

Passa Porta Seminar 2018 'The Reader'

The Ghost Reader

In Koli Jean Bofane

No doubt that if I had not been born at the intersection of the Congo river and the equator, reading would never have taken on such a sacred character as I always perceived it to have. Because one must realize that in that country, and especially in the small towns around the equator where I lived, right after independence, books were rare, written materials were not very common. Prior to independence, individuals who could read would wear a white shirt, a tie and often a hat. The white man would rank them as 'evolved': a status in its own right that one could only obtain if one could decipher a basic alphabet. So, perhaps it is not surprising that, from time to time, the old uncle, at the time of day when the sun reddened the sky, after a day's hard work, with a beer before him, would put on his glasses and act like those fluent readers, even if he would stare for minutes on end at the newspaper he had picked up at work – three months ago, at least. Around him, no one ever committed the sacrilege of asking whether the uncle could in fact read or whether he was only decoding each character on the paper in an attempt to understand a word. That wasn't important. What mattered was the act of posing a solemn gesture for all to see, of carrying out the performance that consists in embodying those who possess a mysterious wisdom, such as a Chokwe or Kuba idol sculpted in wood, assuming the motionless but capable posture of prodigies, even being able to morph into a demiurge, if necessary.

The Congolese are familiar with the power of writing and reading. Is it not said in the country of Mobutu that the white man steals with a pen? Put an X to an unreadable document and the next day a man turns up to inform you that the ground beneath your feet, the country surrounding you and your own person are now at his disposal. Naturally, in an environment that has been through such an experience, the book will be more than a book: it will be a book of magic or something similar. In the dusty avenues of Kinshasa one often comes across people tracing the 'Line 11'¹ with a single book under their arm, a work meant to contain the key to their existence. In such a context, as a child, I too was eager to make such a gesture: the alert gaze immersed in two open pages, scanning the words in succession, and with a concentrated air like that worn by those famous people whom one only encounters in dictionaries.

1 Having to travel a long distance on foot for lack of money to buy a ticket, the legs forming two parallel sticks, similar to the number 11.

When you measure just over a metre, a library with its book-lined shelves is like the wall of a mountain where knowledge takes on the colours of the spines of books with labels such as Gallimard, Mercure de France and Fleuve Noir. I used to pass in front of my father's every day. My eyes would be drawn to the names of women and men such as Flaubert, Stendhal, Sand and Faulkner; to titles too, such as *L'Arrache-cœur*, *Bonjour tristesse*, *Quand sonne le glas* and *J'irai cracher sur vos tombes*. To me it was clear that knowing who that individual was who snatches hearts had become an obsession, and understanding why someone would spit on a grave meant, I realized already, understanding a large part of the world's complexity. Although I had to restrain myself, I would never have thought of taking a book without its owner's permission, i.e. my father's. The sacred cannot be passed down like that, in an offhand manner. You need a priest and a suitable rite, and some words must be spoken.

Then a war broke out, the Simba Rebellion. It raged in 1964. My brother and sister were sent to Belgium and I stayed alone with my parents. If, despite being sorely tempted, I never let myself take a book in order to read it in hiding, it is because I aspired to become a High Priest of reading and no less. In such a case, an initiation is required, like for those young people forced to enter the seminary in order to, one day or another, accede to the papacy or like for those children from Tibet with the shaved heads, wearing orange or saffron-coloured robes, whom I had seen in *National Geographic*. Because of the war, my father's back was up against the wall. It was absolutely necessary to transcend the pervading morbidity and to attain superior levels of thought. He led me to the wall of books which looked like the mountain where Hassan-I Sabbah had lived with his Assassins, the old man from the mountain whom my father had told me about, on the veranda, one evening, to the sound of crickets, the hooting of nocturnal birds of prey, the whistling of bats. He made me stand before the altar. I spontaneously raised my face upwards as though at an assumption. My father then stretched out his arm, and uttered a word that made complete sense: 'Choose!' It was as though Christ had said, 'Lazarus, get up!'

It's true that my choice was clear. When destiny opens wide the doors of the future for you in a grandiose manner, one must show determination. The gods are touchy and dislike those who dither and those who waver in their faith, in other words, who doubt their abilities. Remember also that I was born during the colonial era. The white man had taken over everything at the time, especially the shelves of the family library. Among those writers and thinkers, one of them had immediately attracted my attention. It was Émile Zola. The word 'zola' in Lingala means 'love' and since the title of the novel was *Nana* – a typically Congolese first name – I was convinced that a fellow countryman had disregarded the concepts of slavery and colonialism so as to pull himself up, by who knows what miracle, beyond the third shelf of the library – like some of those who had just granted me a brand-new independence. After a page and a half, I had to resign myself to accept the fact that, once again, a devil of a Frenchman, saddled with a fake name and having chosen a catchy title, had pulled a fast one on me: *Nana* had nothing to do with the Congo. The swindle was like a challenge and I swallowed the work without even catching my breath, enjoying *Nana's* luscious curves, taking the place of one of her lovers when he kissed her hand, trembling when a lock of her red hair blew in the light breeze, on Rue de la Chaussée-d'Antin.

When you become a High Priest of reading, your life no longer belongs to you. It is to the written word that you will devote yourself. As a child, I used to read anything I came across: not only books and all the blurbs, but also magazines, comic strips, the pages of the dictionary, medication instructions, the notices on the boxes of *biscottes* and of oatmeal at breakfast. I was under such a spell that I even read the white and yellow pages of the telephone directory, labels on clothes or the brand and specifications of car tires as the wheels spun on the asphalt. All this did scare me a bit. I had anticipated this wonderful addiction but the road taken by the High Priest does not allow for U-turns. One must realize that it is compelling, like a priesthood.

The years went by, I became an adult and my reading rhythm kept up until the day another war broke out. In Rwanda, this time. And it traumatized me to such an extent that I went through to the other side of the mirror and set myself the task of climbing the mountain of knowledge represented by the shelves of my father's library. I have already mentioned the virtues that books possess in the face of war. I now had to write one like those I had read during the time of my own war, the Simba Rebellion.

As I turned to writing, I discovered the reader. After my first novel, Mohammed Moulessehou, alias Yasmina Khadra, whom I came across at my first book fair, told me about the primordial importance of building up a readership. 'Without it, you're dead', I thought I heard him say. As a High Priest of reading, I cannot ignore the symptoms of the addiction taking over the reader: the violent emotions, the vertigo it induces, the questions this activity raises. Let's not mention the secondary effects in the event of an overly captivating fiction: constantly distracted, fits of giggles that one must stifle in the metro when the author has managed to make you laugh at yourself through a character, the gaze of the other.

It is on the basis of these symptoms that I intended to realize the quest that my fellow writer had advised me about. Without the reader, there is no point in writing. Aware of this fact, I had anticipated things before even publishing anything but I had to know whether the reader would welcome me in his psyche. I selected the first readers myself. As my father had done before me, I had to use a sacred word as powerful as 'Choose!' So I told them: 'Read!' They immediately obeyed and started reading because I have to tell you that at the time, freshly arrived in Belgium without papers or any legitimacy, but with a lot of daring, I worked clandestinely as a bouncer. I chose my first readers among the clients leaving the disco at dawn, when alcohol kindled their senses and their longing for their partner and when their mind was on the verge of losing its coherence. If the client, abruptly absorbed, read the text to the end, without paying attention to his moaning girlfriend who wanted to go home, I had won. To underline the sacred aspect of the approach, I would choose those I suspected of never having been struck by literature, so that my text could fill them and act like a revelation.

I soon discovered the ghost reader. He appeared unexpectedly, as soon as I wrote the first lines of my first novel. I was ready for anything but the presence of a shadow sitting in the chair to my right. A friend had let me stay in his castle in a forest in the province of Luxembourg. The wooden floors and the woodwork on the walls squeaked constantly and the family portraits stared at me in the dusk. I had thought that I was totally alone, and it was at this moment that he appeared. Motionless most of the time, he never spoke to me, forcing me to try and guess what he was thinking. By his somewhat

awkward air, I sensed that he wasn't seeking my sympathy, but I understood that he was indispensable, somehow, to the creation of my future oeuvre. It was with him that I discussed the problems that I encountered. He and I, we treated ourselves to intellectual jousts that lasted through the night. Sometimes, in order to try to throw him off, I didn't write everything out, leaving him with the task of trying to figure out what I was thinking. He was brilliant, he remained silent, but during gatherings it always seemed to me that his thoughts came out of the mouths of the best readers and critics.

The ghost reader is also a cynical entity. A word could escape me for months, and during that time I sensed that he was mocking me. Finally, to increase my frustration in the face of my shortcomings, he sneeringly whispered the word into my ear. These were, as it happens, the only sounds he uttered: sneers. His attachment to me could have made me believe that his love for me was unconditional, like the love real-life readers pour over me, but in his case, his intentions towards me were murky. Not knowing what he wanted from me, I never fully revealed myself, and I could not afford the luxury of writer's block. It was important not to show my weaknesses. I was suspicious of him and to be totally honest, I still can't love him as perhaps I should. In any case, I will never be able to get rid of him.

The other day, a seer friend came to see me. She told me that she could see 'something' vague next to me, but she also told me that I didn't have any reason to worry about his presence: the guy seemed to be my spitting image, she claimed, but I had strong doubts. Literature had created me, and subconsciously I knew that literature could not create this kind of ghost. Even Shakespeare, by creating the ghost of Hamlet's father, would have thought twice about creating one like my ghost reader.

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