# Ngugi's *Matigari* and the Politics of Literature

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The issue of art in the service of politics is a notoriously complex one. Although many are content with the concept of imaginative writing being harnessed to a political enterprise, not all are happy with the end result. In a review of Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Petals of Blood*, for example, Homi Bhabha (1977) suggests that although the narrator avoids a form of 'romantic nationalism' that 'can lead to an idealized quest for identity, for a mystical pristine Otherness', the text's 'rambling narrative and wide cast of characters' are less than impressive. Bhabha continues:

> In spite of [Ngugi's] serious and intelligent commitment to the problems of neo-colonialism, [his] failure to find an appropriate and original form limits the power of his deep-thinking novel.

Despite Bhabha's reservations, and his belief that Ngugi's adaptation of the classic realist form for a socialist agenda is simply too ambitious, one aspect of the text's composition elicits approval: the fact that

> Ngugi achieves some of his most memorable effects in using the traditional mode of story-telling within the novel to awaken his characters to their own myth and history (Bhabha 1977).

While Bhabha's approval of the use of orature in *Petals* may critically redeem the text, it has an even greater bearing on the later *Matigari*. Published in 1986 *Matigari* is a much shorter novel than *Petals*, with consequently a greater degree of organisation and focus for the narrator and reader alike. Written originally in Gikuyu before being translated into English, *Matigari* values concision where *Petals* strove for a monumental, almost epic quality. More importantly, *Matigari* is keenly allied to the oral tradition, finding in indigenous culture a more formally satisfying method with which to engage with the specificities of post-independent Kenya[1]. Where *Petals*, in

[1] 'It is important that any society that wants to fully understand itself must give serious attention to its oral literature and artists. The artists play a major role in shaping and perpetuating the society's image of itself. They also record and transmit the cultural heritage. These same artists are an important media for the society's self-evaluation' (Kabira & Karega wa Mutahi 1988:4)

other words, used certain folkloric images or references—the character of Nyakinyua and the spiritually fantastic properties of theng'eta, for example—to tie the text to a non-western tradition, *Matigari* makes the oral tradition a central component of the text itself. The employment of oral motifs and structure, with the accompanying use of song and story-telling, not only privileges one set of, specifically non-western traditions over another, but posits a formally decisive movement towards aligning indigenous practice with radical politics.

In the course of this essay I wish to examine Ngugi's most explicit attempt to marry traditional and experimental forms, and to question how beneficial are his efforts at integrating orature within the fictional world of *Matigari*, particularly when the text gestures towards developments within postmodern writing also[2]. That said, although I wish to engage with the relevance of a postmodern reading of *Matigari*, I want to stress the limits of an overly postmodernist position, arguing that *Matigari* needs to be principally tied to the realities of Kenyan politics and not just to the formally experimental techniques of contemporary Euro-American writing[3]. Besides, Ngugi not only posits the superiority of an African aesthetic, making the oral tradition, song and story-telling, a central component of the text itself, but he invests these aspects of the text with a value that goes beyond aesthetic considerations only.

## I

If there is a particular cultural and ideological source to whom Ngugi has consistently turned over the past thirty years it is Frantz Fanon. In Fanon's *Studies in a Dying Colonialism* the identification of the French language with complete authority can be linked to a long established critique by Ngugi of the denigration of African languages in favour of English, within the educational system, but also within the publishing industry upon whom Kenyan teachers are largely dependent. In *Black Skin, White Masks* the psychological assessments of relations between colonised and coloniser are

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[2] Traditional values, views and expressions are never as conservatively understood within Ngugi's writings as we might imagine. As this essay will demonstrate, 'tradition' is taken as a method of positive retrieval, and as something that can be beneficially developed. If tradition carries reactionary connotations within other cultures, it serves to radicalise and reinvent in the works of Ngugi.

[3] For a highly subjective, if passionate, account of the complexities of Kenyan history, see Ngugi's critical works to date (*Homecoming* 1972; *Detained* 1981a; *Writers in Politics* 1981b; *Barrel of a Pen* 1983; *Decolonising the Mind* 1986; *Moving the Centre* 1993; *Penpoints, Gunpoints, and Dreams* 1998). In addition to charting the ongoing battles, periods of disillusionment, and difficulties of exile associated with vigorous campaigning, Ngugi outlines the political transformations of the last twenty-five years or so in considerable detail. For a sufficiently up to date general history that is somewhat critical of Ngugi, see Ogot & Ochieng' (1995:214-236).

taken as the basis for many of the concerns developed in Ngugi's plays, novels, and critical works to date. However, it is in Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* that Ngugi finds some of the most useful, and most appropriable, comments. Many people now think of *Wretched* as the text which challenged the ideology of nationalism, almost solely, but *Wretched* also talked about the complex and difficult task of establishing a national literature, and of the usefulness of the oral tradition in particular:

On another level, the oral tradition—stories, epics and songs of the people—which formally were filed away as set pieces are now beginning to change. The storytellers who used to relate inert episodes now bring them alive and introduce into them modifications which are increasingly fundamental .... Every time the storyteller relates a fresh episode to his public, he presides over a real invocation. The existence of a new type of man is revealed to the public. The present is no longer turned in upon itself but spread out for all to see. The storyteller once more gives free rein to his imagination; he makes innovations and he creates a work of art (Fanon 1961:193f).

Fanon's emphasis on the commonality of experience, of the benefits to be gained from oral literature but, more significantly, of the importance of the storyteller helps to contextualise *Matigari* perfectly. For example, Ngugi (1987) dedicates the novel to 'all those who love a good story; and to all those who research and write on African orature'. There then follows a note on the English edition of the text, followed by a precis/poem, in which the reader/listener is advised on how best to approach the text:

> This story is imaginary. The actions are imaginary. The characters are imaginary .... May the story take place in the country of your choice!

The introductory note further informs us that the idea for the novel comes from 'an oral story about a man looking for a cure for an illness. Finally, the tale not only 'dispenses with fixed time and place', but is described as 'simple and direct', thereby suggesting a model that can transcend the difficulties of artistic and imaginative presentation for a peasant, frequently non-literate, audience.

While *Matigari* engages with several of the issues outlined in texts such as *Devil on the Cross* and *Petals of Blood*—such as the writing of history, the problems of identity, and the complexities of locale—the overall sense of the text is of a rather more refined project. Almost as though the criticisms levelled by figures such as Bhabha against *Petals* considerably altered Ngugi's narrative vision, *Matigari* seeks to engage with the complexities and challenges of postcolonial identity, but to do so by recourse to a smaller cast of characters and a tighter narrative order. In addition, Ngugi employs immediately recognisable historical icons with which to strengthen his strategy. By opening the first chapter of the text with the image of a returning 'Mau Mau' fighter, for example, Ngugi presses for a recognisable moment from the past, but one that has a

contemporary relevance also[4]. Matigari is presented as being in possession of an AK47, in addition to being attired in a variety of colours and fabrics suggestive of prolonged deprivation and hardship. He is suggestive, therefore, not only of those who took to the forests for the duration of the Emergency, but he actually conforms to historically verifiable fact. Robert Edgerton, for example, presents several examples of the outward appearance of 'Mau Mau' and, more importantly, of their effect on native and settler society alike[5]. However, the inclusion of a 'Mau Mau' figure in Ngugi's writing has consistently meant something more than a symbol of political insurrection; rather it represents a potentially regenerative force in the struggle against neo-colonial authority. Indeed, Ngugi has made strenuous efforts to rework the 'Mau Mau' image and its reputation for implacable opposition to colonial authority, and it is in this context that *Matigari* should be placed[6]. As might be seen from several of his critical references, in addition to his celebrated and notorious play *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*, Ngugi not only wants to bring 'Mau Mau' 'back', but to use them as a means of transforming, or at the very least challenging, a corrupt and degenerated polity.

With respect to the oral tradition, Ode Ogede (1992:76) has spoken of the 'lyrically balancing incantatory statements' of oral performance, and of the way in which they can 'confer a sing-song quality to the passage that thrills the audience whom it transports, as it were, in a hypnotic fashion to a land of miracles'. Something of the same quality that Ogede mentions is discernible in *Matigari* also, for example in the way that Matigari is lingeringly, almost lyrically introduced to the reader—"'What is your name?" Ngaruro wa Kiriro asked him. "Matigari ma Njiruungi". "Matigari ma Njiruungi?" "Yes, that is my name"' (Ngugi 1987:20)—or the way in which emphasis is added to the mystery of the character at the ends of chapters:

> Who was Matigari ma Njiruungi, a person who could make prison walls open? From that night Matigari's fame spread over all the country. He

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[4] 'The words "Mau Mau" have no literal meaning in Gikuyu or Swahili, there is no generally accepted origin of the name and, most important, the members of the movement did not apply the name to themselves. "Mau Mau" was the colonizer's name for the movement and will accordingly be placed in inverted commas. Any unqualified use of the name is implicitly an endorsement of a particular view of the movement—that propagandised by Kenyan whites during the Emergency' (Maugham-Brown 1985:16).

[5] 'As far as most whites were concerned, the Mau Mau were filthy, long-haired "vermin" who mutilated cattle and dogs, and brutally murdered women and children. They were held to be contemptible, too, because instead of dramatic tribal war regalia or modern military uniforms they dressed in shabby and dirty European clothing' (Edgerton 1990:108).

[6] In terms of his imaginative engagement with 'Mau Mau', the co-authored *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* (1976) is possibly his most explicit statement on the issue. But see also his essay entitled 'Mau Mau, Voilence and Culture', in the *Homecoming* (1972) essays.

> became a legend. He became a dream. Still the question remained: Who was Matigari ma Njiruungi? (66)

At other points repetition is supplemented by the incorporation of phrases that add definition and emphasis, but which also hint at something potentially regenerative. For example, Matigari speaks of 'blowing the horn of patriotic service and the trumpet of patriotic victory', of 'blow[ing] the trumpet to call together the family of all the patriots who survived', and of 'hear[ing] now the sound of the trumpet and the sound of the horn of justice' (6,38,21). In each instance a different emphasis may be discerned, between victory, community and justice for example, but the cumulative effect is of a politically charged device which hints at the power of an oral tradition. Indeed, Ngugi has personally spoken of how language has a quite different function within Gikuyu culture, and of the way in which it is seen, not as 'a mere string of words', but as having

> a suggestive power well beyond the immediate and lexical meaning. Our appreciation of the suggestive magical power of language was reinforced by the games we played with words through riddles, proverbs, transpositions of syllables, or through nonsensical but musically arranged words (Ngugi 1986:11).

Balancing statements and repeated phrases, then, have an important role in *Matigari,* for they bind the text to the immediacies of lived oral tradition. But in some cases repetition and emphasis has a further structural relevance, one that manages to fuse the various strands of the text together, in addition to providing a focus for a specific set of issues. Consider, for example, section ten, part two of *Matigari,* in which a five line episode provides a whole battery of structural connections:

> The true seeker of truth never loses hope. The true seeker of real justice never tires. A farmer does not stop planting seeds just because of the failure of one crop. Success is born of trying and trying again. Truth must seek justice. Justice must seek the truth. When justice triumphs, truth will reign on earth (Ngugi 1987:84).

In this quotation, incidentally the entirety of section ten, the narrator uses a series of methods with which to document the realities of neo-colonial conflict. Encouraging commitment and perseverance, the text is a recapitulation of many of Ngugi's concerns: the pursuit of honesty and personal integrity, and the demand for justice and truth. In addition, it provides a rural, specifically agricultural image, so that the message may be deemed sufficiently concretised for a peasant audience; an important element in the case of orature since works that are rooted in 'social reality ... have the resonance and authenticity' of lived experience (Ogede 1992:73). More specifically, perhaps, the text may be said to have significant structural status, in addition to displaying some of the incantatory and balancing strategies referred to by Ogede. For example, 'the true seeker of the truth' and 'the true seeker of ... justice' not only echo one another, but are replayed and further echoed in 'truth must seek justice. Justice must seek the truth'. The effect of

the language, mesmerising for those who might hear it spoken, enhances the impact of the piece greatly. Furthermore, by dividing the quotation evenly into two halves we can see how carefully constructed an extract this is: the first half marked by its reliance on a series of negative assertions—'never loses hope ... never tires ... does not stop'—followed by a correspondingly emphatic list of positive assertions—'is born ... must seek ... will reign'. Even if the interchangeability of the ideas require a moment's thought from the reader, the overall effect is that of a poetic, almost musical form supplementing a politically committed and articulated view.

However, it is in terms of the overall structure of the novel that the extract's presence is most keenly felt. Positioned, not only at the precise midway point of a nineteen piece chapter, but effectively at the centre of the text itself, it clearly demonstrates its importance. It reinforces the notion that Ngugi incorporates verbal symmetry and patterning, not just for its own sake, but as part of what Neil Lazarus (1990:130) calls a 'resistive ethic'. The extract may be characterised by a series of alternating rhythms and cadences, beyond doubt a central aspect of an oral tradition, but its positioning in the overall scheme of the text locks it into a more sharply defined commentary about the political importance of structure. Ngugi wishes to present a coherent and compact model of revolutionary challenge, a tightly organised web of simple, but forcefully articulated images, and he consciously does so by positioning the most important ideas of the novel at the very centre of his text itself. Operating as the fulcrum of the novel, then, this section has particularly well defined energising abilities, both in terms of the individual units of which it is comprised, as well as in terms of its simple location. It addresses a series of metaphysically troubling issues, such as truth, justice and hope, but it translates those issues into the potentially unifying image of rural simplicity. For Ngugi, the farmer's determination to succeed, the emphasis on integrity, self and collective well-being, as well as the symbolic force of the life-giving seed, suggests a centrally important image of political regeneration and hope.

## II

In a short story entitled 'The Fig Tree', first written and published by Ngugi in 1960, but not anthologised until 1964, a story of tribal and familial unification is told with reference to what the narrator calls 'the sacred Fig Tree' (Ngugi 1964:182). The story tells of how a young woman, unable to have children, decides to leave her family but, on the night of her departure and only a short distance from her village, is caught up in a violent storm. Forced to seek shelter within the 'sanctuary and peace' of the Fig Tree the woman discovers herself to be pregnant, realises more fully her 'responsibilities' to her husband, and returns to help 'unite and support the tribe, giving it new life' (Ngugi 1964:182f)[7]. Although the significance of an early short story might not seem

[7] It should be pointed out that Ngugi's representation of women has received less than

immediately apparent to the Ngugi canon, this particular tale, or at any rate the symbolic importance of the fig tree, has a direct bearing on *Matigari*. In terms of its relation to the short story, the fig tree has the power to give and sustain life, as well as act as a place of spiritual, almost religious importance. When Mukami, the young woman, has her attention drawn to the tree, her intention is rather simply and quickly to reach it:

> It was a matter of life and death—a battle for life. There under the sacred Fig Tree, she would find sanctuary and peace. There, Mukami, would meet her God, Murungu, the God of her tribe (Ngugi 1964:182).

By way of contrast, Ngugi's incorporation of the fig tree within the opening pages of *Matigari*, is far more politically developed. Here is how Matigari comes upon the fig tree:

> He walked along the banks of the river. Then suddenly he saw what he was looking for: a huge mugumo, a fig tree, right in the middle of a cluster of other trees. It was remarkable for its very wide trunk, and its four roots were visible, with one jutting out from the middle, and three others sticking out at the sides. He smiled to himself as he stood his AK47 against the tree and drew his sword from where it was hidden beneath his coat. He began digging the ground next to the central root. He covered the bottom of the hole with dry leaves (Ngugi 1987:3f).

While emphasis is being laid on the actualities of resistance, which ties the text to recent historical experience, the tree's broader associations affiliate the text with a different belief system entirely. For example, Jomo Kenyatta, in his *Facing Mount Kenya*, tells how Gikuyu tribal legend attributes particular significance to fig trees, and of how they appear in the earliest stories of bountiful nature being handed over to the Gikuyu by 'Mogai (the Divider of the Universe)' (Kenyatta 1962:5). Kenyatta also states that sacred trees were central to initiation ceremonies, and goes on to suggest that the

> mokoyo [fig] tree has a special significance for the Gikuyu people. It might even be suggested that the name of the people is derived from that of the tree, e.g. mokoyo, the tree; mogekoyo, a Gikuyu person (Kenyatta 1962:248).

In the case of Matigari, however, the fig tree takes on additional importance,

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favourable critical attention. Elleke Boehmer (1991:188), for example, has written of how his ambivalent 'attitude towards women forms a significant part of a wider contradiction undercutting his populist nationalist programme for a new Kenya'. Boehmer (1991:192) 'acknowledge[s] that Ngugi's women characters remain pioneers in the field of Anglophone African fiction written by men', but she also documents his frequent difficulties in moving beyond stereotypical, sometimes simply offensive, representations since the publication of *A Grain of Wheat* in 1967.

especially where the narrator uses the tree to suggest not so much sexual fertility, as revolutionary fertility (the gun as 'traditional' phallus?), and where he invites the reader to regard Matigari's activity not so much as concealment or military caution, as impregnation (the gun/phallus bringing forth revolutionary fruit). What I wish to suggest about Ngugi's use of the fig tree, then, is that it finds itself not only the subject of constant discussion, as in *The River Between*, where it appears as 'a huge thick tree, thick and mysterious', a 'holy and awesome' sight, but as something which he frequently updates and employs as an accessible cultural referent (Ngugi 1965:19). In other words, the symbol locks Ngugi's two texts together and shows a developed political awareness, but it also functions at the level of immediate oral tradition, and as a means of providing the basis for what Edward Sackey (1991:390) calls the 'africanization of the novel form'. Basically, *Matigari* is a novel about one man's arrival and subsequent movements through the landscape of modern Kenya, his search for a home, and the radicalising influence he has on those with whom he has some degree of contact. However, in other respects it is about finding an appropriate medium to fully express those ideas, one that can successfully utilise traditional forms to a political end.

Barbara Harlow (1987:169), in *Resistance Literature*, discusses Zakariya Tamer's *Locusts in the City* in terms of its 'disorientated traveller', someone who finds the usual procedures of recognition and movement significantly altered, someone who finds himself 'a stranger in his own land. Topographical and architectural detail may be familiar, suggests Harlow, but the character's sense of unease, all the more apparent because of the patent familiarity of the surroundings, is fully established. In Elleke Boehmer's *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature* (1995), a similar claim to Harlow's is made:

> From what we have observed, it becomes apparent that the many acts of remembering which characterize post-independence writing partake in an over-arching metanarrative of journeying and return ....

And later:

> A writer may also choose to focus on specific episodes in the greater narrative of journeying: the idyllic childhood and the dawn of self-consciousness; or the time following, of severance and departure, and the loss of roots, home, or motherland (Boehmer 1995:199-200).

I cite Boehmer's discussion of the 'postcolonial journeying tale', which includes Wilson Harris's *Palace of the Peacock*, Ayi Kwei Armah's *Two Thousand Seasons* and Wole Soyinka's *The Road*, as well as the image of Harlow's 'disorientated traveller', because they provide precisely the sort of context best suited for understanding *Matigari*. In Ngugi's text a character's arrival is marked, not just by a form of self-transformation in which the accumulated hardware of timeless resistance (swords and guns) is put to one side, but by his crossing over from one side of the country to the other. However, the effect of crossing the river, a baptismal and purificatory gesture

reminiscent of the initiation ceremonies for young men, tends to confirm the land of his birth as a territorially appropriated enclave. Like the frontiers that separate one nation state from another, Ngugi suggests that divisions not only exist, but exist to maintain control and to exclude a resisting, revolutionary politics from entry. As with the characters cited by Boehmer and Harlow, Ngugi's *Matigari* is both peripatetic, and confused, a native and an exile.

From the outset, then, the importance of oral structures, such as story-telling, songs, traditional metaphors and myths, is clear. Indeed, Matigari himself is drawn directly from myth, and from the sort of testimony that is the preserve of traditional society. In its original form the myth is 'about a man looking for a cure for an illness', and about his quest for relief from discomfort and pain. But in the newly updated version provided by Ngugi it is about a man's political suffering, and about his search for integrity and truth in contemporary Kenya. Based on a traditional text, but updated for a more contemporary purpose, Ngugi manages to draw the reader toward an established folkloric element, while at the same time giving it a more current usage. Moreover, Ngugi (1986:78) supplements these story-telling and mythological traditions by employing particularly communal gestures, galvanising records from what he has called 'a known tradition'. Indeed, the narrator's use of song is particularly important, given its emphasis within Gikuyu culture itself. For example, in the text's opening scene, as Matigari bends down to the river 'to wash his face and hands', he is reminded

> of the other waters in the past which had been just as cold. He remembered how, then, they had sung throughout the night in the open air (Ngugi 1987:4).

At several other points in the text references are also made to songs, with the stress usually on belonging and loyalty and plans for the future:

> We shall all gather, go home together, light the fire together and build our home together. Those who eat alone, die alone. Could I have forgotten so soon the song we used to sing? (Ngugi 1987:6)

And, of course, in the final episode of the text, with the emphasis on regeneration and the continuity of resistance, songs are also included:

> He recalled the night of the worker's strike. And suddenly he seemed to hear the worker's voices, the voices of the peasants, the voices of the students and of other patriots of all the different nationalities of the land, singing in harmony (Ngugi 1987:175).

In each case then the incorporation of song can be said to evoke mood and a participatory element from the audience, something that Ngugi has written of directly in several texts. For example, in his writing on African theatre he has spoken at length about the use and benefits to be gained from the incorporation of song:

> Song and dance as we have seen are central to nearly all the rituals celebrating rain, birth, the second birth, circumcision, marriage, funerals or to all ordinary ceremonies. Even daily speech among peasants is interspersed with song. It can be a line or two, a verse, or a whole song. What's important is that song and dance are not just decorations; they are an integral part of that conversation, that drinking session, that ritual, that ceremony (Ngugi 1986:45).

While the thrust of Ngugi's essay concerns song as a formally intrinsic aspect of African theatre, the sense of song having a central, almost pedagogical part to play in life and literature generally is well made. By punctuating his text in the manner that he does, in other words, he provides his narrative with additional interest, but also with a set of folkloric cadences that provide cultural depth. Moreover, song may also be regarded as a challenge to more western novelistic conventions, since it incorporates 'a living mythical framework' that endows the text with something distinctly separate and special (see Kirpal 1988:151).

Perhaps one of the most important uses of song, however, lies not just in its affiliation to an oral tradition but in its direct relationship to 'Mau Mau'. In Kenyatta's anthropological study of Gikuyu custom and folklore, songs are described as having very specific functions, such as the use of cultivation songs, praise and warrior songs, as well as the extensive range of initiation songs that mark the transition from childhood to adulthood:

> In every stage of life there are various competitions arranged for the members of the several age-groups, to test their ability to recall and relate in song and dance the stories and events which have been told to them, and at such functions parents and the general public form an audience to judge and correct the competitors (Kenyatta 1962:xvi).

However, Roger Edgerton also suggests that songs were a specifically central part of 'Mau Mau' resistance and culture, and he cites the 'Mau Mau' passion for singing before, during, and after their many compulsory meetings as a common occurrence. Referring to 'Mau Mau's' practice of especial commitment to what he calls 'song fests', Edgerton (1990:117) concludes

> there is nothing peculiar about the men of a revolutionary army singing songs about the reasons for their rebellion, although the amount of time they spent time doing so was certainly remarkable.

Given Edgerton and Kenyatta's dual emphasis within Gikuyu culture to the use of song, one can begin to understand better, I think, why Ngugi decided to include them in *Matigari*. They provide rhythm and texture, of course. But they also establish a relationship to 'Mau Mau' and to direct historical experience. In this way the narrator is able to demonstrate both an affiliation to cultural practices unbound by the dictates of historical provenance, as well as a commitment to the specificities of Kenyan,

specifically Gikuyu, resistance that is barely thirty years old.

## III

In a recent essay by Helen Gilbert (1994:98f) on the subject of aboriginal drama and, in particular, its use of a 'linguistic innovation and structural repetition' that 'evoke[s] notions of performed speech or story-telling', it is suggested that the oral text should be seen 'as a mode of decolonization' and appreciated for its 'attempts to avoid hierarchies of value that privilege the literate'. While Gilbert's comments are more directly relevant to the 'native' cultures of Australasia, they are of considerable importance for our reading of *Matigari* also. As stated at the beginning of this essay, Ngugi employs traditional methods and ideas with which to produce a revolutionary novel capable of reaching as broad an audience as possible. As a starting point he uses an oral tale which he then embellishes and reworks, thereby allowing himself to simultaneously traditionalise and modernise his text. In addition, he employs certain motifs, and uses certain language techniques, to accompany what is a late twentieth century western narrative form concerned with the problematics of neocolonialism. Developing a rapport with an audience through the use of traditional symbols, then, is one of the primary concerns of *Matigari.* Fundamental to the writing of a text obliged to a living oral tradition, however, is how ideas and political motivation can be best communicated. In other words, it is all very well being aware of what *Matigari* is intended to signify, but as so much of the text involves his interaction and constantly updated transformations the question of how his story is to be told becomes increasingly important. In an essay on the development of contemporary postcolonial writing in India Meenakshi Mukherjee (1989:46) suggests that

> Ngugi tries to capture the quality [of oral culture] not only in the texture of the narrative but also in the structure of the novel, which gradually unfolds in a freewheeling manner. Anecdotes are linked with episodes either in a chain with contemporary situations, others as part of the realistic fabric of the narrative—all done in very broad strokes and not in the subtle and muted techniques of his earlier work.

Mukherjee goes on to suggest that since the earlier *Devil on the Cross* 'was read out in homes, in buses, in offices during lunch breaks and in public bars, and was reintegrated back into the oral tradition' its success as a fully hybridised medium, at once oral and literate, capable of mass appeal while operating within the parameters of sustained imaginative writing, was well established.

Interestingly, because the English translation of *Matigari* follows on from the original Gikuyu version we are able to see how *Matigari* fared in terms of its public reception, and able to establish its political impact also. First published in October 1986, *Matigari* became such a source of worry to the authorities, suggests Ngugi in the note to the English edition, that

> by January 1987, intelligence reports had it that peasants in Central Kenya were whispering and talking about a man called Matigari who was roaming the whole country making demands about truth and justice.

Although the reports soon made clear that the figure was more fictional than real, the confiscation of all copies of the novel still took place the following month. Because the novel was deemed to be subversive, and because its central character had apparently the power to infiltrate even the enclosed and impoverished areas of the Kenyan countryside, it had to be repressed. Of course, however hard the government might try to eradicate or make negligible the story of Matigari, its efforts to eliminate the text from popular consciousness entirely must be regarded as a failure; a failure because its existence as a written text had already been bypassed, and because its new life as an oral document had been absorbed within those communities most likely to benefit from its message within a relatively short period. In Ngugi's scheme of things, the power to move beyond the confines of the literate, to free up and publicise an account of revolutionary challenge without having to rely on the transfer of the printed word is not only the best answer to chronic and widespread illiteracy, but to the repressive measures of state supervision and censorship.

Ngugi strives for a text that, because of its immediate accessibility as a Gikuyu published novel, achieves greater political renown than if it were to be only published in English. In addition, the popular and easy appropriation of the text, the sense that its characters and their various difficulties can be widely discussed, suggests a text that has taken on a distinct life, one that has drawn from, and is now drawn back into, oral tradition. For instance, in the opening pages of *Matigari* one is introduced to a scene in which a sense of locale and history is established, and in which a central character, developed through the use of highly rhetorical language and motifs, is clearly presented. Emphasis is kept on the physicality of the man through a set of detailed and visualised descriptions, while the physical landscape is either subordinated or well muted. In keeping with the almost reverential quality of the scene, and as an effective method of drawing attention to the details of transformation and arrival, an effective silence is consistently maintained. The third person narration, in the ideal story-telling position, simply documents the scene, taking care to emphasise the importance of water, initiation procedures, and the quest for a sense of belonging.

But how does Ngugi invite his audience to empathise with this, and in what way can the story be told so as to allow for further, public retellings? Perhaps one of the most engaging methods of directly involving an audience is to ask questions; not direct questions, but rhetorical ones, such as can be found at the end of the first and second sections of the text. For example at the end of section one the narrator suggests that 'from that night, Matigari's fame spread over all the country. He became a legend. He became a dream. Still the question remained: Who was Matigari ma Njiruungu?' (Ngugi 1987:66). At the close of the second section we are told of how

> the songs spread like wildfire in a dry season. They spread through the villages. The people sang them day and night .... They would sing the song of Matigari ma Njiruungi .... But who was Matigari ma Njiruungu? (Ngugi

1987:127)

These questions may well have the effect of simply retaining interest, or of tying the various strands of the story together in ways that I have already discussed, but they also invite a form of interrogative and participatory involvement where the audience is concerned. And something of this technique is established in the opening scenes also, techniques that challenge and provoke the audience, thereby drawing them directly into the text. In other words, even where Ngugi presents one voice or one set of psychological considerations within the text, he still invites others to contribute[8]. At other times he simply establishes a democratic, non-hierarchical structure by providing multiple, frequently competing, voices; for example in the way that he uses radio sequences not only to heighten tension but to provide additional commentary from alternative perspectives. By splitting his narrative up, by creating a sense of what Derek Wright (1992:86), in a discussion of Armah's *Two Thousand Seasons* has called 'traditional communal intimacy', Ngugi builds oral structures directly into the text. Of course this was a strategy he had attempted with *Petals* also, with various characters taking it in turn to discuss their experiences, each experience seen as a uniquely articulated moment that would eventually collect around a central idea. But the process within *Matigari*, I think, is a much more developed and structurally intrinsic aspect of the text.

Direct appeals to story-telling and to its hypnotic, in some cases transhistoricising power, run throughout the novel:

> The man's eyes shone brightly. His melodious voice and his story had been so captivating that Muriuki and Ngaruro wa Kiriro did not realise that they had reached the restaurant. His story had so transported them to other times long ago when the clashing of the warrior's bows and spears shook trees and mountains to their roots (Ngugi 1987:22f).

In this particular instance story-telling would seem to be capable of reaching into the past, suggesting a continuity of resistance, in addition to providing a vehicle for statements of solidarity and communal feeling. In addition, Ngugi's deliberate referencing to an active and tribally unified opposition might be seen as a means of showing how politically repressed individuals can be successfully motivated by the use of story-telling techniques. At a more practical level, however, the activity of story-telling prepares the ground for the text's direct (re)introduction into oral culture. The easy identification made between the text and oral tradition helps define the novel as directly amenable to a story-telling environment and gives it a more performative

[8] 'In order for the [Kenyan] students to fully appreciate the genre, we encouraged them to fully participate in any performances that they came across. This helped them to understand how the audience can shape the narrative, and how time can help an artist to make an otherwise short narrative into a long complex one' (Adagala & Kabira 1985:89).

sense, one that renders it less fixed and less dependent on print media. In striving for a more committed oral contribution, then, writers such as Ngugi are not only stating their belief in the value of traditional forms and methodologies, but publicising their explicit opposition to the formal criteria established by western novelistic convention. In other ways, however, they are addressing the immediacies of post-independent African society, and find that by forging 'a connection with indigenous poetic traditions of folk tales, conversation and meaningful recounting of personal moments of experience' a truer and more relevant form is established (quoted in Ashcroft *et al* 1989:128).

For instance, at the beginning of the second section of *Matigari* Ngugi incorporates story-telling as a distinct and politically motivating tactic. Up until this point we have witnessed Matigari's arrival, his search for a home, his increasing disapproval of contemporary Kenyan life, and his subsequent imprisonment. Representing the undying spirit of revolutionary nationalism, Matigari clearly presents a newly resurrected force capable of personal and social transformation in a country of increasing corruption. But by the time we get to the opening scenes of the middle section, however, Matigari has become a much fuller figure; his fame has spread and, more importantly, is seen to have been spread by word of mouth: 'Tell us. Tell us about the man .... Tell us about Matigari' the young boys ask:

> The story of how Matigari had saved Guthera from the police dog had already reached them. They had heard how the police had already shaken with fear in front of Matigari (Ngugi 1987:69).

In an example such as this Ngugi directly addresses the issue of postcolonial history, seeking to reclaim what he has called, in a different place, the 'collective memory [of] ... a people' (Eyoh 1986:163). Moreover, by providing his audience with direct and uncomplicated approval of an oral tradition, he shows how the story of Matigari can be successfully transposed from locale to locale and—possibly the ultimate test for the text—from the imaginative to the real. Story-telling, in other words, is seen as both a shaper of action, as well as a part of it. It can be a provider of pooled, communal information, giving support and providing a forum for potentially radicalising ideas, but it can also create opportunity and its own momentum. It can be a reference point for indigenous culture, but its importance for this text lies in the way in which events are given additional emphasis with each subsequent retelling: 'Just wait till you hear the whole story!' (Ngugi 1987:71).

## IV

If *Matigari* is marked by a proliferation of voices and multiple perspectives, it is important to remember that while the text's plurality might take it into the realm of experimentation, it is most satisfactorily read within the context of postcolonial writing. In a recent essay arguing for a distinction to be maintained between postcolonial and postmodern writing, Helen Tiffin (1991:vii) acknowledged the 'formal and tropological overlap' that exists between both forms, but suggested that

since the postcolonial text 'is conceived of as a set of discursive practices, prominent among which is resistance to colonialism', its essential independence from the postmodern must be established. Tiffin's argument should be seen not only as one which has witnessed the writings of figures such as Ngugi becoming increasingly appropriated for postmodernism, but one who regards these loosely structured forms as requiring more, rather than less, critical sophistication. Ngugi might employ song and oral testimony, and generally work with formally experimental techniques found within the Euro-American tradition, but his writing is of a consistently political nature. Moreover, to make little distinction between the two types of writing, or to allow the commonality of expression discovered at the level of form to suggest a more general, specifically ideological, similarity, is to advance some very dubious arguments indeed. To establish the similarities between postmodern and postcolonial writing as our principal and determining critical concern, I would argue, is to repress the historical and political specificities of imperial intervention.

We might be able to see how these arguments are better understood if we take the development of Matigari himself as an illustration of some of these issues. I have already spoken of Matigari's arrival, and of the way in which the opening scene is structured around him, but perhaps a more direct way of assessing the fundamental differences between postmodern and postcolonial writing would be to look at the supernatural and fantastic manner of his depiction. To begin with, our introduction to *Matigari* is one of physical-force nationalism, and of historical coherence. Ngugi has spoken himself of the filmic quality of the text, or at any rate of his sense of having 'visualiz[ed] the whole movement of [the] characters as if ... standing behind a camera'; so the very stylised, and historically verifiable sense of the character, is clearly and directly intended (Eyoh 1986:166). But a sense of supernatural agency, something that stretches the realistic frame of the scene out somewhat, follows on from this quite quickly, and suggests a different type of character entirely. For example, when Matigari is attacked by the young boys who live among the wreckage of an increasingly alienated and materialist culture, Matigari 'seemed to be protected by a powerful charm, because not a single stone touched him' (Ngugi 1987:17). A little later he is described as appearing as though 'he could see far into the future' (Ngugi 1987:19), and as moving easily between youthful and aged states. Gestures of self-transformation such as these might be compatible enough with an oral tradition more used to the surprise and challenge of fantasy, what Okpewho (1988:3) might call 'mystical rapture', but what relationship might they enjoy with the postmodern and, more importantly, what sort of reading and critical strategies do they require?

Ordinarily, our first inclination would be to establish links between Ngugi's use of supernaturalism or fantasy, and the manner in which it might be said to be employed by other writers, perhaps from other cultures. For example, T. Apter (1982:76), in *Fantasy Literature*, suggests that

> the transformation theme is utilised in modern fantasy to indicate, as does the double theme, doubts about our own identity, about that of others, and about the way in which our relations with others affect our identity. The modern use

> is linked to its mythic counterpart in which metamorphosis provides special powers of disguise and, frequently, of mobility.

However helpful such comparisons are Ngugi's use of fantasy still requires that the text, because of its political commitment and its broader intentions, be read differently. Obviously Apter's comments about conflicting or doubtful identities, the power of disguise, and the mobility allowed to characters of transformational properties make for instructive enough criticism. However, the motivation for the use of fantasy in Ngugi's case has to be seen as stemming from a desire for social instruction, and from a wish to make compatible traditional and modern forms.

What I wish to suggest about the development of fantasy in *Matigari*, then, is that while the text has all the appearance of comparable forms within the Euro-American tradition, its motivation and ultimate objectives are substantially different. Something of the interest in developing a character of supernatural qualities may be found in Ngugi's earlier *The River Between*, for example when Chege, an elder in the tribe, is said to have 'the gift of magic' and, more importantly, said 'to gain in stature and appearance so that Waiyaki [the protagonist] thought him transfigured' (1965:8). Like Matigari, Chege's reason for having been bestowed with these powers is not so he can act as a focus for the development of experimental techniques, but because he represents the apotheosis of Gikuyu wisdom and generosity, and because such attributes are best illustrated with reference to a non-realistic idiom. By the time of writing *Matigari*, of course, figures of supernatural and timeless significance have come to carry much greater and bolder responsibilities for Ngugi, but the fantastic qualities that a character represents are still intended for purposes other than mere literary affectation.

What the development of issues such as those of supernatural agency consistently reveal, it seems to me, are motivations that have a basis in lived, historical and political experience. Postmodern writing may well be the product of, or a response to, a crisis in western philosophy. And it may well articulate that crisis by celebrating non-linear forms and by leaving its narratives essentially open-ended but the crisis, if it can be called that, within the postcolonial text is rather different. In other words, the superhuman Matigari whose various metamorphoses suggest comparison with other forms of literary representation is there for the purpose of political instruction. The novel may well work within several representational domains, but its commitment to a specifically political and ideological ideal is undiminished.

Patricia Waugh (1993:49) describes postmodern art as mediating

> a sense of multiplicity, fragmentation, instability of meaning, dissensus, the breakdown of grand theories as either narratives of emancipation or speculation.

Waugh goes on to question the legitimacy of those for whom postmodernism is a non-committed and politically unaware practice, and she presents the example of Linda Hutcheon whose 'earlier non-political interest in modern uses of self-reflexive forms'

has transpired into 'a defence of postmodernism as a mode of intertextual, 'self-reflexive discourse', always inextricably bound to social discourse' as an interesting, perhaps acceptable, development. In addition, she cites the ideas of other critics who see postmodernism as problematising 'dominant values by contesting their codes of representation from within' and who, therefore, re-present and re-politicise the postmodern. Yet a difference still seems to exist between the writings (as opposed to theoretical speculations) of many postmodern writers, and figures such as Ngugi. For instance, Waugh (1993:51f) speaks of postmodernism as being 'a condition where the possibility of human agency has disappeared' and of how, in a brief discussion of Salman Rushdie's *Shame*, postmodernism thrives on the creation of 'provisional identities'. However, as principal elements of a mode of writing committed to political issues, comments such as these would find little acceptance in *Matigari*. Problematising identity, of course, is acceptable if it leads, as with *Matigari*, to an accumulation of transhistorical referents capable, in turn, of the reactivation of emancipatory politics. But it is not acceptable if it leads, as in *Petals*, to characters losing a sense of themselves and of their will to live. *Matigari*, it must be emphasised—and here is how the supernatural elements of the text may be said to differ substantially from the sort of gloss they might find in a postmodernist reading of the text—is rendered plural and fragmented, is seen as a figure of multiple and complex composition, because that is the best method of securing a sense of optimism and radical commitment from a reader. Difficulties may be discerned, of course, and so long as Ngugi continues to move between literate and oral traditions, linking fantasy and song to the more practical considerations of a revolutionary form, he will continue to be seen as appropriable to the postmodernist canon. But the emphasis on making those combinations and movements distinctly proactive, making them appear as a gesture of commitment and political integrity, will persist:

> 'Our people, let us share this bean, and this drop of wine'. Something in Matigari's voice made them listen to him attentively. There was a sad note about it, but it also carried hope and courage. The others now fell silent. His words seemed to remind them of things long forgotten, carrying them back to dreams they had long before. 'How are we going to see in this darkness?' (Ngugi 1986:56).

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