Dragooned into Solidarity

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Every Day Is for the Thief
by Teju Cole.
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In a recent interview with *The New York Times Book Review*, the young Nigerian writer Teju Cole said that "'the novel' is overrated, and the writers I find most interesting find ways to escape it." Cole himself may be, like the writers he most admires, not "really a novelist," though his first book, *Open City* (2011), was widely and rightly celebrated as an excellent first novel. His new book, *Every Day Is for the Thief*, though labeled a novella, is a collection of revised blog posts; this mode manages to find more interesting ways to escape "the novel"—at least the sort of novel Cole finds so uninteresting—than *Open City* did.

Cole was born to Nigerian parents in Michigan, and then raised in Lagos. In 1992 he returned to Michigan for college, and has mostly lived in New York since. Long before he became known as a writer in print, he maintained a series of popular blogs, and he continues to use such online media as Twitter to experiment with varieties of literary experience across new media. Perhaps his most popular foray online has been "Small Fates," the Twitter feed he kept up from 2011 to 2013. Looking back to the French tradition of *faits divers*, or "various things," he tweeted news briefs drawn from Lagos papers. Some of them were intentionally funny—"Pastor Ogbeke, preaching fervently during a storm in Obrura, received fire from heaven, in the form of lightning, and died"—and some were more serious—"Cholera, a bus crash, and terrorists, have killed 30, 21, and 10, in Adamawa, Ondo, and Borno, respectively." But all partook of the absurd, and his hope was that he might offer these self-contained stories as postcards from the delirium of Lagosian life.

Teju Cole

Lagos, 2013; photograph by Teju Cole

Every Day Is for the Thief is the anecdotal record of a young man, long in self-imposed exile in New York, on his first visit home to Lagos in many years. The chapters are revised versions of short essays Cole posted to a site he called *Modal Minority*. In 2007, the site was deleted with no explanation, but shortly thereafter a small publisher, Cassava Republic, in the Nigerian capital, Abuja, issued a collection of the posts, along with some of Cole's photographs, in book form. That book has now been reissued as the "cult" forerunner of *Open City*, a kind of prequel. The books, however, feel like two very different experiments with the same character, run in parallel rather than in a series.

In each book, a young "half-caste" drifts through a large city, recording his encounters in a series of vignettes that seem drowsily, almost resentfully observant. He writes as if he's been roused from the comfortable slumber of routine to chronicle a world that everybody else is too busy or self-involved to notice. He pays particular attention to what happens on the margins and in places dimly lit. The cities are different—*Open City* takes place in New York, with an extended detour to Brussels, while *Every Day Is for the Thief* happens almost entirely in Lagos, with a detour to Abuja—but the set pieces are almost identical. Both string together scenes at an Internet café, a museum, and places where historical tragedy has been inadequately memorialized—all knitted together with mixed experiences on foot and with public transportation.

The narrator of *Every Day Is for the Thief* is never named, but his biographical details overlap neatly with those of *Open City*'s Julius. Cole's novels hover in cloudy zones, but there are in both cases just enough clues to fix an outline of the narrator's life. Both were born in 1975 to a Nigerian father and a white mother. Both narrators grew up comfortably in Lagos before being sent north to a military boarding school. At fourteen, they lost their fathers. Their relationships with their mothers frayed, and, in 1992, they escaped to American universities through the goodwill of generous uncles. The narrator of *Thief* is in his first year of a psychiatric internship in a New York hospital, though he rather freely concedes his literary ambition. Julius is in his final year of what's plausibly the same program, at Columbia Presbyterian. The major superficial difference seems to be that Julius doesn't like jazz and the narrator of *Thief* is pleased to find a Lagos shop that sells jazz CDs, a place "that caters to the tastes of the minority."

Neither narrator is in actual exile, but neither is a fully enthusiastic emigrant, either. They are never quite sure what their homesickness means, or whether they deserve to feel homesick at all; they know they don't belong, and they take pride in that, along with feeling frustration. Julius contrasts his own displacement with that of the birds he watches overhead. He envies their necessary, instinctive roving, the "miracle of natural immigration." (This migratory imagery is cleverly juxtaposed with the other thing Julius sees when he looks up: men and women behind plate glass strenuously immobile on exercise bikes.) The narrator of *Thief* returns from New York to Lagos with the hope that his homesickness might there abate; his visit, he implies, might be a trial run for an actual homecoming. He describes his return, in the clinical, faux-antiquarian language common to both narrators, as "an inquiry into what it was I longed for all those times I longed for home."

On the plane to Brussels, Julius tells his seatmate that, two years earlier, he'd visited Nigeria for the first time in fifteen years. It is this visit that *Every Day Is for the Thief* seems to document, but the Nigerian experiences of the unnamed narrator, along with the blog-post form in which they were originally composed, lead him in an altogether different direction.

Thief opens with a scene that occurs in New York but is of Nigeria: the narrator is affronted by the bribe he must pay at the consulate to expedite the renewal of his passport. He makes the same sort of first impression that Julius does: prickly, and committed to his self-image as a truth-teller of unimpeachable integrity. After his arrival in Lagos he sees one minor racket at work after another, and he comments that he has "returned a stranger" to "a patronage society." When a community cannot find a way to pay police officers the wage they deserve, they find their only recourse in the abuse of their power. This system makes all human endeavor into a procession of prisoner's dilemmas, where "precisely because everyone takes a shortcut, nothing works and, for this reason, the only way to get anything done is to take another shortcut."

But the narrator comes to recognize, in relatively short order, that the locals share a more tolerant attitude toward this than is his intuitive custom. They understand these dynamics to be a natural part of the daily hustle:

> For each transaction, there is a suitable amount that helps things on their way. No one else seems to worry, as I do, that the money demanded by someone whose finger hovers over the trigger of an AK-47 is less a tip than a ransom. I feel that my worrying about it is a luxury that few can afford. For many Nigerians, the giving and receiving of bribes, tips, extortion money, or alms—the categories are fluid—is not thought of in moral terms. It is seen either as a mild irritant or as an opportunity. It is a way of getting things done, neither more nor less than what money is there for.

The narrator not only relaxes his judgment of those doing their best to survive in a corrupt system, he even comes to admire the crooked poetry of their efforts. He visits an Internet café full of e-mail scammers, called "419" offenders after the local criminal statute against fraud, spending the day pecking out their elaborate schemes. The narrator notes their long, committed hours, and doesn't hesitate to call what they do "work." He allows himself to be taken with the arabesques of their fictions. He looks over to his right at a letter being written from the "Chairman of the National Office for Petroleum Resources." "The writer," the narrator observes with some amusement,

> is a rough-looking man who is clearly chairman of nothing. There are other letters, from the heirs of fictional magnates, from the widows of oil barons, from the legal representatives of incarcerated generals, and they are such enterprising samples of narrative fiction that I realize Lagos is a city of Scheherazades. The stories unfold in ever more fanciful iterations and, as in the myth, those who tell the best stories are richly rewarded.

The narrator claims he has visited Lagos to inquire after home, but from the beginning there's a tension between the easy identification that might make him feel at home in Lagos and the distance that would permit him to write about it. His insights at the Internet café, however, put him in the mood to be circumspect about his own narrative priorities and prerogatives. His own storytelling, he realizes, is perhaps somewhat closer to the instrumental

fiction of the 419 scammers than he might initially have thought.

One morning he witnesses a car accident. The two drivers jump from their cars and begin to beat each other up. "They fight fiercely but without malice, as if this is an ancient ritual they both have to undergo, less for the right-of-way than to prove their manliness." A passerby breaks up the fight, and the narrator catches himself taking unashamed pleasure in the spectacle. "Well, this is wonderful, I think. Life hangs out here. The pungent details are all around me."

When he sees a second brawl in the same place a week later, he concedes his literary—rather than just his spectatorial—interest:

> It is an appalling way to conduct a society, yes, but I suddenly feel a vague pity for all of those writers who have to ply their trade from sleepy American suburbs, writing divorce scenes symbolized by the very slow washing of dishes. Had John Updike been African, he would have won the Nobel Prize twenty years ago.

The narrator does not want to write that clichéd dishwashing novel, which is presumably the sort of domestic artifice Cole thinks is "overrated." But neither does he want to feel as though he's taking advantage of Lagos's circuslike eventfulness to write a colorful Africa novel for Western consumption. He believes the stories of Lagos ought to be told, but recognizes that Lagos's energy comes at the cost of the sort of bourgeois stability that makes John Updike possible. He misses the quiet of New York. The din and frenzy of Lagos so overwhelm him that while there he neither reads nor writes anything—except, we know, blog posts; his only successful creative effort has been the photographs that punctuate the book. "I am not going to move back to Lagos. No way. I don't care if there are a million untold stories. I don't care if that, too, is a contribution to the atmosphere of surrender."

Open City attempted to solve Cole's problem with the artificiality of "the novel" by, first, creating a narrator that, in his biographical similarity to his creator, seems more honestly deployed than invented; and, second, by making that narrator obviously unreliable. Where the narrator of *Thief* is given pause by what he shares with the 419 scammers, *Open City*'s Julius remains inflexibly committed to his own rectitude. His version of the 419 boys are his own psychiatric patients; he remarks, toward the end of the novel, that they are "good story-tellers because they engaged in world building." But Julius draws a hard line between his own storytelling and that practiced by the unsound of mind.

Julius takes himself much more seriously than the narrator of *Thief* does. He justifies his flanerie as an exercise in paying close attention to the otherwise unheeded. It is to him "unimaginable how many small stories people all over this city carried around with them," so he places himself at the front lines of the struggle against entropy. Julius often sounds like W. G. Sebald's narrators, who concern themselves, as the narrator of *Austerlitz* says, with "the history of countless places and objects which themselves have no power of memory." But Sebald's narrators trade in self-diminishing melancholy, Cole's in self-congratulatory spleen. Julius compliments himself on his ability to recoup those lost histories.

He describes himself more than once as a good listener, and he rather ostentatiously collects the vignettes of the marginalized like charms on a bracelet: an elderly Haitian shoeshine man in the "catacombs" of Penn Station; a Liberian immigrant in a Queens detention center; an old Berliner at a photography exhibition. As the novel goes on, Cole undermines his narrator's moral self-image. Julius promises to visit his dying mentor with increasing frequency, but we know these promises will prove empty. Eventually, we learn that he was stingy with his attention in the first place; Julius, in one of his final scenes with the mentor, coldly describes his "party trick" of "seeming to be there while totally distracted."

This point—that Julius is proud to be a good noticer, all the while noticing only what conforms to his idea of what deserves notice—eventually gathers itself into a criticism of novelistic aestheticism *tout court*. Julius might have a fine eye for the details of paintings or cornices or the flight patterns of migrating birds, but he fails to notice that his next-door neighbor has lost his wife, or that a patient of his is suffering so badly she's about to kill herself. Cole underlines the latter negligence when Julius stops to peer at a "curious junco" as he's barely registering the shock of her suicide. (The repeated scenes of bird-witnessing seem like barely concealed swipes at the novelist Jonathan Franzen, a bird-watcher himself, who has repeatedly defended naturalist aestheticism as the moral precinct of the novel.) All of this culminates when Julius is confronted at a party by a female friend who tells him that long ago, at a party in Nigeria, he forced himself upon her.

Julius is a seductive presence, and this final revelation is supposed to come as a shock: we have identified with this proud flaneur, thoughtful and independent of spirit, an aesthete who writes with equal poise and effortless elegance about the paintings of John Brewster and the music of Mahler, and now we come to see that the story he has told us is shot through with narcissistic fantasy. But it doesn't really register as a shock, because we've been so well prepared for it. *Open City* was a distinguished debut novel, but insofar as it erred, it erred in being too obediently novelistic. By the end, we have been reminded too reliably of the narrator's unreliability. Cole's criticisms of his narrator feel heavy-handed and programmatic. The novel fails as a novel when it feels as though it was designed and set in motion only to drive home the point that novelistic aestheticism can be shallow. It was in trying too hard to escape "the novel" that this particular novel inadvertently enfeebled itself.

Every Day Is for the Thief, though it often feels like a slighter effort than *Open City*, successfully sidesteps this problem. Its prose can be slack—at one point the narrator comments that "it is important for a people to have something that is theirs, something to be proud of, and for such institutions to have a host of supporters"—and its connective tissue is scant. Where *Open City* pulls off the trick of making its anecdotal flanerie seamless, *Thief*, in the way of a blog, trusts its own companionability enough to do away with gluey transitions. But it is exactly that looseness, coupled with the lack of the defensiveness that Cole brought to his more novelistic novel, that makes the narrator feel much more complicated, vital, and unpredictable.

Cole's "small fates" tweets worked as dispatches because, as he once wrote, they represent "the closed circle of the story. Each small fate is complete in itself. It needs neither elaboration nor sequel." They require no fixed self as a center of narrative gravity behind them. The narrator of *Open City* spends a lot of time defending the righteousness of

Teju Cole

Self-portrait of Teju Cole, Brooklyn, 2010

the self he possesses. The narrator of *Thief* is beguiling insofar as he feels much of the time that he doesn't have to do so. The mode of a revised blog post, and the narrative consciousness it creates, is very successful here.

It's not just the online origins of this book but the facts of Lagos that inspire Cole's gentler and more forgiving attitude toward his narrator. The corruption that pervades Lagos has blurred the line between honest and dishonest work, so the narrator of *Thief* seems less anxious to defend his own flaneurial idleness as principled protest. He can look at his attentive wandering, and his writing, as another variety of the hustle, rather than an activity that grants him elevated moral status—and must therefore be brought low by his wiser creator.

Thief's narrator is also more flexible in his dealings with the various communities that might ease his sense of exile and flotation. *Open City* describes a series of situations in which Julius feels dragooned into solidarity. In one exchange, an African taxi driver is miffed that Julius hasn't greeted him as a brother. Julius finds the demand presumptuous and irritating: "I was in no mood for people who tried to lay claims on me." Julius left Lagos to live his life "on his own terms," and he finds these readymade communities unfit to shelter him. Cole's narrators are aesthetes, and it is through their aesthetic preferences, rather than their inherited circumstances, that they hope to ground their affiliations. But this frequently lands them in places where they feel uncomfortable. Julius visits Carnegie Hall and is acutely aware that he has entered an all-white space. He suspects his fellow concertgoers don't even notice the homogeneity of their surroundings.

The narrator of *Thief* returns to Lagos in part to figure out how to reconcile what he's chosen with what he's been given. He recognizes that the burden of meaningful community is a heavy one for aesthetic preferences to bear, and seeks out affiliations that might feel less effortful. He notes that his recent experiences with African art at museums in various European and American outposts were "excellent," and "what each of those places had done was create a desire in me to see this astonishing art at its best, to see it in its own home. London, New York, and Berlin had made me long for Lagos." He longs to see these works outside of quotation marks, in a setting where they will retain something of their original power—where they might inspire strong feelings of fear and awe rather than merely cerebral or aesthetic appreciation.

But when he visits Lagos's National Museum, he feels betrayed by the shabby, improvised, neglected exhibits. If these are the disappointing standards of official culture, he hopes at least to find a saving remnant. On a crowded minibus, he spies a woman reading a Michael Ondaatje novel. He wonders what kind of "eccentric" might read that book, an item that requires great effort to come by in a place that was such a "hostile environment for the life of the mind." He tries to approach her, but worries he might show that "wild look common to all those who are crazed by overidentification."

At the end of his time at the National Museum, he visits an exhibition of political advertisements. "The sequence of posters gives an impression of orderliness and continuity in Nigeria's postindependence history," ignoring the violent upheavals and epidemic corruption that have hindered the development of civil society. "What, I wonder, are the social consequences of life in a country that has no use for history?" Julius resists the too-easily extended camaraderie of his cabbie, but the narrator of *Thief* can't help but see how far such easy camaraderie, in an accountable political order, might go toward the development of a relatively young nation.

Both of Cole's narrators point out the selectivity and whitewashing that go into the production of official history. In New York, Julius finds, the legacy of slavery is something that has been officially dealt with and set aside, and part of his aim is to point out the delusions of this attitude. The narrator of *Thief*, across the Atlantic, visits the harbor from which the slave ships sailed, and observes that even now "there is no monument to the great wound." The America of *Open City* can seem like a settled and decrepit project patrolled by an attentive if self-impressed idler. The Lagos of *Thief* feels like a chaotic but open-ended affair, toured by a narrator who is in equal measure critical of and inspired by the home he's escaped. He isn't quite so sure of his own response to what he sees. The provisional, improvised, bloggy spirit of the book is winning. It reads like the sort of novel that has successfully escaped itself—which is to say, a good one. □