

March 1982

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Recommended Citation

Bjornson, Richard (1982) "Middle Class Ideology and the Autonomous Self: The Emergence of the Novel in Europe and Africa," *University of Dayton Review*: Vol. 15: No. 3, Article 2.
Available at: <https://ecommons.udayton.edu/udr/vol15/iss3/2>

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MIDDLE CLASS IDEOLOGY AND THE AUTONOMOUS SELF: THE EMERGENCE OF THE NOVEL IN EUROPE AND AFRICA

by Richard Bjornson

There is no single source of the novel as a literary genre, nor is there any single ideology which is most appropriate to it. Narrative techniques and devices associated with the novel are present in earlier epics, romances, novella collections, travel accounts, fables, miscellanies, jest books, lives of saints, and chronicles, just as most ideological perspectives have at one time or another found expression in the novel. Nevertheless, novel-writing has tended to develop in different places, when similar socio-cultural concerns were beginning to surface; in particular, it can often be identified with an emergent belief that individuals constitute a primary locus of meaning and value in the world. During the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries in Europe and shortly after the second world war in Africa, this idea stood in strong opposition to one of the major tenets of traditional belief: that individuals are only important in terms of their positions within a larger social and genealogical matrix. In Europe a growing interest in the individual's responsibility for self-definition can be correlated with the evolution of a middle-class ideology to sanction the social status of people whose talents and ambitions had enabled them to acquire wealth and, as a consequence, to desire a higher position than one they had inherited by birth. In Africa, a similar ideology was disseminated by the European colonizers who, even before the twentieth century, had thoroughly assimilated it themselves. Early novels written in both places do not necessarily espouse the intrusive ideology; in fact, many of them explicitly condemn it. Yet even they were defining their stance in opposition to the new individualism. In other words, the emergence of a middle class ideology provoked a need to clarify the nature and role of individual experience in a social context, and the novel offered writers a particularly congenial way of responding to this need.

Unlike most other literary genres, the novel must conform to few, if any, formal rules, and its range of subject matter is virtually unlimited. This freedom from constraint makes it difficult to define the novel as more than a prose narrative of an arbitrarily determined minimum length, but it does help to explain why writers with quite different ideological convictions had recourse to the novel at times when traditional ideas about the individual's place in society were being challenged by a new concept of the self. The very looseness of the novel's form enabled them to invent a variety of encounters between characters and their social environments. These encounters implicitly corroborated the author's position in regard to the nature and meaning of individual experience. Furthermore, because the novel was not intended for public performance, it could establish the illusion of complicity between an author and a single reader. Their sense of complicity was of course heightened by the privileged access they shared to the perceptions, motivations, and

reponses of the characters in the text. Because this access was often more intimate than it was in real life, readers had the impression of glimpsing beneath the surface events of other people's lives — of learning about things that were generally concealed from them. Although the characters in novels were only imaginary people in imaginary worlds, their behavior (if it was to remain comprehensible to readers) had to reflect possibilities for thought and action in the real world. This nexus permitted an author to take rhetorical advantage of the complicity he had established with readers, for his fictional representations always implied a standard of value which delineated the proper relationship between the individual and society, and this standard of value could always be applied, directly or indirectly, to the world in which he and his readers were living.

Among the earliest examples of the European novel are the Spanish picaresque fictions of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, and they illustrate quite well the way in which the novel was employed to address the problem of individualism that had been made relevant by the nascent development of a new social class. In *Lazarillo de Tormes* (1554), a naive young boy is initiated into a harsh and deceptive world where survival depends on masking one's true sensibilities and on tricking others without being tricked by them. Through a series of varied encounters with this imagined world, he assimilates the attitudes and behavior patterns of the dominant society, but in doing so he becomes cynical and self-serving. This fictional process suggests that *Lazarillo* did not have an inherent nature which should have determined his place in the social hierarchy; on the contrary, it implies that his character was molded in a constant interaction between his consciousness and the object world. Furthermore, his development is presented from his own retrospective point of view, lending substance to his claim that he is divulging previously unknown details about a life sufficiently interesting to warrant its contemplation by others. In one sense, his fictional experiences were important because they reflected a social conditioning process which was transforming many actual people into dehumanized creatures like himself; however, *Lazarillo* was preoccupied by the specific characteristics of his own past, not by its symbolic or general significance, and he was proud of having risen in society by his own efforts. In other words, he regarded himself as a unique individual who deserved credit for what he had done after rejecting the social situation into which he had been born. Although his stance is presented ironically, the fact remains that his underlying assumptions about the individual's proper role in society are in conflict with those of the dominant aristocratic order. And the generic possibility which suggested itself to the anonymous author of *Lazarillo* as a means of representing and testing these assumptions was the short novel.

Lazarillo and the second major picaresque novel, Mateo Alemán's *Guzmán de Alfarache* (1599-1604), helped establish the legitimacy of employing lower-class individuals as protagonists in morally serious works of fiction, and both works ultimately criticize society for distorting the lives of such characters by obliging them to emulate corrupt models of behavior. In contrast, the third major picaresque novel, Francisco de Quevedo y Villegas's *El Buscón* (1626) reasserts the validity of traditional values, according to which any lower-class character who aspires to a higher social position is himself a source of

corruption, because he has failed to fulfill his principal moral duty — knowing and keeping his place in a God-ordained hierarchy. By devising a series of encounters between the inherently vulgar Pablos and an object world which operates on the principle of divine justice, Quevedo tests the pícaro's character, repeatedly revealing its weaknesses and self-deceptions. Like *Lazarillo* and *Guzmán, El Buscón* is an early example of the European novel. Unlike them, its ideological content is traditional and conservative. Yet, the dominant concern in all three texts revolves around alternative definitions of the individual's proper relationship to society. By offering the possibility to trace a series of interactions between the subjective constructs of characters and a variety of situations in the object world, the novel proved particularly well suited to represent, explore, and articulate the ramifications of these definitions, and that is one of the reasons why authors of widely divergent ideological views were attracted to it.

Don Quijote (1605-1615) differs from picaresque fiction in a number of ways, but it too illustrates how the earliest European novels exploited the genre's expansiveness and lack of formal restrictions in order to explore the nature of the individual's relationship to society. In Cervantes' narrative, the confrontation between consciousness and the objects of consciousness takes the form of recurrent tensions between Quijote's idealized vision and the mundane world in which he lives — between his expectations of what will happen and his experiences of what actually does happen. On the basis of his readings in chivalric romances, Quijote has forged the notion of a better society. Believing that the forces which prevented the emergence of this society appeared in the same forms as they had in the romances, he conceived the idea of combating them in the same fashion as had the knights errant about whom he had read so much. Thus, his various stories represent attempts to prove himself worthy of the social role he has created for himself. But when he transforms windmills into giants or herds of sheep into armies, the object world denies the subjective interpretations of it. Even when he momentarily succeeds in imposing his will on others, as he does with the barber or the farmer who is beating a young servant boy, he actually brings about suffering and injustice rather than a better society. In each case, he has made a fool of himself — a fact which the author and the reader immediately recognize but of which the character remains oblivious. Quijote's folly derives from his inability to reconcile an idealistic goal with an adequate comprehension of the external world in which his actions have real consequences. Instead of learning from these consequences, he insists on incorporating them into his map of the world. Although this inflexibility makes him vulnerable to suffering and humiliation, there is something admirable about his persistence in pursuing an ideal and in attempting to realize the self-image he has invented for himself. By tempering Quijote's blindness with his awareness of death and of the need for money in Part II, Cervantes excludes the possibility of dismissing his hero as no more than a comic figure; in fact, readers who compared Quijote's motivations with those of more respectable people like the Duke and the Duchess could be expected to discern some unequivocally positive values in his attitude. Thus, from a series of encounters between the inner world of a fictional character and the external world, there emerges an acknowledgment of the complex role an individual is called upon to play in society — a role which demands both acuity of vision and devotion to the good. For Cervantes, the novel provided an

As in Spain, the earliest novels in France, England, and Germany appeared at a time when traditional concepts of the individual were being challenged and defended. In many of these novels, authors sought to combine aristocratic notions of inherent character with bourgeois conceptions of a more flexible hierarchy in which it would be legitimate to seek a higher social station, if one possessed the superior talents that corresponded to it. Such possibilities are evoked in Sorel's *Francion* (1623-1633) and in Grimmelshausen's *Simplicissimus* (1668), but they emerge even more clearly in the works of Lesage, Marivaux, Defoe, and Richardson. For example, Lesage's *Gil Blas* and Defoe's *Moll Flanders* both rise from humble beginnings to positions of wealth and physical comfort. Their success is justified on the basis of their character and attitude, which are revealed in a series of interactions between themselves and the external world. Because the lack of formal constraints in the novel enabled Defoe and Lesage to elaborate freely on these interactions, it served them as a highly suitable vehicle for testing and affirming their own views about the individual's proper role in society. Marivaux also participated in this debate, although in a somewhat different way. He introduced *La vie de Marianne* (1731-1741) as the direct representation of one human consciousness seeking its own form of expression. When regarded in such terms, the novel becomes its own justification, because it illuminates domains of perception and sentiment inaccessible to non-narrative modes of analysis. This conviction — shared by Richardson, Sterne, Rousseau, and even to a certain extent by the young Goethe — provided the socio-cultural rationale for a marked increase in novel-writing activity during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries; in fact, when combined with the Romantic notion that individuals were unique and autonomous beings who had the moral responsibility to integrate their experiences independently of conventional belief systems, it transformed the novel into a mode of knowledge, capable of showing the reader how an infinite variety of imagined characters had become who and what they were. The potential for employing the novel in this manner was certainly present in the early picaresque fictions, but not until Goethe's *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* (1795-1796) was the idea of the self-actualizing individual fully assimilated as the primary motivation for adopting the format of the novel. Subsequently, however, the theme of character development became the dominant concern of nineteenth-century European fiction — a concern which the novel's flexible sequencing of encounters between the self and the not-self was particularly well suited to articulate.

This development in the novel reflected a belief that had become widely accepted in Western culture at the same time that Europeans were colonizing Africa. It was the belief that individual experience constituted the primary level of reality and that self-realization was a goal toward which everyone should strive. Embedded in the complex of ideological assumptions behind colonial institutions, such concepts were not generally applied to Africans, who tended to be regarded as childlike or backward; nevertheless, as more of them received European-style educations, they began to adopt Western ideas, like individualism, and Western modes of cultural expression, like the novel. Particularly after the second world war, there was also an intensification of two processes which had contributed to the rise of individualism in Europe: the vast movement of people toward the cities and the emergence of a relatively small

but Bjornson, Middle-Class Ideology and the Autonomous Self. The Emergence of by many people in this changing environment were diametrically opposed to traditional African ways of life, which emphasized communality, cyclical recurrence, and the wholeness or interconnectedness of all that exists. As in sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth century Europe, the individual's role in society had become problematic, and it is not surprising that Africans, like Europeans before them, resorted to the novel as a means of probing and redefining different concepts of the self.

Just as the writers of picaresque fiction established the legitimacy of employing lower-class characters as protagonists in morally serious works of literature, the early post-war African novelists affirmed the validity of placing African subjects at the center of similar works. Reacting against the stereotyped, dehumanizing images of Africans then current in the Western cultures from which they had borrowed the literary genre they were using, writers like Ferdinand Oyono (Cameroon), Mongo Beti (Cameroon), Chinua Achebe (Nigeria), James Ngugi (Kenya), and Hamidou Kane (Senegal), exploited the novel's potential for elucidating the dialectic between consciousness and its objects in order to demonstrate the capacity of their characters to experience insight and suffering. For example, Oyono's *Une vie de Boy* (1956) and *Le vieux negre et la médaille* (1956) focus on quite ordinary Africans who, having been conditioned to accept the myth of European superiority, allow themselves to be victimized by it. Yet, although the young hero of the first novel and the older man of the second are humiliated, they both eventually realize that they have been duped by a cruel and hypocritical system. Through their suffering and insight, they reveal qualities superior to those of the colonizers who exploited their gullibility, and these qualities can be traced back to their rootedness in traditional African values. Foremost among these values is the sense of community which links each African to other members of his family, his clan, and his village. Only when he is in proper relationship to them can he be most fully himself. In opposition to European individualism, Oyono is asserting the need to maintain an awareness that every person is part of a larger social entity. He is also implying that the solidarity achieved through a recognition of this fact will enable Africans to regain the sense of identity which the colonizing powers had attempted to take from them. The novel provided a particularly congenial way of communicating such contentions, for it permitted Oyono to validate them on the basis of hypothetical examples that depended upon complex interactions between the inner worlds of his characters and the outer worlds with which they were obliged to cope.

However, like most African novelists of this period, Oyono was not advocating a simple return to traditional society. He was seeking a new synthesis between the wisdom of the old order and the practical effectiveness of the new order. The conflict between the two has often been internalized; in fact, the individual caught between contradictory self-definitions has perhaps been the single most common theme in neo-African literature. In *L'aventure ambiguë* (1961), for example, Kane depicts a hero who is first apprenticed to the traditional religious leader of his tribe and then sent to French schools to learn how the Europeans could, in his father's words, "win without being right." During the first period, he is subjected to hunger, pain, and severe mental

discipline in order to develop a sense of humility before the totality of which he is but a small part. He is taught to see the world as an interconnected whole with its beginnings and endings and to see his own life as the ritual recurrence of lives that had gone before him. He is taught to regard his tribe as having a communal identity with its collective wisdom vested in its religious leaders. In the European schools, he learns to perceive the world as a conglomeration of discrete objects which can be manipulated to serve the short-run interests of men. He learns to separate thought from being, to consider time as a linear movement without endings, and to define himself as a unique autonomous being justified in pursuing his own desires. When he returns to his people after a long sojourn in Paris, he discovers that he cannot embrace either self-concept with conviction, and his indecisiveness leads to his death, which mystically reunites him with his ancestors and with the spirit of wholeness that had been lacking in the Western modes of thought superimposed on his original intuitions of it.

A similar tension between possible identities afflicts Obi Okonkwo, the hero of Achebe's *No Longer at Ease* (1960). As the novel opens, Obi is on trial for bribery. Because he had been a brilliant student and obtained a prestigious government position, no one can understand his criminal actions, but after his story is told retrospectively, the reasons for his behavior become clear. In two areas of his life, he had been pulled in divergent directions. As an European-educated individual, he had the sense of civic responsibility which caused him to oppose all forms of nepotism and corruption; he also had the independence of mind to think that he could marry anyone he pleased, even if she belonged to an outcaste family. However, his education had been subsidized by people from his region, and they expected a return on their investment — a demand which could only be satisfied if Obi were willing to compromise his principles and use his position for their benefit. Furthermore, his family and the people from his village were strongly opposed to his marriage. In the resultant frustration and to meet the constant financial needs of his social position, he becomes more flexible. He begins to take bribes, and he is caught. According to the traditional view, Obi should have realized that he was an integral part of the larger social body which sustained him and gave him the opportunity to achieve an identity; in return he was supposed to support it and abide by its values. In the village, this communal concept is effective and workable, but in the city — where there is no allegiance to the whole society but only a congeries of competing clans and tribal groups — it leads to corruption. Yet the solution suggested by the European view is no more satisfying, for acquisitive individualism and middle-class freedom to pursue one's own interests ultimately result in alienation and loneliness.

Two of Achebe's novels — *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and *Arrow of God* (1964) — are set in earlier historical periods, and they reveal an awareness that individuals in traditional African society were subject to dramatic internal conflicts, even before European colonial institutions had affected the ways they thought about themselves. Both Okonkwo and Ezeulu believe that they are acting in accord with traditional customs, but in actuality their own desires bias their perceptions of complex situations; their own inflexibility in interpreting these customs even betrays a lack of sensitivity toward the traditional balancing of opposing forces. Just as the format of the novel enabled

Achebe to play out the consequences of Odu's conflicting self-definitions, it allowed him to trace sequences of interactions between the individual consciousness and the external world during earlier times. In both *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*, these sequences originate in partial blindness and culminate in death or the loss of authority. Yet, although Okonkwo is represented as living in the late 1800's and Ezeulu in the 1920's, their imagined lives help to clarify the relevance of traditional values in contemporary society. For example, when Achebe quotes the Ibo proverb "no man however great can win judgment against his people," he implicitly identifies one of the weaknesses in his characters, but it is also a weakness in post-independence African society, for it suggests that anyone who harms the whole, of which he is a part, harms himself. In *A Man of the People* (1966), a major character concludes that personal loyalty is one of the few values still possible in the modern world. If one combines the thrust of these two ideas, it becomes clear that Achebe is drawing attention to the need for a redefinition of the individual's proper role in society. Like Oyono and Kane, he envisages a role which would reconcile the traditional respect for wholeness and community with a new recognition of the individual's potential for independent, personal attachments.

In the quest for a new synthesis of traditional and modern self-concepts, the neo-African writer has frequently arranged the subject world-object world interactions, which characterize the novel, into patterns of education or character development. This tendency influences Ngugi's portrayals of individuals whose lives are variously affected by the struggle for independence in Kenya, and it is a major structuring principle in most of Mongo Beti's fiction. In *Mission terminée* (1958), for example, a young city boy returns to the village, where sexual and philosophical initiations prepare him to break with the assumptions which had previously assured his conformity to the wishes of his father and, indirectly, to the European ideology he had been taught in the schools. In *Le pauvre Christ de Bomba* (1957), another young boy undergoes a similar maturation experience, but this time it is specifically linked with an insight into the inherent corruption of the social and religious institutions spawned by the colonialist presence in Cameroon. Although neither of these novels culminates in the complete self-realization of individuals who comprehend the need to oppose the forces that have distorted their lives, the process by means of which they could achieve this stage of awareness has begun, and the dehumanizing forces have been exposed to the reader's scrutiny. In fact, in his more revolutionary later novels — *Perpétue* (1974) and *Remember Rueben* (1974) — Beti actually does focus on the individual's evolution toward this awareness and on its consequences for political action.

In Europe and Africa, the novel emerged as a significant literary genre at a time when traditional social forms were disintegrating. In both places, the idea that every person had a permanently fixed place in a larger social and temporal order was being challenged by new concepts of individual autonomy and responsibility. Because the novel was minimally subject to formal restraints and because it offered a maximum opportunity to trace the encounters between the consciousness of the individual character and the object world, it proved to be an excellent vehicle for exploring and affirming the conflicting self-concepts which surfaced in this intellectual climate. Adopted with equal

facility by proponents of the old order and advocates of the new, its ideological content could not be identified with the interests of a particular class, although the rise of the middle class clearly contributed to the sense of urgency with which the individual's proper role in society was being discussed. What made the atmosphere particularly propitious for the appearance of the novel was the nature of the underlying debate and the novel's capacity to address the principal issues at stake in that debate.

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