

In Search of Mister Johnson: Creation, Politics, and Culture in Cary's Africa

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J OYCE Cary's *Mister Johnson* has been read as a novel that is about Africa and Africans,¹ and occasionally as a patronizing novel on that subject.² It has also been read as a novel that is not about Africa, but about the human situation, or about man as creator, especially of himself, in a universal situation, or, indeed, about "creative vitality" itself.³ As such, it has been considered anything but patronizing. Cary's own view of the novel would appear to be closer to the latter than the former: "In this book the problems of Rudbeck *making* his road, his wife *creating* her independent life . . . Johnson creating his personal legend and the careerist making his career — all immersed in the world of creation — of free imagination — of injustice, of change — are those of actual souls faced with personal problems which are also universal ones."⁴ However, neither view of the book, taken simply, is accurate or satisfactory. As I shall attempt to show, as a book about the problems of self-creation, *Mister Johnson* fails to convince completely, because these problems cannot really be considered apart from their relation to the *specifics* in that background of "injustice," of "change," that Cary was very much aware of in general terms. Yet, as a book partially about a social problem shaped by the special circumstances of colonization it also falls short because Cary, although an excellent observer, did not sufficiently understand these problems. Both kinds of response to *Mister Johnson* are relevant. Cary, so often called the novelist of the "creative imagination," grouped

many different kinds of observations within the conceptual framework, "creation." His political thinking cannot be separated from his thinking about the artistic process. Mister Johnson is the embodiment of potential freedom for Africa and of the freedom of the artist; creation is artistic creation and the creation of new modes of life. This paper seeks to explain the effect that these linked concerns have on the nature of the book. As such, it will take issue with certain aspects of a view of the novel best expressed by M. M. Mahood, for whom *Mister Johnson* is "an unadulterated work of art" quite separate from Cary's political theorizing, which "as he realized was not really the novelist's concern."⁵ However, in addressing herself to the basic problems of the subject of *Mister Johnson*, and the author's attitude toward his major character, Miss Mahood has raised significant questions and established some of the connections crucial for my differing perception and interpretation. As such, this essay owes a great deal to her work.

When *Mister Johnson* is called a book about a "universal" situation, whether by Cary or by his readers, what they undoubtedly have in mind is that *all* of the characters — black and white — are seen in terms of Cary's understanding of universal human problems. However, there are some anomalies in Cary's universal intentions; there are inevitable limits set by our participation in our own cultures and by our personal conceptual frameworks on *what* we see, and even on what we call universal. The overall framework of the artist's freedom and responsibility to shape his life contains the specific framework of the African's freedom and responsibility: the content of the latter is shaped in part by cultural biases. Cary chooses to treat Mister Johnson's ultimate failure to mediate between freedom and responsibility in terms clearly thought of as universal, while, in fact, portraying him to a certain extent as being limited *by* being African (because the "primitive" is finally only like all of us *as* children). This accounts for one disturbing discrepancy. And universal

terms finally ignore what in Johnson's being African might specifically explain the situation in terms other than Cary's chosen ones, accounting for another, in fact, conflicting discrepancy. Therefore, although the book does indeed make a claim on being "universal," its very universality is what makes it biased. Cary is caught in the liberal's dilemma: he wants to be understood as saying all men are basically alike; this however, makes it impossible to explain the limited possibilities of some men by taking into account the cultural contexts and special situations that might make their behavior unique.

An examination of the novel as about the universal creative man, and the novel as about a man caught in a specific cultural predicament; of the relationship of Cary's conscious intentions and the results; of his general attitudes towards freedom and responsibility and the specific application of them in *Mister Johnson* goes a long way toward explaining the reasons for the contradictory reactions of readers, and, I think, a long way towards a more complete and accurate assessment of the novel. Most interestingly, Cary himself, his portrait of Mister Johnson, and indeed the responses of the "universalist" critics illustrate a phenomenon Cary did not understand substantively enough to make use of — although he hovered on the edge of such understanding — that all of us incorporate our new perceptions and experiences into pre-existent personal and cultural schemes.

The application of the level of the novel that deals with the universal problem of self-creation is very well given by M. M. Mahood in *Joyce Cary's Africa* (pp. 167-96). The insistence of the thematic imagery related to creation certainly gives support to the reader's feelings that this is Cary's overt formulation of the problem. Johnson is the improviser of songs, the creator of lovely S's in government reports, the "artist under possession of the spirit"⁶ the shaper of situations which are given "into his hands like wood to be carved or a theme to be sung" (p. 32). He

jumps "like a ballet dancer" (p. 4), sets his "imagination . . . at work upon [a] theme" (p. 107), exhibits a cloth "with the pride of an artist showing his masterpiece" (p. 131). The language of the novel also insists, and Mahood of course points out, that this problem of creating oneself, or finding a sustaining role in life, is one that is shared by almost all the characters in the novel, from Sozy, whose self-definition is found in the role of Johnson's helper, through Celia, who creates the role of "seeker after the primitive life," for lack of anything better to do, to Gollup, a creator when drunk (p. 160), and Ajali, "a kind of poet" in his malice (p. 69). And most significantly, the problem of having the freedom, like the artist, to shape one's life and the possibility of evading that freedom in sterile "duty," or evading its responsibilities in self-abandon, and thus remaining either a dutiful *child* or a willful one, is found in parallel in the two major characters of the novel, Rudbeck and Johnson. Rudbeck first needs to *find* freedom; Johnson does act as inspirer. But, in their freedom which has yet to know its implications and its limits, both Rudbeck and Johnson are child-like. Rudbeck, like Johnson, acts like a child when his schemes are foiled, "like a small boy being chafed" (p. 49). Rudbeck, "like Johnson, has the power of refusing to notice unpleasant things until they force themselves upon him" (p. 93). Of course, the whole business of building the road is for Rudbeck very much like a boy's passion for a new toy. It is the fact that *both* Rudbeck and Johnson take their places as *children*, at least initially, in Joyce Cary's scheme, that, of course, makes us qualify — by references to the intentions that the thematic imagery communicates — any notion that Cary is *simply* drawing a picture of the primitive as child.

Up to a point, the "universal" and abstract themes of the need to exercise one's freedom in the taking of risks, the inevitable payment for some of those risks, and the need to learn to limit one's freedom by an awareness of the rights of other humans account for the trajectory of

both Rudbeck and Johnson. Freedom without responsibility in Rudbeck interacts with the same in Johnson. Rudbeck's ability to ignore everything but the present in his child-like enthusiasm can result in his blaming Johnson, who is his responsibility ignored, for following his model in his own way. He fires Johnson peremptorily because of his own disappointment at the completion of the road, even though Johnson, in taking a rake-off from the zungo dues to pay for beer for the road-workers, has done nothing very different from what Rudbeck did at Johnson's own suggestion: manipulate the Treasury votes.

However, the universal standpoint — realized in the themes of the artist and the child — is not consistently maintained (for Johnson, unlike Rudbeck, ultimately is incapable of any growth or self-knowledge, however tenuous); it cannot make Johnson a triumph; and finally, it cannot explain what happens to Johnson, the particular character. The treatment of Johnson as an amoral character, an artist creating his life, his significant consequences for the book, and needs to be considered critically, i.e. from a point of view larger than that of Cary's overt intentions. First in accordance with the dialectic of freedom and responsibility, imaginative vision and its opposite in the book, Johnson is *subject* to the same framework of judgment as other characters in whom imagination *may* be an abuse, *even though* Cary will not blame him; this points even more clearly to the question: what explanation of his character makes judgment irrelevant? One should not confuse Cary's not blaming Johnson with his not seeing the adverse effects of his behavior. Second, rather than being an explanation of Johnson's character, his role as universal artist is an abstraction that reveals the underlying assumptions that made it impossible for Cary to explain him. Finally, Johnson's role as universal child-artist fails to convince and ultimately separates him from the other characters, indeed finally making him the *primitive* as child, in spite of Cary's conscious intentions.

In the context of Cary's thought and, I think, in the novel, freedom is a mixed thing. From one point of view, it is clearly positive, as the vitality and joy of Johnson are clearly preferable to the sterility of Benjamin who has an English and Christian petty clerk's superego, and of the traditional natives, such as Bamu and her family, who pay for their clear sense of their roles in life, with a limited horizon. It takes "energy and imagination" (p. 194) to break out of poverty and Johnson clearly has those qualities. Similarly, the risks that Rudbeck takes in "cheating" on the British colonial system are also preferable to the limited views of such colonial administrators as Blore, and of such native conservatives as the Emir and the Waziri, especially since related to bringing more opportunities to Africa via the road. Nevertheless, the dangers are also clear. Johnson's freedom to create may ignore the reality of other people, or of situations, as he ignores the reality of Bamu, in his wish to make her into a government lady, regardless of her own desires. The road will bring as much harm as benefit, unless colonial administrators can accept the challenge it presents.

Freedom is both positive and dangerous for Cary, and it is with this awareness that both *Mister Johnson* (1939) and *The Case for African Freedom* (first published in pamphlet form in 1941, published in expanded form in 1943) were written. Cary's stress on the possibility that order, the parallel of responsibility, may be deadening, and chaos, the parallel of freedom, regenerative, should not encourage one to conclude that he polemically favors anarchy. However often the comedy of freedom is also the tragedy of freedom, ideally freedom and responsibility are not incompatible. "A free man is one who has mastery, so far as possible, of his own life. And since his life is joined in greater or lesser degree with every other life, with the national life; the world life; with all knowledge and religion, with all movements of the spirit; he needs for that mastery as much wisdom as he can get. In so far as he refuses, consciously or unconsciously, to seek the truth, or

to take responsibility, he is abdicating from freedom; he is making himself a slave of prejudice and fear."⁷

The dialectic of freedom and responsibility — the fact that each term can be positive or negative — and this ideal view of freedom *as* responsibility make Johnson subject to the same criticism as Celia. Cary's Celia is motivated by boredom, a lack of any reasonable expectations about her function which suddenly confronts her when she is thrown "out of the nursery into the inane" (p. 123). Part of the scorn that Cary generates for Celia in the first part of the novel depends on the notion that no-one could sincerely seek "the joys of the primitive life," unless blinded by other difficulties. And indeed Celia is described as "blind to . . . reality" (p. 117) and embarrassing in that blindness when she, for example, describes the local jail as finer than anything in England (p. 120). She is motivated by ideas, not a concern with truth in any sense. Yet, she at least sometimes thinks that she is "acting a part" (p. 110), she knows she is not sincere and is genuinely disgusted with herself (p. 123). Celia's blindness is not unrelated to Johnson's, though the content, and indeed the evaluation of it by Cary are often reversed. It is as if Mister Johnson illustrates the other side of the dichotomy. If the fascination with ideas to the exclusion of a search for the truth is a liability in Celia which Cary really scorns, imaginative feelings and ideas, even if unrelated to reality, may be seen as part of an ultimately greater truth when Johnson is compared to Ajali, for whom the truth is ugliness: ". . . I don' tell you the truth — I don' tell you how much Mister Tring 'gree for me because you so little small ting like stink bug. How anyone tell stink bug about de glory of God — he only make so bad stink he make you sick for belly" (p. 130). Celia is ultimately capable of some insight, that is, of seeing through Rudbeck's prejudices when she teases him for his sensitivity to the "wog" 's observing them swimming; she begins to "see" when she comes to terms with herself, within her own restricted limits (she comes to exist by virtue of her pregnancy).

However, Johnson, unlike Celia, has no capacity for growth or self-knowledge. His disgust with himself is as impulsive as his pleasure with himself. If Johnson is generous in giving of himself and his possessions, it is rather hard to credit him with this trait because it is as much a product of his impulsive nature interacting with chance, as is the murder he finally commits. There is an inherent danger in his undifferentiated good nature and good feelings which "take form . . . as . . . love of Bamu," for example (p. 10). As universal child, Mister Johnson is *primarily* motivated by an imagined, aesthetically pleasing idea of a role. We do not know his motivations, as compared to Celia's, we do not know why he is incapable of insight, however tenuous, into his own situation, we do not know what the reality is that he abandons for his "joys of the civilized life." Both Celia and Johnson are glorifiers of reality in their very different ways and there are dangers in both glorifications. Nevertheless, the scorn Cary generates for Celia's lack of insight is almost never called up for Johnson; one can think only of the incident in which Johnson turns his back on his own vision of Bamu in government lady clothes because the government lady likes Bamu "native." Unlike the other characters, the dangers of whose fantasies we are allowed to condemn, Johnson, for all the glories of his creation, is treated as a victim, but we are not certain what is victimizing him.

In this context, then, one must question the conclusion reached by Mahood, that there "was nothing inadequate about the Johnson who was taking shape in Cary's imagination" (p. 171). It is not even unqualifiedly true that Johnson's "daydreams are far from the paranoid's delusions of greatness" (Mahood, p. 174). If not a paranoid, Johnson does have delusions of greatness:

"He my money," Johnson laughs at him. "He my store, Mister Benjamin — because I got de key to him." (p. 248)

.....
 "I king of dem Kaduna. I king of all dem country. I say to all dem policemen, open up dem prison, for clerk Johnson come out."

"Oh, Johnson, dat fool talk now."
 "How it be fool talk, Ajali? Dey my prison, I catch dem key." He holds up the knife in front of Ajali's eyes.
 "Me king of all dem prison in de worl'." (pp. 250-51)

Mahood argues that Cary abandoned an idea of Johnson as morally ruined, and instead decided to treat him as an ultimate triumph, not a failure (pp. 171-72). For her, imagination, as it is found in Johnson (thereby making Celia unimaginative) is the positive value on which the book turns; it is failure of imagination that explains negative actions and attitudes, including racism. But, to see Johnson in entirely positive terms is to ignore the dialectic, which she elsewhere recognizes (pp. 191, 195) of freedom and responsibility in Cary's thought and in the book. These were paradoxical terms for Cary; each could contain its opposite, each could be positive or negative. It seems clear that Cary did decide not to treat Johnson as an *immoral* character: immorality implies the availability of a system of ethics and Cary was not in a position to describe such for Johnson. Johnson, for Cary's purpose, tribeless, without even the negatively seen system of standards that Bamu has, is treated as an amoral character. What does emerge from the book in accordance with Cary's overt conceptions is that Cary does not feel he *can* blame Johnson. "But as Johnson does not judge, so I did not want the reader to judge."⁸ But that is not to say that Cary did not see Johnson's difficulties or that he would not have welcomed and explanation of them, to avoid leaving the political and cultural questions he cared about without hope of an answer. Mister Johnson exemplifies that potential for creative self-development that Cary so much wished colonial administrators to encourage, as explained in *The Case for African Freedom*. Yet the novel, more than the treatise, suggests, without explaining, the enormous practical complexity of that task.

An explanation of Johnson is not to be found in the motive of social climbing, the desire for status in itself. Rather, as he is presented by Cary, his social climbing

motivations flow directly from his overall creative impulses. Johnson tries to inhabit a "paradise" (p. 41) of his own making that just happens to take on the form of the English way of life. He is first of all, *the creator*, in accordance with Cary's general scheme; his freedom to create gets expressed in terms of the acquisition of the material aspects of Western culture. The causality implied here, which might seem rather odd from certain points of view, was concordant with Cary's habit of thinking about imaginative creation in a broad way that subsumed his own cultural biases. In *The Case for African Freedom*, the desire for the material goods of the West, even for trivia, was seen as a positive impulse, an indication of the larger desire of the free individual to express himself, to develop his potential. Cary might have at first been "disgusted to find that ten minutes in a company store could change a warrior fit for the Parthenon pediment into a nigger minstrel." But, he goes on:

But since then I have been struck by this point: that in deploring the loss of the tribal standards and tribal dignity by the native, I never asked myself what the native himself wanted; I never said: "Why is it that the Tulas are so delighted with the stores and the things that they can buy there? Why do they flock to earn sixpence a day about the station, or volunteer for the tin mines and the railway gang?"

It struck me that the tribal native is often extremely bored with tribal life. He finds the same attraction as Europeans in change and discovery; above all, in new freedom, even that small amount to be bought for a wage of sixpence a day. (*Case*, p. 38)

Thus, Johnson, although on the one hand, the archetypal creator, seeking to shape a life, is, in terms of Cary's political views, free because true freedom is the freedom of modern, technological, democratic societies.⁹

This underlying specificity of thought and opinion conflicts with the emphasis on what amounts to an entirely abstract sort of motivation in the novel. Similarly, abstractly speaking, the dialectic should go both ways, that is, Johnson should be as culpable as Celia, but he is not, because the glorification of the primitive life, is by Cary's

standards, far worse than the glorification of the civilized life. These, I think, are some of the discrepancies, i.e. between "universalist" intentions and the theme of "creation," abstractly conceived, and specific biases inherent in Cary's ideas about creation, that account for the conflicting evaluation of the novel by critics, for the judgment that it is "universal" and for the judgment that it is patronizing.

Aside from Rudbeck's part in it, Cary gives us no choice other than explaining Johnson's downfall as a result of the negative factors inherent in his romantic self-creation, which in its positive aspect creates joy, happiness and beauty. The sheer urge to create or maintain his role explains entirely contradictory actions. Thus, the *idea* of patriotism — which is as nebulous and unrelated to practical or moral considerations as his idea of English weddings founded on an oleograph of the royal family — moves him to refuse the bribe offered by the Waziri. He is moved without reference to any moral considerations, for example, of the indigeneous system, or, of some, perhaps conflicting mixture of what he understands of the new system and what claims might be made by the indigeneous system. And it is this refusal of the bribe that in fact explains his later *taking* of the bribe in the sense that all of Johnson's actions stem either from his momentary role-creating, or from attempts to assure that he can continue to play the role he has created. And he needs money to continue the role of "government man."

Finally, the major problem of this vision of Johnson as primarily motivated by his creative impulses is that it fails to convince completely in the climatic section of the novel, the murder of Gollup, which is so shocking to the reader who has been made to care for Johnson. We want very much to read between the lines a sense of despair that stems from threats to Johnson's entire self-estimate. However, his self has been defined only in terms of his desire to play roles. Thus, we are prepared for the killing of

Gollup by the play-acting that takes place, à la gangster movies, when Johnson tries to get the keys to Rudbeck's safe. (Johnson must get documents for the Waziri so that the latter will save him from being indicted for embezzlement of the worker's salaries.) There are indeed other factors. Johnson has been treated in a demeaning way by Rudbeck. It has become increasingly difficult to carry out his chosen role. Gollup has been playing a "heads I win, tails you lose" game with him all along (p. 175). Perhaps Johnson even fears prison, because it is fit only for bush people and therefore an insult to his pride. All of these factors might account for a readiness to risk all, and suffer death for murder rather than be imprisoned for robbery. But Cary almost never makes Johnson react in anger to Rudbeck's or Gollup's games; Johnson is made to have a habit of intuitively disregarding all the injustices he suffers — a function of his being a child. The role-playing which has been emphasized all along, and which is again rehearsed when Johnson tells his plans for robbing Gollup's store to Benjamin, if not an "explanation," is the only thing offered as substantiation of the likelihood of Johnson's committing murder. Indeed, the other "explanations" are only present in the tone of Johnson's words; the reason for the despair possibly behind the tone have to be guessed at. The murder itself does occur after Gollup fires his gun. But we are not even sure that Johnson was acting in what he might have thought of as instinctive self-defense when he actually used the knife he was prepared to use, in imaginative anticipation. It essentially just happened. In terms of the scheme of the book, what we have is creativity gone wrong; the habit of not distinguishing between reality and imagination spilling over into violence. Yet we understand the reasons behind that habit of mind better in Celia's case, and we *are* asked to judge Celia.

After (and because of) the murder, it is no longer possible to see Johnson and Rudbeck as parallel children. When Johnson is caught, depression does come. But this

depression implies no growth; it seems to afflict his body, without the consent of his mind (pp. 290-291). Rudbeck at first stays removed from Johnson's trial; he ignores the part he played in Johnson's downfall. By being supercorrect, he attempts to show up the authorities who, he dimly feels, are unaware of the complexities of reality. But this is really no different from Benjamin's toeing the line; it is an evasion of his ability to act *for* Johnson. However, his final decision to shoot Johnson, rather than hang him according to his orders, so that Johnson may die like an English gentleman according to his wish, does follow a period of self-examination, even if the light Rudbeck shines into himself only illuminates a corner. Although ironically once again inspired by Johnson, Rudbeck does reassert a kind of freedom within the limits of the situation, a freedom that *is* responsibility, for it involves a recognition of his own part in Johnson's career and a recognition of Johnson's own self. Even if it is Johnson who encourages Rudbeck's wider perspective and Johnson's imagination that is the catalyst of Rudbeck's responsibility, still Rudbeck *has* some insight and some responsibility.

Mahood sees this ending mainly as a positive victory for Johnson. She sees Johnson as free, creating freedom once again for Rudbeck. "When Cary speaks of Johnson as the artist of his own joyful tale, he means I think that Johnson was able to transform a story of failure, in Cary's mind, into a triumph, and this is what Cary makes him do in the book" (p. 172). For Mahood, Cary's personal tension between "responsibility and abandon" comes close to resolution in *Mister Johnson* (p. 191). "It's hero is in some degree the completion of a triad, the natural outcome of the dialectic between self-surrender and responsibility in Cary's first three novels. . . . His responses to the impulse of each moment are not surrenders to the irrational" (p. 195). If not, what are they? In the world of the novel, no-one has complete clarity of moral vision. But some degree of self-consciousness is necessary to medi-

ate between surrender and responsibility. Rudbeck is troubled, does reflect on the past and knows he has contributed to Johnson's behavior. He comes closer to the balance in Cary's dialectic than does Johnson, who more than Rudbeck, does live in the fluid moment, and seems to have no unitary self on which to reflect, whose exercise of freedom is finally incompatible with any restraints or self-insight. The symbolic triumph of Johnson as maker is not enough to eradicate this difference or render irrelevant the question "Why does this potential to create and develop get destroyed"? To see the book as finally "about" art, however clearly one level of it supports such an interpretation, is to see it too abstractly and to ignore too much of it.

There may be enough explanation of Johnson's demise in the reality that the world of "injustice," of "change," even of "bad luck" always has its part in determining the trajectories of risk-takers, in accordance with Cary's general scheme. If Rudbeck cheats, if Johnson defies the laws, consciously or unconsciously, each must pay the price exacted within the existing system, whether that system is right or wrong, and no matter how complex the situations that produced their acts. The universalist view of the novel and Cary's apparent understanding of his own stance depend on the notion that Johnson does *as well or as badly as any of us might*, as we "swim, with more or less courage and skill for our lives."¹⁰ But, we have already seen that this stance does not really cover what does and what does not happen to Johnson himself. If Johnson is indeed unlike the other characters, need we not consider the ways in which Rudbeck and he are not equally open to the vagaries of the unjust world and equally capable of surmounting difficulties, of finding a reconciliation between freedom and responsibility? Certainly Cary's sympathy for the Johnson who can so easily get blamed for imitating what his superiors do, as he understands it, shows that he did take this kind of difference into account. But only up to a

point. Rudbeck has precedents for how he can and should behave; Johnson does not. Each must pay for the consequences of his own risks; yet clearly there is something more specific than the general exigencies of "bad luck" and "chance" at work. The native is more likely to be caught, more likely to pay more, less likely to see clear alternatives.

In *Art and Reality*, Cary shows an awareness of the difficulties of learning cultural systems, which, not untypically, he contains within his larger interest in art. In order to define the essential nature of art, he describes the process of cultural transmission by which the child may find order in the chaos that surrounds him:

. . . a world of reality that possesses such definite forms both of fact and feeling, presents itself to us as chaos, a place full of nonsense, of injustice, of bad luck; and [that is] why children spend so much of their time asking questions. They are trying to build up, each for himself, some comprehensible idea by which to guide their conduct in such a terrifying confusion.

They find the task extremely difficult. Often they get the wrong answers to their questions, also they easily get the answers wrong. For words need interpretation and the interpretation depends very much, not only on the selection of the words, but the emphasis given to the words, on the quality of the words and on the tone of voice with which they are spoken. It is the selection, the emphasis, the tone, that gives the valuation. If a child is told, 'Don't eat too much cake,' and 'Don't torture the cat,' with the same mild emphasis, it will regard both actions with the same indulgence.

This selection, this tone, this emphasis is art.¹¹

Cary understood, then, that the difference between such injunctions could be conveyed only by a tonal emphasis to the child struggling to understand how to conduct himself in the world and he understood that this emphasis was often missing or failed to communicate for other reasons. Johnson, much more than Rudbeck, is the child in the specific colonial situation who must learn such differences or pay. Yet, the proper emphasis is all too readily not communicated: the difference between stealing from the Treasury by arranging votes and stealing from Gollup's store armed with a knife may be confused when Rudbeck

approves of Johnson's former idea "with a grin" and says "I didn't know you were a bloody thief" (p. 95). This kind of explanation of Johnson's difficulties is covertly present, but not underscored, in the novel.

Johnson is a child, not presumably because he does not have a cultural system of his own (though Cary leaves this out), but because he must learn the subtle nuances of a new system, the British. But, as we shall see more fully in the latter part of this paper, Cary does not completely recognize the shaping force of primitive cultures as on an equal level with other orderers of chaos. Thus, for him the primitive is easily equated with the *universal* child, as described in the quotation from *Art and Reality*, for example. This equation ultimately ignores the reality that African children grow up no less frequently than English children, however difficult or imperfect growing up may be in either case. Indeed, in *Mister Johnson*, Cary seems to confuse Johnson as a child in the specific situation with Johnson the universal child-artist struggling to shape his world. This amounts to confusing Johnson's lack of knowledge of the British system with a child's lack of knowledge of *any* system; each has to learn the system he is confronting, but the one has to fit the new system to an old while the other does not. Presumably there are injunctions against certain forms of wrong-doing in Johnson's own culture, against homicide, for example. But we do not know what these are, if they differ from British mores or not, and why Johnson's individual self would work to push them into the background. When Johnson is troubled, by a "dim fear that he may have infringed some law or regulation of the service by taking forced loans from laborers" (p. 29), how are we to understand it? Does his own system have no such injunction or a conflicting expectation?

Aside from his lack of knowledge of Johnson's "old" system, Cary's thematic concern with our universal child-ishness, in its negative and positive forms, is also relevant

to the shape Mister Johnson takes. But the theme of the child is a metaphor. Of course, there is a difference between being a child and being like a child, between having no preconceptions, no structure through which the world is perceived and having the ability to perceive and act freshly on occasion, to get out of learned ruts, or, negatively, to evade responsibilities or ignore realities of which one has some awareness. In Johnson's case, the metaphor become reality. Because Cary seems to have confused the child in the context of the colonial situation with the actual child, Johnson's vitality and freshness; as well as his irresponsibility, are finally linked to actual childishness. Thus, it is categorically impossible for Johnson, unlike the other characters, to find valuation or order in the world; in effect, he finally is the primitive as child, conceived as having no system of restraints or sanctions, no learned structure through which reality is perceived and ordered. Thus Johnson, although a fantasizer like the other characters, is ultimately not to be blamed for the dangers inherent in his fantasies, just as the child who has internalized no moral system, would not be blamed.

As someone interested in the fate of colonial Africa, Cary needed to understand the rules of the *specific* game, the circumstances of Johnson, the temporary child. The lack of attention to the responses of a seventeen year old to constraints of his own culture permits Cary to treat Johnson as unshaped wood on which the creative impulse carves, to allow other explanations of his behavior to remain in the background, unsought and unformulated.

Johnson is really too naive as a character. Although the town of Fada is strange to him, he fails to function in some ways that make him unbelievable: he exchanges European clothes for native cloth at one tenth their value; he buys a hide of holes. Yet, Cary was a very good observer, and strangely enough, the evidence is present in the book for another explanation of Johnson's behavior: an explanation that takes cultural factors into account,

although Cary's concentration on the general theme of the freedom of creation and some of the implications of that already suggested mean that he does not make such factors motivating ones. There is for example, an implicit argument in the book that Johnson may handle money as liberally as he does, not simply because of an abstractly conceived effort to "create" himself in pleasing terms, but because people unaccustomed to a cash economy handle money differently. More significantly, although it is not clear whether Johnson's party giving is meant to be understood as an African imitation of Western style or not, Johnson acts freely with his money in an African, not a Western way; his parties with their provided entertainment and liquor are traditional West African entertainments. Johnson, by virtue of being a "government man," is by definition "rich" (just as Peace Corps volunteers in Africa discover that they are by definition rich) and he spends freely in the manner considered appropriate in many West African societies where the rich man is supposed not to worry too much about compensation in kind, although he may be rewarded in status. In this sense, Johnson's behavior may be explained by assuming that he has the same expectation of others towards him as he has for himself, but, of course, his expectations are not warranted. He is acting out of certain cultural assumptions as are the English; the problem is in the mutual misinterpretation. Cary was certainly aware of this *kind* of thing; Mahood points out that in his unpublished short story "Adamu," Cary hints that "Adamu's bribe-taking is just as much a social convention as is the A.D.O.'s readiness to risk Government money in cashing a cheque for an unknown white man" (p. 182). (Such bribes or "dashes" are a well-known African custom.) In *Mister Johnson* one suspects that other behaviors as well might be part of local systems; however, when Johnson takes a rake-off off the zungo dues, for example, we are not given a clear framework of judgment. Thus, we are most likely to see this act as an

imitation of Rudbeck's cheating. To summarize, then, Cary had thought about problems of inter-cultural communication, but he did not really know what was "inside" Johnson. And he wanted to see him in universal terms, that is, as the man of imagination, a formulation that for him enclosed or contained the other problems. The evidence of cultural factors is there, but for Cary, the problem is not consciously put in this form. Perhaps this fact is not unrelated to Cary's feeling that he had simplified his original concerns — which included the social — when he wrote *Mister Johnson*, making it into the tale of an artist.¹² Certainly our sense of the ways in which cultural assumptions make communication difficult is something that has grown in recent years; Cary cannot be expected to have written an anthropological novel. Indeed, anthropological study in Africa — in which Cary was interested — was only beginning at this time. But he has also not written a novel that is simply and convincingly about the "artist" in a universal situation. It is Cary's thinking about Africa in less than universal terms — to which we now must turn more explicitly — that supports and underlies the process by which Johnson, the child like all of us, becomes Johnson, the primitive as child.

The reasons for the ultimately limited possibilities of *Mister Johnson* begin with Joyce Cary's avowed anti-primitivism which ultimately defines Africa as a place where only restraints exist, a place that has to be "given" freedom in all its forms, because it does not nurture it itself. If those who think the African is unfit for civilization are out and out racists in Cary's terms, those who like Blore in the novel, think civilization is unfit for the African are subtly condescending and subject to Cary's scornful (and highly successful) mimicry: "I knew such and such a tribe when they were bare-arsed pagans, the finest chaps I ever met, honest as the day, straight as their backs, clean as their own rain-washed skins. And look at them now since they got stores and ploughs and mission schools,

trousers and clap. The lousiest, laziest, most worthless lot of mean bums that ever disfigured the dung-heap they live in" (*Case*, pp. 37-38). Cary's anti-primitivism explains his contempt for Celia's romance of the primitive life; it explains the place in the novel where the author's voice suddenly intrudes in a description of Fada which gives vent to such contempt: "Poverty and ignorance, the absolute government of jealous savages, conservative as only the savage can be, have kept it at the first frontier of civilization" (p. 121).

Although in favor of progress, Cary was aware, as he makes Rudbeck marginally aware, that the bringing of changes, such as roads, creates new problems. The British would have to "grow up," even as Rudbeck must; the political responsibility of colonizers is just the personal responsibility of Rudbeck to Johnson writ large. At least in his non-fiction, Cary's solution to the questions "what went wrong?" and "what do we do next?" was "total development." "[E]conomic development is a part of a complex general development; . . . supply requires a demand; industries need markets; and markets depend on factors which are often more psychological than economic; on habits and customs, taste, and even religious tradition. . . . Whenever, then, in this book, the phrase 'economic development' is used it must be understood to assume, as premise, all those other developments, social and personal, without which it can only be superficial and local" (*Case*, p. 1). Cary's criticism of indirect rule, which had allowed people like the Emir to stay in power and keep development at a superficial minimum parallels his concern that the British go beyond protecting Africans from restraints on their freedom (e.g. by stopping slave raiding) in order to give them the *freedom to create for themselves*. Johnson, whether as imitator of the West, or liberated (i.e. de-tribalized) African, somehow has that initial capacity.

Cary's view of Africa takes its particular shape as a result of what he did not know about it and about primitive

societies and of his major preoccupations with freedom and creation. If, unlike Conrad, he does not see Africa as a symbol of a place in the human soul completely without restraints, the ultimate difference between his view and Conrad's, is not as great as might be expected. Cary did not understand how African systems of belief about the nature of the world, like other such systems, work to provide the necessary rationales for moral and social order. Even if he came to understand African systems as the creation of humans, of free minds, and thus not as systems fixed for all time, but subject to change, to the fresher visions of the new generation (Mahood, p. 194), he certainly did not see much virtue in such systems.¹³ For Cary, Africa is a place largely characterized by negative restrictions, a place where freedom to develop human potential to its fullest is not naturally nurtured, and consequently, if not a place without restraint at all, a place where freedom may easily lead to chaos. Although Cary knew that Africa contained a great variety of cultures and governments, he tended to think of the African as "tribal man." The term "tribe" has little meaning: it can be used to describe an ethnic group, a political organization or a kinship unit, among other things. For Cary, the tribe is clearly an autocratic social organization that suppresses individualism. "Tribal life is inconceivably narrow and boring — a combination of totalitarian government and authoritarian church in their most oppressive forms."¹⁴ Release from the tribe, for army recruits, for example, besides offering the definite benefits of health care, allows Africans to enjoy "an independence which to us is normal, [but] to them is so strange that we can scarcely imagine it." Such independence also has its dangers: "Too much freedom may be as bad as too little. In South Africa thousands of such detribalized natives quickly went to the devil. The soldier and the young policeman are learning discipline at the same time as they practise a new freedom. They remain under discipline and are taught to be respon-

sible for their health, cleanliness, and conduct" (*Case*, p. 73). Cary's attitude toward Bamu, Johnson's native wife, captures mostly his negative attitude towards African restraint. Bamu's idea of her own place and duties is well developed. Cary, having himself once idealized the "bare-arsed pagan," can even see some of the advantages of such a position when he compares her sense of self to Celia's initial lack of one. But, Bamu's role is also clearly and most importantly a restriction on her potential; she is subservient to her brother and father. Her only indulgence of self in the book appears in conversations about what clearly are superstitious beliefs to Cary (and even to Johnson).

It follows from Cary's idea of African society that freedom as he conceived it, could not be achieved within or make use of any existing social structures. However much Cary might have metaphysically understood the paradoxes of restraint within freedom and freedom within restraint, he could define freedom in the treatise and the novel, only as the impulse towards the West, with its material and for him, psychological, benefits, the attraction to which is in itself an indication of a sense of potential.

Johnson, however, lacks self-knowledge, the "mastery" of his own life, the "wisdom" that are ultimately the responsibility of freedom, in Cary's own terms (*Case*, p. 111). If the novel asks us not to judge him as immoral, what will explain his failure of freedom, however unconscious? Cary's vision of Africa explains why he could come up with no other view of the problem than that of the dangers inherent in the impulse towards self-creation. True restraint, like true freedom, can come only from the West. The de-tribalized army recruits Cary described in *The Case for African Freedom* receive both freedom and discipline from the West. Rudbeck must remain "mother and father" (p. 290) to Johnson. Clearly, the old restraints cannot embrace the new freedoms. Johnson, the universal creator-child is ultimately seen as the primitive as child,

because African cultures, having only negative restraints, as opposed to the restraints that can embody freedom, render him essentially without a moral system. The only way Johnson, truly blameless as children are blameless, can exercise the responsibilities of his new freedom is to internalize Western morality. Yet, here the novel goes beyond the thinking in *A Case for African Freedom* by showing that "education" into civilization, which was to be part of going beyond mere "freedom from restraint," and which, on a large scale, would work as part of "total development," fails quite dismally. Johnson's education has been haphazard — one might argue that he fails because of insufficient education — but education fails in the case of Benjamin.

Benjamin, restrained but not personally or psychologically free, is proof of the failure of Western morality. He has totally internalized Christianity, can even argue against Johnson's robbing Gollup's store on the grounds that it will disturb his *conscience*, yet he is not happy. Ironically, the new restraints are really no better than the old restraints: while the old restraints do not allow for the expression of a potentially Westernized and richer self (in Cary's view); the new restraints do not allow Benjamin any expression of his African self. Benjamin envies Johnson his exuberant dancing throughout the book, yet never feels it is appropriate behavior for himself. Therefore, the internalization of the West has become a new prison for him in several ways. Indeed, he wishes for an even more restrictive prison in which he will be "free," because he is restrained. Benjamin is like those caged birds Cary mentions in *The Case for African Freedom* who seek new cages when theirs are thrown open (although the novel is less than optimistic about that "opening"). His unexpected cheating with the Post Office accounts stems, it is strongly hinted, from a desire for imprisonment. In prison, as he earlier said, one "wouldn't be afraid to lose his job — he'd be more free" (p. 53). Benjamin is "abdicating from freedom" (*Case*, p.

111); he has become a slave to fear. His new role makes it impossible for him, even more than for Johnson, to go back to "bush" ways; he is so afraid of losing the only life he has that he would rather go to prison than live in fear of losing it. Thus, the book reaches a complex stalemate. The old system has restraint, but does not foster the new freedom to develop human potential; that new freedom can be experienced, but only without restraint, as in Johnson's case. The only workable restraints are Western, yet they fail, creating a new prison, in the case of Benjamin, who has totally internalized them. They fail because freedom also includes the possibility of expressing one's self in culturally familiar ways. It is as if Cary discovered this other freedom — one with which he was to become more concerned — in the process of working out his ideas about Africa through the writing of his novel. However, freedom — new and old, political, material and psychological — and restraint are not compatible; the tension between "abandon and responsibility" is not resolved.

The stalemate may be inevitable in Cary's metaphysical terms: no-one really completely grows up, although some come closer than others; the comedy of freedom is also the tragedy of freedom; we always tread a line between absolutism and chaos. But Cary was certainly concerned about a solution to the political problem, or at least a way of understanding the problem in order to make life better for Africans.

In *The Case for African Freedom*, it is as if Cary began to understand that "giving" freedom and "giving" education are more complicated things than he suspected because people have their own systems of ideas which interact with what they understand of what is presented to them. He talked to a Nigerian chief who made him see briefly that people do not necessarily accept what you give them as you define it. The result is that the most well-intentioned giver may look like a hypocrite without knowing it; the same phenomenon accounts for some reviewers'

responses and African responses to Cary's novel. The Nigerian chief was told he was "free" to exercise his powers as a traditional ruler; as a result he exercised his powers, or misused them, in Cary's terms, in order to close a trade route troubled by murder and robbery. He was later deposed.

I remember an old chief complaining to me, "Yes, you say we musn't catch slaves, but all our land is a slave."

.....
 "How did I know it was wrong to catch the foreign merchants — they were buying all the oil and my people had none. You say I am a chief but now I am a fool and a slave. . . ."

I did not understand the force of this old man's bitter complaint. I thought it was enough to say, "I give you freedom to act, carry on." I did not realize his feelings when he discovered that what he thought was a reasonable act, was to me stupid and wrong. . . .

He meant that it was not much good telling an old man to take his freedom, if he could not understand the new order. . . . (*Case*, pp. 25-26)

When Cary then writes: "It is not a question of pouring the West into an open container: You cannot give liberty to a people by a wave of the hand, as you throw open a cage . . ." (*Case*, p. 26), he sounds as if he has begun to understand that these people are not open or empty containers. But his comment here still rests on the assumption that there is only one valuable kind of freedom, in terms of which African social life is a series of cages. The emphasis falls on the fact that political freedom does not guarantee true creative freedom, on the fact that the cages must be opened slowly (with the help of *all* the benefits Cary encouraged), on the fact that people such as the chief must be educated with long views, not on the fact that the contents (which are not all products of autocratic systems anyway) are going to make the assimilation of what is "given" — whether "freedom from fear" or health care and education — far more problematic than Cary thinks. There is no recognition here, as there is implicitly in the novel, that the new "freedoms" may turn into cages, if the receivers are taught to despise what gave

them joy in the past. Cary seemed to feel that the "tribe," like some lower evolutionary form, would disperse on its own account, once European ideas became available.¹⁵ Perhaps too confident that education will make possible the kind of acceptance and understanding of the values of modern, democratic technological society that he has, he does not realize that this education, too, will be interpreted in terms of the receiver's learned structure of ideas.

Interestingly enough, the view that finally emerges from *Mister Johnson*, of the African hopelessly lost between two worlds, unable to mediate between them, anticipates the view in a recent work of sociology, concerning the legacy of colonialism: Colin Turnbull's *The Lonely African* (New York: Doubleday), 1963. The African's "loneliness" is the result of a situation in which the old sanctions are no longer given full credence and the new are, understandably, both not fully understood and discredited, in part because they inevitably appear to be practised hypocritically, or, in fact, are. Johnson's apparent amorality and the damaging of the pride that is only hinted at in the novel (in favor of Johnson's resilience, which is not only the resilience of the artist, but, in Cary's view, the resilience of primitive people¹⁶) call out for explanation in such terms. He is damned if he tries to live up to the models placed before him — which he inevitably perceives in ways partially formed by the culture he already possesses; his efforts may actually increase negative response to him. On the other hand, he can in no sense return to the bush, which he has been taught is beneath him, and which he has fully internalized as such. These terms are in fact concordant with the implicit structure of observations in the novel.

Johnson's "jump," his willingness to try on new situations, his apparent ability to bear no resentments, even his "creative vitality," his desire to please which may misread the clues, are, I think, characteristic of a type of African one can indeed still meet.¹⁷ Those who recognized a truth to their experiences in Cary's portrait are not

wrong. However, this personality is indeed a role, a face presented to the European world. It no more represents the whole person than Benjamin's role does.

Cary's "universal" rubric "Creation," and his theme of our "universal" childishness can, in fact, only account for the *role*, because they hide a very definite bias. Cary's conception of Africa as a place that had to be reshaped, a place whose restraints could not give shape to any of the new freedoms in a world of individuals, amounted to thinking of Africa as a blank slate. This view of Africa is of course parallel to Cary's view of Johnson as a blank slate, a universal child because he is a child in the specific situation. If the only grown-ups are by definition Western, Johnson must remain a child. This underlying concept explains the possibility of Cary's casting Mister Johnson as a universal type — the universal child — as much as Cary's liberalism, his desire to see all humans as fundamentally the same, explains his casting of Johnson as a universal type, who is initially, but not consistently, in parallel with the other "children" of the novel. The universal intentions communicated in the parallelism of characters and the thematic imagery are finally belied in the differential treatment of Johnson. It is the very assumption of the universality of his theme, then, obscuring, as it does, his particular biases, that contributes, along with his lack of knowledge of Johnson's "inside," to Cary's failure to treat Johnson *in* a universal context, as a person who has a culture. This paradox accounts for the claims of both those readers who found the book disturbingly patronizing and those who found that claim disturbing.

NOTES

- ¹"Cary's prime concern in writing *Mr. Johnson* was to create what he believed to be one 'type' of African personality, a type that was rapidly disappearing. . . . Cary crawled inside an African skin and created a personality whose brilliance and sparkle has threatened to make all subsequent Africans in novels with African backgrounds seem shallow and undeveloped." Charles Larson, Introduction to Joyce Cary, *Mister Johnson* (New York: Harper & Row), 1969, pp. v-vi.

- ²See M. M. Mahood, *Joyce Cary's Africa* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company), 1965, p. 170 and footnote 1, p. 183.
- ³*Ibid.*, p. 185. Also see, for example, Andrew Wright, *Joyce Cary: A Preface to His Novels* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press), 1972, p. 62. "That is, Cary's interest is not in Africa as such. His interest is always in drawing a map of life that will do justice to the human situation as he observes it; and he sees the human situation as everywhere the same."
- ⁴From a letter of Joyce Cary to Mark Schorer, quoted in Mahood, *Joyce Cary's Africa*, p. 177.
- ⁵P. 169. Subsequent references to M. M. Mahood's book are to the edition cited above and will appear in parentheses in the text.
- ⁶Joyce Cary, *Mister Johnson* (New York: Harper & Row), 1969. Subsequent references are to this edition and will appear in parentheses in the text.
- ⁷Joyce Cary, *The Case for African Freedom and Other Writings on Africa* (Austin: University of Texas Press), 1962, p. 111. Subsequent references are to this edition and will appear in parentheses in the text.
- ⁸Author's Note: Preface to the English Carfax Edition, in *Mister Johnson*, 1969, p. 300.
- ⁹In his discussion of indirect rule in colonial Africa, Cary did state that it was not the form of government that mattered, but the opportunity for the individual to indulge his tastes and develop his talents (*Case*, pp. 59-60). But elsewhere it is clear that only technologically advanced democracies meet his criteria. "But the ideal state, that which gives to all its members the best chance of happiness and realization, and makes the best use of their different powers, is obviously that with the greatest variety of social and economic organization. It is not the tribe with its simple pattern of existence, but the highly complex modern state, like the U.S.A. or the northern European democracies, which gives to its subjects the greatest liberty of will and action" (*Case*, pp. 131-32).
- ¹⁰Author's Note, in *Mister Johnson*, p. 300.
- ¹¹*Art and Reality: Ways of the Creative Process* (New York, 1961), pp. 21-22.
- ¹²"Cary's preface to the Carfax edition of *Castle Corner* shows that the whole trilogy was to 'raise such questions as: Is there a final shape of society to be founded upon the common needs and hopes of men?' But as he there admits, a story which is first and foremost concerned with persons could not answer universal political questions. 'And in the upshot I abandoned the whole enterprise, and turned to write about the simplest of characters in a simple background, with the simplest of themes, Mister Johnson, the artist of his own joyful tale'" (Mahood, p. 169). The initial question was more open-ended; it might have required more attention to what was "inside" Johnson. The recognition of "simplicity" may also be a recognition of a failure to deal with the more complex question.

- ¹³"It must never be forgotten that even in the worst days, . . . the missions were taking their schools and hospitals, and a religion, which at its crudest was infinitely better than any native creed, to the tribes" (*Case*, p. 19).
- ¹⁴"Catching Up with History," [A Review of *Black Power*, by Richard Wright] in *The Case for African Freedom and Other Writings on Africa*, p. 222.
- ¹⁵"African tribes do not wait to be destroyed by European influences; they disband. The foreigner does not need to attack the tribal idea; at the first rising of the other idea of liberty, even in its crudest shape, it begins to grow pale and weak" (*Case*, p. 40).
- ¹⁶Johnson's quality of "jump" seems to be linked in Cary's mind with what he thought of as the resilience of primitives who are "like children" in the sense "that they do not bear resentment, they do not remember bitterness. . . ." They are too busy in the struggle for life. (*Case*, p. 75).
- ¹⁷On the basis of my own experience in West Africa (Ghana), 1967-68.