

Representations and Transformations in the Fiction of Kojo Laing: The "Language of Authentic Being" Revisited*

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In a recent article in this journal, Francis Ngaboh-Smart presented an interpretation of Kojo Laing's novel, *Major Gentl and the Achimota Wars* as a representation of African identity in the modern context of faceless transnational technology. In doing so he claimed to take serious issue with some of my own statements on Laing's use of language. The following remarks respond to some of the points he raised.

In that article, Ngaboh-Smart remarked (with reference to an earlier article of mine) that "... by saying that Laing's work is concerned with the articulation of an "authentic experience," Dakubu presents Laing as yet re-accentuating his precursors' modernist construction of postcolonial identity, for Dakubu's notion of "authenticity" will probably not make sense to us if we do not believe in the enormous emphasis on subjectivity in modern culture" (72). I confess I do not entirely understand this statement, but he is quite right about subjectivity, for the informing spirit behind Laing's literary enterprise is nothing if not subjective. There also seems to be some confusion here concerning the application of the psychoanalytic concept of "authenticity" propounded by the Scottish psychiatrist R. D. Laing (no relation to the novelist), which has nothing directly to do with specifically African identity, let alone the use of African languages, and everything to do with strict honesty and openness in communication at all levels in any language, which means above all the displacement of cliché and stereotypical categories of thought. The necessity of a revolution in communication is indisputably a major concern of Kojo Laing's poetry and of especially the first of his novels, *Search Sweet*

*Reference: Francis Ngaboh-Smart, "Science and the Re-Representation of African Identity in *Major Gentl and the Achimota Wars*," *Connotations* 7.1 (1997/98): 58-79.

Country. It is not quite clear, furthermore, just how Ngaboh-Smart construes the technical use of the term "concrete" in connection with the Concrete Poetry movement in Scotland; Kojo Laing's relationship with this movement, like his reading of R. D. Laing, is a matter of historical record. However one may wish to analyze what this has actually meant in practice, the "concrete" in this context is not to be confounded with the realistic or "mimetic," as Ngaboh-Smart seems close to doing (73).

Such considerations are in any case perhaps irrelevant to the novel under discussion, K. Laing's third, *Major Gentl and the Achimota Wars*. The two articles by myself that Ngaboh-Smart referred to were both written, and one was published, well before the appearance of *Major Gentl and the Achimota Wars*, and both dealt only with K. Laing's early poetry and first novel. But the language of *Major Gentl* is indeed different, and different moreover in ways that seem to be intimately related to the different concerns and emphases of the later novel. It is worth considering how the language has changed, in relation to the ways in which it has not changed, and what implications this may have for Laing's literary-linguistic program.

One thing that has not changed is the close textual fabric. A major problem in reading Kojo Laing is that his thick and highly expressive language of imagery makes very few concessions to the reader's previous literary experience. The works of most writers quite naturally show continuities of theme and style, among themselves and in relation to other literary texts. Intertextuality as engagement with a literary tradition of any sort, while not of course entirely irrelevant (hence our references to R. D. Laing and Concrete Poetry) is not, I suggest, of central importance to critical interpretation of Kojo Laing. Ngaboh-Smart feels that his "language, as a feat of style, becomes an outrage on the readers' understanding of phenomena" (71). Characteristically, that is, K. Laing continually reworks and resets extremely original figures and the words that clothe them, constructing and reconstructing an intertextuality of his own, and demanding his reader's acquiescence in its apparently eccentric terms. In appropriating the languages of the world at all levels of popular speech, integrated to create a subversive variety of standard English, he plays a double game of solidarity and domination with his audience,

forcing readings that start afresh from words and sensory (not only or even primarily visual) experience, unconstrained by ready-made notions of the relations between signifiers and what they signify (Ngaboh-Smart 71). This is not because such relations do not exist, or because the images are intended to disorient the reader, but because to reach the truth, to allow the kind of communication that is the precondition for personal and national wholeness, the language must be made new.

In his poetry before 1980 Laing built up a literary language that owes relatively little to other literary texts, and continually reappears in his novels, so that for maximum appreciation the reader must be continually aware of the larger corpus. This is most obviously true of the two earlier novels, but on close inspection it also applies to *Major Gentl and the Achimota Wars*. Much of the apparent outrageousness of language and image disappears when, for example, we realize that the literal disappearance of most of Ghana in *Major Gentl*, and the necessity of eventually finding it, repeats in a more drastic form the quest for national wholeness of *Search Sweet Country*. The extreme strangeness of equating Nana Mai Grandmother Bomb's former husbands with doors dissipates, although the image is not simplified, when one recalls the church door of the poem "Godsdoor" (*Godhorse*), with its multiple functions as protector, rebel and observer.

This closed intertextuality is situated moreover in a universe of discourse that even to the casual Ghanaian reader is almost hermetic, even though entirely public, because it presumes an intimate knowledge of very many details of southern Ghanaian life and speech, and their recall in contexts that at first may seem highly unusual. His use of personal names provides relatively simple examples. Common Ghanaian day names aside, many of the characters' names are meaningful, but they are not generally included in the glossaries of non-standard English words provided, and even if they were the glosses might not be particularly revealing. One cannot really appreciate the visual and tactile image intended in "Abomu gave a scowl worthy of the stew of his name" (*Major Gentl* 8) unless one knows that *abomu* is indeed the name of a kind of stew in Twi, with a certain kind of surface texture, colour and smell. Similarly, it is important to the appreciation of the character of Nana Mai Grandmother Bomb to

know that in Akan and Ga traditional courts, the elders retire to "consult the old woman," in the popular expression, before giving final judgment. It is part of the character of the politically ambitious businessman, Pogo Alonka Forr, that *alonka* is a common market measure. Indeed, a thoroughly informed reading of any of Laing's novels would seem to require annotation on a massive scale, at least as extensive as has been devoted to *Finnegan's Wake*. Judgements of the presence or absence of "deep meaning" should therefore be made with great caution.

In Dakubu (1993) several prominent characteristics of Laing's language as displayed in *Search Sweet Country* were discussed. These included: multilingualism, or the use of words from many languages (most listed in a glossary provided); an essentially demotic speech style in the mouths of the characters; a great deal of phonetic patterning, particularly alliteration; linking or chaining of clauses and sentences by repetition of words, and the extensive use of balanced images, expressed in balanced clauses, often employing systems or paradigms of contrasting words and expressions. In *Major Gentl and the Achimota Wars*, the vocabulary is still highly multilingual, and the characters' speech is still evocative of popular speech, but the other features, the stylistic devices of patterning, linkage and balance, so closely related to the style of his earlier poetry, have gone.¹ I suggest that this is no coincidence. *Major Gentl* is a far angrier novel than either *Search Sweet Country* or *Woman of the Aeroplanes*. The dreadful imbalance between the rich nations and the poor, the powerful and the powerless, is now at the forefront. A diction that both expresses and is linguistically based on balance, so that balance and equality in the medium is a symbol of balance and equality in the world of the novel, is therefore ruled out.

In Laing's earlier novels, language is very much part of the subject matter, for authenticity in communication, among individuals and in society, is seen as a large part of the problem, and a transformation of language is at the core of the solution. The change in diction was already in progress in Laing's second novel, *Woman of the Aeroplanes*, in what Deandrea refers to as his "increasingly ingenious style" (88), compared to the "utter lyricality of the language" of *Search Sweet Country* (68), and he relates this to the movement outward in the characters' attempts to

reconcile the modern and the traditional (74). In *Major Gentl and the Achimota Wars*, however, the problem is much worse. The anonymity of "the bosses abroad" (7) has changed the quality of the struggle, from a dialogue framed as interior to the country, Ghana, (*Search Sweet Country*) or a dialogue between North and South in which individuals and cultures recognize a common humanity and both parties can interact fruitfully as equals (*Woman of the Aeroplanes*) to a battle with an impersonal, invisible enemy with whom there is no possibility of real human communication. Bad communication is still at the root of the problem, but it is not at all clear, now, that language can provide the answer.

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NOTE

¹A comparable change may also be observed in his post-1980 poetry. However a discussion of the wider motivations for this change is beyond the scope of this paper.

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