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Writing the Postcolonial Animal : Patrice Nganang's *Temps de chien*

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How can one go beyond the horizon of expectations constructed by big Western publishing companies by means of efficient marketing strategies, beyond this new exoticism made of successful themes: hardly democratic one-party systems, Fathers of the Nation one cannot get rid of, tribal wars and the child soldiers they create? This is the question postcolonial writers now have to face. Cameroonian Patrice Nganang provides an answer, at least as far as form is concerned, by introducing an animal character in his novel *Temps de chien*. Furthermore, the dog is the autodiegetic narrator who begins the story: “Je suis un chien,” he says at the outset. Having a dog speak in a kind of canine autobiography is not new—Miguel de Cervantes (*Novela del coloquio de los perros*, 1613) and E. T. A. Hoffmann (*Die neusten Schicksale des Hundes Berganza*, 1814) did it before—but Patrice Nganang couples it with geographical transplantation: the story takes place in Yaoundé, Cameroon, which is a way of decentering the point of view onto another continent. Moreover, endowing animals with the power of speech has been fairly common since Aesop and in every oral tradition, especially in tales, but this practice is part of a strategy typical of postcolonial literature, which aims at reclaiming an oral tradition that had been muzzled by colonisation for a long time, as well as at appropriating Western literary genres.

Some of the hallmarks of postcolonial studies are to be found in the questioning about language, the construction of various discourses, and particularly in the idea that language does not merely represent the world, but that it constitutes it. In the text under study, the animal is precisely endowed with the sovereignty of a speaking subject and expresses himself just like men, or, at least, shows a capacity for rational thought which finds its expression in human language. Moreover, postcolonial studies condemn the hierarchical organisation of subjects and knowledge which is reflected in a system of binary oppositions, coloniser/colonised, civilised/primitive, North/South, to which the novel under study adds

another, quite unexpected in this context, human/animal.

Introducing an animal instead of a human being could pose ethical problems, as Philip Armstrong suggests,¹ by possibly minimising and trivialising the sufferings caused by slavery and colonisation. However, not only are postcolonial conflicts not as virulent as they used to be, but one also has to admit that the animal world has many more links with the human sphere—the two are thus more interconnected—in African, Aboriginal, or Amerindian cultures which do not separate man from his natural environment. In the history of Western thought, on the contrary, civilisation has been invariably built around rejection and repression of the wild and of animality, the culminating point of this process being reached with the rationalism of the Enlightenment and its humanistic essentialism, a constant target of postcolonial theorists.

Representing an animal as a subject endowed with the power of speech is a way of freeing oneself from certain paradoxes of a postcolonial discourse which often tends to appropriate the victims' muzzled speech (“captation de la parole muette des victimes,” Ertel) or to fetishize it, and of offering thereby another point of view, a “third space of enunciation,” in which meaning and representation are renegotiated, as Homi Bhabha puts it (53-56). As postcolonial studies tend to join environmental approaches and “animal studies,” this article aims at showing to what extent animal autobiography partakes of a philosophical and political projects which aspires to un-think Eurocentrism and to deconstruct logocentrism in the context of a literature which renews the pastoral and the fable (Huggan & Tiffin, 81-120).

Enunciative Scenography

Well-known are Dominique Maingueneau's works on enunciative scenography which have helped to characterise postcolonial writings that are intent on specifying where they speak from, i.e. in relation to colonial practices and an often hybrid sociocultural settlement (“topography” and “chronography” according to Maingueneau).

The animal-narrator is, as we have said, autodiegetic—*Je* is an animal—and tells his story in the first person through an autobiographical novel. Mboudjak, the dog, does not move about in a rural world fraught with traditions which leave little room for individual

¹ Philip Armstrong, “The Postcolonial Animal”, <www.animalsandsociety.org/assets/library/481_s10413.pdf> accessed July 19, 2010. He refers, among others, to M. Spiegel's *The Dreaded Comparison: Human and Animal Slavery*, New York, Mirror Books, 1996.

consciousness, but in a changing urban environment which nonetheless involves other constraints. Indeed, Mboudjak lives at ground level, with his nose on the pavement: “J’observe le monde par le bas. Ainsi, je saisis les hommes au moment même de leur séparation de la boue” (Nganang 2001, 44²). This is how he witnesses the spectacle of life, from hidden places such as his owner’s “empty doughnut stall” (“l’étalage de beignets vide,” TC 170). He is not isolated from the world, but in touch with it thanks to pub stories,³ and directly confronted to its most prosaic and sordid manifestations, especially those from the bustle of African streets.

The narrator-protagonist of *Temps de chien* has similarities to the picaresque hero revived by Günter Grass with Oskar in *Die Blechtrommel* (1960), and the “gaze from below” of someone who occupies a lower rung of the social ladder. But what is a metaphor in the picaresque novel becomes a very concrete figure in the case of the dwarf Oskar, who lives literally below the others and whose gaze can only come from below—Grass speaks of “toad’s perspective”—while being at the centre of the action. Dwarfism becomes equivalent to a camouflage outfit, so that Oskar can hear all the lies, see all the mean acts in the world, and look without mercy behind the masks and behind the scenes. This position and this low-angle gaze are shared by the dog Mboudjak, whose animality deprives him of men’s attention, so that they open up unreservedly, forgetting his existence. In the position of *voyeur*, the dog relates what constitutes the life of the poor quarter (“sous-quartier”), “toutes ces histoires qui viennent tous les jours en mille rumeurs mourir devant le comptoir” (TC 73). The ideal place for rumour is the market, which Mboudjak walks around with his nose on the ground, weaving his way through the stalls, a real “roundabout of life,” a “pulsating hub” of the poor quarter (TC 220). A voice from the ground, or even from the underground, Mboudjak is a dog-philosopher, a true cynic like the picaro. Yet, the abjectness of the world he discovers through exploration and through the consumption of refuse sometimes nauseates him—“Je fouillais jusqu’aux profondeurs de ma propre nausée” (TC 83)—first physically, then on an existential, almost Sartrean level. When he leads a vagabond life, in particular in company with “the spirit of the bins” (“l’esprit des poubelles,” TC 83), Mboudjak ceases to be “a dog-thinker,” changes his diet out of necessity—he becomes “herbivorous and even omnivorous” (TC 210)—and his adventures change into a saga of hunger—a truly animal hunger. Sometimes embodying a

² All subsequent references to *Temps de chien* will be abbreviated: TC and the page number.

³ The novel *Verre cassé* by Alain Mabankou also relies on this type of stories. See also the English-speaking tradition with Dambudzo Marechera or Chenjerai Hove.

“trickster” driven by survival instinct, he tries to steal some meat and ends up in a butcher's bloodstained basement before running away from the threat of a beating (TC 210-212). As is often the case in the picaresque genre, laughter contributes to desacralising all forms of authority.

As well as being the narrator, the animal is a figure of the writer expressing a linguistic and literary consciousness. Therefore, one can speak like J. Derrida of “l'animal autobiographique,” (Mallet) as a form of “écriture de soi du vivant,” (Derrida 72), while remaining aware that the ability to write one's life story is peculiar to man.

Patrice Nganang's novel focuses on the figure of the writer, first through a *mise en abyme* reminiscent of *Les Faux-monnayeurs* by Gide, since there is a character “dressed in black-black” nicknamed “Corbeau” who takes notes in a red notebook with the aim of writing a novel which is precisely entitled *Temps de chien* (TC 120-122).⁴ Secondly, the hero Mboudjak himself appears as a figure of the writer, carrying a certain aesthetic and looking for the pith and marrow of things. Indeed, he seeks “dans la viande du monde la dureté de l'os, la partie la plus sûre du festin de la vie,” which leads him to proclaim Realism and to reject the imaginary constructions and the continuous bombastic chatter of the old man named Panthère (TC 110). Furthermore, the novel demonstrates the power of rumour, simultaneously praising and denouncing the way it works, both in its creative fecundity (“un cocktail explosif de mots,” “sa bouche paroleuse,” TC 96-97) and its subversive dimension which generates an unbridled imagination: “le pouvoir de la parole folle des rues, le pouvoir régicide de la rumeur” (TC 116).⁵ Following a mythicizing process, rumour ends up creating a reality out of the stories it spreads from the “sous-quartiers” which constitute “man's forge of invention” (“la forge inventive de l'homme,” TC 121).

Telling a story through an animal narrator is a way of rethinking the postcolonial subject outside the bounds of European reason, of shattering Western analytical structures, but it is also a way of changing fundamental questions, such as the construction of individual and collective identities, into a reflection on humanity as being different from both animality and inhumanity (Paravy 225-237). *Temps de chien* examines the human species through a fundamental question: “Où est l'homme ?” (TC 35, 150, etc.), which invariably faces the

⁴ The title appears again on p. 240: “Il parlait de temps de chien, utilisant pour son compte le titre de l'homme en noir-noir.”

⁵ The power of rumour is illustrated in the story of the man who steals black men's *bangalas* (genitals) in order to sell them to white men who suffer from impotence (TC 117).

acknowledgement of generalised inhumanity in a world in which “l’homme n’est pas le frère de l’homme” (TC 146). Indeed, Mboudjak has himself survived human barbarity: he escaped euthanasia by making the vet laugh and only heaven-sent help prevented his dying after being hanged on a tree by his son's owner. Reflection on humanity is the stated goal of the dog Mboudjak who presents himself as a “chercheur en sciences humaines” (TC 85): “J’étudiais la longueur et la largeur de l’humain” (TC 49). On this account, one can refer to the concept of “humanimity” put forward by M. Surya in connection with the protagonist of Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, who “never ceases to be human although his condition is that of an animal” (“ne cess[e] jamais d’être humain quoique [son] état fût celui des bêtes,” Surya 83-84), a humanity laid bare and deprived of any idealisation by the animal discourse in our text.

A Political Fable

Postcolonial studies concern themselves with the oppressed's initiative and ability to act (their agency), and portraying an animal is an original and unconventional way of representing the subaltern described at length by G. Spivak, of giving a clear voice to beings who do not have one. Barring his role as protagonist of the novel, the dog could be regarded as a figure of Otherness essentialised in a state of inferiority. In addition to often denouncing man's hegemony as well as expressing a strong will to free himself from it, his words demonstrate his ability to represent himself as a popular consciousness. He could also appertain to subaltern studies, which aim at calling attention to “the small voice of history” (Gopa 141). Resorting to an animal-narrator is a way, according to H. Bhaba, of situating “the postcolonial subject within the play of the subaltern instance of writing,” and of disjoining it from European models. That is why the novel can be construed as a metaphor of the postcolonial situation, making it possible to readdress the stakes of this situation in a playful tone through a philosophical as well as political fable.

The animal discourse conveys a certain amount of common criticism towards European colonies. Thus, on behalf of all animals, Mboudjak adopts and voices the views of postcolonial theorists who condemns the coloniser's discursive, metaphoric and epistemological authority by denouncing “the arrogance men show when they name the world, when they allow some space around them, or when they order them to be quiet” (“l’arrogance qu’ont les hommes de nommer le monde, de donner une place autour d’eux et de leur intimer l’ordre de se taire,” TC 12). The Europeans' wish to reconfigure the colonised world in some god-like manner is

reflected through men's behaviour towards animals. The criticism voiced by Mboudjak is both akin to Said's theories, which were inspired by Foucault and his dyad knowledge/power, and which condemn the epistemological violence exerted by Europeans in the name of their science, but also to E. Boehmer's analyses (103-104), which mention "the cartographic and metaphoric authority of the colonizer." Therefore, the dog from the shanty towns of Yaoundé introduced by Patrice Nganang seems to be the historical antithesis of the ferocious dog of the plantation represented by Patrick Chamoiseau, a mastiff symbolical of oppressive colonisation, but which one can paradoxically construe as the *alter ego* of the runaway slave he hunts down, for he is a victim of the same historical disaster (Desblache 267-279).

It is an Africa turned into a huge dump which Patrick Nganang reveals by depicting the utter destitution of the poorer quarters of Yaoundé, especially the Madagascar quarter, in a type of novel he calls "a novel of garbage" ("roman des détritius," Nganang 2007, 259). Significantly, politics, which is symbolised by the house of the Party, adjoins the biggest dump in Madagascar. During his period of wandering, Mboudjak spends his time in dumps and likes wallowing in waste in order to free himself from the constraints of domestication: "Je me couchais carrément dans les senteurs, dans l'infinie chanson des mouches" (TC 150). In addition to becoming a sign of the world disorder as well as of a carnivalesque reversal of values, the proliferating dump of Madagascar can also be interpreted as indicating a misunderstood—economical and urbanistic—development, the fruit of an unsuitable development and/or of Western colonialism which does not loosen its grip (Huggan & Tiffin 27 sq).

The African situation is explosive, and the novel, which was inspired by events that shook Cameroon in the 1990s (Nzessé), represents the ongoing violence in postcolonial societies. During a demonstration in the Madagascar quarter, Mboudjak, who presents himself as an incompetent narrator at this point, repeats words that he is hearing and whose meaning he claims he does not understand, such as "mandat d'arrêt," "état de droit," and "dictature" (TC 140). This alleged failure to understand is all the more significant as the protest was caused by a police superintendent's arbitrary decision concerning the "man in black-black," the writer accused of being a regime opponent. However, the narrator-dog is far from being as detached as the Voltairian observers who look at the world from Sirius; his barking is his cry of rebellion against injustice. The tautological sentence "Le Cameroun, c'est le Cameroun," which is the unquestionable leitmotiv of the novel, eventually sums up all the misfortunes

pouring down on the country. The state of insurrection and collective madness leads to murderous violence. Relatively speaking, “as if driven by a maniac force” (“comme poussé par une force maniaque,” TC 274), Mboudjak kills a hen while the superintendent, who “also seemed seized with madness, or panic-stricken” (“[qui] semblait lui aussi saisi de folie ou alors frappé de panique,” TC 282), fires at Takou, a boy he wounds fatally. Canineness, so to speak, then becomes an almost inescapable referent, for instance in the speech of the revolted man, who has “a face like a bulldog” (TC 235). His virulent diatribe against a dictatorial figure, President Biya (“Biya must go!” TC 295), a kleptomaniac state, and politicians who steal Cameroon's riches and then seek false excuses for the general destitution—the crisis, colonisation, white men—reaches its climax with words that are unflattering and unfair to Mboudjak: “Des chiens, ils sont tous des chiens, rien que des chiens” (TC 253).

The end of the novel seems to offer a utopian, almost messianic resolution which culminates in a big demonstration denouncing the child's murder, during which an animal chorus, including the “small leaps of hens,” the “meowing of cats,” the “nodding of geckos,” and, of course, the “barking of dogs” (TC 286), adds to the human claims. *In fine*, despite repression, man and dog rise in unison, determined to walk in a very Brechtian “jungle of cities” and to claim their freedom from the “mad lion” who runs the country: “Unis nous étions l'homme et moi, dans la précipitation saccadée du langage nôtre: dans nos aboiements” (TC 296). Revolt is expressed through the general, incessant barking of the demonstrators who are seized by mythical anger, which would tend to demonstrate the oppressed's collective ability to act and to bring about some change, their agency as critics would say, in an unusual way—general animalisation instead of anthropomorphism. However, focusing on animals seems above all to be a fictional means to temporarily suspend the ongoing tragic process in African history, whose most visible sign is state violence, within the imaginary republic that the novel constitutes.

Conclusion

The novel *Temps de chien* renews the animal fable by resorting to an exotic setting, but also through its similarity to the picaresque novel, here radicalised into a shanty-town novel. Like the fable, this text embraces ethics which are expressed through the issues related to the postcolonial situation, in particular the way power works. Patrice Nganang also underlines the necessity to break with old idols as his mischievous hint at Africanist intellectuals who get

indignant about Mboudjak, “pauvre chien aliéné de sa canitude” (TC 103), shows. This is obviously a dig at *négritude*, which Wole Soyinka had derided years earlier by remarking that a tiger does not claim its tigrity but that it shows its claws and pounces on its prey.

One could see in this text a kind of ecocriticism or, more precisely, zoocriticism, insofar as the denunciation of eurocentrism changes easily into a questioning of anthropocentrism and the damage it has done. Nevertheless, even though one can notice ecological themes, in particular through the correlation between the shanty town of Yaoundé and heavy pollution, even though Mboudjak's words sometimes sound like a remonstrance against the ill-treatment of animals, environmental concerns do not seem to be the main issue of the novel under study—no ecological sentimentalism finds its expression in it—nor is the novel about defending animals or protesting against Western ideologies of development.

Although postcolonialism has often expressed its disagreement with humanism owing to the latter's alleged universalism which establishes *de facto* selections and hierarchies between cultures, races, genders, and species, the novels under study do not preclude humanism—which is paradoxically supported by the animal discourse—insofar as it abandons certain ideological prejudices and its hierarchical presumptions by including other living species, especially animals, which are promoted to the dignity of literary characters.

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