Modernism in James Joyce's *Ulysses* and Wole Soyinka's *The Interpreters*

Djelloul BOURAHLA

The purpose of this dissertation is to challenge the orthodox view of Modernism as an art dismissive of politics, history and social commitment and as exclusively oriented towards style, technique and cosmopolitanism. By comparing James Joyce's *Ulysses* and Wole Soyinka's *The Interpreters*, we aim at redefining European and African Modernism through taking the colonial and postcolonial contexts into account and employing a neo-Marxist critical approach to assess the political implications of the Modernist mode of writing.

By mode of writing we mean the unifying characteristics of a group of works experiencing similar historical and social circumstances; what Roland Barthes calls "*écriture*".[1] Traditionally the modernist mode of writing is said to be metaphoric which of course tends to put emphasis on *how* language is used rather than *what* it conveys and implies. Hence Western works that are conventionally labeled Modernist have been perceived as dependent on the aesthetics of autonomy and therefore dismissive of historical social and political attachments.

As inherently apolitical, the appropriation of the Modernist mode of writing by African writers has been viewed by 'Afrocritics' and Lickacsian critics as irrelevant to the African post-colonial situation and as an example of cultural colonization. In their polemical *Toward the Decolonization of African Literature*, the three Nigerian critics Chinweizu, Onwuchekwa Jemie, and Ihechukwu Madubuike assume that poetry and fiction by contemporaries of Wole Soyinka is

> a stiff, pale, anemic poetry, slavishly imitative of 20th century European modernism, with its weak preciosity, ostentatious erudition, and dunghill piles of esterica and obscure allusions, all totally cut off from the vital nourishment of our African traditions and home soil…[2]

Of course, such a view of the African modernist mode of writing and of European Modernism may be justified if analyzed and approached through such literary critical methods as the New Criticism, which has an exaggerated concern with form and questions of literary style and technique, or through traditional Marxist criticism which dismissed Modernism all together as it considered its concern with psychology, the subjective experience of time, and the form of the novel itself a sign of 'introversion' or of a lack of political commitment, corresponding to a rejection of the external reality that concerned nineteenth-century realist novelists.

The problem then is one of approach. If we want to debunk the political ramifications of Modernist works, we should use the appropriate approach (or rather approaches) that would transcend the heavy technical characteristics that mark this kind of literature.

For the purpose at hand, I shall conform, in my analysis of the two works under study, to the definitions that Terry Eagleton suggests in his *Marxism and Literary Criticism.*[3] I shall then stress the inseparable relationship of form and content and argue that both are subversive, thus political. We also read the two novels in the light of Frantz fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*. With its amalgamation of postcolonial and Marxist thought, Fanon's work is most suitable for analyzing the Irish society of *Ulysses* and the Nigerian society of *The Interpreters* under (neo)colonial, petty-bourgeois and capitalist dominance. In addition, intertexuality, analogy and influence are the beacons that will help us clear out way throughout this study. Indeed, by means of comparative analysis, we shall establish Joyce's influence on Soyinka and bring out relations of analogy between the two through an exploration of their historical and social backgrounds.

Of course the most obvious and probably the most important similarity between the two writers is their countries' subjugation to Britain, which affected and dramatically endorsed the political dimension of their writings.

Both Ireland and Nigeria have witnessed divisions within their societies: ethnic, religious and geographical partition characterized much of their pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial history. The partition of Ireland into a northern Protestant province and a southern Catholic republic, which itself had many conflicting powers, resulted into endless social and political squabbles that persist to this very day. The difference with Nigeria is of degree rather than kind. Nigeria comprises over two hundred ethnic groups, each with its own language, customs and traditions. Ethnicity formed one the most acute challenges that faced the colonial and post-colonial Nigerian society and political system. Fragmentation rather than fusion characterized the country, a fragmentation that would culminate in a civil war.

We may also note that the colonial image was almost identical: both Africans and Irish were stereotyped by their colonizers. The image of the African was always that of a 'savage' and a 'primitive'; the Irish was always seen as a 'buffoon' and a drunkard.

At a more personal level it is important to mention that both writers are atheists. Joyce's strong opposition to Catholicism is well known and forms a very important dimension of his writing. Soyinka spent his childhood in Ake, a town in which Christianity prevailed and in Isara, a town that strongly kept committed to many cultural and religious Yoruba beliefs, which explains the fusion of Christian and Yoruba materials in Soyinka's works. But despite this rich religious upbringing, adult Soyinka practices neither the Christian nor the Yoruba religion. It seems that both Joyce and Soyinka saw religion as a system of restrictions that is inadequate for artists and free-thinkers like themselves.

Such an attitude manifests itself also in their life in exile. Joyce's self imposed exile has been given many interpretations: first, the need to free himself from the 'nets' (that is his own family, the catholic church, the Nationalist and British imperialism) that could restrain his artistic growth; second, the ambition to become a cosmopolitan writer; last but not least, to put his art in the service of his country, colonized Ireland. Similarly, Soyinka has also experienced, throughout his life, many years in self imposed exile, all linked to his political activism.

Politics indeed is the salient feature of both authors' writing practice. To start with Joyce's *Ulysses* and its form, we observe that the radical experimental and parodic nature of Joyce's writing has a powerful subversive political force. Such narrative devices as the stream-of-consciousness technique and the interior monologue are essentially meant to challenge the conventions of English literature and therefore challenge the cultural and political status quo. By parodying Homer's *Odyssey* and Greek myths for instance, *Ulysses* attacks the emblems of Western culture; ones which have been used as icons of cultural superiority and justifications for (British) imperialism. As it challenges (cultural) imperialism, Joyce's writing practice enacts a critique to the capitalism that lies behind it through its fragmented form. The fragmented narrative structure of *Ulysses* is a commentary on the shattering effects of imperialism and capitalism on Ireland, a commentary further strengthened by Joyce's linguistic parody.

While equally subversive, parody is not so much central to Soyinka's writing practice. In fact as many other African writers, Soyinka's use of modernist formal strategies such as the stream of consciousness technique, interior monologue and myth shows the influence of Joyce and other modernists on his style. Witness Ngugi's indebtedness to Conrad:

> […] the shifting points of view in time and space; the multiplicity of narrative voices; the narrative-within-a-narration; the delayed information that helps the revision of previous judgment so that only at the end with the full assemblage of evidence, information and points of view, can the reader make full judgment *–these techniques impressed me*. [4] (my italics)

Through altering these techniques to suit local needs, by injecting indigenous forms, Soyinka calls attention to the originality of his style and therefore resists formal 'colonizability'. Actually, the modernist mode of writing in *The Interpreters* expresses the state of disillusionment and disruption in post-independence Nigeria caused by neo-colonialism and 'late capitalism' just in the same way that the formal fragmentation in *Ulysses* performs a linguistic subversion of imperialism and capitalism in Ireland.

At the level of content, the major forces in Irish politics, namely British imperialism, the Catholic Church and Irish nationalism, remain strongly present and crucial throughout *Ulysses* and are identified as the main sources of oppression in Ireland. Stephen Dedalus stands as an opponent force in face of British imperialism in the novel, from his early intellectual confrontation with the Englishman Haines, to his later and more violent encounter with the guardsman Private Carr. The Catholic Church is identified as the primary source of sterility and paralysis in Dublin. These three antithetical forces suggest a paradoxical complicity contributing to the fragmentation of Irish society.

There is also a kinship between imperialism and capitalism, which can be discerned through some important elements in Joyce's criticism of Irish pre-independence society. Capitalism was imposed by British imperialism and was responsible for the alienation of individuals in Dublin. In this sense Leopold Bloom,

Ulysses's main character, can be interpreted not so much as a victim and outsider in Dublin because of his Jewish inheritance, but as the embodiment of a decadent (post)colonial petty-bourgeoisie as characterized by Fanon. Bloom's alienation by bourgeois ideology is mainly manifested by his sentimentality and mimicry of his British masters sardonically satirized by Joyce.

In *The Interpreters* we find the same satirical thrust towards the Nigerian post-colonial bourgeoisie. The Nigerian society is represented as trapped within the ways 'of a traditional bourgeoisie, of a bourgeoisie which is stupidly, contemptibly, cynically bourgeois.'[5] Soyinka pits his main characters, the interpreters, against this emergent decadent bourgeois class. Their attitude is iconoclastic and they provide an effective social critique of the attempts of the Nigerian bourgeoisie to mimic, rather than oppose, their former English masters. It is important to note, however, that these 'interpreters' remain equally trapped, in the same way as Bloom, in a bourgeois ideology they outwardly oppose. Soyinka's 'interpreters' also resemble Joyce's characters in their alienation: as with Bloom, theirs is a direct consequence of the reification of social relations and the fetishization of commodities in the neo-capitalist Nigeria; they are as alienated as Stephen because as disillusioned intellectuals, they feel no linkage to any other social group: they are unredeemable misfits.

In fact, both Joyce and Soyinka show little interest in other social groups (peasants, lumpenprolertariat, the working class) other than their own (petty bourgeoisie and the intellectual elite respectively). Their inability to represent the lives of 'the wretched of the earth' can be regarded as a shortcoming indeed. They are strong in their criticism and subversion of the existing order, but weak on suggestions for possible changes. Even worse, their intense aestheticism alienates them from the majority of the people: the ordinary reader lacks the sophistication of a Jameson or an Eagleton and is, as a result, ill-equipped to discern the political implications of modernist literature. The Modernist mode of writing, therefore, seems to suffer from serious (didactic) shortcomings in its political dimension.

Nevertheless the historical, social and political implications of Modernist texts should constantly be emphasized by critics because they are highly valuable and can have an impact on people's daily lives: the protest strain that characterizes these novels is even more powerful than the one we may find in the realist novel. If the Modernist text appeals so little to 'lowbrow readers', it is not so much because of its difficulty but because of the way in which critics have perceived and stereotyped it: 'the well wrought urn', 'the verbal icon' and 'art for art's sake' have done nothing but discourage the ordinary reader, and has made Modernist literature look like an aimless literature; while on the contrary it is a literature which can evince, through an alert reading, a more complex and sophisticated commitment then its Realist counterpart. It is the task of the critic then to 'democratize' these texts not by solving their technical riddles in order to presumably make them easy, but by relating their form and content to the dominant ideology under which they were produced in order to make them accessible to the ordinary reader.

Références bibliographiques.

[1] "A language and a style are blind forces; a mode of writing is an act of historical solidarity. A language and style are objects; a mode of writing is a function: it is the relationship between creation and society, the literary language transformed by its social finality, form considred as a human intntion and thus linked to the great crises of History." Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero*, trans. Annette Lavers and Colin Smith, New York: Hill and Wang, 1968, p14.

[2] Chinweizu, Onwuchekwa Jemie, and Ihechukwu Madubuike, *Toward the Decolonization of African Literature*, Washignton, DC: Howard Univesity Press, 1983, p3.

[3] "Marxsit criticism is not merly a 'sociology of literature', concerned with how novels get published and whether they mention the working class. Its aim is to *explain* the literary work more fully; and this means a sensitive attention to its forms, styles and meanings. But it also means grasping those forms, styles and meanings as the pruducts of a particular history." Terry Eagleton, *Marxism And Literary Criticism*, London: Rouledge Classics, 2002, p3.

[4] Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, *Homecoming*, New York: Lawrence Hill, p.76

[5] Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, New York: grove Weidenfed, p.150