

BATE BESONG: IS HIS POETRY TOO DIFFICULT FOR CAMEROONIANS?

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Bate Besong is the most paradoxical Anglophone Cameroonian writer today in the sense that his work attracts and repels readers at one and the same time. While his poetry is relatively opaque, he nevertheless remains popular, and while his themes entice readers, his style alienates them. Even some dons are ill at ease with his jazzy, abrasive style. Yet among university students there is no literature lecturer more popular than Bate Besong, an erudite iconoclast with an exceptional range of vocabulary power. The presence at any public lecture of this passionate social critic and *bête noire* of the ruling class is a crowd-puller. This curious love-hate attitude towards Bate Besong by the Cameroonian public can be explained only in terms of the fact that, somehow, controversial figures remain very interesting people indeed.

According to Bate Besong (1993:18) the Cameroonian creative writer's art should 'become a fighting literature, he can write works which are artistically profound and politically correct: he can write works of indictment and works that show how his world is and could be.' This quoted expression is an apt description of the distinctive character of most of Bate Besong's own poetry, or imaginative writing in general, for that matter; for it is impossible to understand the bulk of his poetic output outside this militant commitment. In his selected poems with the cryptic title of *Just above Cameroon* (1998), Bate Besong reveals himself as a firebrand poet irrevocably committed to the fierce denunciation of economic exploitation, political mismanagement and dictatorial gangsterism. Like his drama Bate Besong's poetry is manifestly concerned with public misdeeds and constantly pre-occupied with the practice of bad governance. These are the

major public themes that dominate his poetry in addition to such private concerns as love and death.

Like any good satirist Bate Besong is ridiculing and flagellating those in authority with the moral intention of making them change their bad habits for the better. His severe criticism of public officers is but an indirect advocacy of good governance, of economic and political transparency in the management of public affairs. Bate Besong's social vision then begins to crystallise. His ideal society would be one marked by moral decency, and rid of economic and political abuse, a society where there is social justice and fairness in the distribution of the wealth of the nation and not one in which this sharing is skewed in favour of the rich and the powerful, a society devoid of electoral chicanery, gerrymander, corruption and the violation of the human rights of defenceless citizens. Ultimately then, by implication, Bate Besong is advocating authentic rigour and moralisation in the conduct of '*la chose publique*'.

But to articulate these objective realities Bate Besong employs a mordant, muscular style of verbal pugilism, and adopts a modernist approach, placing his poetic practice within the tradition of modern poetry, with some of its characteristic obscurantism. His imagery is conditioned by his peculiar pre-occupation; for the satirical butts of his verbal punches are irresponsible political leaders pictured as buffoons, clowns, fools and dunces, people reduced to the level of animals; a cartel that to satisfy its greed seeks to grab all for itself, leaving little or nothing to the rest of the nation.

For sure Jewry stood for an exploiting race, but our
own middlemen manage to amaze them for all that.

Indeed, they have sworn fealty to their Masonic lodges
& to each other to bankrupt our national coffers.
The curse on the heads of the corrupt banditti.
(‘Their Champagne Party Will End,’ Besong 1998:22).

No wonder the poet equally employs violent animal images evoked by such creatures as ‘jackal’, ‘hyaena’, ‘mongrel’, ‘crocodile’ and ‘iguana’ etc; and powerful

verbs of action like 'despoil', 'loot', 'plunder', 'bankrupt', 'ruin', 'butcher', and 'squander', etc; to depict the very destructive effect of these cruel, unpatriotic and unconscionable rulers. Conventional versification is not his inclination. Not for him the regular poetic lines, rhymes or fixed stanzaic forms. Like most modern poets Bate Besong prefers free verse. He eschews 'poetical' expressions like 'dewy wine', 'bonny lass', 'verdurous pastures', 'pastoral eglantine' or any other juicy Romantic effusions. His poetic expressions are hard and stern:

'Prison blues (ii)'

...

Only from such deranged insomniacs
such precursors of the hydraulics
of terror, dyspeptic,
ghouls

whose thong-glued
calendars register
gaudier golgothas
for sanctuaries, breed

tombstones
from a crevasse
of communal lore

only such demented precursors
who, rejoicing, puke
prodigal lacerations
behind prison bars

('Prison blues (ii)', Besong 1998:5)

At the level of diction Bate Besong sometimes goes but for the rare word, one that looks strange and seemingly unpronounceable and unAnglo-Saxon. Yet more often than not it is an English word e.g. 'djinn', 'thong', 'thaumaturge', 'simurgh', etc. These words of less frequency often are not found in the average dictionaries. Even in the most advanced dictionaries a few of Bate Besong's words cannot be located, in which case they may simply be words of his own coinage, or borrowings from his local vernacular e.g 'Mfam' or 'Obasinjom'. Occasionally Bate Besong boldly brings into his poetry

words from such diverse languages as Arabic, German, French or Kenyang, etc; in an attempt to express an idea precisely.

He is a poet with an elliptical poetic imagination; his poetry is often erratic in its movement. There is no rigid respect for chronology in the expression of his thought and ideas, nor an attempt to stick to syntactic logic in the structure of his sentences:

At Auschwitz thro' treblinka
A clan of minotaurs of Chaim
Hertzog
(*time again & again*) had,
doused.

the pogrom charters
with the yiddish
bitumen
of jew wiesenthal-

in whorls, suited
in whorls of quisling
carnations, he

nation-wrecker
buoyed

by the crack units
of cannibal hussars, indeed,
of a humpback
torah

who was to know
that ___he___;
mandarin-thagi; and sophomoric
thaumaturge, had
promised

obasinjom assuagement
of the gravamens
of a humbugged
diaspora?
(*'The Kaiser Lied'*, Besong 1998 : 14)

The result is that in some places we have, instead of complete sentences, fragments of sentences that apparently make little or no sense. In fact some lines are made up of three or two words, and some others of only one word. This great freedom with syntax and diction has the advantage of lending his poetic utterances greater force and resonance, hence the extra-ordinary energy of his poetic lines.

Bate Besong equally possesses a heightened poetic imagination teeming with analogies and parallels, etc. He is never content with simply talking about one thing only, but he must seek parallels, analogies or contrasts here and there, hence the highly allusive nature of his poetry. His images at times take the form of cinematographic shots. To enter Bate Besong's poetry is to encounter a mercurial mind, one that makes use of just about any material; indeed, the universe remains his source of inspiration. To read Bate Besong one should be prepared for bewildering, mental acrobatic feats, to move swiftly in space and time, sometimes for an elusive mental trip from Africa to Europe to America to the Middle East and back to Africa ('The Kaiser Lied'); one should be ready for an allusive excursion into history, literature and the Bible, and for scientific references from Biology, Physics and Medicine, etc. Indeed the following statement by T.S. Eliot (1932:289) is as enlightening with regard to Eliot's method in *The Waste Land* and the early poems as it roughly defines Bate Besong's approach in *Just above Cameroon*:

Our civilization comprehends great variety and complexity, and this variety and complexity, playing upon a refined sensibility, must produce various and complex results. The poet must become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate if necessary, language into his meaning.

These characteristics point to the erudition of the man Bate Besong, for he invariably brings his recondite knowledge to bear on his poetry. Obviously this is

intimidating to the average reader. All of these stylistic quirks and idiosyncrasies have the net effect of rendering Bate Besong's poetry difficult, obscure and partly impenetrable, and they account for the obscurantism of which he is often accused and guilty ('Just above Cameroon'). In this particular poem the poet-persona admits that his poetry is obscure and he betrays feelings of guilt as he wonders whether he had done a wrong thing to have adopted such an abstruse style that has rendered his poetry inaccessible, 'was it a wrong turning I had taken?' ('Just above Cameroon').

Guilt:

(Was it a wrong turning I had taken?)
for, I too have crushed into silence
the daylight robbery of hands soiled
with heroes' blood & ill-gotten gains
(& chewed
the curd of complacency...)
to lose sight from pain
from the obsequies over the wall
of state torture, friend;
come on and see come on and see...

for I too have exhumed the cadaverous past
long
worn its glorified ostrich mask,
and poured
the rubble
of its narcissistic muse
on my masquerader head...
have built:

poetries' canaans
in obscurities which led
to the labyrinth of my own inertia
(all that gone with the wind now)

I too have
Imprinted a century's dark decade
(this, to the best of my ability)
hidden, in a curfewed song!
('Just above Cameroon', Besong 1998:19)

In this regard the title poem 'Just above Cameroon' must be interpreted not in terms of geographical location but in connection with the difficult nature of his poetry vis-à-vis the mental ability of the average Cameroonian to apprehend it. If our line of reasoning is correct, then what Bate Besong is saying through the intriguing title of his selected poems, *Just above Cameroon*, is that because of its obscurity his poetry is a little beyond the understanding of Cameroonians. It therefore stands to reason that to spare himself any more regret and free himself from further feelings of guilt it behoves Bate Besong to consider discarding his present arcane style in favour of one more accessible to his many fans and admirers, the masses on whose behalf he is waging a ferocious battle against the ruling elite. He should lay aside his poetic opacity, forsake his metallic words and thunderous sentences, and come down to earth and address his people in an idiom they can understand. Now, when he is widely read by the masses like the object of his admiration, Mongo Beti, he too can then be proud of having made a 'refulgent contribution' in the history of the flagellation of vice in the Cameroonian society.

After everything I hope I have not given the impression that Bate Besong's poems are purely cerebral abstractions. On the contrary, objectively looked at, the poems are not rarefied intellectual exercises but deeply felt emotional utterances. The nefarious comportment of the ruling class is the main-spring of Bate Besong's anger. If he did not feel strongly about the harm politicians were doing to the nation in both material and human terms, he would simply remain mute like the rest of the silent majority. But as seen from the poems Bate Besong is an angry individual, a man with an intellectual passion for truth and social justice, and he possesses the moral courage to back up his insight. This explains his passionate dissatisfaction with the misconduct of those in authority and the fierceness with which he flays them ('Facsimile of a Jackal', 'The Party's Over!', 'Prison blues (ii)', 'The Kaiser Lied', 'You must come to our rally', 'For Osagyefo Thomas Sankara', 'Their Champagne Party Will End'). From this perspective, therefore, his poetry is both cerebral and emotional; it appeals to both the head and the heart.

True, Bate Besong's obscurantism is only too obvious, but the reader can still enjoy some of his poetry even when he does not understand it. This may sound contradictory but it is true. When one reads Bate Besong aloud, and does not enjoy his grandiloquent and often cacophonous poetic utterances, one will, at least, appreciate the fact that, from the harshness of the sounds, here is a passionate somebody who has lost his temper. After all when a person loses his temper, he does not usually speak smoothly and steadily. Besides, the discordant note in his poetry reflects the moral ugliness of the depraved individuals he is castigating. 'His haughty use of humour and hyperbole does not water down his rage against the society, for when a society is deaf one must shout for it to listen' (Ngwane 1993:24). The cacophony is therefore functional and effective.

The conscientious readers will reap more from Bate Besong. The sentiment of anger, that basic quality that runs through much of his poetry, is a boon to the readers. Guided by it the meticulous readers can reasonably get into the core of many of the poems because the anger reveals Bate Besong's attitude towards his subject matter. One can always tell, especially in poems dealing with a public theme, that Bate Besong is bitter or angry about some thing or with somebody. This guiding sentiment is invariably couched in emotion-laden words, words with negative connotations: adjectives, nouns and verbs that reveal his subjective feelings. Some of these words and images we have already cited above. Here are some others: 'greedy brain', 'lame-brained', 'blood-suckers', 'zombie clamour', 'jokers' 'nation-wrecker', 'idiot-soaked demagoguery' 'numbskull establishment', 'dunce-stable', 'mongrelized-iscariots', 'The curse on the heads of the corrupt banditi', 'A plague on the heads of the corrupt banditi, etc...'

These words and expressions can be spotted by the assiduous readers. This done the targets of Bate Besong's anger can then be more easily identified, and they are likely to be unconscionable, unpatriotic politicians, dictators, looters of state coffers, torturers, or stooges in the hands of some well-placed tyrants, etc; some of them pictured in terms of wild animals. Once the butts of Bate Besong's satire have been spotted, it is not too difficult to discover what they have done that has provoked his anger. At this point the

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