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Culturalism and existentialist thought—a reading of Julien Kilanga Musinde's *Retour de manivelle*

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Published in 2008, the novel *Retour de manivelle* ("Backlash") by Julien Kilanga Musinde revives the unfinished debate related to the search of identity in African writing. The universe depicted represents the modern society and Musinde's main character is changing as fast as he relocates to a different society. The author depicts this flexibility as a strength that commands the adaptability of the character without suppressing the initial culture of the protagonist. Musinde chooses to freely express his fantasy and, at the same time, integrate his subjective world vision and multidimensional scholarship in the interpretation of the identity. The question of culture being central to the novel, the paper is aimed at demonstrating, however, that the culture that is depicted as both exclusive and dynamic in Musinde's work should be understood mainly in cyclic perception in which both the starting and the arrival points are joining in a unique individual subjectivity, such a subjectivity having the potential of engendering a new discourse by attempting to juxtapose conflicting ways of life. The paper also demonstrates how Musinde distances himself from the materialistic world vision commonly expressed by existentialists and Epicurean philosophers. This attitude allows the author to reflect on the interconnectivity between the immediate empirical reality and the world beyond from the perspective of a transnational African intellectual in a globalizing world. **Keywords:** Congolese literature, cultural identity, existentialism, globalisation, Julien Kilanga Musinde, meaning of death.

It is common knowledge that African literature is embedded in the immediacy of incidents that punctuate socio-political life to such an extent that an informed reader might discern numerous predictable repetitions in its corpus.¹ It is little wonder, therefore, that Francophone African writers tend, in most cases, to derive inspiration from the same sources which could be summed up as the mismanagement of State affairs and the denunciation of social ills such as corruption, dictatorship, neo-colonialism and the like. Thus, as they grapple with socio-political issues, the respective roles of writers and historians sometimes merge. Notwithstanding the broad range of tendencies that characterise modern African literature today, it can nonetheless be noted that, generally "African literature is purely a function of history and, by implication, politics, in the sense that literary works project themselves as position statements on history" (Madebe 93). This type of dependence on history that

hamstrings African writers like a “Gordian knot” (Nganang 88), is one of the principle hallmarks of post-colonial African literature.

However, Julien Kilanga Musinde’s *Retour de manivelle* (“Backlash”) gives the reader the sense that the author of “Vagissements” (“Wailing”) has a diametrically opposite view as evidenced by his literary slant and take on the literature of his country, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and the African continent in general.² Walking in the footsteps of his compatriots and predecessors, Vumbi Yoka Mudimbe and George Ngal, Musinde sets out to set the record straight by reviving the philosophical approach to literature in a world where such a perspective is apparently becoming obsolete. In this novel, which was published in 2008, the author uses the hero to distance himself from the kind of literary endeavours that are usually embedded in everyday life, which he views as “contrived anyway” (119). For Musinde, cultural (or literary) prosperity is a function of national prosperity (119). He subsequently argues that literature embedded in everyday life events would be depraved, given that it would be prone to describing “the scourges of the times, wars, famine, poverty, violence and dictatorship” (119). By contrast, and using his own style in this novel, Musinde focuses on cultural and philosophical issues, thereby revealing his ontological stance to the reader. It can be discerned that the author delivers a novel in which he propounds the theoretical bases underpinning his outlook on the essence of being. Similarly, *Retour de manivelle* is a definition of the *self* and the *other* that resurrects the existential question of the meaning of death. However, the author reveals worldview and, thus, implicitly affords the reader a graphic illustration of fundamental philosophical issues.

As far as the narrative is concerned, *Retour de manivelle* focuses on the issue of cultural identity in the context of globalisation. Josué, the hero, recounts the story of his life from the perspective of an adult: modest beginnings in the village before settling in town, an exceptional school career, the opportunity to hold leadership positions, and so forth. The hero’s return to his home village, as an adult and international civil servant, seems to be the high point of the novel, the moment when he both literally and figuratively comes back to life, amidst his own people after a short stint in the “kingdom” of the dead.

The issue of cultural identity

The search for cultural identity in African literature is as old as literature itself. For instance, in the novel *Un homme pareil aux autres* (“A Man Like Other Men”), the writer René Maran had already invented a borderline character. Cast in the hero’s role, Jean Veneuse, subsequently made the following remarks: “Having arrived in Bordeaux as a toddler, at a time when it would have been difficult to come across eight or ten black people here, my best friends are whites. I think and live like the French. France is my

religion. She is the be-all and end-all to me. Ultimately, other than my skin colour, I feel European” (Maran 184).

This passage heralds not only the loss of a traditional identity but also the acquisition of a new identity by the same person. This is a romanticised depiction of the danger of decline hovering over certain cultures against a backdrop of coexistence and cultural strife. Yet, it is not in the interest of any people to watch their culture disappear. How then can one stem the imminent cultural threat facing a postcolonial African society whose attention is focused *elsewhere*? Would it, perhaps, be advisable to live like a hermit for the sake of preserving one’s culture? Through his novel, *Retour de manivelle*, Musinde reflects on these concerns to which, in his own way, he attempts to suggest some solutions. The beginning of the novel offers the following passage to the reader: “Son, I know that you want to go to those distant lands to discover other cultures. I do not wish to stop you. But, before [you consider] embracing other cultures, you must imbibe your own culture first” (10).

Such were the words pronounced by Josué’s father to his son and hero of the novel, on the eve of an odyssey that would take him far away from the land of his birth. These instructions form part of the travel arrangements and, as in the case of Kourouma’s novel, should be viewed as an attempt to “alleviate, if not ward off, the effects of bad luck” (Kourouma 151) on the traveller. Placed at the beginning of the novel (on the second page), these remarks indirectly bring to the fore ontological issues undergirded by a cultural essence that is part and parcel of the hero’s identity which, in this instance, could be symbolic of the modern African intellectual. It is clear that Josué, the main character, is a young man who is not yet fully immersed in his own culture. Hence, the assertion “you must imbibe your culture first” sounds like a moral injunction from a master (the father) to a novice (the son). Far from being a mere exhortation, these words should be viewed as moral coercion, reinforced by the deliberate subsequent use of the imperative mood in injunctions like “look at this tree” (10), “look at these leaves”, “observe them carefully” (11), and so forth. These commands lay emphasis on initiation to the secrets of nature following which, the initiate is invited to “drink palm wine from a buffalo horn” (11), as a form of ritual coronation.

Reflecting on this natural symbolism might help bring to light a current trend amongst African youth and intellectuals to embark on discovering the world by gravitating towards *the Other*. This narrowing of space, as Senghor once put it, “tends to trigger a reflex for self-defence in the face of increasing uniformity” (Biondi 122). The rite of “drinking from a buffalo horn is a serious reminder aimed at African intellectuals that urges them to *come to terms* with nature (the temple) (13) and the homeland. The latter, in turn, not only refers to the patriotic sentiments that should characterise African intellectuals as they encounter the “other world” but also to the unwavering attachment to history and the past, which, from the author’s point of view, constitute a crucible of sacred forces. It is in this sense that significance of the

mention of the word “ancestors”, which further cements the notion of the sacred as repeated in the phrase “temple where any prayer to the ancestors takes pride of place” (13), can be grasped. Affinity between mankind and nature (which is scared) is consistent with the Baudelairian view according to which the spiritual and the material commune harmoniously with one another as might be gleaned from the poem “Correspondances”, from the collection *Les Fleurs du Mal*:

Nature is a temple in which living pillars
Sometimes give voice to confused words;
Man passes there through forests of symbols
Which look at him with understanding eyes. (Baudelaire 85)

In Musinde’s world, Baudelaire’s “sacred nature” takes on a new dimension: it becomes specific. The specificity of the “temple” is expressed by the use of demonstrative determinants in lexical units such as: “this tree”, “this buffalo horn”, “this forest”, and so forth. The specification or, rather, the individualisation of nature is a vivid expression of “the instinctive bond with soil”, as a result of which the main character Josué “gets lost” in the wide world only to “rediscover himself” upon returning to his home soil. That way, Musinde keeps his perspective of the world rooted in a particular culture where the instruments for transition to the afterlife are predetermined. Hence, the author surmises that “the life and development in this country largely depend on the moderate observance of the dictates of tradition.” (125).

One could wonder, in the light of this perspective, whether the same absolute imperatives that bring the hero back to the culture of his homeland would alert the “community” to the gradual extinction of their national culture in the event of an encounter with a new culture. Even without travelling, the danger of “cultural extinction” is sometimes felt locally as a result of multifaceted interactions coupled with the influence of the media. The father’s concern is to ensure that his culture will live on in perpetuity. This very same sense of sadness which was also felt by Senghor, for instance, serves as a pretext for those who desire to see their own culture grow in influence, notwithstanding the lurking multiple dangers. Hence, it is with a due sense of sadness that Senghor deplures the gradual cultural demise of his country as witnessed in the very same environment whence it should have prospered: “I came to grief when my home village, Joal, organised a feast for me to celebrate my seventieth birthday! Young girls no longer know how to sing or compose gymnastic chants extolling the virtues of their ‘slender dark-skinned heroes’. Neither could the young men properly execute the victory dance by shaking their bronze bells” (Biondi 122–23).

In this context, Musinde’s world is a form of subjectivity aimed at enhancing or promoting a worldview that is endangered or misrepresented due to lack of interest, on the part of those who should have been promoting it, bad faith or even ignorance

on the part of those that dread it regardless. Musinde endeavours, in this regards, to locate his imagination in a postcolonial context, described thus by Moura:

To postcolonial critics, the novel aims to forge itself a standing in the world by anchoring itself into a socio-cultural continuum rooted in a specific territory, with the process being frequently hamstrung by the (intransigent) Western mode of valuing—or rather the outright devaluing of the “primitive”—of the traditions involved. The postcolonial setting presents a significant singularity, in the sense that the novel sets out to legitimise the culture from which it emanates by projecting itself as a contemporary embodiment of its [inherent] traditions. (Moura 111).

Starting from this clarion call to acquaint oneself more with one’s culture first, Musinde rekindles the profoundly culturalist debate which, save for a few exceptions, had been suppressed for quite some time as result of politics taking precedence over culture in a continent riven by political woes such as slavery, colonisation, dictatorship, neo-colonialism and so forth. The Socratic precept “know thyself” is clearly at work here, considering that Musinde’s main character seems to “be asserting his stature as a man” who, though not always like the rest, would not easily forget his roots, even well beyond his native land.

A multicultural being

Cultural issues make up the superstructure of *Retour de manivelle*. However, a discursive analysis reveals that the worldview propounded in the novel neither portrays nor fosters the notion of a cultural ghetto where people are devoted to chauvinism of the highest order, in a rather static and essentialist fashion. It should also be noted that the *ethos* customarily “associated with typical African characters, like the African *griot*,³ the French West Indian sorcerer or the storyteller from the East” (Moura 122) is epitomised by Josué, the main character. The choice of a Judeo-Christian name, in the context of foregrounding African culture is neither neutral nor arbitrary. That the story is narrated by a character with a foreign name, in stark contrast with the cultural practices of his village, is an early signal of the author’s intention to invent a different world. Reflecting on African onomastics, Alpha-Noël Malonga observes that: “Amongst the Bantu [...] naming is synonymous with defining the identity of the individual being named as well as the state [of mind] and, even, the psychological make-up or the thought patterns of the person doing the naming [...] Names are messages that designate name-holders for the rest of their life” (Malonga 26–27).

Consequently, notwithstanding the need to abide by tradition, the characters in *Retour de manivelle* are scarcely confined to a closed cultural environment. Notwithstanding the importance of his traditions, living in isolation would be suicidal. Musinde’s work projects a worldview of a modern African intellectual

compelled by necessity to reach out to *the other*, as exemplified in the protagonist's declaration of intent: "I would like to travel to an unknown world where no reliable guide awaits me. I must still go over there, regardless" (13).

Leaving his homeland is, similarly, born out of the need for significant encounters, at a time when "everything [was] up for rethinking" (57). Since encountering *the other* had become a necessity, leaving would help engender "an ideal civilisation of a *hybrid* nature, akin to the greatest civilisations in history, like those of Sumeria, Egypt, India or even China and Greece" (Senghor 96).

Musinde creates a character who embraces elements of other cultures. The protagonist, Josué, confesses, for instance, that he is "torn between external practices and the philosophical and literary outlook gleaned from various literacy sources" (33). Josué boasts a humanistic education in which Greco-Latin culture looms large. This is not only reflected in the translated Latin expressions in the text—"time erodes everything" (*tempus edax rerum*) (20) or "time always changes us" (*o tempora o mores*) (20)—but also evident in the allusion to Greek mythology, with particular reference to Orpheus and Eurydice (21). The protagonist of *Retour de manivelle* also happens to have read Voltaire and frequently points the reader to the character Candide for whom "everything is for the best in the best of all possible worlds" (21, 33). Besides *Candide*, it is quite clear that Josué read the great classics and could even reel some of them off by heart: the famous "Chanson de Roland" (Song of Roland), poems by François Villon, Ronsard, Du Bellay, Racine, La Fontaine, Corneille, and son on (31). He could even quite easily talk about Montaigne, Rabelais, Pascal, Descartes, Molière, Musset, de Vigny, Kafka, Hopkins, Shakespeare, Baudelaire, etc. (32). Reference to all these authors bears testimony to Josué's humanist credentials, whose multicultural dimensions transcend his home village.

However, the memory of the buffalo horn and palm wine rituals which were performed prior to his departure from his homeland, should be regarded as a key factor that binds the main character to the temple of his home soil (nature) in the way the umbilical cord binds the embryo to the placenta. These symbols represent a kind of spirituality that is so strong that it can withstand any attempts to usurp it from without. The latter view conjures up the idea that, through these ceremonies, some supernatural power is passed on to the person undergoing the rituals, in a manner similar to that of a religious baptism ceremony. The person is subsequently imbued with such immense intangible powers that they can join the select group of insiders and custodians of considerable esoteric knowledge. This amounts to saying that, in *Retour de manivelle*, Musinde offers the reader a hero with an indomitable spirit. It is indeed this very same resilience (just like biological half-castes, cultural half-castes need tremendous strength of character to overcome and reconcile their multifarious contradictions (Senghor 96–97)) that helps ensure that, far from losing himself in the universal, the hero embraces several cultures on top of a firmly rooted internalized

culture; he thus becomes the “locus of multiple cultures” (115). Does this lead to a clash of cultures? A cursory analysis might lead the reader to such a conclusion: “This is how I was introduced to the Western world. We were not allowed to use local languages. Speaking an indigenous language was sufficient grounds for suspension from school”. (31)

However, knowing that a permanent power *in nobis sine nobis* prepared and “inhabited” the main character goads us to believe that the use of the phrase “I was thus becoming the locus of multiple cultures” could be justified in the sense that these cultures are internalised and mastered without causing disaffection or conflicts. It is this kind of cultural juxtaposition, that is anchored in mutual respect, that Glissant refers to as *créolisation*, a concept which transcends linguistic considerations and is defined thus by the author: “Créolisation requires that disparate elements [that have been] brought together “value one another”, which implies that no human degradation or loss, be it from within or without, should result from such [cultural] encounters or blending.” (Glissant 19)

Musinde’s main character is not only a free spirit but also *his own man* whose free will is not at the mercy of opposing schools of thought, which he both masters and transcends. As an internationalist, he endorses views as articulated by Senghor: “Internationalism will not be built on national realities, not even those of homelands. [...] But internationalism or, better still, a universal civilization must be built by rising above nations.” (Biondi 120)

However, one can discern a sense of increasing concern on the part of the hero who believes that he “lives in a *different* world from the one inhabited by others” (45). This notion of “difference” is complemented by that of “emptiness”: “[when] I look around me, [all I see is] a void” (45). This void is further amplified by a sense of “solitude” (45) that haunts the protagonist. Subsequently, this begs the question of how this void or rather the fear of emptiness should be interpreted.

In a multicultural context, African intellectuals living in the West, as in the case of the main character of *Retour de manivelle*, feel the urge to make contact with *the other* (the West) in order to contribute something to the latter’s life. However, once rebuffed by *the other*, they feel an overwhelming sense of loneliness and perpetual emptiness, from both the physical and psychological points of view. Josué asserts that he “has not yet experienced that emptiness because his current place of refuge (Europe) is still using his knowledge” (122). These words appear to suggest that a person’s worth is defined by the recognition of his value by the society to which that person belongs, a reality consistent with African tradition according to which “the essence of a person’s existence is dependent on the community”, as captured by the Zulu saying: *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*.

Whereas the feeling of “emptiness” results from rejection by society, the reasons why the main character is shunned remain a mystery. It is quite clear that Musinde’s

literary work should be read in the light of other literary works, especially *Terre des hommes* (translated as *Wind, Sand and Stars*) where a similar issue is broached: “Why should we hate one another? We are all one, standing on the same planet, crew members [serving] on the same boat. While it is good for civilizations to clash in order to foster the emergence of new concepts, it is horrible that they do devour each other.” (Saint-Exupéry 233)

Besides, Josué is not an amoral character. He is not of the same ilk as Meursault in Albert Camus’ novel *L’Étranger* (*The Outsider*), who disregards all social norms.⁴ Neither can he be likened to Michel, the immoralist hero in Gide’s novel also titled *L’immoraliste* (*The Immoralist*), who was said to live by his own rules as opposed to the norms of the new social environment.⁵ On the contrary, Josué is a rational and legalist character who understands the rules of his new society but is, nonetheless, judged harshly when he tries to bring forth social norms from his original community to which he holds dear:

One day, overwhelmed by loneliness, I knocked on my neighbour’s door so that I could get to know her. The lady responded so viciously that she even threatened to call the police. When I narrated this experience to friends who had welcomed me to Vouillé they simply made fun of me and advised me not to repeat this dangerous stunt. What could be so unusual about making contact with neighbours if my culture allows it? (114–15)

It is clear from this extract and, indeed, the entire text that the protagonist feels “duty-bound to make himself understood” in order to *fill the void* and live amongst *those others*. Having made the first move when he embarked on the journey that led him to *the other*, it now behoves on *the other* to be more forthcoming by pulling themselves out of the *ghetto Occidentaliste* to which their education and culture have confined them. What was said to Africans in Ngal’s novel sounds equally relevant for Westerners in the context of Musinde’s writings:

What a friend referred to a while ago as an “assault on our security” is nothing more than an “onslaught on our uniqueness, an attack against our inward-looking attitudes”. Nonetheless, we should bear in mind that “uniqueness” in itself leads to its own suffocation in the sense that it does not get fresh air from outside. Cultures survive by opening themselves up to other cultures which, in turn, frees the former from the tendency to gravitate towards collective narcissism. (Ngal 112)

Quite clearly, the protagonist of *Retour de manivelle* plays a part in creative development to the extent that he belongs to several cultures without disavowing any of them. (Biondi 124)

Who am I?

Reflecting on the relationship between philosophical thought and creative writing, Albert Camus contended that “a novel is never [a mere representation of] philosophy through imagery”, and that “in a good novel all philosophical issues are presented through imagery” (1417). Perusing through *Retour de manivelle* brings the recurrent existential question “who am I?” into sharp focus, especially on pages 48 and 63, among others. Though some would derive philosophical analyses from the novel that might lead to multidimensional ontological discoveries, this writer would instead like to proffer a metaphorical analysis of the principal forms of imagery used by the main character to define himself.

The beast

In *Retour de manivelle*, Musinde revisits the issue of the ontological definition of mankind. Let’s consider the following remarks directed at the main character as he defended his doctoral dissertation at the University of Ubal: “No beast could have accomplished what you have achieved, said one member of the panel of examiners, evoking a phrase used by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry in *Terre des hommes* or *Vol de nuit*.” (81)

In this extract, Musinde is evasive regarding Saint-Exupéry’s literary work which is the exact source of these remarks. The remarks themselves were made by Henri Guillaumet and subsequently reiterated in Saint-Exupéry’s *Terre des hommes* in this manner: “I bet you that no beast could have ever done what I have done.” (45, 52) Even though these quoted remarks, nonchalantly attributed to Saint-Exupéry, highlight the animal-like propensity for endurance, the metaphor of the beast shows that the definition of man starts from his animal essence which takes precedence over his other attributes. The novel implicitly evokes Platonic ontology, according to which “man is a featherless two-legged animal”. Based on physical attributes, this view is further enhanced in the text by the musings of Josué’s future spouse, Huguette, on the meaning of life: “I see, I see, I know nothing, and yet I exist.” (63) This would amount to saying that it is possible to exist without knowing everything about the meaning of life, in other words, without engaging in critical self-analysis. From this perspective, existence itself would be absurd in the sense that it does not lend itself to any form of philosophical understanding, hence the image of the beast. Unlike Huguette who knows nothing about her existence, Josué “thinks”, because what he has accomplished (an excellent doctoral thesis) falls within rationality and that “no beast could have done it”. This goes to suggest that Josué is an extraordinary kind of beast, a gifted beast, endowed with both physical and exceptional intellectual prowess.

Is this a disguised reference to Blaise Pascal’s famous *reed*, “man is nothing more than a reed, the weakest reed in creation; he is a thinking reed nonetheless” (130)? The reader could establish this parallel from the very moment the protagonist of Musinde affirms that he read Pascal (32). The latter’s *thinking reed* is the equivalent of

Musinde's intellectually gifted beast. Thus, the author attempts to place man or the African intellectual above all other ordinary mortals, on account of his sheer propensity to think. This perception of the world forms the initial component of Musinde's attempt to address the question "who am I". Since it has been demonstrated that the main character, Josué, is a humanist who draws on all cultures, it could be argued that his interest in Platonic and Voltairian thinking could have goaded him to define man from the perspective of his animal attributes. In the novel *Candide*, one of Musinde's possible sources of inspiration, the character Pangloss puts the following question to a Turkish dervish: "Master, we have come to beg you to tell us why such a weird animal called man was created." (Voltaire 241) Thus, the metaphor of the beast is revived, in a world where it could be anachronistic, just to rekindle the debate around the animal essence of man.

The silhouette

The term "silhouette" is used several times in the novel, particularly on pages 35 and 64, among others. Consider the statement "I walk behind my silhouette" (35). The nature of a silhouette is such that it does not drag the object that creates it: the silhouette is dependent on light and the movement of that object. While the protagonist claims that he can "walk behind his silhouette", this metaphor could, in a pinch, be construed as the African intellectual's ability to define him/herself as a *being*; moments of hesitation, as is indeed the case in the novel (35), do not disrupt the sequence of actions that potentially determine his destiny. Far from symbolising man's destiny, the image of the silhouette dragging its maker would connote man's passivity in the face of his inability to comprehend the passage of time or its effects. Therefore, passive people cannot perceive reality. If "life is a battlefield where armies and ideas clash" (35), an indecisive or passive person is probably subjected to an imposed fate all the time. Such a person is always behind some silhouette of themselves possibly "made" without them. However, the main character's goal is to create silhouettes, to "increase their numbers" (64) because they are his "doubles" (64). This would only become possible if the protagonist was considered as a "focus of interest" or as an object capable of disseminating its identity abundantly. In concrete terms, "light" illuminates Josué and he, in turn, enlightens the world. Therefore, Josué has "light" (122), and this light is (his) intellectual savvy (122). Josué's desire to create multiple *silhouettes* could thus be viewed as the desire to transform his entourage through the effects of his knowledge. The first *silhouette* in the series could be his female companion Huguette who possibly owes her *existence* to Josué's existence and enlightenment. Furthermore, the poetic tone of page 64 of the novel suggests that this influence is of a reciprocal nature, considering that Josué is incapable of creating *doubles* without Huguette's contribution. This might lead to the conclusion that Huguette too is so enlightened that she contributes to the production of the doubles that the world needs.

The rose

Josué is a rose. The metaphor of “the rose that must blossom in the midst of brambles” (56) is also a response to the hero’s search for identity. Given that the rose is the ideal symbol of beauty, life and spreading change, ‘brambles’ alluded to the novel might symbolise a broad range of hostile elements opposed to the ideal of harmonious and positive transformation of society. These negative forces opposed to “the radiance of rose”, whose desire is to replicate itself, can be found in the hero’s immediate circles, not only in the Ubal village but also abroad, in Vouillé. This “rose-brambles” oxymoron represents an understanding of existence that stands in contrast to a *candid* view of society where things are presumably “perfectly in order”, the kind of posture in which the hero was stuck at the beginning of the novel.

This contrast enables the reader to get an inkling of the deep-seated antagonism between proponents of progress and agents of decline. It can be surmised that, according to Musinde, just like *the rose*, *the being* can only be defined in terms of its capacity to deal with challenges encountered along the journey of its evolution. From this perspective, Musinde’s kind of *man* comes across as Sisyphus who, aware of the constant presence of danger (brambles), would be prepared to live in the moment without attempting, there and then, to superimpose his worldview on it. In that sense, Musinde’s *rose* blossoms individually without dampening its desire to enlighten the surroundings in which the *being* is evolving and regardless of the numerous obstacles lying in wait.

The issue of death or the absurd

Musinde’s *Retour de manivelle* is a discursive space centred on the search for the profound meaning of life. To attain it, the author not only uses previously explained metaphors but also has recourse to a different approach where the meaning of life is also clarified through the conceptualisation of opposites. For instance gaining insight into the nature of death could lend meaning to life, if not death itself.

The subject of death is not explored in the novel in an abstract or dispassionate manner. In Musinde’s view, thinking critically about death calls for subjectivisation, to the extent that individualisation may give rise to the most pragmatic reflections. In fact, the author draws attention to a loved one who dies or is on the throes of death. The hero of *Retour de manivelle* uses his mother’s sickness (“a generous woman”, 76) as well as the emotions engendered by the thought of her impending death to reveal to the reader some of own views about death. It is clear from the description of his worldview that the hero is familiar with the numerous authors and schools of thought of all time that dealt with the same issue, well before Musinde. Thus, the question of death apparently transcends pure and simple dialectics to become the hero’s personal issue, which approach is consistent with relevant conventional methodology.

“What is death?” Such is the question posed by the hero on page 76 of the novel. Given that “only man has the privilege to be aware that he will die some day” (77), the hero believes that it is absolutely vital to “understand the phenomenon of death, its characteristics, [and] its value so as not to consider it as an obstacle to harmony in the universe” (77). Musinde’s entire novel embodies the kind of wisdom that forbids the fear of death, referred to in Latin as *ne mortem timueritis*. In his approach, the hero of *Retour de manivelle* acts a teacher who is committed to the principle of didactic progression which advocates starting from the simple to the more complex, or from the known to the unknown. For instance, Josué turns his world into a space where diametrically opposing viewpoints meet: while the hero is reminiscent of the materialistic perception of life, the spiritual perspective is also starkly brought to the fore, as exemplified in the following extract: “Death should not be feared, for it has nothing to do with us. As long as we are, there is no death, and as soon as death comes, we are no more. Death does not mean anything to the living or the dead.” (78)

This Epicurean viewpoint, which is subsequently complemented by Sartre (79), does not address the burning question of life and death. According to the protagonist, it is merely a form of therapy for “those scared by punishment in the afterlife or the [whole] system of life on the other side” (79). This mode of thinking provides an insight to the effect that, in the hero’s view, human existence should be overshadowed by the fear of death. The pressing need to comprehend the meaning of death impels the hero to seek answers to the issue of death beyond the absurd, as previously articulated by materialists. It is this kind of understanding that goads the hero into searching for answers elsewhere, particularly amongst those who do not consider death, as will become evident, to be the ultimate end. In essence, the hero of *Retour de manivelle* refuses to be compared to Meursault (80), the materialist character in Camus novel *L'étranger* (*The Outsider*), for whom the issue of death hardly matters. Josué, on the other hand, attempts to transcend material realities: “But where am I? [...] I see myself lying on the bank of Ayamo River. And there, far away, in the water, close to the other river bank, I catch a glimpse of my mother, my father, my elder brother, my maternal grand-mother, my paternal grand-mother [who have] already crossed over to the other side.” (123)

These words provide a description of death. Having been dead for some time, Josué returns to the sensible world with a personal account of life on the other side. The fact that he even talks about instructions he received from the inhabitants on the side regarding things he had to do upon his return on earth, somehow bolsters his belief in the continuity of life after apparent death. *Retour de manivelle*’s universe should therefore be perceived as a space where death does not mark the end of life, but rather a passage to another world, which passage calls for other forms or new sensory organs. For all their differences and contradictory as they might seem to be, Musinde’s literary work demonstrates that these worlds complement each other and

that the intangible world on the other side has the power to influence the destiny of the physical world. This becomes manifest when, in the face of challenges, the hero calls upon his (already deceased) mother's name for protection against forces of evil lurking in the physical world:

Going back home at two in the morning along the 30 km stretch of road, suddenly right ahead of us there appeared a mysterious and multicoloured creature whose sparkling lights dazzled the driver to a point where he could hardly see the road ahead. [...] I cried as I called upon my mother's name [...] Mentioning my mother's name worked [...] I called upon my mother's name again. Then the mysterious creature cleared the way so we could pass. (89–90)

It also turns out that in the story about death, cited earlier, the boundary between the two worlds is symbolised by *Ayamo River*. This river represents the vicissitudes and matter that supposedly confine *beings* to one world at a time. The hero is instructed not to cross this river; he must, instead, develop a complete awareness of the physical world by living in it in accordance with tradition, as symbolised by the “buffalo horn” (123–24).

Furthermore, the hero of Musinde's novel deliberately evokes the following Christian thought, cited in André Gide's novel, *Si le grain ne meurt (Unless the Seed Dies)* (1924): “Unless the seed dies, there can be no productivity. In fact, to become a tree that bears succulent fruit, the grain dies without perishing.” (108)

These thoughts of Jesus-Christ, as recorded in *The Bible* (“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit” (John 12: 24), point to Musinde's insinuation to the effect that death can only have meaning through rebirth. The hero comes back to life as a new entity transformed by a stint on the other side. In this universe, this movement between these two manifestly different worlds can be likened to the process of maturation, which is “characterised by moments of negativity and positivity, in other words, moments of dialectical contradictions” (108). It is precisely this implicit reference to the growing process that places Musinde on the same wavelength as Gide in the sense that symbolic death denotes life's challenges which, rather discourage the youth from pursuing their goal of inner development, become a trigger for them to aspire to rebirth or greater consciousness. It can thus be inferred that it is possible to make sense of Josué's metaphorical death through the lens of Gidean thought, to which Musinde lends home-grown imagery from Bantu cosmogony, which is centred on the dialogue and cosmic interconnection between this world and the next.

Conclusion

Though based on the author's life experiences, vaguely discernible proof of abuse of power and extremely bloody political conflict, Musinde's novel steers clear of describing horror. Even its take on the many political events it evokes is rather timorous. This stance enables the author to get off the beaten track and, thus, express his fantasies by using his pen to portray a subjective worldview, which he complements with his cosmopolitan knowledge of the world, as it manifests itself through his perception of identity. For the most part, the novel delves into issues of culture. However, this culture, which is projected as being dynamic and hybridised at the same time, can only begin to make sense in the context of a cyclical conceptual framework whose points of departure and arrival converge in one being in whom internationalism appears to have instilled a sense of accommodation vis-à-vis *the other*. That "the novelist narrates the truth, his truth or what he considers to be the truth" (Pageaux 17) could only imply that, in this novel, Musinde has created a new truth, that of the tradition of the future. In this tradition (of the future), voice is given in turn to seemingly antagonistic identities, namely past Greco-Latin, Franco-British and African identities, on the one hand, and a globalised present where the narrowing (cultural) space is grappling with exclusive cultural specificity. While the issue of death is foregrounded in the novel, it only makes sense to the author with regard to rebirth. After all, the entire novel is offered as a panegyric of *the future*. With regard to existence, just like *the absurd man* (Sisyphus) who uses his condition to change the situation, Musinde's hero adds an inherent metaphysical belief in the existence of invisible higher entities (ancestors) well beyond the realm of empirical or rational scrutiny. It is from these entities (beyond Ayamo River) that one can derive the power to confront the rigorous challenges and wickedness that are part of the daily grind (brambles) in the physical world. It could be argued, to quote Mouralis, that thanks to his travels and multiple encounters, the hero of *Retour de manivelle* pitted a conventional perception of Africa against "an inclusive worldview" epitomised by a "special witness who has readily opted for the autobiographical narrative style" (Mouralis 24). Musinde's novel owes its merit to the fact that the author juxtaposed manifestly conflicting identities on a subjectivity whose perfect balance depends on the extremes.

Notes

1. This article is my own translation of my article "Culturalisme et réflexion existentialiste. Une lecture de *Retour de manivelle* de Julien Kilanga Musinde" published in *Tydskrif vir Letterkunde* 50.1 (<http://dx.doi.org/10.4314/tvl.v50i1.8>). Unless stated otherwise all translations of subsequent quoted texts are mine.
2. "Vagissements" (wailing), poems published in the volume *Comme des matins éternels*. Kinshasa: UEZA, 1984.
3. The *griot* is a French word for a traditional West African musician, poet, praise-singer and storyteller who recounts the oral history of a family, clan, village, community, etc.

4. Meursault is the main character of the novel *L'Étranger* (*The Outsider*) by Albert Camus published by Éditions Gallimard in 1942.
5. Michel is the hero of the novel *L'immoraliste* (*The Immoralist*) by André Gide published by Éditions Gallimard in 1902.

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