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THE NOVEL IN AFRICA

J.M. COETZEE



The Novel in Africa

THE DOREEN B. TOWNSEND CENTER FOR THE HUMANITIES was established at the University of California at Berkeley in 1987 in order to promote interdisciplinary studies in the humanities. Endowed by Doreen B. Townsend, the Center awards fellowships to advanced graduate students and untenured faculty on the Berkeley campus, and supports interdisciplinary working groups, lectures, and team-taught graduate seminars. It also sponsors symposia and conferences which strengthen research and teaching in the humanities, arts, and related social science fields. The Center is directed by Randolph Starn, Professor of History and Italian Studies. Christina M. Gillis has been Associate Director of the Townsend Center since 1988.

Introduced by Randolph Starn, Director of the Townsend Center of the Humanities, *The Novel in Africa* is the text of the most recent Una's Lecture, delivered by South African novelist J.M. Coetzee on November 11, 1998. While a Coetzee text, one critic has noted, "typically produces irritation or discomfort" in a reader, *The Novel in Africa*, as Professor Starn suggests, produces surprise as well: the lecture is embedded in a fiction, and functions as both a lecture and a segment in a short story.

Una's Lectures in the Humanities, endowed in memory of Una Smith Ross, Berkeley class of 1911, and administered by the Townsend Center, are intended to bring to the University a "deeper understanding of human beings and their achievements." J.M. Coetzee is twenty-ninth in the list of distinguished individuals who have held Una's Lectureship at Berkeley.

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Preface

When, in 1971, Edward Hunter Ross established Una's Gift in memory of his wife (B. A. 1911; M. A. 1913), one purpose was to bring original minds and true seekers from afar into our midst at Berkeley. No one could better fit that mandate and the Townsend Center's particular interest this year in internationalizing the humanities than the 29th Una's lecturer.

Though best known for his novels—seven so far, translated into at least twenty languages, several of them recipients of prizes and honors around the world—J. M. Coetzee was educated in his native South Africa and then in the U. S. in mathematics, computer science, and linguistics. He took a Ph.D in literature at the University of Texas (1969) with a dissertation on Beckett and began publishing fiction only in the early 1970s, just before leaving this country under the cloud of Vietnam-era protests to return to the maimed South Africa of apartheid. At once a decidedly South African writer and a fully cosmopolitan one, Coetzee is also an academic—he is Arderne Professor of English at the University of Cape Town—and a literary intellectual with engagements at home and abroad in literary history and criticism, translation, political and cultural commentary, and, most recently, autobiography.

A collection of Coetzee's essays framed by interviews with David Attwell refers for its title, *Doubling the Point* (1992), to a passage from *Foe*, a novel Coetzee published in 1986. The Daniel Defoe/Robinson Crusoe character of the novel says:

In a life of writing books I have often, believe me, been lost in the maze of doubting. The trick I have learned is to plant a sign or marker in the ground where I stand, so that in my future wanderings I shall have something to return to, and not get worse lost than I am. Having planted it, I press on; the more often I come back to the mark... the more certainly I know I am lost, yet the more I am heartened too, to have found my way back.

The interviews with David Attwell “double the point” many times over. They are dialogues—and they double as autobiography and literary criticism. The cited passage is not just a pretext for a title. The fictional author, “Foe,” doubles well enough for the actual author in setting out, coming back to the “trick” of a planted sign or marker, then setting out again. “There is,” Coetzee remarks in one interview, “a true sense in which writing is dialogic; a matter of awakening counter-voices in oneself and embarking on speech with them.” Studied ambivalences have served his countering of ethical and political compulsions of an either/or kind, the terrible symmetries of totalizing ideologies and self-righteous simplifications that end up reproducing one another. Then again, Coetzee has consistently “doubled the point” in the sense of raising the stakes, by calling to account against one another his mixed commitments as a white South African writer in English with a private vision and allegiances to literary modernism.

This scrupulous reflexivity regularly trumps any category that a reader or critic might wish to impose upon it, including the categories I have just offered. Two collections of Coetzee’s essays deal extensively with literature in Africa. *White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa* (1988) concentrates on the 1920s and 30s; *Giving Offense: Essays on Censorship* (1996), though not focused exclusively on South Africa, was mostly written in the early 1990s with the censorship regulations of the apartheid regime still in force. The title of the Una lecture prepared us for an update and hinted at an argument: not the African novel, not the novel and Africa, of Africa or for Africa, but “the novel in Africa,” with the interplay of occupation and displacement the words suggest. The lecture as delivered on November 11, 1998, actually turned out to be a brilliant tale which John Coetzee has generously

allowed us to publish, slightly revised, as the Townsend Center's seventeenth *Occasional Paper*.

Like other Coetzee fables, this one figures real oppositions in emblematic characters and settings, then presses them to some extremity where differences begin, momentarily at least, to collapse. A middle-aged Australasian lady novelist and a Nigerian author on the international circuit have signed on to the culture program of a Scandinavian cruise ship headed for Africa via Antarctica. Elizabeth Costello gives a stale talk on the future of the novel; Emmanuel Egudu a rousing one on the novel in Africa. Neither believes in the other or, for that matter, in him- or herself. One says, without conviction, that novels are about the past; the other, while exploiting the author's perquisites and the institution of literature, proclaims that the novel is an imperial prop in Africa where culture is "essentially" embodied and oral. We have here, if I dare say so, more doubling to contend with: contrasting characters and arguments; lectures within fables; even a character, Elizabeth Costello, who appears as the voice of animal rights in John Coetzee's latest book, *The Lives of Animals* (Princeton 1999), based on his Tanner lectures at Princeton University. Coetzee has assayed the truth-telling value of different literary genres in his writing, from the explorer's narrative to variations on the novel. The format of fictional lectures is another foray along these lines. The lectures and the story are drawn out on a chilly antipodal sea of exotic fauna and bad faith toward a denouement that leaves one wondering whether sides have been taken somewhere betwixt and between—or not.

I don't have the obligation of a literary critic to decide questions such as this. Nor, perhaps, does the literary critic in the face of a story that tweaks literary criticism. The calculus of exploration is what matters here in any case, not the answers, or at least not the easy answers. Coetzee's cruise ship will never come to port, but I can fairly promise that readers of his story will be fascinated and instructed by the voyage of an exacting and powerful literary intelligence

—Randolph Starn
Director, Townsend Center for the Humanities
Marian E. Koshland Distinguished Professor in the Humanities

The Novel in Africa

J.M. Coetzee

At a dinner party she meets X, whom she has not seen for years. Is he still teaching at the University of Queensland, she asks? No, he replies, he has retired and now works the cruise ships, travelling the world, screening old movies, talking about Bergman and Fellini to retired people. He has never regretted the move. “The pay is good, you get to see the world, and—do you know what?—people that age actually listen to what you have to say.” He urges her to give it a try: “You are a prominent figure, a well-known writer. The cruise line I work for will jump to take you on, you will be a feather in their cap. Say but the word and I’ll bring it up with my friend the director.”

The proposal interests her. She was last on a ship in 1958, when she sailed from Sydney to England, to the Mother Country. Soon after that they began to retire the great ocean-going liners, one by one, and scrap them. The end of an era. She would not mind doing it again, going to sea. She would like to see Easter Island and St. Helena, where Napoleon languished. She would like to visit Antarctica—not just to see those vast horizons, that barren waste of ice, but to set foot on the seventh and last continent, know what it is to be a living creature in a land of inhuman cold.

X is as good as his word. From the headquarters of Scandia Lines in Stockholm comes a fax. In December the *S.S. Northern Lights* will be sailing from Christchurch on a fifteen-day cruise to the Ross Ice Shelf, and then on to Cape Town. Might she be interested in joining the education and entertainment staff? Passengers on Scandia's cruise ships are, as the letter puts it, "discriminating persons who take their leisure seriously." The emphasis of the on-board program will be on ornithology and cold-water ecology, but Scandia would be delighted if the noted writer Elizabeth Costello could find the time to offer a course on, say, the contemporary novel. In return for which, and for making herself accessible to passengers, she will be offered an A-class berth, all expenses paid, with air connections to Christchurch and from Cape Town, and a substantial honorarium to boot.

It is an offer she cannot refuse. On the morning of December 10 she joins the ship in Christchurch harbour. Her cabin, she finds, is small but otherwise quite satisfactory; the young man who coordinates the entertainment and self-development program is respectful; the passengers at her table at lunchtime, in the main retired people, people of her own generation, are pleasant and unostentatious.

Among her new colleagues there is only one she knows: Emmanuel Egudu, a writer from Nigeria. She first met him years ago, more years than she cares to remember, at a PEN conference in Kuala Lumpur. He had been loud and fiery then; she had thought him somewhat of a *poseur*. But at least there will be someone to talk to, someone who will, in a sense, be on her side.

Egudu spends little time nowadays in his native country. He makes his living on the lecture circuit, a circuit wide enough, it would seem, to encompass the cruise ships. This will be his third trip on the *Northern Lights*. Very restful, he says; very relaxing. Who would have guessed, he says, that a country boy like me would end up this way? And he gives her his big smile.

I'm a country girl myself, she would like to say, but does not. *Nothing special in being from the country*.

Each of the entertainment staff is expected to give a short public talk. "Just to explain who you are, where you come from," explains the young co-

ordinator in carefully idiomatic English. His name is Mikail, he is handsome in his tall, blond Swedish way, but dour, too dour for her.

Her talk is advertised as “The Future of the Novel,” Egudu’s as “The Novel in Africa.” She is scheduled to speak on the morning of their first day out to sea; he will speak the same afternoon. In the evening comes “The Lives of Whales,” with sound recordings.

Mikail himself does the introduction. “The famous Australian writer,” he calls her, “author of *The House on Eccles Street* and many other novels, whom we are truly privileged to have in our midst.” It irritates her to be linked once more to a book from so far in her past, but there is nothing she can do about that.

“The Future of the Novel” is a talk she has given before, in fact, many times before, expanded or contracted depending on the occasion. No doubt there are expanded and contracted versions of the novel in Africa and the lives of whales too. For the present occasion she has selected the contracted version.

“The future of the novel is not a subject I am much interested in,” she begins, trying to give her auditors a jolt. “In fact the future in general does not much interest me. The future is, after all, only a structure of hopes and expectations. It resides in the mind, it has no reality.

“Of course you might reply that the past is likewise a fiction. The past is history, and what is history but a story we tell ourselves, a mental construct? But there is something miraculous about the past that the future lacks. What is miraculous about the past is that whole nations, perhaps even humankind as a whole, have succeeded in making thousands and millions of individual fictions—the fictions borne by individual human beings cohere well enough to give us a shared past, a shared history.

“The future is different. We do not have a shared fiction of the future. The creation of the past seems to have exhausted our collective creative energies. Compared with our fiction of the past, our fiction of the future is a sketchy, barren, bloodless affair, as all visions of heaven tend to be. Of heaven and even of hell.”

The novel, the traditional novel, she goes on to say, is an attempt to understand a human fate, to understand how it is that someone, some fellow being, having started at point A, and having gone through experiences B and C and D, ends up at point Z. The novel is thus, like history, an exercise in constructing the past. Like history too, the novel is an investigation into the power of character and the power of circumstance. By exploring the power of the past to produce the present, the novel suggests how we may explore the potential of the present to produce the future. That is what the novel does, or can do. That is why we have it.

She is not sure, reading her text, whether she any longer believes in what she is saying. These ideas must have had some grip on her when she first wrote them down years ago, but after so many rehearsals they have begun to seem tired, unconvincing. On the other hand, she no longer believes very strongly in belief. Things can be true, it seems to her, even if one does not believe in them, and conversely. Belief may be no more, after all, than a source of energy, like a battery into which one plugs the idea to make it run. Like what happens when one writes: believing whatever has to be believed in order to get the job done.

If she has trouble believing in her argument, she has even greater trouble in preventing that lack of conviction from emerging in her voice. Despite the fact that she is the noted novelist, author of, as Mikail says, *The House on Eccles Street* and other books, despite the fact that her audience is of her generation and ought therefore to share a common past with her, the applause at the end of her talk lacks enthusiasm.

For Emmanuel Egudu's talk she sits inconspicuously in the back row. They have in the meantime had a good lunch; they are sailing south on what are still placid seas; there is every chance that some of the good folk in the audience—numbering, she would guess, about fifty—are going to nod off. In fact, who knows, she might nod off herself; in which case it would be best to do so unnoticed.

“You will be wondering why I have chosen as my topic the novel in Africa,” Emmanuel begins, in his effortlessly booming voice. “What is so special about the novel in Africa? What makes it different, different enough to demand our attention?”

“Well, let us see. We all know, in the first place, that the alphabet, the idea of the alphabet, did not grow up in Africa. Many things grew up in Africa, more than you would think, but not the alphabet. The alphabet had to be brought there, first by the Arabs, then again by Westerners. Therefore in Africa writing, script, to say nothing of novel-writing, is a recent affair.

“Is the novel possible without novel-writing, you may ask? Did we in Africa have a novel before our friends the colonizers came? For the time being, let me merely articulate that question. Later I may return to it.

“A second remark: reading is not a typically African recreation. Music, yes; dancing, yes; eating, yes; talking, yes—lots of talking. But reading, no, and particularly not reading fat novels. Reading strikes us Africans as a solitary business, one that leaves us uneasy. When you visit great European cities like Paris and London, you see passengers climbing aboard trains and at once taking books out of their bags or pockets and retreating into their solitary worlds. Each time the book comes out it is like a sign held up. *Leave me alone*, says the sign: *I am reading. What I am reading is more interesting than you could possibly be.*

“Well, we are not like that in Africa. We do not like to cut ourselves off from other people and retreat into private worlds. And we are not used to neighbours of ours retreating into private worlds. Africa is a continent where people share. Reading a book by yourself is not sharing. It is like eating alone or talking alone. It is not our way. We find it a bit crazy.”

We, we, we, she thinks. *We Africans. It is not our way.* She has never liked *we* in its exclusive form. Emmanuel may have grown older but he has not changed. Africanness: a special identity, a special fate.

She has been to Africa: to the highlands of Kenya, to Zimbabwe, to the Okavango swamps. She has seen Africans reading, ordinary Africans, at bus stops, in trains. They were not reading novels, admittedly, they were reading newspapers. But is a newspaper not as much a private world as a novel?

“In the third place,” says Egudu, “in the great world-system under which we live today, Africa has become the home of poverty. Africans have no money for

luxuries. In Africa, a book must give you something in return for the money you spend on it. What do I stand to learn by reading this story? an African will ask. How will it advance me? We may deplore the attitude but we cannot simply dismiss it. We must take it seriously and try to understand it.

“We do make books in Africa, but the books we make are for children, teaching-books in the simplest sense. If you want to make money publishing books in Africa, your best hope is to put out books that will be prescribed for children, that will be bought in quantity by the education system to be read and studied in the classroom. If you are a writer with serious ambitions, wanting to write novels about adults and the matters that concern adults, you will struggle to find publication. All too often you will have to look abroad for salvation.

“Of course it is not the whole picture I am giving you here today, ladies and gentlemen of the *Northern Lights*. To give you the whole picture would take all afternoon. I am giving you only a crude, hasty sketch. Of course there are publishers in Africa, one here, one there, who will support local writers even if they will never make money from them. But in the broad picture, stories and storytelling provide a livelihood neither for writers nor for publishers.

“So much for the depressing generalities. Now let us turn our attention to ourselves, to you and to me. Here I am, you know who I am, the program tells you: Emmanuel Egudu, from Nigeria, author of novels, poems, plays—winner, even, of a Commonwealth Literary Award (Africa Division). And here you are, wealthy folk, or at least comfortable, as you say (I am not wrong, am I?), from North America and Europe and of course let us not forget our Australasian representation, and perhaps I have heard the odd word of Japanese spoken in the corridors, taking a cruise on this splendid ship, on your way to inspect one of the remoter corners of the globe, to check it out, perhaps to check it off. Here you are, after a good lunch, listening to this African fellow talk.

“What, I imagine you asking yourselves, is the African fellow doing on board? Why isn’t he back at his desk in the land of his birth doing what he was born to do, if he really is a writer, namely, writing books? What is he doing here going on about the African novel, a subject that can only be of the most peripheral concern to us?

“The short answer, ladies and gentlemen, is that he is earning a living. In his own country he cannot earn a living. In his own country (I will not belabour the point, I raise it only because it holds true for so many fellow African writers) he is in fact less than welcome. In his own country he is what is called a dissident intellectual, and dissident intellectuals must tread carefully in the Nigeria of today.

“He is here, abroad, earning his living. He earns a living by writing books that are published and read and talked about and judged, for the most part, by foreigners. He earns a living, too, from the spinoffs of his writing. He reviews books by other writers in the press of Europe and America. He teaches in colleges in America, telling the youth of America about the exotic subject on which he is an expert in the same way that an elephant is an expert on elephants—the African novel. He addresses conferences; he sails on cruise ships. While so occupied, he lives in hotel rooms or rented apartments. He has temporary addresses but no fixed abode.

“How easy do you think it is, ladies and gentlemen, for this fellow to be true to his essence as writer when there are all those strangers he has to please, day after day—publishers, readers, critics, students, all of them coming to the fray armed not only with their own ideas about what writing is or should be, what the novel is or should be, what Africa is or should be, but also about what being pleased is or should be? Do you think it is possible for this fellow to remain untouched by all the pressure on him to please others, to be for them what they think he should be and to produce for them what they think he should produce?

“You may not have noticed, but I slipped in, a moment ago, a word that should have made you sit up and prick your ears. I spoke about my essence and about being true to my essence. Given half a chance I would speak at greater length about the essence of being African, about the essence of African writing; but this is not the occasion. Nevertheless, you must be asking, how do I justify the notion of essence in these anti-essential days, these days of fleeting identities that we pick up and wear and discard like clothing?

“Around essentialism there has of course been a history of turmoil in modern African thought. You may have heard of the Negritude movement of the

1940s and 1950s. According to the founders of the movement, negritude is the essential substratum that binds Africans together and makes them unique—not only the Africans of Africa but Africans of the great African diaspora in the New World and now in Europe.

“I want to quote some words to you from the great Senegalese writer and thinker Cheikh Hamidou Kane. Cheikh Hamidou was being questioned by an interviewer. ‘I have some reservations,’ said the interviewer, ‘about what you call African writers and African writing. In view of the fact that the African authors you refer to write in a foreign language (in this case French) and are published and, for the most part, read in a foreign country (in this case France), can they truly be considered African? Are they not simply French writers of African origin? Why should national origin take precedence over language?’

“This is Cheikh Hamidou’s reply: ‘They are truly African because they are born in Africa, they live in Africa, their [sensibility] is African... [What distinguishes them lies in] vital experiences, in sensitivity, in rhythm, in style.’ He goes on: ‘A French or English writer has thousands of years of written tradition [behind him]... We [on the contrary] are heirs to an oral traditon.’¹

“It is not a mystical response that Cheikh Hamidou is offering here. It is not metaphysical. It is not even anti-materialist. It is certainly not racist. It merely gives proper weight to those intangibles of culture which, because they are not easily pinned down in words, are easily passed over. The way that people live in their bodies. The way they move their hands. The way they walk. The way they smile or frown. The lilt of their speech. The way they sing. The timbre of their voices. The way they dance. The way they touch each other; how the hand lingers; the feel of the fingers. The way they make love. The way they lie after they have made love. The way they think. The way they sleep.

“We African novelists can embody these things in our writings (and let me remind you at this point that the word *novel*, when it entered European currency, meant almost nothing, it meant the form that was formless, that had no rules, that made up its own rules as it went along, that was all it meant)—we African novelists can bring it off because we have not lost touch with the body.

The African novel, the true African novel, is an oral novel. On the page it is inert, only half alive; it wakes up when the voice breathes into it, when it is spoken aloud.

“The African novel is thus, I would claim, in its very being, and before the first word is written, a critique of the Western novel, which has gone so far down the road of writing—think of Henry James, think of Proust—that the only appropriate way in which to read it is in silence and in solitude. And I will close these remarks, ladies and gentlemen—I see time is getting short — by quoting, in support of my position and Cheikh Hamidou’s, not from an African, but from a man from the snowy wastes of Canada, the great scholar of orality Paul Zumthor.

‘Since the seventeenth century,’ writes Zumthor, ‘Europe has spread itself across the world like a cancer; stealthily at first, but now for some time [running] wild, ravaging today all sorts of [life-forms], animals, plants, [habitats], languages. With each passing day, several languages of the world disappear: repudiated, choked out... One of the symptoms of this plague was from the beginning... what we call literature: and literature has gained ground, prospered, and become what it is—one of the vastest dimensions of man—by denying voice. We must stop... privileging writing.... Perhaps the great and unfortunate Africa, pauperized by our political industrial imperialism, will find herself closer to the goal than the other continents, because she is less seriously touched by writing.’²

The applause after Egudu’s talk is loud and spirited. He has spoken with force, perhaps even with passion; he has stood up for himself, for his calling, for his people; why should he not have his reward, even if what he says can have little relevance to the lives of his audience? Nevertheless, she does not like it, does not like the mystique of orality. Always the body that is insisted on, pushed before one, and the voice, dark essence of the body, welling up from within it. She had expected Emmanuel would grow out of it, but evidently he has not, evidently he has decided to keep it as part of his professional pitch. Well, good luck to him. There is still time for questions; she hopes they will be searching.

The first questioner is, if she is to judge from the accent, from the Midwest of the United States. The first novel she ever read by an African, the woman

says, was by Amos Tutuola, she forgets the title now. (“*The Palm Wine Drinkard*,” suggests Egudu. “Yes, that’s it,” she replies.) She was captivated by it. She thought it was a portent of great things to come. So she was disappointed, terribly disappointed, to hear that Tutuola was not respected in his own country, that educated Nigerians disparaged him and considered his reputation unmerited. Was this true? Was Tutuola the kind of oral novelist our lecturer had in mind? What has happened to Tutuola? Have more of his books been translated?

“No,” responds Egudu, “Tutuola has not been translated any further, in fact he has not been translated at all, at least not into English. The reason is that he did not need to be translated, he had written in English all along, which is the root of the problem that the questioner alludes to. The language of Amos Tutuola is English, but not standard English, not the English that Nigerians of the 1950s went to school and college to learn. It is the language of a semi-educated clerk, a man with no more than elementary schooling, barely comprehensible to an outsider, fixed up for publication by British editors. Where Tutuola’s writing was frankly illiterate they corrected it; what they refrained from correcting was what seemed authentically Nigerian to them, that is to say, what sounded to their ears picturesque, exotic, folkloric.

“From what I have just been saying,” Egudu continues, “you may imagine that I too disapprove of Tutuola or the Tutuola phenomenon. But in fact that is not so. Tutuola was repudiated by so-called educated Nigerians because they were embarrassed by him—embarrassed that they might be lumped with him as natives who do not know how to write proper English. No, I am on Tutuola’s side. Tutuola is or was a gifted storyteller. I am glad you liked his book. Several more books penned by him were put out in England, though none, I would say, as good as *The Palm Wine Drinkard*. And, yes, he is the kind of writer I was referring to, an oral writer. I have answered you at length because the case of Tutuola is so instructive. What makes Tutuola stand out is that he did not adjust his language to the expectations—or to what he might have thought, had he been less naive, would be the expectations—of the foreigners who would read and judge him. Not knowing better, he wrote as he spoke. He therefore had to yield in a particularly helpless way to being packaged for the West, to being packaged as an African exotic.

“But, ladies and gentlemen, who among African writers is not exotic? The truth is, in the West all Africans are exotic, that is our fate. Even here, on this ship sailing toward the continent that ought to be the most exotic of all, in the sense that it has no natives except the walrus and the penguin, I can sense I am exotic.”

There is a ripple of laughter; Egudu smiles his big smile, engaging, to all appearances spontaneous. But she cannot believe it is a true smile, cannot believe it comes from the heart, if that is where smiles come from. If being an exotic is a fate then his is a terrible fate; she cannot believe Egudu does not know that, know it and rebel against it. The one black face in this sea of white.

“But let me return to your question,” Egudu continues. “You have read Tutuola—now read my countryman Ben Okri. Amos Tutuola’s is a very simple, very stark case. Okri’s is not. Okri is an heir of Tutuola’s, or they are the heirs of common ancestors, but Okri negotiates the contradictions of being himself for other people (excuse the jargon, but there are times when I must show that I too can be a literary critic) in a much more complex way. Read Okri. You will find the experience instructive.”

The Novel in Africa was intended, like all the shipboard talks, to be a light affair. Nothing on the shipboard program is intended to be a heavy affair. Egudu, unfortunately, is threatening to be heavy. With a discreet nod the entertainment director, the tall Swedish boy in his light blue uniform, signals from the wings; and gracefully, easily, Egudu obeys, bringing his talk to an end.



The crew of the Northern Lights is Russian, as are the stewards. In fact, everyone but the officers and the management elite is Russian. Music on board is provided by a balalaika orchestra—five men, five women. The dinner-time music is too schmaltzy for her taste; after dinner, in the ballroom, it becomes livelier.

The leader of the orchestra, and occasional singer, is a blonde in her early thirties. She has a smattering of English, enough to make the announcements. “We play piece that is called in Russian *My Little Dove*. *My Little Dove*.” Her *dove*

rhymes with *stove* rather than *love*. With its trills and swoops, the piece sounds Hungarian, sounds gipsy, sounds Jewish, sounds everything but Russian; but who is she, Elizabeth Costello, country girl, to say?

She is seated at a table with a couple from Manchester, having a drink. They have both enrolled, they tell her, in her course, and are looking forward to it. They are not at all like her idea of Manchester. The man is long-bodied, sleek, silvery: she thinks of him as a gannet. The woman is petite, sensual. Steve and Shirley. She suspects they are not married.

To her relief, the conversation turns not to her and her books but to ocean currents, about which Steve appears to know all there is to know, and to the tiny beings, tons of them to the square mile, whose life consists in being swept in serene fashion through these icy waters, eating and being eaten, multiplying and dying, ignored by history. Ecological tourists, that is what Steve and Shirley call themselves. Last year the Amazon, this year the southern ocean.

Egudu is standing at the entrance-way to the lounge, looking around for a familiar face. She gives a wave and he comes over. "Join us," she says. "Emmanuel. Shirley. Steve."

They compliment Emmanuel on his lecture. "I was thinking, as you spoke," says Shirley, "that the printed book is probably not the right medium for you. Have you thought about composing straight on to tape? Why make the detour through print? Why even make a detour through writing? Speak your story direct."

"What a clever idea!" says Emmanuel. "It won't solve the problem for the whole of Africa, but let me give it some thought."

"Why won't it solve the problem for Africa?"

"Because I'm afraid Africans will want more than just to sit in silence listening to a tape spinning in a little machine. That would be too much like idolatry. Africans want the living presence, the living voice."

The living voice. There is silence as the three of them try to imagine what he can mean.

“Are you sure about that?” she says, imposing herself for the first time. “Africans don’t object to listening to the radio. A radio isn’t a living presence. What you seem to be demanding is not just a voice but a performance: a living actor before you, performing your text. If that is what you demand, then I agree, a recording can’t take its place. But the novel was never intended to be the script of a performance. From the beginning the novel has made a virtue of not depending on being performed. You can’t have both live performance and cheap, easy distribution. It’s not possible. If that is what is demanded of the novel—to be a pocket-sized block of paper that is at the same time alive—then the novel has no future in Africa.”

“No future,” says Egudu reflectively. “Then what is your answer, Elizabeth?”

“My answer to what? I don’t have an answer. I do have an alternative question. Why are there so many African novelists around and yet no African novel worth speaking of? That seems to me the real question. And you gave a clue to the answer yourself in your talk. Exoticism. Exoticism and its seductions.”

“Exoticism and its seductions? Tell us what you mean, Elizabeth.”

If it were only a matter of Emmanuel she would, at this point, walk out. She is tired of his jeering. But before strangers, before *customers*, they still have a front to maintain, she and he both.

“The English novel,” she says, “is written in the first place by English people for English people. The Russian novel is written by Russians for Russians. But the African novel is not written by Africans for Africans. African novelists may write about Africa, about African experience, but they are glancing over their shoulder all the time as they write at the foreigners who will read them. Whether they like it or not, they have assumed the role of interpreter, interpreting Africa to the world. Yet how can you explore a world in all its depth if at the same time you are having to explain it to outsiders? It is like a scientist trying to give his full creative attention to an investigation while at the same time explaining what he is doing to a class of ignorant students. It is too much for one person, it can’t be achieved, not at the deepest level. That, it seems to me, is the root of your problem. Having to perform your Africanness at the same time as you write.”

“Very good, Elizabeth!” says Egudu. “You really understand; you put it very well!” He reaches out, pats her on the shoulder.

If we were alone, she thinks, I would slap him.

“If, as you say, I understand, then that is only because we in Australia have been through the same trial, and come out at the other end. We finally got out of the habit of writing for strangers in the 1960s, when a proper Australian readership grew to maturity. Not a writership—that already existed. We got out of it when our market, our Australian market, decided that it could afford to support a homegrown literature. That seems to be the lesson. That is what Africa could learn from us.”

Emmanuel is silent, but continues to wear his ironic smile.

“I’m interested in the way you talk,” says Steve. “You talk as if writing were a business, a matter of markets. I was expecting something different.”

“Oh? What?”

“You know: how you get inspiration, and so forth.”

Inspiration. Now that he has produced the word he seems embarrassed. There is another awkward silence.

Emmanuel speaks. “Elizabeth and I go way back. We have had lots of disagreements in our time. That doesn’t alter things between us—does it, Elizabeth? We are colleagues, fellow-writers. We belong to the great, worldwide writing fraternity.”

He is challenging her, trying to get a rise out of her before these strangers. But she is too weary to take up the challenge. Not fellow-writers, she thinks: fellow-entertainers. Why else are they on board this expensive ship, *making themselves available*, as the invitation so candidly put it, to people who bore them and whom they are beginning to bore?

Emmanuel is restless, she can sense that. He has had enough of them; he wants someone new.

Their chanteuse has come to the end of her set. There is a light ripple of applause. She bows, bows a second time, takes up her balalaika. The band strikes up a Cossack dance.

What irritates her most about Emmanuel, what she has the good sense not to bring up in front of Steve and Shirley because it will lead only to unseemliness, is the way he makes every disagreement a matter of personality. As for his beloved oral novel, she finds the concept muddled. She suspects that Emmanuel and his friends in the African novel business know it is muddled too, but will go on touting it as long as it serves their own purposes. “A novel about people who live in an oral culture,” she would like to say, “is not an oral novel. Just as a novel about women isn’t a women’s novel.”

In her opinion, all of Emmanuel’s talk of an oral novel, a novel that has kept touch with the human voice and hence with the human body, a novel that is not disembodied like the Western novel, but speaks the body and the body’s truth, is intended to prop up the old mystique of the African as the last repository of primal human energies. Emmanuel blames his western publishers and his western readers for driving him to exoticize Africa; but Emmanuel has a stake in exoticizing himself. Emmanuel, she happens to know, has not written a book of any substance in ten years. When she first met him he could still honourably call himself a writer. Now his living is made on the lecture circuit. His books—if they are even in print any longer—are there as credentials, no more. A fellow-entertainer he may be; a fellow-writer he is not, not any longer. He is on the circuit for the money, and for other rewards too. Sex, for instance. He is dark and exotic, he is in touch with life’s energies; if he is no longer young, at least he wears his years with distinction. What Swedish girl would not be a pushover?

She finishes her drink. “I’m retiring,” she says. “Good night Steve, Shirley. See you tomorrow. Good night, Emmanuel.”



She wakes up in utter stillness. The clock says four-thirty. The ship’s engines have stopped. She glances through the porthole. There is fog outside, but

through the fog she can glimpse land no more than a kilometre away. Macquarie Island it must be: she had thought they would not arrive for hours yet.

She dresses and emerges into the corridor. At the same moment the door to cabin A-230 opens and the Russian emerges, the singer. She is wearing the same outfit as last night, the port-wine blouse and wide black trousers; she carries her boots in her hand. In the unkind overhead light she looks nearer to forty than to thirty. They avert their eyes as they pass each other.

A-230 is Egudu's cabin, she knows that.

She makes her way to the upper deck. Already there are a handful of passengers, snugly dressed against the cold, leaning against the railings, peering down.

The sea beneath them is alive with what seem to be fish, large, glossy-skinned black fish that bob and tumble and leap in the swell. She has never seen anything like it.

"Penguins," says the man next to her. "King penguins. They have come to greet us. They don't know what we are."

"Oh," she says. And then: "So innocent? Are they so innocent?"

The man regards her oddly, turns back to his companion.

They will stand off Macquarie until noon, long enough for those passengers who so wish to visit the island. She has put her name down for the visiting party.

The first boat leaves after breakfast. The approach to the landing is difficult, across shelving rock and through thick beds of kelp. In the end she has to be half-helped ashore by one of the sailors, half-carried, as if she were an old woman. He has blue eyes, blond hair. Through his waterproofs she feels his youthful strength. She rides in his arms as safe as a baby. "Thank you!" she says gratefully when he sets her down; but to him it is nothing, just a service he is paid to do, no more personal than the service of a hospital nurse.

She has read about Macquarie Island. In the last century it used to be the centre of the penguin industry. Hundreds of thousands of penguins were clubbed to death here and flung into cast-iron steam boilers to be broken down into useful oil and useless residue. Or not clubbed to death, merely herded with sticks up a gangplank and over the edge into the seething cauldron.

Yet their descendants seem to have learned nothing. Still they swim out to welcome their visitors; still they call out greetings to them as they approach the rookeries (“Ho! Ho!” they call, for all the world like gruff little men). They allow visitors to approach close enough to touch them, to stroke their sleek breasts.

The boats will carry them back again at ten. Until then they are free to explore the island. There is an albatross colony on the hillside; they are welcome to photograph the birds, but are urged not to approach too closely, not to alarm them. It is breeding season.

She wanders away from the rest of the landing party, finding herself eventually on a plateau above the coastline, walking on a vast bed of matted grass.

Suddenly, unexpectedly, there is something before her. For a moment she thinks it is a rock, smooth white mottled with grey. Then she sees it is a bird, bigger than any bird she has seen before. She recognizes the long, dipping beak, the huge sternum. An albatross.

The albatross regards her steadily and, it seems to her, with amusement. Sticking out from beneath it is a smaller version of the same long beak. The fledgling is more hostile. It opens its beak, gives a long silent cry of warning.

So she and the two birds remain, inspecting each other.

Before the fall, she thinks. This is how it was before the fall. I could miss the boat, stay here. God could take care of me.

There is someone behind her. She turns. It is the Russian woman, dressed now in a dark green anorak, with the hood open and her hair tied down with a kerchief.

“An albatross,” she remarks to the woman, speaking softly. “That is the English word. I don’t know what they call themselves.”

The woman nods. The great bird regards them calmly, no more afraid of two than of one.

“Isn’t Emmanuel with you?” she says.

“No. On ship.”

“You are a friend of his, I know,” she presses on. “I am too, or have been. May I ask: what do you see in him?”

It is an odd question, presumptuous, even rude. But it seems to her that on this island, on a visit that will never be repeated, anything can be said.

“What I see?” says the woman.

“Yes. What do you see? What is the source of his charm? What do you like in him?”

The woman shrugs. Her hair is dyed, she can now see. Forty if a day, probably with a household to support back home, one of those Russian establishments with a crippled grandmother and a husband who drinks too much and beats her and a layabout son and a daughter with a shaven head and purple lipstick. A woman who can sing a little but will, one of these days, sooner rather than later, be over the hill. Playing the balalaika to foreigners, singing Russian kitsch, picking up tips.

“He is free. You speak Russian? No?”

She shakes her head.

“German?”

“A little.”

“Er ist freigebig. Ein guter Mann.”

Freigebig—generous—spoken with the heavy g’s of Russian. Is Emmanuel

generous? She does not know. Not the first word that would occur to her. Large, perhaps. Large in his gestures.

“*Aber kaum zu vertrauen*,” she remarks to the woman. Years since she last spoke the language. Is that what they spoke together in bed last night: German, the new imperial tongue? *Kaum zu vertrauen*, not to be trusted: she hopes she is getting it right.

The woman shrugs again. “*Die Zeit ist kurz. Man kann nicht alles haben.*” There is a pause. The woman speaks again. “*Auch die Stimme. Sie macht dass man*”—she searches for the word— “*man schaudert.*”

Schaudern. Shudder. The voice makes one shudder. Between the two of them passes what is perhaps the beginning of a smile. As for the bird, they have been there long enough, the bird is losing interest. Only the fledgling, peering out from beneath its mother, is still wary of them.

The voice. She remembers the year she met Emmanuel Egudu, when she was young, or nearly young, when she slept with him three nights in succession. “The oral poet,” she said to him teasingly. “Show me what an oral poet can do.” And he opened her out, spread her, put his lips to her ears, opened them, breathed his breath into her, showed her.

NOTES

1. Quoted in Phaniel A. Egejuru, *Towards African Literary Independence* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1980) pp. 87-88.
2. Quoted in Eileen Julien, *African Novels and the Question of Orality* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992) pp. 12-13.

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