

BOOK REVIEW: *Tell Me Africa: An Approach to African Literature*, by James Olney, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973. Pp. 325 + xii. \$15.00. \$3.45 paper.

James Olney has written a book on autobiography, *Metaphors of Self: The Meaning of Autobiography (1972)*, which apparently led to the writing of *Tell Me Africa*. The "approach" to African literature in this case is through autobiography, because, Olney tells us, autobiography offers for the non-African "a way of getting inside a world that is inevitably very different from his own in its assumptions and values, in its attitudes and beliefs, in its practices and observances . . . [and that] through autobiography one can, in many instances, approach fiction or whatever other literature with considerably greater assurance and validity (*Radiance of the King*, for example, yields a much richer meaning with a prior reading of *Dark Child*)." (p. 7) Before he is finished, Olney convinces us that this is true. However, it would seem that the substitution of "fiction" for "autobiography" here would result in an equally valid statement. Likewise for the statement that "autobiography, being a product of a conscious awareness shaped by and operating at the center of a total environmental situation, affords a unique means of access to that situation for someone culturally or historically outside it." (6) And likewise for several other statements made in the opening chapters of the book. The difficulty being that Olney fails to make a clear case for the superiority of autobiography over fiction itself as the vehicle for his "approach". I mean only to suggest here that the method is better than Olney's description of it.

Further difficulties are raised when we discover that Olney plays a little fast and loose with his terms, which allows him to say, for example, that Yambo Ouologuem's *Bound to Violence* "can be figuratively seen as a symbolic autobiography of the entire continent and community of Africa," (17) and that Chinua Achebe's *A Man of the People*, as well as being a novel, is also an "'autobiographic' portrait of modern Nigeria". (162) Nor is it entirely clear what Mr. Olney's criteria are for good and bad autobiography. In one place he says that "although [Dugmore] Boetie's *Familiarity is the Kingdom of the Lost* purports to be an autobiography, one must confess that it does not always have a tone of verisimilitude about it;" (259) while in another place the author chides a reviewer of Ouologuem's book for saying that the "characters live and suffer and are like real living people." (235) This blurring of definitions and inconsistency of the

application of critical criteria will leave the reader mildly irritated at times.

Another peccadillo is Olney's hypersensitivity--to what, I am not sure. He says triumphantly in his preface, "I do not pretend to speak in this book as an authority on Africa: I am not African; neither am I what is called an 'Africanist' or an 'African Studies' expert. I consider this latter fact, however, rather a claim to virtue than a confession of weakness." (vii) *Mea culpa!* The reviewer must here confess an interest in Africa of several years' standing; he would probably be called an "Africanist" or "African Studies expert" by his friendlier colleagues; and thus, according to Olney's standards, comes to this task from a position of some weakness and little virtue. So be it

Let us look, then, at Olney's critical apparatus. Early in the book he says, very insightfully, "the Western literary critic who picks up an African novel will unconsciously be carrying in his overnight bag all the philosophical and psychological assumptions programmed into him as he grew up, as he pursued his studies in the Western tradition, as he read the masterpieces of Western literature." (11) After implying further that the Western critic must try to overcome this cultural set, we are also told, in the very same paragraph, that "with the best will in the world, the critic will not find in the written literature of Africa anything that is the equal of *The Odyssey* or *The Divine Comedy*. . . ." This attempt at cross-cultural comparison seems particularly unfortunate--not to say gratuitous--in light of what the author has just said. Olney also seems to prefer Achebe's *A Man of the People* to *Things Fall Apart*, because, he says, the former "is preeminently a 'novel', with all the dramatized complexity of human relations implied by the tradition of the novel." (202) One might ask Olney, whose tradition? And one is justified in wondering, it seems, what hobgoblins Olney has in *his* overnight bag.

Olney seems also on thin ground when he approaches precisely those points that would seem to distinguish African from Western literature. His discussion of *négritude* is a case in point. He is transparently pleased with Ouologuem's "historical revisionism" (213), and his *Bound to Violence* in particular, which, he says, "would not only deprive the addict of the old-style *négritude* of many of his most cherished illusions, but would also lower the stock-exchange value of the hoked-up primitive arts produced by the happy and noble savage, that phantom that issued from the heated and sentimental imagination of 'journalistes, sociologues, ethnologues, africanistes, littérateurs et négrophiles spécialisés,' all of whom have a vested interest in maintaining

the image of the simple, noble primitive that they themselves have created and that they sell on the various world markets." (212) (Olney quotes here from Ouologuem's *Lettre à La France Nègre*). But what is one to make of this statement when he has been told, back on page 26, that "the special task of the critic who approaches African literature from without is to define, simultaneously and equally, both the unity and the diversity, both *the essential African one* that lies beneath and the formal, cultural many that appear on the surface"? (my italics) Would it be in order to point out to Olney that, were he to accomplish this modest proposal, he might very well qualify as an "African Studies expert"? And that, in the process, he would probably have discovered the *négritude* that Senghor defines as "the sum of the values of the Black world"?

On the other hand, if the reader will put aside Olney's pique, and some of the methodological framework and critical inconsistencies mentioned, he will be richly rewarded. There are stimulating chapters on East African autobiographies, for example, and a convincing argument as to how these autobiographies illuminate East African fiction--how, for example, a reading of Jomo Kenyatta's *Facing Mt. Kenya*, Charity Waciuma's *Daughter of Mumbi*, Josiah Kariuki's *'Mau Mau' Detainee* and other autobiographies can bring critical insights to the reading of the fiction, say, of James Ngugi. The special "presence" of the past in Gikuyu culture, for example, has interesting ramifications for the autobiographer and novelist, as Mr. Olney ably demonstrates. A similar point is made regarding West and South African autobiographies, although with regional differences carefully explored--such as the unique relationship that obtains between the horrors of South African life and the writing of fiction and/or autobiography as a black man in that country. There is an interesting discussion--one of the more succinct and lucid this reviewer can recall reading--of the divergences in the Western and African cosmologies, as well as an excellent explanation of the comparative concepts of love, sex, and procreation, and how these divergences impinge on the writing of fiction and autobiography. Such discussions cannot help but enlighten the Western critic's reading of a great deal of African literature. Mr. Olney is to be commended also for his lengthy discussion of Ouologuem, thereby beginning to do justice to this author's importance in the broader scope of the literature and where it seems to be going at the moment.

Perhaps Mr. Olney's greatest service is to bring into focus the very large and varied body of autobiographical writing by Africans. Both the bulk and quality of this writing is generally underestimated by Westerners, I suspect, and would not usually be included in the syllabi of African Studies courses in colleges

and universities. Yet one could argue persuasively, I think, using *Tell Me Africa* as his brief, for the inclusion of more of this genre in discussions more often reserved for the "data" of the social sciences or the artistry of *belles lettres*. As Olney discusses well and at some length, the concept of "pure" art is foreign to African traditions; which suggests that the Westerner might do well to revise his conception of autobiography, at least in the African context, and to see it as a work of art in a tradition in which art for the sake of society, rather than for its own sake, is the norm. Olney has shown us that there is a wealth of good material at hand, and he has discussed it intelligently.

Methodological and critical questions aside, then, Olney's book demonstrates very well the premise that a reading of autobiography will afford many valuable insights into the broad range of African literature. Olney's readings of several literary works have obviously been so enriched, and so will the reader's. This fact alone, not to mention the intrinsic value of the autobiographies themselves, makes *Tell Me Africa* very much worth reading.

Rand Bishop
State University College at Oswego
State University of New York