

ARTICLE

## *Ambiguous Adventure: A Crossroad Novel*

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To begin my lecture, I would like to focus on two terms from an etymological point of view: First of all, the word “ambiguous,” derived from the Latin *ambiguus*, means that which has two faces, two directions, is situated between two things, or has two meanings. To conduct my work, I’ll choose the meaning of “two directions, two ways which are opposed and at the same time meet each other.” The etymology of the word “crossroads” (*carrefour* in French) is *quadry forcum* where several ways, or directions meet. We have also to bear in mind that the most famous myth of human history, the myth of Oedipus, takes place at a crossroads. The story shows that it is actually at a crossroads that the accident between Oedipus and his father Laius took place, and it is where Oedipus’s destiny played out. The personal or common fate of a human being always takes place at a junction. Therefore, I will examine these terms, “ambiguous” (two ways) and “crossroads” (with its paronyms: meetings, encounters, chiasm), to show how in this story which is at the crossroads of civilizations and cultures, beyond the specific destiny of Samba Diallo, beyond the clash between the traditional Africa and the modern West, the very destiny and future of modernity is at stake.

In this text, the literary act, philosophy, and the mystical experience converge. The originality of the text can be seen in the extreme degree of reciprocal implication in a story in which philosophical thought and aesthetic creativity are directly linked to the metaphysical investigation from which they derive their thesis and which influence its development. The text does not say all this explicitly but illustrates it, allowing the reader to grasp directly a thought process, a discourse being developed and a speech being made and the narrative devices, systems of representation and figures of fiction deployed in the real time of the elaboration of that discourse.

Now that the West has extended to the entire world, what could be seen as its particular characteristic? How can *Ambiguous Adventure* be read as the analytical laboratory capable of rendering understandable and transcendental our commonality? My lecture will revolve around three main points. First, the narrative status and its ambiguity, and then the structural characteristics of a text which, according to Garnier, is a “contextual mediation,” and lastly I will try to show that this text is a novel of thoughts, an action of thoughts, and a thought with actions, a novel which makes you think.

### **1- An ambiguous narrative status:**

The action that is centered around the character Samba Diallo combines several types of

texts. It is an educational story which is also a collection of many successive discursive elements. The organization of experience which is expressed in the novel shows clearly that it is a formative novel which tells about the training of an individual throughout the adventures he is undergoing. The story integrates in the narrative sequence fragments of dialogues by a process which consists of intertwining, in the whole book, narrative elements and texts of dialogues, repeating constantly the narrative episodes with dialogued sequences, and inserting in the story fragments of foreign texts (letters, personal reflections).

The primary focus is ambiguous: indeed, it is a story narrated in the third person, but the point of view is very close to first person narration (one could try to write the story in the first person singular). From the opening of the novel, we can easily see that the most dominant point of view in the novel, the one through which we discover the reality, is that of the child (“that day, Thierno had beaten him again”). Our gaze becomes that of the child, meaning that the boundary between the first and the third person singular is blurred. It is also a complex story that combines narration and prayers that do not describe prayer, but foster a state of prayer, dialogues that invite reflection, internal debates, and scenes in which one is in a state where he is about to touch the ground. The novel also contains scenes of levitation, revelatory moments of ecstasy, and finally, episodes of martyrdom involving the body of a suffering child— a guilty body that must be punished for its failings.

These various texts form the framework of an unadorned but passionate style of writing, where dialogues of ideas and debates are in harmony with the loftiest spirituality. It is a story in which the most ordinary daily life co-exists with the most elevated spiritual realm.

## 2- **A contextualized meditation:**

(a) The problems of acculturation and the clash of civilizations are at the heart of the story, and they govern the dynamics of a text constructed around opposing poles. The story shows tension in vigorous contrasts and obvious oppositions. This binary distribution is felt in the representation of memorable scenes as well as in the conception of symbolic characters.

The technique which is based on the interdependence of two elements sets the main tone of a writing style which opposes prayer, contemplation, and religious fervor on the one hand to action, efficiency, and rigor on the other, weaving opposing semantic chains into networks throughout the entire text. The resulting creative energy and its dynamic originality derive from the skillful and meticulous organization of action around opposing paradigms. Dichotomy and antinomy structure the text in such a way as to show a central contradiction in the “Diallobé” environment (what what was once fulfillment, harmony) and the French reality (there, what the hero has now become: emptiness, nothingness and a facade).

The story strikingly illustrates what Lukacs calls a problematic character who has lost the collective life and is confronted with his own fate, and who sees solidarity giving way to individualism, the sacred to the rational, and security to anxiety and anguish. It is as though the story wants to multiply this scenario through an extraordinary thematic and structural homothety, a world of rupture replacing a world of harmony and homogeneity, a lost universe reduced to mere nostalgia. The same rigor and the same reduction to the essential are found in the elaboration of characters.

(b) Symbolic characters and emblematic sequences: The King, the Fool, the Master, and the Royal Lady are, according to Vincent Monteil, like pawns in a chess game. They are speaking creatures with silhouettes, attitudes, and attributes which make it possible to some extent to identify them.

The novel's "dramatis personae" is composed of quasi-mythical characters. It is about real people derived from a personal experience which is purified, according to the principle of bare essentials. The body movements, the aristocratic bearing, and the words and gestures are to be understood in their symbolic meaning. They are quintessential characters, individuals that have become hyperbolically themselves, deprived of daily triteness, so that they could be found again in their own distinctive features. They are characters that equal, through their power of suggestion, legendary beings (understood in the etymological sense of legendary), less real persons rather than imaginary prototypes.

It is the same for the memorable scenes (such as the Night of the Quran and the scene at dusk), that are veritable scenes to be performed (as Blanchot put it), unforgettable scenes that make their own furrow in one's mind and invest in us something at once obvious and unconscious and that inform our collective imagination. The creation of characters and scenes conform to an ultimate global logic: the boundaries are pushed to the limit. The story thus becomes allegorical: banishing borders and multiplying implications. That is why in this narration by which Islam has vigorously entered in the African novel, according to Gourdeau, paradoxically, the mosque is physically absent, but what is important is the interior rites. Characters, setting and scenes are created as pedagogical representations.

### 3- **A novel of thought:**

The moments of philosophical exchange are consubstantial with the narrative development; the "princess adorned with rings" complains about the "unending and fanatical debates." The meaning of the dialogues is found in their actual performance. It is about moving incessantly from concept to concept, constantly preventing us from lingering on any one point. The manipulation of excessive behavior where conflicts and conceptual detours arise creates an organized flurry of arguments and questions, culminating in a state of permanent indecision.

These dialogues have a strange status as they are totally dependent upon the narration, yet manage to preserve an interrogative dimension within their very representation, revealing the reflective process at the heart of the novel. The aim is to vigorously refocus the attention of the reader/listener, between the already-said and the not-yet-heard, then to force him to turn his mind and awareness to open interrogations rather than confine them in the obvious. The dialogues (prayer/work/communism/religion/ Cartesianism/spirituality) unceasingly explore points of view, examine the interstices that partially reveal them, implicating oneself in areas of division. These dialogues, remarkable crucibles of thought and mirrors of major contemporary issues, are powerful incentives to think further and deeper. It is in this ethic of dialogue by which the text interjects us into the most intimate creation of meaning that the story opens the philosopher's ear to the novel's knowledge and comes full circle with philosophy.

## MEANINGS

What does it mean, in a day when technology and science reign and blanket the entire world with their conquests and discoveries, to superimpose two antagonistic visions—one material, the other spiritual? And this is all encompassed in the same novel.

Cheikh Hamidou Kane's novel proposes a sort of "recto/verso" strategy forcing us to juxtapose and read simultaneously two realities, equally antagonistic and necessary: progressive rationalism and Sufi idealism, the arid yet unavoidable empire of technology and science and the sense of spirituality so passionately proposed yet universally threatened. The text thus proposes a mechanism to exclude exclusion; neither of these two realities that seek to mutually exclude each other is destined for extinction. The technoscientific impact in spite of its negative aspect is also a must; the sense of spirituality, strongly shown, is also threatened everywhere.

The spiritual horizon presented as an absolute is also gradually disappearing and is indeed glorified because of this very threat of extinction; thus, it is seen as the value without which humanity would revert to outrageous behavior. The destruction of one's spiritual roots leads the characters (Samba Diallo, the fool) to madness, violence and death. Concerning grief, Lacan indicates that the loved one is lost but the loss itself is never lost.

The end of the novel, conferring upon the fictional word a sort of renewed fulfillment, is the most powerful exhortation to reject the nihilism to which we seem condemned. In presenting opposing visions of the world, the novel does not propose the choice of one over the other, but rather, it proposes that we situate our human condition in the very interstice of their relation. The novelistic form, informed and even consumed by this mystical temptation, urges each one to free himself from the impasse of nihilism by plumbing his depths to find the path of perfection to re-discovering the lost bonds with the universe. The novel places each reader at a crossroads and the very meaning of the work is found in this chiasm: neither the one alone nor the other alone, nor the one without the other. Our collective fate is thus placed in our hands and it is in the perspective of a destiny belonging to each one and it is ever reaffirmed that the novel proposes the outline of an affirmative solution.

## Conclusion

This work, that established itself as a classic from the time it came out and is destined to last, addresses the main contradictions of our time. A mirror of a modernity that encompasses North and South, this novel takes on, through fiction, the questions about our collective future. It is a moral adventure that allows us to better understand the profound stakes of this era, so as to better reconstruct ourselves. It is up to each reader to rely on this work, this ambiguous adventure between two realities that meet and part, the adventure of dialogue, in order to renew his hunger and thirst—since one can never have his fill of love.