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Review

Reviewed Work(s): *L'ombre du poète* by Mahi Binebine

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With this translation, Clark has indeed succeeded admirably in sharing Capécia's "slice of life" with the growing number of American readers interested in the social history of France's overseas departments. The system based on color, caste, and class as depicted in the novellettes presents no surprises for nonwhite readers in America. However, that which is of considerable interest and importance in Capécia's works, for this reviewer, is the philosophical and historical account of life in Martinique and Guadeloupe during the German occupation of France in World War II. Fact or fiction, it makes for good reading. Clark's meticulous translation reminds us that in spite of their date, Capécia's novellettes remain contemporary in today's complex world of illusion and reality.

Robert P. Smith Jr.
Rutgers University

Morocco

Tahar Ben Jelloun. *La nuit de l'erreur*. Paris. Seuil. 1997. 313 pages. 125 F. ISBN 2-02-021595-0.

Upon completing my reading of *La nuit de l'erreur*, I was reminded of a comment Jean Cocteau once made concerning the work of art, to the effect that it is sometimes difficult to distinguish a building being erected from one being demolished, if one passes quickly and does not look carefully. The reader unfamiliar with Tahar Ben Jelloun's earlier works may be stunned by the virtuosity and poetic style displayed in *La nuit de l'erreur* and be swept along by the sheer narrative energy of the text; and even someone familiar with such Ben Jelloun masterpieces as *La prière de l'absent* (1981), *L'écrivain public* (1983), *L'enfant de sable* (1985), and *La nuit sacrée* (1987) might well, like Cocteau's casual passerby, mistake as vintage Ben Jelloun a text which—even as it does demonstrate the sometimes glib stylistic genius for which the Moroccan novelist is famous—actually fails to constitute a novel (or "house"), settling rather for a construction of short narratives (beams, girders, armatures in an unfinished or partially razed house).

We are told the story of Zina, who is born under a maleficent star: namely, on the same day as that on which her grandfather dies. Zina grows up to experience a horrific series of trials and molestations. Ben Jelloun has, as always, pulled no punches in describing depravity, rape, and violence. Unfortunately, in *La nuit de l'erreur* his trademark shifting point of view—which the author normally deals with brilliantly in a clever and involuted manner within a logical frame story—becomes patently disruptive, and Ben Jelloun introduces alternate narrative teams in the guise of itinerant performers and the like, having more or less abandoned Zina short of the requisite number of pages the market might label a "novel."

This is not the first time Ben Jelloun's work has been subjected to marketing strategies. It is obvious that *L'enfant de sable* and *La nuit sacrée* were composed as one text of epic proportions (and what a tour de force, indeed), then parceled into two entities which, almost simultaneously with the appearance of the latter, were offered as a boxed duo or bound into one volume; but that was an instance of solid Ben Jelloun being partitioned by publish-

ing desiderata. In *La nuit de l'erreur* we find Ben Jelloun apparently pacing himself for a length dictated by these desiderata rather than by the actual fitness of his proposed story.

In sum, we have in *La nuit de l'erreur* what we might call self-emulation, or the *reprise* of a previously successful formula which now only partially succeeds. The fabric of the style is excellent, but the tailoring of the suit is alop; or perhaps we should say: the construction materials are top quality, but the building is unfinished, asymmetrical, and lacking in traditional amenities. Tahar Ben Jelloun is a great writer who has, here, authored a book which is well written but is not on a par with his other works, save at the most basic levels of the sentence and the paragraph.

Eric Sellin
Tulane University

Mahi Binebine. *L'ombre du poète*. Paris. Stock. 1997. 238 pages. 110 F. ISBN 2-234-04668-8.

From the top of the Mont des Esclaves, two adolescents watch the city below, talk incessantly, and dream and plan their future. Mahi Binebine's third novel is an exploration, through the lives of Yamou and Nayel, of midtwentieth-century Moroccan society, shortly before independence. It is also a philosophical and political novel that explores the power of words.

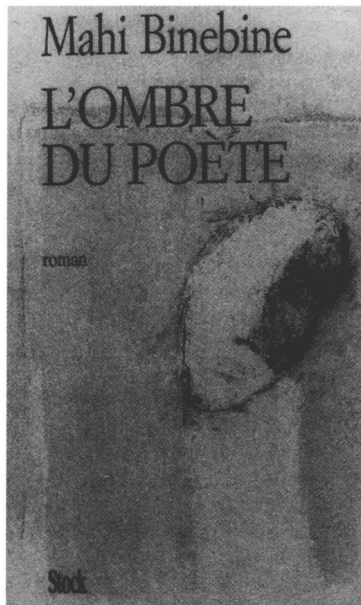
Yamou, son and grandson of barbers, is a poet and dreamer. His father's will is for him to continue the family trade, but Yamou does not wish to do so. His soul is that of a poet, about whom he so knowingly says, "Le poète est un intermédiaire entre l'homme raisonnable et le fou." Whenever he can get away from his father's barbershop, he immerses himself in books. Yamou is determined to become a public letter-writer; so when his father is named the Pasha's barber and moves to the palace, Yamou transforms the barbershop into his office. He quickly learns the power of words in influencing the lives of others, and also the danger of words, as he becomes involved in political resistance in the push for Morocco's independence; for the Pasha allows no protest, and his spies are omnipresent.

Nayel, Yamou's best friend, will follow a very different path, upon which he too discovers the power of words, those of the storyteller. After Nayel's father dies at his birth, his mother throws herself at the feet of the Pasha, begging for help in the face of certain destitution. He takes in Nayel as a "pupille du Pacha," and so this commoner grows up in the Pasha's palace, surrounded by its wealth, hierarchy, privilege, and hypocrisy. Nayel has a place in two worlds, as he lives in the palace yet returns home regularly to visit his mother, Yamou, and the people of his neighborhood. It is largely through Nayel's storytelling prowess that we learn of the fascinating lives of those in the Pasha's circle, and of the life and sufferings of the commoners of Morocco, for Nayel is constantly reinventing his own life, trying to distance himself from his commoner's roots, through an ongoing narrative with which he entertains and enthralls the Pasha's son and his classmates. *L'ombre du poète* is also a novel brimming with stories within stories, mostly told by the everyday people of Morocco: a man who spends time on the public square,

the cemetery watchman, and Yamou's mother, to name but a few. Many are didactic tales, others make us laugh; these multiple layers of stories serve to inform us about the realities of a society in transition, both politically and socially, and about the injustices and miseries suffered by its people.

I at first found *L'ombre du poète* to be less immediately engaging than such earlier Binebine works as *Le sommeil de l'esclave* (1992) and *Les funérailles du lait* (1994; see *WLT* 69:3, p. 632), novels that also explore the sociopolitical context of Morocco. Nevertheless, *L'ombre du poète* is a fine novel whose subtle force grows as the story progresses, and which comes to a moving and dramatic conclusion. We may await Binebine's fourth novel with anticipation.

Melissa Marcus
Northern Arizona University



Nigeria

Dubem Okafor. *The Dance of Death: Nigerian History and Christopher Okigbo's Poetry*. Trenton, N.J. / Asmara, Eritrea. Africa World Press. 1998. 297 pages. \$21.95. ISBN 0-86543-554-5 (555-3 paper).

The Dance of Death is an explanation of the poetry of Christopher Okigbo (who died a major in the Biafran War in 1967) by his nephew, also a poet (see *Garlands of Anguish*, 1997; reviewed in *WLT* 71:3, p. 638). Dubem Okafor counters powerful Western/ized Okigbo critics such as Ali Mazrui and Paul Theroux. "Surely, Heinemann has done a disservice to Okigbo and his poetry through the use of his 'authenticating' (really Orientalizing/Africanizing) voice of Paul Theroux," he says of the preface to *Collected Poems* (1986). "It is clear that Theroux hardly 'knew' Okigbo, whose poetry is also clearly beyond his understanding, as is evidenced by his misreading of the few quoted lines in the 'Preface,' and by his not par-

ticularly original or distinguished readings of Okigbo and of African literature published elsewhere. . . . / Thus, one cannot take seriously Theroux's assertion, in the closing paragraph of the 'Preface,' that Okigbo did not care for politics, but he was greatly attached to the past." Okafor explains: "Okigbo was neither obsessed with the past, which he understood in the same critical way as Soyinka and Achebe; nor was he a nativist (Appiah 1991). But he cared very much for politics, not in the sense of partisanship or *parti pris*, for he loudly detested the politicians and the ruins they wreak on society. But as populist poet-critic, Okigbo was concerned with politics as affecting and determining every facet of human life and the direction in which society careers."

The British manufactured the name "Nigeria" for an area they created by lumping together diverse ethnic groups, each of which could have formed a nation-state, with the feudal structure of the north in charge, Okafor says. Mazrui and Theroux distort Okigbo's decision to fight in the war, however; it is not Okigbo's escape from responsibility to poetry but an extension of it, a concern not with village or tribe but with humanity. (Which explains why lines from *Path of Thunder* could become title and epigraph to my novel of an Amin-like figure expelling Indians from a Uganda-like country, *The General Is Up*.)

Okafor traces Okigbo's poetic trajectory: "After flirting with Graeco-Romanism, Modernism, Cubism, and other Western Avant-gardist isms, he came back to the Nigerian cultural-political *milieu*, at which time his poetry became suffused with imagery from the Nigerian cultural landscapes and motivated by nationalism and love for the people. The mature phase of his poetry encompassed cultural crusade, anti-colonialism, postcolonial politics, and social-political criticism, which culminated in the prophecy and disillusionment of *Path of Thunder*." He had returned after preparing for his mission: "Having now overcome his decacination and alienation from his cultural moorings, which the conjuncture of colonialism, colonial education, and cultural imperialism had produced, and having after a protracted retracing of the exilic route through a series of penitential and purificatory ordeals, achieved acceptance, reintegration, and empowerment, the poet launches his cultural crusade." Like Coleridge, he is sustained by Reason, Truth-seeking, Patriotism, and Pity. His "strategic postcolonial device" is to demarcate his field of combat "by locating in history the source of the cultural, and eventually political and economic, disaster which has been the lot of Africa and the Third World." His references are wide because he is aware, as books like Martin Bernal's *Black Athena* showed later, that loot and plunder from Africa and elsewhere had been "appropriated as the founding kin of European civilization."

Okigbo's spiritual roots were in Igbo culture. He was a reincarnation of his maternal grandfather, the High Priest of Ajani, Okafor says. He died with a neck wound like that of his grandfather, self-inflicted, Okafor believes, rather than surrendering to those who won by betrayal as prophesied in his poetry. He was an *ogbanje*, a spirit not long for this world. Critics' accusations of obscurity, of an egoistic love of big words, and of psychosexual wounds trivialize a poet who was like the Trickster tortoise, "that eternal creature, paradigmatic, in folklore and real life, as a being of great wile and wisdom, resilience, duplicity, ubiquity, and divination." As example, Okafor quotes an