

***Broken Glass***, by Alain Mabanckou, London: Serpent's Tail, translated by Helen Stevenson, 2009, 165pp.

***Black Bazaar***, by Alain Mabanckou, London, Serpent's Tail, translated by Sarah Ardizzone, 2012, 263pp.

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## Unpacking A Library #2: Trois-Cents Operas

In common parlance here in Britain the term 'the local' refers to what is often celebrated as a peculiarly national institution: the public house, the pub. One's 'local' is not defined exclusively by mere geographical proximity – strictly speaking, it may not be the closest drinking establishment to one's place of residence or work though in truth it is seldom much further than "just 'round the corner." No, what is most important is the temporal rather than spatial dimension: the 'local' is the most frequented watering hole, the place in which one does one's usual drinking and socializing, the home from home in which over time, one might come to constitute, and consider oneself to be, a 'regular,' joining that dedicated band of daily patrons, of hostelry habitués.

Now admittedly the bars of Brazzaville and Paris may be very distant and distinct, from each other as well as from the British pub, but the life that ebbs and flows in them, the motley characters that are irresistibly drawn to them, the hard luck stories that get told and retold in them, are perhaps not so very different, certainly if the writings of the contemporary Congolese author and UCLA scholar Alain Mabanckou are anything to go by. In two uproarious comic masterpieces, Mabanckou introduces us to the denizens of the wonderfully named *Credit Gone West*, a drinking venue in the Trois-Cents district of the Congolese capital and principal haunt of the eponymous 'Broken Glass' ('VerreCassé'), and those of Jip's, an "Afro-Cuban bar near the fountain at Les Halles in the 1<sup>st</sup> arrondissement" (BB: 5) and 'local' to all manner of sub-Saharan immigrants, among them the 'Buttologist', self-styled anatomical aesthete and narrator of *Black Bazaar*.

These tales are set in very different cities and are set down by very different raconteurs – one a former local primary school teacher now fallen on hard times as age and dissolute living begin to catch up with him; the other the dandified founder member of SAPPE, the Society for Ambient People and Persons of Elegance. Nevertheless, they share not only a common geographical origin (the Buttologist, too, hails from Trois-Cents, and indeed seems prefigured in the character of the Printer in *Broken Glass*) but also a common preoccupation: the vexations

and vicissitudes of writing itself as a vocation. Broken Glass is presented with a notebook by the Stubborn Snail, patron of Credit Gone West, and asked to fill its pages as confessor and chronicler since “this is the age of the written word, that’s all that’s left, the spoken word’s just black smoke, wild cat’s piss” (BG: 5); the Buttologist meanwhile embarks upon a diary to assuage his anger and anguish at being abandoned by his lover, Original Colour who, taking their baby girl Henriette with her, has headed back home to the Congo in the arms of a musician, the hateful ‘Hybrid.’ Both men turn reluctantly to writing as they have already turned readily to drinking; alcohol flowing more freely and easily than ink. And in so doing these hapless, hopeless barflies immediately attract the attention of their loquacious fellow regulars who are only too quick to accost them, providing all manner of unwanted advice, insisting that their misadventures and misfortunes are indeed worthy of inclusion, and threatening every kind of violence and mayhem when their unwelcome opinions, uninvited interjections and cautionary claptrap are given short shrift. And so the poor Buttologist has scarcely managed a word on his second-hand typewriter when Roger the French-Ivorian, tipped off by Paul from the big Congo, takes it upon himself to regale our would-be writer with words of wisdom as what should and should not be included in his tome: “but in these stories of yours,” he asks insistently, “have you at least got a sea and an old man who goes fishing with a young boy?” (BB: 8); “have you at least got a great love that

takes place in a time of cholera between a poor telegrapher and a young schoolgirl who will end up marrying a doctor later on?” (BB: 12); “have you at least got a character with a drum, somebody who from the age of three doesn’t want to grow up, a character who will be interned in a mental hospital later on and who will tell their life story to their keeper through the peep-hole, eh?” (BB: 13). Finding his great literary learning unappreciated, the increasingly inebriated and irate Ivorian turns upon his unfortunate interlocutor and upbraids him with:

“Down here, Buttologist, everything has already been written! Everything! Take it from me, I’ve read all the great books in the world. So don’t go thinking you can change things. And you’d better make sure I don’t find my name in your diary of a cuckold! Speaking of which, where are your woman and child now, eh? You can’t put that in writing because you’re ashamed of people finding out. Call yourself a writer? You’re just vomiting up your anger against your ex and the minstrel who stole her of you. Serves you right!” (BB: 14).

Roger’s outburst is both acute and amiss: true, *Black Bazaar*, the Buttologist’s book, is most assuredly indebted to and imbued with bitterness towards Original Colour and her new lover; but precisely and paradoxically in this way, the Buttologist’s own humiliation and shame are thereby inevitably and indelibly ‘put in writing’. Indeed, such indignities take myriad forms and come from many sources. His obnoxious neighbour ‘Mr Hippocratic,’ for example, holds him personally responsible for “digging the

hole in the social security" (BB: 17), reproaches him for displaying political ignorance of his homeland (though in truth it is he, the Martiniquais, who is in error, muddling up the two Congos), and tells him pointedly and repeatedly to go home to Africa. And even when, as a proud new father, the Buttologist introduces his new-born daughter to his drinking friends in Jip's, things go awry: the Chadian Bosco the Embassy Poet, "with a glass of red wine in one hand and a copy of Rimbaud in the other" (BB: 94) promises a verse to mark the occasion for a small fee, but the poem never materialises; Vladimir the Cameroonian "with the longest cigars in France and Navarre" (BB: 95) lectures him on his poor choice of name (BB:95-97); Yves the just-Ivorian thinks the baby's skin colour is all wrong and insists "you should have had a mixed-race kid!" (BB: 97); and, Roger the French-Ivorian, not to be outdone by his countryman, questions the child's paternity altogether (BB: 99-101); by the end, notwithstanding the intercession of his compatriot Pierrot the White and Paul from the big Congo, the Buttologist has had enough of the all pseudo-politics and postcolonial prattle that ensues and makes a firm resolution: "I didn't go back to Jip's with Henriette. If someone asked me to bring her in, I replied that my baby was not a specimen for some colonial exhibition" (BB: 102).

Broken Glass fares little better; worse perhaps. At least the Buttologist gets to tell his version of events from the start. But the more Broken Glass writes, the longer he is required to defer his own concerns and confessions as the other regulars each in turn

demand to have their say, to have their story told because: “they think their story the most extraordinary, most astonishing, the weirdest, most surprising, most action-packed ever told, and they want to get you to believe the tale they’re going to tell is of a gravity and seriousness equalled only by the death penalty itself” (BG: 35-6). And so the notebook becomes a patchwork of tall tales and sob stories: the terrible fate of the Pampers Guy thrown out by his ex-wife, accused of child molestation and raped in prison; the woes of the Printer, newly returned from Paris having found his new lover cheating on him with his own teenage son; the pissing competition between the local floosie Robinette and the puffed-up ‘Casmir high life’; the self-proclaimed all-powerful shaman Mouyeké who winds up in prison on fraud charges; and then there is the Pampers guy once more, this time come to remonstrate with Broken Glass for besmirching the good name of his beloved wife. And even those whose demands for inclusion are refused – like Holden, a “weird looking guy” absorbed in a copy of something “... in the rye” (BG: 150-1) – even those who Broken Glass denies a mention are, of course, dutifully mentioned. In this respect Broken Glass lives up to his name: a damaged vessel that serves as a receptacle for the outpourings of others, but one nonetheless with a cutting edge that can draw blood. And so it is only towards the end, as his bicycle chicken supper from the stall outside grows cold on the counter, that Broken Glass, with the encouragement of the Stubborn Snail, is finally able to tell his own tale, a familiar

refrain of a decline into drunkenness and despair; of a long marriage destroyed his drinking; of eventually preferring time with the bottle than time with his wife; of interfering in-laws; of dismissal from the Trois-Martyrs school for various indecencies (baring his own behind in anatomy lessons, urinating in the classroom); of ending up the most regular of regulars at Credit Gone West such that he, Broken Glass, is the one entrusted by its owner with the task of bar-room biographer and historian.

The pages, then, start to fill up, each book in its own way laying stories upon more stories, creating manifold narrative strata which like geological deposits compress and compound into wondrous contours, fracture and fissure into fault-lines. As transcriptions of dialogues and monologues, these writings perfect the art of interleaving of the varied voices of different characters, the capturing of idiosyncratic speech patterns, tones, rhythms, inflections and obscenity-strewn vocabularies. Amidst this cacophony of small-talk, each word rings true, every voice seems pitch-perfect. Mabanckou has clearly spent a lot of time in his local: and it was time well spent. Even in translation, these books have an infectious beat, a musicality best captured by the Buttologist in his equivocal reception of jazz:

“Our music from back home is something else. And we got rid of the trumpets and other saxophones a long time ago. ... It’s all about furious rhythms now. A few lyrics, for one or two minutes tops, and then more than twenty minutes of dance, of ‘hot stuff’. You sweat when you dance, you hold your partner tight, you try

to make her slip up so she brings her chest and lips right up close. And then, bam, you're in direct action.

"You wouldn't be able to pull off a feat like that with Miles Davis." (BB: 255-6)

Mabanckou's writing, too, is "something else"; it is "hot stuff".

Perhaps surprisingly, amidst all this babble, there is scarcely a description to be found of the physical layout or appearance of the bars themselves. Then again, these establishments serve their purpose which is to provide a refuge and rendezvous for these eccentric characters, and above all to act as a backdrop to the chatter and banter as these men proclaim, pronounce, and pontificate, all the while pouring another glass. Indeed, this is what matters most in these books: characters and conversations; characters disclosed in and delineated through their talk; talk turned into the written word; talk become text. In this way, *Credit Gone West* and *Jip's* each constitute a locality understood as a "linguistic cosmos" as Walter Benjamin once said of the street names of Paris.

How might one understand these discursive universes constituting these particular 'locals'? There are perhaps three elements here.

Firstly, they are produced through the performance of masculinity of a particular kind, that is to say, of a failed and fickle hyper-masculinity which is ultimately defined by the

inability to form and sustain mature relationships with women. This fundamental flaw is epitomised by the two would-be authors and shared with all those inebriated and inadequate males who orbit around them. And yet, despite their manifold foibles and follies, perhaps even because of them, the Buttologist and Broken Glass are, each in their own way, the most engaging of storytellers and the best of company. The former, a latter-day Baudelaireanflaneur whose aloofness and narcissism are the basis of his remarkable resilience and restraint in the face of all manner of petty prejudices and provocations, nevertheless displays an undeniable and irrepressible charm. The latter, an old-timer who has ruined himself, struggles to retain the last vestiges of dignity but is certainly not bereft of fine feeling and sentiment. A preening peacock and a derelict drunk are very different storytellers but, however derided and down-trodden, however much they protest at and refuse the nosy and noisome interference of others, they remain humble, honest and humane documenters of their own lot and of the fate of others; they are patient and scrupulous scribes of local life. Sparing the reader no details, sparing themselves no blushes, these narrators provide more than enough scatological, obscene comedy to avoid the charge of pathos, and sufficient melancholy and morbidity to deny any aspersions of common lewdness and farce. The pages of their books are filled with the grotesque and the sublime in precise counterpoint, or rather, together up close, bam, in “direct action”.

Secondly, this is a cosmos in which literature, philosophy, postcolonial politics and the diverse experiences of diaspora run riot. By means of the most intricate intertextual interlacings, the words of great Francophone literary figures and philosophers first and foremost Franz Fanon, are parroted and parodied by various characters, noble ideas and insights set in sentences of invective and expletives. The result is that conversations are always philosophical-political-phenomenological-psychological-postcolonial-theological profanations, hybrids and mash-ups, montages. Sitting in the Roi du Café, the Buttologist is treated to a long lecture on the unappreciated felicities and benefits of French and Belgian colonial rule by Mr Hippocratic. Soon after, our narrator himself imparts his thoughts on the recent history of his homeland to “the Breton”, contrasting the Red Revolution bringing Communism and the Horizontal Revolution bringing prostitutes from Zaire, and concluding that:

“the President was very fond of the books of Marx and his wife Angel. ... In his opinion your visionary men from bygone eras, also known as philosophers, had simply interpreted the world, but from now on it needed changing with Rwandan machetes and Kalashnikovs imported directly from Russia via the narrow border with Cabinda even if the Angolans and their rebels didn't agree ...” (BB: 239)

In this way, much of the time, the characters seem to utter

utter nonsense; but this is perhaps only because the pieces of the puzzle are so garbled and jumbled up. Properly arranged, this is nonsense which may come to form a pattern, a mosaic of apparently inconsequential fragments, and one which presents profound truths about the contemporary conditions of African peoples, men in particular, wherever they may find themselves: of on-going exploitation and dependencies; of the catastrophic legacies of imperialism and racism; of the complexities, contradictions and challenges of multiculturalism and cosmopolitanism in European cities and the ghettos of the banlieus; of the common structures of feeling which, born of coincidence and contiguity, sustain immigrant communities; of how to live with black skin and disdain any white mask.

And finally there is throughout the issue of transcription: how to turn all this small-talk and chit-chat into a coherent narrative, how to transcribe all this gossip, to find its inscription, its trace, so that it might survive beyond the moment of utterance. At the end of these books, their authors have completed their task – “mission accomplished” (BG: 158) Broken Glass declares as he hands his notebook to Holden in *Credit Gone West*, even though the Stubborn Snail has already complained about his poor grammar, lack of full stops and capital letters and scattering of commas and speech marks, the whole a multi-vocal mess spewed out onto paper. In his Epilogue, just as the Buttologist puts the finishing touches to his *Black Bazaar*, Sarah, the new woman in his life, suggests they move in together. With

a new look (straightened hair) and off the booze, he can look forward to a new life. But for Broken Glass, there is only death. The penultimate section of the book provides a marked change of mood as ribaldry gives way to exquisite elegy. Broken Glass leaves Credit Gone West and, forsaking the allure of Robinette, anticipates a midnight walk along the river bank, the river Tchinouka which claimed his mother many years before (in a nod to this, there is a reference to the drowning of Magritte's mother at the end of *Black Bazaar*). It is high time, he thinks, for them to be re-united. Beset by all these stories of failed loves, infidelities and sexual misdemeanours, Broken Glass movingly remembers his mother's love for him in a sudden Proustian turn:

“it makes me smile to think that this evening no one knows I'm going to travel with a salmon, and walk along the river Tchinouka, and go and find my mother, and we'll drink, drink once more the waters which carried off the only woman who could say 'my son, Broken glass, I love you, and I still love you the day you're no more than a piece of rotten garbage', she was my mother, she was the most beautiful woman on earth, and if I had the talent I'd have written a book entitled *The Book of My Mother*, I know someone's already done it, but you can't have too much of a good thing, it would be the unfinished novel, the book of happiness, the book of a man alone, of the first man, the book of wonder, all rolled into one, and on every page I'd write my feelings, my love, my regrets, I'd invent a house on the edge of tears for my mother, some wings too, so she could be queen of

the angels in heaven, so she could protect me for ever and ever, and I'd tell her to forgive me for this lousy life, this life and a half which brought me forever into conflict with the red liquid of the Sovinco [winery], and I'd tell her to forgive me for the happiness I never failed to find in inspecting the bottom of my bottles of red, and I know she would forgive me, she'd say *'my son, it's your choice, there's nothing I can do,'* and then she'd tell me about my childhood, my long lost childhood..." (BG: 160-1)

In finishing a different "book of wonder" that will bear his name, Broken Glass has done his duty as the ghost-writer for others: and he will soon be only a ghost himself. At midnight: for him it will be time. Time gentlemen please, time gentle man.

In his famous 1936 essay 'The Storyteller: Observations on the Works of Nikolai Leskov', Walter Benjamin reflects upon the apparent demise in the modern era of the tradition of the telling of folktales, fairy stories and other forms of oral lore. Wise words are no longer to be heard by an enthralled audience gathered in a hushed circle around the speaker. But in his deft weaving of these wonderful tales, Mabanckoudeserves our heartfelt thanks for reminding us that all is not lost: the storyteller, the fabulist, is still to be found propping up the bar, staring into a half-empty empty glass, just around the corner, at your local.