

Rin Afr. Lib 1612 (1985)

NGUGI WA THIONG'O'S "JOURNEY OF THE MAGI":
PART 2 OF PETALS OF BLOOD

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The structure of Ngugi wa Thiong'o's fourth novel, *Petals of Blood*,¹ has attracted a considerable amount of critical attention: the shaping of the plot by way of carefully delayed revelations, the complex shifts in time, the subtle use of several viewpoints, the interweaving not only of different stories but of different narrative levels—all these aspects have been explored and diagrammed.² In this paper I wish to examine the particular position allotted to the second of the four parts of which the novel consists.

Even at the most immediate level, there are some arresting differences between part 2 and the three others. There are six chapters in the first part, and the first chapter in part 3 is chapter 7. Part 2 thus stands apart from the succession of numbered chapters. This particular status is corroborated by the exceptional use of a second title, "The Journey," beside the title that seals formally the continuity with the other parts: "Toward Bethlehem." The titles of the first three parts—"Walking," "Toward Bethlehem," "To Be Born"—echo the last lines of W. B. Yeats's "Second Coming": "What rough beast / Slouches toward Bethlehem to be born?" though with a notable difference, for the words apply here, not to some "rough beast," but to the people of Ilmorog; hence the substitution of the purposeful "walking" for the ignoble and repulsive "slouches."³

A third indication that part 2 stands on a special footing is its position in relation to Munira's report, this "mixture of an autobiographical confessional and some kind of prison notes" (p. 190) written during the eleven days he spends in jail after the arson of Wanjia's place and the consequent triple murder. This report provides one of the structural frames of the novel. Its main function, I suggest, is occasionally to remind the reader of the police inquiry in the context of which twelve crucial years in the history of Ilmorog are reconstituted. In the six sections of part 2, there is not one single reference to those feverish pages by the schoolmaster, and it is obvious that part 2 cannot belong to the report either: apart from inconsistencies of tone between the two, how could Munira know what happens at Mr. Hawkins's house, or what takes place between Wanjia and Karega when they go to the lawyer, or what thoughts occur to their MP as he ruminates upon his humiliation and the course of his vengeance?⁴

This complete separation from Munira's report is all the more striking as the last lines of part 1 as well as the first line of part 3 belong to the schoolmaster's statement. In chapter 6 he writes: "It

was the journey, . . . it was the exodus across the plains to the Big City that started me on that slow, almost ten-year, inward journey to a position where I can now see that man's estate is rotten at heart" (pp. 117-18). His words there point to another journey of the soul toward understanding, albeit in his case an understanding utterly distorted by his religious fanaticism: "man's estate is rotten at heart," he says, echoing Hamlet, and all we can do is turn to God and obey His orders. The last words on that page—"The journey. The exodus toward the kingdom of knowledge"—have to be similarly interpreted as referring more to that inner journey than to the actual trekking across the plains. While these passages refer to changes in Munira himself, the first words of part 3 stress the importance of the expedition as a turning point in the fortunes of Ilmorog: "Yes, Ilmorog was never quite the same after the journey" (p. 190).

But part 2, the account of the journey itself, is removed from the limiting viewpoint of Munira's report. It exists on its own and is soon to become a legend, part of the running mythical history of the Ilmorog community as it is remembered and sung by the elders. "Nyakinyua, mother of men" (p. 123) is the one who takes upon herself the task of commemoration. At the harvest festival a year after the expedition, they all listen to her singing:

She was singing their recent history. She sang of two years of failing rains; of the arrival of daughters and teachers; of the exodus to the city. . . .

And now it was no longer the drought of a year ago that she was singing about. It was all the droughts of the centuries and the journey was the many journeys travelled by the people even in the mythical lands of two-mouthed Marimus and struggling humans. (pp. 209-10)

It was Nyakinyua too whose eloquent support had won the adhesion of the group to the idea of going as a community to the capital: "We must sing our tune and dance to it. Those out there can also, for a change, dance to the actions and words of us that sweat, of us that feel the pain of bearing. . . . But Ilmorog must go as one voice" (p. 116). Once they were on their way, she was "the spirit that guided and held them together" (p. 123).

After two years without proper rains, famine threatened Ilmorog, and Karega proposed to go tell their MP about their plight as an alternative to the killing of Abdulla's donkey, charged with the crime of being an impenitent grass eater. Clearly, though, the

journey is more than an errand for outside help, it is also a quest for some deeper source of life. And for all main characters involved, as well as for the community as a whole, it turns out to be the starting point of changes far deeper than what they had expected.

There is at least one other famous "Journey" "Toward Bethlehem" in contemporary English literature: T. S. Eliot's "Journey of the Magi." While parallels can be traced between the two (very dissimilar) situations, the reference works mainly by contrast. Christianity is an imported commodity in Kenya, and mostly a cover-up for exploitation: "Christianity, Commerce, Civilisation: the Bible, the Coin, the Gun: Holy Trinity" (p. 88). The god the Magi came upon in a manger can thus hardly be a source of regeneration, and there is more loss than gain in the change of dispensation that followed upon the journey to Nairobi. But the journey does bring out the strength of collective concerted action and will indirectly result in an assertion of life that counters and defeats the "harlot's curse."

Unlike Eliot's Magi, they leave behind not a place filled with decadent comfort ("the summer palaces on slopes, the terraces / And the silken girls bringing sherbet") but a wasteland, a place of starvation. The hardships they have to endure, however, are comparable. In both cases they travel at "the worst time of the year / For a journey." Lancelot Andrewes spoke of the snow and the sharp weather. Our pilgrims have to face the heat of the sun and the severity of the drought; as Munira is to write:

I can once again feel the dryness of the skin, the blazing sun, the dying animals that provided us with meat, and above us, soaring in the clear sky, the hawks and vultures which, saturated with meat of dead antelopes, wart-hogs and elands, waited for time and sun to deliver them human skin and blood. (p. 118)

Indeed for some days they find themselves "without food and without water" (p. 143), and "hawks and vultures [fly] high above them" (p. 144). But this they can meet almost to the end with communal courage springing from the awareness newly revived by Abdulla that they are all capable of heroism:

despite the sun which had struck earlier and more fiercely than in the other days, as if to test their capacity for endurance to the very end, despite indeed the evidence of the acacia

bush, the ashy-furred beleshwa bush, the prickly pears, all of which seemed to have given in to the bitter sun, they walked with brisk steps as if they too knew this secret desire of the sun and were resolved to come out on top. (p. 143)

Much worse still than those natural calamities is the hostility they meet when they eventually reach Blue Hills, an affluent, polished, and policed suburb of Nairobi. "And the cities hostile and the towns unfriendly," the Magi also remembered. But in Ngũgĩ's novel, lack of charity is not left general and anonymous. Three people are branded with patent heartlessness or worse, and all three are Africans, that is, traitors. One is the Reverend Jerrod Brown, who stands for a hateful hypocritical mission Christianity; then come Chui, the famous headmaster of the famous Siriana High School, and Mr. Hawkins, otherwise known in the novel under the name of Kimeria, the man who seduced Wanja and left her with child, the former home guard who betrayed Abdulla and Karega's elder brother.⁶

What the Magi find at the end of their journey will forever remain ambiguous: "were we led all that way for / Birth or Death?" While to a Christian believer, the ambivalence of this birth that also signifies death points to the presence of the Passion within the Nativity; and while those balanced lines recall the truth that birth is necessary to death and conversely death to birth, the words have yet another specific meaning to those kings from pagan countries. They say "this Birth was / Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death," and they explain two lines further that what has been shaken and ruptured is the "old dispensation," an order in which there is no place for the Resurrection. They feel stranded between two worlds—"no longer at ease," which, significantly, is the title of Achebe's second novel—and thus wish for "another death."

In *Petals of Blood* too, the journey marks the beginning of a complete disruption in the "old dispensation" and contains the elements of a possible rebirth. The one is an ironical result of their mission; the other has not been found in Nairobi, but has germinated, as it were, in the process of the expedition.

There is something altogether wrong about the end of the journey. Not that it is mistaken to go to claim one's rights when the situation is desperate. But the people of Ilmorog set out, not toward a village, much less toward a stable by the wayside, but to "the Big Big City," reminiscent more of Babylon than of Bethlehem, toward a place which some of them at least, among whom the originator of the idea, know to be a trap. Yet as long as they

toil on, the capital-city shines in their hearts, even in the hearts of those who know better, like a promise of salvation; and when they can at last distinguish the buildings down in the valley, they feel the same elation as Christian and his companions do when they behold the Celestial City: "But for Joseph's illness, they would all have felt immeasurable happiness at the sight. For they could now see the city below them" (p. 145). But the next sentence points to the rot that eats Kenya as the worm eats the flower with petals of blood (p. 22). The proud symbol of Kenyan political independence has been erected, with Western money, next to an international symbol of tourism as big business. Their experience of the town—first, the heartlessness of the inhabitants of Blue Hills; then, the crawling misery of those who try to sell themselves, their work power or their bodies, in order to survive—accounts for the two bleak epigraphs by William Blake: the terrible "harlot's curse" from the last verse of "London" and the chilling exposure of the falsehood that lurks in pity from "The Human Abstract."

In the city, however, they also find the lawyer,⁷ and it is that dedicated man who expresses most clearly, about the middle of the novel, how the beast goes to work, how the monster-god money eats the seed of African freedom and turns it into a parody:

... the whole world, motivated by different reasons and expectations, waited, saying: they who showed Africa and the world the path of manliness and of black redemption, what are they going to do with the beast? They who washed the warriors' spears in the blood of the white profiteers, of all those who had enslaved them to the ministry of the molten beast of silver and gold, what dance are they now going to dance in the arena? ... But we, the leaders, chose to flirt with the molten god, a blind, deaf monster who has plagued us for hundreds of years. (p. 163)⁸

Ilmorog had not been quite forgotten by the beast. There are in part 1 clear indications that the land was drained dry of resources and men by colonial exploitation: "The road had once been a railway line joining Ilmorog to Ruwa-ini. The line had carried wood and charcoal and wattle barks from Ilmorog forests to feed machines and men at Ruwa-ini" (p. 11); "the only thing that pained them was this youth running away from the land. . . . even this had always been so since European colonists came into their midst, these ghosts from another world" (p. 19). Yet on the whole, an ancient economic balance had been maintained, largely because

the place was far removed from any developing project. Their market, for instance, "was more of a social gathering of friends than a place for exchanging commodities and haggling over prices. . . . One could more or less do without hard cash except when one went to Abdulla's shop or to Ruwa-ini. Money or food or an item of clothing: any of these would do as a basis of exchange" (p. 17). Everything in "both Ilmorog ridge and Ilmorog plains" (p. 17) is regulated by Mwathi wa Mugo, an invisible but all-powerful wise man and sorcerer, who knows when to plant and when to harvest, when the cattle should be moved to higher grounds, what to do when it does not rain, and how fecundity can be restored to a woman's womb. Significantly, weapons can only be beaten at his place, so that the ironmonger is "protected from the power of evil and curious eyes" (p. 17).

The most spectacular consequence of the journey is to bring the beast down to Ilmorog and blast what survived of the old dispensation: "He would soon launch a giant financial project—Ilmorog (KCO) Investment and Holdings Ltd—as a quick means of developing the area. Ilmorog would never be the same" (p. 187).

These are the thoughts of Nderi at the end of part 2. While part 3 does show a kind of rebirth (which I shall discuss presently), the bitter comments by Munira with which it begins, disclosing as they do most of what is going to happen to that rural community, cast a black pall over what frail light may seem to emerge:

after that journey . . . a devil came into our midst and things were never quite the same. (p. 190)

We went on a journey to the city to save Ilmorog from the drought. We brought back spiritual drought from the city! (p. 195)

Such statements are qualified by the narrator as being inspired by Munira's later-day fanaticism, yet also partly sanctioned:

There was an element of truth in Munira's interpretation of events that followed their journey to the city. An administrative office for a government chief and a police post were the first things to be set up in the area. Next had come the church. (p. 195)

After those "outposts of progress" came the road:

And so the road was built, not to give content and reality to the vision of a continent, but to show our readiness and faith in the practical recommendations of a realist from abroad. . . . And so, abstracted from the vision of oneness, of a collective struggle of the African peoples, the road brought only the unity of earth's surface; every corner of the continent was now within easy reach of international capitalist robbery and exploitation. (p. 262)

The effects of this shattering advent are presented in part 4. A climax in the uprooting and leveling process is the destruction of Mwathi's place:

So we stood and watched as the machines roared toward Mwathi's place. We said: it cannot be. But they still moved toward it. We said: they will be destroyed by Mwathi's fire. Just you wait, just you wait. But the machine uprooted the hedge and then hit the first hut and it fell and we were all hush-hush, waiting for it to be blown up. . . . The two huts were pulled down. But where was Mwathi? There was no Mwathi. (pp. 265-66)

Appropriately then part 2 moves from Ndemi to Nderi. It begins with the glorious story of Ndemi "who tamed the forest," "who wrestled with God" (p. 121), of Ndemi the mythical founder of the agricultural community of Ilmorog. It ends with the petty political plotting of Ilmorog's MP, Nderi wa Riera. Absorbed in his selfish and greedy calculations, he is unable to understand that people may be disinterested and ready to help a community which is not their own without harboring some further motives or being manipulated by some other ill-intentioned politician:

Then he remembered his enemies. . . . Who were they? Could it be that boy Karega and that teacher and the crippled fellow? [Karega, Munira, and Abdulla are from Limuru.] No, these were only front men: they were working for somebody else. Who could it be? And suddenly he knew. The lawyer of course! (p. 187)

For a time it does seem as though the beast and its ministers—whether they hid their greed behind some respectable pretense like Nderi, the "man of the people," or Jerrod, the "man of God," or do not even bother to disguise their selfish appetite for

more and more profit like Kimeria—would crush those who dare to rebel and to claim a right to live and not to starve, as though the quest for rebirth was to end in the victory of universal prostitution and in the final denial of hope: "this Africa knows only one law. You eat somebody or you are eaten," Wanja tells Karega after he has been away for five years (p. 291).

Yet the journey has also initiated different changes whose fruits will grow only later. One is a definite heightening of communal militant awareness. The expedition acts as an element of cohesion: "The trek to the city had attracted many people carried on the waves of hope and promises, and had awoken a feeling that the crisis was a community crisis needing a communal response" (p. 123). This sense of community is fed by Nyakinyua's tale of the distant past in the first section and further sharpened by Abdulla's story of heroic defeat in the second:

They had a feast that night. Even long afterwards they were to remember it and talk about it as the highest point in their journey to the city. (p. 139)

Abdulla's feast, as they called it, had leashed them new life and determination. (p. 143)

The third section of part 2 presents the people's several ordeals on entering the city. But the fourth takes them to the temporary haven of the lawyer's place. As we have seen above, he provides a thorough theoretical exposition of what went wrong at the Independence, as well as a possible remedy:

here is our hope . . . in the new children, who have nothing to prove to the white man . . . and therefore can see the collective humiliation clearly and hence are ready to strike out for the true kingdom of the black god within us all. (p. 167)

This, however, is partly lost on his listeners: "They were all captivated by the parable, although they did not always understand it" (p. 166). When they face Nderi wa Riera in the next section, only Abdulla has the right answer to the politician's apologetic lies and dilatory argumentation. He tells how Hare made use of Antelope to get out of the hole into which they had both fallen, then not only failed to help him but lectured him instead. Afterward he walks out without another word. His response, however, is prompt-

ed not by anything the lawyer may have said, but by an innate intuition of Nderi's treacherous cunning.

The awareness they gain results in a more rational organization of labor on the fields once they have come back:

Munira could not understand the new motion of things, the new mood of the village after the journey. Wanja and the other women on the ridge had formed what they called Nderni-Nyakinyua Group to cultivate and weed the land and earth the crops, working in common, one on another's fields in turn. (p. 200)

This cohesion too may seem wholly lost when the money monster steps in and divides. But it emerges again at the end of the novel on a larger scale and fraught with wider promises.

The journey is also loaded with Wanja's quest for love and need for a child. In the first section of part 2, Nyakinyua's tale brings Wanja and Karega close to each other and helps establish a complicity between them. Together perhaps they can exercise the past. Perhaps, without even mentioning anything, each can absolve the other of the death for which they feel responsible: Karega for that of his beloved Mukami, who jumped from a cliff because she loved him; Wanja for that of her newborn child.⁹ This complicity is completed in physical communion in the night of *ibeng'eta* drinking, an almost mystical ceremony presided over by Nyakinyua:

Then they started slowly, almost uncertainly, groping toward one another, gradually working together in rhythmic search for a lost kingdom, for a lost innocence and hope. . . . And she clung to him, she too desiring the memories washed away in the deluge of a new beginning, and he now felt this power in him, power to heal, power over death, power, power . . . and suddenly it was she who carried him high on ocean waves of new horizons and possibilities in a single moment of lighting illumination, oh the power of united flesh, before exploding and swooning into darkness and sleep without words. (p. 230)

There is no irony in this beautiful rendering of the act of love. But the passage may point to one reason for which their union will not be strong enough to detain Karega when he is dismissed by Munira, or indeed to give Wanja the child she so much wants. Both look for oblivion in their embrace; that is, they are not yet

ready to face the complexity of their predicament. Moreover, at this stage, Wanja has not yet fully disclosed what happened to the child she had by Kimeria. Besides Karega is still a very young man who has to find himself. He goes away, and when he comes back he is unable to help her, although she pleads with him: ". . . and I am only sorry, really sorry, that you are on their side. KCO and Imperialism stand for the rich against the poor. They take from the poor and that's why they hate to see the poor organise and you are helping them'" (p. 327). Karega has all the right ideas; by the end of the novel he knows how they should proceed in order to bring about "the kingdom of man and woman . . . joying and loving in creative labour" (p. 344). But he is too self-righteous to understand Wanja's plight and to admit that he is partly responsible for it. Not Karega but Abdulla, the forgotten hero, will be the father of Wanja's child. Abdulla does not judge. Once he refuses the money she offers because it comes from the man he ought to kill. But he knows he is wrong: "But later he felt ashamed of the action. He knew very well that it was her who was now paying school fees for Joseph. In any case, he did not blame her: she was turning the way the world was tilting" (p. 313). He has weaknesses and shortcomings, and he is aware of them—for instance, of the way he treats young Joseph until Wanja insists that he go to school, or of the wish for private property:

the question had always troubled him . . . : is it right that that which had been bought by the collective blood of a people should go to a few hands just because they had money and bank loans? Was it bank and money that had fought for it? But he had never found an answer because it was true that black hands were owning it. And he would have liked to own one of those farms himself. (p. 166)

But he is also capable of selfless dedication. Because of this very human mixture of weakness and strength, he is the one who plants the seed of life between the thirsting lips of Wanja's womb.¹⁰

The seed of future harvest is not to be found in some imported myth, but within the past of the people. As the lawyer says, "'Our people had said: Let's not be slaves to the monster: let us only pray and wrestle with the true god within us. We want to control all this land, all these industries, to serve the one god within us'" (p. 164). The regeneration proposed in Ngugi's novel has to feed on their indigenous past. It is not, however, the impossible dream of some return to precolonial time. In spite of his direct reference

to Years, Ngūgi's vision of time is not cyclical: things never come back to their beginning; they move on to new beginnings.¹¹ While Eliot's poem ends in a mood of somber resignation, part 2 of *Petals of Blood* ends with ominous threats of destruction and death that will materialize in part 4, but it also outlines promises of life that find a tentative development in part 3 and blossom in the last pages of the novel.

NOTES

1. Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Petals of Blood* (London: Heinemann, 1977). All page references in the text are to this edition.
2. See in particular the first two papers in the issue of *Echos du Commonweath* devoted to *Petals of Blood*: René Richard, "History and Literature: Narration and Time in *Petals of Blood*," *Echos du Commonweath*, 6 (1980-81), 1-36, and Christine Abdelkrim, "Petals of Blood: Story, Narrative, Discourse," *Echos du Commonweath*, 6 (1980-81), 37-51.
3. See Christine Abdelkrim, p. 45, and Florence Stratton, "Cyclical Patterns in *Petals of Blood*," *Journal of Commonweath Literature*, 15 (1980), 115-24, esp. p. 123.
4. The distinction I make between part 2 and Munira's report is in contradiction with the view held by René Richard: "As the reader might at times forget it, the novelist frequently takes pains to remind him that *all episodes* are related by Munira in the statement, that everything (or practically everything) is seen through the prism of the narrator" (pp. 8-9; emphasis added).
5. There are other references to T. S. Eliot in the novel, for instance, Ngūgi's characterization of Munira with phrases that echo the spiritual emptiness of J. Alfred Prufrock: "the burnt-out cigarette-ends of his life" (p. 269); "why should I dare?" (p. 30).
6. Wanja tells the story of her seduction in chap. 2, pt. 1, pp. 38-41. Abdulla relates how Kimeria deceived him and Nding'uri in chap. 7, pt. 3, pp. 221-24. They recognize that they have been betrayed by one and the same man in chap. 10, p. 256.
7. Contrary to what Françoise Albrecht believes ("Blood and Fire in *Petals of Blood*," *Echos du Commonweath*, 6 [1980-81], 87), the lawyer is not an Indian, although he lives in an area "formerly and exclusively reserved for Indians" (p. 160). It is clear that he is an African from Wanja's reaction when she first meets him ("I have never been so grateful for the sight of another black skin," p. 134) and from the education he received in the United

States ("While I was at a black college in Baton Rouge," p. 165), as well as from his commitment to the cause of black people.

8. This recalls an image used by Abdulla in one of the very last sections of the novel: "maybe, he thought, history was a dance in a huge arena of God. You played your part, whatever your chosen part, and then you left the arena, swept aside by the waves of a new step, a new movement in the dance" (p. 340).

9. Karega tells about his ill-fated love for Mukami in chap. 7, pp. 219-20. Wanja eventually blurs out the long repressed truth about her child several years later, in chap. 11, p. 291.

10. See also Jacqueline Bardolph, "Fertility in *Petals of Blood*," *Echos du Commonweath*, 6 (1980-81), 75.

11. There is, of course, a cyclical recurrence of similar patterns of events. But history, unlike nature in its seasonal cycle, never comes full circle. This is in contradiction with what Florence Stratton claims (p. 121). The way modifications are effected within an apparent repetition is perhaps most explicitly illustrated by the four strikes that take place at Siriana High School. The pattern of events is roughly the same: pupils rebel, go on strike, and are eventually defeated. But each strike has a different aim and the level of awareness is gradually higher. This point is neatly developed by Christine Abdelkrim, p. 47. The novel in no way warrants the assumption that Wanja, whom Stratton chooses to illustrate her point, is unable to break the circle of guilt and money and that the sense of rebirth she experiences toward the end will not take her "anywhere but full circle" (p. 121). The novel is wholly open-ended, which also means that, while we may entertain doubts, based on sad historical observation, as to the future of the workers' movement, social renewal too is suggested as a possibility on the last pages of the book.