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# Whack: Two Vignettes on Color and Other Pleasantries

## A Closed Idea

The world of the novel is a prison-house. We think Oe, Dickens, Achebe, Lessing, Morrison or Fielding and we naturally think of the novel as open spaces in which words roam free, burdened only by the writer's imagination. But the novel is really a zoo, a prison-house in which we only pretend that tamed words cavort in the wild, indifferent to exile. The only way a novel can achieve the status of speech is to show that it can stutter, which, of course, is something that can never happen. Perhaps this is why the spoken word is a jungle the novel can never hope to become.

Words as words (and as a stutterer myself, I mean the spoken word), belong to the world of acting, energy. Like good actors, they cross with other words from all other cultures, and, as the fellow said, they live faithfully under imagined circumstances, for the story's sake.

But what do you get when you cross words: a yell? Do they flush and get angry? Can they sue if they feel violated? Take the Japanese term *shibui*. A beautiful word. Maybe even less a word than a way of sensing the world. Compact and comforting sound. Sheer restrained elegance. Which is what *shibui* means, that elusive point where joy rocks our passions in its arm. To say it properly I imagine silk idling on shuddering skin. Or take another term, *sprezzatura*, from the Italian Renaissance, by way of Castiglione. A gift of grace. The jazz trumpeter Miles Davis had plenty of this. He played the trumpet as if he was actually merely playing. The burdened glut of muscle in his face somehow became a part of the beauty of his music. Without apparent effort, he suggested heat without radiating it. The sounds he

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created overcame the ugliness and the distortion caused by the effort, and transformed effort and effect into something radiant.

The closest idea to this that I can think of in the Ghanaian language Twi is the word *bokoo*. This is the gift of grace and elegance. The eloquent pause before the ravishing; what happens as the bee hangs, moved to prayer before the petal. *Bokoo* is in the nature of all desire; it moves by moving us. The Spanish *duende* does not do it (because it is so pretty), but *presteza* comes very close.

The moral of all this is not to be found in the skin in which we work the world, nor in cowrie shells, talk of war, or in the passion of pomaded belles. We reject the skin (except for drums) because it has become a wounded idea: cross white with black and all you get is *whack*, a silly portmanteau word. And it is silly and deadly because it is only skin deep. However, words are not in any danger of death any time soon, but there is clearly a need to establish a new template. Purged of all ambiguity and saved from the clutter of race, the word to take home is the German *gelassenheit*. And that is no black magic. Just whack.

### A Novel Idea

There is a novel I have been talking about writing. Only talking about. When I invited thoughts about it from a friend, he wanted to know what it will be about. I said it is a story predicated on the slave trade in Africa. He asked if he could be in it. I said no, because his presence would change the novel into a biography. But I decided to show him random passages from the draft. What follows is what he read. It is a body of vignettes, portraits and events without clear borders, brief and unclosed. The first vignette is what it is because it confuses a woman with her life story. The second is a two-part rumination on autobiography, a form of writing favored by people who think of themselves as central to their own lives, a common enough human failing. The sharp contrast in styles in the two parts is deliberate.

#### Random Passage #1

In 1948 the French war in Vietnam was two years old. Berlin was a blockaded city. Palestine became Israel. Colonial Africa was a decade away from the rising suns of independence. In the Gold Coast colonial administration was looting the land to sandbag a dissolving island recently home from the War. Nobody thought much of a rag-tag army of African veterans marching on the governor's castle to demand to be paid for defending the empire with their lives. They marched as they were taught in the army, in a straight line, forgetting that only evil walks in a straight line, and they sang songs from the front that was behind them. For some, the future lay in the past, which is how prophets of doom get made. For others the future was like clay in anxious hands.

That same year, in a village whose name is not necessary to the plot of this story, a girl was born to a girl of fifteen. The new father sat at the hearth with his drinking friends, contemplating

the quality of night in their calabashes. The sky was like hide, the creator's repartee to the devil on this cantankerous night. Someone caught the mood by raising a song:

*The stool is superior to the king  
Under the eyes of Dahomey  
Do not cross Kpassé  
Do not look to Xwegbaja  
Do not go south to Ganvié  
They have soaked memory in water  
And history walks on stilts  
Above all wars*

The voices churned the words wildly, as if the song was a boat and their voices the sea on a rough night. At the end of the song somebody said: "Let us forgive ourselves before God does." They all nodded. Men in silent arms. A baby being born. Fear and a crying star.

About a mile away to the south and towards the sea, a woman was turning the beach sand with her feet. She ran the way rivers run, until stopped dead by drought. Her heels sank deep into the sand from running so hard. Her shoes were soggy. Her breath came hard, her chest harsh with hot effort. But the sand held her feet. The harder she tried the slower she managed. Still her thighs, knees and feet churned the sand, answered the hurtful language of shore with leather. Thus clipped, she plodded until in time she forgot how to fly and right there and then, on the wide breathless beach, under the opaque and unyielding sky, her feet sly to the bone, she fell, clawing air for solace, any kind of peace, and clung to the pale soft comfort of the beach sand.

The rain began to fall not long after the woman fell. All night it fell. In patches and puddles, easily and casually the way a dog marks newly-discovered territory with piss. This was crafty rain, she thought, and the thought seemed far away. Crafty. Cunning and hairy rain falling in all directions at once.

She was close enough to the sea to be touched by salt-water. The waves came, lap-lapped around her defeated feet. She gathered her knees



beneath her and dug her elbows in. By now the rain had destroyed the crazy map of sweat in her dress. The sand gave as she pressed in, gently at first, and then as with all her actions lately, with a bellowing desperation. She hunched her back and burrowed dog-fashion, haunches high up in the air. A frantic urging shoved her into the earth's womb. She pawed away, all the while making painful animal sounds deep in her throat. The waves met every

solitary cry and swallowed it, then rolled back to rescue the next.

Her mind was there and not there. She remembered but did not know what. There was a song. A song with a cave in it. A cave with people in it. And the people fought well. With the infinite advantage of desperation. Now she is far away. Far, far away. Beyond pain. Beyond caves. Beyond pain in a cave crammed with nightmares. With air dead yet not dead. Slack with too much stench. A father, a mother and a crying star. O mother Earth, to drink blood, must we always swallow swords?

Outside, a keening and a howling. But what is she doing here? This was a land of hyenas. Twigs and brambles. Stunted growth. Dry, harmattan air. It was the same country but no longer what it was. Blister and sag. This was the way of ruin. Belly full with sag. Life without repair. This is life at war, without end, unbroken, exhausting, bleak, degrading. Soon the raiders in their wit will invent a name for this new condition of pauperized living. They will consider the cave full of eyes, the savaged men guarding it and call it, the sad cave and sad the eyes, under their breath, Gold Coast.

Inside. Night crowded decay into their faces. Night. A cave full of faces. Eyes of night. Whack! She, trapper of rats, watched the children play in the cave's moist soil. They laughed and jostled each other. The echoes of their joy came back hard and worn. But she was happy watching them, the future. And fearful, too, of her bliss. Unaccountably, she remembered her mother's words: "To the night the innocence of all children is black." She was happy inside. This, she thought, is the world for which we live and brave the terror out there, the light of the coming day.

Without any interest whatsoever, she watched the flight path of a mosquito, its belly fat with her blood. She picked up the comb in her lap and ran it through her hair. The rat in the trap was eating the trap, she noticed. She cocked the comb like a weapon. When she was done, she wore her hair like a headache.

Outside and inside, what peace there was multiplied the barren wars. As prophesied, an owl coughed in the copse. And the people, they were all conquered by a hunger for conquest. It was like this when morning came. Phantoms on the wall. Fire on the horizon. The walls jumped. The smoke crashed wildly. Morning, and here was menace wearing whack.

And thus things stood, caught between the teeth of God. Her mind could no longer find the song of the caves. The spear become blunt. Merely a desperate silhouette clawing into the evening on a desolate beach, a devouring series of waves, eager and warm from the hot day.

The returning fishermen discovered the peaceful contours of her buttocks sticking out of the mounds. Her long dress was high on the small of her back. She protested, but her voice could not be heard over the waves and the surprised chatter of the men. They carried her home as they would a baby. Her head rolled when she was hoisted on the bed and tucked in beside the baby.

The morning found her rising tender as roseflesh, her skin taut and darkly translucent. She felt like dew, liquid made into light. She sat up and pulled free from the sheets and wrappers, and revealed herself pure as happiness. She smelt sweetly like a washed and talcumed baby.

No one spoke about the evening before, her new grandson, her trip to a place without motion, Maamy Water's kingdom, the exhilaration, the beings sent spinning, and the seven coins which she threw behind her, eyes shut, the sun that lost its head and arose in the west. Most of all, nobody, not even the twenty-four hour mouths, spoke of the clumsy skirt, the fingers caught between God's teeth, the jungled womb, the emptied homes, the hole in the sand. Nor the twenty wan years.

The day and the night were recovered only in silence, and all memory vanished. It passed. Like stealth between lovers.

**Random Passage #2:**

**An Almost Silent Bounty**

There is a pervasive rationalism in literary theory today which at its extreme end argues that language can lead a life of its own because it is not able to control its own tropology. The problem began, I think, with the realization that full interpretation is impossible because the cycle of meaning can never be completed. There is no certain meaning, and this is partly because, whereas meaning is yielded in context, context itself remains infinite. The world of the text is replete with shady things; like an enchanted forest in a children's tale there are many hoary matters which cannot be accounted for.

M.H. Abrams, among many others, has summarized this critical world-view for us. Its practitioners have proclaimed the death of the author, and embracing the bold discoveries of Ferdinand de Saussure, have asserted that the writer does not speak, only language does. The interpretation of texts, these new gladiators of the word say, has got to reach beyond humanity and humanism; it must yield place to an inner entelechy, the purposeful and autonomous logic of language. The word has no kinship to its writer, no allegiance to human purpose. And, they claim, the motion of language is initiated and sustained by a remorseless inner energy as a result of which discourse moves, quite like something



possessed, towards vitiating, dissolution, subversion and self-deconstruction. Language is words, and words become no more than their constituent parts to test the outer limits of sense, where, perhaps, with all metaphor or psychology purged, it assumes a robotic power, thick with the grammar of machines. Words stand alone at the beginning of this reductive process. The philosophy of this view, often expressed in complex and highly paradoxical outings, is echoed by Wylie Sypher: "we are walking in a universe where there is no echo of the 'I'" (79).

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One of the fountainheads of this type of criticism out of which human agency has seemingly been purged is the French thinker Roland Barthes. In his own autobiography Barthes denies the primacy of humans in language. In fact, there is established a problematic relationship between the author and the self within the book which has been created through language. Despite the many disclaimers—"I do not say: 'I am going to describe myself' but: 'I am writing a text, and I call it R.B.'" (Roland 56)—the created self threatens to overwhelm the author, the man external to the text. Barthes' agony as writer is that such is the power of language that simply by writing of himself the writer takes the fatal chance of being replaced by a fictional self in the autobiography. Indeed

there may prove to be nothing more to him than the created self:

The fact (whether biographical or textual) is abolished in the signifier, because it immediately *coincides* with it. [...] I myself am my own symbol, I am the story which happens to me: freewheeling in language, I have nothing to compare myself to [...]. The symbolic becomes literally *immediate*: essential danger for the life of the subject: to write on oneself may seem a pretentious idea; but it is also a simple idea: simple as the idea of suicide. (Roland 56)

Perhaps, what Barthes means by the simplicity of suicide is the notion that ultimately a suicide is one who decides by taking no side.

The suicidal angst Barthes expresses here is similar in kind to the innocence—what else?—of the man in the apocryphal tale who refused to have his picture taken because he was afraid that the camera, if allowed to work its magic, could steal his soul and cause him to die. For both this man and Barthes, self-representation and self-reproduction, whether imagistic or verbal, are a suicidal act.

Fearing self-revelation (as one would fear death itself?) then, Barthes' autobiography is a montage of cartoons, sampled thoughts that hop-hop from subject to subject, and photographs with sometimes confusing, at other times exceedingly clear captions. Under a picture of his father, for example, is:

The father, dead very early (in the war), was lodged in no memorial or sacrificial discourse. By maternal intermediary his memory—never an oppressive one—merely touched the surface of childhood with an almost silent bounty. (Roland 56)

Barthes' autobiography sidesteps the conventions of the genre, despite such memorable and achingly beautiful passages. Operating in a genre where the centrality of the narrator defines the form, he emphasizes the oblique and focuses on the marginal in his past life. Thus the autobiography is a writhing mass without conventional unity or center. He declares that he is not uni-

fied as a subject and wants to "side with any writing whose principle is that *the subject is merely an effect of language*" (Roland 79). The autobiographical quest, for self-understanding usually, here becomes an assault on all the fronts of certainty and meaning. Hating to come to any conclusion about anything, Barthes writes: "fragments: so many beginnings, so many pleasures" (94). The joy for him is in fragmentation, de-construction, that plurality of meaning which in the end succeeds, perhaps, only in self-cancellation. Barthes' neutrality, however, is not a neutered condition; an important purpose served by all this paradoxically, is to harangue into the open the hidden interests of the center, Common Sense, and the assumptions of expressive realism, and to challenge their power.

The major attraction of Roland Barthes, critic and autobiographer, I find, is his sassiness, a seductive flair that is at once innovative, innocent and world-weary. He writes with a careful carelessness, a flourish that mixes at will the profound and the silly, flirting with both in equal measure. The problem with such a charmer is the difficulty in separating sense from game, for, his wit has a way of muddying his meaning, his "almost silent bounty."

It has been said of Barthes that he "provides an alternative story that leads to a different evaluation of contemporary literature" (Culler 25). The story of present day criticism suggests such to be the case. He has achieved the effect, building on the foundations of de Saussure and the French structuralists, of almost singlehandedly purging the author from any role of prominence in literary studies. He has argued for the study of texts not authors. "A text's unity," he writes in "The Death of the Author," "lies not in its origin but in its destination" (148). The reader is the receiver of the text, but even this consumer is de-personalized:

The reader is without history, biography, psychology; he is simply someone who holds together in a single field all the traces by which

the written text is constituted [. . .] the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author (148).

At the base of this anarchical, un-gendered, narrowing of concerns and banishment of makers is the post-structuralist impulse to renounce historical antecedents and to concentrate exclusively on the structures by which phenomena are related. Thus, "writing" becomes:

That neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing ("Death" 142).

The "negative": the man in the story who feared to commit suicide by photographically reproducing his identity, did he finally succumb, or did he not? Barthes for his part seeks confirmation of the loss of identity in neutral, composite and oblique spaces, in the metaphor of the broken center. We know why the other man feared to have his picture taken: we know more than he does; he is ignorant of the camera. But what of Barthes? What is the source of his anguish?



### *Anointed Memory*

To conclude properly, we have to return to Africa and modern African literature. A number of years ago in an essay about Ayi Kwei Armah's first novel *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, Chinua Achebe identified that existential anguish similar to Barthes' as a peculiarly European outgrowth: it is something that happens to a people when they have overreached themselves "in technical achievement without spiritual growth" ("Africa" 24-25). He labels the malaise "the sickness of Europe," a phase of despair he ridicules as "The *human condition* syndrome" (24). Since the crisis so identified is native to Europe, Achebe believes it would be false and therefore wrong for an African writer to assume the burden of what is essentially a "foreign metaphor," and an African writer who does so is "clearly an alienated writer" (26). And yet these problems of the human condition and that "aura of cosmic sorrow and despair" (25) which Achebe so rejects are not as foreign to African literature as he would have us think. In his own novels, Achebe's protagonists wrestle with the inscrutable and quite often patently absurd forces of modern African history. The tragic lives of Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart*, Ezeulu in *Arrow of God*, and Odili in *A Man of the People* highlight the genesis and impact of personality disintegration and the

development of ironic self-awareness in African literature; they also serve to show the folly, despair and anguish that issue out of the seemingly inexorable roll of the colonial wrecking machine. The establishment of a causal relationship between colonial exploitation on one hand and the status of Okonkwo as an alienated hero and of Odili as an absurd hero on the other is one of the major achievements of Achebe.

But the point is not to look for generic markers of existentialism or Barthesian self-dissolution in African literature. It is clear enough, despite Achebe's own angst over the matter, that the totality of the individual cannot be assumed in modern African writing. Self-definition, whether fictional or biographical, is closely aligned to genotypes provided by the prevalent culture at the levels of convention, language and class. The articulated self in writing is a product of changing historical and cultural institutions; put another way, the biographical or fictional individual is shaped by the writer in intercourse with society, its history and culture, and cannot be said to be privately determined. This being so it becomes clear that African literature cannot escape intercourse with African history and it is here, in the interstices of historical experience, that we may look for the causes of personal fragmentation in African literature.

History as malaise can be traced throughout African literature, and this is perhaps clearest in the genre of autobiography. Because of the referential premise of its narrative autobiography is the genre in literature closest to history. We may simplify the matter by referring to the obvious, that as life-story, autobiography takes its thematic roots in specific historical experience. In spite of Barthes, to the autobiographer the historical life is the source, the total geography of the enterprise; in a sense, history is the given, the ambit of the vocation. It supplies in broad terms the themes that must be grappled with in the creation of autobiography.

History, then, is the autobiographer's burden; it is to be freed from by the intervention of metaphor. Thus a writer's history and vision are like coupled notes on a piano, except that one is black, an inventory of values invented by society, and the other is white, insistently personal and self-made. For these reasons, African autobiography is bound to African history, and the value extrapolated from that history in telling the life-story constitutes what we may call the autobiographical vision. The tragic implication is obvious: African autobiography finds its vision at the tragic frontiers of African history. It enfolds all the terrible dimensions of the African past precisely because African autobiography strikes a compromise between the life which is its primary subject and the broad story of society. This describes the autobiographical tension between individual freedom, that is self-expression, and the burden of remembrance, what one American writer refers to as "re-memory" (Morrison). Autobiographical self-expression (the attempt to create a vision), precipitates a paradox: the simultaneous suspension and expansion of the self and its immersion in the larger society. This is why as a rule African autobiography is katascopic: it begins with the description and recreation of the group and then reaches out to uncover its protagonist. The autobiographies of Naboth Mokgatle, Kwame Nkrumah, Wole Soyinka, Taha Hussein, Haile Sellassie and so many others begin with the story of society. And since the story of society in Africa, that is its history, is essentially tragic, African autobiography, even the most optimistic, describes the broken curve of life disrupted at its apogee.

Properly speaking, therefore, African autobiography is an instrument of revelation serving epiphanic purposes at both individual and social levels. Even when enclosed in the singularity of its personal context, as in the case of Camara Laye, the autobiography still remains linked to the manifest nature of the genre by referring back to a view of African history. In this context self-definition and personal vision become a

distinction between good and evil: freedom versus slavery, as in Equiano; a non-racial society versus apartheid, as in Modisane; freedom versus colonialism as in Nkrumah; peace versus war, as in Haile Sellassie; childhood innocence versus patriarchal strictures, as in Diallo.

Furthermore, its relationship to history explains why African autobiography is in its own way an exercise in self-empowerment. The mere telling of a life lived in the shadows of repression, whether in the nature of enslavement, colonialism or apartheid, is an act of assertion. Thus even when it tries to avoid a show of anger, as in Mokgatle's understated story about life under apartheid, the autobiography still holds in waiting the threat and passion of a re-statement of historical verities. The autobiography in Africa opens at the center of the historical agon, and every opening is mysterious and intimidating.<sup>1</sup> Even the most private and innocent autobiographies of childhood, such as Diallo's lightly touched story, imply the politics of their times and the inevitability of conflict. The necessity of judgment is always implicit.

Therefore, the crisis of values and the metaphor of the broken center so common to contemporary western literature and literary theory, and so well-expressed by Barthes in his autobiography, are not foreign concepts in African autobiogra-

phy. However, there is an etiological distinction that must be made. For unlike their western variant, alienation, metaphysical anguish, and problems of the human condition in African autobiography have their sources not in an a-historical existential nothingness that is assuaged by moral and physical arrest, but in blood-bound historical experiences such as centuries of enslavement, colonial exploitation, murder, rampage, invasion and the malignancy of something akin to fate set in motion by an unappeasable Europe. The testimonial urge in African autobiography comes to the fore for these reasons. There are wild, unbelievable tales to be made human in the telling; histories of horror to be revisited and appeased; there are broken lines of resistance to be twined and hardened for the sake of the future; faces to be recalled from death; and gaping holes in families blasted and landfilled with misery to be weaned back to life. And above all there is memory to be anointed. ✠✠✠



### Notes

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1. The demands of the form are reversed, and nearly all begin, not with the story of the autobiographer, but with the story of their people and their country. Equiano defined

the opening of the autobiography in Africa when he started his life story with "The Author's account of his country, and their manners and customs" (Equiano, 31), and then settled for long pages to describe and defend the way of life known to them.

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