

Conservative Aesthetics and Radical Politics in the Early Work of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o

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When examining writing careers lasting more than five decades, scholars rarely agree on the approach to division of an *oeuvre* into clear and distinct phases. However, in the case of the celebrated Kenyan novelist, playwright, and essayist Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, critical views of his thinking and writing have remained remarkably consistent over the last several decades. Conventional wisdom regarding Ngũgĩ has it that the story of his development is one of increasing political and aesthetic radicalization over time. Beginning as an author grounded in conventional Western aesthetics and unthreatening liberal humanist politics, the argument runs, Ngũgĩ has transformed himself into a stridently bellicose opponent of Western neo-colonialism and national corruption—a celebrated figure whose aesthetically innovative and politically disruptive writings have taken provocative aim at powerful opponents both internationally and in his native Kenya. The marked transformation in Ngũgĩ's reputation is perhaps unsurprising, given some well-known biographical details: Ngũgĩ famously called for the abolition of traditional English departments in African universities at the same time as he was becoming a highly regarded producer of English literature, rejected his Christian name in favour of a traditional Gikuyu one, shifted his language of literary expression from English to Gikuyu, and fell afoul of the Kenyan government for his involvement in collaborative grassroots theatre. He is therefore frequently perceived to have become increasingly challenging for, and even perhaps confrontational toward, the liberal humanist Western reading public with whom the author was once believed to share common aesthetic and political grounds.

Given the changes in Ngũgĩ's personal and professional life, it is little surprise that academic appraisals of his work have sought and found evidence of correspondingly increased radicalism in his writings. David Cook and Michael Okenimkpe established the prevailing critical paradigm concerning the coalescence of Ngũgĩ's politics and his aesthetics in their 1983 monograph. In it, they argued for the division of his writing into three phases: an early humanist-moralist phase coinciding with his academic immersion in a predominately Western literary canon, an

intermediate period of “maturing vision” that shows the influence of the author’s readings in a range of Marxist and other revolutionary texts, and a mature final phase that exhibits the markings of “corrosive disillusionment” (13) regarding a putatively postcolonial Kenya that was becoming increasingly neocolonial. From such a standpoint, the trajectory of Ngũgĩ’s thought takes him from a critical-yet-hopeful engagement with colonialism’s legacy from within the wings of an authorized tradition of largely Western progressivism to an endpoint at which the capacity for Western-inspired liberation politics and aesthetics to effect change in a neocolonial setting comes seriously into question.

This view of the author’s development has been further expanded and nuanced in subsequent criticism. Oliver Lovesey, for instance, sees the story of Ngũgĩ’s development as one of aesthetic transformation from an early classical realist aesthetic, to an intermediary socialist realism, to a final stage that Lovesey dubs Ngũgĩ’s “Mau Mau” aesthetic, wherein the English language and Western-influenced modes of writing alike are abandoned in favour of Gikuyu expression and narrative paradigms. In a similar vein, F. Odun Balogun contends that, aesthetically, Ngũgĩ evolves “from being an imitator to becoming an avant-garde experimentalist, a pacesetter” (114); the (re)turn to Gikuyu linguistic and narrative paradigms that might have signalled a conservative nostalgia in another author’s work becomes, in Ngũgĩ, an innovative synthesis of aesthetics rooted in local traditions and global anti-colonial politics. What is implicit in Lovesey’s and Balogun’s visions is broad agreement with the outlook of Cook and Okenimkpe: politically and aesthetically, the story of Ngũgĩ’s writing career is one of increasing radicalization, first within Western aesthetic and political radical traditions, and later beyond and against those traditions. For most critics, the developments in the author’s writing and thinking are dramatic. As Lovesey puts it, the “liberal, ameliorative political stance of most of Ngũgĩ’s writing in the first part of his career is striking given the radical shift in his later work” (22). Continuing in this vein, it is worth noting that if the first decade of Ngũgĩ’s literary output is characterized by its “broadly liberal/humanist outlook” (Williams 57), then the author’s “mature work suggests a confident break with his literary past” (Gikandi 2). Putting it even more baldly, Elleke Boehmer writes that after the 1960s, Ngũgĩ’s writing “turned revolutionary” (144). What I hope has become clear is the *consistency* of critical perception when it comes to Ngũgĩ’s development: against the view of late Ngũgĩ as a pacesetter in postcolonial radicalism,¹ a corollary view of early Ngũgĩ as politically and aesthetically tame is almost automatic and unquestioned in contemporary scholarship.

This reading of Ngũgĩ’s development fits well with conventional views of the interrelation of form and content: it no doubt both makes

sense and is compelling to suggest that Ngũgĩ's ability to depart from the more conservative conjunctions of Westernized culture and politics is intimately bound up with the abandonment of Occidental formal norms. The "use of the fabular, the grotesque and the supernatural" in Ngũgĩ's later fiction's "deployment of popular and traditional elements of African culture" (Williams 113) cannot but be seen as evidence of the author's attempt to find the artistic forms capable of engendering his mature political content. Nowhere is the correspondence of form and content more evident, however, than in Ngũgĩ's decision, after *Petals of Blood* (1977), to write all his fiction and drama in Gikuyu, which he explained by asserting that "[l]anguage carries culture, and culture carries, particularly through orature and literature, the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the world" (*Decolonising the Mind* 16). The implication to be carried from Ngũgĩ's much-quoted assertion is that, for even the author himself, his ability to produce radically anti-colonial content is dependent upon finding its linguistic and aesthetic equivalents. If both the English language and the aesthetic forms brought to Kenya are accompanied by "bourgeois ideologies inherited from the colonial school" (Gikandi 14) that stand at odds with the mature Ngũgĩ's commitment to the project of decolonization, it then takes a short leap in logic to perceive the later Ngũgĩ, at his ostensibly least Western point aesthetically, as the most radical, authentically postcolonial Ngũgĩ.

As convincing as such reasoning appears to be, does aesthetic conservatism really preclude political radicalism? Can it truly be said that writings which bear the hallmarks of a colonial literary apprenticeship, such as Ngũgĩ's earliest works, must inevitably be beholden to a colonialist ideology, implicit or otherwise? Is Ngũgĩ's development as a writer proof that Audre Lorde was correct in asserting that the master's tools can never dismantle the master's house? Despite appearances that may suggest affirmative answers to these questions, Ngũgĩ's writings reveal the answer to all of them ought to be a resounding *no*. It is my contention here that as compelling as such a schematic chronological division of Ngũgĩ's *oeuvre* into more conservative and more radical phases might be, it belies a more complicated truth in which Ngũgĩ did not become progressively radical in such discrete stages. Rather, the radicalism that is typically seen as characteristic of the later Ngũgĩ is very much evident, even if in more hesitant and ambivalent forms, from the author's earliest writings.

"The Martyr," a story included in Ngũgĩ's 1975 collection *Secret Lives* but written much earlier, near the beginning of his writing career, and which might be seen as a prototype for the early novel *Weep Not, Child* (Gikandi 78), nicely illustrates the argument I make here. Focusing

on the earliest days of the outbreak of anti-colonial violence, it is chronologically Ngũgĩ's "first story to address the [Mau Mau] Emergency" (Lovesey 25). Given the prevailing notions concerning the author's development, "The Martyr" ought to be politically the least radical of Ngũgĩ's works in terms of what it has to say about a period in Kenyan history that even today remains "hotly contested" (Lovesey 9). To be sure, "The Martyr" is formally unadventurous: the story, essentially linear in plot and calmly narrated in the third person, is not only written in English but also in an English that is uninflected with any local Kenyan cadences and which avoids clear partisan affiliations; exceedingly well-wrought, with an almost Chekhovian command of unwasted detail, the story is infused with persistent ironies that no doubt appealed to (and took guidance from) the prevailing New Critical orthodoxies that Ngũgĩ would certainly have come into contact with as a student of English literature going to university in East Africa in the 1960s. Insofar as the story initially seems better suited to the expression of apolitical despair at the colonial situation it depicts than to being the vehicle for the articulation of a strident anti-colonial perspective, it would appear to lend support to the notion of a clear division between the author's younger and older, more revolutionary selves. Moreover, "The Martyr" shows no signs of its author's later "discovery of Marxism and its language of class consciousness and ideological struggle," which "provided him with the appropriate language for understanding the Kenyan past" (Gikandi 7). In place of the later Ngũgĩ's ability to draw on Marxist concepts and language to determine the frame through which to view Kenya's present and past, "The Martyr," for Gikandi, exhibits evidence of "the emergence of a narrative method trapped in the author's desire to represent colonial 'terror' in the 'civil' language of English fiction" (80). Such a reading of Ngũgĩ being *trapped* by the conventions of literary civility lends credence to viewing the author's youthful output as distinctly less radical; however, contrary to Gikandi's sense of Ngũgĩ's entrapment and also in contrast to Lovesey's assertion that "The Martyr" can be characterized by "the liberalism of [its] story" (25), there are indications that the author was already finding ways to articulate a more radical political position than is often recognized, even if, in aesthetic terms, the story does display the conservative hallmarks of a period of artistic apprenticeship. Though the story displays the aesthetic conservatism that is typically best suited to the politics of moral humanism for which Ngũgĩ's early writings are known, the artistically imitative approach taken in the story ironically emphasizes its radical conclusions concerning anti-colonial violence, generally, and the legacy of Mau Mau in Kenya, specifically.

That Ngũgĩ, as a young author writing in an African literary context in which the teaching and valuation of English-language literature

was defined by a pronounced stodginess, would even choose to take up the topic of Mau Mau at the beginning of his writing career is itself a noteworthy comment on his early willingness to push the boundaries of what was sayable in fiction. As Oliver Lovesey points out, the history of the Mau Mau Emergency in Kenya still continues to be “fought over by various camps of historians, politicians, and cultural intellectuals” (9). In the context of the early 1960s, with the defeat of Mau Mau less than a decade removed and, as one of Ngũgĩ’s characters notes in *A Grain of Wheat*, with the leadership of a newly independent Kenya encouraging Kenyans to “bury the past” (66), the boldness of Ngũgĩ’s choice of subject matter at the time would surely have been difficult for readers to miss.

Boldness regarding the historical and political meaning of Mau Mau is, of course, characteristic of Ngũgĩ’s wider *oeuvre*, in which he has emerged as one of the most important interpreters of Mau Mau, its legacy of anti-colonial resistance in Kenya, and its role in the making of the modern Kenyan state. If W.O. Maloba is correct to sum up the effect of Ngũgĩ’s writings on Mau Mau as involving the group’s “reinvention...as a socialist liberation movement out to expel imperialism (in all its facets) from Kenya” (69), such an interpretation is the product of a lifetime of thinking and writing and reflects the author’s “belief that art can be marshaled as a weapon for revolution” (Maloba 74). What makes “The Martyr” of interest, in the context of the image of Mau Mau created in the later works, is that the text presents readers with a story in which the author has not yet arrived at a mature interpretation of Mau Mau and in which he at first glance appears unready to marshal his story in service to any kind of revolutionary agenda; however, viewing “The Martyr” and its treatment of the early Emergency period through the lens of the later Ngũgĩ’s ideological certainties fails to do justice to the story on its own terms. Moreover, doing so leaves the critic and reader blind to how the story does not ask us to *begin* our reading journey from a position of assumed political radicalism but, rather, through its pervasive mobilization of ironies, invites the reader’s epiphanic *arrival* at the realization of the necessity of anti-colonial violence in Kenya. In contrast with later works that, because of the mature author’s fame and reputation, have the freedom to announce their politics from the outset, “The Martyr,” written by a young, unknown author with no reputation to speak of, depends on its reader coming to realize the political implications of its tale, and, as I will argue shortly, it is in this moment of insight that the young Ngũgĩ’s radicalism shines through.

At its heart, “The Martyr,” set in 1952 at the onset of the Mau Mau uprising, is a story about the dramatic and peculiar decisions that the colonial situation forces upon characters who are in so many ways unexceptional people. The story’s two primary characters – Mrs. Hill, the

wealthy white widow who owns a “remote, lonely house built on a hill” (39) and Njoroge, Mrs. Hill’s African houseboy, on whose family’s ancestral land Mrs. Hill’s house stands – are faced with drastic, morally charged choices about how to act in a context in which, according to Lovesey, “a tragic muddle of mixed perceptions, limited points of view, and missed opportunities for mutual cultural understanding” abound (25). At some level, Lovesey’s description both accurately reflects what goes on in “The Martyr” and helps illustrate why some readers might wrongly, in my opinion, perceive the story’s politics as fundamentally liberal in nature: after all, a story about mixed perceptions and missed opportunities could theoretically be written by almost anyone – from a sympathetic European moved to pity by a colonial situation plagued by violence to a middle-class African educated in and morally shaped by colonial schools – and, as such, seems far removed from the perspective of the mature Ngũgĩ, whose thinking had come to be shaped by figures such as C.L.R. James and Frantz Fanon and who completed the later *Petals of Blood* under the auspices of the Soviet Writers’ Union.

The plot of “The Martyr” is relatively straightforward. It begins with the report of the murder of two prominent settlers, Mr. and Mrs. Garstone, at the hands of “unknown gangsters” (39). The story of the Garstones’ deaths figures prominently on “the front pages of the daily papers and...in the Radio Newsreel” (39). Mrs. Hill, whose husband is dead when the story begins and whose children are “getting their education at ‘Home’” (39), crucially begins the story in a position of physical and social isolation: the fact that she “was much respected by the others if not liked by all” (39) encapsulates the alienated condition of the colonial “liberal, progressive type” (40) that she represents. As an alienated liberal settler, she can find no true friends either amongst her less liberal fellow settlers or amongst those she condescendingly refers to as her “‘boys’” (40). Mrs. Hill, with no recourse but to socialize with those who despise and envy her, discusses the news of the Garstones with her fellow settlers, Mrs. Hardy and Mrs. Smiles, the latter of whom, on seeing Njoroge, plants in Mrs. Hill’s head the idea that Njoroge is “[q]uite the innocent flower but the serpent under it” (41), sowing doubts in Mrs. Hill’s mind as to the reliability of her own houseboy. While it turns out that Mrs. Hill’s easy faith that her so-called boys “all love [her]” (40) is wrong – when the story commences, Njoroge “hate[s] settlers...[and] their hypocrisy and complacency” (43) and looks forward to Mrs. Hill’s death with “grim satisfaction” (44) – as the story nears its climax, Njoroge undergoes an epiphany during which, upon remembering Mrs. Hill’s grief at the death of her husband in which “her settlerism had been shorn off” (45), he ultimately realizes that he cannot kill a wife and mother and goes to warn his employer of her impending death. Nearly simultaneously,

Mrs. Hill also undergoes an epiphany of her own when she is surprised to realize that although she “had lived with [Njoroge] so long...she had [never] thought of him as a man with a family,” having “always seen him as a servant” (47). Mrs. Hill recognizes her own lack of knowledge about Njoroge as “an omission, something to be righted in the future” (47), but, tragically, she never gets the chance to transform this moment of hopeful potential into lived reality. Hearing Njoroge at her door, with the unsettling knowledge in her mind that it was the Garstones’ own houseboy who had “knocked at their door and urgently asked them to open” it for their killers (41), Mrs. Hill acts decisively. Using her late husband’s pistol, the panicked settler fatally shoots Njoroge, unaware, as the narrator laconically observes, that she “had in fact killed her saviour” (47). In this climactic moment, Mrs. Hill undergoes the transformation Fanon suggests is common to periods of decolonization, as she stops being “crushed” by her “nonessential state” and becomes one of history’s “privileged actor[s], captured in a virtually grandiose fashion by the spotlight of History” (2). The day after Mrs. Hill shoots Njoroge, her story appears in the papers, where it is reported that a single European woman fought off a gang “fifty strong” in a display of “bravery unknown” (47), transforming the otherwise ordinary woman into a potent symbol of the colonizers’ resolve.

“The Martyr” is thus a story that at first glance is a deceptively simple tale of misunderstanding, of bigotry, and of seemingly unnecessary death, one that effectively leaves its readers with a series of haunting “*What if?*” questions: What if Mrs. Hill had possessed the resources – internal, familial, or social – to resist Mrs. Smiles’s bigoted fearmongering? What if Njoroge and Mrs. Hill had arrived at their mutual epiphanies early enough to pre-empt the moment of climax? What if, instead of adding fuel to the conflagration overtaking colonial Kenya by suggesting that Mrs. Hill had bravely fought off a gang “fifty strong” (47), the papers’ reports shed a truer light on Njoroge’s good intentions and Mrs. Hill’s true motivations? What if – as Njoroge himself wishes when he realizes that he cannot bring himself to see Mrs. Hill killed even though he believes she will always remain “a patronizing, complacent woman” (45) – there had “never been injustices” (45) in Kenya? What if no one in this story had to die?

It is likely because the story may prompt such increasingly desperate hypotheticals that critics have been inclined to see in “The Martyr” a form of vaguely liberal pessimism wherein Ngũgĩ can only diagnose the ills of colonial Kenya without proposing solutions. Such a reading, however, misses the import of what Ngũgĩ’s story actually suggests in inviting such utopian hypotheticals: to believe that Mrs. Hill could resist her fears, to believe that either Mrs. Hill or Njoroge could have been transformed by epiphanic insight any sooner, to believe that colonial media could separate

its reporting from the ideological defense of the colonial presence, to believe the English could have colonized Kenya without injustices, to believe that the story could conclude with Mrs. Hill and Njoroge both living in perpetual and untroubled harmony is, for Ngũgĩ, radically to misunderstand the colonial situation in Kenya in the 1950s. It is to make Ngũgĩ's resolutely realist narrative something that it is not: a work of disengaged, apolitical fantasy.

"The Martyr" is—indeed must be—a poignant tale. It evokes a more hopeful *dénouement* than it delivers, and it is within the gap between the seeming optimism of the paired epiphanies and the crushingly pessimistic conclusion of the story in which Mrs. Smiles is left feeling "triumphant" (48) and validated in her worldview that "[a]ll of [the natives] should be whipped" (48) that the tragic dimensions of the text become clear. To some degree, Ngũgĩ's story is almost Greek in its ability to suggest that its central tragedy is fated. But, in the case of "The Martyr," rather than fate being the product of supernatural forces, it is instead the deterministic product of the social conditions captured within the story's realism. Though limited to only four representative characters, the story reveals much about the complexity of life in Kenya during the early days of the Emergency, and Ngũgĩ is careful that no early detail – from the death of Mrs. Hill's husband, which leaves Mrs. Hill in possession of his pistol, to her children's absence, to the role of the houseboy in what happens to the Garstones – fails to play a pivotal role in the story's conclusion. Within the classic realist lens employed in this story, Mrs. Hill's isolation from fellow settlers is eminently believable: they are envious of the fact that she was "one of the earliest settlers [who] own[ed] a lot of land with big tea plantations sprawling across the country" (39) and resentful of her liberal certainty that "the natives were obedient at heart and *all* you need to do was to treat them kindly" (40). Her isolation from her fellow settlers is mirrored by her isolation from the native Kenyans, for whom she fulfilled her obligations of paternalistic benevolence by building "some brick quarters (*brick*, mind you)...[and] put[ting] up a school for the children," which is "more than most other settlers had the courage to do" (40, emphasis Ngũgĩ's). Far from earning the good will of servants such as Njoroge, Mrs. Hill's actions in building a house that Njoroge can "almost touch all the corners of...if one stretched one's arms wide" (44) earns her their understandable enmity. Thus, it becomes clear that the physical and social landscapes of the short story function both to explain (anti-)colonial violence and to justify the plans to eliminate Mrs. Hill that Njoroge's actions thwart. Mrs. Hill's physical and social isolation determines her recourse to violence at the end of the story: a product of natural, understandable fear, Mrs. Hill's shooting of Njoroge reveals the ultimate inconceivability of a colonial situation in which

anticolonial violence could be avoided and morally uncontaminated non-violence could be a route to political justice in Kenya.

If Njoroge's choice to save Mrs. Hill's life – which could alternately be understood as his choice *not* to subordinate his humanist identification with Mrs. Hill to his anti-colonial political commitment – is the defining decision in “The Martyr,” and is the most telling sign of Ngũgĩ's early radicalism, it helps to compare this story to that of another identically-named early protagonist in *Weep Not, Child*. This book is Ngũgĩ's better-known reckoning with Mau Mau from a similarly early point in his development. As with “The Martyr,” *Weep Not, Child* is, at first glance, easily assimilable to the dominant critical view regarding Ngũgĩ's early liberalism. A story that tracks Njoroge's development from being a boy for whom the promise of colonial education allows his “vision of childhood” to open onto a “bright future” (3) to someone “no longer” a child (146) who, by the novel's end, knows “that [his] tomorrow was an illusion” (145) after his family and dreams are torn apart during the Emergency, *Weep Not, Child* lends itself to being read in aesthetically familiar and politically conservative terms: at one level, it is the archetypal story of a young man whose dreams of self-improvement through education are swept away by conditions that precede him in origin and events that exceed him in scope. Viewing the novel with this frame in mind, it is Njoroge's ultimate and depressing self-discovery that he is at heart “a coward” (149) that matters most, with the conditions and events that give rise to this final revelation – namely, the dispossession of the Gikuyu from their lands and the resulting Mau Mau uprising – of secondary importance, relevant primarily as factors contributing to Njoroge's development. Such a view, of course, could only reinforce the view of the early Ngũgĩ as an author who had not yet become radicalized.

Yet, from the beginning of *Weep Not, Child*, there are signs that the perspective that would privilege a story of private development over one of communal conflict is closer to Njoroge than to Ngũgĩ. When Njoroge imagines his bright future, we are told that “He lived it *alone*” (3, emphasis mine). That the novel subsequently describes the racially bifurcated ridges of Kikuyuland in which “You could tell the land of the Black People because it was red, rough and sickly, while the land of the white settlers was green and was not lacerated into small strips” (6) is not a sign of the author's desire to create an exotic colonial background for his archetypal struggle between individual and community; rather, the narrative secondariness of the colonial context is arguably a reflection of Njoroge's privileging of the private over the political. Such a privileging remains in place near the novel's end, when Njoroge pleads with Mwhiki, whom he loves, to run away with him, telling her that “Kenya is no place for us” (146). When she refuses, explaining that “Our duty to other people

is our biggest responsibility” (146), her commitment to community is one which he cannot follow, and which leads him, in despair, to the brink of suicide. This most insular of acts is interrupted only by the voice of Njoroge’s mother, which sends him “trembling” (148) into her arms. That Njoroge’s final decisions in the novel move him further from the communal bonds that he might have shared and further towards increased states of guilt-ridden isolation is a sign that Ngũgĩ leaves him in a pitiable, but not pitied, condition of Fanonian non-essentiality. While critics such as James Ogude are probably correct to say that Ngũgĩ’s “earlier texts” force their readers “to grapple with the notion of nationalism and other related issues such as ethnicity and individualism” (6), it would be a mistake to neglect that, for characters who also grapple with such notions, such as Njoroge in *Weep Not, Child*, a descent into losing faith “in all the things he had earlier believed in, like wealth, power, education, religion” and “[e]ven love, his last hope” (147) is not so much a personal tragedy as a political abdication.

Writing about the later novel, *A Grain of Wheat* (1967), Brendon Nicholls observes that in it Ngũgĩ’s “fictional representation of Mau Mau reveals an extraordinary ambivalence towards Mau Mau violence” (86), an interpretation which Nicholls recognizes situates him adjacent to a “critical orthodoxy” on the novel that says its “residual sympathies with English liberalism lead it to exaggerate Mau Mau violence in the name of a flawed ideology of aesthetic balance” (85). Though Nicholls himself may not go so far as to equate the ambivalence toward violence he sees in the early Ngũgĩ with a straightforward liberalism, his identification of a central ambivalence in the fiction lends itself to a continued perception of the young author as someone for whom apolitical despair and distaste disrupt political commitment, and it is from such an interpretive perspective that I depart. Indeed, I argue, such ambivalence contributes directly to the early fiction’s somewhat reluctant radicalism: what becomes apparent in both *Weep Not, Child* and “The Martyr,” works written before Ngũgĩ’s most famous “crisis novel” (Nicholls 85) and which anticipate its balanced aesthetics, is that the characters’ and author’s shared awareness of the moral ambivalence that accompanies violent anti-colonial struggles does not in itself result in a liberal aesthetic that cripples a more radical politics.

If the Njoroge of *Weep Not, Child* signals Ngũgĩ’s distaste for a young protagonist who cannot join Mwihaki in “wait[ing] for a new day” (146), the adult Njoroge of “The Martyr” is also a protagonist unwilling to wait, in this case on the side while Mrs. Hill dies. In teaching “The Martyr,” primarily in junior English classes, I often ask my students to take a step back from our usual work of literary interpretation and to consider what happens in the story in more approachable terms. In

deciding to warn Mrs. Hill about the risk to her life, I ask, does Njoroge do the right thing? With predictable regularity, most students declare that, yes, Njoroge's decision is the right one. When I press for the rationale behind this near-consensus, the answers I get resemble some version of the following: Njoroge is properly obeying a moral obligation to save a human life, particularly when his actions appear to offer no immediate danger to him; by putting aside his *political* animosity towards a settler, he is doing what is *morally* right by protecting another human; finally, by seeing Mrs. Hill in gendered terms as a wife and mother, Njoroge upholds a chivalrous code of masculine conduct wherein the man forfeits his own life to guarantee a woman's survival. Such explanations are surely appealing to many students and readers, for they bring with them the twofold benefit of providing a form of emotional relief from a troubling tale and of allowing readers disinclined on moral grounds to accept the political legitimacy of non-state violence to remain firm in their beliefs.

But, as I explain to my students, Njoroge decides to warn Mrs. Hill without knowing that this decision will cost him his life. In one of the story's many pervasive ironies, Njoroge hears the "cry of the night bird" and concludes that, as always, it "portended death – death for Mrs. Hill" (44); therefore, it is not clear that Njoroge would make the same decision if he recognized the bird's cry as a portent of his own death. If Ngũgĩ had written a different story, one in which Njoroge's death were straightforwardly and unironically the product of the protagonist's informed and willing decision to die in place of Mrs. Hill, then it might be possible to believe that, for the author, Njoroge makes the correct choice. But this is decidedly *not* the story Ngũgĩ wrote. In "The Martyr," Njoroge acts in order to *save* a life. His intentions are quietly to perform an act of compassion towards a woman for whom he feels pity, not to become consequential by providing the colonial newspapers with ideological ammunition, not even by becoming – in the story's sole indication of a Mau Mau perspective – the titular martyr for the anti-colonial cause. After all it is worth noting that at the moment of his death, Njoroge is in the midst of betraying the movement by warning one of its targets of the threat to her life.

Contrary to Njoroge's intentions, however, he does not end up saving a life, but *exchanging* his own for that of his employer, and it is that detail which illustrates Ngũgĩ's most challenging point. In a story replete with ironies– from naming "a lean, middle-aged woman" with a "tough, determined nose and tight lips" Mrs. Smiles, to having Mrs. Hill's terrified murder of Njoroge publicly lauded as "bravery unknown" (47), to the titular martyr's death in apparent service to a cause that he, at least temporarily, does not subscribe to Ngũgĩ's final, and cruellest, irony lies in the revelation that an action can be at once *morally* right and *politically* so

very wrong. I share Brendon Nicholls's sense that in the end Njoroge "succumb[s] to a seductive mythology of the family as a realm somehow outside of politics" (80): recognizing Mrs. Hill as part of the wider human family to which Njoroge and she both belong, Njoroge ironically manages to free himself from one habit of thought inculcated by a colonial discourse that separates settlers from native at the same time as his assumption of a liberal humanist mindset hamstringing his desire to reclaim what has been taken from him. But I cannot agree with Nicholls when he claims that in "The Martyr" Ngũgĩ "resurrects the liberal humanist discourse that his fiction has exposed" (80), for it is liberal humanism that gets Njoroge killed and sets the movement back.

Indeed, while the story wraps up very quickly after Njoroge's death, there can be no doubt about the consequences of what has transpired. With none the wiser regarding his motivations, Njoroge's private act of human fellowship is transformed in the papers into a collective act of craven cowardice by a "gang fifty strong" (47), a case of misreporting that could only fuel settler hysteria and the depiction of Mau Mau – called "Freedom Boys" in the story (44) – as an illegitimate criminal element rather than an antagonistic political opponent to British interests in Kenya. The overtly ideological way in which the newspaper accounts of Mrs. Hill's actions vilify the nascent anti-colonial movement as the story concludes works to highlight the hidden bias in the colonial media at the story's outset: for most readers, myself included, the story's exposition, which contains early reports of the Garstones being murdered by "*gangsters*" (39, emphasis mine), draws no readerly challenge, as the apparently objective language of reportage obscures how the colonial media subtly reduces any and all anti-colonial resistance to criminal activity. In this way, Ngũgĩ suggests something similar to Fanon's argument that "[f]or the colonized subject, objectivity is always directed against him" (37). By the end of "The Martyr," however, even all pretences of objectivity have ceased, and the newspapers openly and actively become willing partners in the maintenance of colonial power, making heroes of the brave outnumbered settlers and craven villains of the unnamed movement.

As further signs that Njoroge's death has accomplished nothing, Mrs. Smiles and the ironically named South African transplant Mrs. Hardy, who "mostly found herself agreeing with any views that most approximated those of her husband and her race" (40), remain unchanged, implacable enemies of Kenyan self-determination, their formal rigidity contributing to Ngũgĩ's subtle assertion that justice could come to Kenya with their forcible expulsion. In contrast to her fellow settlers, Mrs. Hill is a dynamic character, but her change is not for the better as she goes from being a character who confidently, if patronizingly, asserts that "*all* [the settlers] needed was to treat [the natives] kindly" (40) to one whose final, tentative

words are “I don’t know” (48). Thus, by the conclusion of “The Martyr,” it is clear that the situation in Kenya is worse than it is at the beginning: a potential member of the fight for independence is dead, the newspapers are providing grist for the colonial mill, the opinions of bigoted and unlikable settlers have hardened, the kinder and more decent settlers are plagued by uncertainty, and the political uselessness of wishing, as Njoroge does, that “there had never been injustices” (45) becomes readily apparent, for such wishes manifest the truth of Fanon’s assertion that decolonization cannot be accomplished by “the wave of a magic wand, a natural cataclysm, or a gentlemen’s agreement” (2).

Accordingly, despite the absence of any overt statement of the radical anticolonial politics for which the mature Ngũgĩ is well known, “The Martyr” is ultimately unambiguous in its suggestion of the *necessity* of anticolonial violence. We cannot know if, like Njoroge, the young author inwardly wished that there had been no injustices in colonial Kenya, but it is clear that, unlike his protagonist, he was well aware of how politically useless such wishes were. In *Weep Not, Child*, Ngũgĩ similarly dismisses Njoroge’s persistent “Hope of a better day” as “He did not know that this faith in the future could be a form of escape from the reality of the present” (121). More than a name, the Njoroge of *Weep Not, Child* and the Njoroge of “The Martyr” share a politically escapist point of view that Ngũgĩ simply does not countenance. Ultimately, in “The Martyr,” Ngũgĩ reveals that the rightness of Mau Mau and its cause rests not in the moral villainy of settlers like Mrs. Hill. It is a testament to the author’s fairness that Mrs. Hill, regardless of the “complacency” for which Njoroge “had always resented her” (43), is no bigot, no one-dimensional villain; she is not even, in moral terms, a particularly bad person, as her commitment to kindness makes her a more sympathetic character than her fellow settlers. The justification of anticolonial violence, then, rests elsewhere, both in the futility of non-violence as evidenced by “the famous 1923 Nairobi Massacre when police fired on a people demonstrating peacefully for their rights” (43), killing Njoroge’s father, and in the impossibility of non-violently reclaiming the land, symbolized by the fig tree to which Njoroge’s father calls his son’s attention (43), that had previously belonged to Njoroge’s people.

“The Martyr” ends in violence and death, as Ngũgĩ insists it must, for it is the colonial situation itself that engenders violence in which either the Mrs. Hills or the Njoroges of Kenya will die. The paired epiphanies that allow Mrs. Hill and Njoroge to see each other as individuals rather than as members of a group brings a temporary measure of hope to the story, only to set up a point that the author may regret but of which he is certain: that until the colonized can subsume under a political commitment to anticolonial resistance their natural, moral humanistic sympathy for the

“liberal progressive type” of settler whose philosophy towards the colonized can be summed up in the words “*Treat them kindly*” (40), the “foreign elements that had displaced the true sons of the land” (43) will never leave willingly, and the dispossessed, whose “land had been taken away” (43) will never know justice.

In his seminal work on anticolonial violence, *The Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon asserts that “decolonization is *always* a violent event (1, emphasis mine). For the mature Ngũgĩ, such a statement might seem axiomatic, and critics would surely not be surprised to encounter a similar sentiment in the author’s later works. After all, the long-established pattern of critical interpretation has favoured a view of the author’s gradual radicalization over time, a narratively satisfying tale of an author’s personal transformation from being a purveyor of artfully crafted but politically tepid tales to a strident anticolonial champion of the local and global subaltern. But “The Martyr,” which seems to share Fanon’s point of view, is not one of Ngũgĩ’s later works, and, as I have attempted to show here, the political gap between the young writer and his mature counterpart may not be as wide as has been commonly assumed.

While it is certainly true that an early story such as “The Martyr” lacks the aesthetic boldness that characterizes the later Ngũgĩ’s writings, to see political tameness as the necessary consequence, in a colonial context, of a period of imitative aesthetic apprenticeship is to misperceive the more complicated truth of “The Martyr.” Though the story could not exist in its current form without its author’s colonial education in English literature, what makes the story noteworthy is the tension between its conventional – indeed, colonial – aesthetics and its radically anticolonial politics. Fittingly, in a story built on the ironic gaps between appearance and reality, the appearance of non-threatening conventionality belies the reality of a story that ultimately repudiates the moral decision of its protagonist to put aside anticolonial politics in the name of shared humanity. If “The Martyr” is, artistically speaking, a product of its author’s early immersion in the Leavisite Great Tradition, it confronts readers with the irony of its insistence that the purveyors of that tradition in Kenya ought to be unseated politically.

With this in mind, it may be worth revisiting the common understanding of the relation between Ngũgĩ’s very real turn to aesthetic innovation and his perceived turn to more politically radical positions. What is likely undeniable is that in aesthetic terms Ngũgĩ leaves behind what Ogude, speaking primarily of the politics of nationalism, calls “a derivative discourse” (6); it is fair to say that Ngũgĩ does not remain stagnant either aesthetically or in the specific shape of his political radicalism. But it seems to me that underlying the current consensus is the assumption that the linguistic and formal experimentation found in the

author's later works don't simply facilitate Ngũgĩ's transformation but are the grounds of its very possibility. Without the formal changes found in the later works, this argument runs, the more radical content simply cannot be articulated. The overlooked political radicalism that I contend "The Martyr" expresses means that this critical orthodoxy regarding Ngũgĩ's development needs to be rethought and reversed: it is only in the later works – from *Petals of Blood* to *Wizard of the Crow* – that Ngũgĩ's radically innovative forms finally catch up to his always already radical content.

Notes

1. It is not only in terms of his class-based nationalist politics that Ngũgĩ is seen to have turned a radical corner. The gender politics evident in the author's later works, especially *The Wizard of the Crow*, can also be said to have become "genuinely feminist" (Nicholls 51) over time: for Ndĩgĩrĩgĩ, *Wizard* "articulates the voices of the subaltern women of the postcolonial world in a remarkable fashion" (222). Such appraisals mark a significant shift in views of Ngũgĩ's gender politics (for which he has sometimes been taken to task) and contribute to the cumulative sense in which the author's trajectory has been towards greater radicalism.

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