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The Word Within the Word: Wole Soyinka's Perspective

The car radio sputtered the news only slightly louder than the usual static, "Wo. . ." the announcer was having trouble with this one. "*Wally* Soyinka has been awarded the Nobel prize for literature in 1986." *Wally*? This name brought on an image of Beaver's older brother. It was a pleasant image, and I could imagine thousands of listeners simultaneously making a similar mental connection and smiling just a little. Would Wole Soyinka, the first African to win this prestigious award also smile at his new American name?

To answer this question we must necessarily reach a perspective where we can see not only his artistic vision, but we must also understand several elements of the metaphysical basis that underlies his view of art and its relationship to society. Any cross-cultural understanding of Wole Soyinka's drama draws one fully into the traditions of the Yoruba people of Western Nigeria. Their artistic aesthetics and the traditions they stem from are largely unfamiliar to the Western mind, and they are grounded in a metaphysical system that is in many respects fundamentally different from our own.

In the Yoruba metaphysical system the realm of the Gods, the unborn, the dead, and that of the living coexist at any moment of earthly time. Although they exist simultaneously they are separated from each other by a dangerous abyss. While within this system communication is possible between each realm through special individuals who act as mediators between the coexistent planes, movement from one plane to the next has always been fraught with perils. An attempt by the individual to bridge the plane where he presently exists to the next plane is a direct challenge to the jealous, chthonic powers that guard each abyss. During transition the abyss becomes a battleground where the chthonic powers match their collective strength against that of the individual human will.

In the Yoruba tradition, any attempt to bridge the abyss becomes an act of hubris, and within their metaphysical system it is as much an act of hubris to die as it is to be born. The hubristic nature of these rites of passage become a strong element and a driving force behind Soyinka's view of tragic drama and its relationship to his society.

In Wole Soyinka's vision, the transition of human will across the abyss is difficult and dangerous at the best of times. Far from the best of times, the current rites of passage are inextricably complicated by a profanation of the sacred realm. This came about in several ways. First, the traditional Yoruba religion — a richly complex animism — has been deeply eroded by the influence of Christianity, creating a syncretistic religion that is largely ineffectual. Secondly, those individuals who once mediated between the domain of the living and the other realms have not only reflected this ineffectuality, but by connecting the sacred realm to their position outside of the sacred space they have polluted the sacred realm. Finally, the many and varied effects of the British colonial system on the outer lives and the inner psyches of the Yoruba people has led to profanation of the previously sacred aspects of their relationship to each other.

The effects of this metaphysical pollution are most easily seen at the inherently dangerous points of transition with tragic results. Where once the transitions from one realm to the next moved the individual ever nearer the ancestral plane, this has been often replaced by a diabolical and tormented cycle of birth and death.

In his drama and poetry, it is this world, literally pregnant with stillborns and mutations, that Wole Soyinka portrays: a land where Abiku, the spirit child whose fate is a recurrent cycle of death and rebirth, comes to his mother again and again. Soyinka suggests that not even the ritual mutilation of the dead child with a heated shell's sharpened fragment can dissuade the return of the especially stubborn Abiku. Those who were particularly insouciant sometimes return as novelist Chinua Achebe tells us, "carrying the stamp of their mutilation." This world of metastasis is similarly filled with the physically deformed and the morally corrupt.

This profanation of the rites of passage also carries implications connected to the political situation in modern Nigeria. With each new government comes expectations for a new life and vitality, but in each case these expectations die in the womb.

Soyinka's work often suggests that the neuroses born in the colonial process are given new animation in Nigeria's current leadership. The autocratic prestige previously associated with the colonial ruler has been unconsciously incorporated and is given even more monstrous form by the new masters — men whose will to power is nearly disengaged from any reasonable accountability. It is a common feature of Soyinka's plays to see politics and law as primarily instruments of repression and torture to the populace. While he sees the psyche of Nigerian society affected by the worst aspects of the colonial culture, those more material aspects of Western society that might have been a positive contribution also suffer from the metaphysical breakdown that affects the birth and death cycle. In Soyinka's play, *The Road*, his tragic

character professor ties these ideas together when he says, “[A lorry] dragged alongside, and after an eternity it pulled to the front swaying from side to side, pregnant with stillborns. Underline — with stillborns.” (*Plays 1* 196)

The breakdown that led to the destruction of Yoruba moral character has a similar effect on the impersonal world of machines; as the birth process is transposed to the physical plane, the metaphysical breakdown causes dissolution of physical object.

Things fall apart.

The mechanical world in Wole Soyinka’s artistic vision is crumbling to pieces. If there is a building here, it is rotting away by the moment; a car, it is rusted, broken or the wheels are about to come off. Everything that is built is in a constant state of decay.

The Yoruba God who rules the world of machine is Ogun, and the metaphysical pollution has reached even to His realm. The importance of Ogun to Wole Soyinka is hard to overestimate. Ogun is the God of machine and metal, of war, of artistry and creativity, and He is the God of the road. To Wole Soyinka, He is both muse and a major symbol around which much of his artistic vision revolves. In the Yoruba metaphysics it is Ogun who first crossed the abyss to reach the domain of the living, and for this reason He becomes a fitting representative in Yoruba drama for the living in their attempt to cross the abyss at their death. Before Ogun’s quest through the chthonic gulf, humanity had been completely separated from the realm of the Gods by an abyss that defied any attempt at transition. Ogun’s quest to reconnect the realm of the Gods to the plane of the living not only redeemed humanity, it also symbolically brought an order to chaotic elements in the earth itself. From ores came metals, and from metals came the machines — artifacts directly stemming from His successful quest.

Yoruba metaphysics holds that the individual’s spirit is essentially fragmented with a split occurring between one’s current condition and one’s essence. There is a sense of loss that comes from humanity’s perceived separation from the eternal. As the individual stands before the infernal gulfs of transition there occurs a recognition that only through the dangerous transition across the abyss can wholeness be attained. While one cannot wish away this gulf, one can through sacrifices weaken its effect and achieve a closer marriage between one’s essence and sense of self. (*Myth* 140-151)

Soyinka’s use of tragedy through its construction around Ogun moves individuals to that point where their primal spirituality momentarily confronts the chthonic powers of the abyss. At the final point in Soyinka’s tragic drama, individuals recognize that their will can prevail over the forces of dissolution. As Ogun can overcome the numinous powers of dissolution by His will alone, so individuals realize that their

will can defeat the chthonic powers of the abyss. At this instant of recognition individuals feel a momentary release from the sense of separation at the center of their beings.

Perhaps Wole Soyinka makes his greatest use of Ogun as symbol in his outstanding tragedy, *The Road*. Ogun, the God of the road, demands sacrifices, but rather than sacrifices we see Professor hoping to receive rather than give. In contrast, we hear Samson — recognizing that withholding from Ogun the required sacrifice carries an inherent danger — say, “When other drivers go out of the way to kill a dog, Kotonu nearly somersaults the lorry trying to avoid a flea-racked mongrel. Why, I ask him, why? Don’t you know a dog is Ogun’s meat? Take warning Kotonu. Before it’s too late take warning and kill us a dog.” (*Plays I* 165)

Professor enters the play with a road-sign bearing a single word, BEND, and he refers to his find, “God God God but there is a mystery in everything. . . this word was growing, it was growing from the earth until I plucked it. . . (*Plays I* 157). He is engaging in a cabalistic quest set against a backdrop of syncretistic religious faith and decaying society. He seeks the Word in every possible location and situation for he realizes from the outset that this hidden Word will give him the power of the Gods. The Word he searches for can be found in many different religions. Its formulation will echo the Word of the Johannean logos: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” It is also the Word of greatest power in the Yoruba pantheon — a sacred Word guarded by Ogun.

The Road literally overflows with various homeopathic and contagious magical elements of Yoruba dramatic ritual. Yet here they are turned in upon themselves in a dangerous and convoluted manner. This rather bleak perspective is tempered by elements of satire, clever dramatic interaction, and occasional comic relief; yet the drama never loses focus. It is at bottom a serious quest that sustains and moves the drama beyond its comedic aspects and reveals in its unfolding complexities many serious issues in Yoruba society. Beyond his occasional comical aspects, Professor serves as mediator to a liminal society, and his mediation is profane and unlawful. His words are twisted and broken from the start, and his latent apostasy moves in a spiral outwards towards ever greater heresy as the drama progresses. Through his cabalistic search and a variety of magical rites the Professor approaches the Word only to have the elusive Word of power slip away. His hubris grows as the play unfolds until, while perpetrating a final act of hubris against the Gods, he is killed. Soyinka’s treatment of the Word throughout this play can be seen as moving through its cabalistic transposition to a more mathematical conception. This hints at an Augustinian breakdown between signified and signifier that grows more complete later in his dramatic vision.

While *The Road* carries a lighter tone in its treatment of a variety of serious subjects, an exegesis of Soyinka's *Madmen and Specialists (Plays II)* reveals a turn in his later drama to a view of the human condition that is profoundly dismal and nearly without hope. In this later play the magical elements are more than simply twisted and perilous, they lead to ever greater evil and utter depravity. In *Madmen and Specialists* we see a world of grays, a place where sickness and deformity is the rule. It is a world of madness and mutilation. In this bleak and terrifying world the breakdown of the word becomes more complete.

As Was the Beginning, As is, Now,
As Ever shall be. . . world without. . .

(*Plays II* 241)

As is used in this context as a new *Gloria Patri* carrying both promise and negation. It takes on a liturgical significance, not only taking on the aspect of a Holy Word, but actually being seen as equivalent with God. As in this context implies a fatalism, and as it becomes a part of the inverted liturgy of a black mass it becomes fully demonic in implication.

Soyinka's view of politics in this later play is extremely pessimistic. Here we see the excesses and evils of those in power grow as the play progresses until even at the point of cannibalism the leaders feel a strong inner drive towards some greater depravity. Dr. Bero in this drama approaches a megalomania by the play's finale where he actually begins to conceive of himself as a God. The Old Man understands more clearly than Dr. Bero that once one's feet are set upon a path to greater depravity there is always one step further, a greater evil to perform.

As *Madmen and Specialists* reflects the disintegration of character and moral fiber in society, the breakdown of language in the play also carries a special implication when the Old Man and chorus start their chanting game, ". . . the tick of politics, the mock of democracy, the mar of marxism, a tic of the fanatic, the boo in Buddhism, the ham in Mohammed. . ." (*Plays II* 275). Here each word carries its own personal contradiction. With this breakdown of the word comes the realization that every element of society based on the clear meaning of words is in jeopardy.

Without a doubt, Wole Soyinka's view of Yoruba culture is pessimistic and growing darker as the years pass, yet it is not without a ray of hope. Even at its most dismal moments there is the theme of eternal return with its hopeful implications. There is his use of Ogun as muse and central motif that welds into his artistic vision the hope inherent in Ogun's creativity, as well as the promise His victory over the chthonic gulf holds for our human situation. The anthropomorphic nature of the Gods of the Yoruba pantheon — Ogun Himself has human qualities — makes Soyinka's art as

much as anything else human, and being human it holds all of the complexities and possibilities of the human condition.

If there is one aspect of his art that I appreciate more than any other, it would be the rich tapestry of colors and patterns that open up just beneath the surface of his drama. While there is the pessimism of metastasis in both the individual and society, there is the courage of Ogun's quest across the gulf of dissolution to reconnect God and humanity in counterpoise. If eventually Ogun's current preeminence is succeeded by Sango — God of lighting and all electricity — as Soyinka has suggested is occurring in the Western culture, I hope that the theater revolving around Sango would hold as many possibilities as Wole Soyinka finds in Ogun.

This idea of electricity reminds me of my radio, and the question of the new name. Maybe its Anglicization into *Wally* might call to his mind the colonial experience, or possible the *Wo* in Wole might catch his ear. In relection, I'm not sure if he would smile at the new name, but I'm confident that he would find it interesting.

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