"My Mother the War": *AK* as Caul in Peter Dickinson's Africa

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In thinking about historical fiction, I begin with the words of Paul Ricoeur on metaphor; Ricoeur describes figuration as the work of adjusting facts and explanations to one another (51). The task of the reader is to fight two prejudices—one for microcosm, one for macrocosm—by interweaving references drawn from the local and the global spheres so that the consistency and correspondence of the figuration becomes apparent. The reader can't expect either the factual, micro world or the interpretive, macro world to make sense by itself. When Peter Dickinson describes Nagala as a vast, poor country on "no map of Africa, but . . . there," he sets up a desire to find Nagala on a map while accepting that its existence is an interpretation of a reality larger than a particular country. As Ricoeur observes, this process evokes simultaneous resistance and renewal of meanings within the reader. If the story isn't about a "real" country, then what is the imagined, or imaged, reality it offers? *AK* is not included in the ambitious bibliography of English-language books depicting Africa that Meena Khorana published in 1994, yet it appeared in England in 1990. I want to suggest some ways that this text challenges the categories we use to describe literature: the book is history, the book is fantasy; the book is colonial, the book is postcolonial. It depicts a nation-state drawn from Enlightenment ideology, yet it inexorably describes the situation of a former colony in a technological age. I find the book very interesting indeed, yet the prejudices for history and for poetry that I must employ in reading it makes me cautious in describing the achievement of the writer.

While I cannot greet *AK* with traditional praise, the book does evoke in me a double loyalty, to narrative—the recounting of the past—and to metaphor—the representation of it (29). In this show of loyalty, I exercise a political poetics, moving between reading strategies that allow a search without requiring submission to one symbolic tradition over another. As Howard Zinn expressed it in an early consideration of the uses of history, it's important to start from values we want to achieve, not simply to wait until we're presented with problematic dichotomies (286). This stance contradicts ways of thinking about the reader we often cultivate in school, where we pledge allegiance to the tale, not the teller. Yet resistant reading is familiar to us from feminist and multiethnic theory, and I think Ricoeur's comments about the reader's suspended judgment of fact and interpretation make room within the notion of resistant reading for rich literary experience. But because we so often conceive of young readers as vulnerable, political poetics is not the usual form of literary analysis in our field. In this reading, I try to demonstrate how a reader's affinity for the complex language and action of a changing and diverse culture can, on one hand, refuse a text's participation in a symbolic postmodern tradition of alternative endings, and on the other hand supply a specific cultural context when a writer has declined to particularize one. For some literary critics, the strategies of alternative endings and ironic reflection used by Dickinson have been key to their analyses of children's literature, without reference to strategies used by readers to make sense of the text.

Here are two examples drawn from recent critical books. When Maria Nikolaeva reads this novel, she sees the binary principles of computer games at work in allowing for either a happy or a sad resolution when the reader confronts ending "A," the boy hero's success at

keeping his rifle buried, or ending "B," the hero's death in a cycle of wars fought by children. When John Stephens and Robyn McCallum discuss works by Dickinson, they emphasize his contextual practice; this writer offers frame narratives that define choices without disempowering readers (29). Both of these examples show a writer who respects readers, but they do not describe the way particular readers can use *AK* to interweave narrative and metaphor as a problem-solving exercise in a world that actually exists and needs to change (Hobsbawm 585). In my experience, the reader can thread the "A" ending with memories of complexity acquired in the main story, and perversely see the continued war of the "B" ending as a return to normalcy. Neither ending need be accepted as written. And the contextual framework offered by the writer can be verified and altered by a reader who interrogates it. What is left is the openness not of the ending but of the reading process itself and the life process it fosters. As historians like Bonnie Smith put it, we acknowledge the charged nature of writing the past. As literary critics like Louise Rosenblatt claim, we help to produce the text and its implications for the future. The very active reader, then, is needed in the world that Peter Dickinson constructs, to mediate between language and reality.

My approach is rooted in the traditions of literacy fostered by humanists and feminists. Outside sources, inner resources—these conspire in my political poetics. The title I offered for this piece shows my interweavings. "My Mother the War" is a recurrent motif in the story, accounting for the sequence of events. The boy hero, Paul, remembers almost nothing before his birth as a Warrior, a child soldier working with the leader Michael Kagami. At a decisive moment in the narrative, events are shaped by Paul's refusal of his "mother's" plea, "Bring me alive with your beautiful gun" (172). Images of burning and explosion define the war and its lure; the fighting sustains the Warriors, and is a mode of nurture for lost boys. When Paul refrains from shooting, he does so in temporary resistance to the pervasive life force of constant struggle for power. He operates from memory rather than from desire, making common cause with his adoptive father Kagami's teachings about democracy. The contradiction between the overwhelming reality of war and the insistent dream of peace moves the novel in swift trajectory toward those two proferred endings. Historical issues, skillfully but abstractly defined by Dickinson as the ironic outcome of British exigency, are subsumed into figurative language: the war is the boy soldiers' mother because the ambitious African could have authority only in the army, and thus it is the army that can bring some children into conscious humanity (3). Paul, like many other boy soldiers, has no memory of life before he wandered into the soldiers' employ. The motif, war as mother, is the real situation, and Michael Kagami's preaching about the need to run railroads and administer institutions seems anything but real. Functioning roads and railroads are a dream of the future. In fact, Paul ultimately decides that the best way to save Kagami from political prison is to destroy judicial evidence, a car transported on a train. Blowing up a Mercedes Benz is Paul's response to injustice. It is a response drawn from war's ethos, not from the leader's increasingly tentative hopes.

If the war-as-mother motif has control of the narrative, the insistent image of Paul's gun makes that sequence questionable. The AK seems to mark the boy soldier at metaphoric birth; Dickinson uses the particular kind of gun to explain the war's cruel necessity. It folds, shaping itself to a body, easily concealed by a soldier's blanket, and it requires mastering to keep it on target. Durable to a mythic degree, the gun can be buried until needed and resurrected for new battles, not so much like a caul or covering of the face as I thought on first reading—though one

of the word's original meanings, a close-fitting cap, does convey the image of a newborn in uniform—but more like a cord binding the boy to the earth. The seemingly simple metaphor takes on resonance within the political teachings of Michael; the soldier-father speaks of democracy and idealism in terms that value the excitement of the market-place and its earthy smells and possibilities for incendiary action by the masses. The AK can be wrapped in bright woven cotton, and it can be cocked in naked defiance of law. The boy's bond with his father, his interpretation of his father's dreams, transpose into the AK metaphor when Michael refers to kids as weapons of the future (24) and Paul and the women of the marketplace play out the partly unpredictable reproduction of the nation-state of Nagala.

The active, if not resistant reader has to notice that women's equality and the inevitable dynamism of commodity trading are grounds for much of the narrative sequence. The figuration linking fact and idea depends on these modern concepts as much as on the "quest for the father" and "separation from the mother" residue from hero stories. The artistry of the book seems inherent in the use of the abstract war and the concrete rifle as interweavings. But in reading a novel of the postcolonial period, what Elleke Boehmer would call a migrant's text of remembered danger written from relative safety, I reach out for the "real" in other accounts. Detective work is one strategy I use, reading about Dickinson's birthplace, now called Zambia, and noting with satisfaction how scholars have shared his version. The abstractness, deliberate denial of specificity to the setting of Nagala, matches the way others have written of life in Africa: "The African townsman is a townsman" (H. M. Gluckman qtd. in Middleton 2: 95). The arbitrary placement of the capital city in a "non-tribal" or uninhabitable place is one of the ironies of both Dickinson's novel and the larger situation it describes, and Zambia's geography matches Nagala's in its landlocked but varied topography. The transition of boys to men through the quotidian routines of obedience, respect and learning are part of the African profile, as is the elevated and even fearsome role of the mother, but not of the wife, in cultural values.

The bland rhetoric of the modern democratic state is an almost terrifying feature of this novel. The transcendent Michael Kagami is the solitary hero without a history. We are left to wonder how he was educated, where he learned to be a leader—or whether we are supposed to believe he was formed solely by Western and urban ideologies. Unlike Africans who identify themselves by language and culture rather than by their nation-state—the playwright Tess Onuweme says that she is Nigerian only in the United States, because in Africa she is Ibo[1]—the boy Paul does not remember his history, but he has faint memories of it in language of story and lullaby. Michael, by contrast, is known to us only in the present. His insistence on national goals as a reason for living doesn't correlate with that of Africans who remember or know their kinship systems. The dangers of those systems is carried out in the story of Jilli, Paul's sister Warrior who leaves her father's rule but brings her female resistance with her into the marketplace. When I turn the pages of the novel from the marketplace to the alternative endings, I see two sketches that omit Jilli, the music, the clothing, the bartering that made the boy's story exciting. I do not think this omission was part of an ironic strategy used by the writer to offer two bleak possibilities; rather, in an English-culture outline, the war and the gun subsume the reasons for life to continue. Only the reader's stubborn wish for vitality and complexity, for interweavings of fact with interpretation, can make the historical novel work. A responsible view of Peter Dickinson's Africa must ask why the alternative endings revert to orderly worlds of work and war in which the women of the marketplace are dead or gone. That's why I mentioned at the

outset that this novel of much artistry cannot be praised for its wholeness, its comfort, or even its argument. This book offers the conflicted language of a divided world, and its title unfolds and clicks into place as we patrol the borders of what we need to value in that world.

Note

[1] Paraphrased from a presentation Onuweme gave at Augustana College, April 5, 2001.

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