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## THE CHILD SOLDIER'S SOLILOQUY. VOICES OF A NEW ARCHETYPE IN AFRICAN WRITING

The soliloquy is part of my personal literary mindscape, since during my PhD research I came across *King Leopold's Soliloquy*, a rather unknown piece by Mark Twain, published in 1905 during the height of the debate on colonial atrocities in King Leopold's Congo Free State<sup>1</sup>. This soliloquy is a bitter satire about one of the best-known villains of colonial greed and violence. Ever since this research on the literary representation and reimagining of colonial violence in the Congo, my fascination for violence not only as an anthropological constant in human history, but also as an aesthetic subject in literature has never ceased. In African contexts, the interconnectedness of colonial and postcolonial violence with regard to the colonial heritage of structures and conflicts such as dictatorial regimes, ethnic tension and civil wars is evident<sup>2</sup>. This has, of course, been a major topic for the study of entangled histories in postcolonial theory and I would propose that a comparative reading of colonial and postcolonial, European and African narratives of violence that is attentive to these entanglements could be fruitful.

Given the historical facts of slavery, colonialism, postcolonial dictatorships and civil wars, African writers have very often turned to violence as a major subject of literature. For instance, the Nigerian Civil War (1967-1970), also known as the Biafran War, constitutes a lasting collective trauma for the postcolonial nation that is Nigeria. The war has become a major topic in Nigerian literature<sup>3</sup>, in terms of the sheer quantity of texts produced. Strikingly, this does not only refer to the decade following the war, but there are still recent and successful rewritings of that war by a younger generation of Nigerian authors such as Chimamanda Adichie<sup>4</sup>, Uzodinma Iweala

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<sup>1</sup> Twain (Mark), *King Leopold's Soliloquy. A Defence of His Congo Rule*. New York : Warren, 1905, 49 p.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example : Mbembe (Achille), *De la postcolonie. Essai sur l'imagination politique dans l'Afrique contemporaine*. Paris : Karthala, 2000, 293 p. ; and *Sortir de la grande nuit. Essai sur l'Afrique décolonisée*. Paris : La Découverte, 2010, 243 p.

<sup>3</sup> Pape (Marion), *Gender Palava. Nigerian Women Writing War*. Trier : WVT, coll. LuKA (African literatures and arts), 2011, 183 p. ; p. 20-24, give an overview of the literary output about the Civil War and the research done on these texts so far.

<sup>4</sup> Adichie (Chimamanda), *Half of a Yellow Sun*. London : Fourth Estate, 2006, 433 p.

and Chris Abani. Texts by Iweala and Abani<sup>5</sup> feature boy soldiers as protagonists and first person narrators, a form of enunciation that I would like to call « the child soldier's soliloquy » for the purposes of this article.

More generally, during the decade after 2000, a considerable boom in both testimonial and fictional literature on child soldiers involved in African conflicts has emerged in both Anglophone and Francophone literatures across West and Central Africa as well as in the diaspora. This literature touches on one of the major problems of postcolonial violence in politically fragile African nation states and points to the urgency in mediating such violence through narration as a tool for analysis and overcoming, or at least renegotiating, traumatic experiences. The recent wars in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Uganda, both Congos, Ivory Coast and Sudan, to name but a few, have involved a high percentage of young combatants fighting for both insurgent and national armies. The armed conflicts in these countries have recently been labeled as the *New Wars* by political theorists<sup>6</sup>, because they can no longer be understood in terms of classical warfare between nation-states or even classical civil wars, but rather as conflicts linked to a vicious circle of local and international economic and power interests. The danger of such theories, together with a superficial representation of internal African Wars in Western media means that Africa, as in colonial discourse, gets constructed as a place of « evil » and « primitivity ». The notion of Africa allegedly sliding back into pre-colonial « barbarism » comes up with theorists like Herfried Münkler as well as in the Western media.

While it is impossible to ignore the nature of violence that takes place in African wars, I believe that the writing of African authors offers an important and more nuanced vision. In this paper, I will deal with fictional literature only, although I believe that a comparative approach to both autobiographical testimonial texts and fiction on the topic shall open up a wider scope of research in the future. However, with regard to narrative reconstructions of the New Wars in Africa, the child soldier has already become a major literary persona and, as such, a new archetypical figure in African writing,

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<sup>5</sup> Iweala (Uzodinma), *Beasts of No Nation*. New York : Harper Collins, 2005, 142 p. ; Abani (Chris), *Song for Night*. London/San Francisco/Beirut : Telegram, 2007, 159 p.

<sup>6</sup> Kaldor (Mary), *New and Old Wars : Organised Violence in a Global Era*. 2nd edition [first edition : 1999], Cambridge : Polity Press, 2006, 256 p. ; Münkler (Herfried), *Die neuen Kriege*. Hamburg : Rowohlt, 2002, 284 p.

which deals with trauma and recent history through individual stories. This new archetype replaces, at least to some extent, the dictator whose career in literature started in the 1970s and went on through the 1980s and 1990s, most prominently in francophone Congolese novels<sup>7</sup>, but also in Nigerian poetry of the Abacha era<sup>8</sup>. Through the shift from the dictator to the child soldier, a shift from the embodied centre of power to the margins of power takes place. Small soldiers, as they are termed in West-African English, are victims who become culprits; they are ambivalent, caught in an ambiguous state between innocence and guilt. The novels try to turn the unspeakable violence perpetrated on and by children into narration. As Justin Bisanswa put it: « Au fond, l'enfant-soldat présente beaucoup d'avantages aux yeux d'un romanesque qui met en doute la représentation. Il est le lieu d'un secret; il est perçu comme ambivalent; il joue d'une continuelle absence-présence »<sup>9</sup>. However, the novels that feature a soliloquy of an allegorical child soldier do symbolically give voice to the often voiceless marginal figures of war with a focalization from their perspectives. The naïve, childish voices of child soldiers in literature allow for an especially effective unveiling of the absurdity of war.

Many, although not all, of the texts of the larger corpus of literature on child soldiers use the form of the monologue of a traumatized narrator, caught between childhood and adulthood. Thus, I come back to my use of the genre of the soliloquy in the title of this article; it is not to be taken literally, but rather as a trope for the texts that I will deal with here: three short novels in form of a monologue enunciated by a single first-person narrator, a juvenile soldier: Ken Saro-Wiwa's *Sozaboy* (1985), Uzodinma Iweala's *Beasts of No Nation* (2005) and Chris Abani's *Song for Night* (2007). In

<sup>7</sup> Labou Tansi (Sony), *La Vie et demie*. Paris: Seuil, 1979, 191 p.; and *L'État honteux*. Paris: Seuil, 1982, 156 p.; Lopes (Henri), *Le Pleurer-rire*. Paris: Présence africaine, 1982, 315 p.

<sup>8</sup> See the research of Sule Egya who often focusses on the figure of the dictator in political Nigerian poetry: Egya (Sule E.), « "Every Poem Becomes Dangerous": The Aesthetics of Resistance in Contemporary Nigerian Poetry », in *Presentations of Postcolonialism in English: New Orientations*. Edited by Jaydeep Sarangi. New Delhi: Authorpress, 2007, p. 95-106; and « Art and Outrage: A Critical Survey of Recent Nigerian Poetry in English », *Research in African Literatures*, t. 42, n°1, 2011, p. 49-67.

<sup>9</sup> Bisanswa (Justin), « La transparence de l'énigme et l'énigme de la transparence. Poétique du social dans *Allah n'est pas obligé* d'Ahmadou Kourouma », *Dalhousie French Studies*, n°90, 2010, p. 13-29; p. 28. Ahmadou Kourouma's famous *Allah n'est pas obligé* (2000) would, of course, also fit in line with the novels I deal with, but for the purpose of this limited article, I prefer to stick to a Nigerian context.

drama theory, the soliloquy is a grand monologue on stage, without an addressee, enunciated by a person who believes him/herself to be alone and thus speaks of hidden truths. There is obviously a metonymical link with the form of the novel as a monologue, and the unveiling of « unspeakable things » here, although the question of the addressee is different. In each of the three short texts, the narrator addresses an explicit reader or imagined listener and thus express the desire to testify. At the same time, the texts point to the difficulties of human communication and put language into question. The specificity of the « subgenre » of the « child's soldier's soliloquy » resides in the question of language in relation to power structures and the politics of representation through the narrowing of the narrative to one subjective perspective : that of the lonely figure of a child at war and who is finding a voice.

In other fictional texts of the larger corpus, a more complex, heteroglossic narration is composed as in Léonora Miano's *Les Aubes écarlates. Sankofa cry* (2009) and Helon Habila's *Measuring Time* (2007), novels that delve into the issues of memory and historiography. Another privileged narrative strategy is the form of a dialogue between two oppositional or solidary narrative perspectives. Examples of this are Emmanuel Dongala's *Johnny chien méchant* (2002), a novel that creates a contrast between the juvenile male fighter and a female civilian victim, and Ahmadou Kourouma's *Quand on refuse, on dit non* (2004) as well as Wildfried N'Sondé's *Le Silence des esprits* (2010), texts that stress the aspects of solidarity between different oppressed groups and their traumatic experiences.

In what follows, I focus on the form of the child soldier's soliloquy and Nigerian writers at home and in the diaspora. I will briefly introduce *Sozaboy*, which I consider as a founding text for the emerging tradition of the child soldier's soliloquy. Subsequently, I will concentrate on Iweala's and Abani's texts. In terms of generations in literary history, the Nigerian writer and environmental activist Ken Saro-Wiwa (1941-1995) has become a canonical author (in Nigeria as well as in the field of postcolonial literature) and his texts serve as a well-known literary reference for younger generations. Chris Abani, who was born in Nigeria in 1966, was a political prisoner under the Nigerian military regime of the 1980s and went into exile in Britain, then moved on to the United States. Uzodinma Iweala was born to Nigerian parents in Washington D.C. in 1982.

### ***Sozaboy* as a Founding Text : War and Diglossia**

Written and published fifteen years after the Nigerian Civil War and fifteen years before the boom of the New War literature, Ken Saro-Wiwa's *Sozaboy* introduces the type of enunciation, which takes place in the sub-genre of the child soldiers soliloquy into literature. Saro-Wiwa's protagonist Mene, nicknamed *Sozaboy*, is, in fact, the first young soldier in Nigerian literature to have an extended soliloquy. Saro-Wiwa, himself a witness of the Nigerian Civil War, chose a fictive setting for his novel, which becomes a more universal representation of war. *Sozaboy* is undoubtedly a prominent example, not only of the New Literatures in English, but of a New English in literature : a perfect example of the postcolonial double process of language abrogation and appropriation<sup>10</sup>. Saro-Wiwa explains the specific language code which he inscribes into the subtitle of his novel (*a Novel in Rotten English*) in his « Author's Note » :

Sozaboy's language is what I call, « rotten English », a mixture of Nigerian pidgin English, broken English and occasional flashes of good, even idiomatic English. This language is disordered and disorderly. Born of a mediocre education and severely limited opportunities, it borrows words, patterns and images freely from the mother-tongue and finds expression in a very limited English vocabulary<sup>11</sup>.

Drawing heavily on Pidgin structures and vocabulary (which is translated in a glossary at the end of the text) as well as on colloquial Nigerian English, the self-defined « rotten English » is close to certain Nigerian language registers, but after all it is also a carefully constructed literary language<sup>12</sup> : « No one in Nigeria actually speaks or writes like this but the style functions in the novel extraordinarily well »<sup>13</sup>. This language reflects the complex sociolinguistic situation of diglossia in the multilingual setting of postcolonial societies, such as Nigeria. *Sozaboy* uses an interlanguage<sup>14</sup> that mediates between

<sup>10</sup> Ashcroft (Bill) et al., *The Empire Writes Back*. London : Routledge, 1989, 283 p. ; p. 27-76.

<sup>11</sup> Saro-Wiwa (Ken), *Sozaboy. A Novel in Rotten English* [1985]. New York : Longman African Writers, 2001, p. VII.

<sup>12</sup> See Uwasomba (Chijioko), « War, Violence and Language in Ken Saro-Wiwa's *Sozaboy* », *African Journal of History and Culture*, vol. 2, n°2, 2010, p. 18-25.

<sup>13</sup> Boyd (William), « Introduction », in Saro-Wiwa (K.), *Sozaboy*, op. cit., p. I-V ; p. III.

<sup>14</sup> On the phenomenon of interlanguage in europhone African writing see : Zabus (Chantal), *The African Palimpsest : Indigenization of Language in the West African*

silenced local African languages and the unreachable British standard, coined as « big big English » with « fine fine grammar » by the narrator. This use of diglossia is obviously related to power structures. Standard English as used by politicians, military leaders, the media and the economic elite excludes the majority of the population from participation. The protagonist who joins the army merely through social pressure from his girlfriend and neighbours never really understands what the war is about because the ideological discourses on the war are in the official language, which is beyond his reach.

Confronted with the terror of war, as both victim and perpetrator, Sozaboy tries to desert, but accidentally changes side – and this doesn't mean anything to him, because he lacks any identification with one or the other side of the war. Instead, he internalises the resigned catchphrase *War is War*, a recurrent phrase in the text : « the otherwise circular statement captures the foolishness and bestiality of war » as Chijoke Uwasamba put it <sup>15</sup>. Furthermore, Sozaboy's resigned acceptance of the war motto « To kill or to be killed. I will not forget that one at all » <sup>16</sup>, stresses the vicious circle of violence. The effects of war on the body, psyche and mind of the young combatant drive him also to recognise the acceleration of his maturation : « I begin to know that after all I will not be small boy again » <sup>17</sup>. But *Sozaboy* is not a *Bildungsroman*, at least not in the classical sense of coming to age and identity through education. If the experience of war slowly changes Sozaboy's naïve, childish attitude, the situation does not allow him to grow into an adult person. On the contrary, at the end of the novel, his very humanity is denied. When he comes back to his destroyed hometown, where his mother and his beloved died, people believe that he is a ghost and chase him away. This pessimistic image of a person whose very humanity is denied to him drastically sums up the effects of war. These concerns with language and the theme of the loss of humanity through war are major features in the texts by Abani and Iweala as well.

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*Europophone Novel*. Amsterdam & Atlanta : Rodopi, 2007, 261 p. (revised and enlarged version of 1994, 240 p.).

<sup>15</sup> Uwasamba (C.), « War, Violence and Language in Ken Saro-Wiwa's *Sozaboy* », *art. cit.*, p. 22.

<sup>16</sup> Saro-Wiwa (K.), *Sozaboy*, *op. cit.*, p. 128.

<sup>17</sup> Saro-Wiwa (K.), *Sozaboy*, *op. cit.*, p. 164.

### Recent Rewritings of War : Violence and the Figure of the Small Soldier

The link between language as a marker of social status and power in postcolonial societies and the role of the subaltern *small soldier* in warfare in the form of the novel as a monologue that creates the effect of a confession is thus being exploited in a series of newer short novels. It is remarkable that the subgenre of the child soldier's soliloquy is bound to the relatively short form, which is classified as novella in the English literary tradition<sup>18</sup>: *Sozaboy* has 187 pages, *Song for Night* has 158 pages and *Beasts of No Nation* only 142 pages. The monologue of one first-person narrator, constructed as the voice of a traumatized child with a limited educational background<sup>19</sup> is certainly an effective narrative strategy, but is not apt to an extensive overuse in terms of reading time. Many readers of Kourouma's *Allah n'est pas obligé*, which happens to run 232 pages and uses repetition as a major stylistic device, experience a certain disturbing weariness with the protagonist's voice and language. Iweala and Abani avoid this carefully : the suspense created by the perspective and language of their protagonists is carefully built up and oriented towards an ambivalent open ending before the narrative style actually becomes overused.

To what extent do Iweala and Abani, as Nigerian diasporic authors who write about child soldiers after 2000, refer to *Sozaboy* ? In fact, both the form and content of their novels show several intertextual links with Saro-Wiwa's classic novel. There are not only the previously mentioned concern with language and the form of the monologue, but several other motifs as well : the figure of a loving and caring mother; the ambivalence of the child who is a victim and a perpetrator at the same time ; the loss of innocence as well as of faith – in the sense of religious faith as well as of faith in humanity in general – which are important in all three texts. In *Beasts of No Nation*, Iweala chooses an unnamed setting, but uses

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<sup>18</sup> A novella is shorter and less complex than a novel, but longer and more complex than a short story. It may be close to the French *nouvelle*, but as the broader French term would nowadays cover the short story as well as the novella, there is no strict equivalence. I mention these generic classifications only because of their relevance with regard to the specific form of enunciation in the texts under survey. My playful use of the soliloquy indicates that otherwise classifications shall not be misunderstood as solely fixed categories.

<sup>19</sup> It must be mentioned, that in Iweala's and Abani's texts the protagonist have a much stronger educational background than was the case with Saro-Wiwa's *Sozaboy*. It is the war that interrupts their school career and their religious education.



some Igbo names and cultural references, whereas Abani's setting is explicitly the Nigerian Civil War from the perspective of a boy fighting for Biafra. As for the representation of violence, both authors go far beyond Saro-Wiwa's representation of killings and physical harm. Nightmarish scenes of torture, dismembering, rape and hacking civilians to death are prominent in the later novellas. Once caught in the spiral of violence, the children experience violence as ecstasy, an irrational folly that compensates for their own sense of powerlessness in an adult hierarchy. However, those scenes haunt the memories of the protagonist-narrators, who are much younger than Mene in *Sozaboy* who was close to eighteen years old : Iweala's Agu is about ten, and Abani's *My Luck* narrates from the perspective of a fifteen year old boy who started fighting at the age of twelve. I consider both texts as rather successful literary attempts to give a voice and a language to trauma. This does not mean, that fiction can speak for « real » child soldiers or even represent their experiences adequately. Rather, fiction can contribute to a better understanding of situations of political and social crisis, moments of extreme violence and trauma through creative imaginations about what might be the psychological landscape of children at war, who become symbolic figures for the breakdown of human values in general<sup>20</sup>. The point I am making thus far about the link between the history of internal African wars and fiction is not that fiction should be considered as a source material about war, but rather that fiction can help reconsider violence by means of symbolic narrations in which the trauma of individual characters is representative of a collective trauma, especially in the ambivalent figure of the child soldier who combines both the most vulnerable and the most aggressive parts of society.

### **The Language of Trauma in Iweala's *Beasts of No Nation***

Iweala's title *Beasts of No Nation* is a quotation from a Fela Kuti song from 1989. Kuti himself took the line from Chinua Achebe's *No Longer at Ease* (1960) where it refers to the wandering protagonist, but in the song lyrics the beasts are explicitly meant as a metaphor for postcolonial African dictators. While shifting from the

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<sup>20</sup> That means, in Africa and elsewhere. If Africa has recently become the continent, which is most prominently associated with the (ab)use of child soldiers, the phenomenon is of course not new and certainly not an African invention or specificity. In this context, read : Bandele (Biyi), *Burma Boy*. London : Vintage, 2007, 216 p., a historical novel on the (ab)use of African troops and child soldiers in the British army during World War II.

bestiality of dictatorships to other forms of bestiality in war, and especially those perpetrated by children as fighters, the title indicates a correlation between different levels of structural and physical violence. Through these intertextual links, Iweala also confirms my hypothesis about the shift from the dictator to the small soldier as an archetypal figure of violence in literature.

In terms of narrative time, the narration in *Beasts of No Nation* is progressive and starts with the forced recruitment of the narrator, Agu, who then goes on to narrate his experiences during the war, crisscrossed with flashbacks of childhood memories. In the last chapter of the novella, after an ellipsis associated with traumatic amnesia, the boy is in a refugee camp where both a catholic priest and an American psychologist try to make him speak out about the war. While the communication with the priest fails completely and the dialogue with the white American woman remains superficial, it is the text as a whole which offers the expected confession to us as readers and, if not a talking cure, at least the story reveals the emergence of the young narrator's voice.

As for language, Iweala continues or rather rewrites Saro-Wiwa's experiment with a new form of English. Strikingly, in contrast to *Sozaboy* there are no lexical references to Pidgin or African languages. The use of doublings of adjectives and verbs and the use of onomatopoeia are prominent in both texts. However, the most outstanding rupture with Standard English grammar by Iweala is the overall use of the present progressive tense. While the doublings and the tense refer to tendencies in Nigerian pidgin, the novel is far more readable to an international public than Saro-Wiwa's *Sozaboy*. Therefore, Nigerian reviewers have criticized Iweala as inauthentic and as a diasporic outsider in relation to Nigerian realities. In response, I would like to argue that authenticity, if ever authenticity exists at all, doesn't function as mere mirroring of empirical material in literary texts, whether linguistic or historical material. Iweala's literary language, especially the use of verb tenses, obviously creates powerful effects such as rapidity, drama, emotional intimacy with the protagonist and a feeling of timeless absurdity, as « all actions seem to be continuously ongoing, interminable »<sup>21</sup>. Despite all the dramatic outer action that takes place, the focalisation is on Agu's inner perspective. As an example of how this perspective and

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<sup>21</sup> Hron (Madelaine), « Oran a-azu nwa : The Figure of the Child in Third-Generation Nigerian Novels », *Research in African Literatures*, vol. 39, n°2, 2008, p. 27-48 ; p. 41.

language work together, I quote from the scene in which the boy will be forced to kill for the first time:

KILL HIM NOW ! I am starting to crying and I am starting to shaking. And in my head I am shouting NO ! NO ! NO ! But my mouth is not moving and I am not saying anything. And I am thinking if I am killing killing then I am just going to hell so I am smelling fire and smoke and it is harding to breath, so I am just standing there crying crying, shaking shaking, looking looking<sup>22</sup>.

As in this passage, the dynamic between speaking and silence is an important motif throughout the novella. In this way, *Beasts of No Nation* is also a story about the loss of human language. Several traumatized child soldiers lose their capacity for speech; in general, the soldiers do not speak to each other, but rather yell orders and curses and during the killings their cynical laughter compensates for the horror of what their doing.

Furthermore, beyond the title, animal metaphors as well as similes are plentiful in the text, implementing a menacing fauna as key elements in the text. Mosquitoes and other biting and stinging insects torture the protagonist throughout his journey through the war. They are metaphors for the overwhelming presence of various sources of physical and psychological aggression and harm. The protagonist's name Agu signifies leopard and refers to the Igbo myth about twins: in this myth, the first twins have the magical power to change into animals resulting in the eating up of the brother who changed into an oxen by the brother who changed into a leopard. The telling of this Igbo myth is, with the story of Kain and Abel in the Bible, part of Agu's early childhood memories. Both parables of fratricide prefigure Agu's role in the war, while the Igbo myth stresses dehumanization through its animal allegories. In the last lines of the novella, the protagonist is conscious that his environment perceives him as «some sort of beast or devil» or as a «thing»<sup>23</sup>. Like Sozaboy, he has lost his place as a recognised human being.

### **The Outspokenness of a Silenced Voice in Abani's *Song for Night***

Chris Abani also takes up the important questions of language and the dynamic relationship between silence and speaking, but he goes

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<sup>22</sup> Iweala (U.), *Beasts of No Nation*, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

<sup>23</sup> Iweala (U.), *Beasts of No Nation*, *op. cit.*, p. 142.

against the grain of Saro-Wiwa's and Iweala's experimentation with new varieties of English. While the text is entirely written in Standard English, the protagonist My Luck refers to the language construction in the text as fiction per se, when he explains :

Of course if you are hearing any of this at all it's because you have gained access to my head. You would also know then that my inner-speech is not in English, because there is something atavistic about war that rejects all but the primal language of the genes to comprehend it, so you are in fact hearing my thoughts in Igbo. But we shan't waste time on trying to figure all that out because as I said before, time here is precious and not to be wasted on peculiarities, only on what is essential<sup>24</sup>.

While this points to a preference for content over the formal language question, language appears on yet another level. The narrator is literally mute, as he is part of a special unit of children trained to detect landmines; a job that doesn't allow them the right to speak or shout during the process. Therefore, their vocal cords have been cut. Throughout the text, the explanations of the sign language those children of the special unit invent amongst themselves serve as headings of the many small chapters, which create a highly fragmented structure of the novel. To give but a few examples of the titles : « Mercy is Palm Turning Out from the Heart », « Love is a Backhanded Stroke to the Cheek » or « Dawn is Two Hands Parting Before the Face »<sup>25</sup>. This body language, put into the written English language (which the reader has in mind to be a fictional translation of thinking in Igbo) in the form of versets is poetic and even tender: it contrasts with the authoritarian language use of the adult commanders of the war and with the overall atmosphere of violence, death, depression and guilt of the novel. As an alternative mode of communication, this sign language opens up spaces of friendship, hope, even love, during a merciless war.

The title *Song for Night* can be read as a quotation of Friedrich Hölderlin's volume *Nachtgesänge* (Night Songs) of 1805, a collection of rather hermetic, melancholic poems on depression, the loss of faith and the longing for death. While *Song for Night* is less hermetic in content, the depressive mode is very much alive with the protagonist My Luck who has been silenced during the war, not only physically, but through his subordinate position as well. His inner language, made up of both strong emotions and astonishingly mature

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<sup>24</sup> Abani (C.), *Song for Night*, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

<sup>25</sup> Abani (C.), *Song for Night*, *op. cit.*, p. 75, 49, 35 respectively.

reflections, is recreated through the literary text. As in Agu's case, his voice in the form of soliloquy is subjected to trauma, which is reflected through the fragmented structure of the text.

The basic plot is constructed around an odyssey of the protagonist-narrator who has lost his unit and is searching for his comrades, while travelling down the river. The symbolic river, which is crowded with dead bodies, is reminiscent of the Greek myth of Styx, as a passage to death. Through the river motif and My Luck's hiding in the bush, a dense tropical rainforest, when he is afraid of being discovered by the enemy, there is also an intertextual link with motifs from Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*: in both texts, the voyage down the river and into the African rainforest leads to death and madness. Furthermore, Abani makes use of the metaphorical tension between light and darkness as well as between inner and outer darkness. For example, in one passage the narrator is confronted with « an impenetrable darkness » of the landscape, which he immediately links to his « darkest » anguish : « There is something sinister about this particular darkness, as though every childhood fear I have is woven into its very fiber »<sup>26</sup>.

Like Agu, My Luck is a narrator who is haunted by guilt and during his lonely voyage memories of his violent acts get mixed up with traumatic dreams. Interestingly, in contrast to Saro-Wiwa and Iweala who stick to a child's perspective, Abani constructs a narrator who reaches a highly mature, quasi metatextual consciousness about his own post-traumatic stress disorder. He comments on the pressure of his memories and how they intensify during the journey: « This trek of mine is getting more and more ridiculous. I am mostly moving from one scene of past trauma to another, the distances between them, though vast, have collapsed to the span of a thought »<sup>27</sup>. However, the frontier between life and death, reason and madness becomes more and more permeable. At the end of the text, the boy, who has finally climbed into a coffin for his voyage down the river reunites with his beloved mother, who had been killed during the war. Madness and death become the only possibilities for a kind of happy ending in the novella.

### Final remarks

In the soliloquies of *Sozaboy*, *Beasts of No Nation* and *Song for Night* the concern with language, although dealt with in a singular manner

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<sup>26</sup> Abani (C.), *Song for Night*, *op. cit.*, p. 143.

<sup>27</sup> Abani (C.), *Song for Night*, *op. cit.*, p. 139.

in each text, reflects an overall difficulty of finding an adequate form of enunciation for the expression of traumatic war experiences through literature as a space of negotiation. In the novellas, linguistic, political and human chaos come together and reflect one another at different levels of the narration. At the same time, the concern with a literary rewriting of the immediate or recent history of wars through the voice of the symbolic figure of the child soldier points to an urgency in dealing with violence and trauma in both local and global contexts. Those figurative soliloquies are indeed striving to reach their readers, to move them emotionally, and not least to show the essential fragility of moral values and human lives – not only in Africa.

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