Thus 'Silla', the town where most of the action is set, is Cape Coast; 'Dierra' is Takoradi; 'Agada' is Accra; etc. (the map of 'Lost Coast' makes most of this clear). Likewise—to mention only a couple—'Alegba' is Dr. J.B. Danquah (who died, in the Redeemer's custody, in 1965); and 'Kruman' is Dr. Kwame Nkrumah. (This last involves a pun on Kru-man—a member of the tribal group based in Liberia, who spread all along the coast of West Africa in the fishing and cargo-handling industries: Nkrumah himself was an Nzima, from the West of Ghana, from a small tribe which has often been despised by the more central, and important, Fantes, Asantes, and Gas.) Other names, such as 'Hasley-Cayford' and 'Pobee-Biney', are contrived to suggest families which are still of note in Ghana. In fact, there is so much of this that I cannot feel that it was not Godfrey's intention to write a *roman à clés*. Although many references explain themselves, much in the book will remain baffling to the reader unfamiliar with Ghana. (Kotoko and Dwarfs, for example, are football teams: 204.) Local colour is guaranteed by this technique, but it is rather irritating: why not name names directly, and have done with the ubiquitous coyness?

The tale Godfrey tells is set in the last years of the Nkrumah régime, which, on 24 February 1966, was overthrown and replaced by a military government. The political picture is one of decay: tyranny has replaced idealism, thuggery politics, and perversion natural instincts. This is the period when, after the first attempted assassination at Kulugungu in 1962, Nkrumah retreated more and more from contact with the public, to become almost a recluse in his well-guarded hermitage. In a remarkable passage in the middle of the book, the reader is introduced to Kruman's sumptuous private apartments in Flagstaff House ('Black Buckingham' in the *argot* of the British Council men), where fantasies of Ghanaian history are enacted before the Redeemer's eyes by voluptuous damsels. (183-185) Righteous revulsion at the evils of the slave trade gives way in this passage to a melancholy lesbian debauch. To what extent this corresponds with the historical facts of Nkrumah's rule is for the professional historian to say: the scene, however, is not incompatible with contemporary rumour, and with recollection current even today. Within the novel as a whole, the sexual encounters indicate, on Kruman's part, a loss of political vision, and, on Burdener's part, the loss of faith in the power of education to effect social change:

"I know how you have been taught," he said. "You have been taught to seek answers. Bloody, foolish, imperialistic, mine-warping rot." (154-155)

These are the first words Burdener's wife, Ama, (later to become Kruman's 'dirty woman') hears from him at the Workmen's University College (the present University of Cape Coast), and they show that Burdener is a teacher with a difference:

Steal from obruni, [the white man] he would shout . . . "For generations he has been *stealing* your lumber and your cocoa and your gold and your bodies. Steal from him now; steal all that is left to him: his knowledge, his magic, his books. You are only learning; you ought to be stealing. Because the Redeemer is right; you *do* have to catch up one hundred years in only ten". (156)

With views such as these, Burdener can hardly be said not to have merited the following deprecating—if rather lofty—comment from the British Council man in Silla: "Our Mr. Burdener has been playing the ignoble Englishman again." (16)

The main part of the book consists of the two sections: 'A Child of Delicacy' (i.e., Ama, Burdener's wife); and 'Freedom People's Party' (i.e., Nkrumah's Convention Peoples' Party). This part of the novel relates how Burdener develops from being an idealistically-minded teacher with advanced views, to throwing his lot in with a pair of shady characters who are associated in different ways with the obnoxious régime. One of these is Gamaliel Kofi Harding (the name an anglicisation of the Ghanaian name, Kwarteng), who, though born in Ghana, was brought up in America, became a professional musician, returned to Ghana to help the cause of the Redeemer, became the owner of a beer-bar, graduated to the position of government toady, wrote hysterical articles in the gutter style of the Party press, and was finally murdered by the redoubtable market 'mammies' who, then as now, control the Makola market in Accra. This murder, one climax of the narrative, is partly what prompts Burdener's deportation in the first pages, for the book begins *in medias res*. Burdener's second associate is one First Samuels, or FS, who, from being a nobody in Silla society, jumps on the Nkrumahist bandwagon while it is rolling swiftly, reaches a point where he can pay off petty scores against his enemy, Awotchwi, becomes disillusioned with the activities of the 'verandah boys' (as Nkrumah's bully-boys were called), and joins with dissident students against the Redeemer and all his works—such as the Kruba (i.e., Volta) Dam, which, though trumpeted as a grand gesture of socialist redemption, is felt to be a sellout to international capitalism. It is the metal-clad fist of FS which gives the *coup de grâce* to Harding in the market orgy.

From this brief summary, the reader will perhaps gather that Godfrey has attempted to blend the fragmentary insights of an impressionistic technique with a story of political skulduggery. It is the impressionism which makes the stronger impact, however, and anyone reading *The New Ancestors* for the story might be tempted to hang himself—as Dr. Johnson said of *Clarissa*. The sketch just given is an attempt to shed some light on a highly complex narrative presentation, which, to my knowledge, has left not a few readers perplexed. Such, doubtless, is the curse of modernism.

Undeniably, however, some of Godfrey's vignettes are brilliantly successful. One might mention the perverse revolutionary catechism by Harding and Burdener of the former's son, whose scarred back is made the scapegoat of his father's frustrations and his uncle's (Burdener's) indoctrinations. (104) Or again, the pain felt by Ama Awotchwi (Burdener's wife) at the degradation of her once prosperous father before the *arriviste* First Samuels. (127) (Readers who do not know Cape Coast should realise that in that town the traditional hobby has been, and still largely is, anglophilia. There is a network of interconnected families, who have adopted British (often Scottish) surnames, joined Scottish-based Masonic lodges, and belong to the Presbyterian, Anglican, or Methodist churches. These are the 'old families', for whom Nkrumah's grandiose schemes of African Unity and compulsory national socialism—'Democratic Centralism'—could spell only ruin.) Best of all, perhaps, is the scene where Kruman's bulldozer, heralded by the electrically magnified propaganda from the Truth Van (Orwell would love that touch!), destroys an Ewe village in the interests (officially) of Unity, but (in fact) of naked tribalism. (199) This is the scene in which the student leader is almost burned to death—a horrific, but quite plausible, portrayal of political brutality, and it leads to the scales falling from the eyes of First Samuels. Many other examples could be given: indeed, the author's ability to dramatize particular scenes is the best feature of the book.

On the negative side there are several things to be mentioned. As far as the narrative technique is concerned, I feel that the impressions fail, too frequently, to be integrated into the whole structure. The mosaic, almost *pointilliste*, technique seems sometimes to be gratuitous, rather than functional. One example is the framing by Burdener and First Samuels of the green Peace Corps man, Ricky Goldman. Ricky is flash-photographed in bed with a cooperative whore, and will be blackmailed later, one supposes. (55) But when?—the novel makes no use of the incident. Clearly this is an unnecessary

intrusion from the mode of the spy-thriller (even though it accords with the general themes of disillusionment and revenge on *obruti*). One might say similar things about the whole of the fifth section, which is set in the Sahara, and is mainly concerned with the sad fate of Rusk, the CIA agent who appears briefly but ominously on an earlier page. One suspects that Godfrey has thrown in eighty pages dealing with Mali in a desire not to waste good notes: there was scarcely any American or Canadian volunteer worth his salt who did not make the journey from Ghana to Mopti. And on another tack, what is the ultimate success of the capricious shifts of focus from one character to another? Burdener, Ama, Harding, First Samuels—they appear and disappear with insufficient preparation or justification. This is the obvious consequence of sacrificing character and action on the altar of theme.

It is not so often that an author is bold enough to portray main characters who belong to different races. Whether Godfrey's account of Africans as Africans is quite convincing I leave to African critics to determine. But he has certainly tried hard: he has gone far beyond the discreet reticences of Conrad and Greene—to name two of the authors most admired in the critical orthodoxy of modern African literature departments—and his perspective is far removed from the external world of Cary or Waugh. But I certainly feel entitled to criticize his portrayal of the main character, Burdener. Should one wish an explanation of the genesis of Burdener's attitudes, one must look for it in a couple of short scenes at the Norfolk sanatorium where Burdener's mad father is interned, and also in a couple of recollections of the time when, as a young child, he leaves the good nuns who have been looking after him, for a mysterious meeting with a powerful father-figure in Fortnum and Mason's Tea Room. (Where else?) The links between father-obsession and direct political action should be more securely fastened. Moreover, the pages in the final section dealing with the hero's earlier experiences in Egypt tell us little about him, and point to nothing so much as a desire to suck as much novelistic juice as possible from the oranges of old diaries. The impressionistic technique is a dangerous one: it will always allow the reader to convince himself—the question is, will it convince others? Godfrey's hero has gazed rather too long into his pool of Narcissus.

Burdener is shown to us between his Egypt phase and his Hanoi one, with a brief stopover in Scotland. This should remind us that some essential background dimensions to the novel are those of Black Power in the States (the Stokely Carmichael period), student agitation

in North America and Europe, rebellion in Rhodesia, and war in Vietnam. The profound sense of *déception* which pervades the entire book has to be understood in this variegated historical context. In the mid-sixties, and later, students from North America went over to Ghana out of mixed motives of idealism, curiosity, and desire for easily available hash. Black students had the additional motive of wanting to escape from the oppressive white world of L.B. Johnson, to the black freedom of Nkrumah's Ghana. It is instructive to recall the account by Leslie Alexander Lacy of the visit to the University of Ghana in 1964 by Malcolm X (who was murdered in the following year). This account was printed in *Black Fire*, edited by Leroi Jones and Larry Neal in 1968. If we pass over a mention of student intolerance at the beginning of Lacy's essay (when a Ghanaian academic, critical of Black Power ideas, is unceremoniously ejected from the Great Hall), we come to this picture of the surging, irrational empathy linking Malcolm X and his student audience:

And what a proud father he could be! Unlike his children of African descent in America, these children would grow up, nay, develop in a free society. They would be black and beautiful; most would be brave and all would be free. (21)

The irony, of course, as Lacy emphasises, is that Nkrumah—author of *I speak of freedom* (1962), *Africa Must Unite* (1963), and *Consciencism* (1964), etc.—emerges, in the treatment of his own people, as a poor defender of the faith of African Unity and Freedom which he continued to promulgate on the international front. Yet it was to Nkrumah's Accra that men like Gamaliel Kofi Harding flocked, as to a new Mecca. Disillusionment, or identification with the squalid ochlocracy, or both, were the natural consequences. *The New Ancestors* shows how the beauty went out of Black Power—at least, when that power was wielded by the Convention Peoples' Party. The author, who has the temerity to describe himself in the final 'Note on the Missing Glossary' as "somewhat of an adopted Ghanaian nationalist" (who has adopted whom?) must presumably have shared in the all-pervasive sense of betrayal, experienced by both black and white visitors to Nkrumah's Ghana. This is made into the central psychological dilemma both for Burdener (white, from the U.K.) and for Harding (black, from the U.S.A.), though their responses diverge more and more as the novel develops. In reality, despite the impressive array of facts concerning Ghanaian history and traditions, and the constant quotation of proverbs in the original languages, the

main themes of the book—concerned with the undergoing of *rites de passage*—are by no means unfamiliar to North American and European readers: overcoming a father-fixation; receiving sexual initiation; discarding the ballast of youthful illusions. The further South Huck Finn and Jim drift down the Mississippi, the further they move from the world of childish adventure towards that of dangerous adulthood. For Burdener, the equivalent journey is from the fairly harmless invectives of an ivory-tower classroom to the *demi-monde* of West African political intrigue, with its thugs, whores, crooked traders, and the rest.

Why return to *The New Ancestors* at this moment? Well, history has a knack of sometimes dealing out the same cards twice. Many of the characters in *The New Ancestors* speak of the imminence of a *coup*, and speculate on the likely leaders. Dave Godfrey, publishing his novel after the downfall of Nkrumah, is able to include some winners in the political guessing games. However, there is an uncanny resemblance between the Ghana of the last years of Nkrumah and the Ghana of the last years of Col. (later Gen.) Acheampong. Several of Godfrey's disguised characters were to reappear in the late seventies. One of the most memorable scenes in *The New Ancestors* is played on the steps of the cathedral at Cape Coast, where Burdener and First Samuels try and fail to break up a religious procession (led by Bishop Lamaire), which is making a powerful protest against the blasphemy of Nkrumahist pretensions to godhood. Burdener, in fact, is beaten up by former altar-boys, who are vigorously following the example of St. Peter. In a more recent chapter of Ghanaian history, the churches—especially the Catholic church—played a prominent role in the denunciation of Acheampong's similarly blasphemous political interpretation of the Trinity (to be composed of army, workers, and students: needless to say, the members of this unholy trinity could scarcely have equal powers). and in leading a campaign to repudiate the 'Union Government' referendum of 1978—a referendum widely regarded as a sham before, during, and after the time at which it was held. Such parallels between the mid 60's and the late 70's extend the relevance of the book: the keys to this *roman à clés* unlock more than one door.

The New Ancestors is in the tradition of European novels of disillusionment set in exotic lands: influences from Conrad, Greene, and Lowry are not hard to discern. But the techniques of the *nouveau roman* give the book a modern feel: the clarity of linear narration has been passed through the prisms of the main characters' conscious and

unconscious minds, and emerges in the broken lights (in Tennysonian phrase) of fleeting glimpses, portentous adumbrations, dim memories. Godfrey has written a difficult and challenging book, which, though not free of faults, is a commendable attempt to come to personal terms with a tragic expense of spirit in a waste of shame. (It cannot, however, by any means be considered an adequate and balanced assessment of the historical importance of Nkrumah—a controversial subject, on which the passage of time may one day allow general agreement.) The book is just what “those cautious little Canadians” (17) would be bound to love: to win the Governor General’s Award is not nothing. Above all else, *The New Ancestors* sounds the deathknell of the optimism of the Kennedy era. The hero is someone who has asked—a trifle impertinently, perhaps—what he can do for someone else’s country, and the ironic consequence of his labours is an ignominious deportation. At the heart of this book is an existential *angst* which allows one to view the main character as the Kurtz of our time. What man, after all, can choose new ancestors for himself, and what will be the likely fate of one who tries to do so?