*Escaping the Nightmare of History: The Development of a Mythic Consciousness in West African Literature**

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IN "New Directions in African Writings," a paper presented in 1971 at the Annual Meeting of the African Studies Association,[1] Emile Snyder took a large step in defining what are now obviously two mainstreams of African literature. The paper affords considerable insight into the relationship of Armah, Awoonor and Soyinka's work,[2] yet there is an important, though implicit observation we would do well to question. Snyder begins by asserting that we can now see two "generations" of African writers, separated more by their aesthetics than their age. On the one hand we have the first generation of African writers epitomized by Achebe, and on the other the second generation epitomized by Soyinka. In making his distinction he draws comparisons with European writers, showing parallels between Achebe's work and the Victorian realistic novel and between Soyinka's work and the modern experimental novel. Certainly the writers of both "generations" have been very much influenced by European writers, and such comparisons are often useful, but we should never let this lead us away from the fact that a writer is usually writing within his own cultural milieu. In effect, the implication of the generational idea is that

*This paper was first presented at the MLA conference in New York in December 1972 [Editor].

Africa has been following the literary movements of Europe and it is doubtful that this could be fully substantiated. We must agree with Snyder that the writers of the new novels use a universal language, but it is on a level that can only be comprehended through an understanding of their particular cultures.

A key statement in Snyder's argument is that "With *The Interpreters* the African novel transcends history and enters into the realm of metaphysics."[3] If we exclude Amos Tutuola, we may agree with this observation about the novel per se, but we cannot extend it to draw conclusions about African writing in general. The metaphysics of *The Interpreters* can also be found in Soyinka's earlier work, and perhaps more importantly, in the work of Amos Tutuola.

Ten years ago in *Seven African Writers* Gerald Moore wrote what is still one of the finest essays on Amos Tutuola. But perhaps the most hazardous task any critic can undertake is to predict what the influences on future literature will or will not be. In a rather infelicitous statement at the end of this essay Moore asserted that "Tutuola's books are far more like a fascinating cul-de-sac than the beginning of anything directly useful to other writers. The cul-de-sac is full of wonders, but is nonetheless a dead end."[4] Moore was countering an earlier statement by Geoffrey Parrinder that Tutuola's work was the beginning of a new direction in African literature. At the time Moore's prognostication would have seemed the more sensible and Parrinder's the more foolish. Aside from the fact that Tutuola's books had been very unfavorably received by African critics, much of the literature that had been published in the decade between the publication of Tutuola's *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* and Moore's book was social protest. Though the emphasis shifted from colonial criticism to self-criticism, the mainstream of West African literature continued to be concerned directly with social issues treated in a realistic manner.

Bernth Lindfors has argued that Tutuola has had an influence on African writing, albeit an indirect one. In getting world recognition Tutuola opened the doors of Western publishing houses to West African writers and showed that they could write on their own terms. Still, with most critics, Lindfors insists that Tutuola's works are *sui generis,* "unique because his background, imagination, and linguistic equipment are unique."[5] Certainly it would be difficult to prove that Tutuola's language has had a direct influence on other writers, but another writer from his home town of Abeokuta, Wole Soyinka, has shown an imagination very similar to Tutuola's. Moreover, a fundamentally similar sensibility is evident in two Ghanaian writers, Kofi Awoonor and Ayi Kwei Armah. The common denominator is a mythic consciousness that orders the underlying structure of their work. Other writers, notably Chinua Achebe and Elechi Amadi, have employed myths, but an ethical consciousness, their pervading didactic purpose, has led them to structure their work in a different way.

Some definitions are now in order if we are to come to a clear understanding of the nature of the differences. Any survey of the myth scholarship done by linguists, anthropologists, folklorists, and literary critics reveals that a consensus of what the term "myth" means has never been achieved within any of these fields, let alone among them. Even a simple rehashing of the arguments that have taken place would lead us far away from our topic, so we will need to accept for the time being the following working definition of myth as a narrative that explains, explores or attempts to resolve the primary ontological, psychological and physical problems that man has recurrently faced. The essential characteristic of any myth is that in one or more ways we are led outside of a time referent.

Northrop Frye has shown that myth is one end of literary design and realism the other, the two respectively being arts of implicit metaphor and simile.[6] Myth repre-

sents an ahistorical inner reality, though that reality is necessarily revealed in objective correlatives that we can recognize and a cyclical rhythm that we can feel. On the other hand realism shows us an outer reality that is like the historical one we daily experience and is thus controlled by a corresponding continuity. To borrow Frye's terms, but employ them in a different sense than he uses them, we might say that the writer whose imagination is governed by an ethical consciousness feels the rhythm of continuity, while the writer whose imagination is governed by a mythic consciousness feels the rhythm of recurrence.

Shortly after Moore's book came out Soyinka had begun to make a similar distinction in an essay for *The American Scholar*. He saw Achebe and Tutuola as epitomizing two diametrically opposite styles, yet completely rejected the all too facile observation that the one style is sophisticated and the other primitive. Though he takes nothing away from Achebe, Soyinka understandably has more praise for Tutuola whose poetic sensibility is closer to his own and in whose writing is to be found:

> . . . a largeness that comes from an acceptance of life in all its manifestations; where other writers conceive of man's initiation only in terms of photographic rites, Tutuola goes through it as a major fact of a concurrent life cycle, as a progression from physical insufficiency, through the Quest into the very psyche of Nature. *The Palm-Wine Drinkard,* as with Fagunwa's *Ogboju Ode* and universal myth, is the epic of man's eternal restlessness, symbolized as always in a Search . . . .
> For Tutuola involves us in a coordination of the spiritual and the physical, and this is the truth of his people's concept of life. The accessories of day-to-day existence only become drawn into this cosmic embrace; they do not invalidate it . . . .[7]

In contrast he writes the following of Achebe:

> In a sense — not a pejorative one — he is a chronicler, content to follow creases and stress lines, not to impose his own rearrangement on them.
>
> . . . .
>
> There is no good and evil, however, only concepts of continuity — what works for society and what does not. And this knowledge, this magic is achieved from within society itself. The author, understanding this, has excluded all private imposition . . . .[8]

When Soyinka speaks of the writers who "conceive of man's initiation only in terms of photographic rites" he is certainly not speaking of Achebe, but rather only those writers who could not transform their anthropological and sociological material into art. Nevertheless, though he admires Achebe he is deeply excited by the mythic consciousness of Tutuola. This excitement is nowhere more clearly indicated than in a review he wrote of E. K. Ogunmola's folk opera adaptation of *The Palm-Wine Drinkard.* Soyinka had nothing but praise for Ogunmola's *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* except for the ending of the production where he was quite severe in his criticism of a slight alteration. Ogunmola has his hero wake to find that he had been dreaming, that his tapster, whom he had thought dead was in fact still alive. Soyinka complained that this ending robbed the drama of the mythic vitality of Tutuola's story: "There was no need to fear that *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* would not exact implicit acceptance on the terms of Tutuola's cosmological reality. For it did. Until the dream gimmick, it did. The production explored theatre and plumbed it to its imaginative depths; it should have retracted nothing."[9] That the criticism is a logical extension of his own creative impulse can be seen from the fact that of the four plays he published in 1963, the same year as this review, only one, *The Lion and the Jewel,* does not demand our acceptance of a "cosmological reality." In the remainder of this paper we will survey the ways in which Awoonor's and Armah's work, as well as Soyinka's explore this reality.

The most obvious way is in their use of traditional myth. Yet where this appears to be clear in the pantheon of gods in Soyinka's *A Dance of the Forest* or the mammy water figure in Awoonor's *This Earth, My Brother,* it is something that needs closer examination in the case of the trickster figure in Soyinka's *The Trials of Brother Jero* or in the ghost and cargo cult metaphors employed by Armah in *Fragments.* But appearances are deceiving and

little work has been done to study the ways in which even the obvious borrowings from traditional myth are transformed by the artists. At any rate, we may be reminded that writers like Achebe have regularly used traditional myths, but they have done so primarily within a historical perspective. These other writers have used myth in that mythic sense of movement towards time *ab originae*, towards, as it were, a utopian vision.[10] Thus in talking about his novel Awoonor has said: "I think if we go back to the festival of the senses, our destruction of things and people will cease. In a way, that long journey that Amamu takes through Nima is a journey at a very realistic level, not only at the mythical level. It is also a journey into himself, into the society — into the very entrails of his society in order to turn from it . . . It may be lonely and anguished, but it is achieved and fulfilled."[11] It would seem this is an example of what Snyder meant when he spoke of the way in which these writers internalize the collective consciousness of history into the consciousness of their characters.[12]

In his criticism as well as his creative writing Soyinka has continually made the point that the gods may change their outer appearance but they are still very much with us. He tells us that "*Sango* (Dispenser of Lightning) now chairmans the Electricity Corporation, *Ogun* (God of Iron) is the primal motor-mechanic."[13] As with Tutuola he may be having fun in doing this, but it in no way undercuts his ultimate seriousness. In *Idanre,* for example, the gods and their battles are shown to be as real and as present as the course of the seasons and the journey of the poet through the night.

The dominant images of these writers fall into two main categories, demonic and apocalyptic. Through *agon,* that is conflict and suffering, the characters are reborn into a higher state of consciousness about the human condition. In effect the conflict is between these states of consciousness indicated by two opposing clusters of images. Again

we can take our frame of reference from Awoonor who had the following to say about his images in *This Earth, My Brother*: "People have clearly pointed out the two images of the dunghill and the field of butterflies, which you may say have taken over my earlier duality. I saw the traditional society almost stupidly as a golden age, a beautiful and sinless kind of world. I no longer have that perception. I'm aware that suffering comes out of that condition. Thus I created these two images, let them fight against one another and then had the image of this woman who will eliminate the conflict and the sorrows, and almost in an atavistic sense, take us back to the primal nature, the primal good nature of all ourselves."[14] In short, the action centers around the mythic move and the image clusters are the vehicles for effecting that move.

The landscape through which the protagonists move is a scatological nightmare relieved only occasionally by a flower or a moment of respite found in the act of making love. These characters are, in a sense, shaman priests painfully aware of the ontological gap between the demonic world in which they live and the apocalyptic world they envision. It is just this gap that Soyinka has referred to as the "anguish of severance,"[15] a primal awareness of the separation of man and the gods. As these "priests" make the journey Awoonor spoke of into the entrails of society, the anguish is followed by a sense of despair, for every move that would lead them out also leads to a checkmate. We need not look any further than the titles of Armah's books to sense this: *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born, Fragments,* and the ironic *Why Are We So Blest?* Perhaps the demonic imagery is more overwhelming in Armah than in the other writers, but one does not have to get very far into either Awoonor's or Soyinka's novels to find it.

This imagery and its concomitant anguish in the psyches of the protagonists has been a real stumbling block for critics. We see only a deep sense of despair without pene-

trating into the quick of these configurations. The brilliance of Armah's language dazzles us, but it is possible to feel about *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born* the same thing that E. M. Forster felt about Joyce's *Ulysses*: ". . . it is a dogged attempt to cover the universe with mud, an inverted Victorianism, an attempt to make crossness and dirt succeed where sweetness and light failed, a simplification of the human character in the interests of Hell."[16] Perhaps this is too harsh a statement, after all we are existentialists where Forster was not. And yet we are in the embarrassing position of those nineteenth - century ethnographers who saw that the distinguishing characteristic between advanced and primitive religions was in the ability to separate the sacred and the profane. Dirt, so the argument runs, is simply a negation of the sacred.

But it is not all that simple. Mary Douglas's book, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*,[17] is suggestive of a much more revealing way we can approach Armah's work. She defines dirt as that which is out of place in an organized system; thus, the very existence of dirt implies a prior concept of order. The demonic, the scatological and the insane are categories which are outside and hence dangerous to the established structure of society. Tutuola's Unreturnable - Heaven's Town is the very antithesis of what we would expect a well-ordered society to be; the people are cruel, filthy and entirely mad. What happens in Tutuola as well as in Armah is a kind of symbolic inversion whereby the ineffable, Heaven, Utopia, the perfect society, call it what you will, gets named in terms of its opposite.

Contemplation of either the demonic or the apocalyptic is not something the mundane world can long endure. Those who persist in such contemplation are seen either as madmen or priests who exist on the margins of society. They are in touch with powers that are paradoxically baneful to society, yet also essential to the continuing vitality of the social structure. They are baneful in that they are

beyond human control, essential in that they are necessary to prevent social structures from becoming too rigid and thus dying. The marginal man by virtue of his liminality exists as a mediating agent filtering new energy into society and cushioning society from the dangers of that energy. The central characters, in the works of the writers we have been considering, all exist as liminal figures. We can now even qualify our earlier statement about Soyinka's *The Lion and the Jewel,* for even the old Bale is certainly a marginal man, a trickster who defies conventions only to give traditional life a new lease.

Usually, however, the marginal figure is more of a priest, an individual who, as a mediating agent between man and the gods, must bear more anguish than the ordinary man could live with. And while the authorial presence guides us into seeing the protagonists as priests, their societies see them as insane. When they reach the very nadir of their journeys they must devise a strategy to live with an impossible situation. As R. D. Laing has shown us, this is the essence of the schizophrenic experience. The individual caught in this situation "cannot make a move, or make no move, without being beset by contradictory and paradoxical pressures and demands, pushes and pulls both internally from himself, and externally from those around him."[18] But Laing has also shown that the individual's apparent sickness is but a reaction to the real sickness of society. Using the metaphor of the journey he has argued that the healthy individuals, the true "priests," are those who have made this journey and returned. Soyinka was aware of this same idea when he spoke of the Palm-Wine Drinkard returning "wise *only* from the stress of experience."[19] More recently he has treated the subject in his play *Madmen and Specialists* where the "madman" holds the vision of a healthy society and his son, a doctor, is bent on cutting up the society. For us as well as for these characters the world is completely turned on end. Outside it is dying of its own

corruption while in the inner world of the schizophrenic lies the seeds of regeneration both for the individual and society.

Here we have one of the most important keys to understanding the distinction between the ethical and mythic consciousness. Achebe has written a novel about a traditional priest, Ezeulu, who goes mad as a result of his conflict with his society. But the madness is seen as insurance of the society's continuity, as a lesson that "no man however great was greater than his people; that no man ever won judgement against his clan."[20] Sekoni, the engineer in Soyinka's *Interpreters,* also goes mad, but here we never lose sight of the real madness in society. Though he is eventually killed in a car accident, Sekoni emerges from his insanity as an artist whose vision remains a force among the other interpreters, even after his death. We come to know Ezeulu in much more detail than we ever know Sekoni, but in the rendering of their respective conflicts we see Ezeulu's conflict externalized and rejected and Sekoni's conflict internalized and transformed into a positive and accepted force.

As we might expect, these two different types of conflict are reflected in the language and the ways in which space and time are manipulated. Where the conflict is externalized we are in the world of objective phenomena and accordingly the language is aimed at verisimilitude; where it is internalized we enter a subjective realm, the language reflecting states of mind. Amamu, the lawyer of *This Earth, My Brother,* finds he must serve almost in the traditional role of carrier, a scapegoat who cleanses the community by carrying out all the accumulated evil and by voluntarily being sacrificed. Almost in a syncretic sense Amamu is a Christ figure wanting to let the cup pass from him, but knowing he must accept it. In a highly lyrical manner Awoonor catches this conflict employing the rhythm of the traditional drum:

> The seventh night, deep deep night of the black black land of gods and deities they will come out. First the drums to-gu to-gu to gu to to to-gu if they insist and say it must be by every means. If they insist then I shall die the death of blood I shall die the death of blood . . .
> Sometimes I rode on the back of one of the smaller ghosts gidiga gidiga, rode through centuries I cannot recall. Mother, didn't I tell you I hated the sun, father, didn't I tell you I hated the sun . . . .[21]

Soyinka is a complete master at using language this way for dramatic effect. Toward the end of *The Road,* Samson, the passenger tout, begins to shift into pidgin, indicating his possession by the dead lorry driver, Sergeant Burma, and recollections of his own past. In the opening chapter of *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born,* Armah's language captures the malaise of the man. The long, detailed description of the bus ride and the man's arrival at his job reflect the utter oppressiveness of his existence, the continuous and inescapable landscape of real and metaphorical filth.

A result of this use of language in an impressionistic and often expressionistic fashion is the relative nature that time assumes. The chronological element, if not entirely confused, is at least subordinated to the space in which the conflicts take place. While aspects of this have already been explored in several articles, a thorough comparative study has yet to be done.[22] Nevertheless, it is apparent that without a mechanism for taking us out of so-called real time the writer would not be able to establish a mythos where by definition aboriginal time must prevail.

Our main concerns in this brief survey have been first to indicate that the work of Soyinka, Awoonor, and Armah needs to be seen less as a recent development in African literature than as a mainstream, the continuity of which can be traced back to Amos Tutuola, and secondly to offer a conceptual framework with which we can approach their aesthetics. In their use of myth, demonic and apocalyptic imagery, and language they have much in common, but our typology will only be useful in so far as we recognize the

limits of our parameters. Armah, for example, draws on traditional myth far less than Soyinka. In fact, his latest work, *Why Are We So Blest?* could be seen as anti-myth, an artistic exploration of the racial ideas in Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* and *The Wretched of the Earth,* and as such, an attack on "la mystification." Nevertheless, it still falls within our definition of myth, and the language and imagery are used in the ways we have been considering. While Soyinka and Armah are working along the same axis, they may often be at different ends, the fantastic and prophetic poles that E. M. Forster has written of in *Aspects of the Novel.*[23] More than anything else these positions have to do with authorial tone. We may remember that at the fantastic end are those works where the authorial presence asserts itself quite forcibly, creating a fundamental sense of confusion and resultant humor. At the prophetic end we find a more humble authorial presence directly concerned with establishing unity, avoiding humor, and creating only incidental confusion. Armah and Awoonor clearly fall at this end of the axis and Tutuola at the other, while Soyinka continually shifts his position, being the prophet in *Idanre,* the fantasist in *The Trials of Brother Jero.* As often as not he shifts within the structure of one work, hence the serio-comic tone of *A Dance of the Forests, The Interpreters,* and *Madmen and Specialists.*

Regardless of these differences, their common sensibility leads us into worlds with which we may no longer have any daily contact. To the extent we can leave our rational baggage behind as we enter, we too may return wiser from the stress of that experience.

NOTES

[1]Emile Snyder, "New Directions in African Writings," Publication 71-92 (Waltham, Massachusetts: African Studies Association, 1971).

[2]The paper also deals with Ezekiel Mphahlele's *The Wanderers,* but that is outside the scope of this article.

[3]Snyder, p. 7.

[4]Gerald Moore, *Seven African Writers* (London: Oxford, 1962), p. 57.

[5]Bernth Lindfors, "Amos Tutuola: Debts and Assets," in *Cahiers D'Etudes Africaines,* 10, No. 38 (1970), 333.

[6]Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (New York: Atheneum, 1967), p. 136.

[7]Wole Soyinka, "From a Common Back Cloth," *The American Scholar,* 32, No. 4 (1963), 392.

[8]Soyinka, pp. 392, 394.

[9]Wole Soyinka, "Amos Tutuola on Stage," *Ibadan,* 16 (1962), 24.

[10]See Sunday O. Anozie, "Structure and Utopia in Tutuola's Palm-Wine Drinkard," *The Conch,* 2, No. 2 (1970), 80-88.

[11]Bernth Lindfors, Ian Munro, Richard Priebe, and Reinhard Sander, eds., *Palaver: Interviews with Five African Writers in Texas,* Occasional Publication No. 3 (Austin, Texas: African and Afro-American Research Institute, 1972), pp. 60 - 61.

[12]Snyder, p. 8.

[13]Soyinka, "From a Common Back Cloth," p. 390.

[14]Lindfors, Munro, et al., p. 55.

[15]Wole Soyinka, "The Fourth Stage," in *The Morality of Art,* ed. D. W. Jefferson (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969), p. 122.

[16]E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964), pp. 125-26.

[17]Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (New York: Praeger, 1966).

[18]R. D. Laing, *The Politics of Experience* (New York: Ballantine, 1967), p. 115.

[19]Soyinka, "From a Common Back Cloth," p. 392.

[20]Chinua Achebe, *Arrow of God* (New York: Doubleday, 1969), p. 261.

[21]Kofi Awoonor, *This Earth, My Brother* (New York: Doubleday, 1971), pp. 17 - 19.

[22]See Donald Ackley, *"The Interpreters," Black Orpheus,* 2, Nos. 5 and 6 (1972), 50 - 57, and Charles Larson, "Time, Space, and Description: The Tutuolan World," *The Emergence of African Literature* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1972), pp. 93 - 112.

[23]Forster, pp. 111 - 150.