

# *The African Short Story Written in English: A Survey*

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LITERARY CRITICS SEEM SO FAR to have paid little attention to the African short story, and in particular to the African short story written in English.<sup>1</sup> Despite the increasing importance of the production, they still relegate it to a very secondary position in the field of fiction. And critics are even more encouraged in their dismissive attitude by the fact that, in Africa, the genre tends to appear mostly in popular magazines and Sunday papers as well as to serve as a means of apprenticeship in creative writing for aspiring writers,<sup>2</sup> earning in consequence the rather disparaging label of beginner's work. But above all, as do their Western counterparts, critics of African literature seem to remain wary of a genre which paradoxically meets the favour of both the reading public and the connoisseurs, and which at the same time makes such high demands on the writer's craft while retaining such a dubious literary status.

Be it tales or legends, man has always loved to tell stories and it can be said with Somerset Maugham that, in a way, "the short story was created in the night of time."<sup>3</sup> However, it is only in the nineteenth century that the short story became a specific feature of literary production and as such attracted Edgar Allan Poe's critical attention. In his review of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales*,<sup>4</sup> Poe sought to define for the first time what he calls "the short prose narrative" — or "prose tale" — and to enunciate the rules governing its composition. For Poe, a tale must be short enough to be read "at one sitting" so that "during the hour of perusal the soul of the reader is at the writer's control." It must also tend to bring out "a certain an unique or single . . . preconceived effect," and therefore, says Poe, "in the whole composition

(of the tale) there should be no word written of which the tendency, direct or indirect is not to the one pre-established design." Like an arrow, the short story must fly straight to the very centre of the target. It is "something" says Eudora Welty, "that begins and carries through and ends all in the same curve."<sup>5</sup>

Those rules which for some writers still constitute "a statement of fundamental principles"<sup>6</sup> have been challenged by others who, on the contrary, advocate the need "to break the picture free from the frame"<sup>7</sup> in which Poe had wanted to enclose the short story. For them, a short story can only gain in vividness from "a looseness of structure,"<sup>8</sup> from an "unmitigated shapelessness of . . . narrative."<sup>9</sup> To the restriction of the convergence of effects, they oppose the freedom of the "open form."

However, the opposition between these two main trends must be seen as merely superficial. What finally matters in the short story, is the *accord* between form and substance. Beyond points of content, technique, style, and composition, the only point really worth-examining, as Truman Capote says, is "whether or not a writer has divined the natural shape of his story,"<sup>10</sup> whether or not his story is "final" as "an orange is final"; or, as William Saroyan will have it, as "an egg is whole, and is an egg no less because it is small or large, ostrich or robin, white or spotted."<sup>11</sup> But to achieve such a perfect blend, short story writers must reach a mastery of which unfortunately very few of them are capable.

Considering the role that society assigns to literature in Africa, would it be entirely fair to envisage the African short story only from the point of view of literary mastery? To do so would indeed be too much of a one-sided assessment. No doubt the African short story can be — and often is — in Poe's words, "the fairest field for the exercise of the loftiest talent"<sup>12</sup> as the works of Alex La Guma, Taban Lo Liyong, or Ama Ata Aidoo amply prove. But the kind of literary challenge that the short story can provide to the African writer is not uppermost in his mind. If not different, his aim is certainly wider. It is not only to produce "a bird song,"<sup>13</sup> no matter how beautiful it is, but what Ulli Beier calls "snapshots, revealing a terrible moment of truth";<sup>14</sup> it is not only to show reality as it is, but to give his own vision of it. For the African writer, the short story is certainly a *form*; but much more, it

is "a thoroughly efficient tool for the presentation of modern life"<sup>15</sup> — or shall we say, for the social statement on modern life which the African is, first and foremost, seeking to make.

The needs, aspirations and anxieties of the present-day world loom very large upon the African short story, and Beier is right to point out that "by far the greatest number of African (short story) writers are interested in depicting present-day situations and problems. The past and traditions hold little interest to them."<sup>16</sup> Indeed, there is hardly any story in which the past is the subject matter of the narrative; as for those which centre only on traditional values, "And the Rain Came Down" of Ngugi Wa Thiong'o for instance,<sup>17</sup> they also remain exceptional. Elsewhere, be it in Cyprian Ekwensi, Kwabena Annan, Barbara Kimenyi, Charles Mungoshi, or Abioseh Nicol, tradition only becomes important in the narrative insofar as it bears upon contemporary life. And it is worth noting that in the African short story, the old and the new never come to terms with each other; they interlock in a perpetual conflict whose outcome is always doubly negative, both sets of values registering failure.

In "The Ivory Dancer" of Ekwensi, the traditional authority of the village chief turns to arbitrariness and oppression; the talent of the young ivory dancer and of her little group, although nurtured in the village tradition, only serves to provide some "exotic" kind of entertainment to an influential Senator and a rich Hollywood film-maker. Modern values, however, do not fare better; despite all their education (a religious one for that matter!), the chief's junior wife and her schoolboy lover become cheats and thieves; the young village girl sacrifices the prospect of real happiness of a traditional marriage to the illusion of a love-story not even worthy of a cheap novel. As for the protagonist of Charles Mungoshi's "The Coming of the Dry Season," the news of his mother's imminent death in the village is not enough to draw him away from the pleasures of the weekend in town. Unfortunately, he is so much haunted by his failure to fulfil his filial duties that he does not find any solace in sex and drink. And in the end, the mother's figure which tradition sets as an ultimate value turns to nightmare. Instead of leading him to redemption, guilt and remorse take Mungoshi's hero one step further on the way to com-

plete degradation. Kimenye and Nicol's humorous vein bears mainly on the present-day world; tradition, however, does not remain unscathed. It is not so much to rejoice with a lucky brother, but to taste sweet money, that "hosts of relatives" descend on "The Winner" of Kimenye "from the four corners of the kingdom"; and the formidable cousin Sarah (who is no cousin at all!) does not hesitate to invent a fictitious family relationship with old Pius Ndawula in order to further her marriage plans. In Nicol's "A Truly Married Woman," the white missionaries' naive bursts of religious enthusiasm as well as their readiness to be fooled by an ingenious *mise en scène* are certainly laughable, but so is the double-game — or is it triple? — of the jujuman whose palm can be so easily greased. And if the "European part" of the marriage ceremony between Ajayi and Ayo is meaningless, the strict observance of the traditional rites cannot hide the fact that the "Maiden chaste, beautiful and obedient" who is about to marry is no other than the thirty-year-old mother of three who has lived happily in sin with the bridegroom for the past twelve years!

On the whole, it can be said that in African literature neither the old nor the new order of things offers to the characters a solid point of anchorage. The scope of the novel, however, is wide enough to allow for a gradual evolution towards some kind of emancipation or transcendence from a situation of conflict. In the short story, on the contrary, partly because of its "short pulse or rhythm," the characters are left embroiled in their contradictions. And there is no better illustration of this point than the black sailor of Samuel Kahiga's "The Ambulance" who remains entangled in the same dilemma which he was facing at the very beginning of the story.

In the African short story, characters seem to be continuously repulsed by two negative poles. In order to escape from such an unbearable situation, most of them seek refuge in a new world — that of the town — which they see as a kind of no-man's land, in-between traditional and modern life. But in reality what they find in the town is a world plagued with the very ills and contradictions from which they were in fact trying to escape. The city is ever-present in African literature and especially in the short story.

Is this any wonder considering the rate of urbanization of the African continent in the last few decades? Ezekiel Mphahlele's remark on South African writers can now also be applied to those of nearly every African nation: "they keep digging their feet into an urban culture of their own making."<sup>18</sup>

Nature untouched has become a myth and so has rural life, even in Africa. Be it in "Ding Dong Bell" of Annan, "Certain Winds from the South" of Aidoo or "Something to Eat . . ." of Eric Ng'maryo, the worm is already in the fruit. Either as a distant threat or as a dreaded next-door rival, the town is always present in the villager's life or mind. More, it imposes its needs on the rural economy; it entices away the village youth lured by false hopes of money, pleasure and easy life. And once they have got there, the gates are shut on them; there is no way out. In order to dispel his obsessive guilt, Mungoshi's protagonist flees the city; but it always hovers at the horizon of his aimless walk; and in the end, he does not strike out into the bush, but circles round the city like a punished dog round his master. For those who have always lived there, like the young delinquent in La Guma's "A Walk in the Night," the drunken lout in James Matthews's "The Portable Radio" or the little boy in Samuel Kariara's "The Boy of the Parking," the city is no haven, far from it. It is not only in Glasgow or London but also in Lagos, Nairobi and Johannesburg that "the path of a poor and lonely African youth . . . is precarious, and accessible to agony, humiliation and above all a perpetual crucifixion."<sup>19</sup> Like Saturn of old, the city eats its children; it is what psychoanalysis calls the "bad mother."

Unfortunately, nature does not qualify to be the "good mother" even with those who wish to live or die in her peace, like Kamau in Ngugi's "The Return," for instance. The land is exhausted, "barren like the crocodile's back, bare like the bottom of a monkey"; it only brings out "sickly-looking crops"<sup>20</sup> on which even a handful of people cannot feed. In the African short story, with few exceptions such as "The Tender Crop" of Fwanyanga M. Mulikita, Mother-Earth is not — as she often is in the novel — a life-giving and protective force, the keeper of the past and the tradition. On the contrary, she is unfriendly and ungrateful even with those who love her most. So that, in the end, they have no

other choice but to leave her. Eventually, they will join the anonymous labour-force of the city or worse, the obscure and silent armies of the lumpen-proletariat in those shantytowns which surround threateningly the prestigious "residential areas." "Restless City" is the title of one of Ekwensi's short stories; it could fit nearly every African short story. The town is the privileged environment in which the unending struggle of man with his destiny, the bitter conflict of cultures can be witnessed; it is the nexus from which stem the main themes through which the African short story shapes its own vision of the world.

It is not within the limits of this article to catalogue all the themes to be found in the African short story. Racial hatred ("Resurrection" by Richard Rive), violence ("Blankets" by La Guma), alcoholism ("A Week-End of Carousal" by Maurice Chishimba), political corruption ("The Voter" by Chinua Achebe), war and death ("Death by the Waterfall" by Rasheed Gbadomosi), hunger and misery: those recurrent themes delineate the picture of a bleak and gloomy world whose inhabitants lead meaningless and miserable lives. In his preface to *Modern African Stories*, Charles Larson takes up the classification set out by Mphahlele in *The African Image*. Short stories, according to Larson and Mphahlele, can be divided into three major groupings: "the romantic-escapist story," "the protest story" and "the ironic short story," the last being a sort of "meeting point between protest and acceptance."<sup>21</sup> This thematic typology is far from satisfactory, as themes have a marked tendency to overlap and to proliferate to such an extent that there is no end to possible subdivisions. Ulli Beier's approach, as outlined in his preface to *Black Orpheus*, is more to the point: it draws mainly on the writer's point of view and distinguishes between two types of texts. On the one hand, those in which the writer's role is limited to that of "a reporter of events and situations" and seeks primarily "to mirror the world around objectively"; and on the other hand, those in which the writer sets off "to travel along a lone road" and, through theme or style, endeavours "to go deeper, to unravel the mysteries that lie behind appearances."<sup>22</sup>

It is not the object of this article to propose a further typology. However, it could be argued that a purely textual approach might

yield better results in this direction. In particular, a study of narrative voices would have a triple advantage. It would do away with the confusion inherent in the thematic approach; it would trace the writer's presence within the text itself; and it would structure the story both as regards content and form. Above all, it could also help establish a link between traditional oral literature and the modern short story.

It is not possible to give wholehearted support either to Larson's statement that "the modern short story in Africa belongs to an oral literary tradition centuries old and still very much alive in Africa today"<sup>23</sup> or to Gary Spackey's that "the contact between oral literature and the short story has been — and must remain — minimal."<sup>24</sup> The question would require further probing and at the present stage of our study, all that can be done is to map out its contours. But before doing so, it is essential to make a clear distinction between short story and tale. Otherwise, the obvious relationship between tale and folk (or oral) literature would pass wholesale to the African short story.

The courtly tradition of the *griot* with his heroic tales and legends is hard to trace in the African short story; the only two examples which come to mind are, for content, "New Life in Kyerefaso" of Efua Sutherland, and for style, "The Old Man Of Usumbura & His Misery" of Lo Liyong. It is more tempting to try to establish a link between the form of the oral tale and that of the short story. However, it does not seem that such a link can be found. The narrative of the oral tale spreads in many directions in order not only to capture and retain the audience's attention but also to delay an outcome whose moral terms are always the same. The African short story, on the contrary, follows more or less Poe's rules, "strikes swiftly and drives home a point with economy of language and time."<sup>25</sup> Whatever the African short story borrows from the oral tale is always a matter of content and even that remains little.

If a valid relationship between oral literature and the short story is to be established, it could be between the respective "telling gesture"<sup>26</sup> — that is to say the narrative techniques — of the story-teller" and of the narrator of the short story. Though it still remains to be seen, it is not impossible that in the process it would

be found that both keep the same firm control on their narrative, allude to the same "intertext," share the same "biography"; and it could then be said that both speak with the same African "evocative diction." There is one aspect, however, in which the two genres still stand apart. While the story-teller held — and still holds — an honoured place in traditional society, the short story writer has been given so far little recognition. It might no longer be true that "the African short story writer remains — for the most part — almost unknown";<sup>27</sup> but he is yet to receive the praise of the literary critics.

Critics, like generals, always lag behind, and the reading public, especially in English-speaking Africa, already knows better. Nowadays, the short story is found everywhere, in school and university magazines as well as in Sunday papers. The genre has become part of the African literary scene and its success must be accounted for. As an American critic bluntly put it, people do not write short stories "because they hope to get rich, or even to make a living, from them" — all things that a novel can achieve — they write them "because they must."<sup>28</sup> Is this because as in South Africa, "the political, social climate . . . has been growing viciously difficult for a non-white to write . . . a poem or a novel or a play" that the short story "is often used as a short-cut to prose meaning?" Is this because there is something "unsettled" about African city life which makes the "slice-of-life" kind of short story more appropriate than the integrated and highly organized form of the novel? Or is this simply because the short story takes less time to read and is cheap to print? In any case, in African literary production, the short story has become the most common medium "whereby (writers) and their immediate audience can come to terms with a world of physical and mental violence, of dispossession,"<sup>29</sup> be it that of apartheid or class-struggle. And is it not the ultimate goal of literature to give the writer the means of expressing his own vision of the world, and the reading public of knowing and understanding the reality of its own environment?<sup>30</sup>

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> To avoid cumbersome repetitions, throughout this article the use of "short story" will refer to the genre while "African short story" will imply "written in English."



- <sup>2</sup> See for instance, David Cook, *Origin East Africa: A Makerere Anthology*, devised and edited by David Cook, (London: Heinemann, 1965).
- <sup>3</sup> Somerset Maugham, *Points of View*, (London: Heinemann, 1958), p. 62.
- <sup>4</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, *The Complete Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, Vol. XI, Literary Criticism, Edgar Allan Poe, Vol. IV, Virginia Edition, (1902; rpt. New York: AMS Press Inc., 1965), pp. 104-13.
- <sup>5</sup> Eudora Welty, Interview published in *Topic*, No. 137, International Communication Agency, U.S.A., p. 57.
- <sup>6</sup> Herschel Brickell, "What Happened to the Short Story?", in Eugene Current-Garcia and Walton R. Patrick, *What is the Short Story?*, rev. ed., (Glenview, Illinois: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1974), p. 110.
- <sup>7</sup> Brickell, p. 110.
- <sup>8</sup> Albert Cook, *The Meaning of Fiction*, (Detroit: Wayne State U.P., 1960), p. 174.
- <sup>9</sup> Eudora Welty, "The Reading and Writing of Short Stories," in *What is the Short Story?*, p. 106.
- <sup>10</sup> Truman Capote, Interview published in *Paris Review*, Spring-Summer 1957, and quoted in *What is the Short Story?*, p. 124.
- <sup>11</sup> William Saroyan, "What is a Story?" in *What is the Short Story?*, p. 80.
- <sup>12</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, p. 106.
- <sup>13</sup> Eudora Welty, p. 103.
- <sup>14</sup> Ulli Beier, *Political Spider, An Anthology* edited by Ulli Beier, (London: Heinemann, 1959), p. viii.
- <sup>15</sup> Henry Seidel Canby, "Free Fiction," in *What is the Short Story?*, p. 53.
- <sup>16</sup> Ulli Beier, *Black Orpheus*, (Ibadan: Longman), n.d., p. 7.
- <sup>17</sup> To avoid burdening the text with too many references, a bibliography of the short stories quoted in this article is given at the end.
- <sup>18</sup> Ezekiel Mphahlele, *The African Image*, (London: Faber & Faber, 1962), p. 246.
- <sup>19</sup> Gaston Bart-Williams, "The Bed-Sitter," *Black Orpheus*, p. 36.
- <sup>20</sup> Eric Ng'maryo, "Something to Eat . . .," *Joe Magazine*, (Nairobi, 1974).
- <sup>21</sup> Charles Larson, *Modern African Stories*, (Glasgow: Fontana Collins, 1977), p. 7.
- <sup>22</sup> Ulli Beier, *Black Orpheus*, pp. 7-8.
- <sup>23</sup> Larson, p. 7.
- <sup>24</sup> Gary Spackey, "Notes on the African Short Story." Unpublished M/S.
- <sup>25</sup> Ezekiel Mphahlele, in Larson, p. 9.
- <sup>26</sup> M. M. Liberman and Edward E. Foster, *A Modern Lexicon of Literary Terms*, (Glenview, Illinois: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1968), p. 110.
- <sup>27</sup> Larson, p. 9.
- <sup>28</sup> Brickell, p. 114.
- <sup>29</sup> F. A. Komey and E. Mphahlele, *Modern African Stories*, (London: Faber & Faber, 1964), p. 12.
- <sup>30</sup> We wish to thank Professor J. Moody from the University of Zambia, and Professor D. Cook and Dr. P. D. Tripathi, both from the University of Ilorin, for their most useful suggestions and comments.

## A BIBLIOGRAPHY OF THE AFRICAN SHORT STORY

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Anthologies marked with an asterisk are entirely devoted to the short story genre. Others include also poetry, plays, tales, etc.

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