

*Cross-Cultural Dialogues  
with Greek Classics:  
Walcott's "The Odyssey" and  
Soyinka's "The Bacchae of Euripides"*

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DEREK WALCOTT'S *The Odyssey* and Wole Soyinka's *The Bacchae of Euripides* represent creative attempts to revitalise Western canonical works by offering a visionary reconstruction of subterranean mythic recurrences through a creolization rooted in Caribbean folklore, on the one hand, and an exploration of the myth of Dionysos in the light of Yoruba cosmology on the other. This imaginative reshaping of literary and religious myths does not so much betray a need for classical validation as it reveals a comparative scrutinising of archetypal patterns in order to disclose "latent cross-culturalities" (Harris, "Quetzalcoatl" 40, qtd. in Maes-Jelinek 37), that is, a subterranean cross-cultural polyphonic structure. Homer's epic and Euripides' play appear as palimpsests constantly disrupted by overarching textual revisions entirely written in the spaces between the Greek words. The revelation of cross-cultural streams of myths, concepts and symbols underscores the regenerative potentiality of the original literary paradigms whose latent ambiguity, shifting meaning and archetypal qualities define them as poetic sites particularly open to creative alterations.

Walcott's and Soyinka's plays reveal an unrelenting obsession with myth and make clear its complex interaction with history. The two playwrights' poetic imagination is constantly immersed in currents of change by crossing mythological archetypes (Caribbean, Yoruba and European) with fresh historical insights and by bringing myths "into explosive contact with the rawness of the present" (Moore 169). This reactivation and creative

mutation of mythological themes reveal the two poets as both users and creators of myths: their imagination is both rooted in mythic grounds and involved in a mythopoeic dynamics of cultural cross-fertilization.

By focusing first on the literary model of *The Odyssey*, then on *The Bacchae*, I wish to bring to light the common themes of exile and problematic homecoming and their re-inscription in postcolonial terms. Indeed, these two inspirational Greek sources probe into the meaning of cultural disorientation, clash of civilisations, search for identity and recognition, and the ambiguity of character blending creativity and violence. Soyinka's and Walcott's poetic strategies, as they transform the Western original texts and translate them into an African and a Caribbean context, represent webs of linkages and correspondences intimately and ultimately reconnecting continents across the wounds of history. By juxtaposing an African perspective and a creolised version of Greek founding texts, I suggest a commonality of poetic vision which evades fixed notions of ethnic specificity and yet offers infinite creative possibilities engendered by cultural tensions.

Walcott's version of *The Odyssey* follows rather closely the outline of Homer's epic; yet under the surface of a faithful "stage version" lies a much deeper process of cross-cultural dialogue between the Old World and the New. This balance between preserving the epic spirit of Homer and activating Caribbean voices and sensibilities is foregrounded from the beginning with a "Prologue" sung by Blind Billy Blue, a blues/calypso singer, a Homeric alter ego whose verse connects two oral traditions.

The first scene, imagined by Walcott and absent from Homer's poem, shows the Greek warriors laying their weapons on a pyre in a ritual farewell to war as Odysseus expresses his longing for home. He inherits Achilles' shield after arguing with Ajax who, bitterly looking at the shield "covering" Odysseus, curses him and introduces one of the Odyssean metaphors of the play: "Bear it, you turtle! Take ten years to reach your coast" (4). Ten years later, the swineherd Eumaeus similarly addresses Odysseus: "you look like a turtle, poking out from that shell" (111); and Odysseus eludes Penelope's

question, “will you miss the sea?” by dreamily uttering, “turtles paddling the shields of their shells” (159). Just as the turtle carries its “home” on its back, Odysseus accumulates in his twenty years of wandering memories that form the very “shell” of his personality, his mythified as well as dark sides:

- ODYSSEUS: My house has dark rooms that I dare not examine.  
 PENELOPE: Where’s your house?  
 ODYSSEUS: Here. (*He touches his temple*) The crab moves with its property.  
 PENELOPE: And turtles. (131)

Walcott brings into sharp focus the ambivalent nature of homecoming and injects postcolonial concerns in the interspaces of the Western narrative: the figure of Odysseus appears as a personification of “Caribbean poetic subjectivity . . . a migrant condition perennially poised between journeying and a desire for home” (Thieme). When Odysseus is shipwrecked on Sheria, Alcinous’ kingdom, Nausicaa notices “the map of the world’s on your back. The skin’s peeling” (50). This Donne-like metaphysical conceit reflects in cartographic terms the restlessly questing Caribbean spirit longing for a “home” but at the same time resisting psychic and cultural enclosure. Odysseus’ back, like a turtle’s, represents the somatic expression of his psychic heritage: the world has become his home, his exile a “pleasure.” He has become, to quote from Tennyson’s poem, “a part of all that [he has] met,”

. . . seen and known; cities of men  
 And manners, climates, councils, governments,  
 Myself not least. (Tennyson, “Ulysses” lines 13-15, 18)

These Tennysonian accents are echoed by Anticlea, Odysseus’ mother:

Wasn’t this the promise I made you, Odysseus,  
 That in an oak’s crooked shade you would take your ease  
 Quiet as a statue, with a stone bench for your plinth,  
 That here in this orchard is where you would end your days,  
 With memories as sweet as the honeycomb’s labyrinth?  
 Now your heart heaves, not from the Cyclops’ boulders  
 But that your mother’s prophecy should come to pass?  
 (158-159)

"Quiet as a statue" expresses Odysseus' fear of stasis and the "stone bench" suggests the petrified world he would have to live in if his mother's vision were to materialize. Against the perspective of homecoming as sterile fixity come Athena's final words: "the harbour of home is what your wanderings mean" (159), echoing Menelaus' conception of home as, "God's trial. We earn home like everything else" (29).

Odysseus' exile thus represents rites of passage to his own self/home in the form of a confrontation with different types of society and spheres of existence. His first ordeal is the imprisonment on the island of the Cyclops. Walcott translates this episode into a critique of present-day totalitarian government. He signals the leap in time by having Odysseus introduce his telling as "the future is where we begin" (60) and the "Martial Chorus" sing "a thousand years in the future" (60). The Cyclops' society is presented as a timeless "era of the grey colonels" (62), where "thought is forbidden" and "History erased" (61). His one eye stands for repressive one-sidedness and spiritual blindness, his cannibalism (he eats Odysseus' companions) for his destructive power. Odysseus conceals his identity under the pseudonym "Nobody." In a society where "there is no I after the eye, no more history" (60) and where "a man becomes nothing at that hero's bidding" (61), to survive is apparently to negate one's individuality and merge into "nothingness" in order to subvert that society from the inside. But as Robert Hamner suggests in his review of the play (104-105), the linguistic constellation nobody/nowhere/nothing echoes other social and political implications. It also reflects the Caribbean historical trauma rooted in the void created by the European conquest and the institution of slavery that transported "nobodies" to a "nowhere" where their culture and individuality were reduced to "nothing." It also contradicts V.S. Naipaul's statement that "nothing was created in the West-Indies." (29). Like the Cyclops' "nation," "sheep herded in pens" (61), the Caribbean folk seemed featureless and insignificant, destined to the unproductive fate of a subject people. The slaves' adaptability, their forced assimilation of an alien culture and the silent but subterranean maintenance and development of their own

tradition, allowed them to survive in the West Indies in the same way as Odysseus' "disappearance" into a non-entity fools the Cyclops. Freed from the totalitarian/imperialist eye, Odysseus can freely utter his name:

MY NAME IS NOT NOBODY! IT'S ODYSSEUS!  
AND LEARN, YOU BLOODY TYRANTS, THAT MEN  
CAN STILL THINK! (72)

The plural "tyrants" applied to a single Cyclops reinforces his archetypal significance and further emphasises the continuity through time of man's struggle against repressive forces.

The second ordeal in Circe's "brothel" (76) represents a double rite of passage. The two Homeric divine "temptresses," Circe and Calypso, are semantically merged in a pun implied in Billy Blue's "calypso" introducing the twelfth scene on Circe's island. She reveals that Odysseus must enter Hades and find the seer Tiresias who will disclose his future. The ritual is culturally transposed into an Afro-Caribbean Shango ceremony where Zeus and Athena are invoked alongside Ogun, Erzulie and Shango. "Odysseus' eyes are wrapped in a black cloth" (88) and he is given a wooden sword "severing this world of light from one past knowing" (88) and symbolising the duality of human nature and cosmic order: "the world/the underworld", "body/soul" (88), life/death, known/unknown. As an "archetypal protagonist of the chthonic realm" (Soyinka, "Morality" 3), "the shadow of imagination" (85), he undertakes an inner voyage so that these antinomies make "each other whole" (88) and he finally reaches Ithaca with a deeper knowledge of himself. In the tradition of Amiri Baraka/Leroy Jones' *Dutchman*, Hades is transposed to the underground, "earth's stomach" (89), where Odysseus is confronted with his mother's reflection in a mirror. The dramatic use of a mirror probably alludes to the immaterial condition of the dead condemned to be reflections of their former earth-selves, but it also presents Odysseus confronted with himself as a "being inhabited by presences" (Walcott, "Muse of History" 2) belonging to his past with which he webs a dialogical relationship to reach another level of self-consciousness. The disclosure of a latent heteroglossia within the individual reflects

on a metaphorical level the underpinning “double-voicedness” of Walcott’s *Odyssey*.

These poetic voices entangled in a creative cross-cultural dialogue are dramatically rendered through the many voices and musical traditions Billy Blue represents. He assumes the part of the two Homeric blind court poets, Demodocus and Phemius, the first a poet in Scheria at Alcinous’ palace, the second in Ithaca. Significantly, Walcott displaces these two Homeric projections (Hamner, “*The Odyssey*” 103): Demodocus becomes Ithaca’s poet and Phemius the bard at the Court of King Alcinous. This fusion of three characters — the Homeric story-teller whose voice introduces *The Odyssey* and the two displaced court poets — suggests a fluid continuity of the poetic voice echoing through space and time:

Since that first blind singer, others will sing down the ages  
Of the heart in its harbour, then long years after Troy, after Troy.  
(160)

They represent crucial articulations of a larger discursive setting in which the Aegean text is constantly stretched by the Atlantic world. Just as Odysseus passes “through this world’s pillars, the gate of human knowledge” (i.e. through Hercules’ columns separating the Mediterranean sea from the Atlantic ocean; 27) and reaches for the “Other(’s)” side beyond his own cultural sphere, Phemius’ poem “will ride time to unknown archipelagoes” (59), and Demodocus, coming from “a far archipelago,” connects both worlds with a common source of imagination, “the sea [that] speaks the same language around the world’s shores” (122). The sea metaphor is a key concept in Walcott’s work, who by adapting Homer’s *The Odyssey* creatively opens up the closed Mediterranean world and expands it to the New World. The sea evokes the peculiar poetic power of the Caribbean landscape and the internal creative rhythm of the West-Indian psyche. The Caribbean Sea represents a “complex womb” (Harris, *Palace* 39) in which

a quiet culture is branching from the  
white ribs of each ancestor,  
deeper than it seems on the surface. (Walcott, *Omeros* 296)

The “sound of surf” opening the Prologue sets from the very beginning the metaphor of the sea as a poetic continuity of imaginative visions and revisions through a cross-cultural dialogue:

*Andra moi ennepe mousa polutropon hos mala polla . . .*  
 The shuttle of the sea moves back and forth on this line,  
 All night, like the surf, she shuttles and doesn't fall  
 Asleep, then her rosy fingers at dawn unstitch the design. (1)

The first verse<sup>1</sup> of Homer's *Odyssey* preserved in its original Greek form signals the cross-cultural dialogic pattern of Walcott's version. The Greek text recedes in three dots, both eroded and regenerated by the eternal flux of creativity. The tidal motion is associated with Penelope's endless weaving and unweaving of the tapestry. Wilson Harris similarly uses the Penelope figure as the symbol of the imagination's infinite creative and recreative potentialities: “She would weave it and at night unweave it, ravel and unravel, all the time . . . the fiction re-visions itself, doom re-visions itself, pre-Columbian rituals of doom re-vision themselves in a cross-cultural tapestry with ancient Greece” (“Absent Presence” 87).

Walcott's *Odyssey* appears as a palimpsestic “tapestry” in which the Aegean and Atlantic texts are intricately interwoven. It represents “a medium of spatial perception which allows for the reformulation of links both within and between cultures” (Huggan 408). As already suggested, the merging of Billy Blue and the two Homeric bards into a single but modulated poetic voice epitomizes the latent cross-cultural heteroglossia. They are the embodiments of the artist whose intuition discloses the truth and exposes Odysseus' ambiguous nature. Both Demodocus and Phemius recognize Odysseus despite his effort to conceal his identity: Phemius “heard that voice at Troy” (59) and Demodocus “never forget[s] a voice” (54). Both “can feel the truth, the way blind men sense the wind” (54). Phemius reveals that “what lasts is what's crooked. The devious man survives. . . . That's the way with tears. Crooked streams join their rivers” (54).

This double entendre reflected in the word “crooked” (dishonest and curved, twisted) translates Odysseus's ambivalent

personality: Menelaus describes him as a “smart . . . acquisitive . . . sacker of cities” whose materialistic interest is to take “his share” (32). Odysseus himself destroys the myth of his own moral perfection when he tells his story at the Court of Alcinous and depicts himself as a “devious . . . divisive . . . liar” (53-54). The Odyssean virtues defined by the recurring epithets “*polutropos*” (1), “*polumechanos, polutlas, polumeis*”<sup>2</sup> (110) are counterbalanced by their excess or perversion. These adjectives defining a positive intelligence are turned into antithetic flaws. Smartness becomes “natural cunning” (60), the man of invention (he conceived the conspiracy of the Trojan horse) becomes the “man of evasions, man skilled at lying” (110). Odysseus appears as an extension of the African and Caribbean trickster figure, an association further emphasized by his “Egyptian” nurse Eurycleia: “Nancy stories me tell you and Hodyssus . . . People don’t credit them now. Them too civilize” (8). These flaws represent the obverse of the “metis” and reveal a complexity that the Homeric Odysseus possesses but only fleetingly discloses. Walcott introduces a Nemesis element by presenting a guilt-ridden Odysseus mistaking the dead suitors for the ghosts of the Trojan war heroes, “soundless shadows . . . [a] silent Greek chorus” (151) torturing an awareness of the horror of violence from his mind: “Troy’s mulch! Troy’s rain! Wounds. Festering diseases!” (151). In his temporary “madness” (151), he nearly kills Billy Blue/Demodocus for preserving the epic tradition by translating his rejection of the war into the celebratory “Troy’s glory” (151). Odysseus’ fury reflects the thorny intricacy of history and “narrative,” of factual “reality” and its transmission through “literature.” Odysseus wants to kill the poet “for telling boys that lie!” (151), that is, for turning a reality of suffering into a glorious epic. Walcott infiltrates into the interstices of the traditional Homeric epic a critique of the genre and is, at the metafictional level, engaged in the same conflict as Odysseus with the poet, the voice of “metaphor” (121). He questions the very essence of the epic genre which, like history, deprives flesh and blood people of their “substance of life” (Harris, *Palace* 52) and petrifies them into abstractions: “one reason [he does not] like talking about an epic is that [he]



think[s] it is wrong to try to ennoble people. . . . And first to write history is wrong. History makes similes of people, but these people are their own nouns" (Walcott, qtd. in Bruckner 397).

In contradiction to his epitome of the poetic voice, Billy Blue, Walcott tarnishes Odysseus' heroic qualities, questions his sense of justice, and exposes the materialistic cause of the war by letting Helen utter: "the whole thing was not over me but some sea-tax" (31). Walcott significantly drops all allusions to the council of the Olympian gods, and Hermes' intervention on the island of Circe is replaced by Athena's offering Odysseus the moly-flower that prevents him from being transformed into a pig. Walcott "de-supernaturalises" *The Odyssey* and transforms it into an existential quest for self-definition where Odysseus, after fighting against his own dehumanised myth and being exposed in his weakness, acknowledges his responsibility for his destiny. Athena appears as an epitome of his "good conscience" leading to self-discovery: "I'm the cause of my own wretchedness?" (119), he asks her in a moment of revelation. By demythifying Odysseus and by erasing the gods' manipulating presence, he places the individual in a painful conflict with himself, with his ghosts and dark sides:

PENELOPE: Were there strange things out there?

ODYSSEUS: Monsters, God pity us.

PENELOPE: Why?

ODYSSEUS: We make them ourselves. (159-160)

Walcott's imagination creatively fluctuates between transformation and continuity, thus showing a postcolonial ambivalence which contradicts and at the same time expands the Homeric literary myth beyond the boundaries of cultural constrictions.

*The Bacchae* of Euripides provides another canonical model which Soyinka creatively appropriates and revitalises by infusing the Greek text with Yoruba metaphysical concepts as well as social and political comments. Edward Said considers *The Bacchae* of Euripides as "perhaps the most Asiatic of all the Attic dramas [where] Dionysus is explicitly connected with his Asian origins and with the strangely threatening excesses of Oriental

mysteries" (*Orientalism* 56). The play represents the meeting place of two overlapping traditions: Dionysism, an archaic cult originating from Thrace or Asia, and the Greek Eleusinian Mysteries devoted to Apollo and controlled by the authorities of the "polis," represented in the play by Pentheus, king of Thebes. Both Mysteries belong to ancient traditions of vegetation gods. Their common source of inspiration already undermines the later simplified conception of the Apollo/Dionysos dualism:

Les Mystères d'Eleusis, comme d'ailleurs le dionysianisme et l'orphisme, posent au chercheur d'innombrables problèmes, surtout d'origine et, par conséquent, d'ancienneté. Car dans chacun de ces cas, nous sommes aux prises avec des rites et des croyances extrêmement archaïques. Aucun de ces cultes initiatiques ne peut être regardé comme une création de l'esprit grec. Leurs racines plongent profondément dans la protohistoire. Des traditions crétoises, asiatiques, thraces ont été reprises, enrichies et intégrées dans un nouvel horizon religieux.

(Eliade 241-242)

Euripides' *Bacchae* relates the legend of Dionysos' return to his birthplace, Thebes, to assert his divine authority and impose his worship:

And now I come to Hellas — having taught  
All the world else my dances and my rite  
Of mysteries, to show me in men's sight  
Manifest God. (Euripides 8)

The introduction of the dionysiac cult into Greece represents a subversive, liberating force clashing with Pentheus' brutal, tyrannical regime. The king refuses to acknowledge Dionysos' divinity and violently tries to prevent the cult from spreading by imprisoning the converted Theban women who escaped from their home to live on mountain Kithairon. The power struggle between Dionysos and Pentheus reaches a first climax when the god is chained, questioned, imprisoned and then miraculously escapes. Pentheus gradually surrenders to Dionysos' hypnotising power and agrees to be led to the mountain, disguised as a bacchante, to secretly observe the Maenads. He is escorted by the god who takes a terrifying revenge by letting Agave, Pentheus' mother, and her sisters tear his body limb from limb in a state of Bacchic possession.

All these elements of the myth as adapted by Euripides are faithfully recapitulated in Soyinka's adaptation but their cultural, social and political implications are translated into a postcolonial context of liberation from an imperial centre and revitalised through a creative syncretism. Soyinka transforms Euripides' play into

an imaginative exploration of the human revolt against deathness, stagnation, the lack of renewal which runs contrary to man's visceral identity with the nature around him; an exploration which is taken to the ultimate extremism of the expression of the Life Force through a superman arrogation of the right to existence of the other.

("Between Self and System" 46)

Soyinka sets the sterile violence of Pentheus's regime against Dionysos' regenerating violence. Edward Said observes that Pentheus' "rationality is undermined by Eastern excesses, those mysteriously attractive opposites to what seem to be normal values. The difference separating East from West is symbolised by the sternness with which, at first, Pentheus rejects the hysterical bacchantes" (*Orientalism* 57).

Dionysos in the original play is thus a mediating figure between the Hellenistic and Asian cultures. He epitomises the "alien," an "other" doubly inscribed in Oriental and Western mythology. While preserving these features, Soyinka's Dionysos is modelled on the author's conception of the Yoruba god Ogun. The Euripidian opposition between Greece and Asia is here creatively disrupted by a third term, Africa. The original syncretism of dionysiac Mysteries is further reactivated by their literary re-inscription in African concepts<sup>3</sup>:

LEADER: Tribute to the holy hills of Ethiopia  
Caves of the unborn, and the dark ancestral spirits.  
Home  
Of primal drums round which the dead and living  
Dance. (248)

Soyinka expands Euripides' geographical topoi to include Africa and inserts in the interspaces of the original text the Yoruba metaphysical conception of time and human existence based on "the principle of continuity inherent in myths of ori-

gin, secular or cosmic" ("Morality" 11), that is, the fluid movements of transition between the "various realms of existence . . . ancestor, living and unborn" ("Morality" 4).

Soyinka focuses on the revolutionary political dimension of the original text and the class struggle it implies through the mutation of the Greek chorus and its leader into a slaves' chorus led by a subversive personality. As a force opposed to Pentheus' dictatorial order, Dionysos represents "a scent of freedom" (236), the "free spirit, soul of liberty, seed of the new order" (271): "nature [which] has joined forces with . . . [the] slaves, helots [and women], the near and distant dispossessed" (240) to break "the barrier of age, the barrier of sex or slave and master" (235). The slaves' leader associates the hills and the vines with freedom and "the air of Thebes" (237) with sterility. He rejects the elitist "yearly Feast of Eleusis" (237) sponsored by the State and dominated by the priests:

LEADER: Why us? Why always us?

HERDSMAN: Why not?

LEADER: Because the rites bring us nothing! Let those who profit bear the burden of the old year dying. (237)

The cleansing ceremonies have been perverted into "unspeakable rites" (237): the symbolic "killing" of the old year is violently materialised in the annual flogging to death of an aged slave. Soyinka introduces the revolutionary idiom by displacing the sacrifice of the slave onto the ritualistic murder of the king. The actual death of Pentheus is the necessary dramatic act by which Thebes can be politically and socially freed and reunified within a communal spirit of equality. By hitting the old slave to death (263-264), the tyrant's "profanity" of the "symbolic rite" reflects his government's "desecrations and outrages, about to receive an equally violent purgation" (Wright 63) and be replaced by "a new remorseless order" (240). The dionysiac cult indeed instils in man the recognition of the intrinsic nature of his freedom:

SLAVE: Currents.

Laws, Eternal Causes.

SLAVE: But they are born in the blood

Unarguable, observed and preserved before time . . .

LEADER: As freedom. No teaching implant it  
 No divine revelation at the altar.  
 It is knotted in the blood, a covenant from birth.  
 (292-293)

To an imperialist system of exploitation based on slavery, Soyinka opposes a Hegelian conception of man's freedom. The conflict between these two antinomic conceptions is personified in the Pentheus/Dionysos confrontation: the "free spirit of life" which miraculously breaks chains is opposed to the "man of chains" whose "world is bound in manacles" (284).

The "revolutionary" character of *The Bacchae* was already implied in Euripides' play: Dionysos is presented as the god of the common folk, despised and banned by the ruling class for advocating a communal egalitarianism in harmony with nature. "The most revolutionary of the Greek tragic poets, Euripides, attacks the class distinctions between men . . . in a sententiously constructed verse . . . a noble slave is nowise inferior to a free man" (Auerbach 285):

No grudge hath he of the great;  
 No scorn of the mean estate;  
 But to all that liveth His wine he giveth,  
 Griefless, immaculate. (Euripides 26)

According to Soyinka,

Euripides equates the liberation of the human psyche with a harmonious resolution in nature, thereby side-stepping, or at least subjecting the importance of a seeming situation of anarchy to that larger man-nature-community inter-related renewal . . . Revolution, as idiom of the theatre and explication of Nature itself is, in my opinion, at the heart of *The Bacchae* of Euripides. ("Between Self and System" 45)

In the opening scene of Soyinka's *The Bacchae of Euripides*, the priest Tiresias takes over the role of the scapegoat and receives himself the "symbolic flogging" given by overseers who can no longer tell "the difference between ritual and reality" (241). His "extreme self-sacrifice" represents an individual attempt at spiritual regeneration. The wounds on his lashed body mirror his psychic and social transformation from an agent of a decaying State to a life- and nature-adoring devotee:

Perhaps those lashes did begin something.  
 . . . feel a small crack in the dead crust of the soul. (244)

The cracking of his skin and soul announces a spiritual rebirth through the recognition of the essential creative/destructive life-principle. Through the revelation of "what flesh is made of . . . [w]hat suffering is" (243), through the intense and innermost feeling of "life . . . its force," Tiresias reaches a superior spiritual dimension and passes "into the universal energy of renewal . . . like some heroes or gods [he] could name" (243). He forsakes the "futile role" of a "tantalised psychic intermediary, poor agent of the gods through whom everything passes but nothing touches" (243) and enters the entranced state of the "Bakchoi", an incarnation of the god, released from social and psychological restraints. He embodies Soyinka's conception of

divine enlargement of the human condition [that] should be viewed dramatically through man. The mode for this is Ritual. The medium is Man. Ritual equates the divine (superhuman) dimension with the communal will, fusing the social with the spiritual . . . The progression from Eleusis to Kithairon (and vice versa, historically) is as much a part of the dynamics of social change — even priesthood opportunism is part of the story — as it is a continuous human search to relate more integrally to Nature. ("Between Self and System" 48-49)

Soyinka refashions Dionysos' features according to his earlier interpretation of Ogun, the creative/destructive suffering god who, like Agave, slaughtered his own kin. Both gods' effect on mankind is beneficial and malevolent, "most terrible, most gentle to mankind" (290), "most fearful, yet to man most soft of mood" (Euripides 52). Dionysos is described in Ogunian terms: he is the "creative flint" (251), the "god of seven paths" (295) who

. . . makes an anvil of the mountain-peaks  
 Hammers forth a thunderous will. (251)

Similarly, Ogun, "Him of the Seven Paths" (*Ogun Abibiman* 6), is the god of iron and metallurgy and embodies the "combative will within the cosmic embrace of the transitional gulf" ("Fourth Stage" 150). In "The Fourth Stage," Soyinka precisely enunciates the similitudes between the two myths and thereby,

as Maes-Jelinek remarks, points to “a kind of ontological cross-culturalism which subverts and dismantles Western assumptions of a superior cultural heritage” (37):

Dionysos’ thyrsus is physically and functionally paralleled by the opa Ogun borne by the male devotees of Ogun. . . . A dog is slaughtered in sacrifice, and the mock-struggle of the head priest and his acolytes for the carcass, during which it is literally torn limb from limb, inevitably brings to mind the dismemberment of Zagreus, son of Zeus. Most significant of all is the brotherhood of the palm and the ivy. The mystery of the wine of palm, bled straight from the tree and potent without further ministrations, is a miracle of nature acquiring symbolic significance in the Mysteries of Ogun. For it was instrumental in the tragic error of the god and his sequent Passion. (“Fourth Stage” 158-159)

Soyinka also refers to the “Dionysian-Apollonian-Promethean essence of Ogun” (“Fourth Stage” 157), a blended archetypal ancestry reflected in Dionysos’ “mesh of elements reconcil(ing) a warring universe” (251). In his Ogunian thus “dearyanized” (Zabus 205) incarnation, Dionysos represents a harmonising balance of extreme opposites and an enlightener and catalyst of human potentialities:

TIRESIAS: He frees the mind  
 Expands and fills it with uplifting visions . . .  
 Dionysos grants self-knowledge. (260-261)

The existential dimension of his Mysteries lies in the revelation of the totality of divine, human and natural experience. The recognition of “the bond of ether and flesh, earth and the breath inside [man] . . . melt[s] as wax the wilful barriers of the human mind,” leading to “the end of separation between man and man” (265). He mercilessly engages Pentheus in a “death-hunt of the self” (301) to punish him for violently rejecting “an essence that will not exclude, nor be excluded” (235) and for refusing to recognise the “real stature of man,” his absolute intrinsic freedom, the “richest essence of all — [the] inner essence” (255). Mortal through his mother, divine through his father and animal through his multiple avatars, Dionysos embodies the unity of the three essences. His cult dissolves the barriers between man and beast: women suckle cubs, they

dismember cows thinking they are men, Pentheus mistakes the god for a bull and Agave massacres her son believing she is killing a lion. Dionysos died as a mortal to be reborn as a deity, thereby soothing the "anguish of this severance, the fragmentation of essence from self" ("Fourth Stage" 145) that Soyinka describes as the root of Yoruba tragedy.

Soyinka's interpretation and reshaping of both Dionysos' and Ogun's myth are greatly influenced by Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*. Nietzsche presents Apollo and Dionysos as independent powers and "art-impulses of nature" (29), "involving perpetual conflicts with only periodically intervening reconciliations" (21). These two "heterogeneous tendencies" are set in a dialectical relationship, "continually inciting each other to new and more powerful births" (21). Both forces are in balance and their interaction catalyses a unity possessing greater energy and complexity than either pole. Nietzsche describes Dionysos as an elemental force of change related to nature's cycles of death and regeneration. He associates him with the "powerful approach of spring penetrating all nature with joy" (26). He also describes him as a contradictory force bringing forth creation and destruction, triumph and pain: "the curious blending and duality in the emotions of the Dionysian revellers reminds one . . . that pains beget joy, that jubilation wrings painful sounds out of the breast. From the highest joy sounds the cry of horror or the yearning wail over an irretrievable loss" (31).

The intrinsically contradictory character of man and nature, that is, the fusion of antinomies such as peace and violence, beauty and horror, life and death, are personified in Dionysos and Ogun. Both suffer and murder, both experience in themselves "the primordial contradiction concealed in the essence of things, i.e. [they] trespass and suffer" (79) and both represent the "sublime view of *active sin*" (78). Ogun's essence as "the first symbol of the alliance of disparities" ("Fourth Stage" 146) represents an undercurrent of energy constantly flowing between opposite poles and generating a synthesis of contradictions. Soyinka changes Euripides' apocalyptic finale (horrified at the god's revenge, Agave rejects Dionysos and is sent into exile) into a "Communion Rite" when wine, not blood spurts



from Pentheus' severed head in a miraculous "transubstantiation in reverse" (Swan 285, qtd. in Harris, "Judgement" 23) regenerating the community. The tyrant's blood is turned into the dionysiac substance of life, a miracle reversing the eucharistic transformation of wine into Christ's blood. Soyinka adapts the Nietzschean "necessity of crime" by which "men acquire the best and the highest" (*Birth of Tragedy* 78-79) to Yoruba philosophical and ritual concepts, and he shapes his own conception of personal and communal regeneration through the unwilling sacrifice of the individual. Pentheus's dismemberment re-enacts Dionysios's passion as the necessary sacrifice which enables Thebes "to embrace a new vitality" (*Bacchae* 252). It belongs to the endless cycle of creation and destruction, the intrinsic cosmic rhythm:

TIRESIAS: Perhaps . . . perhaps our life-sustaining earth  
 Demands . . . a little more . . . sometimes, a more  
 Than token offering for her own needful  
 renewal. (306)

Soyinka's adaptation of the Ogun myth represents both an aesthetic endeavour and an epistemological design: it offers to a society in search of self-definition the philosophical model of a regenerating transformation through an act of the individual will. The tension between stasis and disruption as epitomised in the divine pair Ogun/Obatala<sup>4</sup> catalyses a dynamics capable of energising man (and implicitly society) up to a higher level of self-consciousness: "*many facets of experience in the process of catalysing the status quo* into a new level of society are understandable and explicable through a recourse to myth" ("Who's Afraid" 73). According to Soyinka, the mythic "society" of the Yoruba gods "manifests the familiar Hegelian tension . . . the apparent stasis as symbolised in Obatala's serenity, contradicted and acted upon when events demand by the revolutionary Ogun" ("Who's Afraid" 73). This acknowledged influence of Hegel's historicism on Soyinka's interpretation of Yoruba metaphysics is, however, limited.

According to Hegel, "world history is governed by an ultimate design, that is a rational process . . . a necessary evolution of the world spirit . . . whose rationality is not that of a particular

subject but a divine and absolute reason . . . . A divine will rules supreme and is strong enough to determine the overall content" (28-29, 30).

Whereas Hegel's conception is fundamentally Christian essentialist and presents reason and a divine absolute as the "ultimate rational" plan behind the chaos of individual actions, Soyinka perceives history as a "recurrent cycle of human stupidity" ("Writer in a Modern African State" 20) that can only be disrupted through the necessary sacrifice of the individual who, inspired by the contradictory creative-destructive impulse, achieves a violent breakthrough of consciousness. His metaphysics does not reflect a deep religious belief, but rather rests on an aesthetics closer to the conception of a new humanism than to a transcendental faith. He radically diverges from Hegel's belief in a divine essence of absolute perfection. His tragic vision of a dual human nature is reflected in the Yoruba pantheon of anthropomorphic divinities conceived within the context of human fallibility: "the Yoruba religion is one of the most humanistic religions because the gods act as the humans" (*Supernatural* 14). Hegel also considers that "the highest value is that of change itself" (125). The "impulse of perfectibility . . . incompatible with the idea of a peaceful stability" (125) allows man to reach a "new stage of development" (32) through a "spiritual rejuvenation" (33) achieved through the death of his stultified self: "for out of death, new life arises . . . the spirit rises again, not only rejuvenated but also enhanced and transfigured . . . it emerges as a purified spirit from the ashes of its earlier form" (33). But whereas Hegel sees man as "the antithesis of nature . . . a being who raises himself up into a second world . . . the province of the spirit" (44), Soyinka perceives men, gods, spirits, and nature as existing "within a cosmic totality" where man "possess[es] a consciousness in which his own earth being, his gravity bound apprehension of self [is] inseparable from the entire cosmic phenomenon" ("Morality" 3).

Through the exploration of the transformative and therefore fertile potentialities of myth, both Soyinka and Walcott transcend the static character of tradition and enter a syncretic dimension of creativity capable of engendering a new cultural

ethos. This acute yearning for a communal identity is reflected in the artist figures conceived as the heralds and initiators of a new existential and cultural awareness. Odysseus and Dionysos (and Ogun) appear as embodiments of the artistic will to overcome stasis and a consolidating discourse, to resist spiritual enclosure and to recover a pristine oneness with nature. *The Odyssey* and *The Bacchae of Euripides* signal a strong belief in the individual's regenerating effects on a community: the three Homeric alter egos, the communal poetic voices, ensure the continuity and creative transformation of mythical traditions across the seas; and Pentheus's blood turned into wine symbolises communal renewal, even if it is still "every man's actions [that] save or damn him" (*Bacchae* 242). Both Walcott and Soyinka deconstruct their main protagonists by exposing their moral ambiguity: Odysseus's and Dionysos's murderous revenge reveals their terrifying destructive side. Their contrasted virtues and moral flaws give them a human dimension that prevents their petrification into monolithic abstractions. They are both restless "wanderers," exiled from their home and traditions, whose problematic homecoming symbolises the ambivalent condition of the artist, eternally poised between a craving for cultural belonging and therefore fixity, and a desire, "To follow knowledge like a sinking star, / Beyond the utmost bound of human thought" (Tennyson, "Ulysses" lines 31-2), that is, to constantly question and catalyse cultural assumptions through the exploration of latent cross-cultural rhythms to reach a regenerating syncretic vision. As postcolonial artists, Walcott and Soyinka are involved in a restless literary quest for mythological symbols that release a creative energy and thereby reactivate both West Indian and African cultures and the Western canon. Soyinka considers Dionysos as "a universal paradigm for the artist — the dramatic artist that is, as illusionist, conjurer, agent of release and control, a medium of primordial chaos yet midwife of beginnings" ("Between Self and System" 46-47). The artist "shapes a new future, although doing it symbolically through art" (*Supernatural* 5), he/she is "the visionary . . . who inherit[s], or at least deserve[s] to inherit the earth" (*Supernatural* 5). Similarly, Walcott uses the archetypal figure of

Odysseus as “a representative of the travelling West Indian poetic spirit . . . and fluid imagination that resist closure, unitary definition and . . . home” (Thieme). But whereas Soyinka returns to ancient Yoruba myths and discovers an underlying universality in the latent correspondences between African, European, and Asian symbols, Walcott, like Odysseus, reaches for “new beginnings” in a creative apprehension of the metaphorical powers of the sea which bridges continents and civilisations through the fluid continuity yet Protean nature of the human imagination.

Beyond their different political agendas and poetic strategies, Walcott and Soyinka emphasise the need for individual self-discovery and offer a humanistic, syncretic and cross-cultural vision capable of transcending stultifying conventional values and enforced discourses. Both writers see moral and existential regeneration in “a memory of imagination” (Walcott, “Muse of History” 25), a “creative (or re-creative) imagination” compensating for “historical ‘data’(sic) [which] is permanently, irretrievably and irrevocably incomplete” (Soyinka, “Who’s Afraid” 62).

#### NOTES

- 1 “The hero of the tale, which I beg the muse to help tell, is that resourceful man,” Homer 1.
- 2 “Polutropos” and “polumechanos” mean resourceful, shrewd, but also shifty and full of tricks; “polutlas” means enduring much; and “polumetis” refers to Odysseus’ archetypal quality, his exceptional cleverness.
- 3 My contention that Soyinka’s version of *The Bacchae* is inscribed in a larger syncretic context has been confirmed and closely analysed by Chantal Zabus in “The Yoruba Bacchae.”
- 4 Ogun and Obatala symbolise the essence of creation versus the “essence of quietude and harmony” (“Morality” 13). Soyinka’s interpretation of this essential duality is strongly reminiscent of Nietzsche’s Dionysos/Apollo opposition.

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