

'A Bellyful of Colours': Bruce Chatwin and Visions of Africa

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- Everyday you walk forty miles through the thorns and why are you barefoot? Don't you have any shoes?
- I don't trust shoes.
- Then why don't you have a horse?
- I'd never trust a horse. I don't trust people either, but I long to go forth from here to another world.

Werner Herzog, *Cobra Verde*

Bruce Chatwin's first published work, *In Patagonia*, directly addressed the disillusion experienced when an individual, restlessly travelling in search of a utopia, instead finds themselves trapped in a new home that fails to meet their expectations. Many of those who had journeyed from the west in search of the intangibles of freedom and happiness in the landscape of Patagonia had, ultimately, been disappointed; a disappointment that developed to the malaise of intensified restlessness and nostalgia upon the realisation that they were unable to leave. The author's second published book, *The Viceroy of Ouidah*, addresses a very similar theme; it is also, essentially, a work about the perils of restlessly travelling in search of illusory goals and ultimately getting stuck. As Nicholas Murray observes, "*In Patagonia* introduced Chatwin's great theme of restlessness and his second book focuses on the life of another restless spirit" (55). Chatwin's approach to his theme, however, was substantively different to that of *In Patagonia*, with a combination of factors provoking a new response to old problems, and ultimately producing a work more profound and insightful in its analysis of restlessness, but also bleaker, less empathetic and somewhat controversial. Where the disappointment of the Patagonian emigrants exacted a response of general disillusionment and nostalgia, so, in *The Viceroy of Ouidah*, the same frustrations engender a far more dramatic reaction. The central character of the novel, an irrepressible wanderer who, through a series of passive decisions, finds himself imprisoned on the edge of Africa, is moved to violence and sex to alleviate the symptoms of his restless nature.

A number of factors contributed to Chatwin's new approach. Key amongst these was the main geographical setting that Chatwin chose for the novel; the Marxist Republic of Benin, formerly Dahomey, which as Nicholas Murray observes, "already had a place in the literary imagination where it functioned as an image of extreme barbarism" (52). Richard Burton (from whose *A Mission to Gelele* Chatwin took much of the background detail for his novel) had visited and was disappointed to find that stories of canoes floating on lakes of human blood were untrue; the myth arose, Burton recorded, from "the custom of collecting the gore of the victims in pits about four feet deep and two in diameter" (*The Present State of Dahomey* 403). There was, however, no shortage of active ritual violence on display in the era Chatwin portrays, as Lieutenant Frederick Forbes attested on the occasion of his ambassadorial mission to the country in the mid-nineteenth century, designed to encourage the abolition of the slave trade there. Forbes records his visit with some horror:

At the foot of the ladder [...] lay six newly-cut-off human heads, the blood still oozing; at the threshold of the entrance gate was a pool of human blood. Within, the scene was entirely different from yesterday: in the centre of the Palace-court stood a huge

crimson cloth tent [...] ornamented with devices of men cutting off others' heads, calabashes full of human heads, and other emblems of brutality and barbarity. (*King Guezo of Dahomey, 1850-52* 60).

Eighteenth and nineteenth century accounts of the Slave Coast abound with representations such as these, taking delight in contrasting the civilised lifestyle of Georgian and Victorian England with the barbaric and primitive cultural practices of the unrefined Africans; a necessary objectification, one might cynically observe, for a society whose economic structure was intrinsically bound up with the slave trade.

The violent undertones of *The Viceroy of Ouidah* did not, however, emerge exclusively from historical accounts of the region. Chatwin had experienced at first hand a present day instance of violent instability on the occasion of his second trip to Benin. During his 1976 visit to the country, undertaken to research *The Viceroy of Ouidah*, Chatwin had the misfortune to become embroiled in an attempted overthrow of the Marxist government, an action seemingly orchestrated by the President in order to root out his enemies. As a foreign national – a writer, no less – Chatwin was of suspicion, and hence was duly rounded up and imprisoned for the duration of the coup. Chatwin recounted his experiences in a piece written for *Granta* magazine which vividly evokes the tenuous uncertainty of the situation: “In addition to the mosquito bites, my back had come up in watery blisters. My toe was very sore. The guard kicked me awake whenever I nodded off [...] At two or three in the morning, there was a burst of machine-gun fire close by, and we all thought, This is it” (*What Am I Doing Here*¹ 28). Whilst in captivity, Chatwin remembers a pertinent and discouraging observation made by a descendant of De Souza's: “‘Yes,’ he sighed, ‘the Dahomeans are a charming and intelligent people. Their only weakness is a certain nostalgia for taking heads’” (24). Despite the threat of violence, Chatwin and his fellow captors were released shaken but unharmed, though there is the suggestion in both his writing and in documentary reports of something darker having taken place that remains unwritten. An account from James Lees-Milne elaborates on this possibility:

In one little country – I forget which – he was arrested for some misdemeanour, passport not visa-ed, and beaten up. He was hit in the face, stripped of all his clothes – what a pretty sight to be sure – and humiliated in public. “How awful!” I said.
“Well,” he replied. “I must confess to having rather enjoyed it.”
“Then you are a masochist, I surmise.” “Just a bit,” he answered.
(qtd. in Shakespeare 332)

The veracity of this story is unknown, and, given the source, perhaps not to be taken on faith. Yet, if one assumes that Lees-Milne did not wholly invent the story, the account offers more evidence of an undertone of violence in the author's experience of the country. Given both Chatwin's contemporary experience and the evidence of historical sources, it can hardly be seen as surprising that he should have written a novel so distinct from his previous text; the volatile political and social landscape of Benin sits in stark contrast to the passivity of the Patagonian pampas.

However, location was not the sole, or even primary, influence on the new approach taken by Chatwin in *The Viceroy of Ouidah*; yet more important was the provenance of the story that eventually developed into the published fiction. Whilst *In Patagonia* was a text fundamentally predicated on lived experience, *The Viceroy of Ouidah* had a far murkier relationship to the real world. As he attests in the – subsequently excised – preface to the first edition of the work, Chatwin had initially planned his work to be a biography of

¹ Hereafter WAIDH

Francisco De Souza, a man referred to by Pierre Verger as "the most notorious slave trader of all time" (28). Chatwin had been busily engaged on research in Benin for this non-fiction piece, when he became embroiled in the machinations of the coup d'état referenced above: "His research came to a screeching halt" (Interview with Elizabeth Chatwin), comments Elizabeth Chatwin of the impositions of the coup. Having escaped imprisonment, Chatwin describes, in his account of the coup, a conversation regarding his project with one of his fellow captives:

"This is Africa."

"I know and I'm leaving."

"For England?"

"No," I said. "For Brazil. I've a book to write."

"Beautiful country, Brazil."

"I hope so."

"Beautiful women."

"So I'm told."

"So what is this book?"

"It's about the slave trade."

"In Benin?"

"Also in Brazil."

"Eh bien!" The champagne had come and he filled my glass. "You have material!"

"Yes," I agreed. "I do have material." (34-35)

The material was partial, however, and did not offer a solid enough basis for the non-fiction work Chatwin had intended: "I did not go back to Benin," he wrote in the novel's preface to the first edition. "I did come away with the bones of a story and a number of vivid impressions. [...] But such was the patchiness of my material that I decided to change the names of the principal characters – and went on to write a work of the imagination" (Preface to the First Edition 2-3).

The influence of external events led Chatwin to create a work that contains elements of both fact and fiction; there is quite obvious authorial license evident within the text, yet, equally, much of Chatwin's experience in Benin clearly filtered into the novel. In "Werner Herzog in Ghana," an article first printed in *Interview* magazine, and subsequently included in the collection *What Am I Doing Here*, Chatwin recounts that one of Herzog's favourite lines was "given to me by the eight-year-old Grégoire de Souza" (*WAIDH* 138), a clear indication that there are cases of direct quotation from real sources in the book. Elizabeth Chatwin attests to the work's opening as having its foundation in reality: "[A]ll that was real, I mean the luncheon party that starts the novel; he walked in on that. They had gathered from Paris and all different places where they lived and went on about how they were white. And then someone came in screaming that Mama Wewe had died" (Interview with Elizabeth Chatwin). Chatwin even tacitly acknowledges his observational role in these ceremonies in the text:

One of the women plucked a wing-feather from a live fowl and twizzled it in her ear.

"It's to take away the human grease," a small boy informed the European tourist: and the tourist, who was collecting this kind of information, patted the boy's head and gave him a franc. (6)

From the basis of this lived experience, however, Chatwin had to develop and refine the historical narrative at the heart of the text, and the infinitude of possible fictional approaches to the material he had gathered must have been daunting for an author whose work, until this point, had been totally reliant on either lived experience or documentary

sources. Before *In Patagonia*, Chatwin had worked for the *Sunday Times*, where he had posted documentary reports from around the world; before the *Times*, he had, of course been engaged in the writing of his pseudo-academic tract, "The Nomadic Alternative". *The Viceroy of Ouidah* was to be the first time the author had been forced to construct – rather than reconstruct – the bulk of a narrative, and it proved a struggle: "*The Viceroy of Ouidah*,' remarked Chatwin's editor, Susannah Clapp, 'was squeezed out sentence by polished sentence'" (165).

Yet fiction also offered certain advantages; Chatwin was freed from the restrictions of fidelity to sources, and his story could be as outlandish and excessive as he wished. Chatwin must certainly have been encouraged in his project by a letter he had received from the polymath writer Patrick Leigh Fermor soon after the publication of *In Patagonia*. Praising the travelogue as "splendidly original," Fermor told Chatwin that he wished the work "half as long again – not, here, for an extension of those particular travels after the last page (though of course one would like that too) but I wish you had let it off the leash a bit more [...] I think you are too strict with yourself" (Chatwin Archive). Chatwin certainly seemed to take Leigh Fermor's advice to heart and "let it rip"; whilst rooting his novel in a recognisable reality, the author simultaneously took great delight in allowing his imagination to dictate the outcome of the story, taking authorial control over the eventual fate of his characters and, through this control, offering a more dramatic depiction of the symptoms and effects of his grand theme of restlessness.

In this new approach, Chatwin turned to new models. Where *In Patagonia* had taken as its inspiration the documentary photography of Henri Cartier-Bresson, with Chatwin taking faithful "snapshots" of the individual characters of the work, and subsequently rearranging them to form a cohesive thematic whole, the main influences on the writing of *The Viceroy of Ouidah* were writers who, whilst seemingly offering an objective reality, were in fact masters of the art of fiction, simply masquerading as dispassionate observers; chief amongst them were the disparate French authors André Gide, Gustave Flaubert and Jean Racine. These writers, divided by some years, share a punishing disinterest in regard to the destiny of their characters, assembling a fate-bound group of individual types in a claustrophobic environment and allowing the action to play out as if not in true control of the ultimate consequences. Of Racine's *Bajazet*, referenced in the opening chapters of *The Viceroy of Ouidah*, Susannah Clapp observed: "[W]hat really interested him was the sense of constriction: whenever he spoke about *Bajazet* he talked with horror about the confined space in which the characters were stuck together" (Clapp 164). The approach of these authors – which might be best described as "objective fictionality" – offered a bridge to Chatwin from the documentary depiction of the restless communities of Patagonia to the clearly embellished story of the tortured Francisco Manoel Da Silva, Chatwin's fictional stand in for the slave trader De Souza. The character of Da Silva is a composite figure, combining the factual material he had already accumulated in his research for the proposed biography with a profoundly non-realist literary depiction of a character afflicted with an almost pathological restlessness.

Francisco Da Silva is born into the harsh and unforgiving environment of the Sertao, in north-east Brazil: "[I]ike all people born in thorny places,' Chatwin writes, he dreams of 'green fields and a life of ease" (31). Da Silva's early life is marked by tragedy; his father dies when the boy is one, and Da Silva is brought up by his mother and an "Indian half-breed called Manuelzinho" (32). His first memories are of "watching the pair, creaking night and day in a sisal hammock: he never knew a time when he was not a stranger" (32). The harshness of his upbringing cultivates a spirit of fierce independence in Da Silva; he has the pedigree of a wanderer. In early adulthood, he drifts around the Sertao, "taking odd

jobs as butcher's apprentice, muleteer, drover and gold panner. Sometimes he knew a flash of happiness, but only if it was time to be departing" (37). Already, at this early stage of the narrative, the bleakness of Chatwin's depiction of the character's restlessness exceeds anything contained within the pages of *In Patagonia*.

Soon, however, it seems that perhaps the narrative will become one of redemption: "he [...] believed he would go on wandering for ever: yet on Santa Luzia's day of 1807 – a grey, stifling day that held out the promise of rain – the aimless journeys ended" (38). Da Silva marries; yet, like the rain, the happiness that the union seems to offer is an unrealised promise. Settlement engenders frustration and ultimately violence from Da Silva:

He woke one sunrise on a patch of stony ground and, squinting sideways, was surprised to see, so far from water, a green frog crouching under the arm of a cactus. [...] He poked the frog with a stick. It stiffened with fright. He watched its eyes suffuse from silver to purple. He took a stone and pounded it to a blood-streaked slime and, for a whole week, regretted what he had done. (39)

In "The Nomadic Alternative," Bruce Chatwin put forward the theory that enforced settlement of an individual could lead to aberrant behaviour, including violence and sexual perversion: "Violent solutions to complicated problems attract him; for diabolic energy is less insupportable than torpor" (3). The characterisation of Da Silva in *The Viceroy of Ouidah* is the literary manifestation of that theory. As the character sinks into settlement and domesticity, Da Silva's violent tendencies grow more uncontrollable; the protagonist first kills his wife's cat, then almost murders his own child: "He held the guitar above the cradle, waited for the crash of splintering wood, then checked himself and broke it across his knee" (40). The character is at least sufficiently self-aware to extricate himself from confinement, and in the aftermath returns back to his peripatetic life: "He went back to his solitary wanderings. Believing any set of four walls to be a tomb or a trap, he preferred to float over the most barren of open spaces" (40).

Whilst the intangible of romantic love proves to be insufficient to counter his restless instincts – it would be later in Chatwin's writing career that his characters began to find the solution to their restlessness in the arms of another – Da Silva does eventually cease his wandering. He begins to gravitate towards the "cities of the coast" (42) where he becomes friends with Joaquim Coutinho, the son of a rich trader. Da Silva begins to associate the lifestyle of this wealthy youngster with his notion of an earthly paradise:

The two young friends fought gamecock: and trained a pack of hounds to hunt for capybaras in the forest. Returning, hot from the chase, they would wave up to Joaquim's sisters, who lounged on feather hammocks or fed slips of custard-apple to their pet marmosets. [...]

Or they would leaf through volumes with vistas of European cities, or visit rooms where precious objects were strewn in disarray: Venetian glassware, silver from Potosi, crystal and cinnabar and black lacquer cabinet sloughing pearlshell.

Francisco Manoel could not account for what he saw. He had never thought of owning more than his knives and a few silver horse-trimmings. Now, there was no limit to his thirst for possessions. (44)

Africa seems to offer a possibility of realising this desire for property: "The most valuable slaves came from Ouidah," Da Silva is temptingly informed, "and Ouidah, by terms of the Prince Regent's treaty with England, was the one port north of the Equator where it was legal to trade [...]" (48). The country also appeals to the restless Da Silva on an imaginative level, in its very difference to Brazil – an appeal not dissimilar to that of Patagonia to the western migrants of the previous chapter: "Jeronimo told him stories of

mudbrick palaces lined with skulls; of tribes who exchanged gold dust for tobacco; a Holy Snake that was also a rainbow, and kings with testicles the size of avocados. The name 'Dahomey' took root in his imagination" (46). Da Silva is persuaded to travel to Dahomey to re-establish the trade, an undertaking that his financial sponsors think impossible, though, at the cost of one man's life, worth the gamble: "At the end of the interview," Chatwin writes of the city meeting at which it is decided Da Silva will travel to Dahomey on their behalf, "everyone rose to their feet to congratulate the man they knew would be a corpse" (49).

Da Silva travels to Africa naively unaware of the implications of his decision. On arrival, however, he is starkly presented with the reality of the position he has accepted:

He landed at Ouidah between two and three of a murky May afternoon smelling of mangrove and dead fish. A band of foam stretched as far as the eye could reach. Inland, there were tall grey trees which, at a distance of three miles, anyone might mistake for watersprouts. He was the only passenger on the canoe: the crew knew better than to set foot in the Kingdom of Dahomey. (51)

Almost from the moment of his establishment at Ouidah, stuck on the edge of the African continent, Da Silva, mirroring the response to arrival expressed by those who travelled to Patagonia, realises his mistake and begins to long to leave:

And Da Silva was always dreaming of Bahia. Whenever a ship sailed, he would watch the yardarms vanish into the night, then light a pipe on the verandah and sink into a reverie of the future: he would have a Big House, a view of the sea, grandchildren and the sound of water tinkling through a garden. But then the mirage would fade. The sound of drumbeats pressed against his temples and he had a presentiment that he would never get out of Africa. (58)

Da Silva becomes the personification of many of Chatwin's ideas around the implications and effects of a settled life. Chatwin addressed the issue not only in "The Nomadic Alternative", but also in a number of essays, and the consequences Chatwin ascribes to this enforced lifestyle are severe; he cites American research that declares that "Monotonous surroundings and tedious regular activities wove patterns which produced fatigue, nervous disorders, apathy, self-disgust and violent reactions" (*Anatomy of Restlessness* 100).

In *The Viceroy of Ouidah*, the frustration engendered by Da Silva's imprisonment leads to violent and dramatic outbursts, as evidenced by this indulgently bleak and troubling passage – a passage which acts as testimony to the fact that Chatwin was attempting something quite different and fundamentally unremitting in *The Viceroy of Ouidah*:

Each year with the dry season, he would slough off the habits of civilisation and go to war [...] He crossed burning savannahs and swam rivers infested with crocodiles. Before an attack on a village, he would lash leaves to his hat and lie motionless till cockcrow.

Then, as the dawn silhouetted the roofs like teeth on a sawblade, a whistle would blow, the air fill with raucous cries and, by the end of the morning, the Amazons would be parading before the King, swinging severed heads like dumb-bells.

Dom Francisco greeted each fresh atrocity with a glassy smile. He felt no trace of pity for the mother who pleaded for her child, or for the old man staring in disbelief at the purple veil spread out over the smouldering ruins. (74)

Violence is not the only consequence of Da Silva's frustration at his enforced settlement; the character also indulges in sexual promiscuity in order to alleviate his torpor. In "The Nomadic Alternative", Chatwin writes of the settled individual that "Pinned to one place (he) verbalizes or enacts his sexual fantasies. (The Marquis de Sade is pre-eminently the product of confinement)" (3). *The Viceroy of Ouidah* – for which the original title, tellingly, was "Skin for Skin" (Chatwin Archive) – realises this notion in the almost insatiable sexual desire of Da Silva: "[H]e would lie in his nightshirt, waiting for the creak of the verandah: on the bad nights, the game of breaking virgins was his only consolation" (79). Francisco's sexual desire is not expressed specifically towards women, either; Chatwin makes the character's homoerotic tendencies explicit and Africa itself is transmuted into, to quote Edward Said, a "living tableau of queerness" (*Orientalism* 103). Francisco's most profound relationships are with men; as is so often the case with Chatwin's restless protagonists, Da Silva has little interest in establishing a relationship with a woman, with all the constriction and domesticity that implies in the author's conception. Da Silva establishes a number of significant male relationships in the novel; first with Joaquim Coutinho in Bahia, then with the Major-Domo of the fort at Ouidah, Taparica, who "slept outside his master's room [...] found girls for his bed, aphrodisiacs if the weather was exceptionally sticky, and warned him not to make lasting attachments" (87), and finally with the Dahomean King, with whom Da Silva swears a blood pact: "The two men knelt facing each other, naked as babies, pressing their thighs together: the pact would be invalid if their genitals touched the ground" (106).

Sex is inextricably linked to the restlessness of his central character; Da Silva seems to take little erotic pleasure from his encounters – he indulges because the experience takes him away from who and where he is: "He never knew what drew him to the mysteries. The blood? The god? The smell of sweat or the wet glinting bodies? But he was powerless to break his addiction [...]" (60). Chatwin goes to great lengths to convey the inherent sense of dissatisfaction his central protagonist feels with both himself and his surroundings. The transgression inherent in the sexual or violent act offers a way of alleviating that monotony, of providing a way out of one's self.

In Chatwin's work, however, this connection is generally rarely drawn; sex is almost always sublimated in his oeuvre, perhaps as a result of his own complicated sexuality. Yet, *The Viceroy of Ouidah* is overt in its presentation of the sexual – and even homosexual – possibilities found in the travelling life. This openness seems to be attributable to the climate and culture of "the relaxed latitudes that Sir Richard Burton termed the sodadic zone" (Ryle) and first manifests itself in the short story "Milk". The tale, published in 1977 (the same year *In Patagonia* entered the public realm) presents a vision of Africa, which, in its sense of the forbidden exotic and its frank presentation of sexual desire, shares a number of similarities with *The Viceroy of Ouidah*. The story is essentially around the pleasures and possibilities of transgression. A young American – who may or may not be an authorial persona; Kerry Featherstone observed that "Chatwin's wavering moods and his obvious attraction to the African men he meets make him a candidate as the model for this character" (87), whilst Jan Borm and Matthew Graves comment that the tale was "clearly drawn from Chatwin's African notebooks" (*Anatomy of Restlessness* 188) – visits Africa and whilst travelling through a non-specific French-African colony, has an affair with a prostitute. The title, "Milk", refers to the warnings the young American, Jeb, has received from his family in Vermont to avoid drinking African milk. Jeb, however, chooses to ignore this advice and in his transgressive behaviour finds pleasure: "The doctor had given him sterilising tablets and packets of dehydrated food. He had not used them. Jeb drank the milk in spite of and because of the doctor" (*Anatomy of Restlessness* 36). His thrill in

performing the sexual act is born of a similar delight in breaking Western/African boundaries in sleeping with a black prostitute:

"You have loved an Africaine?" asked Annie.

"Never," Jeb said in an even voice. He had never been to bed with a woman, but he did not want to show this.

"You must go with Mamzelle Dela. She wants it."

[...]

"Listen," she said protectively. "I speak with you as a mother. You are afraid to go with her because you have heard bad things. I tell you, African women are cleaner than white women. They are très pudique. And they are much more beautiful." (43)

Africa's appeal in the story is centred on the possibilities of transgression for a western protagonist away from the judging eyes of family and friends. Jeb notes his distance from home: "It was winter in Vermont. He tried to picture it, but the picture kept slipping from focus, leaving only the heat and light" (37).

Chatwin establishes in this story a connection between the erotic and exotic that certainly seems manifest in the unusual frankness of the later *The Viceroy of Ouidah*. A number of accounts suggest that Chatwin's experience of Africa and Brazil, in conjunction with the manifest literary sources for the novel, provoked these overt references to sex and sexuality, which are, generally, absent from Chatwin's other work. Susannah Clapp commented of the impact of this authorial experience that "*The Viceroy of Ouidah* has many glistening black male bodies and many lithe black females. Bruce was to talk – sometimes as if it were fantasy, sometimes fact – of a day at the Rio Carnival spent making love first to a girl, then to a boy" (161). Nigel Acheson, Chatwin's host in Bahia, confirmed Clapp's assertion: "Bruce cruised around and often went off on his own to make conquests" (qtd. in Shakespeare 336). This sense of transgressive freedom is also present in his account of the Benin coup he became embroiled in during his 1976 visit: "I'd asked the waiter what there was to see in town. 'Patrice' 'Patrice?' 'That's me,' he grinned. 'And, monsieur, there are hundreds of other beautiful young girls and boys who walk, all the time, up and down the streets of Parakou'" (WAIDH 23).

In Chatwin's notebooks, too, one finds confirmation of the erotic appeal of Africa to the author. A poem written during a visit to Mauretania ends:

Black and rippling
And the rump
And the walk
Both sexes are irresistible. (*Photographs & Notebooks* 40)

For both Da Silva and Chatwin, the exoticised sexuality of these tropical climates seems to appeal for their offer of a way out from the constrictions of their individual personalities and situations. Sexual indulgence – and sadistic violence – are the unmentionable results of the inherent personal dissatisfaction that clearly plays a significant role in cultivating a desire to constantly move on, to restlessly search; as Paul Fussell observes, "the English popularity of the term wanderlust conveys its own suggestions" (113). *The Viceroy of Ouidah*, together with Chatwin's few other African writings, represents the only occasion that Chatwin would overtly and frankly deal with the topic, though it continued to resonate as a sublimated theme, particularly in *On the Black Hill* and *Utz*.

That the novel deals so openly with issues of sex and violence vividly highlights the fact that Chatwin was attempting something new in *The Viceroy of Ouidah*. The unsparing

openness of this approach was precipitated by the possibilities Chatwin saw in the generic ambiguity of the work as already described and appears to a great degree inspired by the literary models he followed in the writing of *The Viceroy of Ouidah*, in particular Flaubert, whose writing on Africa – specifically his diaries, published as *Flaubert in Egypt* – also demonstrates a degree of permissiveness absent from that writer's other works. Chatwin intended the work as objective and unstinting in its representation of the life of Da Silva, and he consequently adapted his approach from that of his previous work, stripping down his prose style and characterisation and overtly addressing new and controversial themes, to offer as pure and artful a representation of the consequences of restlessness and enforced settlement as was possible. The closest comparison in modern fiction to Chatwin's undertaking in *The Viceroy of Ouidah* is to be found in Flaubert's *Salammbô*, the follow-up to his own phenomenally successful debut, *Madame Bovary*. Chatwin had always been a great admirer of the reclusive Flaubert, as his wife Elizabeth testifies: "He adored Flaubert, he thought Flaubert was absolutely fantastic. He must have practically memorised *Madame Bovary*. He used to carry it around with him" (Interview with Elizabeth Chatwin). Flaubert had achieved public notoriety with *Madame Bovary*, and in *Salammbô* he attempted to push the tolerance of his audience even further, recounting a story of third century BC Carthage in dense, oblique, historical prose. Flaubert's influence on *The Viceroy of Ouidah* is profound; the dispassion of *Salammbô*, and the way in which it weaves together documented historical information with very modern literary representations of sex and violence is manifest in Chatwin's novel.

Part of the cost of this new and unsparing literary approach, however, was that Chatwin was forced to abandon any sort of humanistic characterisation or description, remaining dispassionate and unemotional at all costs. The critic John Thompson, in a review for the *New York Times* compares the novel unfavourably to Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of God* (which Thompson, mistaking it for Conrad's late novel, refers to as *Arrow of Gold*) as a result of this lack of human emotion, commenting: "That novel of West Africa has violence enough, and cruel superstition too, yet it is suffused with the common humanity of which I find not one dried drop in *The Viceroy of Ouida*" (28). Chatwin's work avoids "scrupulously, any authorial interventions or oblique commentaries" (54) observed Nicholas Murray, an approach that sets the novel in contrast to *In Patagonia*, with its obvious narratorial empathy and humane rendering of character. The characters of *The Viceroy of Ouidah* are something less than human, though something more than caricatures; they resemble figures from the age of myth, inscrutable in their behaviour and ultimately bound to fate.

This deficit of human emotion had implications for the author; Susannah Clapp documented the difficulties Chatwin confronted in the construction of the work: "The cruelty of his material oppressed him. He left his desk each day washed out, often having found it hard to produce anything" (165). His struggles would have been familiar to Flaubert, who grew similarly frustrated by the lack of humanity in his own *Salammbô*: "I would give the demi-ream of notes that I have written during the past five months and the ninety-eight volumes I have read, to be really moved by the passion of my hero for just three seconds" (qtd. in Steegmuller 346). In an observation worthy of Chatwin's work, Gerard Hopkins wrote of Flaubert's African novel: "Motive, psychology, life – these things are missing from the central characters, and we are left with what must surely be a freak in the long history of imaginative fiction – a novel which is almost wholly descriptive" (*Salammbô* 8). In his emulation of Flaubert, Chatwin surely comes close to replicating this feat of authorship, providing the reader with a deeply sensual literary world which remains – almost – entirely surface: "always detached" (*Orientalism* 103).

Chatwin's distanced approach to the subject matter engendered controversial press, with some citing his attitude to Africa as politically naive and essentially touristic in its objectivity. Charles Sugnet commented of Chatwin's novel that its "lurid prose belongs on the shelf somewhere between Conrad and H. Ryder Haggard," pigeonholing Africa's appeal to the author as that of the typical western visitor: "Chatwin loves Africa – the Africa of safari postcards and Hollywood films – it's just those inconvenient Africans that spoil it" (73). In particular, the novel's aestheticised approach to the slave trade and its seeming delight in the barbaric details of the industry, caused some to question the appropriateness of Chatwin's approach: "We should be able to endure reminders of its horrors," John Thompson wrote in the *New York Times*, "but should we relish them or leer at what is repellent to us?"

Yet, these critics miss Chatwin's intention; despite the objective approach, the novel – like those of Flaubert – was never intended as a realist text, to address the self-evident wrongs of slavery or colonialism, nor were the characters of *The Viceroy of Ouidah* intended as realistic or to pertain to equivalents in real life; they act primarily as personifications of Chatwin's framework of ideas around restlessness. The author's moral ambiguity on the matter of the slave trade results from his treatment of it within the terms of the novel, viewing it as a pursuit which turns a "footloose wanderer" into "a patriot and man of property" (86). The novel suffers, like Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, from being a novel set in Africa that does not overtly address the African 'issue'; Chatwin has failed to give proper consideration to Gide's apposite observation in the introduction to *The Immoralist* that "[t]he public nowadays will not forgive an author who, after relating an action, does not declare himself either for or against it" (8). For the purposes of *The Viceroy of Ouidah*, Africa is merely a space where Western conventions are – as yet – not present, providing a reality in which the gradual corruption and psychological decay of the central character can occur. The key fact is, of course, that Da Silva, like Kurtz, was a damaged human being before he left Brazil; the appeal in both novels is to a more universal corruption than that evident in the strict politics of slavery, as Hunt Hawkins observes: "The dark wilderness, as Marlow realises by the end of the story, is not just in Africa but lurking in the streets of Brussels and hovering over the Thames" (Hawkins 371).

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