

Roberto Gaudio. 2019. *The Voice of the Text and its Body. The Continuous Reform of Euphrase Kezilahabi's Poetics*. Köln: Rüdiger Köppe. 306 pages. Paperback. EUR 39.80. ISBN 978-3896457394.

First of all, I would like to explain why it is my high concern to review this monograph, not being a specialist in literature from Sub-Saharan Africa. The BA program “World literature” at Göttingen University aims at the understanding not only that there is a colorful multitude of literatures all around the globe, but also how these literatures are interconnected and how literature, despite all differences, works. Gaudio's monograph caught my interest, first of all, by giving the “voice” and the “body” not only to Africa, but first of all to the text itself. That means, that for Gaudio, criteria of literary quality are applicable to, and comparison within a world literature context are possible with, African literatures. The essentialism of a unique “Africanness” of literature from sub-Saharan Africa which Europeans cannot understand is, although present in Kezilahabi's essays, rightly rejected by Gaudio. However, the argument of cultural essentialism is not new. Every scholar working in the field of foreign language philology knows it. “As a stranger you will never understand the Russian soul,” or, “our holy Pushkin can be understood only by native Russians.” Incomparability and the denial of access is the end of scholarship. This is why Gaudio's book is important far beyond African philology. Gaudio gets access through analysis, and with the tool of analysis, he starts to properly understand. He shows, that Kezilahabi took many ideas from western philosophers intensively read by him – above all, Nietzsche and Heidegger.

Thus, Gaudio gets down to do the work of understanding, despite Kezilahabi himself 2015 told him in an interview, that he cannot understand but only “know” him (: 67). Nevertheless, Gaudio, going through the paradigm of Kezilahabi's poetry as well as through his theoretical texts, provides us in the first chapter of his book with a profound analysis of the contradiction within Kezilahabi's work between his essentialism and what he calls his “aim of liberation.” And this conflict touches a crucial strain of the understanding of what is world literature. It raises questions like: can non-Africans understand literature from Africa? May African poets use non-indigenous languages? Do Africans write and read other than Europeans? Are the analytic tools, developed by Europeans, like for example hermeneutics, suitable for literature in African languages? You see, that African essentialism, which denies all these questions, would, if expanded to any region of the world, immediately kill all endeavor to explore world literature.

Kezilahabi wrote in Swahili. This is why Gaudio plunges medias in res by discussing first of all the scandal of Kezilahabi dropping traditional Swahili poetry meter in favor of free verse. This was a double sacrilege – not only breaking the tradition of African poetry by using a “western” invention,

but also using a language which was not his native Kerewe. Gaudioso explains Kezilahabi's move, first, politically in connection with Nyerere's efforts to unite the peoples of Tanzania with a "national" language, which ought to be Swahili, and second, in terms of poetics, arguing that the deciding power and expression of poetry is not prosody but "flow" – in Swahili *mitiririko*. Flow is hard to objectivize, but modern poetry is unimaginable without this characteristic. But is the transition from prosody to flow "westernizing" African poetry? Gaudioso rightly denies this. Traditional Swahili poetry prosody has also been imported – from the Arabic world. Moreover, the religious connotation of this prosody is Islam, and Gaudioso denies that Islam is native to sub-Saharan Africa. He sees a problematic tendency in contemporary Africa to colonize itself after decolonization – by enforcing Christian and Islam religions, while Africa used to be characterized by religious freedom and sexually liberal societies.

The latter characterizes two novels by Kezilahabi analyzed in detail in the first chapter of Gaudioso's monograph – *Rosa Mistika* (Kezilahabi 1971) and *Kichwamawij* (Kezilahabi 1974a). Both deal with "fallen" women who act out their sexuality. As Gaudioso convincingly puts it, most critics, who are satisfied with the "moral verdict" on the heroines, misunderstood Kezilahabi's plea for sexual freedom. This effect, which comes from Kezilahabi's prose style and which I would call *impassibilité* – a pity Gaudioso does not link his valuable stylistic observation to Flaubert – seems quite the opposite to what happened to Flaubert after publishing *Madame Bovary*. Both, Flaubert and Kezilahabi, wanted to escape pre-emptive moral judgement. But while Flaubert was accused of immorality, Kezilahabi was mistaken as being preachy.

Gaudioso's second chapter emphasizes the role of the text proper in order to understand whatever Kezilahabi's literary production is going to tell us. Literature is in the text and nowhere else. On the other hand, Gaudioso also rejects an exclusively stylistic description of the text, which instead of unleashing its semantic potential would objectify it. Gaudioso cites Jakobson and Ricoeur who both stress the poetic function of a text at the expense of its referential function. This poetical function is defined as "composed by a refraction of words rather than by the words themselves." So, in Kezilahabi's poetry, the text does not refer to a body, but is a body by itself in the full sense. This Gaudioso also demonstrates by a detailed analysis of a poem by the Swahili writer Ebraim Hussein: *Ngoma na vailini* ('Drum and Violin,' Hussein 1995 [1968]). He rejects hasty conclusions about the opposition in this poem between Christianity and Islam or western versus African identity – the drum and the string are both parts of the poetic as well as of the human body. This is what Gaudioso calls a "somatic" approach to the text. Literature enters the flesh of humans. The text with his body is like a previously unknown alter ego to the reader, body to body. Acts of understanding are possible by sensing, through the principle of analogy.

In the third chapter Gaudioso analyzes Kezilahabi's first collection of poems, *Kichomi* (Kezilahabi 1974b). The method of analysis is hermeneutics, understood as a dialogue between content and form. Many of the poems in this collection are dialogues between two speakers; others are narrative. But always there is an implicit voiceover which Gaudioso reconstructs. Kezilahabi metapoetically refers to this voiceover as being *patulivu*, which approximately can be translated as an inarticulate or even quiet shout. This unique silence is called the voice of the future. Another aspect of the text as a human body is the key role of *maumivu* 'pain' in the poems. It refers to physical trauma as well as, being mental or comprehensive pain, to the trauma of colonialism. Poetry is the voice to this pain. Africa as a home becomes ambivalent – in *Dhamiri yangu* ('Consciousness') it suffocates like strangling, in the metapoetic introduction to *Kichomi* (Kezilahabi 1974b), poetry itself is, like in Heidegger's late philosophy, a home. *Jinamizi* ('Nightmare') has an expressive rhythm structure, which Gaudioso successfully links to the political implications of the poem.

In the fourth chapter, Gaudioso links Kezilahabi's poetry with European romanticism, with Novalis who was always heading for an imagined home. But, as Gaudioso discovers, in Kezilahabi's poetry the lyrical I is always alone on its way to this home, regardless of being the "awaited one." Nevertheless, the poet's journey is a circle of eternal recurrence, the ever-lasting dance to the drum-beat of life. Behind all, however, there resides the mysterious *Nagona*, which Gaudioso, in my opinion a bit too narrowly, identifies with Nietzsche's "Overhuman." Nevertheless, Gaudioso extracts many traits of "Nagona" out of Kezilahabi's poems – being female, non-locatable, giant.

After a pause of 20 years, Kezilahabi published the collection of poems *Dhifa* ('Banquet;' Kezilahabi 2008). Here, music and the myth of Orpheus play a central role. Gaudioso analyzes this collection in his fifth chapter, particularly referring to the opposition between agony and the flow of time which dominates the collection.

In conclusion, I would like to emphasize that Gaudioso's book is a new and serious approach to poetry from Africa – using form analysis and hermeneutics as a tool to take this poetry fully seriously, not "explaining" it by specific African circumstances. Nevertheless, these circumstances are present in Gaudioso's book, but not as conditions for Kezilahabi's poetry, but as expressed by rhythm and style, by the interplay between form and content out of the poems themselves. Only one qualification about Gaudioso's book comes to my mind – Gaudioso again and again states the importance of Nietzsche, Heidegger, Rilke and Leopardi for Kezilahabi's poetry, but not always he convinces me, because sometimes these statements lack documented inference. But this doesn't lower his meritorious endeavor to apply serious text analysis to a key figure of genuine African poetry.

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