1978

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W.P. No. 5

African Studies Center

1978

WORKING PAPERS
NO. 5
AFRICAN STUDIES CENTER

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# JOYCE CARY'S AFRICAN ROMANCES*

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Previous criticism of Joyce Cary's African novels has universally proceeded on the assumption that Cary was writing realistic fiction. However, the contention in this paper is that we can better appreciate the novels if we treat them as romances and more so if we examine them within the rich socio-historical background of African colonialism which was the source of Cary's experience and which is the ambience of the action within the novels. In keeping with Cary's belief that the imagination "dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to recreate" what the mind has experienced, this paper will focus on the manner in which his experience in Nigeria is recreated in the African novels.

In order to examine the transmutation of Cary's experience into the symbolic structures of his novels it is not necessary to scrutinize all the biographic details of his stay in Nigeria. The concern here is not so much with the relation between biography and literature as it is with the effect that social experience in a colonial situation has on

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*Since this paper was prepared for oral presentation (MLA Convention, December, 1978), it does not contain documentation. I have therefore included a selected bibliography.

the literature that grows out of that society. Since it is evident that the final form of Cary's attitude to the colonial world is not substantially different from that of his fellow colonial officers in Africa, we shall be concerned with the generic rather than the idiosyncratic aspects of his experience.

Cary was a District Officer in the Colonial Government in Nigeria from 1913 to 1920. When he arrived there he was almost totally ignorant about the natives he would govern, but this did not produce reluctance or anxiety because he was armed with the traditional grandiose and romantic ideas about his mission to civilize the natives, to bring light to the dark continent. This mood of idealistic, paternalistic despotism was soon shaken by the actual conditions. His subsequent experience, which is important to our understanding of his romances, is composed of three major affective components: an experience of profound isolation, a disenchantment with the Colonial Government, and a strong antipathy towards the Africans.

In the "bush" Cary was isolated from his fellow Englishmen and was surrounded by natives with whom he neither wished nor was able to communicate with in any substantial way. The isolation, caused initially by language barriers, was then

compounded by the colonialist's treatment of the African as an object that he had to manipulate rather than as a person with whom he wished to be involved in a personal way. Finally as Cary himself points out, the very nature of colonial dictatorial government irrevocably separated the alien ruler from the native subject. Cary's isolation was radical enough to have caused a virtual breakdown. For instance, he complains in one of his letters of being reduced to making faces at himself in the lampshade in order to find a little human companionship.

In his function as an employee of the Colonial Government he felt exploited, and in his function as an administrator, developer, and civilizer of Africa he felt betrayed by bureaucratic inefficiency and authoritarianism of the Colonial Government and by its unwillingness to pursue seriously its mission of civilization. His criticism of the Government varies in mood from humorous to vitriolic, and while he keenly perceives what occurs he fails to confront the subtler logic behind imperialism.

In his relationship with the Nigerians he functions as a dictator whose inability to understand his subjects translates itself into a paranoid fear of their unpredictability. He describes his paranoia in a later monograph:

> No one not placed in such a position can fully realize the sense of blindness and distrust which took possession of me in those first months of solitude in Borgu. I say "took possession" because it was at once like a foreign invader seizing on my mind, and a sort of demon. I would wake up at night and feel as if the dark itself were an immense black brain, meditating, behind its thick featureless countenance, some deep plan for a new and still more surprising outbreak.

In its final ideological turn this fear of the unpredictable native translates itself into the notion of the emotional and intellectual instability of the "African personality."

This, then, is the basic affective structure of Cary's experience: isolation, flanked by bitterness and betrayal on the one hand and paranoia, distrust and the consequent assumption of savagery on the other hand. It is essentially the repetition and reworking of this pattern of experience that is responsible for the structure of the racial romances that Cary wrote after retirement from the service. His first four novels, Aissa Saved (1932), An American Visitor (1933), The African Witch (1936), and Mister Johnson (1939), which I will examine, are based on his experience in Nigeria. Thereafter, his fiction focuses on English settings and characters.

In the novels, isolation is shown as more congenial than in Cary's personal experience, but nevertheless it is the central fact about the predicament of all the fictional

District Officers. They are surrounded by a hostile native population and by an obfuscating bureaucracy. Language is again the initial source of isolation: factual information about their territory has to reach the Officers through their native interpreters and political agents who will only communicate what suits them. Ignorance, compounded by misinterpretation caused by the Officers' wishful thinking and tenacious preconceptions about native behavior, is often pivotal for the plots of the novels: it leads to disastrous rebellions and violence. Finally, the District Officers' actions are often rendered ineffectual by the conflicting purposes of the African and European cultures; the Officers' attempts to change native social institutions and to make technological improvements are usually met with traditional resistance and sometimes with sabotage. Yet since all these problems with the Nigerians are an inherent part of the colonial situation, the Officers and the narrators accept the frustration with good humor because it is a part of the white man's burdern, a part of his moral and heroic duty to civilize the African.

However, the narrators are not at all tolerant of the Government which consistently hampers the District Officers' heroic efforts. The characterization of the administration by the narrator of Aissa Saved is typical:

> The Treasury did its duty, which is not to produce wealth or advance the welfare of the people but to scrape and hoard; and to invent new obstacles in the way of officials who desire to spend everything.
> For the Treasury, roads, bridges, hospitals have nothing to do with trade or humanity, but are counters in a game.

In the white society of Nigeria, the bureaucracy is not only the source of all power but also the source of white magic. The magical powers reside in the literary skills of the bureaucrats. As the narrator of The African Witch explains:

> Experience, therefore, had convinced the Resident that, in a world where it is impossible for the rulers to have direct personal contact with the ruled, and government must willy-nilly depend chiefly for its data on reports and discussions by letter, the wording of the reports and letters is an important matter. Real things--the lives, happiness, destinies of living people--depend quite as much on literary skill as upon the political ability of an official.

Yet this principle, it turns out, is an euphemism for a habit of mind that seeks "to combine the minimum of information with the appearance of complete openness." In a society where reports are more important than reality the unavailability of information about native action proves to be a blessing in disguise, for it allows the bureaucrat "a free hand in the composition of /reports/." Cary insists on indicting administrative whitewash by contrasting the violence of native rebellions, for which the administration is

directly or indirectly responsible, with the inconsequential mildness of the Official Enquiry reports in which the bureaucrats exonerate and even praise themselves for their handling of the riots.

Thus in an autocratic colonial society white magic is extremely powerful; aspects of reality that are undesirable can be easily altered on paper in order to create an idyllic image of society. Bureaucrats like Lord Lugard create the idyllic vision of white man's burden, and through the use of white magic they perpetuate the image of a good society with noble intentions.

Although the novels are critical of bureaucratic inefficiency and obfuscation, they never really question the aims of colonialism or the theory of the white man's burden. In fact, the few European characters in the novels who do see that the whole colonial endeavor has a duplicitous structure with a rigorous subconscious logic are dismissed either as sentimental anarchists or senile cranks; their insights are never developed, and they are shunned by both the narrators and the white community.

The real heroes of the good society are not the powerful and magical bureaucrats but the District Officers who are constantly hampered and frustrated by native intransigence

on the one hand and administrative red tape on the other. Their dedication to important colonial tasks, such as building roads and bridges, is regularly arrested by unnecessary financial stringency, and they are thus forced to embezzle money from other allocations in order to continue these projects. They are far less successful in their attempts to protect the rights and resources of the blacks against commercial encroachment and exploitation. Thus, in this struggle with the bureaucracy their motives are pure and noble, as are their intentions in their paternalistic concerns for the natives.

Thus trapped between the real intentions and the supposed aims of colonialism, the District Officers begin to question their function and the goals of colonial policy. But they fail to pursue this kind of questioning either because of external pressure or because of their own reluctance. Rudbeck, the District Officer in Mister Johnson, stops his questioning after he is warned that he will be labeled a Bolshevik if he persists in looking closely at colonial policy. One of the natural results of this predicament is the District Officer's confusion and despair that is clearly exemplified in Mister Johnson. But the other, more typical response is again that of Rudbeck who, paraphrasing Tennyson's "The Charge of the

Light Brigade" ("Ours not to reason why"), decides with the traditional English stoicism and devotion to continue serving the rather absurd and aimless colonial endeavor.

If we treat characterization in romance as a feature of its mental landscape, then the above pattern can be seen as the novelistic manifestation of the affective structure of Cary's attitude towards Colonial Government. His sense of betrayal manifests itself as empathy for the dedicated and heroic colonial officers who are admired and pitied, like Tennyson's cavalrymen, for their foolish courage and their devotion to a rather hopeless fight. On the other hand, his bitterness is expressed in the overt criticism of colonialist whitewash and bureaucratic authoritarianism. The insights into and feeling about the deeper logic of colonialism are checked by their association with idealism and anarchism. We shall see later the ideological reasons for this bifurcated and realistic-satiric presentation of the white/good society.

Cary's presentation of the black/evil society conforms more readily to some of the classic features of romance. Characterization of blacks is based on a traditional series of metaphoric equations: the natives are seen either as children, as inherently unstable and hysterical beings who have no will power, or as animals. The phenomenological

genesis of these formulaic devices begins with similes which are soon turned into metaphors and then finally absorbed by the colonialist ideology itself so that the devices become an integral part of colonialist perception and a basic structural principle in Cary's fiction. This mode of perception treats blacks as evil primarily because of their color: it is simply their otherness which renders them evil. The formulaic devices have the effect of further reinforcing their otherness: as children, as irrational, hyper-emotional beings, and especially as animals, They are not quite human, and thus the distance between the white colonialist and the black other is increased. Characterization based on these formulas originates in colonialist ideology and results in a feature typical of racial romance: the black characters are simultaneously archetypes and stereotypes.

Cary's use of a specific variant of the animal metaphor, the black-as-monkey or -ape clarifies both the romance and the ideological function of the representation of the natives. This formula is applied only to "accultured" blacks, that is, to natives who emulate the white culture, but not to the "pagan" blacks who have no desire to emulate the Europeans. The "accultured" natives are depicted as apes who imitate and distort various aspects of English culture; as a white

character in The African Witch puts it, the "acculture" are "bad copies of English gentlemen." However, their function as demonic parodies of the "good" society earns them an even stronger hatred from the white characters and narrators of the novels. Thus Akande Tom who has presumed to wear European clothes for half a day is presented by the narrator as a proud and confident man, who through fear of his mistress, the Witch, turns into "a baboon, shuffling to and fro," then into a "lizard," then a "frog," then a "snake," and finally into "a flattened, boneless mass--a black jelly, protoplasm." The whole process is witnessed by a crowd that "delighted in Tom's misery and terror." The narrator too seems to take pleasure in this orgy of hyperbolic reduction of a man to non-human status.

Such antipathy is pervasive and violent. Scenes, actions and motives, when they are those of "pagan" blacks, are described objectively, accurately, and in terms of normative psychology, but when they are concerned with "accultured" blacks the descriptions provide very little useful information, and their function is only to express the narrator's antipathy and to channel forcefully the reader's affective responses. The strength of the narrator's hatred towards the "apes" is clearly indicated by the gruesome mutilations and

decapitations of "accultured" blacks and by the blatant contradictions in characterization. A native "pagan" girl, typical of her society, is presented as very mature, considerate and calm, whereas Christianized native adults from the same tribe are depicted as hysterical, irresponsible children. The violence behind this attitude is clearly responsible for the fact that all of Cary's major "accultured" black characters are killed at the end of the novels and that the native political power always remains in the hands of the "pagans."

This provides us with a romance structure that is radically bifurcated. Blacks are treated as the shadows or antitheses of the whites--the uncivilized "pagans" are diametrically opposed to the civilized whites, and the upstart "accultured" blacks are bad imitations of Englishmen. The systematic elimination of blacks who attempt to become like the Europeans is designed to separate permanently the good and evil societies. It is the very presumption by the blacks of possible mobility towards goodness and equality that arouses the narrator's violent antipathy. The colonialist aim is to preserve the otherness of the blacks at all costs; emulation cannot be allowed to succeed. This imperative of Cary's romances is closely paralleled by the underlying colonialist ideology. Since the perpetuation of the colonialist's

privileged position in the colonies is directly dependent upon the "uncivilized" state of the native, the African who assimilates Western culture directly threatens the duration of the colonialist's privileged status. Thus Cary's romances do not seek to purify the evil society by "civilizing" the natives, but rather they aim to preserve the moral and political status quo.

Moral and social distance between the good/white and the evil/black societies is further reinforced by the use of several rhetorical strategies that are unique to Cary's romances. The first one is centered around the use of landscape. A night scene that is permeated by drumming, laughter, and distant animal noises is described as a

> ...heart beating through the murmur of blood; the working of a body; the amusement and sharp, unexpected pain of a living creature; and now it seemed to be frightened. It was a stupid savage heart, like that of a beast.

In this device what were previously similitudes finally become metamorphosed into an organic unity between Africans and Africa. Similitudes, then, give way to a metonymic displacement that is symbiotic: the individuality of an African can be negated by ascribing his traits to "primitive" nature and vice versa. A common and favorite variant of this device is to describe Africa as hell and consequently to render

Africans as various versions of the devil. This device, which we may call the "racial pathetic fallacy" (for it attributes human characteristics through race to nature, that is, to genetics rather than to culture) has its main function in increasing the moral distance between good and evil. In a Christian universe, where man has dominion over nature and where he is in constant combat with the devil, any other man who is associated with primitive nature and hell is automatically inferior and evil.

The second strategy of estrangement is furnished by the repeated shifts in roles and attitudes of the narrators who generally speak from an unlimited editorial-omniscient point of view. However, often the narrators slip from this role and become members of the colonialist communities and at times address the reader as if the latter belonged to the same community and had specific knowledge about the events in the novel. These slippages, occurring at points that are crucial for the reader's understanding of Cary's black protagonists, provide only distanced, external and superficial views of the character. The slippage in role is paralleled by a shift in the narrator's attitude towards his black protagonist. For instance, Aladai, an Oxford-educated black, is mockingly described by a resentful white character named Rackham as

"the cannibal chief in the Balliol blazer." The narrator's attitude to Aladai, which gradually changes through a series of shifts until it includes Rackham's rhetoric and its implication that the "African personality" is inherently incompatible with English education and civilization, finally culminates in the following description:

> /Aladai/ was dressed in the famous coat, put on over a blue kilt. His legs were bare, and there was a small white skull-cap on his shaved head. He looked like the cannibal chief in the comic papers, in his old school blazer. The white patch sewn around the spear-hole in the pocket made a good imitation of a school shield.

The coincidence between the white character's and the narrator's attitudesis not limited to rhetorical or intellectual aspects only but encompasses the affective response as well. Just as Rackham inflicts heavy physical punishment on Aladai for his presumption to equality so does the narrator, as we have seen, punish Akande Tom for having dared to wear European clothes.

The overall effect of these shifts in roles and changes in attitude is twofold. First, the distance serves to simplify the complexity of an African's character and of his response to his predicament as well as to limit the reader's sympathy for the black protagonist. The result is clearly a

simplification of moral issues involved in the black-white relationships in a colonial society. It is this simplification of moral fact which, according to Frye, is one of the central characteristics of romance. Second, the collusions between the points of view of the narrators and the white characters severely limit the multiplicity of viewpoints necessary for a more thorough representation of reality. This absence of perceptual complexity results in a highly subjective and monolithic view of Africans which is characteristic of the romance mode. The subjective attitude denies other possible interpretations of African characters and realities while the strength of the affective aspect of that subjective antipathy is manifested in the intense, gratuitous violence towards "accultured" blacks relished by the narrators of Aissa Saved and The African Witch.

The violence, however, is a product not of the subjectivity per se but of a series of schizophrenic double-binds which cannot be resolved so long as the colonial situation itself persists. In Cary's racial romances the schizophrenia is manifest in the very characterization of the "accultured" Africans. Aissa, the protagonist of Aissa Saved, is seriously presented through a series of interior monologues as an emotional, religious mystic; yet at crucial moments the narrator

distances himself from her and gives an external, comic vision of her spirituality. She is thus doubly damned for being emotional and ridiculous. Aladai is literally presented as a schizophrenic with one educated, European voice and one savage, African voice battling within his head. It must be emphasized that Aladai's schizophrenia is not the result of individual psychological malfunction (for the novel does not present any such evidence), but rather it is a product of the colonialist notion that savagery and civilization are incompatible. Not only are other "accultured" characters caught within variations of this bind, but the romances themselves are products of contradictory imperatives. The most glaring example is the contradiction between the preface and the actual narrative of Aissa Saved. The former claims that the "faith in ju-ju stands badly; a few dry years, a very little 'contamination' from a government instructor destroys faith in the lingam." Yet the action of the novel shows that this primitive faith is anything but shallow and ephemeral; the attempt to Christianize Aissa only results in the same old "ju-ju" practice in the name of Christ.

These textual contradictions are products of socio-political double-binds that in turn arise from the opposition between colonial policy and colonial practice. The policy is

to "develop" the natives--to educate them, to teach them self-rule, Christian virtue and so forth. But the philanthropic policy is accompanied by a highly profitable commercial exploitation and by the creation of a society wherein the colonizer enjoys the privileged status of a feudal baron. Thus if the colonizer does in fact educate the native and develop the colony, he simultaneously undermines his own privileged status. The inability of the colonizer to escape this contradiction between the imperatives of his avowed moral duty and his desire for profit and privilege results on the one hand in violence against the native (which is clearly present in Cary's romances) and on the other hand in innumerable subsequent contradictions which befuddle an otherwise logical mind. Thus, for example, Cary is able to criticize the Colonial Government for not educating the Africans while he also claims in the preface to The African Witch that "Education would bring in more violence, more barbarities; it would break up what is left of tribal order, and open the whole country to the agitator." The characterization of Aladai, then, is a direct product of this kind of opposition.

This colonialist contradiction can be traced further back to a conflict caused by the colonizer's subconscious realization that in perpetuating the colonial situation he

is transgressing against his own moral ideals or, at least, those of his culture. The ideological roots of this conflict lie, then, in the opposition between the democratic/egalitarian imperatives of the colonizer's home culture and the imperialistic/autocratic imperatives of the colonialist practice. Cary's subscription to both sets of imperatives accounts for the formal variation between his racial romances and the romances in the mainstream of the English tradition. The democratic imperative allows him to represent the good/white society in a more realistic-satiric manner than would a traditional romance. Cary's racial romances are negative, then, in the sense that they are conspicuous for the lack of heroes and the abundance of villains. The conflict between the two sets of imperatives also makes his racial romances far more interesting than those of other colonialist romancers like Rider Haggard who have little, if any, sense of guilt.

Cary himself was troubled by a dim awareness that there was something in the colonialist subject matter which compelled him to write a kind of fiction in which he did not believe. After writing his second African romance he wished to avoid Africa and particularly

> ...the African setting which, just because it is <u>dramatic</u>, <u>demands</u> a certain kind of story, a certain violence and coarseness

> of detail, almost a fabulous treatment, to keep it in its place.

Africa, of course, can be dramatic in many ways, but the inescapable "drama" of colonial Africa is the opposition between black and white. The allegory that lurks behind Cary's "fabulous" racial romances is the same allegory that underlies what Fanon has called the "Manichean" structure of colonial society: it is the allegory of white and black, of good and evil, of civilization and savagery, of the elect and the damned, of superiority and inferiority, of the self and the other.

That such a society should demand racial romances is not surprising. If romances are written in societies with a strong sense of destiny, then for Cary this idea of destiny is readily available in the moral obligation of white man's burden. If the romances are produced in conjunction, as Frye says, with the aristocracy and feudalism, and, as Jameson says, with magic and a radical sense of otherness, then again the colonial society fulfilled both conditions for Cary. That Cary should have "kidnapped" the romance form and transformed it into the "racial" romance is also perfectly understandable because the guilt and the desire for privilege and profit would undoubtedly demand an apologia that would try to idealize and justify the functions of the ruling class in colonial

society. Finally, the strength of this demand is illustrated by Cary's continued writing of racial romances and, I hope, by the analysis I have presented. The point is that Cary's racial romances are products not of conscious and deliberate design but rather of subconscious and deliberate design.

The fact that the colonial situation compelled and also limited him to write racial romances is revealed by the fact that once he moved the setting of his novels to Britain he began writing realistic fiction instead of romances. The English novels, which take up some of the same themes as his African romances, do much greater justice to the complexities of character and theme. They do not possess any of the narrative shifts or contradictions of the romances. However, just as his English novels re-present to us aspects of the English society so do his romances reveal the "worldness" of the colonialist world: the "racial romances" are a direct manifestation of the shape and strength of colonialist ideology.

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