

**BERNARD FONLON AND BATE BESONG AS  
AESTHETIC IDEOLOGICAL FOES: A COMMENT  
INSPIRED BY OSCAR LABANG'S *THE TRIAL OF  
BATE BESONG***

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**Abstract**

The paper is a comment on Bate Besong's charges against Bernard Fonlon as conveyed by Oscar Labang's *The Trial of Bate Besong*. Its main thrust is that Bernard Fonlon and Bate Besong are respectively from the traditional and modernist aesthetic schools of thought. Even though Bate Besong's attack is, to a limited extent true, it is largely misguided. If Fonlon is not a poet with an authentic voice to serve as a model for young Anglophone Cameroonian writers, it is as a literary essayist that Fonlon's contribution to the Cameroonian society must be assessed. If Bate Besong is a major Anglophone Cameroonian poet and dramatist today, Bernard Fonlon remains Anglophone Cameroonian greatest literary essayist. Generally, both writers are concerned with impacting their society for the better, with transforming their society into a better one. The difference between them is rather one of method, of approach.

***Keywords: Aesthetics, Ideology, Oscar Labang, Bate Besong,***

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Oscar Labang's *The Trial of Bate Besong* (2009) is a humorous, critical and provocative play written in the tradition of drama of ideas as propagated by George Bernard Shaw. In it the accused, BB or the Voice (Bate Besong), is taken to task and charges are pressed against him, one of which is the defamation of a national hero, "Fanlan" Bernard Fonlon. In his defence the Voice (BB) attacks Fanlan, while defending the role of literature and the function of the creative writer in the society, especially with regard to socio-political issues of the day. Now of late, both Bernard Fonlon and Bate Besong are two prominent Anglophone Cameroonian scholars, from two opposing aesthetic ideological backgrounds and the mention of whose names will leave no one who knew them or who was familiar with their works, indifferent.

With regard to poetry writing Bernard Fonlon is a great believer in conventional poetic practice; and for his models, he turned to English classicists like Alfred Lord Tennyson, Walter Scott, Robert Burns and William Gray. After closely studying their poetry and mastering their craftsmanship, he imitated them and began to produce his own poems in the manner of these models. He would have loved to continue writing like them but, according to him, modern critics said quantitative, conventional versification was no longer fashionable. He adored classical critics like Aristotle and Horace whose style was clear, classical and beautiful, in contrast to modernists who were unnecessarily high-sounding, obscure and inaccessible.

A votary of traditional grammar Fonlon believed in the internalization of the rules of English grammar so that should one decide to violate them, let this grammatical transgression be done from linguistic competence and not from syntactic ignorance. In his opinion, this is one reason for the greatness of Chinua Achebe as a competent master of

the English language. “Master the rules, then you can dump them” says Fonlon (*ABBIA* 38-39-40) 175.

Now, to turn from Bernard Fonlon to Bate Besong is to move from a realistic, conservative writer with a reactionary poetics to a firebrand poet and dramatist with a modernist aesthetic. Bate Besong, in his poetry and drama, reveals himself as a fiery writer, irrevocably committed to the fierce denunciation of economic exploitation, political mismanagement, squandamania and dictatorial gangsterism. His poetry and drama are aimed at the social deconstruction of Cameroon. But to articulate these objective realities, Bate Besong, employs a mordant, muscular style of verbal pugilism, and adopts a modernist approach, placing his poetic practice within the tradition of modernist poetry, with some of its characteristic obscurantism. Labang’s work is certainly inspired by his admiration for Bate Besong the man, his works, and the values he stood for. Similarly, *The Trial of Bate Besong* could possibly give rise to a follow-up imaginative defence by votaries of Bernard Fonlon, the man, his works and ideas, and the values he upheld. Be that as it may both men, as stated above, are now dead, but their ideas remain alive in their written works and will go on to be variously evaluated by future generations for what they are worth. This is the fate of ideas when they leave the private domain of subjectivity to the public arena of objectivity, thanks to the mediating art of writing and reading. Godfrey Tangwa puts this idea beautifully thus:

Without the culture of writing and reading and the criticism that ensues from both, no society can progress. By putting our thoughts and ideas in writing, we raise them from the purely subjective world of private mental states to an objective and independent world where they can be appraised, assessed, criticised,

modified, accepted, or rejected. This is the risk that every idea or thought that is put into writing must run.<sup>1</sup>

This is consequently the risk that Bate Besong's ideas, with regard to literature and the literary artist, as conveyed through Labang's work, and Bernard Fonlon's ideas on literature and the literary artist, as culled from his "Idea of Literature" and other essays, run when subjected to our scrutiny in this commentary. To properly examine them, I am afraid, we may have to first quote substantially the portion of Labang's text dealing with Bate Besong's attacks against Bernard Fonlon before we proceed to analyse them in the light of Fonlon's own ideas as contained in his texts mentioned above.

Prosecution: My Worship, there is every evidence that the accused is the stubborn breed. In as much as he does not want to answer the questions put to him, he also does not want to collaborate with this court for the progression of the trial. He is bent on saying what he wants or likes in flagrant disrespect of this honourable court. I will leave him there My Lord.

Judge: Does the Civil Claimant have questions for the accused?

Judge: You may continue the cross examination.

Civil Claimant: While adopting and relying on the brilliant cross examination of the State, I will like to raise a few issues for the accused to clarify.

Judge: You may proceed.

Civil Claimant: Thank you my Worship. Dr BB you were charged for defamation of the character of a national hero. According to the charge you in a conference in Wende, openly declared

in the presence of young and innocent minds that the national and well revered hero from Kama North Region was a failure because he did not write rebelliously in your manner. You are one of those who poison young republicans' minds and insult national figures.

Voice: Ha ha ha. Yes my friend, if you knew Fanlan, you would agree with me that...

Civil Claimant: I am still to come to the issue...

Voice: You see... The influence of Dr Fanlan is negligible on contemporary Anglophone writing.

Civil Claimant: Can you permit me put the issue across to you before you answer. Your Lordship, I think the accused needs to be called to order.

Voice: Yes, His Lordship, Fanlan was a classicist in art. He believed in the ideals of the classical school and so fell for poetry that that needed more energy to rhyme the words than address the issue of his day.

Judge: Can you allow the prosecution to finish his question?

Voice: Good. Go ahead then. Ha ha ha.

Civil Claimant: Even if Fanlan was influenced...

Voice: Yes you are right. His influence is negligible on contemporary Anglophone writing. His manifesto on creative writing as the diktat for a minority sanitized literature is a defence of the art for art pedigree...

Civil Claimant: But there are writers and critics who revere him and it is on the basis of this that he is a national figure.

Voice: Look, Fanlan is often quoted by bourgeois scholars for his loud defence of classical and neo-classical tenets; no writer of my generation has heeded to his call. This kind of writing could not usher in any structural changes needed in the society because it often neglected the major issues of Kamangola society, which are purely socio-economic. Mao Tse Tung pithily reminds us that: *Ignorant of their own society, some people can only relate tales of Greece and other foreign lands.* And...

Civil Claimant: But he stood for a cause.

Voice: How could Fanlan be writing classical literature in the attempt to fight a people's cause? You need to shock the tyrants out of their stupor of squandamania and Champagne parties. That cannot be done using classical typologies. You need words with atomic effects to be able to murder sleep in the eyes of Power and his gang of bootlickers. Here classicism fails Ha ha ha... The Kaiser in Fanlan's time was more rigorous in chaining down anyone who spoke the contrary. How many times was Fanlan questioned for his writing? None. Because he was a student of Newman. That is not the kind of literature that I write. I write to shock...<sup>2</sup>.

Before we critically look at Bate Besong's accusation of Bernard Fonlon, let us briefly summarise the key points:

1. That as a poet Bernard Fonlon was a failure because he had no influence on young Anglophone Cameroonians;
2. That Fonlon was practising art for art's sake; and
3. That Fonlon was not concerned with the people's cause.

Having said this, intellectual honesty obliges me to admit that BB is right when he declares that, as a poet, Bernard Fonlon's influence on Anglophone Cameroonians is negligible. For one thing Fonlon did not come out with a collection of his poems in a single volume to be able to give his readers a sense of coherent thematic direction or stylistic development. His poems, relatively few, are scattered here and there in different issues of *ABBIA* the cultural review he edited. For another, Fonlon was bent on imitating his Western poetic models and striving to master the art of quantitative versification at a time when free verse was becoming more fashionable. Fonlon's emulative poetics therefore sometimes makes him sound, if one were to go by his "To A Departed Master's Memory", like the great Victorian poet, Alfred Lord Tennyson, and not a post-colonial writer. Therefore, from a purely post-colonial point of view, Fonlon does not possess an authentic poetic voice.

However, if Fonlon's poetic impact on Anglophone Cameroonians is minimal or nil, if no Anglophone can look up to Fonlon as a poetic role model, Fonlon's drudgery in the rigours of English prosody paid off ironically when he transferred the benefits of his metrical skills into the writing of his essays, giving the latter a distinctive poetic rhythm.<sup>3</sup> And this is the angle from which my admiration for Fonlon as an original essayist springs. In a recent study on the art of the first and second generation Anglophone Cameroon poets, Norbert K. Mbulai (2010) makes a similar point when he says, with regard to Fonlon's poetry:

... if in poetry Fonlon could not completely break free of the emulative streak, the

technical dexterity he had garnered from his tedious assimilation of the rules of admired English poets and from the rigours of the prosodic conventions of this tradition was ironically to give much originality, rhythmic form and pithiness to his prose compositions (42).

Fonlon himself had realised early enough that there were urgent political and developmental issues facing Cameroon and that he could neither make a strong contribution to the progress of his society through the type of poetry he was writing, nor through the short story nor through the novel. Consequently, he shoved aside his poetry and chose but the essay, a medium in which explicit facts and ideas are in ascendancy.

In the essay, the essayist's intention is to instruct and persuade through arguments. But with regard to Fonlon, as Shadrach Ambanasom points out in *Matter and Manner* (1990) and other publications, these arguments are couched in felicitous phraseology that gives Fonlon's essays a peculiar literary dimension. The latter is accentuated by a distinctive style that is dignified, elegant, formal, allusive, elevated and solemn.

Therefore, it is as a literary essayist that Bernard Fonlon stands tall, indeed, taller than any other Anglophone Cameroonian in this category, to attain a world class level. It is as a literary essayist, and not a poet, that Fonlon's contribution to the Cameroonian society must be assessed. And in this regard it is too sweeping and simplistic to dismiss Fonlon's influence with a wave of the hand as BB (Voice) seems to do.

But let us attempt to rationalize why BB does not consider Fonlon as a literary essayist because if he did, he would not easily dismiss him. We just intimated above that

factuality and explicitness of ideas are the hallmarks of the essay. And according to Di Yanni, it is this pre-eminence and straight forwardness of facts and ideas in the essay that for long has rendered uncertain its status as literature (1523).

Nevertheless, while the goal of an essayist is to persuade readers to buy his ideas, many essayists, prominent among them, Bernard Fonlon, are equally out to instruct, please and move the readers. Indeed, readers would miss much of the pleasure that many of Fonlon's essays yield if they were to be read only for their facts and ideas. Because of their style and language some of Fonlon's essays can, indeed, be poetic, dramatic and imaginative, for example, *As I See It* (1971), *The Genuine Intellectual* (1978) and "An Open Letter to the Bishops of Buea and Bamenda" (1998).

In fact, aspects of the literariness of Fonlon's *As I See It* and *The Genuine Intellectual* can be gleaned from my most recent work, *Perspectives on Written Cameroon Literature in English* (2012), where I have done some detailed work which I do not deem necessary to reproduce here. As for the literary excellence of "An Open Letter ..." on the curriculum of the formation of students of the Major Seminary in Bambui, readers are called upon to consult it, remembering that the letter's sound and noble ideas as well as its felicitous and elegant manner of articulation generated world-wide enthusiastic responses from Catholic clergy and laity alike. These impassioned reactions were carefully documented 25 years after and published alongside Fonlon's letter on the occasion of the Silver Jubilee of the Foundation of St. Thomas Aquinas' Major Seminary Bambui in 1998.

These and other essays are Bernard Fonlon's true literary legacy to Anglophone Cameroon; they represent an important part of Anglophone Cameroon written literature: the essay as a literary genre. If Bate Besong is a major Anglophone Cameroonian poet and a dramatist today,

Bernard Fonlon remains Anglophone Cameroonian greatest literary essayist. The other literary essayist who rivals him in that enviable position is, arguably, Godfrey Tangwa, himself a devotee of Fonlon. Incidentally, Bate Besong greatly admired Godfrey Tangwa, the ace essayist of *No Trifling Matter*.

We can quickly counter BB's charge against Fonlon for practising art for art's sake by quoting Fonlon's rejection of the very concept itself: "I do not believe in art for art's sake L'art pour l'art as they French say. Art, to my mind, should be at the service of life."<sup>4</sup> Therefore, contrary to what BB would like to think about him, Fonlon was seriously concerned with literature serving the cause of life, serving man in society.

In this connexion Fonlon quotes the great Roman orator, Cicero, who said literature had a three-fold function: docere, placere, movere: to teach, to please and to move. According to Fonlon the writer "strives to please, to make his lesson easier to learn, he stirs up so that readers should get up and do something about it. And that it is the idea, the problem he poses, the lesson he wants to instill."<sup>5</sup>

Now, with reference to BB's charge against Fonlon not writing in favour of the people's cause, one can only say it is a clear misunderstanding of Fonlon the man and what he stood for. Fonlon had been preoccupied with the problems of his country for long. Even as a young man, a starry-eyed seminarian at the age of 29, Fonlon had penned a major essay "As I See It" in 1953 on the future progress and development of his country, the Cameroons, and the role of the celibate priest in the building of that country. This essay, written on the occasion of his upcoming ordination as a priest, was intended to memorialize that event.

Fonlon once defended in a beautifully written essay, “A Case for Early Bilingualism<sup>6</sup>”, an idea that ironically Canada and the United Nations made greater use of than Cameroon the intended beneficiary. Still for the interest of Cameroon, Fonlon came up with “Idea of Cultural Integration.”<sup>7</sup> A man, who, for the sake of the welfare of his country, is able to sit down and reason deeply to come up with a political title like *The Task of Today* (1966) in defence of Democratic Socialism, must only be one dedicated to the cause of his people; a writer who would take years to work on a research project that would bear the title *To Every African Freshman or The Nature, End and Purpose of University Studies* and finally culminating in the title *The Genuine Intellectual* (1978), a work that, in terms of its matter and manner, I consider the quintessence of Bernard Fonlon (Ambanasom 2012: 281), must only be a man wholly dedicated to serve his people and humanity at large; an intellectual who would take time to reflect profoundly on the curriculum for the formation of young priests in a major seminary and then put his ideas in the form of An Open Letter to the Bishops of Buea and Bamenda, which letter, on account of its content and felicity of textualization, generated world-wide reactions from Catholic Christendom, must only be a rare species whose breast is full of the milk of human kindness.

Does it then make sense to lightly dismiss such a man with a supercilious wave of the hand as the Voice does to “Fanlan”? I say no! The work of such a man should, instead, be extolled to the sky as a great lover of humankind, a benefactor of humanity.

BB’s problem with Fonlon stems essentially from Fonlon’s scorn of modernist poets for their disorienting and disconcerting style. Time and again Fonlon refers to the moderns in disparaging language. He calls them “Critics

with newfangled theories”<sup>8</sup> and says “I have found that some of the moderns say in high-sounding, esoteric language what has already been said by the Ancients, and said precisely and said tersely and said better.”<sup>9</sup> Yet he goes on, “If I started from modern poets, I am sure I would detest all poetry today like the plague.”<sup>10</sup> Then in an interview with G. De La Taille *et al* as late as 1986, Fonlon reiterated his love for the Ancients and hatred for the moderns:

Some have called me an African Socrates. I made a point to study certain works very thoroughly – especially literary criticism, such as by Aristotle and Horace. I found nothing new was said by the moderns in their more confused and bombastic manner than had already been said in a cleaner, more concise manner by the ancients (G. De La Taille 159).

We must make one thing very clear here, and it is this, that Fonlon addresses the moderns as a group and not as individuals. For all I know Fonlon never knew BB as an individual with a modernist predilection, because when he broadcast his famous “Idea of Literature” in which he attacks the moderns, in a series of conversations with Paul Kode over Radio Cameroon in the late 1970s, Bate Besong as a writer had not yet emerged on the Cameroon literary scene. Even when Fonlon died in August 1986 Bate Besong was barely emerging as a recognizable modernist poet or critic. In contrast, BB being a younger person, knew Fonlon very well and, like many of his generation, had certainly read a great deal of Fonlon’s works and taken with a pinch of salt, if not with some subdued anger, Fonlon’s criticism of the moderns.

Bate Besong was not a man to take insults lightly, and many writers and critics feared annoying him because he could “crucify them in newspaper articles” (Bole Butake,

17). Given Fonlon's acerbic criticism of the moderns, Bate Besong's visceral reaction to Fonlon's literary influence and his undervaluing of Fonlon's literary standing is a kind of tit for tat response. But there is another reason for Bate Besong's animosity against Fonlon: BB's hatred for French imperialism:

For this he did not like France, the French and any one that had anything to do with the entire setup such as the Francophone regimes in Cameroon ... Bate Besong was very impatient with people who tended to identify with the regime and so regarded such functionaries as sell-outs especially if they were Anglophones (Butake, 14).

Incidentally Bernard Fonlon, an Anglophone, was very polished in French. He wrote his M.A. Thesis in French: "Flaubert Ecrivain" (1958); he wrote his Ph.D. Thesis too in French: "La Poésie et le Réveil de l'Homme Noir" (1961). There is no doubt that BB saw in this perfectly English/French bilingual Anglophone Cameroonian and a functionary of the Ahidjo regime, an embodiment of the French imperialism that he so abhorred.

Generally both writers are concerned with impacting their society for the better, with transforming their society into a better one. The difference between them is rather one of method, of approach. BB's method is confrontational, radical. BB prefers the use of "shock" devices and violence. For this reason anyone who does not adopt his style is certainly a failure. It is almost as if BB were saying if you are not like me, if you are not with me, you are against me, and therefore you are a failure. This writer thinks that this is basically wrong.

As for Fonlon his approach is that of critical realism. He is analytical and rational and his style is elegant,

beautiful. According to Fonlon if you can teach and please and move people to action, why use a stick and a cane, why employ harshness and violence, why assault the ears with cacophony? In the hands of experts both approaches work. With BB his shock effects in drama work, but with his poetry I am not so sure because of its inaccessible language to many readers. As for Fonlon his essays are read with relish, and have become literary landmarks because of their noble ideas as well as felicity of expression. Therefore, “let the kite perch; let the eagle perch too” (Chinua Achebe 14). The dynamism, the vibrancy of Anglophone Cameroon literature cannot be fostered by a spirit that encourages a straightjacket mentality. Neither monolithism nor orthodoxy can be a viable way of life in a world as diverse and complex as ours today.

### **Note on Contributor**

Shadrach A. Ambanasom, generally considered the most outstanding critic of Cameroon Anglophone literature, is Professor of Literature. He is an initiated member of the American KAPPA DELTA PI, an honour society which encourages high professional, intellectual and personal standards and recognizes outstanding contributions to education. Professor Ambanasom is former Chair of the English Department, and presently the Deputy Director of ENS Bambili in the University of Bamenda. His publications include *The Radical Romantics: An Introduction* (2001), *Education of the Deprived: A Study of Four Cameroonian Playwrights* (2003), *The Dregs of Humanity* (2005), *Homage and Courtship: Romantic Stirrings of a Young Man* (2007), *Son of the Native Soil*, Third Edition (2007/2009), *Perspectives on Written Cameroon Literature in English* (2012) and numerous articles in national and international scientific journals.

**Notes**

1. Godfrey B. Tangwa *Democracy and Meritocracy* 1996, p. 30.
2. Oscar Labang, *The Trial of Bate Besong*, 2009, 60 – 64.
3. Shadrach A. Ambanasom “The Quintessence of Fonlon” and “Matter and Manner” 1990, 81 – 82.
4. Bernard Fonlon “Idea of Literature” *ABBIA* 38 – 39 – 40, 1982, 208.
5. *Ibid.*
6. See *ABBIA*, 4.
7. See *ABBIA*, 19.
8. *ABBIA*, 38 – 39 – 40, 1982, P. 209.
9. *Ibid*
10. *Ibid*

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