



Crime Writing in Southern Africa: A Literary Example of the Interpretation of Political History in Glenn Macaskill's *King's Gold*

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ABSTRACT

Crime writing, long time considered to be of minor quality, generally seeks to reach a large audience. As a literary genre it entered Western history around the 1850s. Literary critics view the origins of this genre in the economic, political and cultural developments of the 19th Century based on various sociological data, in particular the birth of large cities and the reduction of illiteracy of the masses. Still generally speaking, the first texts had the criminal life of the marginal social classes as their main theme. In France, in the United Kingdom and in the United States of America, the period between 1920 and 1950 saw a first diversification of the crime novel. A series of sub-genres is established at that time, they can be summarized as the detective novel, the victim novel, the criminal novel and the mixed novel such as the thriller. In the 1960s criticism of contemporary society becomes, in most crime literatures around the world, the main characteristic of the neo-polar with its uncertain heroes in the rotten world of real estate scandals, corruption and the loss of moral values.

Key words: political thriller, African literature, Rhodesia/Zimbabwe, South Africa, XXth and XXIst centuries

INTRODUCTION

Looking at the eight parameters identified by a number of literary critics to analyse the tendency of a particular crime novel, namely the enigma, the detective, the clues, the investigation, the social background, the suspense, the anguish, the violence and the sexuality involved in the novel, the political thriller forms part of the fourth phase of the crime novel, that of the neo-polar, where political elements are combined with the other constituents of the novel. As a sub-genre, the political thriller, while in general putting more emphasis on the social background, on violence and sexuality than other crime writing, has political struggle of some kind as its backdrop. In this presentation, we would like to analyze certain recently published political thrillers about Zimbabwe and South Africa and their corresponding political scenes.

Crime writing and the political novel in Africa

Specifically writing about Francophone literature, Ambroise Kom (2002) quite correctly explains that crime writing has, since a couple of years, entered the African literary domain and has become popular with its readers. According to Kom, literary critics need to bring the genre into the spotlight and acknowledge its existence and importance.

In Africa, two major regional zones, intimately linked to the language in which its authors write their novels, can be identified. In Francophone and Lusophone Africa the crime novel remains closely linked to postcolonial theories. A socially engaged writing which often talks about social and political disillusion in various novels such as those written by Angolan Pepetela, Malian Moussa Konaté, Senegalese Abasse Ndione and Congolese Achille Ngoye. The sociological dimension of their oeuvres has been clearly identified by Kom (op.cit.), amongst others. According to Vanoncini (1993: 58-59) the concrete data that they present in their novels turn them into precious political, social and economic information about the societies in which the stories are based. Pim Higginson (2005 : 160) explains that crime writing offers Francophone African authors a "new way of representing their acid criticisms of modern Africa". Several humanitarian and political crises have been witnessed on African soil in recent years and have subsequently been 'written' into crime stories and political thrillers. We would like to give two examples of this trend: Ivan Reisdorff in his *L'homme qui demanda du feu* (1978) narrates a policy investigation as a pretext to an enquiry about the Rwandese reality and describes the country at the threshold of radical transformations such as the 1994 genocide. Similarly in Omer Marchal's 1983 novel *Africa, Africa* witchcraft, hunger for power and internal fighting are at the forefront in a narrative in which the enquiry about the murder of a young coloured man remains the background.

On the other hand, in Anglophone Africa, the political thriller based on the American, British and Canadian model is very popular. Recently, several narrative creations have been published in Anglophone Southern Africa; they are often hybrid texts because it is not always clear whether they are literary or purely historical and documentary texts¹. In South Africa, where crime writing, in all its forms, has been particularly popular, several writers have known considerable success. Deon Meyer, Louis-Ferdinand Desprez, Caryl Férey, James McClure and Wessel Eversohn² have all found a privileged way of expressing their concerns through crime writing, they explore, among other things, the dark side of life as well as the "malfunctioning" of the Southern African societies. Recent publications by former members of the Rhodesian police force can be included in this hybrid type of writing.

Zimbabwe and South Africa in literary history³

A large part of the emerging literature in Zimbabwe has seen its origins in the writing of former Rhodesians, for the most white authors, who, after having fled the newly independent Zimbabwe for various reasons, wrote down their experiences and history in texts of a variable literary value. As is the case with many contemporary writers having a political past or present which guided them towards crime writing⁴, these Rhodesian and Zimbabwean authors include all the scandals, questions and wrong-doings of society and its stakeholders in their novels. In a heightened politicized crime writing environment (Rohrback, 2007 talks about politicization of the crime novel) authors do not limit themselves to mere sociological descriptions but are almost obliged to denounce the situations they see and/or encounter in their daily lives, situations of people dominated and rendered powerless by the dominant classes or individuals. Within the troubled political history of Zimbabwe, the choice of a political thriller seems the only possible one. The political thriller becomes the "new battlefield where political and ideological struggles are violently expressed". The authors of Zimbabwean political thrillers are most often former police agents, military personnel or army reservists. In the case of *Come Break a Spear* (1980), Ivan Smith is a former police agent. Alan Thrush is a former captain of the Rhodesian African Rifles at the end of the liberation struggle; his autofiction/faction is entitled *Of land and spirits* (1997). Former officer in the British South Africa Police, in Rhodesia, Peter Stiff published *The Rain Goddess* in 1972; Vera Elderkin, former member of the British South Africa Police and the Zimbabwean Police after Independence, wrote *The last Rhodesian Soldiers*. Tom Hampshire, a former security forces reservist, places the plot of his novel *If I should die* in a fictional country easily recognizable by all as Rhodesia. Barry Wardle publishes *Operation Hurricane* in 2005, he is a former member of the Rhodesian Police Reserve and the Anti-Terrorist Unit of the Police. Peter Davies, part-time soldier for the Rhodesian Army between 1963 and 1975, is the author of the 2006 *Scatterlings of Africa*. The list seems never-ending, which clearly proves two needs: the need on the part of the authors to bear witness⁵ to the history and political life of their countries of origin and the need on the part of the readers to find out more about these histories.

Robb JW Ellis' e-book, *Without Honour* attests to these needs. When it was first published, critics described it as a «unique document about the inside practices of African politics» in which Ellis, former police agent, chronologically depicts the transition between the former Rhodesia and the Unilateral Declaration of Independence, between 1965 and 1980. Very similar to an autobiographical or historical novel, the text is full of reflections by the narrator (who is also the author) on the major historical upheavals of the

Crime Writing in Southern Africa

'new' Zimbabwe. Retracing the Bush War in Rhodesia in the 1970's with the elite military forces, Ellis compares this period with what will become, in the 1980's, the genocide of the Matabele tribe, perpetrated by the president of the country, Robert Mugabe and his Shona supporters.

Robb Ellis' narrative focuses on the historical period before the genocide, while *King's Gold* mainly retraces the post-genocide era. Apart from the important *flashback* of the prologue (p. 1-29) which helps the reader to understand the motivations and revenge feelings of the main protagonists of the novel as the narrative embraces the 1990's entirely.

The majority of political thrillers about modern Zimbabwe or ancient Rhodesia have the national and official history of the country in their storylines. However, one author seems to deviate from this formula: Gordon Thomas Orr, who in his *Grasping the Nettle* invents reality more than he merely describes it. James Hacking, the main character of the novel, a charismatic pilot with a Don Juan reputation, and consequently some issues with marital fidelity, finds himself mixed up in Zimbabwean politics when the president Robert Mugabe is deposed by James' hated adversary, General Spencer Katsiru. Under the new dictatorship, the political repression worsening, agricultural reform and the seizing of white-owned farms turn this once prosperous country into a desperate case of failure.

The reader is not duped. Anybody who has even the faintest notions about the political trends and actions of president Mugabe knows that the reforms and changes put in place by the General in the novel are in reality those effected by Mugabe himself. Indirectly – and perhaps for reasons of personal or family security, the author of *Grasping the Nettle* proposes the same criticism as the other writers describing the horrific situation of the African country under the pretext of a political thriller.

The setting of Jim Woods 2005 political thriller *The Lion Killer* is multinational, the reader goes from Zimbabwe, to South Africa and the United States in pursuit of Lucas, the bounty hunter recruited by the secret white supremacist society, the Avengers, to follow his goal, a politically motivated murder. One year later, in 2006, Peter Davies publishes *Scatterlings of Africa* in which a racial, tribal and ideological conflict against the historical and political backdrop of the Rhodesian antiterrorist struggle and civil war of the beginning of the Seventies. Lieutenant Ron Cartwright is obsessed by the defence of his country against the civil war insurgents, but comrade Gumbarishimba Gadziwa is equally determined to win the battle so that Zimbabwe becomes the people's country.

Glenn Mac skill's *King's Gold*

A private investigator paid by murderers ends up having to violate a nation's laws. Like Didier Daeninckx inspector Cadin, at first timid, then fully involved, convinced of human values who push him to resolve certain cases despite being told off or general indifference, *King's Gold's* hero, Trevor Lawson, white 42-year old, "tall and strongly-built, with brown eyes and dark

wavy hair" (KG 30)⁶ gets involved in the King's Gold affair. Having lost his job as a security guard in the South African surveillance company, recently divorced from his wife, the main character, a simple citizen again, can not remain indifferent to the horrors of daily Zimbabwean life when he visits his sister Janice in Bulawayo. A kind of public detective, this character at the crossroads between a "solitary character, therefore private" and "altruistic preoccupations, therefore public, of a militant in the etymological sense of the word [...] personally fights against injustice which wake him up" (our translation, Raphaël Villatte on pagesperso-orange.fr/arts.combres/Polar_1968.htm)

Suspense is omnipresent in *King's Gold*, however certain chapters are more "frightening" than others. In a quite conventional manner, the end of the novel and chapters 12, 13 and 14 in particular represent an accumulation of scary passages, from the arrival of giant ants, spiders and snakes to the vomit, open wounds, worms and near-death by crocodiles. Once the climax of suspense reached, peace is immediately restored, the gold is saved and so is the honour of the Matabele.

There are two murders in this plot, one collective and one individual. First, in the prologue, the reader finds out that thousands of Matabele have been murdered between 1982 and 1987 in the Gukurahundi, "the rains that clean", by the 5th Brigade of president Robert Mugabe. Young Benedict Nyati's family is part of the Zimbabwean genocide's victims. The second murder is a murder "by negligence", but the feeling of vengeance regarding the implication of the victim in the attack on the missionary school of Elim and the Pentecostal Church of June 1978 is the true reason for the murder. During their archaeological research for Operation Mole and the discovery of the King's Gold, Gift Shimenga, Matabele security officer and tourism guide of the Great Zimbabwe⁷ ruins, and Obert Ncube, worker in Shimenga's department and co-Matabele, are found out by David Motsi. After a fight with him, they leave him "for death" because any way he had too much "blood on his hands" (KS 215).

According to Yves Reuter (2007: 75), the thriller is organized around three main principles, namely a vital danger which threatens a "nice" character, the expiration date of that danger which comes close and is soon known by the reader, and the fact that the reader knows more than each of the character of the novel. The reader of *King's Gold* definitely knows more than any of the characters as s/he follows them all. The narrator – who is not present in the text - is omniscient as s/he knows all the thoughts and emotions of each protagonist and can move from one location to the other, from one period to the other. In this manner, when Trevor and his companions'⁸ situation becomes more and more painful, the political atmosphere of Zimbabwe also deteriorates, there are more frequent murders and violence

Crime Writing in Southern Africa

escalates (murder of white farmer David Stevens on 15 April, KS 208 ; the same day, murder of Morgan Tsvangirai's driver, Tichaona Chiminya, KS 208 ; murder of white farmer Martin Olds on the 20th Independence anniversary, KS 219 ; arson and plundering of a farm and workers' houses close to Harare, KS 238).

Reporting on the political arena of South Africa and Zimbabwe (from 1980 to 2000), this political thriller traces the tragic history of the genocide of the Matabele (during operation *Gukurahundi*) in Matabeleland. The reader discovers the detective plot through typical African literature themes (superstition, witchcraft and legends⁹), mixed with key themes of crime writing (murder, human courage, treason and romantic love).

Located in a country at the brink of total anarchy, this novel is a crude witness of the Zimbabwean reality at the eve of the third millennium, as the story ends in 1999/2000 with the presidential elections and the referendum. As in reality, several foreign political forces are at work behind the scenes in Zimbabwe. At the beginning of chapter 2, the reader witnesses a meeting between Cameron Trott, British Special Intelligence Service Chief in Harare, Rick Denton, CIA Chief for the Southern African region, Ronnie Hendricks, member of the South African National Intelligence Agency, Morgan Tsvangirai, Secretary-General of the la MDC at the start of the novel (he'll become president of the party in January, before the 12 and 13 February referendum; KS 161), the most powerful opposition party, Andrei Voltov, Officer of the SVR, the Russian external security service and Dr Webster Moyo¹⁰, professor at Bulawayo's Polytechnic College, to find opportunities to unseat Uncle Bob, president Mugabe : the first opportunity will arise during the referendum for the new nouvelle Constitution and the second during the general elections of the following year (KS 62). As historical reality has proved, this meeting was probably held and the opposition parties, the MDC and ZAPU, received anonymous donations for this clandestine work.

Each step in the research, the discovery and the securing of the golden bird of King Mzilikazi is accompanied by historical findings of a recent and far past (KS 33, 41, 44-46, 75, 88, 95, 98-99, etc.)¹¹ and political (KS 61, 63-64, 92, 99, 108, 112, 145, "real" character of Dr. Chenjerai Hitler Hunzvi, etc.), economic (KS 30 lack of petrol, 91 " Zimbabwe on the verge of disaster" 119 shortage of basic commodities, 308 "the Zimbabwe economy was on the edge of a precipice, etc.) and cultural revelations¹² (the different national tribes as well as their cultural and religious practices are describes, sometimes in detail) of the Zimbabwean reality.

As the author has been living in South Africa, a place of security, since several years, he can critically analyze Robert Mugabe's regime in the political thriller.

CONCLUSION

Where the traditional novel orients itself to the exploration of the Self and the individual in autobiographies, autobiographical novels, autofictions (sometimes called "factions" by Anglophone literary critics) and other novels "of the intimate", the crime novel, the detective novel and the political thriller, in which man and his profound individual problems are not the main interest, give the reader free access to the different developmental problems and perspectives of any given society. Historical and sociological novel at once, Macaskill's *King's Gold* is an appropriate example of a political thriller which takes part in a "participatory culture"¹³. In this type of political thriller the choice of subjects and themes points to the major issues of a contemporary society in ruins and acts as a "gangway guiding towards the most diverse aspects and problems of today's world: sociological study of an environment, ideological analysis of modern ways of living, update on the repressions of the historical conscience of a community, psycho-pathological portrait of an alienated society" (our translation of Vanoncini, 1993: 104-105). At the beginning of their research to find the golden bird, Trevor and Gift had the intention to sell the bird to become rich, but at the end of the novel they decide that they do not have the right to enrich themselves personally, that the bird and therefore also the money of its sale belong to the Matabele people. Unfortunately, the potential American buyer, Curtis, does not agree with this ethical decision and steal the bird. The epilogue of the novel continues on the negative path as Mugabe wins the elections even though "it was generally accepted that Mugabe's victory was Pyrrhic" (KS 309). The role of political destabilisation by foreign forces is ridiculed when the six politicians meet again to discuss Zimbabwe's fate and when professor Moyo concludes that "the struggle continues" against the "despot, tyrant, dictator, whatever", called a terrorist by Ian Smith in 1975 and by the Matabele in 1985 (KS 314).

First considered as a minor genre, the political thriller contains the ability to confront and defy the status quo. As a poignant form of social commentary, political crime writing attacks violence, arbitrariness, generalized corruption, political propaganda and proliferation of power networks. Political thrillers are part of a teleologic process from social conservatism to radical criticism of society. The more a society is violent, such as the Zimbabwean society, the more authors, within the country or from their places of exile, seem to choose a literature considered to be violent, such as the political thriller. On the contrary, in countries that are politically stable, such as Botswana, the authors of crime writing choose novels in which humour and irony take centre-stage. In particular, we think of Alexander McCall Smith's novels¹⁴ and Michael Stanley's *A Carrion Death* with inspector Kubu as the main protagonist in 2008.

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