

TEN YEARS' SENTENCES

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ALMOST EXACTLY TEN YEARS ago I was sitting in the study of our house in Vancouver, filled with the black celtic gloom which sometimes strikes. I had just received a letter from an American publisher which said, among other things, that their chief reader reported himself to be "only reasonably nauseated" by the lengthy interior monologues of the main character of my first novel, *This Side Jordan*. If I could see my way clear to reconsidering parts of the novel, they would be willing to look at it again. More revision, I thought, was out of the question. I had already rewritten half the book from scratch when I decided, after leaving Africa and getting a fresh perspective on colonial society, that I'd been unfair to the European characters. More work I couldn't face. A quick cup of hemlock would be easier. However, as we were a little short on hemlock just then, I got out the manuscript instead. I hadn't looked at it for months, and I saw to my consternation that the gent with the upset stomach was undeniably right in some ways. I managed to cut some of the more emotive prose (although not enough) and lived to bless him for his brutal criticism.

Ten years ago I was thirty-two years old and incredibly naive about writing and publishing. I had never talked with any publisher face-to-face. I knew only one other writer as a close friend — Adele Wiseman, whose letters throughout the years had heartened me. I had had one short story published in *Queen's Quarterly* a few years earlier, and had been encouraged by Malcolm Ross, the then-editor. I had also recently had a story published in *Prism*, and Ethel Wilson had graciously written to say she liked it — that meant more to me than I can ever express and began a friendship which has been one of the most valued in my life.

Can it only have been ten years ago? What has changed? Everything. The world and myself. In some ways it's been the most difficult and most interesting decade of my life, for almost everything I've written which has been publishable

has been written in these years. I've mysteriously managed to survive the writing of six more books, after that first novel. It's been said that for some writers the only thing worse than writing is not writing, and for me this is nearly true, for I don't write any more easily now than I did ten years ago. In fact, I write less easily, perhaps because as well as the attempt to connect directly with the character's wavelength, there is now also a kind of subconscious monitor which seeks to cut out the garbage (the totally irrelevant, and the "fine" oratorical writing which I have come to dislike more and more) before it is written rather than after, and the two selves sometimes work in uneasy harness. Simultaneously, of course, it's had its exhilaration, the feeling that comes when the writing is moving well, setting its own pace, finding its own form. I've learned a few things I needed to know — for example, that the best and worst time is when the writing is going on, not when the book is published, for by that point one is disconnected from that particular thing. I've learned that my anxieties and difficulties with writing aren't peculiar to myself — most writers have the same kind of demons and go on having them, as I do. (This seems so obvious as to be hardly worth stating, but I didn't really know it ten years ago.) I've lived for the past six years in England, and although I've picked up a lot of peripherally useful information about the publishing aspect of books and a sense of the writing going on in many countries, I don't really believe my being here has influenced my writing one way or another, certainly not to anything like the same extent as Africa once did.

This Side Jordan and the two other books I wrote which were set in Africa, *The Prophet's Camel Bell* and *The Tomorrow-Tamer*, were written out of the milieu of a rapidly ending colonialism and the emerging independence of African countries. They are not entirely hopeful books, nor do they, I think, ignore some of the inevitable casualties of social change, both African and European, but they do reflect the predominantly optimistic outlook of many Africans and many western liberals in the late 1950's and early 1960's. They were written by an outsider who experienced a seven years' love affair with a continent but who in the end had to remain in precisely that relationship, for it could never become the close involvement of family. The affair could be terminated — it was not basically for me a lifetime commitment, as it has been for some Europeans. On Africa's side, in its people's feelings towards me, it was, not unnaturally, little more than polite tolerance, for white liberals were not much more loved then than they are now, and with some considerable justification, as I discovered partly from listening to myself talking and partly in writing *This Side Jordan*. Another thing all my African writing had in common was that the three books were written by a person

who had lived in Africa in her late twenties and early thirties, and it all therefore bears the unmistakable mark of someone who is young and full of faith. In *This Side Jordan* (which I now find out-dated and superficial and yet somehow retrospectively touching) victory for the side of the angels is all but assured. Nathaniel holds up his newborn son, at the end, and says "Cross Jordan, Joshua." Jordan the mythical *could* be crossed; the dream-goal of the promised land *could* be achieved, if not in Nathaniel's lifetime, then in his son's. This was the prevailing spirit, not only of myself but of Africa at that time. Things have shifted considerably since then.

AFTER I CAME TO ENGLAND, in 1962, I picked up some of the threads of a relationship with Africa, although this time only as an observer and amateur friend, for I had had to abandon every *ism* except individualism and even that seemed a little creaky until the last syllable finally vanished of itself, leaving me ismless, which was just as well. I became extremely interested in contemporary African writing in English. It had seemed to me, a few years before, that if anything was now going to be written about Africa, it would have to be done from the inside by Africans themselves, and this was one reason I stopped writing anything with that setting. In fact, although I did not realize it then, already many young African writers were exploring their own backgrounds, their own societies and people. In a period of hiatus after finishing *A Jest Of God*, I read a great deal of contemporary Nigerian writing and even rashly went so far as to write a book of commentary on it. This book, called *Long Drums And Cannons* (the title is taken from a poem by Christopher Okigbo) I now feel refers to a period of history which is over — the fifteen years in which Nigerian writers created a kind of renaissance, drawing upon their cultural past and relating it to the present, seeking links with the ancestors and the old gods in order to discover who they themselves were. This exploration and discovery ended abruptly with the first massacre of the Ibo in the north, some two years ago. When Nigeria finally emerges from its present agony, it will be in some very different and as yet unpredictable form, and its writers may well find themselves having to enquire into themes they have so far hardly touched, such as the appalling grip on the human heart of tribalism in its hate aspect.

In London, in 1965, I got to know a few Nigerian writers when they visited this

country. I remember especially the times I met Christopher Okigbo, and how surprised I was at his external ebullience, his jazziness, so much in contrast to his deeply introverted poetry. And I remember, after having read Wole Soyinka's plays and seeing *The Road* performed here, having lunch with Wole and hearing him talk about the travelling theatre company he hoped to get going (he had already set up two theatres in Nigeria, the first contemporary theatres there). How much everything can change in a couple of years! Chris Okigbo is dead, fighting for Biafra. Wole Soyinka, undoubtedly the best writer that English-writing Africa has yet produced, and one of the best anywhere, has been in a Federal jail in Kaduna for more than a year. Chinua Achebe, that excellent and wise novelist, isn't writing for himself these days — he's doing journalism for Biafra, and all one can hope at the moment is that he manages to survive.

I guess I will always care about Africa. But the feeling I had, in everything I wrote about it, isn't the feeling I have now. It would be easy to convey the impression that I've become disillusioned with the entire continent, but this would be a distortion. What has happened, with Africa's upheavals, has been happening all over the world. Just as I feel that Canadians can't say *them* when we talk of America's disastrous and terrifying war in Vietnam, so I feel we can't say *them* of Africans. What one has come to see, in the last decade, is that tribalism is an inheritance of us all. Tribalism is not such a bad thing, if seen as the bond which an individual feels with his roots, his ancestors, his background. It may or may not be stultifying in a personal sense, but that is a problem each of us has to solve or not solve. Where tribalism becomes, to my mind, frighteningly dangerous is where the tribe — whatever it is, the Hausa, the Ibo, the Scots Presbyterians, the Daughters of the American Revolution, the in-group — is seen as "the people," the human beings, and the others, the un-tribe, are seen as sub-human. This is not Africa's problem alone; it is everyone's.

When I stopped writing about Africa and turned to the area of writing where I most wanted to be, my own people and background, I felt very hesitant. The character of Hagar had been in my mind for quite a while before I summoned enough nerve to begin the novel. Strangely enough, however, once I began *The Stone Angel*, it wrote itself more easily than anything I have ever done. I experienced the enormous pleasure of coming home in terms of idiom. With the African characters, I had to rely upon a not-too-bad ear for human speech, but in conceptual terms, where thoughts were concerned, I had no means of knowing whether I'd come within a mile of them or not. With Hagar, I had an upsurge of certainty. I wouldn't go to great lengths to defend the form of the novel, at this

distance, for I know its flaws. The flashback method is, I think, a little overworked in it, and I am not at all sure that flashbacks ought to be in chronological order, as I placed them in order to make it easier for the reader to follow Hagar's life. But where Hagar herself is concerned, I still believe she speaks and feels as she would have done. She speaks in the voice of someone of my grandparents' generation, but it is a voice I know and have always known. I feel ambiguous towards her, because I resent her authoritarian outlook, and yet I love her, too, for her battling.

I didn't know I was changing so much when I wrote *The Stone Angel*. I haven't ever decided beforehand on a theme for a novel (I know that where *This Side Jordan* is concerned, this statement sounds untrue, but it isn't). The individual characters come first, and I have often been halfway through something before I realized what the theme was. *The Stone Angel* fooled me even when I had finished writing it, for I imagined the theme was probably the same as in much of my African writing — the nature of freedom. This is partly true, but I see now that the emphasis by that time had altered. The world had changed; I had grown older. Perhaps I no longer believed so much in the promised land, even the promised land of one's own inner freedom. Perhaps an obsession with freedom is the persistent (thank God) dance of the young. With *The Stone Angel*, without my recognizing it at the time, the theme had changed to that of survival, the attempt of the personality to survive with some dignity, toting the load of excess mental baggage that everyone carries, until the moment of death.

I think (although I could be wrong) that this is more or less the theme of my last two novels as well. *A Jest of God*, as some critics have pointed out disapprovingly, is a very inturned novel. I recognize the limitations of a novel told in the first person and the present tense, from one viewpoint only, but it couldn't have been done any other way, for Rachel herself is a very inturned person. She tries to break the handcuffs of her own past, but she is self-perceptive enough to recognize that for her no freedom from the shackledom of the ancestors can be total. Her emergence from the tomb-like atmosphere of her extended childhood is a partial defeat — or, looked at in another way, a partial victory. She is no longer so much afraid of herself as she was. She is beginning to learn the rules of survival.

In *The Fire-Dwellers*, Stacey is Rachel's sister (don't ask me why; I don't know; she just is). Her boundaries are wider than Rachel's, for she is married and has four kids, so in everything she does she has to think of five other people. Who on earth, I asked myself when I began writing this novel, is going to be interested in reading about a middle-aged housewife, mother of four? Then I

thought, the hell with it — some of my best friends are middle-aged housewives; I'm one myself, but I deplore labels so let's just call one another by our proper names. I was fed up with the current fictional portraits of women of my generation — middle-aged mums either being presented as glossy magazine types, perfect, everloving and incontestably contented, or else as sinister and spiritually cannibalistic monsters determined only to destroy their men and kids by hypnotic means. I guess there are some women like the latter, but I don't happen to know any of them. There are no women like the former; they don't exist. Stacey had been in my mind for a long time — longer than Rachel, as a matter of fact. She's not particularly valiant (maybe she's an anti-heroine), but she's got some guts and some humour. In various ways she's Hagar's spiritual grand-daughter. When I finally got going at the novel, I experienced the same feeling I had had with *The Stone Angel*, only perhaps more so, because this time it was a question of writing really in my own idiom, the ways of speech and memory of my generation, those who were born in the 20's, were children in the dusty 30's, grew up during the last war. Stacey isn't in any sense myself or any other person except herself, but we know one another awfully well. She is concerned with survival, like Hagar and like Rachel, but in her case it involves living in an external world which she perceives as increasingly violent and indeed lunatic, and trying simultaneously within herself to accept middle age with its tricky ramifications, including the suspicion, not uncommon among her age-peers, that one was nicer, less corrupt and possibly even less stupid twenty years ago, this being, of course, not only a comprehension of reality but also a mirage induced by the point-of-no-return situation.

With this last novel (which interests me more than the others, because I've just finished it and am not yet disconnected) the writing is more pared-down than anything I've written yet, but the form itself is (or so I believe) wider, including as it does a certain amount of third-person narration as well as Stacey's idiomatic inner running commentary and her somewhat less idiomatic fantasies, dreams, memories.

A strange aspect of my so-called Canadian writing is that I haven't been much aware of its being Canadian, and this seems a good thing to me, for it suggests that one has been writing out of a background so closely known that no explanatory tags are necessary. I was always conscious that the novel and stories set in Ghana were *about Africa*. My last three novels just seem like novels.

O VER TEN YEARS, trying to sum up the changes, I suppose I have become more involved with novels of character and with trying to feel how it would be to *be* that particular person. My viewpoint has altered from modified optimism to modified pessimism. I have become more concerned with form in writing than I used to be. I have moved closer (admittedly, in typically cautious stages) to an expression of my own idiom and way of thought. These are not qualitative statements, of course. I don't know whether my writing has become better or worse. I only know the ways in which it has changed. Sometimes it seems a peculiar way to be spending one's life — a life sentence of sentences, as it were. Or maybe not a life sentence, because one day I won't have any more to say and I hope I'll know when that time comes and have the will power to break a long-standing addiction. (How is that for mixed metaphors?)

I've listened to the speech of three generations — my grandparents, my parents and my own, and maybe I've even heard what some of it means. I can listen with great interest to the speech of a generation younger than mine, but I can't hear it accurately enough to set it down and I have no desire to try. That is specifically their business, not mine, and while envying them meanly, I also wish them god-speed.

At the moment, I have the same feeling as I did when I knew I had finished writing about Africa. I've gone as far as I personally can go, in the area in which I've lived for the past three novels. A change of direction would appear to be indicated. I have a halfway hunch where I want to go, but I don't know how to get there or what will be there if I do. Maybe I'll strike it lucky and find the right compass, or maybe I won't.

