MYTHOLOGY AND THE AFRICAN NOVEL

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis is essentially a 'second reading' of a selection of contemporary African novels of which mythology forms a significant but, in criticism, largely neglected feature. This negligence owes a great deal to the prevailing attitude that modern African fiction is more concerned with the depiction of and commentary on contemporary socio-political realities than with making aesthetic impacts; and that the presence of mythological materials is either ornamental (providing 'atmosphere') or symptomatic of atavistic indulgence.

Conversely, the present study seeks to show how certain African novelists have approached the myths and mythopoeic traditions in (as well as outside) their societies in terms of a mythic imagination, thereby sustaining the social and aesthetic concerns of the novel in a particularly African sense and milieu. The study is in five "Parts", the first of which looks at the general problem of 'myth-criticism', and of myths in African fictions; as well as defining its own objectives. Each of the remaining four parts looks at two novels that illustrate particular perspectives on the structural and aesthetic functions of myths, as well as the creative engagement of the mythic and historical consciousness within the context of the contemporary experience in Africa.

Thus, "Part two" sees Awoonor's This Earth, My Brother and Soyinka's The Interpreters from the perspective of the 'Search for a form', while "Part three" focuses on the 'search for community' in Soyinka's Season of Anomy and Armah's Fragments. The fourth and fifth parts concentrate on relationships between myth, history and ideology in Armah's Two Thousand Seasons and Ouloguem's Bound to Violence on the one hand, and Ngugi's A Grain of Wheat and Petals of Blood on the other.

In conclusion therefore, we observe that these works, especially, have been largely misrepresented by the exclusivist tendencies of 'formalism' and 'socialist realism' as critical approaches to the contemporary African fictions.

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CONTENTS

PART ONE

INTRODUCTION

[A]n interest in the creative literature
of our century forces upon us an interest
in myth.

(Richard Chase)

I,(i) Myth, Meanings and Literary Criticism

Perhaps the most daunting and elusive challenge to savants of cultural philosophies, is one of the primal kinds of cultural expression that has for ages passed as "myth". To the Classical mind, myth was a term applicable only to the Greek traditional tales about the gods, heroes and (unproven but popularly believed) events that constitute the foundation and expression of Hellenism. But, in time and with the broadening spectrum of intellectual interests, there have occurred corresponding diversifications in the concept and interpretation of myth favoured by the classicists. The progressive release of the idea of myth (in modern times) from the restrictions of classicism, however, results in a plurality that is no less baffling than when the philosophers of the Greek Enlightenment sought to explain what the "traditional tales" were about.[1]

Modern studies, especially in anthropology, psychology and comparative religion, have consistently sought to demonstrate their respective stakes in myth. Thus,we have a bewildering array of disparate and often contentious meanings of it. The word "myth" becomes so loaded with connotations that it could "mean" anything from a narrative associated with rite (J.E.Harrison, & the "Cambridge School"), to an autonomous - purely fictive - form of consciousness (Thomas Cassirer); or, from primitive man's crude attempt at a scientific or philosophic explanation of natural phenomena and the recurrent cycle of life (J.G.Frazer), to a symbolic escape-hatch for the jelly-hearted from the harsh realities of psychological stress forced upon modern man by the giddy pace of change (Philip Rahv).[2] Between these poles lie further gradations, each expertly applied to suit the moral -- ideological persuasion, convenience or scholastic commitment of which ever party is dealing with myth. In that case, it is possible to

speak of, say, anthropological, psychological, anagogical or poetic-literary meanings without, of course, pretending that any single "meaning" is itself free of eclecticism.

Through the inevitable dynamics of cultural forms, characteristics of imaginative literatures have not only been identified in the myth category, but literature - as a form in its own right - has continually asserted an awareness and vigorous 'interest' in mythology. This much is, at least, certain. But, whether literature _is_ or is _like_ myth, or _vice-versa_, is a question that has haunted literary scholarship since Aristotle first used the word "mythos" to mean "Plot" - imitation of an action - the essence of Tragedy. Nevertheless, the truism of the following assertion by Richard Chase will abide in the foreseeable future: "...an interest in the creative literature of our century forces upon us an interest in myth."[3] And, in concluding his study on the uses of mythology as structural and prefigurative techniques in certain modern European novels, John J.White observes that:

> Attitudes to myths, inside and outside literature may have changed in recent times, with a certain anti-myth reaction setting in. Yet this change in attitude has not led to the disappearance of mythological motifs from contemporary fiction. 4

This statement is equally true of both creative and critical "attitudes". Indeed, whether or not a critic subscribes to one or any combinations of the plethora of theoretical standpoints on the interpretation of the "anthropological" myth and/or its relationship to imaginative literature, the continued embodiment of mythological materials in poetry, drama and fiction is assured. At least, the very nature of the creative act's reliance upon a system of imagery, metaphor and symbol links it, apparently, with the structural language of myth-making. But we can distinguish a _literary_

interest in the subject of myth from that of other specializations. For, as Francis Ferguson warns:

> [Because the literary student]...lacks the knowledge and training to join the debates of specialists on their own terms, [what] he needs...is a renewed sense of his own stake in Myth, plus a firmer reliance on the evidences in literature and on the methods and the criteria of literary analysis. For the point at which Myth concerns the student of literature is the point at which it is brought to life again in poetry, drama or fiction. 5

It is, perhaps, in the context of creative literature that myth is encountered in its least ambiguous forms.

If, for our purpose, we define a myth (provisionally) as a culture - specific narrative or story - usually an imaginative composition of unascribed authorship - then, the novelist who uses myths could be seen to do so in any one of three possible ways. He could be reproducing a known myth. In that case, because the writer often re-tells it in toto, the myth remains only at the level of content in relation to his adopted form. Alternatively, the novelist could borrow the outlines of a myth while telling a different 'modern' story which, nonetheless, literally insists upon our seeing its own meaning through the mythological parallel. The writer, thus, approaches the myth as a structuring device. Otherwise, he could be telling a story which makes allusions to a compedium of mythological themes and symbols as were appropriate to a contemporary theme. Usually, that novelist manipulates the materials in such a way that they become, not extraneous but, complementary or integral to a new, mythic, imaginative activity whereby they acquire new existence and a new significance.

Although predominantly evident in drama and poetry, mythology also appeared in pre-twentieth century European fictions. And, as an illustration of works in which myths exist merely as content, John J. White remarks that:

> The Titanic gods are often espoused by the Romantics (even, for example, in the mythological Gothic of Mrs. Shelley's Frankenstein or The Modern Promotheus), but such figures are largely left as unexploited, heroic embodiments of a vague spirit of vitalism. 6

On the African scene, a corresponding attitude may be found in Mofolo's Chaka (1925; trans. 1931), Laye's recent work, The Guardian of the Word (1978; trans. 1980) and Fagunwa's The Forest of a Thousand Demons (1950; trans. 1968).

The creative services into which artists press particular kinds of anthropological myths may have become more or less complex through the years, in tune with, say, the individual writer's creative temperament, skill, as well as the ethos of his time and society. European writers of the period spanning, roughly, 1850-1950 (Symbolists, Romantics and Modernists) for example, are known to have especially fallen under the spell of certain types of Classical and Far-Eastern mythology. In various ways, they incorporate such myths in fiction writing for their poetic vitality or the semblance of (moral-spiritual) "order" which they seem to represent. It is, indeed, a special feature of romanticism and, more so, of modernism not only to revive, but to seek moral and literary ideology in mythology. As T.S.Eliot remarks in his essay on Joyce's Ulysses:

> In using myth, in manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity, Mr.Joyce is pursuing a method which others must pursue after him... It is simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving shape and significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history.... It is, I seriously believe, a step toward making the modern world possible for art...toward order and form. 7

For writers like Joyce, therefore, myths exist as a body of material, allusion to which becomes a structural device. And this brings to mind, for example, Awoonor's This Earth,My Brother, or Soyinka's The Interpreters and Season of Anomy.

If ambiguity and complexity - due to the influences of studies in anthropology and depth-psychology which popularize many more erstwhile recondite mythology - become noticeable, as in the works of certain European modernist (as well as some African) writers, these could almost always be attributable to the moral-aesthetic effects that the writers wish to procure. The works of certain novelists (say, Faulkner or Kafka, Armah or Ngugi), while not myths in the anthropological sense, nonetheless produce mythic effects. This is, for example, a feature of the significant form of Faulkner's "The Bear", Kafka's The Castle, Armah's Two Thousand Seasons or Ngugi's Petals of Blood. Thus, it may be argued that the creative writer (poet, dramatist or novelist) has never really had a 'problem' of myth. Generally, he is not often troubled by the obtuseness which characterizes "myth interpretation" or, by any sense of irresoluteness about whether the mythological themes and figures he employs were, originally, thought to be religious or historical, gods or culture heroes.

As the great variety of critical essays on the subject of "myth and literature" shows, the obvious conclusion we might draw is that it is literary critics, and not writers, who have always laboured under the incubus of semantics and taxonomy.[8] Interpretations of the myth concept in itself and, vis-a-vis creative literature (especially fiction) have become so ridden with idiosyncrasies and period dialectics, tinged with a large dosage of mutual vilification, that the literary focus of the argument often gets obscured rather than clarified.

In a general sort of way, however, critical interests in "myth" (whether as a quasi-literary form, cosmogony or something which literature itself strives to become) converge on the idea that the mythic perception is superior or, at least, more inclusive than mimetic realism - in the sense that it shoots through the empirical to a deeper "reality". But, when

certain critics, in the manner of Herman Broch, describe the twentieth century as the "mythical age" and urge a "return to myth",[9] they are making value judgments which (more ethical-historical than literary) represent a spill-over from the romantic reaction against the obsessive rationalism of the eighteenth century Enlightenment. For the Romantics, therefore, the "return to myth" is as much an act of ideological resistance to a nascent scientificism which is vigorously mythophobic, as it is a moral protest, expressing the continuing cynicism about the redemption of the world through science and technology. Even Richard Chase who considers that "myth" is literature - albeit a special, "magical" kind of literature - expresses a vision of art which, like the magician's:

> ...is to summon the magical powers of the universe into his own control...to enforce reality and significance upon a chaotic and meaningless world and, by opposing the magical mana to forces which threaten him or his vision of things, to promote a dramatic clash the upshot of which is a resolution of forces into new harmony. 19 (original italics)

Predictably, the opponents of the "present-day mythomania" (presumably among writers as well) decry the practice whereby the "mythomaniac puts himself in the position of speaking freely in the name of both poetry and religion without, however, making himself responsible to either.[11] Thus, among myth critics, the bone of contention has always been that the literary scholar must commit himself to making the necessary discrimination between the anthropological or metaphysical myth (what Northrop Frye calls "undisplaced myth"[12]), and poetic myths - between, that is, magico-religious and aesthetic modes of expression. It is particularly in this respect that one might see Northrop Frye's Anatomy of Criticism (up-dated and bulstered by Fables of Identity) as one of the most important contemporary studies that is substantially geared towards an

investigation of the potentials of myth as a source of symbols and imagery for the literary imagination. But, because of its macroscopic ambitions, Frye's critical method lays itself open to abuse by its disciples and opponents alike.

Spurred as much by insights derived from pivotal studies in anthropology and depth-psychology, as by a felt need for an alternative method in literary criticism, Frye seeks to apprehend the imaginative and universal qualities of myth which may be used as a basis for a more systematic or "scientific" discussion of literature. Already (enhanced by the works of J.G.Frazer and Sigmund Freud), Jungian psychology postulates that some basically universal characteristics of the human mind, revealed in dreams and the "collective unconscious", constantly recur in myths. From this rediscovery of mythology as a repertoire of psychological types, springs Frye's archetypal theory of literature - especially when the use of myths seems to be a recurrent feature of creative writings. And, convinced that "literature is a reconstructed [or 'displaced'] mythology with its structural principles derived from those of myth",[13] he proceeds to discover a unity which inheres in literature but has remained virtually unexploited. Thus, he posits the quest-motif as the central and "co-ordinating principle"[14] of literature, which not only confers a pattern of meaning upon a particular work, but also relates it to other conventions and genres of literature in general. Accordingly, he asserts that: "It is part of the critic's business to show how all literary genres are derived from the quest-myth."[15] It is the one basic and inclusive myth which, leavened with the psychoanalytical theories of dream and the unconscious, is also expected to contain the essence and equivalent of the Jungian archetype in literature. Therefore, the "archetype" is what all great works of art aspire towards, and gives a sense of order to their interpretation.

Naturally, "archetypal" myth criticism has attracted a host of emulators, quite a few of whom have gone far beyond what Frye envisaged. Thus, when it is claimed that, in myth criticism "we have the possibility of infinitely diverse reactions to a work of art",[16] one readily senses the risk of libertine fluidity. Yet, when Frye restates his position - obviously for the edification of those who see "myth criticism" as an open-ended system or, exclusively in terms of "ritual" -- he merely confirms an eclecticism that offers little consolation to his opponents. He writes in Fables of Identity:

> Again, myths are often used as allegories of science or religion or morality: they may arise in the first place to account for a ritual or a law, or they may be exempla or parables which illustrate a particular situation or argument, like the myths in Plato or Achilles' myth of the two jars of Zeus at the end of the Iliad. Once established in their own right, they may then be interpreted dogmatically or allegorically, as all the standard myths have been for centuries, in innumerable ways. But because myths are stories, what they "mean" is inside them, in the implications of their incidents. No rendering of any myth into conceptual language can serve as a full equivalent of its meaning. A myth may be told and retold: it may be modified or elaborated, or different patterns may be discovered in it; and its life is always the poetic life of a story, not the homiletic life of some illustrated truism. 17

However, he makes no apology for the tempting open-endedness of the system; nor does he deny that a myth could function as a symbolic model for the interpretation of a literary creation. Perhaps, the greatest source of unease about Frye's "archetypal" theory and criticism of literature is not so much that it is pronounced on the authority of "extra-literary" disciplines (the works of the best writers often evidence awareness of such possibilities). It is the fact that, ultimately, the "archetype" becomes an instrument that exists in extraneous relationship to the works which it seeks to interpret. Thus, paradoxically, the Fryean "myth criticism" not only bears the stiffest brunt of the modern anti-myth

reaction, but falls foul of certain myth critics. For, as K.K.Ruthven argues:

> It is characteristic of myth-criticism to turn attention away from the local specificities of a particular book towards some myth which is held to be older and grander and therefore better than the book one is actually talking about... This raises the question as to what value there can be in a method of literary analysis which, in reaching towards some indistinct archetype, turns aside from those ectypal particularities which make a novel uniquely what it is. 18

These, among other considerations, have led another prominent 'myth critic', William Righter, to contest even the basic assumptions that Frye (in Anatomy of Criticism) makes about literature and, criticism, as an organized discipline.[19] Righter disputes that literature is an organized body of knowledge or, that criticism is or could be a systematic study like Science. As for Frye's use of the seasonal cycle myths as defining characteristics of the main literary modes (Spring = Romance, Summer = Comedy, Autumn = Tragedy, and Winter = Satire), Righter does not see how a resort to rigid, mystical or psychological explanations could make it preferable to, say, Gaston Bachelard's effective use of the four elements "to provide a phenomenology of the poetic imagination through the way in which poetic imagery coalesces around the poles of earth, air, fire, water."[20] What Righter argues in favour of - especially in his own recent book, Myth and Literature - is an alternative look at myth and, particularly, the mythic imagination.[21]

In making these observations, the present state of the criticism of the African fiction is very much in the forefront of our concern. For, much of the more 'serious' critical efforts that address themselves to the presence of myths in certain African novels, set out from one 'myth-perspective' or another. The present study focuses on a selection of

novels (based on a criterion worked out in the next sub-section) that have used myths in particular ways. The aim is to demonstrate - borrowing Righter's expression in a comparable context - "[a]mong the possibilities that arise here...[,] that the creative power of the particular poet as 'mythmaker' is equal to whatever traditional material he may assimilate and use."[22] Our concern is not with the mythological process; but the ways in which our chosen novelists use, and find liberating outlets in mythology for their own imaginative energies.

I,(i)

NOTES

1. See: Gilbert Highet, The Classical Tradition (Oxford, 1949); David Bidney, "Myth, Symbolism and Truth", T.A.Sebeok (ed.), Myth: a Symposium (Bloomington, 1965) pp.3-24; and G.S.Kirk, Myth: Its Meaning and Functions in Ancient and Other Cultures, (Cambridge, 1973).

2. J.E.Harrison, Themis (Cambridge 1912); Thomas Cassirer, The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms, II (New Haven, 1955); J.G.Frazer, The Golden Bough (Abridged Edition: Suffolk, 1978); and Philip Rahv, "The Myth and the Powerhouse", J.B.Vickery (ed.), Myth and Literature: Contemporary Theory and Practice (Lincoln, 1969) pp. 109-118.

3. Quest for Myth, (Los Angeles, 1949) p.v.

4. Mythology in the Modern Novel (Princeton, 1971) p.240.

5. "'Myth' and the Literary Scruple", Vickery, (ed.) op.cit. p.140.

6. op.cit., p.15.

7. "Ulysses, Order and Myth", Seon Givens (ed.), James Joyce: Two Decades of Criticism (New York, 1963) pp. 201-202.

8. See especially; Vickery (ed.), op.cit.; Sebeok (ed.), op.cit.; White, op.cit.; B.Slote (ed.), Myth and Symbol: Critical Approaches and Applications (Lincoln, 1963); and William Righter, Myth and Literature (London, 1975).

9. Quoted by White, op.cit., p.3.

10. "Myth as Literature", Clifford, James L. et.al. (eds.), English Institute Essays 1947 p.17.

11. Philip Rahv, op.cit., p.110.

12. Anatomy of Criticism (Princeton, 1957) p.139.

13. Fables of Identity (New York, 1963) p.38.

14. ibid., p.9.

15. ibid., p.17.

16. Quoted by H.M.Block, "Cultural Anthropology and Contemporary Literary Criticism", Vickery (ed.), op.cit., p.129.

17. Fables of Identity, p.32.

18. Myth (Cambridge, 1976) p.75.

19. "Myth and Interpretation", New Literary History,III (1972/3) pp.333-42.

20. ibid., p.339.

21. (London, 1975)

22. ibid., p.29.

I,(ii) Mythology in the African Novel: Critical Approaches, Terms and Distinctions

Besides "mythological", other derivatives of the word "myth" often used in critical discussions of a great deal of African fictions include: "mythology", "mythical", "mythic", and "mythopoeic". With the clear exception of Isidore Okpewho, Abiola Irele, Wole Soyinka and, perhaps, Stanley Macebuh, Richard Pribe and Kofi Awoonor, critics of African fictions do not, in general, make adequate terminological distinctions. Besides, a few anthropologically or folkoristic oriented ones often emphasize distinctions between "myth" and, for example, "legend" and "folklore" or "proverbs". Indeed, Oyekan Owomoyela's recent book, African Literatures: An Introduction,[1] is not only constructed upon such distinctions but also classifies "myth" as one of the "prosaic components"[2] of the "folklore". We do not make any 'distinction' between "myth", "legend" or "folklore" in the present study. This fact might run foul of the 'anthropologist's' or 'folklorist's' expectations; but the difference need not degenerate into any great obstacle - provided, and so far as the literary character of the discussions is properly kept in view. Although it could be rather pedantic to insist upon a strict definition of any and every myth---cognates, it becomes important (for the purpose of the present study) that we state what the terms we choose to use mean. As will become evident in the main body and thrust of our discussions, we use "mythic" to distinguish a disciplined kind of imaginative activity from "mythological" - copying or reproducing pre-existent myths. We also use "mythical" to denote the elements of the unreal and purely fanciful quality of myths.

From the evidence of the majority of critical works on the subject. it may seem more natural to speak of the African drama and poetry, rather

than the novel, as "mythological". Although most of the contemporary African novelists have always drawn upon materials of traditional mythology in their best works, critics tend (until fairly recently) to disregard or treat such materials with levity. We may seek an explanation for this fact in the global problem of shifting connotations of "myth" and its derivatives. Coupled with this, is the understandable resistance of much of the pivotal criticism of African fictions against what came to be described as excessive preoccupation with "anthropological information" and "exotic details". Of course, Amos Tutuola (the only unhesitantly acknowledged "mythical" imagination and, so, anomalous in the meainstream of the African fiction) has produced 'novels' which have always been treated as "mythological".[3] But the predominant critical perspective on his work follows as much from the critics' expectation of what the novel ought (or ought not) to be, as from their apparent preconception of a "myth", exclusively, in terms of a tale associated with gods, religion, animism and ritual or, at least, as an extra-terrestrial story with purely fanciful, entertainment value. Thus, the delayed and still scanty critical attention to the mythic elements in the works of, especially, the so-called "second-generation" African writers may be attributable to two primary reasons. There is the historical conditioning that has caused African fictions to be seen as works of social realism and, then, the fact that the critics tend, far too often, to see any reference to mythology too narrowly in terms of content or of ritual.

Closely linked with the general wave of African nationalist consciousness and cultural revivalism which dates back to colonial times, the African novel (like African poetry) has usually been preoccupied with the need to communicate socio-cultural and political points of view in order to meet and counter the colonialist denial of the existence, and/ or denigration of African history and culture. Thus, African writers have

themselves persistently spoken of their "duty" (as artists) in terms of detraumatizing the African's consciousness from European acculturation, reinstating cultural pride, and functioning as the watchdogs over the moral values and political conscience of the society. As Rand David Bishop Jr. has observed:

> The overpowering need to project an "African presence" into the world, coupled with the logical conclusion that this "presence" must be accurate - for the sake of accuracy itself, perhaps, but even more-so in order to correct the West's inaccurate image of Africa and African culture - led the African writer and critic alike to lean heavily upon realism as a technique, and upon African reality for content. Modern African literature, then, had to present not only the realities of Africa, but felt often the need to explain them - to a world that had been heretofore (and to a great extent still is) profoundly ignorant of them....This has meant that African literature and criticism - and for other reasons as well - have been concerned more with external than with internal or aesthetic considerations. 4 (Original emphasis)

Thus, under the eyes of a vigorous critical realism, the obvious uses of myths for sociological or anthropological "information" in the African novel are often regarded as obtrusive, boringly atavistic adornments to narrative which the artists can do without.

A common practice among, especially, Euro-American critics of African literature, critical realism can and has often been carried to extremes. As the indigenous African and a few perceptive non-African critics realised quite early, the insistence on European criteria of realism can degenerate into an incipient intellectual imperialism. It can be used as a platform for not only denigrating the comparatively young fiction but also denying that the best of it is in any way authentically African. Even in the hands of largely well-meaning critical realists like C.R.Larson (who has devoted a book-length study to African fiction) it could be a detour to a Eurocentric universalism when they are not, in

the words of Chinua Achebe, "given to big-brother arrogance, [seeing] the African writer as a somewhat unfinished European who with patient guidance will grow up one day and write like every other European..."[5] For example, in the latest (1978) edition of his The Emergence of African Fiction (1971) Professor Larson retains the following statements - nearly a decade after they were first published:

> How surprising, we might conclude, that with Wole Soyinka and Ayi Kwei Armah, the African novel as a literary genre now moves into the main stream of Western tradition....6

> Description, and treatment of time and space are becoming more typically Western. Experimentation tends now toward Western techniques which replace the traditional conscious or subconscious incorporation of oral literary materials into the text. With some novels it is even difficult to tell whether or not the writer is an African. 7

> While it is probably safe to say that some of the early examples of the influences of the oral tradition upon the novel form will slowly decrease in frequency as these materials themselves are forgotten, and that as a consequence the African novel will become increasingly experimental in a Western instead of an African way,...8

(It is quite amazing that in spite of the mass of recent research evidences to the contrary Professor Larson does not seem persuaded to alter his "Conclusion" and, especially, his views about the oral traditional materials in the African novels). However even before "Larsony" (as an African novelist, Armah, refers to his critical method), there have been many critical essays on the place and role of "traditional elements" or the debts to oral literature in the works of individual African novelists. Too often, a great majority of such essays scarcely reach beyond the itemized (tautological) validation of the existence of such things as vernacular rhythms, proverbs, riddles and anything in social customs from communal festivals to manners of greeting. Their

driving spirit derives, usually, more from polemics aimed at proving the "African character" of the novels than aesthetic considerations. Although Achebe cannot be correctly associated with this spate of testaments to traditional elements (naive as much of it is), he has inspired it by his reaction against what he later called "Colonialist Criticism"[9] of African literature when he wrote these much quoted lines in 1962: "No man can understand another whose language he does not speak"[10] in much the same sense as a nineteenth century philosopher, O.W.Holmes, described every language as the temple in which the soul of all those who speak it is enshrined - "language" being equated with culture.

Thus, despite and because of the many shades of Larsonian critical perspective, there has been reawakened a strong desire among writers and critics alike to free the criticism of African literature from the yoke of eurocentricism, and begin to interpret the literature in terms of the conceptions, tastes, attitudes and beliefs of the milieus that produce it. Rather disappointingly however, much of the enthusiasm for this critical direction has succeeded only in reducing the fiction to its content and then interpreting that. Among the most intensive and deliberately literary single studies of the traditional elements are Professors Emmanuel Obiechina's Culture, Tradition and Society in the West African Novel (1975) and Oladele Taiwo's Culture and The Nigerian Novel (1976).[11] But the relevance of these works to the present study can only be, regrettably, minimal. They have both chosen to operate under such nebulous terms as "culture" and "tradition" - the meanings of which, in any case, are presumed to be understood rather than stated.

Perhaps the first significant myth-oriented criticism of African fiction (no less referential to Achebe's position already mentioned) is the folkloristic approach favoured by Professor Bernth Lindfors who

has himself devoted a collection of essays in book form to the study of folklore, mainly in Nigerian fiction.[12] Such a critical perspective sets out to explore the possibilities of verbal cultural forms like myths, folklore and folktales in the total process of creating written literature — thematically and stylistically. For as Lindfors explains:

> The interpretative critic who studies traditional elements in contemporary African literature is more likely to be interested in investigating their artistic functions or their esthetic [sic] and metaphysical implications than in merely validating their existence. He seeks to go beyond the obvious into less accessible regions, sometimes even venturing to use his tools to probe the mysterious inner workings of the human mind. 13

The perception of the goal is, of course, flawless but because his own work is only seminal it is necessarily limited by its scope which, as he admits, is "tribalistic" and provincial. It also suffers from an apparent handicap which can be associated with the kind of consciousness that lies behind M.Talmadge's argument that:

> For the novelist...it is difficult to see quite in what way the figures and events of African folklore may be invested with that kind of significance which would make them relevant to contemporary readers. 14

Hence Lindfors excludes Wole Soyinka's The Interpreters from his discussion of the influences of vernacular linguistic rhythms in the Yoruba and Ibo prose on the grounds that:

> Wole Soyinka, Nigeria's most versatile Yoruba author, has neither Fagunwa's parochialism nor Tutuola's naivete. Educated at universities in Nigeria and Britain, well-read in world literature and au courant with the latest literary trends, Soyinka is a sophisticated cosmopolitan who can draw upon sources of inspiration which are not available to his less educated countrymen. His novel, The Interpreters, for example, certainly owes far more to James Joyce and William Faulkner than it does to Yoruba folktales. And his English is impeccable; one would search his works in vain for the unconscious West Africanisms and innocent barbarisms that crowd every page of Tutuola's writing. 15

One might be forgiven for quoting at length such a negative passage from an otherwise impressive book. The passage is so self contradictory that one comes to the conclusion that only Soyinka can so draw out a critic - even a usually perceptive one - to over-reach himself! When Lindfors attributes Soyinka's artistic inspiration and skill to alien masters rather than his own natal cultural heritage and individuality so uncompromisingly, only the words of Soyinka himself can be appropriately invoked to clear the air:

> The Yoruba have a proverb for it...A free translation would read: Kinship does not insist that, because we are entwined, we thereby rip off each other's thigh. The man who, because of ideological /read professional/ kinship tries to sever my being from its self-apprehension is not merely culturally but politically hostile. 16

Besides, Professor Lindfors must have been momentarily oblivious to the fact that both Joyce and Faulkner are two of the most tradition-oriented Western writers. Both have not only derived inspiration, but created, from the materials within provincial cultures - the heroic myths of Ireland and the Mississippi county of the American South respectively. That they rank with the world's most sophisticated and successful creative writers does not make them any less traditional. Nevertheless, the efforts of Lindfors and those others like Oyekan Owomoyela in his recent book, <u>African Literatures: An Introduction</u> (1979) remain significant contributions towards a myth-oriented criticism of African fictions.

It becomes obvious from the fore-going that any attempt to understand the <u>uses</u> of myths in African fictions while retaining perspective on literariness, inevitably faces the need to distinguish between the "primal" and what may be called 'social' or historical myths on the one hand, and their

literary rendition on the other. The primal or anthropological myths, we will describe as culture-specific narratives or stories (usually imaginative composition of unascribed authorship) which reveal the process by which a given community seeks to project as totally as possible a world-view that is unique to itself. These stories which frequently find parallels in other societies, tackle (or purport to do so) fundamental existential questions relating to origins and destinations, religious beliefs and precepts. And they are absorbed into the collective historical consciousness of the community through cultural learning. "Social" myths, on the other hand, are more or less deliberate intellectual attitudes which we might simplify in quasi-Jungian terms. They are structures through which we project on to others our fantasies and anxieties, thereby turning them into symbols of our longings (when positive) or baser instincts and nightmare (when negative). The greater our fears the more strongly we tend to believe in the mythical projection. Thus (in literature, witness the "rural" novels of Achebe, the later Armah's and virtually all of Ngugi's novels, Conrad's The Heart of Darkness and Blixen's Out of Africa), the history of the contact between Europe and Africa has been fraught with the conceptual polarities which such myths generate. And, as Thomas R.Knipp rightly remarks, for the African artist:

> One of the most important facts about [the European myth of Africa] is that it has been part of the education of the African elite, including the creative writers. An encounter with the white myth has been an integral part of the process of westernization. 17

The abnegation of this European myth by substituting and proclaiming the humane and positive virtues of the African civiliation (as opposed to a destructive western one) constitute for the African intellectual, a necessary beginning of a programmatic re-presenting of a self-apprehended racial personality and experience. What emerges is an African historical myth which is itself a counter-myth.

In a general sense, African writers operate against the backdrop of the "social" myth and, specifically, within the counter-myth. Thomas Knipp offers the following summary of the historical paradigm of the counter-myth as it may be portrayed in literature:

> (1) The rich black past - sometimes warm, sometimes glorious - in which a secure black identity was and can again be rooted. This rich past exists in a double sense: first as history, as record of the past glories...; and, second, as the culture, more or less intact and accessible in the villages, of the people from which the poet was torn by the process of westernization(...)
>
> (2) The cynical conquest of the continent and its culture by greedy and rapacious Europeans.
>
> (3) The period of bondage during which whites exploited Africa....and during which the black personality was further purified by redemptive suffering.
>
> (4) The rebellion and triumph of resurgent blacks against often decadent, always exploitative white domination.
>
> (5) The productive and creative future in which African glory returns and African leadership enriches the quality of life not only for Africans but for all the human family. 18

Thus, African novels do not only record a general consciousness of the counter-myth, but also register the varying degrees of individual writer's awareness and socio-ethical commitment to the "regenerative" potential of the values derivable from the totality of the African historical and cultural heritage. Hence the perspective held on these general issues often determines the kinds of local "anthropological" myths which any given writer adapts or absorbs into his work. And, as the novelist's perspective influences his choice of myth-types so do they in turn, quite often, define the thematic range and imaginative depth of the work. This fact of reciprocity between the author's outlook and the content and form of his art is one of the underlying assumptions about the distinction we seek to make in considering the aesthetic of the so-called first, and second "generation" of African novelists who have made more than casual references to traditional myths.

The years 1952 and 1958 witnessed two turning points in the history of Anglophone African fiction. These years saw the publication of Tutuola's The Palm-Wine Drinkard and Achebe's Things Fall Apart respectively. Tutuola's book is of both historical and literary interest. Its publication not only brought its author into international literary limelight, but also opened the gates of European publishing houses to many more of his compatriots. A book that stubbornly announces its African presence through its confident advertisement of the treasure troves of traditional folklore and the art of oral story-telling; innocently disregarding the rules of English and the conventions of the novelistic art, The Palm-Wine Drinkard storms its way into the literary world on its own terms. But, more importantly, while both its linguistic imperfection and naive originality bring several dissonant critical voices screaming obscenities and adulation over the head of its author, The Palm-Wine Drinkard also forces attention on the roles that folklore and myths could play in the African novel. So important and far-reaching is the ensuing debate that Achebe's novel (Things Fall Apart) some six years later, would seem, so to speak, like a corrective and, even, revisionist, re-statement of the 'acceptable' direction for the African novel that seeks to portray the authentic African genius. For, obviously conscious of the Tutuolan phenomenon, reflecting the critical heat that surrounds the felt need to authenticate the growing corpus of African literature, as well as anticipating the novels of Achebe and other writers, Cyprian Ekwensi wrote thus in 1956:

> Should he [the African writer], in his new world outlook, remain faithful and loyal to the patterns of self-expression that belonged to his old environment? - the folk tale in the moonlight, the unrecorded episode handed down from generation to generation? Or should he venture forth, utilise the forms that exist in the world at large, bending them to suit his needs?

> My answer is that the choice is not that easy. The African writer must first look back to his own heritage. Then he must look around at what is available to him. If he decides to adapt existing forms..., he can still bring to those forms trends of identity and distinction which will give him a place in the forms known and accepted by the world at large. In doing so he would be directing his artistic and creative temperament into the sophisticated forms of cultural expression. 19

In the same article, Ekwensi commends the efforts of Tutuola towards this projected goal.

However, the Tutuolan genre remains a phenomenon on its own -- its inimmitable style and imaginative orientation are virtually unaffected and not affecting succeeding writers in any visible or direct way. This artistic isolation owes as much to his educational disadvantage - limited (if any) access to the technical resources available to the better educated writers among his compatriots -- as it does to his naively modest conception of art as entertainment. Thus, his works belong to a fundamentally fantastic imagination which makes no pretension to realism as technique, but rather, invents (albeit relying upon the materials wrought by the racial imagination in the first instance) and inhabits its own world of ghosts and demons. As Lindfors aptly puts it: "The Palm-Wine Drinkard is pure fantasy, a voyage of the imagination into a never-never land of magic,marvels and monsters."[20] And we cannot agree more with Ekwensi's comment, in his review of the novel, that it represents "the transition-point between folk-lore and the novel as a literary form",[21] and with Gerald Moore's clarification of the point when he writes that:

> The novel as we know it deals with man in society, while Tutuola is concerned with man alone, suffering and growing amid the images thrown forth by his own mind and by the imagination of his race. 22

Ever since Achebe's Things Fall Apart appeared in 1958, few critics have any doubt about its artistic success - a success confirmed many times over with the publication, six years later, of a third novel, Arrow of God. And, as many will agree, Achebe's novels have done for the Anglophone African fiction what Rene Maran's Batouala (1921; trans.1973 [AWS 7]) achieved for the Francophone West Indian and African. In writing, especially his "rural" novels, Achebe breaks free of docile immitation of the conventional forms and usage of the English language. While retaining its basic structures, he manipulates the language to suit and reflect the modal and conceptual frameworks of an African language and world. Thereby, he strikes a remarkable symmetry of form and content which has remained the main focus of a great deal of the critical essays on his works.[23] His achievement in this area can be glimpsed in the following exemplary passage, from Arrow of God:

> 'I want one of my sons to join these people and be my eye there. If there is nothing in it you will come back. But if there is something there you will bring home my share. The world is like a Mask dancing. If you want to see it well you do not stand in one place. My spirit tells me that those who do not befriend the white man today will be saying had we known tomorrow.' (p.55; original italics)

With a characteristic Achebean vividity and economy, the passage conveys the central theme of conflict and the crisis of change as well as the Igbo speech pattern and rhythm, without sacrificing the syntactical "correctness" of the English medium, or damaging the African cultural outlook.

Besides his singular stylistic accomplishment, perhaps the more important and visible influence of Achebe on subsequent novelists lies in his pivotal role in marrying the socio-political theme of racial retrieval to the novel form.

> This theme - put quite simply - is that African people did not hear of culture for the first time from Europeans; that their societies were not mindless but frequently had a philosophy of great depth and value and beauty, that they had poetry and, above all, they had dignity. It is this dignity that many African people all but lost during the colonial period and it is this that they must now regain....The writer's duty is to help them regain it by showing them in human terms what happened to them, what they lost....In Africa he cannot perform this task unless he has a proper sense of history. 24 (My emphasis)

Although variations occur as a result of differing ranges of perspective, depths of perception and areas of emphasis, that Africa must regain its sense of self is a theme which fundamentally underlies most of African fiction. Basically, this involves (especially in the case of the more mature writers) recourse to traditional African sources for symbols, imagery and "atmosphere" which, refurbished, become integrated with new fictional forms. Achebe himself has a proclivity towards the folklore, proverbs, the traditional art of oratory, social and religious ceremonial symbols. These he deploys in judicious measures to provide realistic support for the actions in the fictional world of his novels while, at the same time, they serve to sharpen thematic foci. However, even as it places much premium on materials derived from extant traditional artistic forms, religious and social myths, the organizing imagination behind Achebe's novels is not mythic. It is basically evolutionary - in the best historical sense - and, being so, increasingly aims at verisimilitude.

Some fifteen years ago, Ben Obumselu wrote that "[i]f folklore has very little either with regard to its techniques or its themes to offer the contemporary African writer, it will be found...that myths and legends are more promising..."[25] He was then discussing Tutuola's The Palm-Wine Drinkard. Today, with the example set by Achebe, it is possible to say

that there is hardly one of the more successful African novelists who has not adopted or adapted some sort of myths and legends in his best work. We need only mention Achebe or Amadi on the one hand, and Awoonor, Ngugi or Soyinka on the other, to appreciate the various ways in which they have done so. The challenge to the critic therefore, is no longer whether, but how the writers have used these myths and legends as vehicles of new kinds of creative activity. But, for too long - because so much of the criticism of African fictions tend to fall under the sway of that "realistic" approach which narrowly sees too many African novels as havens of socio-political commentary - the mythic factor, so crucial to the fullest possible interpretation of the best of the contemporary African novels, has remained largely ignored.

In truly responding to the challenge of the mythic novel, critical enquiry needs to ponder more seriously and take due account of, for example, the philosophical-creative orientations that lead comparably accomplished writers and champions of African history and culture, like Achebe and Ngugi, to use traditional mythological materials as differently as they do. For, although it could be said that, in a general sense, a common consciousness of history draws their novels towards the treasures of the oral traditions, they do not share a common imaginative perspective on history. If we take Achebe's Things Fall Apart for example, we discover that it relies a great deal upon the traditional elements for "authenticity" and cultural (educational) "information". And, because its main focus is historical action, the imaginative relationship to history becomes increasingly documentary. In Ngugi's A Grain of Wheat on the other hand, existing mythology speak (as it were) to, and corroborate a basically - because its main focus is motives of historical action - exploratory, mythic imagination. It need not depend upon pre-existent "material" for self-realization.

Three broad fictional orientations thus become discernible in the works of African writers who have chosen to use materials derivable from traditional myths and legends and oral art forms: namely, the "mythological", "folkloric" and "mythic". The first two generally cohabit in that creative sensibility - often as didactic in intent as it is impelled by the desires to reflect, preserve and/or rehabilitate ancestral traditions and cultural values - which produces what Claude Wauthier has called "novels of the soil."[26] But, strictly speaking, they are separable. The "mythological" novel essentially re-tells pre-existent traditional tales which owe their internal logic, and ultimate meaning or resolution, to a supernatural, superhuman world-construct. Epitomized by the "forest" novels of Tutuola (and encompassing those of Elechi Amadi and Flora Nwapa), the "mythological" novel - because so dependent upon the primal content - has become increasingly anachronistic. It is as much in this sense, as in the fact of its "distance" or remoteness from the contemporaneous socio-historical experience, that the genre (despite its undisputed significance in Africa's literary history) can be seen as a literary dead end.

Much of what we have called "folkloric" fiction is, generally, inspired by the writers' desire to contribute towards the initial creative efforts to establish the African-ness of the "African novel" when, in those days, it was erroneously believed that to be authentically African, a novel was expected to contain exotic "evidence" of its cultural roots. The majority of novels written under this impression (typically, Onuora Nzekwu's Wand of Noble Wood [1961]) are selfconsciously "anthropological" documentation and elucidation of tribal ways and customs. But, in drawing upon traditional myths, the best of the "folkloric" fiction - as we find in Achebe's rural novels, or Camara Laye's The African Child (1953) for example - is not only aware of the problem of authentication, but also uses

"anthropological" materials with remarkable artistic discipline and sensitivity. The traditional myths become supportive media for the artistic goal of showing the spiritual levels (communal and individual) of the encounter between African and European civilizations, underscoring the resilience of ancestral values in the face of aggressive, alien ones. Thus, in its own way, the "folkloric" fiction attempts to rehabilitate African cultural legacies by re-imagining the traditional world but pointing, as it were, to the 'present.' It deals with traditional mythic thinking, modes of apprehending and coping with the problems of communal survival, while it is historically oriented.

The fictional orientation which we have called "mythic" - and the subject of our enquiry - is present in the novels of such African writers as Soyinka, Armah and Ngugi. These have not only shown consistent interests in the study of the aesthetic of African myths, but also use corroborative elements from Judaeo-Christian, Greek, Oriental, or Oceanic mythology for new or, sometimes, the same kinds of imaginative purpose as were appropriate to the original mythic creations. However, more often than not, the "mythic" novel 'returns' to pre-existent myths, only as sources of symbols and imagery which become woven into new motif-patterns in tune with the philosophical, political and artistic perspectives of its informing imagination. For, as Professor Abiola Irele has argued in his essay, "Tradition and the Yoruba Writer",[27] the writer who uses traditional mythological materials approaches creative integrity by the degree to which he imbibes or assumes (as it were) the very spirit of such materials without being enslaved to them. And, even when he comes upon a body of old symbols and forms too rigid or vulnerable to be flouted, he will be judged successful to the extent of his ability to re-imagine them, making them to yield, if possible new, significant meanings.

Thus, the content of the "mythic" novel may often be deeply "traditional" as well as very modern. It may well be (indeed, usually is)

concerned with "history" and the contemporary socio-political experience, but it seeks to see through and beyond these into that, so to speak, numenous region of awareness where temporal experience assumes incandescent permanence. It is, therefore, to such works as Awoonor's This Earth, My Brother; Soyinka's The Interpreters and Season of Anomy; Ouloguem's Bound to Violence; Armah's Fragments and Two Thousand Seasons; or, Ngugi's A Grain of Wheat and Petals of Blood that we must turn for the more sophisticated and aesthetically productive uses of mythology by a mythic imagination.

In their studies of the mythological factor in African literature (embracing such main literary genres as Poetry, Drama, Fiction and Epic) Richard Priebe and Isidore Okpewho have made certain critical distinctions related to that which we have just discussed about the uses of myths in African novels.[28] Priebe has adopted a rather too simple dichotomy between the "historical" and "mythic" consciousness among the African novelists. Thus, he asserts 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. 29

Achebe, on the one hand, and Soyinka, Armah and Awoonor on the other, are thought to epitomize the "historical" and "mythic" imaginative perspectives respectively. Hence, he concludes that the direction of the "mythic" vision is towards utopianism. But it is not necessarily true, as he seems to suggest, that the African novelist with a "mythic consciousness" lacks or fails to project historical and ethical perspectives or vice versa. It is even less true that they have all "used myth in that mythic sense of movement towards time ab originae, towards, as it were, a utopian vision(...)"[30] Even (as Priebe's study paradoxically implies) the

work of his favourite author, Awoonor, is far from this suggestion of an a-historical ecstatic mysticism. For, as Soyinka has reaffirmed:

> What we [Africans] call the mythic inner world is both the psychic sub-structure and temporal subsidence, the cumulative history and empirical observations of the community...The inner world is not static, being constantly enriched by the moral and historic experience of man. 31

Besides, Priebe's conception of "myth" is largely informed by, and dependent upon the ritualist theories of A.van Gennep, Edmund Leach, Mary Douglas, Joseph Campbell interpolated with elements from Jungian psychology and Northrop Frye's theory of literary archetypes. Generally he perceives the fictional heroes as mythic personages "whose experiences conform to the monomythic pattern of separation, initiation and return."[32] While aspects of the theories Priebe has chosen might prove efficacious in interpreting certain African novels, a wholesale adoption of them can, and, does become an unnecessary critical handicap. Priebe himself must have been aware of the limitations of his parameters when a particular work or group of works proves resistant to the neat design of the monomyth or of the rite de passage. He argues, for example, that Armah's Fragments is a "perversion of the monomyth" because the hero cannot confer on his community the expected boon of his "return".[33] It might, of course, be truer to say that Armah has chosen to invert the monomythic structure in order to heighten the tragic sense of the confrontation between the hero, Baako, and his community. Or, it might even be more accurate that the hero has returned with a 'boon' which the community cannot, or has no desire to, recognize. But the far more important critical elision lies in the fact that, in emphasizing the "liminal" statuses or "shamanic" qualities of the fictional characters vis-a-vis their communities, Priebe has largely failed to maintain the necessary distinction between their fictional roles and the real-life social 'ideological' or philosophical persuasion of their creators.

On the other hand, Okpewho's scheme of imaginative ascendancy among African writers according to the degree of their "freedom" from bondage to traditional or old mythology, while acceptable in principle, will seem (if too rigorously applied) too neat to give a satisfactory account of the individuality and aesthetic status of each writer's work - especially those novels upon which the present study focuses. Of course, there is little to be said for those writers who have done little else besides translating traditional stories into English; and, a writer like Armah (with whose Two Thousand Seasons Okpewho's essay deals specifically), may rightly be credited with a radical revision of the old mythological tradition. But to describe Armah's (and that of the unnamed "younger generation" of revolutionary African writers) as "an energy directed at creating a new mythology"[34] (my emphasis) - in contradistinction, that is, to the creative and social vision of, for example, Soyinka - is to wax too dramatic. For, any critical distinction between Soyinka and Armah's art cannot be grounded on the contrastive degree of one and the other's imaginative bondage to or freedom from traditional myths - even less so on "revolutionary" realism. In his own individual way, Soyinka has adopted the well documented myths of the Yoruba pantheon of gods - the humane and revolutionary essence of Obatala and Ogun myths especially - as creative idioms to limn mythic paradigms of historical experience in a variety of contexts: the scape-goat visionary artist in much of his early plays and poetry; and the revolutionary political activist in his more recent post-prison poems, plays, prison diary and his second novel, Season of Anomy. On his own part, Armah draws upon less definitive, syncretic aetiological and heroic myths of the Akan, Yoruba and Zulu (among others) and fragments from pre-colonial and colonial African history to structure and enhance the particularly apocalyptic vision of, for example, his Two Thousand Seasons.

Thus, from whatever perspective we may choose to see the works of these two writers, it is undeniable that they both, like their other compatriots, do use traditional myths, and, as versions of individual (albeit converging) perception of the collective African historical experience.

To quote Irele:

> The essential direction of modern African writing, of the work of the truly significant writers, is towards the definition, in and through literature, of a distinctive mode of thought and feeling, towards an imaginative apprehension and embodiment of an African spirit. And the main motive power in this movement, proceeds from the endeavour of the African writers to work out a new spiritual coherence out of [sic.] the historical disconnection between their African heritage and their modern experience. 35 (my emphasis)

When we set off our critical inquiry on this note, we hope that, by the end of it, we would not only have made clear a perception of the socio-political and spiritual concern of our writers but, above all, we would have given due account of the imaginative and artistic integrity of each of the novels that we have chosen to study.

I,(ii)

NOTES

1. African Literatures: An Introduction (Massachusetts, 1979).

2. ibid., p.2.

3. Amos Tutuola has written eight books to-date; but the most well known and representative of them is The Palm-Wine Drinkard (London, 1952).

4. African Critics and African Literature: A Study of Critical Standards, 1947-1966 (University Microfilms International: Michigan.1979) pp. 231-32.

5. Morning Yet on Creation Day (London, 1975) p.3.

6. The Emergence of African Fiction (London, 1978) p.277.

7. ibid., p.279.

8. ibid., p.281.

9. op.cit., pp.3-18.

10. ibid., p.48.

11. This is also the direction of such champions of "Sociology of African Literature" as, Omafume Onoge and Atta Britwum.

12. Folklore in Nigerian Literature (New York, 1973). He has edited Critical Perspectives on Amos Tutuola (Washington, 1975) and, with C.L.Innes, Critical Perspectives on Chinua Achebe (Washington, 1978). Other 'folklorists' include: O.Owomoyela, D.Ben-Amos and D.Anozie.

13. Folklore in Nigerian Literature pp.12-13.

14. Quoted by D.Izevbaye, "Criticism and Literature in Africa", C.Heywood (ed.), Perspectives on African Literature (London,1971) p.29.

15. op.cit., p.161.

16. Myth, Literature and the African World (Cambridge,1976) pp.X-Xi.

17. "Myth, History and the Poetry of Kofi Awoonor", African Literature Today, 11 (1980) p.41.

18. ibid., p.43.

19. "The Dilemma of the African Writer", West African Review, XXVII (1956) pp.701-702.

20. Folklore in Nigerian Literature, p.53.

21. "A Yoruba Fantasy", West African Review, XXIII (1952) p.713.

22. Seven African Writers (London, 1962) p.42.

23. See especially: C.L.Innes and B.Lindfors (eds.) Critical Perspectives on Chinua Achebe (Washington, 1978).

24. "The Role of the Writer in a New Nation", G.D.Killam (ed.), African Writers on African Writing (London, 1973) p.8.

25. Ibadan, 22 (1966) p.58.

26. The Literature and Thought of Modern Africa (London, 1978) p.75.

27. The African Experience in Literature and Ideology (London, 1981) pp.174-97.

28. Priebe "Escaping the Nightmare of History: The Development of a Mythic Consciousness in West African Literature", Ariel IV, 2 (1973) pp.55-56; and I.Okpewho, "The Meaning of Myth: Apropos of Armah's Two Thousand Seasons" (University of Ibadan, English Department Staff Seminar paper [unpublished] 79/80.) Material from this is included in the manuscript of Okpewho's forth-coming book, Myth in Africa.

29. Priebe, p.58.

30. ibid., p.60.

31. Soyinka, op.cit., p.35.

32. "The Development of a Mythic Consciousness in West African Literature" (Microfilm: University of Texas, Ph.D., 1973) p.vii.

33. ibid., p.25.

34. Okpewho, op.cit., p.4.

35. Irele, op.cit., p.174.

PART TWO

MYTH, STRUCTURE AND INTERPRETATION

The traditional artist is both a technician and a visionary...Forms and motifs already exist in an assimilated time and world construct, and so he serves only as the instrument of transforming these into artistic wholes based on his own imaginative and cognitive world, a world which exists and has meaning only within the larger world.

(Kofi Awoonor)

Transition is now, and is born of every experience, not buried in the stillness of antiquity. This freedom is the true legacy of the modern African [artist], the freedom to reshape, to select and to reject, to build new forms around the image of the past, to reinterpret the ancient idioms through the uniqueness of a personal, contemporary experience. For the new African, form is a movement that constantly supercedes itself.

(Wole Soyinka)

II,(i) The Search for a form

A panoramic view of the corpus of African creative writing to date convinces one that when African literature has run the gamut of a defence of African culture (against an aggressive external intellectual opinion and sceptic audience), confidence grows among its producers and appreciators. With confidence, the culture itself is built and new experiments with the materials of culture become conspicuous in creative literature. The literature becomes conscious rather than self-conscious. This is nowhere more apparent than in African fiction. And if the critics of African literature can be said to reach consensus on any one aspect of it, it is that it must, before anything else, be able to "demonstrate" its claim to being "African" rather than English, French or Portuguese of which it is supposed to be an extension or, at least, a derivation. The African poem or play has little difficulty in asserting its Africanity and can be said to experience virtually nothing comparable to the dilemma in which the "African" novel finds itself. For, the modern African poem and play can, in spite of the mediation of alien tongues (European colonial languages), point to antecedents in the African oral traditions of ballad, heroic song, dirge and, communal rituals and festivals.

On the other hand, the African novel has continually had a hard time of it trying to justify the qualifier, "African". The reason for this is not far to seek. The novel per se is about the only literary genre that has persistently been credited with an exclusively European or Western character - ideologically (if not historically) and structurally. It is, however, undoubtedly the product of a literate tradition. And it is in struggling against this formidable current of facts that a great deal of the indigenous African critical energy can be perceived to be misdirected.

Many a critic of African fiction (especially those of the folkloristic persuasion), in seeking the African antecedent of the conventional novel in the African tradition of story-telling and folklore, must have expended incalculable intellectual resources in pursuit of a goal that is as good as futile. Even if we find the equivalent of the novel's characteristics in the African oral narrative tradition, better results (with respect to our concern with the modern written fiction) can, and are being achieved by turning our attention towards a proper study of the contribution of the writer and his heritage in African tradition to the extension of the aspect and scope of the adopted form. For, as it is now widely acknowledged, the Novel, though a literate genre, lacks (fortunately) the kind of definitive body of theoretical canons which decreed the immutable characters of the "poem" and "play". Hence, it continually undergoes changes in complexion and emphasis as a result of its experience of transplantation and adaptation into new, sometimes, antipodal cultural environments.

Although a greater proportion of novels by African authors (at the uncertain stages of acquiring the experience of creating with a literate medium) appears to be modelled after the form of the European novel - realism, characterization, point of view and all - quite a few novelists are decidedly original in their effort to attack the problem of expressing an African sensibility in a borrowed form. Even fewer critics have shown sufficient appreciation of this fact or sought the evidence of authentic African contribution to the "growth of the Novel" in the right works or for the right reasons. We have witnessed, for example, how spiritedly critics have disparaged or defended Tutuola's "innocent" way with the English language; or Okara's "self-conscious" effort to show, through transliteration (Ijaw to English), the distinctive characteristics of an African language and thought patterns; and Achebe's masterly injection of

an African flavour and "freshness" into the English language, teasing it into bearing the yoke of a strange world-view without sacrificing the essence of one or the other. But, relevant as the language question[1] is, in the creation of a modern African literature tradition, it is undeniable that "language" - by no means the most important African contribution to it - is just an aspect of the novel. That is why we seek to broach the question of the technical and, especially, aesthetic relevance of traditional mythology in the modern African novel with, among others, the works of two eminent African writers - Kofi Awoonor and Wole Soyinka - who are not, paradoxically, primarily thought of as novelists.

Awoonor's This Earth, My Brother and Soyinka's The Interpreters will be seen to belong to the earliest and boldest steps taken by African writers to experiment with the novel genre. For, in their sustained forays into the extant materials and forms of African oral traditions and mythology - deliberately embodying these into the art of fiction - both writers attempt, as it were, a revision of the customary views of the Novel in terms of their own unconventional approaches to "characterization", "narrative coherence" and "chronology". In the "forms" of these novels will be found embedded a critique of the 'received' European novel as well. And - contrary to the (dwindling) opinion among some critics of African literature that the best an African novelist can achieve, in creating in a European language, is to "pour" an African sentiment into a form that is informed and sustained by another literary and philosophical tradition which the African could not really understand or penetrate - there is now growing critical awareness of the possibility of a formal synthesis. That is what Richard Priebe is concerned about when he writes on Awoonor's This Earth, My Brother:

> ...there is probably little beyond the obvious that a formal analysis of this novel will yield to the critic who does not take into consideration the formal elements that come from Eweland as well as those which come from England...This Earth, My Brother is obviously not a dirge in the traditional sense any more than it is a conventional English novel. 2

Kole Omotoso has sought to make a similar point (in a rather extravagant essay) about the constituents of the African novel:

> It is my conclusion...that the form of the African novel is made up of three main units namely: the form of oral narratives (FON), the conventional form of the European novel (CN), and the language and literary tradition of the [sic.] foreign language in use (LLT). 3 (My emphasis)

So, it is the burden of the present study to examine the ways in which a selection of novels by Africans have "succeeded" in the effort to push that form into new areas of creative expression.

II, (i)

NOTES

1. Ngugi wa ThionGo has recently been reviving this question in his two latest books, Writers in Politics and Detained: A Writer's Prison Diary (Heinemann, London 1981) respectively). But, in spite of Ngugi's own conviction and the attractiveness of his idea, it is still as far a cry from the reality that the best known African writers seem to prefer to use European languages, as it is from the need to face up to (at least, for now) that fact; and elicit the authentic African contributions which he, among others, have been making towards creating a virile tradition of modern African fiction.

2. "Kofi Awoonor's This Earth, My Brother As an African Dirge", The Benin Review, 1 (Jun.1974) pp.95-96.

3. The Form of the African Novel: A Critical Essay (Akure, 1979) p.vi.

II, (ii) This Earth, My Brother

The story of Kofi Awoonor's creative career could be summed up as an extended excursion, through the mythic metaphor, into the African racial psyche. There, he seeks, symbolically, to rediscover and restore to society those invigorating ancestral values (disintegrated originally by the centuries of European colonialism and evangelism) which apparent lack of vision prevents its contemporary leaders from seeking. The objective thus simply stated, his best work can be seen to be thoroughly grounded in the cultural ambience of his native Ewe (Ghanaian) mythopoesis and extant poetic traditions. The funeral dirge - a highly stylized branch of the Ewe song tradition - is noticeably Awoonor's adopted, and primary mode of artistic expression[1] providing him, as it were, with a usable lyrical structure and repertoire of symbols, imagery and themes. Upon these, he in turn imposes his own creative will, adapting them to meet the needs of new situations and sensibility.

Traditionally the dirge is performed at funerals by professional bards engaged to mourn the loss of a loved one and to comfort the bereaved. But, besides soothing the pain of bereavement, the dirge functions symbolically as a medium for celebrating the ultimate triumph of life over death. The singer achieves this effect by drawing upon traditionally acknowledged use of humour, hyperbole and even ribaldry to divert attention from the immediate fact of bereavement. He would mock death and praise the undying qualities of valour or generosity of the deceased and his genealogy. While concentrating on the principle of cultural continuity and cosmic order (the continued bond between the world of the living and the dead) the bard would make general reflections upon existence.[2] Considering Awoonor's strong partiality for the world view partly expressed by the funeral dirge, it is hardly surprising that he

insists upon critics seeing his only novel to date,[3] This Earth, My Brother... as much as his poetry, "within the context of that construct of Ewe mythology or ontology..."[4]

While it would amount to an act of extreme naivety to surrender critical judgment to the narrow confines of the author's prescription, it remains important that any attempt to penetrate This Earth, My Brother... must take account of the uniquely Ewe world that lies behind it. Thus, we would recognize that besides its obvious influence on Awoonor's style, the dirge form also becomes for him a creative trope. Through it he endeavours to register his own artistic response to what he has described as "the inability of Africa to reconcile herself to herself and to search through the debris of her history for pieces with which to build that true self in her own image."[5] And since the dirge itself speaks of self and essence, loss and recovery, fragmentation and restoration it could be seen to constitute the major structural vehicle for the communication of Awoonor's creative vision. But because his method is generally non-analytical and abjures or, at best, ignores definitive time referents, it operates within a system of imagery, symbols and allusions that lends itself only to the subjective embrace of the mythic consciousness.

Without making an unnecessary issue of Awoonor's often repeated preference for This Earth, My Brother to be called a "prose poem",[6] it may be observed that no case has yet been made (least of all by its author) for it not to be treated as a novel. Undoubtedly the book has much about it, formally and thematically, to challenge conventional critical procedures. But so do Soyinka's The Interpreters, Okara's The Voice or Tutuola's Palmwine Drinkard, or Mazrui's The Trial of Christopher Oligbo for example. Individually and collectively, these

works share such characteristics of This Earth, My Brother as broken narrative, exploded time scheme (or virtual absence of one) lyrical force, and much else. Perhaps what is especially unique to the formal structure of Awoonor's novel is the diminished significance of a story as such. Whatever sort of 'story' it may contain can only be forged from dug out fragments from the three-level movements of consciousness apparent in the arrangement of the twenty-eight odd chapters.[7]

Pieced together, the chapters (2, 4, 6, 8, 9 and 12-15) which constitute the surface movement or 'present' story, give little else besides photographic details of the average daily life of the hero, Amamu. He is a brilliant lawyer and member of the Ghanaian elite which he thoroughly despises. After court session he goes to the National Club where he is an unamused witness to uninspired, drunken chattering by the new breed of politicians, bureaucrats, professionals and academics about the corruption inflicted on society by successive regimes which they themselves proudly prop up. Then he escapes, through pauperised and decaying suburbs of Accra, to the knowing and comforting arms of his mistress, Adisa, whom he deserts in the middle of the night to return to his 'posh' home and sophisticated wife, Alice, who would nag and accuse him of infidelity. He wakes up the following morning with the inevitable headache. The impregnable monotony of this existence is partially responsible for his dementia and death in the final three chapters. Meanwhile, in between these surface-movement chapters (except the unnumbered one at the beginning, the first and last three) are sandwiched chapters 3, 5, 7, 10 and 11 and the 'a' chapters.

The chapters in this second set function as "lenses" more than as "flashbacks" - being for the most part, excepting chapter nine, only remotely relevant to the surface or 'present' actions). They supply

background information about Amamu as the product of colonial psychological and evangelical spiritual aggression on his society. Thus, the Deme Mission primary school, Bremen church, District Commissioner and military conscription during World War II are all portrayed as manifestations and instruments of that aggression. Together these and the 'present' chapters fill out a picture of contrastive scatological (as it were) to the eschatological images that express the inner beauty which the hero envisions in the 'a' chapters.

The 'a' chapters come at the deepest level of the three-level consciousness scheme. Relative to the other chapters, to borrow the Freudian graduated states of awareness, the 'a' chapters (considered in one piece) would be the unconscious level below the subconscious and conscious respectively. And in Jungian terms, from the Unconscious originate - among others - the figures of mythology. But to consign the materials of these chapters to the Aladdin caves of the Unconscious is to misunderstand the author's deliberate choice and conscious patterning of them. Moreover, it would be a misrepresentation of the mythopoeic resources and ritual order which constitute the Ewe ontology. On the contrary, what we have just called the "unconscious level" will emerge as the ultimate reality in its mythopoeic depths. For, as Joseph Campbell writes: "...mythological figures...are not only symptoms of the unconscious... but also controlled and intended statements of certain spiritual principles, which have remained as constant throughout the course of human history..."[8] (my emphasis).

Thus, viewed from a properly adjusted perspective on the structure and content of This Earth, My Brother, the 'a' parts present the hero, Amamu, at his most "deeply" conscious or "superconscious" state. This perspective will seem to be amply enhanced by the mere fact that it is only in these parts where the first personal narrative is employed. The

technique integrates the physical and metaphysical dimensions of existence in Amamu's consciousness and presents it to us at first hand. His sensitivity, real feeling and response to the events going on at the 'surface' level are registered with stunning clarity: "My search for a repose in pain is not an act of faith. It is an act of worship for fallen gods..."(p.29) or:

> This frame, smashed against such deadly countenances chained to the final idea of the death and decay of this body.
>
> It is the only avenue of salvation, in this angered mood, self-denial, self-effacement become twin weapons to be worn into an equal and equally inconsequential battle. (p.143)

Professor Gerald Moore's remark about Awoonor's "use of certain highly personal moments of vision which are there presented to us only in fragments"[9] is not only most relevant in application to these 'a' chapters, it is also there that Awoonor's deft deployment of lyrical, imagic and symbolic resources of his imagination is most evident.

Any effort to grasp the real theme and deeper meaning of This Earth, My Brother must therefore commence from the deeply introspective frame of the 'a' chapters considered together. Even then the theme will not be found as a "story" but in the conflated images, symbols and allusions drawn from Ewe and, far afield as Christian, Classical and Existentialist sources. Critics have already made much of the theme of "alienation and exile" in the works of Awoonor - not least of all, This Earth, My Brother - and have often drawn comparisons to Christopher Okigbo's theme of the poet/exile as returning prodigal. It is important to remark, however, that while alienation or exile (physical or spiritual) may be considered as a theme of Awoonor's novel, it is not the theme. The hero, Amamu, as much as his creator, is too much aware of alienation (as positive

action) and will not shed any tears on that account. He takes it for granted:

> My refusal to be drawn was interpreted as a primary act of rebellion against the established order of things. I am positive that I have erred somewhere along the line, and dear Lord, I am prepared to pay the price. (p.144)

Here is a stark contrast to, say, Okolo the hero of Okara's The Voice, with whom Amamu has often been compared. The point is that, in spite of the apparent similarity between the careers of the two heroes (indeed, between the two novels), Okolo lacks self-knowledge and, is too idealistic to be able to bear the moral and spiritual burden that he is saddled with. Although Okolo speaks of the supreme quality of a positive "inside" (inner life), he has not himself the gift to enter the numenous: that is why his defeat is as much attributable to personal inadequacy as to the collapse of truth and moral order in his society. But the real difference between the two novels is that Okara seems intent on using his 'myth' to indict the "outside" society in its historical phase, and to show only symbolically the role of the artist; whereas Awoonor's hero has to be shown exploring the hinterland of the psyche in the search for restoration. Thus, we might see The Voice to properly belong in the same category (of the novels of 'social indictment' or of 'disillusion') as, for example, Achebe's A Man of the People or Lenrie Peters' The Second Round. In a sense, therefore, Awoonor's book begins where Okara's ends, by trying to show what happens when the scapegoat goes into the whirlpool.

Thus, Amamu may be spiritually alienated from the mores of the present day Ghanaian society; he is surely not alienated from the essence of cultural roots. And although he may have taken years to respond to the tug of the umbilical cord that binds him to ancestral wisdom; the cord has never been severed. Rather the argument may be reversed: it is his

compatriots who have veered from the ancestral hearth. Amamu knows this to be true and that is why he voluntarily assumes the role of the scape-goat and saviour of society - a role into which he is born, like his grandfather whom he is said to resemble and whose name he is given:

> The pledge was made to the ancestors and the gods. The child should be their torch-bearer and servant all his life...Everybody said the child resembled his grandfather... He was a tree on which they all leaned, and under whose shade they all took shelter. (p.12)

As Amamu grows up, the image of the protective ancestor merges into that of suffering Christ - "...they bring the cross on the back of the black man from Africa..."(p.48) - a point which will be made in greater detail later on. Meanwhile, it will be noted that, rather than alienation or exile, Awoonor's primary concern in this novel is the celebration of the anguish of the restorative process towards the ancestral hearth, for, "a gathering must be proclaimed at our sacred grove, your worship must be renewed." (p.143)

The broad thematic mould in which This Earth, My Brother is cast is introduced by its epigraph from Dante's Inferno. It sets the focus on life as Journey or Quest and trauma, leading eventually to Salvation or discovery or knowledge (self and communal). And in this journey of life the most cherished or worthy, if traumatic, price is the experience of the "dark wood", the infernal primal gulf between detachment and transfiguration. This is how Amamu perceives it:

> The flash point of creation, birth before birth long tunnels tunnels roads of womb darkness stilled the mind's eye cannot behold, prescience prenativity of total darkness, the foreknowledge of the grave the exhilaration and impatience of the emergence. Foetal passages palm tree harmattans dry dry in birthwaters of the rivers swimming at the estuary the entrance to the sea. (pp.13-14)

It is the primeval tortuous passage and process of procreation. The sheer ecstasy of it subsumes the idea of death in the process of the

promised "emergence" or fulfilment. But it is also a passage which only the initiate can voluntarily re-experience. Besides foreshadowing the hero's eventual death, the quoted passage also reinforces one of the thematic strains of the novel - the experience of death as the ultimate reality in Ewe cosmology. Awoonor speaks, thus, of: "...traditional reasoning, [in which] death is an awareness. When you die you proceed into a higher state - you become an ancestor..."[10] The refrains of the talking-drum:("...to-gu to-gu to-gu to to to-gu if they insist and say it must be by every means...then I shall die the death of blood I shall die the death of blood", [p.13]) not only register the overwhelming ritual and musical ecstasy of the primeval passage but also underline the transcience of physical extinction.

The whole point of <u>This Earth, My Brother</u> is founded upon the premise that Africa is in need of spiritual and psychological, as much as socio-economic revolution. In this, the artist's role is essential. A new value system must be evolved. The explication of the process forms the burden and thrust of the argument in Awoonor's book, <u>The Breast of the Earth</u> (Doubleday, 1975) in which he exhorts that "cultural self-discovery [must] become an essential aspect of our new quest for self and race."[11] The novel could therefore be seen as the mythic paradigm of that "quest": to work out, in Awoonor's own words, "the relationship between the historical truth and my own poetic truth - <u>the unification of what has been history and what must now be the reality seen through words and sounds and rhythms</u>".[12] (My emphasis) This comes out clearly in the contrasting movement of the "outside"/"inside" narrative consciousness we have observed in the novel. We must then see Amamu's career and the dirge-form as the twin instrument by which Awoonor aspires to attain a creative marriage of the "historical" and the "poetic" dimensions of experience in one continuing process of (as it were) prophylaxis.

Amamu's appointed destiny is to be the path-finder, albeit, to an ill-defined goal which can be reached only intuitively. Naturally, he knows and detests what he is escaping from: the cheap life of modern (Ghanaian) society. As to what he desires and must acquire, that, he recognizes (rather experiences) only epiphanously. Its mythic symbol - the mermaid - is slippery as a fish and indomitable as his childhood quarry, the rainbow-coloured butterfly which, try as he might, he could not keep: "It flew away." (p.15) His disgust with contemporary society is encapsulated in such words as these: "The blandly silly hills smoking in an afternoon rain, the putrefaction of earth in decaying leaves proclaim a simple solution: Despair and Die." (p.115) But to most of the objects of his nightmare he can also give concrete names and physical representation which he then smothers in a rally of scatological images. For example, his wife, Alice's cortege on the day of her arrival from London and, the Presidential motorcade (human symbols of the society he abhors), are all 'ambushed' at the Ring Road Circle and deftly 'assaulted' thus:

> The President is passing from the Castle to his residence in Flagstaff House. About ten cars ahead was a municipal night soil truck carrying its load from the former European area of Ridge, now occupied by senior African government officials. Alice put a handkerchief on her nose. The smell rose in the wave of the heat, descending on them with a malevolence that was almost a joke. They sat in the car glum and choked by the smell of suburban shit. (p.122)

And the suburban Nima (microcosm of "all slums" - his euphemism for contemporary African and the so-called Third World societies) is seen thus:

> Nima skirts the west central part of the city like a vulture...grew with the rapidity and alark with which all slums grow...No river runs through Nima. Only a huge open gutter

> that stinks to heaven...Here vultures
> mingle with the customers and sellers,
> snatching offal from butchers' stalls
> and dashing off to the 'refuse dumps' or to
> the roofs of the public latrines to devour
> their stolen goods with sad silent faces. (pp.151-2)

Even Amamu's affair with the erstwhile prostitute, Adisa - the calm centre of his cyclonic existence - cannot stay him. In spite of its beauty and peace, the affair represents, for him, only a physical abstraction from his spiritual goal. Physically she is desirable; sexually she is almost divine: "Their dreams asleep and awake were one. This was the hour of their redemption washed clean by tears brewed in anguish of the singular soul." (p.56) But she also lives (in Nima) too close to the "refuse dump" (p.27) and the dunghill images - as opposed to those of the beautiful butterfly, rainbow, moon and almond-tree-by-the-sea of his vision.

Thoroughly nauseated by the surrounding animal and mineral (by extension, moral-spiritual) putrefaction, Amamu is no longer even able to pick his way "carefully...through faeces human or canine,...rotten food and puddles of urine...the...chorus of pungent smells and odours." (p.155) He takes a symbolic exit and withdraws into his psychic depths and ancestral reality manifest as myth. In the dark recesses of the racial psyche, he seeks to reconnect society with those intuitively apprehended permanent values without which living in society will for ever remain mere shell existence. But, paradoxically, he recognizes that these primeval values have vanished, or so far removed from his reach, that he can only keep faith by responding to the mesmerism of metamorphosizing, suggestive image clusters. (His anguish springs from the terror of that awareness as much as from the recognition that he bears a communal burden: "Our sadness itself, based upon that distant sadness which is the history of this land, defies all consolation." p.163)

The dominant symbol is that of the "woman of the sea" - the mythic personification of primal, creative energies and, object of Amamu's quest. She is revealed to his senses in flitting circular and aquatic images - moon, rainbow, drum, breasts, womb, mermaid, whale - all of which (one may presume) are symbolic of feminine principle of fertility and procreation. They are revealed, coalesced in and structure the essence of the Yewe - healing/fertility cult ("Prelude" and chapter 1a especially). All these figures enhance Amamu's prismatic experiencing of his real but dead and much adored cousin, Dede. Sometimes Adisa, his only positive human contact, metaphorically dissolves (in his imagination) into one of the multifarious manifestations of Dede. It is her, as "woman of the sea" that lurks behind and influences his other experiences and relationships.

> Loving the memory of her my first love
> through all lands and all climes, searching
> for her who came out of the sea in the
> shadow of the almond tree...(p.59)

Because of the goddess' indeterminate character as we usually encounter her through the hallucinatory vision of her protege, we can arrive at her real symbolism only inductively.

Thus, she appears (like Dante's Beatrice) to be the symbol of innocence and purity but, above all, victim and saviour figure. Literally she is the victim of a wicked and uncaring society (p.140). But she is also its saviour, being dead and gone to join the rank of the ancestors in "the land of...forefathers." (p.145) In her dual symbolic role as victim-saviour, she could be seen as a mythic personification also of Mother Africa. And, read along some of Awoonor's wellknown poems - "I heard a bird cry", "Weaver bird", and "Exiles" - this interpretation will lead to an identification of the "woman of the sea" with the image of

Mother Africa, misused and abused by generations of aliens and deserted by her own off-spring. In the first of her many apparitions to her votary: "Her hair was long and black... her long thin body... has now become flabby with age and time and labour." (p.4) And she 'follows' Amamu around enquiring about this "neglected compound" and that "house whose fences were falling and termites ate the shiny trees that held it together." (p.5)

It is in this role of the archetypal victim-saviour we have to see Amamu. But our understanding of it in This Earth, My Brother is much more enhanced by Awoonor's adeptness in his deployment of borrowed mythic tropes from sources other than Ewe. And it would seem ironic (or, a misleading turn of the mythic resources of the author's subconscious/ creative mind) that so much of the total meaning of the hero's quest should depend upon consciously drawn symbols and allusions from the Christian Messianic myths - especially, given the demonstrably hostile references, in the "flashback" chapters, to the roles of Christian institutions (Deme church and school) in his early life. Of course we must be able (as one must presume the author is) to distinguish between 'Christianity' as agent of Empire and deculturation, and Christianity as Jungian archetypal truth. But the observation becomes even more relevant when related to the monument which Awoonor erects to the destructive roles of colonialism and christianity in his much quoted poem, "The Cathedral", and to his insistence that:

> Any critic who does not see him [Amamu] within the context of that construct of Ewe mythology or ontology...[and images of] the eternal, elemental invocations of the ultimate ritual of his own and the communal restoration, had better leave the work [This Earth, My Brother] alone. 13

The pre-emptive strike at his critics (just a couple of years after the appearance of the novel!) can be fastened only to Awoonor's unnecessary anxiety for his book not to be misunderstood as socio-political satire on

modern Ghana - like, for example, Armah's Fragments - but to be seen as the statement of a "poetic truth". It is an argument which it is equally unnecessary to labour in the present study.

The fact remains, however, that in This Earth, My Brother Amamu, the hero, denigrates 'christianity'; yet his quest and apotheosis attain intelligibility largely through Christian mythic symbols and allusions - Calvary, Passion, Crucifix:

> Then silently the deliverance occurred in the hour of eternity in the missal hour of reading rosary and journeying the stages of the cross. See here, here they arrested him, Judas is pointing his finger at him, and here, here he plants a kiss upon him my Saviour...There, he falls, my Lord falls and they whipped him... but he was not destined to die there; his journey must be complete. (pp.48-49)

It is thus that one recognizes the prefiguration of Amamu as (sic.) "Joseph" (Jesus?) of Africa, betrayed and bearing the communal cross. Indeed, the eighth chapter is wholly devoted to the themes of Christ's trials and the Passion. The chapter itself develops from the hymn which floats in Amamu's head, into a flashback on his childhood encounter with the "mad" Reverend Paul Dumenyo, a local clergyman fallen victim of the betrayed Christ. (But in his portrayal is embedded an African interpretation of Christianity which is itself a critique of the "white" (European) christianity as a betrayal of its true archetypal meaning.) His subsequent dementia is paralleled to the reference to Amamu (by his friends) as a "mad man" as much as it prefigures Amamu's eventual schizopheric collapse and death. Thus, Amamu's refusal, in his childhood encounter with the Reverend, to cast a stone at him marks his symbolic pact with the dispossessed of society. (p.102) Between the moment of his acceptance and his reunification with his "woman of the sea" lies fathomless anguished foray into psychic depths - accepting the cup and hyssop of despair -

groping towards the primal smell of "cinnamon and wild flowers, ancient smells of treasure well kept for the children of the future." (p.179)

We can now seek a more plausible explanation of Awoonor's personal outspoken (and Amamu's) anti-Christian tendencies, in his relationship to Thomas R. Knipp's "counter-myth" thesis:

> The African historical myth within which Awoonor functions and to which he contributes is, in an important sense, a counter-myth; a response not only to experience but to an unacceptable pre-existing mythic interpretation of African experience and the African past, which can be called the white or European myth of Africa. 14

And so, "For many [African] creative artists the process of re-establishing a personal [and communal] Africanness has been the process of seeing - and then seeing through - the white image and myth of Africa."[15] Thus, to really get at the authentic African image with which he can identify, the African writer inevitably has to draw upon all the iconoclastic potential of his medium which he then launches upon the ubiquitous "myth" of the European civilizing mission in Africa. Of course the degree of success with which each accomplishes the task varies and depends a great deal upon individual artistic skill, temperament and, above all, idiosyncratic definition of "cultural self-discovery" or cultural assertion.

Thus, Awoonor sees and exploits the archetypal, universal validity of certain Christian myths which could be seen to complement the poignant immediacy of Ewe mythopoesis - especially the funeral dirge - as the basic structural motif for the novel. Indeed, at the threshold of his apotheosis, it is to the rhythms of ancestral drums Amamu responds (as Christ might have said):

> I am coming down from the mountains of dung from these hills of shame. I shall walk the steps of ancient war drums, I shall move to the beat of kusago, atrikpui and agbadza...(p.165)

And again, "a voice began to talk about the searcher who finds in the wilderness the death that will kill him..."(p.167) The drums' alternating rhythms of suffering and respite, their urgent, insistent beat in his head finally exorcise his schizophrenia: "For you I renounce the salvation of madness and embrace the singular hope, your hope." (p.165)

If, so far, we have had to concentrate on the exploratory, mythic "inner", more than the expository, historical "outer" world of This Earth, My Brother, it is because that is the effect which the novel seems structured to procure. To conclude a discussion of the novel, therefore, by trying to resolve the question of what the hero's death is meant to achieve or achieves, is to enquire about how Awoonor succeeds in an imaginative (structural and thematic) integration of the 'levels of narrative consciousness' and the reunification of Amamu with his "woman of the sea." Structurally, the novel follows a circular pattern which becomes an appropriate form for the thematic preoccupation with the cycle of decay, death and renewal of society. It opens with a lament or dirge which mourns, simultaneously, a personal loss to Amamu (and, in a sense, his own death) and the spiritual 'death' of his society, while it celebrates the promise of rediscovery, birth and a new beginning:

> She was with me. And I was not afraid.
> I told her my story of the nature and the
> bitterness of the birthwater that nurtured me.
> Of the womb that carried me. Of the pangs that
> delivered me...(p.4)
> .....
> She, as in a dream, moved from my side under
> the Indian almond...She was the last to go.
>
> And I was alone. But not for long.
> (p.6)

Viewed in retrospect, this 'opening' becomes a sort of postcript to the events described by the novel. And, further on, the conflicting images of "dung hill" and "butterfly" (in the "outer" and "inner" narrative movements

respectively) merge into a single consciousness of musical rhythms (in the final three chapters) that lead Amamu's feet towards the beach and to the object of his quest. Thus, his death would be seen as a pre-requisite of the ritual process whereby the self-sacrifice of an individual "carrier" effects communal redemption. In that status, he is more or less a medium, and represents historico-cultural forces larger than, and beyond himself. His reunion with the "woman of the sea" is, therefore, his own apotheosis as much as (by symbolically breaking the cycle of spiritual decay in society) it clears a path for communal renewal.

One of the most scathing criticism of This Earth, My Brother is Professor Gerald Moore's, which lashes at its lack of "recognition that material conditions must change before there can be...spiritual revolution."[16] We could even go further by adding that the hero does not in fact engage in any logical (dialectical?) analysis of the malaise which stalks his society. Nor does he seem to engage his adversaries in, even, a token battle of the will. And everything about him reminds one of the danger of "equating action with movement" of which Soyinka has warned.[17] But will all this yield any fairer assessment of the novel? Would things not have been different and such points as we have just been making go unchallenged had the "African condition" been always self-determined and self-directing for so long? No one would doubt the fact that the colonialist subjugation of Africa by mere force of arms has been made much easier, and has been outlived by a more subtle psycho-spiritual assault. In this light, would not a recourse to the authentic African sources of spiritual sustenance be a lasting answer and basis for a "material revolution"? Other twentieth century writers have thought, indeed, that political solutions are arid and will break down unless there is renewal within. For, as Sekou Toure warns in a context that is hardly different from the present African experience:

> Colonized [materially or psycho-culturally] man must first recollect himself, critically analyse the results of the influences to which he was subjected by the invader, which are reflected in his behaviour, way of thinking and acting, his conception of the world and society and in his way of assessing the values created by his own people. 18

And, as Awoonor himself has said in self-defence: "I am not trying to set up a moral or ethical system...Nor do I even dare to set up any political or ideological system in my work."[19]

Although he is better known as a poet, his only novel to date is perhaps a more complete illustration of his creative vision than any single collection of his poems could be. It not only encompasses, like his poetry, the continuum of feeling and experience of a cultural ambience, but achieves a creative fluency and poise in the drive towards the restoration of self and essence and the celebration of a return to "harmonic order." While Awoonor seeks to realise his theme through a single hero (unlike Armah's Two Thousand Seasons or Ngugi's Petals of Blood,) the informing vision is not individualist in the sense of which Baako, the hero of Armah's Fragments for example, could be seen. For, unlike Baako, Amamu's experience is not "locked in a private psyche."[20] He does not seek an individualist haven or private peace. Baako rejects (at least apparently) society's claim upon him. Amamu is committed to an unobtrusive, yet, relentless search for permanent moral values but, with his focus on society as the ultimate beneficiary. And unlike the personae of Awoonor's earlier poem, "More Messages"; "seeking through dust and dirt/the lonely miracle of redemption", Amamu seems to recognize that the communal survival, first, is the ultimate guarantee of a personal one. It is in this sense as well that he differs from the protagonists of Soyinka's The Interpreters.

II,(ii)

NOTES

All references to This Earth, My Brother (Heinemann,London 1972)

1. Bernth Lindfors, Munro et al. (eds.), Palaver (Texas,1972) pp.48-51.

2. See J.H.K.Nkatia, Funeral Dirges of the Ahan People (New York, 1969).

3. op.cit.,: Awoonor speaks of his forthcoming novel. p.64.

4. Rowland Smith (ed.) Exile and Tradition (London, 1976) p.172.

5. The Breast of the Earth (New York,1975) p.31.

6. Lindfors, et.al., p.54; and Smith, op.cit., p.170.

7. Including the 'a' chapters and the unnumbered one at the beginning. Awoonor also comments about the 'a' chapters thus:
"There was a publisher's error...I wanted the chapters to slide on into the poetic interludes which would be indicated by the use of italics." Lindfors et.al., p.61.

8. Joseph Campbell, The Hero With A Thousand Faces (London, 1975) pp.222-23.

9. Gerald Moore, Twelve African Writers (London, 1980) p.245.

10. Lindfors, et.al., p.60.

11. The Breast of the Earth p.xiii.

12. op.cit., p.57.

13. Smith, op.cit., p.172.

14. African Literature Today, 11 (1980) p.40.

15. Ibid., p.41.

16. Moore, op.cit., p.248.

17. "And After the Narcissist?" African Forum, 1, 4, (1965) p.55.

18. "A Dialectical Approach to Culture", W.King & E.Anthony (eds.), Black Poets and Prophets (New York, 1972) p.62.

19. Lindfors, et.al., p.57.

20. Awoonor, K. "Voyager and The Earth", New Letters, 40, 1 (1973) p.90.

II,(iii) The Interpreters

Very few African novels have managed to generate the degree of diffident critical response usually associated with Wole Soyinka's The Interpreters. For years after the initial (scanty) reviews it received, critics maintained a general attitude of studied silence - punctuated occasionally by gestures of polite acknowledgment with a mixture of embarrassed incomprehension and disapproval.[1] Especially among its African critics, The Interpreters has suffered outraged disclamation. It has been berated variously for the self-conscious opacity of its (author's) language, obscure mystical frame of reference and intellectual elitism.[2] But there is a general concurrence about the incisive thrust of its power as a socio-political satire. However, one rarely encounters the kind of sympathetic but no less hard-eyed critical searchlight which Professor Kinkead-Weekes trains on the anatomy of The Interpreters.[3] In a recently published article he shows how the realistic (social and human) and the mythic ("religious" or preterhuman) "lenses" of Soyinka's creative imagination could be perceived and brought to interplay in unravelling the different levels of meaning in the novel. With this cue in mind, the present endeavour will seek to further the import of Soyinka's creative concern in the mytho-spiritual framework of The Interpreters.

Meanwhile a close examination of the character and quality of its satire will put in proper perspective the governing creative vision in The Interpreters. Casually paraphrased, The Interpreters is about the plight of a group of five young Nigerians (Egbo, Kola, Sagoe, Sekoni and Bandele) seeking to "interpret" the socio-political and spiritual ramifications of a particular historical moment in the life of their country.

In the exercise, the point of reference is their own life-style and role as representatives of "the new generation." (p.178) Their disenchantment with the pervasive atmosphere of moral malaise that plagues the society is undisguised. Accordingly, the attack upon and disrobing of venality, dereliction of duty and philistinism masquerading as social respectability (seen mainly through the eyes and actions of the journalist, Sagoe) is uncompromising. Simultaneously, the protagonists make intellectual efforts to define their own roles in society and to devise alternative life-styles which they perceive to be superior to the surrounding banality. The kind of alternatives they seek find varied expression in the mysticism of Egbo, the "true religion" of Sekoni, Sagoe's "voidante philosophy", the tolerant detachment of Bandele and the art of Kola - all of which add up, ironically, to another glossed mask of impotence. Alongside their own cultivated self-examination and criticism, a looming shadow of authorial attitude of censure can be perceived - symbolized by the presence of Bandele who castigates their "cheap cynicism" (p.179). Thus, through the bi-focal nature of Soyinka's indictment we become aware of a see-saw technique which characterizes the form of The Interpreters.

Justifiably,the poignancy of the novel's satirical thrust has never been in doubt. And much of its 'positive' criticism has focussed on little else. What should however bother the discerning critic is the run-of-the-mill approach of certain critics which tends to perpetuate the impression that the satire's flow is a one-way affair: that the protagonists are a collective mouthpiece through which the author castigates an intransigent society.[4] Consequent upon this sort of critical perspective is the general tendency to group The Interpreters with the so-called novels of disillusion such as Achebe's A Man of the People and Armah's The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born. Even while it may be granted that some

form of social criticism unites them, it should have become clear by now that Soyinka's novel differs significantly from the others. It obeys a different kind of stylistic and formal ordering imagination. Whereas, for instance, Achebe's and Armah's novels depend for their effects on an almost entirely linear progression of narrative and structure and a technique of in-built overtures of conspiratorial mutuality from hero to audience, The Interpreters draws essentially upon a "cyclic...almost static, framework"[5] and tends (when it does not alienate them) to ask the audience to judge. Where the creative visions in A Man of the People and The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born are outward-regarding, the imaginative universe in Soyinka's novel (rather like Awoonor's This Earth, My Brother)is inward-gazing and esoteric. In dealing with The Interpreters, therefore, the critical enterprise will prove much more rewarding if, like Professor Kinkead-Weekes, we consider that "socio-political satire, as in all Soyinka's best work, is a station one passes through in order to arrive at more significant destinations."[6]

From this premise such unorthodoxies as are often pointed at in The Interpreters[7] may be thought to serve a particular kind of imagination. And its particularity unfolds itself in images, symbols and motifs (recognizably deriving from Yoruba and Judaeo-Christian cosmologies) which combine to limn a mythic interpretation of experience. Any serious consideration of Soyinka's art must, therefore, proceed from an acknowledgment of the mythopoeic substratum of his poetic development and creative universe. Indeed it hardly needs mentioning that any effective criticism or appreciation of his works must seek some acquaintance with not only his native heritage in Yoruba culture, but also the prime of place which he accords the deity, Ogun, in his creative philosophy. And it is no accident that his Myth, Literature and the African World (1976) remains,

perhaps, the most perspicacious venture so far at exploring the bonds between the creative impulse and the mytho-psychic order of the African cultural ambience. He takes as the matrix of his exploration the myths of Ogun, the Yoruba deity, god of war and metallic lore as well as the Creative Essence and the patron saint of the arts. It is expecially in the paradoxical attributes (the destructive/creative essence) of this deity that Soyinka seems to find some kind of partial confirmation and purging of his own experiences and aspirations.

Thus, throughout his literary career he has sought to interpret the African social experience not only in terms of the Ogunian contradiction but Obatalan essence of serene stability as well. (Obatala being the Yoruba god of Creation and patron of the plastic arts). Occasionally - as in his play, The Bacchae of Euripides (1973), and his novel, Season of Anomy (1973) for example - he has sought affirmative correspondences to the Yoruba myths in such Grecian gods and heroes as Apollo, Dionysus, Prometheus and Orpheus. And he has consistently devoted creative attention to the meaning of individual action (social and moral) within these mythological constructs. Often his artistic sensibility can be perceived to oscillate between the demands of collective social responsibility and the need to celebrate the individual's self-assertive will and right to self-fulfilment - the pendulum apparently swinging more in favour of the latter. The basic thematic focus of The Interpreters therefore is the spiritual quest of the group of interpreters. It is a quest to make spiritual intelligence of their world in which the individualist attraction of self-determination cohabits uneasily with an awareness of ethical imperatives. Thus the novel may be conceived as a medium for Soyinka's creative exploration of an intense moral dilemma - the crisis and challenge of choice - which is the burden of its introspective universe.

Soon after the novel opens there is a sudden plunge into the past and an immediate focus upon the protagonists drifting aimlessly through Egbo's memory of an earlier atavistic boat-journey. In that journey the conversation among the friends centres on the imminent 'choice' which Egbo will have to make between accepting the invitation to occupy his ancestral throne at Osa or holding-on to his dreary job in the Foreign Office. To accept the one is to become a symbolic custodian of his people's tradition and heir to the power accruing from the position - hence, acknowledging the claims of the past upon the present. To choose the other is to be "free", but also to confirm his own worst fears about leading an ineffectual, "sheer creek-surface" (p.13) existence. The failure of the journey is expressed in the non-choice - to go "'With the tide'" (p.14) - which he makes midstream when pressed for direction by his friends as the boatmen warn about the changing tide. Kola's retort, "'Like apostates'" (p.14) carries the force of both <u>definition and indictment</u> of this evasiveness as well as the group's general inability to organize their lives.

Because, in many respects, Egbo personalizes the crisis and dilemma of the group he becomes the focal point most of the time. His Janus-like temperament is intriguing. He consciously rejects the past of the ancestors but embraces its evergreen copy in mystic communions with anthropomorphic deities - "Osun", "Olumo", "Yemoja". He is a self-declared atheist and scoffs at religion but sees himself as a protege of gods. He hates "'things of death'" (p.8) but yields himself to the "fresh liver on a butcher's slab,...cold gelatinous depths" (p.52) of Simi's eyes and dares the 'death' between her thighs. His involvement in Kola's canvas testifies to his subconscious yearning for order, continuity and community which he denies by rejecting "'making advances to the dead.'"(p.9) As much as he feels ancestral blood pulsating in his veins Egbo abhors determinism because he is essentially an individualist:"'A man's gift of

life should be separate, an unrelated thing. All choice must come from within him, not from promptings of his past'". (p.120) Indeed, to choose is, for him, to be determined and, to be determined is a form of death. And "choice" will later, come to mean to be committed and to face responsibility (in love affairs, comradeship and sympathy) - situations which he doggedly swims around whenever he does not explode in violence. But as the details of the events of his life emerge, Egbo's rejection of the past is revealed to be a mere intellectual front. Thus another level of apostasy, "'...an absolute neutrality'" (p.13), prefigured in Kola's second attempt to define it, is approached.

Egbo seems married to freedom and independence which find expression in his vocation of exploring the unknown and mysterious while he darts "'from one experience to the other'". Even to that, the contradictory forces in his psyche will not let him admit wholeheartedly. It is '"as if life was nothing but experience'". (p.133) He is undoubtedly sensitive, passionate and gifted with a boundless capacity to enter the numenous. But each experience confirms his apostasy. He is afraid wholly to commit himself to the mysteries after which he hungers; and he covers up by adopting ironic attitudes towards his more profound communions. This is the impression created from his relationship with the courtesan, Simi, who is the symbol of his first deliberate approach towards the 'gateway' to the mystery of divinity. But the restorative promise of the mystic power of sex which we have been led to expect dissolves as we watch him tired and hollowed out "like the quarry at Abeokuta when all the granite had been blown apart and nothing but mud-waters of the rain fill the huge caverns underground." (p.125) This one experience has given less than the promise it held out for the young Egbo and so, Simi, the human reincarnation of "Olokun", "ayaba Osa", "Yemoja" falls,in his eyes, from divinity to the demonic, "sorceress".

Some "balance" in Egbo's life has been upset. He proceeds in a daring single-mindedness to wrest spiritual restoration from the gods' abode among the rocks by Ogun river under the suspended bridge. The environment, so suffused with presences that proclaim continuity and connectedness, will seem an ironic place to be in for a temperament that denies both. The "knowledge" which he reaps from daring "a womb of the gods" is quite unlike the bounty" of the other lone-adventurer personae in Soyinka's long poem, "Idanre" (1967). Egbo leaves the abode of gods feeling chastened but with an ambiguous "gift that he could not define" (p.127) However, when its character is traced upon the pattern of Egbo's past tendencies and subsequent involvement with people, no definition of it matches Egbo's: "Knowledge he called it, a power for beauty often, an awareness that led him dangerously towards a rocksalt psyche, a predator on Nature." (p.127; my emphasis) And he makes the spot his preserve, a shrine he erects to flatter his own ego. Thus is prefigured his violation of the undergraduate girl's virginity and reluctance to commit himself to an in-depth relationship with her. Although abetted by her self-confidence Egbo's irresoluteness and evasion is also contrasted and commented upon by it.

If Egbo runs from physical involvement with society, Sagoe remains in the heat of it. And his own brand of apostasy differs from Egbo's only by degrees of opportunity. Although he is never really tested (except when he fails to rescue young 'Barabas'-Noah-from the mob) by any particular necessity to choose, an inference of abdication of duty may be made from his escapades and general comportment. Sagoe has the cat's eyes for scandal equalled only by his lack of real courage. Through him we get a glimpse of the decadence in social morality as he launches assaults on double-dealing and vanity. His baneful scorn for the sneaking bribe-

collecting politician, Chief Winsala, the double-faced retired 'Morgue', Sir Derin and the philistine snobbishness, trite gossiping and tawdry party of the Oguazors are truly memorable. But he lacks the courage to actually look beyond the surface symptoms of an all-consuming malaise. And Banndele adequately remarks Sagoe's "cheap cynicism" (p.179) His potential for compassion and as saviour of the oppressed which earns him commendation as "'a man of God'" (p.118) and his job with the "Independent Viewpoint" is often shrivelled by an indomitable professional desire to use people in order to squeeze material to fill blank pages of his newspaper. Above all, he takes refuge from responsibility in drink and his "philosophy of shit". As Professor Kinkead-Weekes comments again: "His fantasies about his drink-lobes and his intestines are the devices of a professional cynic who cannot bear his life, and who tries to escape its pressures in terms which flatter his sensitivity and sophistication, while they help him to evade his problems."[8]

Very nearly like Egbo, Kola picks his way around social commitment by an indulgence in uninspired art. He shares with Sagoe the professional urge to use people. Human beings hold attraction for him only long enough and to the degree to which they fit into the pantheon on his canvas. This reflects in his attitude towards the albino protege of Monica Faseyi, Usaye, who attracts and repels him simultaneously; towards Joe Golder, the fractionally black American, and young Noah. His rejection of emotional involvement with Monica Faseyi (not on moral grounds) is a measure of his own evasion of responsibility. It is only concordant with "the laws of his own creation" (p.50) to wish away "the enslaving cord" (p.245) of relatedness and community although, ironically, his preoccupation with the pantheon of Yoruba divinities springs from a subconscious desire to reassemble fragments and attain wholeness.

Apostasy may thus be seen at one level to define the quality of the protagonists' life-styles according to how much or less they are capable of approaching social integration. For, the task that confronts the group is not merely how to rise - through their adopted aesthetic forms - above the surrounding lethargy or how to maintain aloof distance from society but, more importantly, how to tame and conquer the chaos within themselves, harnessing its energies towards a socially positive action. This reflects upon and explains their obsession with "power" from the on-set. Will the face of apostasy then change when power is dangled under its nose? This is the question with which Kola teases Egbo. And it is significant that Egbo and Kola are linked to the enigma of power to which each returns with greater seriousness later on.

Still midstream and contemplating the challenge which the chieftaincy of Osa poses to him, Egbo asks: "But what on earth can such an existence hold out for me?" (p.12) Bandele replies with a tinge of humour: "'As many wives as you can handle, for one!'" (p.13) '"And power too?!'" adds Kola. The focus on <u>power</u> in this discussion is in relation to its meaning as a medium for transforming society. Osa holds forth a potential for Egbo - an opportunity for him to use its resources, imposing upon them his own will as well as knowledge and experience in an enlightened drive to create a better society. But his cynicism leads him to interpret power narrowly as an instrument of blackmail and exploitation. He dismisses it lightly: '"That kind of power would only be a hobby.'" (p.13) His rejection of the chieftanship however is attributable to a more deep-rooted cause in his personality. He is repelled by the brute force of power which his maternal grandfather symbolizes in his imagination but he perceives"...a virile essence, a redeeming grace in the oldman and in that existence" (p.11). He is innately afraid of power but the challenge

of it, transmitted to him as a child through the "terrifying virility" (p.10) of the old man's hands, stalks his consciousness. And in spite of his awareness of "...his own overwhelming need to retain that link with some out-of-the-rut existence" (pp.119-20) he opts for the drudgery of Lagos and the Foreign Office. Meanwhile the meanings of power in their attractive varieties continue to unfold as he and his friends pursue their individual pleasures.

Kola alone contemplates about power. Creative power - power for self-expression and consummation in art, the will to transform - is an elusive phenomenon which he chases after relentlessly. And all about him, the evidences proclaim his own failure:

> Fitfully, far too fitfully for the definite realisation of the meaning, he had felt this sense of power, the knowledge of power within his hands, of the will to transform; and he understood then that medium was of little importance, that the act, on canvas or on human material was the process of living and brought him an intense fear of fulfilment. (p.218; my emphasis)

In thinking about power he discovers his own limitations; that he suffers from an "overdose of cynicism" (p.227) and is not really an artist. He perceives experience in disconnected images and fragments and lacks the creative antenna for penetrating the numinous. Thus he mistakes Noah for Esumare as much as he depends upon human models for his pantheon of gods. He does not believe in himself and so, is afraid of power and he "dared not, truly, be fulfilled" (p.218). And in his wilful self-abasement he misconstrues his own potential as well as the real nature of Egbo's attitude to power. Likewise he misrepresents Sekoni's "Sudden" explosion with "this fact of power".(p.219) In thinking about power, however, Kola sheds more light upon how much potential Egbo squanders in pursuit of the elusive. For, only Egbo comes close enough to a form of power which is capable of creating change in human society. Ironically, it is Kola and Sekoni (lacking the advantage of Egbo's proximity to, so to say, a readymade repertory of power to which he can turn at will) who are most conscious of the need for power in its transformative immanence. Kola has experienced its intangible presence in his own hands but "At his elbow was the invisible brake which drew him back from final transportation

in the act." (p.218)

Through training and imagination Sekoni sought to capture the mana of power in a wild ecstasy:

> Sekoni, qualified engineer, had looked over the railings everyday of his voyage home. And the sea sprays built him bridges and hospitals, and the large trailing furrow became a deafening waterfall defying human will until he gathered it between his fingers, made the water run in the lower channels of his palm, directing it against the primeval giants on the forest banks. And he closes his palms again, cradling the surge of power. Once he sat on a tall water spout high above the tallest trees and beyond low clouds. Across his sight in endlest mammoth rolls, columns of rock, petrifications of define droppings from eternity. If the mountain won't come, if the mountains won't come, then let us to the mountain now, in the name of Mohammed! So he opened his palm to the gurgle of power from the charging prisoner, shafts of power nudged the monolith along the fissures, little gasps of organic ecstasy and paths were opened, and the brooding matriarchs surrendered all their strength, lay in great geometric patterns at his feet." (p.26)

Upon his arrival home Sekoni dares to foist his dream on an understandably suspicious and intransigent establishment. Single-handedly he builds an experimental power station. (It is no coincidence that his first project is a power station). A great deal of the dialectic of the novel points towards attitudes to power: "the will to transform...on canvas or on human material" and the chosen "medium was of little importance"; [p. 218] as Kola puts it. Egbo confessed earlier about his thoughtless rejection of power: "If you seek to transform, you must not be afraid of power" (p.182). But Sekoni is exploited and compromised by jealous bureaucratic intrigues. Abetted by an "expat expert", the "Chairman" dishonestly writes-off Sekoni's scheme and reaps large sums of compensation money for his own subsidiary company. The shock of the experience lands Sekoni in a mental hospital. His failure, however, is attributable to his unconnected and

defective vision, apostrophized by an evident overdose of idealism and shortsightedness of which he seems aware when, upon his recovery, he turns to the unified vision of "true religion":

> Sekoni thrusting his fingers through the broken walls of Old Jerusalem, standing pitiless on his heritage before disturbing intimations, suddenly meaningful affinities...and he was awed, so wholly awed, beyond all concrete grasp. (p.99)

His return from pilgrimage witnesses his apotheosis as a natural artist proclaimed by "The Wrestler" - his sculptured interpretation of the spirit of man in the taut posture of a questing pilgrim. Kola "watched with growing respect Sekoni turn the wood into some wilful spirit whose taming was a magic locked in energy...Certainly there was no self-doubt in Sekoni's hand..." (p.100) It is this power to transform self and matter in Sekoni which the remaining interpreters lack or refuse to tap that awes Kola. Eventually Sekoni dies early but not before he has attained a measure of self-fulfilment denied to his friends so far.

Meanwhile, the spiritual ramifications of apostasy - evasion of responsibility on social and interpersonal levels; inability or refusal to tap and direct potential or power towards positively creative action - deepen as further events and experiences in the lives of the main actors unfold. If apostasy emerges as a unifying theme of The Interpreters, Yoruba cosmology forms its underlying structural motif. That cosmology is partially unravelled in the mysteries of Ogun - "God of Iron and metallurgy, Explorer, Artisan, Hunter, God of war, Guardian of the Road, the Creative Essence"[9] and Soyinka's own adopted patron - whose central position in it relates to the Yoruba Creation Myth. Originally the myth is the story of the primal disintegration of the godhead and of Creation, as well as the recurrent cycle of creation and destruction which, in effect leaves Man outside its scheme. In the novel, Kola renders the Creation myth in these cryptic terms:

> And of these floods of the beginning, of the fevered fogs of the beginning, of the first messenger [Orisha Nla] the thimble of earth, a fowl and an ear of corn, seeking the spot where a scratch would become a peopled island; of the first apostate [Atooda] rolling the boulder down the back of the unsuspecting deity - for they must learn the first stab in the back and keep inferiors harmless within sight - and shattering him in fragments, which were picked up and pieced together [by Orunmila] with devotion; shell of the tortoise around devine breath; of the endless chain for the summons of the god and the phallus of unorigin pointed at the sky-hole past divination; [Oranyan's 'staff'] of the lover of purity, [Obatala] the unblemished one whose large compassion embraced the cripples and the dumb, the dwarf, the epileptic - and why not, indeed, for they were creations of his drunken hand and what does it avail, the eternal penance of favouritism and abstinence? Of the lover of gore, [Ogun] invincible in battle, insatiable in love and carnage, the explorer, path-finder, protector of the forge and the creative hands, companion of the gourd whose crimson-misted sight of debauchery set him upon his own and he butchered them until the bitter cry pierced his fog of wine, stayed his hand and hung the sword, foolish like his dropped jaw; of the one who hanged and did not hand, [Shango] who ascended on the Ilana to shy vaults and mastered the snake-tongued lightning and the stone of incandescence, long arms of the divine sling playing the random game of children, plucking houses trees and children like the unripe mango; of the bi-sexed one [Erinle] that split himself into the river; of the parting of the fog and the retreat of the beginning and the eternal war of the divining eyes, [Ifa/Orunmita] of the hundred and one eyes of lore, fore-and after-vision, of the eternal war of the first procedure with the long sickle head of chance, [Eshu] eternally mocking the pretensions of the bowl of plan, mocking lines of order in the ring of chaos; of the repulsive Scourge [Shonpona] riding purulent on noontides of silent heat selective of victims, the avaricious one; of the one who stayed to tend the first fruits of the ginger of earth with passages of the wind around him [Oduduwa] and of the heat and the rain, and the marks of the moulting seasons... (pp.224-25)

Where does Man come in here? Kola might have wondered.

Thus his canvas seeks not only to collate the various strands of the myth but also to impose a personal creative interpretation on it - to introduce, as it were, the human dimension. This is why he has so painstakingly sought to capture the immanence of the gods in his earthly friends and acquaintances. And, in a state of sudden illumination, he bursts out saying: "'It only requires the bridge, or the latter between heaven and earth.'" (p.225) The "link", then, emerges in the figures of Lazarus which he captures with his brush:

> The unfinished part [of the canvas] was an arched figure rising not from a dry grave, but from a primordial chaos of gaseous whorls and flood-waters. He is wreathed in nothing but light, a pure rainbow translucence. It was Lazarus,...(p.232)

Although Egbo scoffs at the "'optimist's delusion of continuity'" (p.233) it is none the less the truest illustration of Kola's vision of the ritual celebration of the human and divine efforts to fuse self and essence. (Indeed, it is against the background of Egbo - in general but, particularly, Kola's representation of him as Ogun-at-the-height-of-drunken carnage - that we perceive the ironic light trained upon the 'story'of Egbo.) Hence, the canvas must be seen as Kola's (albeit subjective) concept of the ideal - the divine forces reaching out over the gulf of transition to be united with the human actor reaching beyond himself, god-like. But, above all, we need to measure the whole of what happens in the second part of the novel against the five protagonists' potential for integration - i.e., judge between promise and performance.

It is, thus, only appropriate that the motif of integration and continuity takes gestation from Sekoni, the hermit-figure (because"'... sometimes...the most non-existent person in the world'" - (p.121) and the most anguished among the interpreters. He alone has a history of self transformation through his search and discovery of a coherent vision and

principles of continuity in true religion. Posited indomitably against the atomistic views of life of his atheist, cynic and nihilist friends is Sekoni's insistence upon the necessary connectedness of experience and a cosmological totality. He pesters them with his "universal d-d-dome" (p.9) which he manages to spell out thus:

> 'In the d-d-dome of the cosmos, th-there is com...plete unity of Lllife. Lllife is like the g-g-godhead, the p-p-plurality of its mmmanifest...tations is only an illusion. Th-the g-g-godhead is one. So is life, or d-d-death, b-b-both are c-c-contained in th-the single d-d-dome of ex...istence...'(p.122)

Sekoni's affirmation directly contrasts with Egbo's bold-faced denial of any ties with his own past. More than any of his friends, Egbo feels the pressures of his heritage, especially as his contemporary situation appears equally to stultify creative independence. The individualist intellectual in him is beleaguered by the "dark vitality" (p.12) of the traditional cycle of continuity. But beyond the fact of giving birth to him, Egbo acknowledges, literally, no ties with his parents whose "carless" death, in any case, left him, a child, to the whims and caprices of foster parents and guardians (pp.8-9; & 12). So, he greets the "insinuations" of obligations on his part from his ancestral home, Osa, with rebuff. When he turns to Sekoni for approval the latter replies:

> 'T-t-to make such d-d-distinctions disrupts the d-d-dome of c-c-continuity, which is wwwhat life is...Ththat is why wwe must acc-c-cept the universal d-d-dome, b-b-because ththere is no d-d-d-direction. The b-b-bridge is the d-d-dome of rreligion and b-b-bridges d-d-don't jjjust g-g-go from hhhere to ththere; a bridge also faces backwards.' (p.9)

Sekoni's point of view stresses the need to connect experiences - past to present, the divine to the mundane and essence to self - in order to get a

meaningful perception of life and so creating a better society. The burden of this view as much as of the meaning of Sekoni's own death as reflected in the agonized self-searching of his colleagues is the point of focus in the second part of the novel.

As one tends to feel before all Soyinka's best work, there is a definite moral vision behind the creative imagination that produced The Interpreters. Soyinka himself has always insisted that one of the prime functions of the writer in society was to be its "conscience" and its "voice of vision".[10] And the author-as-conscience has hardly ever been more conspicuously present among his fictional characters than in The Interpreters. Therefore, the novel is laden with insinuations and statements of judgment. These are perceivable in the various question marks and apostrophes raised against the life-styles and attitudes of the protagonists, in their own self-critical comments, and strikingly in the often heavy silence, nod or comments of the godlike Bandele in his "timeless image brooding over lesser beings". (p.244) Such a technique, if one may borrow L.R. Early's phrase in a somewhat different context, "demands an inductive alertness of us which will penetrate the vision of the novel as it unfolds."[11]

The Interpreters splits into two parts the first of which states and analyses the socio-ethical crisis in which the protagonists are engulfed, describes and comments upon their attempts to respond to it mainly in social and human terms. "Part Two" then subjects their earlier frivolities to a more serene and ultimate spiritual trial constructed on a grand mytho-religious scheme. Thus, it symbolically imitates resurrection on a fantastic scale. It invites no less a response. And in this light, we might see "Part One" as the mundane world of trivialities. All the 'dead' from that world are assembled, as in Judaeo-

Christian myth of resurrection, to be judged at the symbolic threshold of the gods.[12] (In the context of The Interpreters death does not mean just physical extinction as, for example, in the case of Sekoni. (p.155) It also refers to "the existing fossil within society, the dead branches on a living tree" (p.120) such as the political and intellectual Oguazors. There is also the concept of symbolic death which we observe in the numbed sensibility and spirit of Sekoni's friends after his death. (pp.155-8) Then there is Joe Golder's 'death' to his original society and self; as well as the ambiguous death-and-resurrection of the albino, Lazarus.)

The first focus in "Part Two" then is upon the enigma of death and resurrection. It brings all the main characters together. It is the dominant idea and language in their quests and communication. It is the business of Lazarus and the theme of his sermon:

> 'I am the resurrection and the life...And I, Lazarus, give you this assurance, from the personal confirmation which I was given by the Lord. For the hand of God descended on my head, and the light of the Lord poured a new life into me. (p.165)

Sagoe had met Lazarus on two previous occasions - at the simultaneous funerals of Sagoe's employer, Sir Derin, and of the elder of Lazarus's beach church during which Sagoe had offered flowers (spitefully snatched from the ostentatious cortege of his own boss) to the miserable group of Lazarus; then, on the occasion when Lazarus had saved a young thief from an angry Lagos mob. Soon after Sekoni's death which had left his surviving friends "all wet, bedraggled, the paint running down their acceptance of life...in ugly patches" (p.158) Lazarus seeks them out. And aided by the fact they have been morally run-down by the shock of their friend's death, Lazarus goads them into a bemused acceptance of an invitation to his church after having told them of his own recent "resurrection".

At Lazurus's church, having listened to the full story of Lazarus's death and resurrection, Sagoe, Bandele, Kola, Egbo and Sagoe's girl friend, Dehinwa, watch him initiate the erstwhile thief ("Barabas", now named "Noah") as successor to the dead apostle. Having watched Noah's grotesque imitation of the Christian stations of the cross, the curiosity-shop attitude which brought Sagoe's group take on a new dimension. And from their responses to the environment we may begin to ask: how much different are they from their previous selves? Except Bandele, the rest display their characteristic cynicism and readiness to use others to their own selfish advantages. Thus, while disbelieving the resurrection story, Sagoe sees the promise of a story boon for his newspaper. Kola wants to take Noah with him to Ibadan so as to paint him as the "Intermediary" Esumare with which he wishes to complete his pantheon of gods. Egbo, more unbelieving than any other, nevertheless volunteers to return to the church with Kola - partly because he naturally cannot resist the promise of adventure and partly because he is obeying an instinct to learn the secret of Lazarus's apparent success. Bandele alone refuses to question the truth of Lazarus's claim because:

> '...at least one thing was obvious, this
> man did go through some critical experience.
> If he has chosen to interpret it in a way
> that would bring some kind of meaning into
> people's lives, who are you to scoff at it...(?) (p.179)

In the self-possessed earnestness with which Lazarus narrates his own story and pursues his vocation, we perceive (no matter how uneasily) a man's own idea of reconciling the human desire for immortality with the certainty of death. He does not even stop there in his daring to forge a link between temporality and divinity, using human material in the images of the priestess and young Noah.

Arthur Ravenscroft has remarked that Lazarus's effort with Noah introduces a "dramatic complement"[13] to the concept of apostasy. Thus, in Noah's lack of identity (we do not know his real name; he is christened Barabas by Sagoe and Noah by Lazarus) Egbo recognizes "the smooth brass face of an apostate." (p.177) His horrified reaction: '"I do not like apostasy"' (ibid) smacks of a paradox. It springs from an unbelieving self-recognition as "Egbo perceives in the helpless Noah what separation from all social bonds means."[14] And when Egbo remarks that '"Noah's apostasy is not the wilful kind, it is simply the refusal to be, the refusal to be a living being, like a moon'",(p.231) he reminds one of the previous confession he makes about his own tendency to strain "objectivity to its negative limits". (p.14) So, the real nature of our protagonists' apostasy, in the fact of their severance from all social bond, is now out, and illuminates all their previous evasive, deliberately confused definitions of it. And as we asked earlier, will the face of apostasy change when it is brushed against a sense of power? Like previously, Egbo and Kola, haunted by the question, both return to Lazarus's church.

Besides the truth or falsity of his zealousness, Lazarus's attempt to use power to transform himself and others is evident. Both Egbo and Kola recognize it and are drawn towards learning its secret - a fact which comments on their own inadequacy as well as it is a challenge to them to use their potential towards either self or social transformation. The fact of Lazarus's control of the transformative potential of power is almost tangible within his territory, the church. It is felt in the command-effect and unforced obedience and discipline which his mere repetition of: "'My name is Lazarus...'" (p.164) achieves on Sagoe's group as "They took off their shoes, covered in confusion at the distraction they caused..." (p.ibid). Both Egbo and Kola witness Lazarus's attempt to

perform a miracle when he subjects Noah to the ordeal by fire and water. (pp.223-4) As if distrusting the fragile ambiguity of the biblical Covenant, Lazarus now seeks assurance by attempting a fool-proof covenant (between him-as-God and his creature Noah).[15] Lazarus 'fails' but his failure brings Egbo to put a seal of confirmation on his own apostasy. He will never, unlike Lazarus, dare to use power: "...as he (Egbo) walked back in the direction Noah had taken, it seemed to him that he must keep the secret of this man's (Lazarus's) defeat." (p.224; my emphasis)

However, Kola seems to have indirectly received a renewed urge to resume his painting as well as an unexpectedly sharpened sensibility evident in his recognition of Lazarus, rather than the "technicolour... purity" (p.170) of Noah, as the real intermediary figure for the pantheon. Furthermore, the experience with Lazarus has increased the group's involvement in the pantheon as the ritual of self-discovery approaches resolution.

The motif for the pantheon - originally introduced through Sekoni's "Universal d-d-dome" (p.9 - is outlined in a skeletal form of the Yoruba myth of the primal disintegration of the original godhead and of the beginning of creation, tinged with an allusion to the Judaeo-Christian flood of destruction (p.224). Thus the symbolic purpose of the pantheon might be said to extend the dialectic relationships of brokenness and community, mortality and eternity, temporality and divinity and, man's desire to contain the inherent contradictions. Kola's idea of achieving this aim is manifest in his obsession with "the bridge or ladder" as a link. His first contact with Noah suggests to him that Esumare - the rainbow - is the ideal intermediary; but eventually he prefers Lazarus to Noah in that status. And Egbo describes the nearly finished product:

> ...an arched figure rising
> not from a dry grove, but from a
> primordial chaos of gaseous whorls
> and flood-waters...wreathed in
> nothing but light, a pure rainbow translucence. (p.232)

Egbo's reaction to Kola's interpretation of cosmological totality is, characteristically, ironic and negative. He quarrels with Kola's "optimist's delusion of continuity" as much as with his "selectiveness" which portrays the beginning as the resurrection; and Egbo as Ogun at 'the height of carnage". (p.233)

Meanwhile, on the eve of its unveiling at the exhibition arranged to honour the memory of Sekoni, the young Noah dies while trying to escape from the homosexual advances of the American "negro", Joe Golder, whose role at this stage becomes crucial to a comprehensive view of Egbo's group. In addition to his homosexual tendency (Kola's reason for painting him as Erinle, the bisexual river deity), Golder suffers from a physical and psychological crisis of identity. And in the fact of these unresolved contradictory forces of personality, he is something quite like a kindred spirit of theirs. But - more like Lazarus -- he functions as a reflective medium upon the group's responses to their physical, spiritual and moral environment. Thus Golder might be seen as an instrument for measuring their humanity through their reactions to the death of Noah in his hands. And, excepting Bandele, they renounce any obligation of sympthy towards him in spite of their own subtle complicity. So when, later on, Golder bemoans his orphanage to the world, we perceive with greater clarity the vocation of brokenness and bestiality to which the "interpreters" are committed.

Thus, as Golder wails: "Sometimes I feel like a motherless child..." (pp.244 & 45) the atmosphere revibrates with cleavage and, Kola admits painfully that "...it is a night of severance; every man

is going his way." (p.245) However, this pessimism is contradicted in the figure of Egbo looking desperately towards the rain-heavy clouds above outside the hall as he "longed for the rain to fall." (p.245; My emphasis) For, the rain image as a regenerative and life-giving force finds pungent expression in much of Soyinka's poetry. But the character of this insinuation of Egbo's sudden optimism is as yet undefined. Meanwhile, Bandele (the moral arbiter) sits apart from the others through "the freak-show", as he calls the events that climax the exhibition.(p.244) Becase The Interpreters involves the crisis, burden and consequences of moral choice, Bandele has been, all along, positioned unobtrusively at a moral vantage point which monitors and collates the fragments of the protagonists' experiences into a clear pattern. Through his consciousness the real meaning of the drama of the novel is filtered out. For, his personality is a fusion of the essences of Soyinka's creative symbols of the moral absolute - Obatala/ForestHead; the Ogboni cult/Mothers of Benin throne/Earth Mothers - with which we have grown familiar in his plays, A Dance of the Forests (1963) and Madmen and Specialists (1972). Thus, Bandele is best qualified to sit in judgment in his characteristic image, "unyielding, like the staff of Ogboni, rigid in single casting" (p.244) over the "interpreters" as well as the symbol of a society which has driven them to the point of negativity in their search for alternative laws of living. And, having previously dispatched the hollowness of the pursuits of his erstwhile adventurer friends, he descends,braced and "cruel as the Ogboni in conclave" (p.251; original italics) to pronouce malediction upon the slandering Oguazor's cortege: "'I hope you all live to bury your daughters.'" (p.251)

The poignant resonance of the curse is so stunning that it turns Egbo's "choice" into mere bleat. But it is significant to note that Egbo alone manages to find his own thought in the bemused atmosphere following

Bandele's imprecation - just as he is portrayed in an apparent gesture of optimism suggested by the rain image. It may be asked whether this is not a deliberate authorial contrivance to blunt the edge of a pessimistic vision. How are we expected to respond to a sudden about-turn towards an optimism whose Parthian shot is "like the choice of drowning"? This can be explained only in terms of Soyinka's characteristic creative paradox/ambiguity (after the essence of his adopted artistic patron, Ogun) of an "Open-endedness" - often remarked by Professor Eldred Jones - in which conflicts are not resolved in terms of absolutes.

Of course, this cannot be the last word on The Interpreters because the implications of the questions it raises go beyond the creative whims or preferences of a writer, no-matter the sincerity of his portrayal of society and his personal, subjective interpretation of it. For, if we go on to the question of the social relevance of Art as (like Soyinka himself) Kofi Awoonor defines it, The Interpreters stands indictable. Awoonor writes of the writer who does not want to be a mere chronicler:

> In Africa where despair deepens in the practice of politics and in the lives of the ordinary people, the writer must represent the vanguard of the armies that will liberate the masses from ignorance and cultural stagnation and restore for them their earlier attachment to life. 16 (my emphasis)

What the "interpreters" achieve can only be described as purgation of individual emotions but not restoration to community.

Perhaps, given the differences in the creative attitudes of Soyinka and Awoonor towards "characterization" and "narrative" as fictional techniques in general, and towards their respective protagonist(s) in particular, we could say that the 'failure' of "the interpreters" is "in character", but not necessarily pessimistic. In Soyinka's novel 'character' and 'attitudes' are central and indispensable to the theme

of self-knowledge and discovery; whereas in Awoonor's case: "...the pervasive tone [or mood] of the lament holds the novel together and asserts its presence with more force than the actual characters. Character, in other words, is made subservient to the lyrical structure."[17] As a result, Soyinka is more testingly critical of his protagonists than Awoonor is of Amamu. However, in the final analysis we will appreciate that despite this apparent discordance between the authors' attitudes, the careers of their protagonists are drawn against the background of a common awareness of the need to rediscover or recreate a new sense of community. The process and tension of re-integrating the 'straying' individualist consciousness into the stream of societal collective consciousness is, indeed, a recurrent theme in much of contemporary African fictions. It is the distinctive quality of the two novels - Soyinka's Season of Anomy and Armah's Fragments - on which the next part of our study focuses.

II,(iii)

NOTES

1. Early criticisms by G.Moore and E.Palmer.

2. Ime Ikhide, Theo Vincent (ed.) The Novel and Reality in Africa and America (Lagos, 1976) p.28.

3. "The Interpreters: A Form of Criticism", J.Gibbs (ed.) Critical Perspectives on Wole Soyinka (Washington,1980) pp.219-38.

4. Juliet Okonkwo, "The Essential Unity of The Interpreters and Season of Anomy," African Literature Today, 11, (1980) p.116.

5. Ibid., p.110.

6. Gibbs, op.cit., p.219.

7. Palmer, like many others, complains of its "structural unorthodoxy" and lack of "logical connection between the flashbacks" in his book, The Growth of the African Novel (London, 1979) pp.240-87.

8. Gibbs, p.224.

9. "Notes on 'Idanre'", Wole Soyinka, Idanre and Other Poems (London,1967) p.86.

10. "The Writer in An African State", Transition, 31, 6, (1967) pp.11-13.

11. "The Dying Gods: A Study of Wole Soyinka's The Interpreters", Journal of Commonwealth Literature, 11-12 (1976/78) p.163.

12. The Interpreters is clearly, in this respect, part of the same continuum of creative urge that produced A Dance of the Forests and Madmen and Specialists. But Soyinka has obviously used the myths of Creation, destruction and resurrection (Yoruba & Judaeo-Christian) in an eclectic sense. And Arthur Gakwandi remarks also this deliberately "confused" usage in his The Novel and Contemporary Experience in Africa (London, 1977).

13. "Novels of Disillusion ", Journal of Commonwealth Literature, 6 (1969). p.127.

14. Early, op.cit., p.166.

15. Prof.M.Kinkead-Weekes wonders if Lazarus was attempting to assist the Second Coming (p.231)-i.e. by walking on the water, tapping Christ's power. Margaret Lawrence likens it to the depiction of "God in Michelangelo's painting of Creation, holding his hand to Adam" in her book, Long Drums and Canons (London,1971).

16. The Breast of the Earth (New York, 1975) p.355.

17. R.Priebe, "Kofi Awoonor's This Earth, My Brother as an African Dirge", The Benin Review, 1 (1974) p.96.

PART THREE

THE SEARCH FOR COMMUNITY

A private quest? Stuff for the tragic stage and the ritual rounds of Passion? A brave quest that diverges from, with never a backward glance at history's tramp of feet along the communal road?...I have quarrelled too often even with the ego-centred interpretations to which the existentialist gives rise. Any faith that places the conscious quest for the inner self as goal, for which the context of forces are mere battle aids is ultimately destructive of the social potential of that self.(Original italics)

(Wole Soyinka)

The best that is absent from this heavy, mediocre world would be its mark: community. In place of isolate bodies, greedy to consume more privileges to set us above, apart from others, there would be community: sustenance, suffering, endurance, relief, danger - all shared.

(Ayi Kwei Armah)

III,(i) Individual-Community Contradiction

With more subtlety and compelling artistry than most of their compatriots, Soyinka and Armah seek to limn personal interpretations of the severe disjunction between the evolving socio-economically structured 'norms' in contemporary African societies, and the intellectual and morally determined individual (but none the less authentic) values.[1] Hence one of the most outstanding features of their narratives is the portrayal of sensitive, alienated and anguished individuals struggling against cyclical currents of material and moral corruption. Although the individual is sympathetically portrayed (intellectually and morally strong), more often than not, he is ill-fitted to initiate positive action towards change and so gets broken physically and/or psychologically. The careers of Soyinka's protagonists in The Interpreters and Season of Anomy, and Armah's in The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born and Fragments illustrate the point only too well.

However, many of their critics appear to read these novels too literally - seeking in them (as it were) the "image" of society they are supposed to "mirror". It is usually both on account of their creative obsession with "free" individualism and, especially, the vehemence with which they denounce contemporary society that Soyinka and Armah court critical hostility. We only need to recall the indignant and embarrassed sentiments of much of the reviews of, for example, The Interpreters and The Beautyful Ones to appreciate the weight of critical opinion that railed against the "pessimism" of their authors.[2] And, with considerable justification, some critics are dissatisfied with the ambiguous resolutions of the conflicts in Soyinka's two novels to-date and Armah's first two because the informing creative visions "halt [...] just at the doors of

meaning, or divert [...] perception into the thrill of heroic picaresque..."[3] Particularly incensed by the "liberal individualism" and unsympathetic to the "mythopoeic" cast the artists' imagination is a host of radical "Socialist" critics. While, for instance, Biodun Jeyifo writes disapprovingly of "the entirely unrelieved idealist foundation" of Soyinka's intellectual attitude "the absence of 'history' in Soyinka's conceptual universe",[4] Atta Britwum throws himself against "This powerful despair [which] flows from the metaphysical-idealist world outlook, as opposed to the dialectical-materialist, which Armah adopts in the construction of his novels."[5] They are deeply suspicious of a certain ractionary bourgeois complacency to which the works of Soyinka and Armah (among others) might be deemed to minister, instead of adopting a "dialectical-materialist outlook", sharpening the edge of class conflict and devoting their artistic talents to unambiguous affirmation of the imminent victory of the oppressed African masses over all pestilential agents of oppression. The critics, of course, may have valid points to make, but we could never over state the obvious danger of doctrinal prescriptiveness. For, any dogmatic approach (as theirs must appear to be) to literary criticism is bound to misread or read its own prejudices into creative works. And it would appear (regrettably) that the bulk of "socialist" criticism of African fiction occupies itself, more often than not, with what particular novels fail to be rather than what they <u>are</u>; with what they have not said rather thanthat which they do say.[6]

Paradoxically however, it is precisely against the situation whereby, "[i]solated by his very position in society, he [the African writer] mistook his own personal and temporary cultural predicament for the predicament of his entire society"[7] that Soyinka has passionately argued in his Stockholm address. He continued thus:

> "...poet, novelist or sculptor, the artist labours from an in-built, intuitive responsibility not only to himself but to his roots. The test of the narrowness or the breadth of his vision however is whether it is his accidental situations which he tries to stretch to embrace his race and society or the fundamental truths of his community which informs his vision and enables him to acquire even a prophetic insight into the evolution of that society." 8
>
> (my emphasis)

Although Armah is rather reticent about his creative goal, there is enough 'evidence' - the consistent undermining or rejection of the impotent freedom of the "unconnected" individual - in all his five novels to-date to support the proposition that he shares Soyinka's concern. And the mytho-poeic tenor of their creative imaginations could hardly be invalidated as personal modes, either of interpreting social experience or of participating in the quest for a spiritually and materially wholesome community.

To return to the specific contexts of the novels of Soyinka and Armah however, the apparent individualistic tendencies of the protagonist hero would seem less abhorrent than some critics make out. For, as we noted earlier about the "authorial attitude of censure" (through characterization and dialogue) in The Interpreters, we could not afford to ignore the instances of self-questioning, doubt, criticism or recrimination of the protagonists as well as those of irony (situational and narrative) in Season of Anomy and Fragments. Of course, it might be argued that what we designate as the implicit censuring attitudes of the authors sits ill with the predominant foci of the narrative movement and mood on the consciousness of individual heroes. But, unless we take seriously these attitudes of censure on the heroes' narcissist, navel-gazing and insular individualism, we are bound to succumb to the kind of critical practice that readily substitutes "change in creative direction" for the continuum of the same creative vision when confronted, for instance, by Armah's

Beautyful Ones or Fragments and Two Thousand Seasons or The Healers. We would thus fail to see the author's concerns with individual consciousness either in Season of Anomy or Fragments as but staging-posts for trying out attitudes and options in a wider creative design – the search for community, or universal Oneness.

III,(i)

NOTES

1. Of course, we must acknowledge at the on-set that, despite the apparent similarity of Soyinka's and Armah's creative technique of employing individual protagonist's consciousness and point of view to monitor social mores, there is a fundamental difference in their respective conception of the role of the individual in society. For, while the bulk of Soyinka's work evinces the faith in the 'Superman' view of history or Ogunian tragic dare of the protagonist ego, Armah seems to believe in the ultimate irrelevance of the individual "soul" (no matter how beautiful) so long as it remains unconnected to other souls.

2. See especially G.Moore's review of The Interpreters in New African 4, 7 (Sept. 1965) and his book Wole Soyinka; and Eldred Jones review of The Beautyful Ones in African Literature Today, 3 (1969) pp.55-7.

3. Femi Osifisan, "Anubis Resurgent: Chaos and Political Vision in Recent Literature", Chindaba, 2 (Jul./Dec.1976) p.45.

4. Positive Review, 1 (1978) p.15.

5. Asemka, 3 (1975) p.12.

6. The majority view of about a dozen odd papers read at the 'Theory of Literature' Session of the Ibadan "Workshop On Radical Perspectives On African Literature" held between 18th.and 22nd. December 1977, leaves no one in doubt about this. See especially the papers read by, for example:

   Atta Britwum, "Marxist Criticism of African Literature";
   Biodun Jeyifo, "Class Ideology in Contemporary African Literature and Criticism: Some Provisional Workshop Notes";
   P.O.Dada, "Marxist Criticism and African Literature";
   Kole Omotoso, "Radical Content and the Sense of Form: The Case of the African Novel";
   Margaret Marshment, "Ideology in African Literature"; and
   Omafume F.Onoge, "Towards a Marxist Sociology of African Literature".

   Of course no one would doubt that Soyinka and Armah are quite aware of, and subscribe to the popular outcry for a socialist solution to Africa's socio-economic imbalance. But it must be said also that they show equal alertness, especially in their creative works (as Ngugi does), to the limitations of art - the novel form in particular - as an ideological weapon. For, according to one of the participants in the Ibadan Workshop:

   > In order to change the world, we must understand it; and it is incumbent on radical critics to be particularly mindful of the balance in an author among the tasks of reproducing, interrogating and being prescriptive regarding

the ideological constructs of his/her society.

(Richard Joseph, "Form and Ideology in African Literature: An Afterword.")

7. "The Writer in an African State", Transition, 31, 6 (Jun/July 1967) p.12.

8. ibid.

III,(ii) Season of Anomy: The Orphic temper.

Wole Soyinka's creative imagination (as we have sought to understand it in the previous chapter) has been fundamentally and consistently mythic. Against this background, a cursory look at an inventory of his leading characters reveals a conspicuous authorial predilection towards individualist figures such as Emman (The Strong Breed;1964), Egbo and the corps of "interpreters" (The Interpreters), the poet and Atooda ("Idanre";1967). Rebels, ascetics, visionaries; mystical, rarely understood and very often misunderstood by their fictional cohorts and by their audience alike, they usually combine the resoluteness of Ogum with Obatala's capacity for patient suffering. But even behind their superior, messianic armours we also catch glimpses of embedded criticism of the irresponsibility of individualism, especially when (as we are meant to) we keep the communal contexts of their careers in perspective.[1]

It might then be said that Soyinka's choice of themes and protagonist-heroes issues as much from the mythogenic orientation of his creative imagination, as from a desire to seek in myths foci around which to sort out and consolidate incipient thoughts and emotions induced by the socio-political events of contemporaneous experience in his own society. And, as he often affirms, it is only through myth that the poetic self can be reconciled to the authentic impulses of its communal roots.[2] Proofs of this must be sought in, especially, his epic poem "Idanre" (dedicated to the mysteries of Ogum and inspired by the social unrest and violence during the first decade of Nigeria's attainment of Independence); his 'post-detention' works, A Shuttle in the Crypt and The Man Died (1972) as well as his second and latest novel, Season of Anomy. According to the temper of these more recent works, it becomes increasingly evident that in

the chaotic atmosphere of social-political life in contemporary Africa, Soyinka's artistic impulse finds more and more scope for the mediatory appeal of myths.

Largely autobiographical testimonies to personal, traumatic experiences, these works also witness a progressive appraisal and extension of a creative vision of society. For, besides the fact of his personal involvement in the fight for social justice in his country, Nigeria, Soyinka believes (as an artist) that imaginative literature could lend appropriate intellectual support to the political struggle. So implacable is his anti-authoritarian stance that the inevitable clashes with successive civilian and military authorities in Nigeria culminate in his incarceration (during the civil-war years, 1967-70) without trial. Indeed, the militant, angry mood and moral outrage that permeate the 'post-detention' works are directly linked to his experiences in and out of gaol. As he confirms, the works were not only conceived but also 'written' during his solitary confinement:

> Between the lines of Paul Radin's Primitive Religion and my own Idanre are scribbled fragments of plays, poems, a novel and portions of the prison notes which make up this book. 3

Thus, against this background, his earlier anxiety about "whether the hero [in African literature] would still emerge as a narcissist, even in the context of action, once writers became more preoccupied with the violence of the contemporary African situation",[4] assumes a greater sense of immediacy. Significant in this respect is Soyinka's own radical (if temporary) rejection of creative identification with the instinct of self-immolation and martyrdom as in the poem, "Joseph (to Mrs Potiphar)":

> ...A time of evils cries
> Renunciation of the saintly vision 5

The same temper re-echoes in his disclaimer of the promethean urge in The Man Died: "History is too full of failed Prometheans bathing their

wounded spirits in the tragic stream. Destroy the tragic lure!"[6] The greater insight into human suffering offered by a period of violence and pogrom in the artist's society induces spontaneous identification with collective action against the forces of oppression:

> ...We embrace,
> The world and I in great infinitudes.
> I grow into that portion of the world
> Lapping my feet, yet bear the rain of nails
> That drill within to the archetypal heart
> Of all lone wanderers. 7

Thus, it is the tension generated by the process of fusing the private and public vision that Soyinka's second novel seeks to dramatise and resolve.

Season of Anomy is a novel of multiple plots - all of which are woven into thematic unity by the presence and activities of the hero, Ofeyi. He is at once employee of a corporation of cocoa magnates, inspired revolutionary artist, lover and fugitive. As the sales promotions man of the Ilosa-based "Corporation" he is sent to Aiyero - a riverine village which has remained shut-off for almost a century from the rest of society but is now discovered to be a potential base for improving the cocoa yield and new market for cocoa products. But, already morally alienated from the monopolistic materialism of his employers, Ofeyi perceives a "healing essence" for his battered psyche in the primal serenity of Aiyero. He welcomes the sharing and caring structure of the commune as a promising antithesis to the belligerent individualistic ethos of the Cartel-controlled world of Ilosa. "Aiyero promised much, tantalized him with answers, potencies. It had to yield something of his search." (p.7) So he adopts the commune, convinced (despite its xenophobic tendency) that its mystery emits the aura of an essential dream of humanity: "We are here, we prosper and we know harmony...we founded Aiyero to seek truth, a better life, all the things which men run after." (p.9).

Obviously inspired by the Aiyero-cum-socialist ideals, Ofeyi cherishes and initiates the possibility of disseminating "the seeds of regeneration" in the entire decadent national body politic by using the men of Aiyero as evangelists of anti-capitalist doctrines. At first amused by his gimmicks, the Cartel merely sends him abroad on a compulsory study-tour. It is during this sojourn that he encounters two figures (Taiila, the thoroughly spiritual and serene Asian girl, and Dentist, the self-confessed revolutionary assassin and Ofeyi's compatriot) who play prominent roles in the moments of his self-doubt and ethical crisis of decision. Upon returning home his subversive activities and involvement with underground opposition against the economic interests of his employers becomes increasingly daring and overt. He is not only fired, his cocoa "promotions" band wiped out, his Aiyero allies massacred in the Cross-River outpost of the Cartel but, Iriyise, his lover and symbol of creative inspiration, is also brutally abducted in one of those 'accidents' which his adversaries know only too well how to simulate. His subsequent search for Iriyise involves him in various incidents of physical and mental trauma, as much as it opens his eyes to the moral, socio-political and historical context of the Cartel's genocidal desperation in defence of capital monopoly. But, implicit in the search is also a warning and criticism of Ofeyi for arrogantly overestimating his power of persuasion, while ignorantly underestimating the power of his adversary.

At the core of Season of Anomy is the challenge of reconciling contradictory propositions as the hero confronts: a personal yearning for peace and an apparent socio-political expediency of collective action; a non-violent disposition and the survival need to engage in counter-violence; and the dialectically opposed socio-economic and ethical ideals represented by two kinds of communities - the individualist, materialist, profit-oriented Ilosa and the communal and spiritual Aiyero. When the novel opens,

Ofeyi appears to have accepted the need and justification for him to participate in the search for a more just and humane community than the one from which he is fleeing. "[W]ho seeks peace? Who has the right to expect peace?" (p.240) Ofeyi barks out dismissing whatever suspicion of self-indulgence we may hold about him. And, ostensibly, he acknowledges the Aiyero community and its "ideal" as promising bases from which to work out the structural means of attaining the community-to-be. However, at this point we need to clear a point about the unwittingly misleading comparison critics often make between Egbo of The Interpreters and Ofeyi despite - and even because of - that much remarked 'printer's devil'(?) in Season of Anomy.[8]

Of course both heroes (as indeed both novels) are intimately concerned with the question of choice and the meaning of individual action in the context of social pressures. Or, as Juliet Okonkwo puts it rather narrowly: "Their [the novels'] common theme can be stated as 'the intellectual and his responsibility in a new nation'."[9] But while the remarkable similarity between the two characters must be acknowledged, we must also stress the distinguishing quality which lies in each one's perception of history and his relationship to it. Egbo, for example, conceives the question in terms of a personal, individual responsibility for history rather than to it. For, so long as he sees only the "mocking grin" in the face of the "past" and, the present as one long nightmare of intrigue, corruption and bestiality, he can keep a clear conscience in rejecting responsibility or obligation to the past or even present society. Thus, characteristically he resists to the very end all suggestion intended by his compatriots to make him conscious of historical "continuity." But, faced (like Egbo) by the same "restless questioners [past/ancestors/history] rising from dank silt-beds" (p.90), Ofeyi recognizes their insistent demand and search among the "living" (present) for:

> "the transformation of their rotted deeds, thoughts values, tears, bile, decadent and putrescent memories, searching for a parallel transformation to that of rotted earth-flesh reborn into life-giving oil." (p.91; my emphasis)

He accepts the challenge to place his individual circumstances in the broader context of the past-present-future continuum. Thus, while The Interpreters is rather individualistic and introspective, Season of Anomy takes both individual and public spheres of experience in one single stride - in which context Ofeyi recognizes that:

> "The situation, social or political situation overwhelms, fouls and corrodes even the most intimate sensations. In such a situation one is only half a man,...The sentient, sensitive totality of the man recognizes that he is only a mangled part of his human potential." (p.135)

If Ofeyi has any disquiet it had better be sought in the moral dilemma (what Gerald Moore calls, rather unfairly, the novel's "Morality Play pattern"[10]) posed by any form of violence as a means of social redress. Reminiscing his first, simultaneous and portentous encounters with Taiila (a chance acquaintance) and Dentist (a total stranger as far as he could see) Ofeyi tells Pa Ahime:

> "If I had been superstitious I would have thought that she was miraculously sent to save me from the path of damnation as represented by the Dentist. You know, good angel on one side, bad angel on the other." (p.25)

Those deliberately symbolic encounters are dramatically portrayed in the airport-lounge scene. Ofeyi is sitting enwrapped in self-pity over the unhappy events that have made him an unwilling exile in a foreign land. But just when the cloud of nostalgia begins to break as he contemplates a near illicit warmth towards the virginal presence of the Asian beauty (Taiila), his thought is intruded upon by the sudden and violent entry of a young black man. Ignoring the new arrival Ofeyi gets up to go after the strangely attractive Taiila "Only to have the stranger [Dentist]

step in his path." (p.95) - just as, later on, Dentist's knock on a door stops Taiila's breath. (p.101) Thus the contrasting mannerisms of both Taiila and Dentist as well as Ofeyi's subsequent dialogues with each of them, set the tone of the ethical polarity between which the hero is caught.

His new acquaintances represent two recognizably discordant ethical attitudes and offer different possible solutions to the socio-economic problems which confront Ofeyi. From a deeply religious perspective Taiila abhors violence. And as a salvationist, she also aspires to attract the restless soul of Ofeyi into the compass of the inner peace and non-violence she has found. The dentist on the other hand not only scoffs at religion but he is a professional revolutionary assassin. Violent by training, his consciousness is governed by philosophical thoroughness and precision in eliminating the enemy forces like so many diseased teeth in the ailing gum of the national body politic. Thus as a personification of violence, Dentist contains in his making the two possible directions in which it can run: wanton destruction of life and property when uncontrolled or, when properly harnessed and placed at the service of a political objective, a means of counter-aggression. And having undertaken the excursion through the 'Curfew Town' in the company of Dentist, Ofeyi knows enough to conclude that any uncritical acceptance or rejection of Dentist's (as indeed Taiila's) solution can only be "an exaggeration of the mere part against the whole." (p.136) As Ofeyi is so delicately poised between equally exacting propositions, choice either way is held in abeyance. All he can do or aspires to do in the meantime, is, like the Aiyero patriarch, Ahime,

> creating motion within himself and within his environment without a hint of stress, without disrupting the pristine balances. (p.92)

And until we can place his dilemma in the context of his own political and socio-economic ideals and the contemporaneous state of affairs in his society, ascribing any choice (between violence and non-violence) to Ofeyi

is bound to be suspect. For he still remains sufficiently ambiguous about any definite moral choice until he has actually undertaken the harrowing Orpheus-like journey to the earthly nether-world of Cross-River through Shage and Temoko in search of his abducted lover, Iriyise.

In the meantime however, thoroughly opposed to the mafia morality of the Ilosa-Cartel world, Ofeyi is enchanted by the idyllic but arcane promise of Aiyero soil to which he symbolically adopts himself. And in structuring the story of Ofeyi's relationship to Aiyero the author deploys a melange of motifs, symbols and images which create an atmosphere of spontaneous rapport. The basic sense of harmony and life-enhancing vitality of the commune that beckons to the hero's thirst for peace and rejuvenation is conveyed by the white motif - in the pervasive images of white, especially in the "Seminal" chapters. Thus, as Ofeyi watches the ritual ceremonies preceding the Custodian's burial, it is the lucent vitality evident all around him that attacks his senses:

> Camwood vistas and chalk. Walls in bark - gritty daubings of camwood, chalked doors and doorsteps, wide swathes of chalk below the camwood...chalk belts on massive tree trunks, posts, bamboo piers and the storehouses of the waterfront. (p.8)

This is complemented by the agricultural cycle motif introduced by the title and chapter headings depicting (structurally) the process of the birth, growth and struggle for survival of an "idea", a new community or way of life. But Aiyero is not only an agrarian community, its life-rhythm (birth, death, religious attitudes, history and 'politics') also moves in tune with a natural cycle sustained by ritual and sacrifice. Into this setting Ofeyi is potentially fitted - particularly by his speciality in cocoa - yielding promotion and his own pet manner of rendering the concept of national growth in terms of agricultural cycle. He parallels his idea of a new nation or community with animal and vegetal growth process:

> ...Ofeyi envisioned the parallel progress of the new idea, the birth of the new man from the same germ as the cocoa seed, the Aiyero ideal disseminated with the same powerful propaganda machine of the Cartel throughout the land, taking hold of undirected youth and filling the vacuum of their transitional heritage with the virile shoot. (p.19)

By contrast however, images of growth, fecundity and healing as well as the entire symbolism of the agricultural cycle become inverted and negative whenever they are associated with the Cartel. For example, both the symbolic lyrics of the "Cocoa Bean Orchestra" and the parallel drawn between Aiyero's ritual sacrifice of bulls for reproductive potency (celebration of the earth-bull union - pp.15-18) and the Cartel's desperate bid to preserve a negative sort of potency by their sponsorship of nightly live burial of a cow, underline the parasitic and predatory nature of the latter. The "Tentacles" and "Harvest" chapters are particularly fraught with the abortion of the natural agricultural cycle. These chapters focus more on the activities of the Cartel or the repercussions of such activities and so give negative meanings to their titles. "Tentacles" for instance, loses its innocent suggestiveness of life-sustaining roots and progressively takes on the countenance of a rapacious octopus. And in the characteristic Soyinkan manner the "Harvest" has nothing to do (as in his play, Kongi's Harvest or his poem, "Idanre" with grains or fruits meant to give life but symbolizes the bestial desecration of human life which he enshrines in an earlier poem, "Massacre, October '66: Written in Tegel":

> A host of acorns fell, silent
> As they are silenced all, whose laughter
> Rose from such indifferent paths, oh God
> They are not strangers all
>
> Whose desecration mocks the word
> Of peace - *salaam aleikun* - not strangers any
> Brain of thousands pressed asleep to pig fodder -
> Shun pork the unholy - cries the priest. 11
>
> (Original italics)

Season of Anomy can thus be perceived to run on two main levels of perception - a surface (contemporaneous) level of pervasive atmosphere of anomie and fraticidal carnage let loose by opposing socio-economic ambitions and, a subterranean one (more visceral and affective) couched in mythological allusions which catch and magnify the ethical nuances of the struggle above. But we shall note that the ethical ramifications (or some kind of ultra-reality behind) of any form of conflict or action seem to hold greater significance for Soyinka's artistic imagination. As Ofeyi takes in the situation in Season of Anomy for instance, he can only understand it in the sense that:

> The real death that the people were called upon to die was the death from under, the long creeping paralysis of flesh and spirit that seized upon them as the poison tuber might spread through bowels of earth. Those noisy individual deaths were merely incidents. The real extermination went on below. (p.129)

And this will appear to be the justification for Soyinka's resort to the fuscous recesses of the national psyche via an assortment of known as well as recondite but corroborative indigenous and borrowed mythological allusions. In Season of Anomy the link in this dual consciousness is achieved, mainly, through the complex array of characters whose names and deeds recall to mind correspondences to archetypal protagonists of the chthonic realm - Yoruba, Greek, Judaeo-Christian and Oriental mythologies - and prefigure the central fictional actions.

Although there are no direct references to Orpheus or any other mythological personages, orphic adventure and concern (often convoluted and elliptical) emerges as the most dominant single motif that runs consistently through the best part of the narrative. The career of the hero, Ofeyi (not to mention the palpable suggestiveness of his Yoruba name or that of his lover Iriyise) will seem sufficiently capable of sustaining an analogy between him and the Greek hero, Orpheus. And when this gets

into perspective it will not be difficult to see how the other characters and events relate to him, carrying through the Orphic theme as it relates to, say, Orpheus - Dionysus alliance or Orpheus - Prometheus dichotomy or the Katabasis. But there is also the simultaneous linkage with what Soyinka has called "parallel evolutionary relationship"[12] between Yoruba and Greek pantheon of Gods - especially the Ogun/Apollo - Obatala/Dionysus tension and alliance. In addition, we will observe that the Ogun-ideal, according to Soyinka's creative concept of the deity, provides as it were the 'grand motif' in Season of Anomy in which the essences of the various other motifs coalate. For, as the archetypal pathfinder through the transitional gulf, adventurer, revolutionary, patron of the arts, protector of the dispossessed, symbol of the "alliance of disparities" - the destructive and creative essence rolled into one - it is little wonder that "Ogun [ergo the Yoruba pantheon of gods] is best understood in Hellenic values as a totality of the Dionysian, Apollonian and Promethean virtues."[13]

Thus at one level of the mythic design, Ofeyi's career and characterization (as they relate to Aiyero and Dentist) illustrate the dynamic tension of the Ogun and Obatala essence. At another level they also flesh out the orphic quest. Aiyero's mores with which he is in sympathy is modelled on the Obatala-ideal of "certainty of a harmonious resolution [of conflicts] which belongs in time and human faith."[14] But having convinced himself (erroneously) that Aiyero's communal spirituality is no more than an example of inbreeding which "can prove paralysing in a crisis", Ofeyi cannot sensibly remain amidst "the smell of mould, stagnation which clings to places like this." (p.6) He also perceives that the commune lacks the necessary drive and aggressiveness which he believes is its last hope of survival in a competitive and complex world of technocracy. Thus, as the pressures of the on-going social cataclysm close-in upon him, Ofeyi is

tempted by the prospects that: "the sowing of any idea these days can no longer take place without accepting the need to protect the young seedling, even by violent means." (p.23)

However, since Obatala's drama excludes conflict and the revolutionary temper, one of Ofeyi's major challenges is to cultivate these without creating ruptures in the original harmony. For as the Yoruba conception of him goes:

> Orisa-nla [Obatala] is never a warrior; by nature he is no fighter: he is for peace, order, and clean living. Therefore fighting must have been forced upon him by his enemy; his battle was a battle of necessity. 15

And as Ofeyi learns from the Aiyero patriarch, Ahime: "Evangelism [the sort Ofeyi champions] is a form of aggression" in which the people of Aiyero find no virtue. (p.6) Ironically however, Aiyero (the Obatala symbol) is not, strictly speaking, forced into conflict by its enemy but by its adopted son. But with deference to the Obalalan essence of Aiyero Soyinka makes Ofeyi do his 'battle' from without - in fact, he is neither here nor there; being a restless spirit roaming the surface and bowels of the earth. This, like other abundant examples, points to Soyinka's innovative approach to the Orphic myth.

The Orphic premise of Season of Anomy therefore triggers off the inevitable inclusion of an assortment of heroes and devine sojourners in the nether world and reflects the syncretic methods of Soyinka's creative imagination. However, as Walter A.Strauss opines in his comparative study of the Orphic theme in the works of a selection of Symbolist writers:

> ...the decisive factor in appraising the nature of the modern Orphic is not so much in the magical mission of the poet, but in the account and interpretation [or reinterpretation] of his experience as reflected in his poetry - the nature of his Orphic journey, that quest for a dark but 'pure' centre. 16

And the (successful?) use of the Orphic theme in Season of Anomy can be

sought mainly in what interpretative relevance it holds for the contemporary experience in which Ofeyi is engulfed. But in the meantime, one or two points must be cleared which will not only leave Soyinka's concern with the orphic motif in sharper focus but may also prove vital to our subsequent examination of Femi Osofisan's suggestion of a cynical world view in Season of Anomy[17]. To return again to Strauss, certain features are generally not considered to be Orphic:

> Orpheus does not rebel; he refuses to accept the world as it is; he does not lead the people, he charms them...Orphism proposes to transmute the inner man by a confrontation with himself and to alter society only indirectly, through the changes that man can effect within himself. 18

Alongside the conventional visceral status as poet/singer and lover, Soyinka's Orpheus (Ofeyi) does not only internalize the Promethean urge to rebellion, he also aspires to tame and reconcile within himself the Promethean disposition to external action and violence in order to ameliorate man's lot. And much of the rhetorical and reflective and turbulent temperament of Ofeyi may be treaceable to his own anxiety and ambivalent mould vis-a-vis the massive violence being perpetrated in his society.

The descent motif reveals how much of the figure of the Thracian Orpheus becomes the 'model' to which Ofeyi's experience is related. And that brief exchange between Ofeyi and Dentist at the Kuntua refugee (church) camp leaves no one in doubt about the Katabasis or orphic-quest strain to Season of Anomy. Dentist has come to join Ahime in planning the repatriation of the Aiyero survivors of the pogrom unleashed on them by the Cross-River agents of the Cartel; and he asks if Ofeyi would care to take part in a planned raid on the local police armoury instead of embarking on his (Ofeyi's) solo "'great search for a woman'". (p.218) A little irritated by Dentist's apparent insensitivity to the danger in which Iriyise might be in, Ofeyi counters by saying:

> 'I'm sure every man feels the need to seize for himself the enormity of what is happening, of the time in which it is happening. Perhaps deep down I realise that the search would immerse me in the meaning of the event, lead me to a new understanding of history.' (p.218 - my emphasis)

Iriyise is thus sufficiently portrayed in the image of the Orphic Eurydice to make her identity recognizable. Cast in an elusive and mystical aura which we perceive in Ofeyi's lyricised image of her, she is also something of the vegetation goddess (association of the orphic myth with the myth of Persephone) and fertility principle. And the agricultural world of Aiyero readily recognizes in her an essence of the regenerative potency of the earth:

> ...her bared limbs and shoulders among young shoots,
> Iriyise weaving fronds for the protection of the
> young nursery, bringing wine to the sweating men
> in their struggle against the virgin forests....
> Her fingers spliced wounded saplings with the ease
> of a natural healer. Her presence, the women boasted,
> inspired the rains. (p.20)

She emerges most strongly as the symbol of the poet, Ofeyi's creative inspiration and his idiomatic object of self-discovery. She is given to mysterious disappearances and reappearances - a feature which all that come into contact with her accept as perfectly natural and consistent with her role as the mistress of the "dance of the young shoot" in the cocoa playlets. And when Ofeyi demands to really know about her mysterious escapades, she casually reminds him of the meaning of her euphonious Yoruba name. As the name Iriyise proclaims, the owner is "'dew on the feet'"/ "'And dew turning back, fading away...'" (p.63); mysterious and elusive just like the enigmatic "Abiku" in Soyinka's poem of that name.

Ofeyi's sojourn in the nightmarish "territory of hell" of Temoko prison where Iriyise has been tucked away in a coma is marked at every stage by the familiar landmarks and ritual of the Orphic journey to the realm of death.

Between the encounter with the "wagon of corpses" at Labbe Bridge and the uncanny boisterousness of the court of lunatics in the heart of Temoko prison, his experience of terror (the Styx, the snare of Anubis, the reservoir of death) is only matched by the perplexity about the thing in Man's heart that urges him to seek the extermination of his kind. And more striking still is that consummate scene (amidst the emaciated refugees) at the dark chapel where "Knowledge of death filtered through the crypt", (p.270) just as a refugee child's drawing evokes the affirmation of <u>life</u> and community.

> She [the child] had relegated her tragic memories of the catastrophe to this obscure surface - a baby's flight arrested in mid-air, plummetting towards a blazing fire...a tight-robed figure presiding over a scene of slaughter...a long line of waiting victims... as Ofeyi's eyes accustomed itself to the gloom he saw that the child had prolonged the line to the very edge of the floor, continuing the figures up the wall as far as his hands could reach. Then came her mound shapes. Sacramental loaves? Onion images? Or simply bundles? Every bit of space that was not taken by the sacrificial scenes had been covered with irregular loaves. Had someone come round distributing loaves of bread? Or was it bundles which lay so liberally around, the symbol of dispersion, disintegration, the symbol of the final surrender of individuality? (p.274)

If there is one single scene that could be said to bring out the best of Ofeyi's poetic self as well as it points the direction of Soyinka's vision of humanity and community in <u>Season of Anomy</u>, it will be found here. The image of the "shadowy inmates [that, in the 'crypt'] underwent changes of infinite subtleties, drawing together even more, purging individual fears in the font of shared loss" (p.270), meets and complements that of the inmates of "the convoluted bowels of Temoko" prison (p.304); focusing, finally, upon the figure of Ofeyi himself (beside the comatose Iriyise) in the courtyard of lunatics as:

> ...a universal receptor, probing with a million antenae, sieving out distracting atmospherics, terrified to move lest he lose one sigh of pain, one silent anguish of the disordered world contracted into one camp-bed. (p.308)

The two scenes thus bring together all the elements which need one another and are insufficient apart: Ahime, Ofeyi, Dentist, Iriyise (restored), Taiila as well as that symbol of the oppressed, exploited and abused silent humanity, Suberu. It is in the fussion of all these elements that the truly human and humane community could be born.

Much of the tension in Season of Anomy - besides the external cataclysmic terror stalking his society - is carried on in the ever recurring ethical challenge facing Ofeyi in the symbolic figures of Taiila and Dentist. In the circumstances, the tension is partially (even then, tentatively) resolved in favour of the latter. This is the point of Soyinka's juxtaposing Taiila with the appalling explosion and revenge of her mining engineer neighbour, "Semi-dozen". On the one hand, it reflects the futility of individualist options: Taiila's inward (spiritual) flight, and the fool-hardy, single-handed confrontation (by "Semi-dozen") of his assailants. But, on the other hand, while the violence of her neighbour contrasts Taiila's peacefulness, both mirror and deepen (like the scene in the "crypt") the sense of massive despair engendered by the pogrom. Ofeyi finds little comfort in the placid spirituality that Taiila offers. Thus, he increasingly has to grapple with the neo-Promethean method - especially because, now, it carries the (uncharacteristic) promise of organized movement for an ideological purpose - which the Dentist offers as the only sensible option left in the face of the morally untenable socio-economic 'justice' and violence of the Cartel.

In this regard, another of the inevitable rites for the Orphic poet - confrontation with the Promethean - is hinted at. In the gentle argument with Taiila over his relationship with Dentist, Ofeyi declares: "'...I also do not believe in violence. But I see it, I recognize it. I must confront it.'" (p.100) In normal peaceable times it will be expected that the Orphic triumphs over the Promethean urge. But in this time of

engulfing and urgent crisis, Ofeyi's alliance with Dentist (Soyinka's contrivance and creative prerogative) may be acceptable. Thus, watching the Cartel's parade of force through the eyes of Dentist's binoculars (a symbolic gesture):

> Ofeyi...wondered how far from the midst of this treachery that elusive justice could ever be retrieved....One had to presume that they [the armed troops] had minds, these drilling automatons.... To release these minds, it was difficult to escape the thought that the shortest and justest course was - to use the Dentist's phrasing - elimination. (pp.140-41)

In spite of such moments of bravado as this however, Ofeyi is never free of apprehension and mistrust of Dentist; so he feels embarrassed by the prospects of trading his essential humanity in violence. His moral dilemma is vividly conveyed in his attempt to appease his own humanistic disposition by a mental refusal to acknowledge the claims of violence in the feeble disguise of Dentist's role in such less disagreeable terms as; "selective assassin", pre-emptive support" or "agent of retribution". (p.22)

The challenge which the Dentist-phenomenon offers is not only crucial in Ofeyi's final decision, but they both join forces and stir Aiyero (their adopted home) from its primal stupor. After the near-fatal bruise which it has suffered in the confrontation with the rest of the Cartel-controlled society, the commune can no longer remain apathetic to the goings-on around it. But at the same time it preserves its harmonious essence - the nucleus and promise of the future wholesome community which Ofeyi envisions. And as their patron, Ahime, puts it:

> 'We plan that the camp should go into the furthest depths of the forest, join the river at the confluence and follow it home. For me this is a cleansing act. It will purify our present polluted humanity and cure our survivors of the danger of self-pity'. (p.218)

And the Dentist adds:

> 'I insist on seeing it first as a good toughening exercise. The Aiyero idea treks back to source, but it marks the route for a more determined return.' (p.218)

However, the relationship of Dentist to Aiyero remains sufficiently ambiguous for the conclusion that he is some kind of reincarnation of Ogun's terrorist reputation which Soyinka has consistently played down in his works. He is not only violent, dealing in firearms, but he is also presented in the imagery of the blood-thirsty Ogun - "copper coloured", "cloudy" haired and single-minded. But, (if belated) the significance of his coming to rescue Ofeyi and Iriyise is not lost; it points towards the recreative side of Ogun materialising again.

In an otherwise illuminating criticism of Season of Anomy, Femi Osofisan writes: "The vision offered by Beti [Remember Ruben] and Soyinka is lucid, but it is not one we can accept, if only because it will lead to a new cul-de-sac. A step beyond disillusionment, but only into cynicism."[19] This revives a memory of the embarrassed so-called patriotic criticisms which greeted the appearance of such creative works as, for example, Armah's Beautyful Ones, Soyinka's own A Dance of the Forests, and Ouloguem's Bound to Violence. An appropriate, though somewhat cruel, analogy to Osofisan's comment would be the one made by the Old Man in Soyinka's Dance of the Forests[20] at the "treachery"of Aroni and the Forest Head in sending the Dead Man and Dead Woman as the befitting guests at the "Gathering of the Tribes":

> OLD MAN : The guests we were sent are slaves and lackeys. They have only come to undermine our strength. To preach to us how ignoble we are.

Osofisan's thesis is based on the assumption that it is the 'Dentist's essence' and not Ofeyi who emerges forcefully as the heir to the future. His position is no clearer as he also writes:

> The continual argument between Demakin and Ofeyi throughout the novel is clearly meant to provoke us into a clarification of positions and attitudes, and I believe the choice we are expected to make is obvious. (Sic.) 21

The "choice" may not be that obvious unless one is less committed (than Osofisan seems) to wanting to rub-in by all means a justification for his own achievement (as he strives to do) by offering his own creative alternative to someone else's. Indeed Osofisan's (socialist?) alternative to the "resurgence of Anubis" in contemporary African literature does not only deviate from the real issue (the moral and ethical justification of counter-violence); it is escapist:

> KNOWING you is still a sweet thing...
> where eagle wings
> and the incessant threat of edicts
> claw savagely into our faces
> and decrees knock us like hoofbeats...
> for the keepers of
> the national flag have torn it down
> (to sew their underwear)
> and the struggle for living has become
> a struggle among lunatics and
> reptiles
> In a jungle of terror
> Your love is the one sane thing
> that lingers on, beyond
> those fallen leaves and spittle and swirling
> clouds of fear
> and the warmth of your tenderness
> still survives despair. 22

Ofeyi recognises this kind of choice but refuses to make it in such a simplistic manner. The temptation for him was strong and as demanding as the social and political realities around him:

> If it were possible - yes, that was the grim temptation - if it were possible to ignore even the unformed, irrational whisper, the purely psychic intuition, to succumb to the peace of amnesia, expunge all knowledge and define freedom as the freedom not to listen; to read only the official newspapers, to avoid conversation, refuse to open letters whose origins could not be immediately identified and thus evade the cry of distance suppliants, to shut off the strident radio and exist only in the sterilized distillation of the experiences of others, to cling only to the moment of insulating sensuality...(p.136)

He is jolted out of the self-indulgence by Dentist's voice demanding: "'What were the ravages playing on your face?'" (pp.136-37) Even though Soyinka's proposition - in political ('revolutionary') terms - may be objectionable to certain doctrinaire Marxist aesthetics, it cannot be faulted by Osofisan's alternative. For as a creator of consciousness, Ofeyi possesses a greater understanding of history (as objectified in the contemporary experience of the events in Season of Anomy) than Osofisan is prepared to concede.

Certainly the time is out of joint for the magic potency of Soyinka's 'Orpheus'; it is yet a distant dream when he may acquiesce in his pet aphorisms. And, as Dan Izevbaye rightly points out, "[a]s poet, Ofeyi is only a popularizer and merely witty."[23] The Thracian Orpheus held nature together by the power of his lyre and song; our Ofeyi has had his torn to shreds in the hurricane of social crisis, and his voice drowned in the implacable wailing of the persecuted and the murdered. He may be ideal for the reconciliation of opposites, but his role remains disturbingly ambiguous. Perhaps as an orphic poet Ofeyi does attain that all-important self-fulfilment which attends the singleminded defiance of the elements and cosmic forces. However, his individualism can best be understood - not in terms of the narcissist temper of the protagonists of The Interpreters or of the ostensible 'freedom' of Baako, the hero of our next novel, Armah's Fragments - only in the sense that it is a necessary evolutionary stage before meaningful community. That is the point of the novel's ending: a newly aware germ of community taking to the forest, not torn apart in Bacchic frenzy.

III,(ii)

NOTES

Season of Anomy (Rex Collings, London, 1973) All references to this edition.

1. Soyinka has strongly advocated and defended (among other things) what he calls "the communal agency role of the protagonist ego" (my emphasis), "Who's Afraid of Elesin Oba?" (a paper sent to the 1977 Ibadan Workshop on African Literature.

2. Myth, Literature and the African World (Cambridge, 1976) See especially pp.140-60.

3. The Man Died (London, 1972) p.9.

4. "And After the Narcissist?", African Forum, 1, 4 (1965) p.55.

5. A Shuttle in the Crypt (London, 1972) p.21.

6. op.cit., p.89.

7. op.cit., p.27.

8. For comments on the printer's error of substituting "Egbo" for Ofeyi, see especially: Juliet Okonkwo, "The Essential Unity of Soyinka's The Interpreters and Season of Anomy, African Literature Today, 11, p.112; and Kolawole Ogungbesan, "Wole Soyinka and the Novelist's Responsibility in Africa", Ogungbesan (ed.) New West African Literature (London, 1979) p.6.

9. Okonkwo, ibid. p.111.

10. Twelve African Writers (London, 1980) p.229.
Professor Moore is not impressed especially by the predictability of Taiila and Dentist. He not only calls them "cardboard characters" but also suggests that, in "personalizing" and "externalizing" "good" and "evil" in the two characters and then separating them from Ofeyi, Soyinka commits an artistic flaw. Earlier on, however, Professor Moore explains the mythic nature of Soyinka's creative imagination. He writes:

> "...the mythic imagination must simplify and dramatize, imposing its own meaning on events, even at the cost of some violence to the evidence, in order to make them teach a special meaning." (p.224)

If this is anything to go by, then Dentist or Taiila is no more "cardboard" than Ofeyi himself or any fictional figures that are products of the mythic imagination. For, in the final analysis, myths and mythological figures are symbolic; and as symbols they are, unavoidably, predictable unless (as sometimes) they are inverted.

11. Idanre and Other Poems (London, 1967), p.52.

12. "The Fourth Stage", Myth, Literature and the African World, (Cambridge, 1976) p.141.

13. ibid. and passim.

14. ibid., p.152.

15. Bolaji Idowu, Olodumare (London, 1963) p.26.

16. Descent and Return (Massachusetts, 1971) p.10.

17. "Anubis Resurgent: Chaos and Political Vision in Recent Literature", Ch'indaba, 2 (Jul/Dec.1976) pp.44-49.

18. op.cit., pp.10-11.

19. Osofisan op.cit.

20. A Dance of the Forests (London, 1963) p.32.

21. op.cit.

22. ibid., pp.48-49.

23. "Soyinka's Black Orpheus", Lindfors & Schild (eds.), Neo-African Literature and Culture (1976) p.153.

III,(iii) Fragments: Cargo Mentality

About his second novel, Fragments, Armah comments thus: "My family was unhappy because I was too full of ideas, not action...I found it traumatic writing this book because of my family's attitude."[1] This revelation about the immediate motive for writing the novel would seem to confer some legitimacy on the tendency among its critics to isolate 'evidences' and emphasize its "autobiographical" posture. But extracting biographical details from Fragments (or any other fictional work of art) could become as vulnerable an exercise as substituting, (or at best, dependence upon) information from the personal life of its author, for the interpretative job of criticism. Besides courting authorial disclaimer and, even intemperate reproach,[2] an autobiographical focus on Fragments may also tend to divert attention from profounder issues of literary appreciation to merely entrenching cliches of "alienation", "exile" and "disillusion" which have dogged the criticism of African fiction for so long. With these in mind, perhaps we shall be best occupied seeking the key to the complex texture of Armah's second novel in, especially, the 'voices' in it that compete for our attention, the existentialist mould of its hero, and the mythological metaphor that holds its world together.

Fragments is about the tensions (emotional and philosophical) arising from crushing pressures of social conformity and soul-destroying self-isolation. But literally, the story focuses on Baako (the young Ghanaian artist and hero) as he returns home after five years of study in America. The home-coming is fraught with apprehension. He is worried about the prospects for his training and idealism being engaged towards the restitution of the fast disappearing authentic personality and creative potential of a people trapped in the pursuit of material well-being alone.

As he finds out (through a necessarily prejudiced point of view, though), the society to which he returns is one in which materialistic-consumer propensity has been elevated to the status of national fetish. It is also a society where to succeed one has to bribe his way to the top, forgetting "everything good you have ever learned" (p.119); a place of potentially good producers "who'd learned not to insist on being productive" (p.189), where the sole organ of public information ("Ghanavision") exists only to sing the praise and pander to the egomania of the leader. He sees everywhere around him (as does his blind grandmother, Naana), not any desire for or appreciation of creativity but, merely an insatiable, hasty greed to "consume things we have taken no care nor trouble to produce". (p.284)

However, the first profound challenge of Baako's home-coming lies in the protracted emotional battle with his immediate family. His mother, sister and close relatives look up to him - as a "been-to" - to meet certain meticulously charted expectations commensurate with his newly acquired status. But because - unlike his other compatriots such as Brempong - he fails to return laden with material possessions and refuses to own a car or live in government mansion (with all the social advantages accruing therefrom), his family is disappointed. The mutual but silent hostility that ensues reaches a climax when Baako not only resigns his job, but also increasingly isolates himself from the conventions in which the family derives obvious joy and sense of respectability. Hence, his refusal to play the soaring "eagle" or take seriously the role assigned to him during the stage-managed out-dooring ceremony of his sister's child is frowned upon as much as his decision to bury himself among his books and manuscripts. Thus brought under unremitting familial pressures, his earlier nervous breakdown threatens to recur and he consults Juana - the expatriate psychiatrist who later becomes his mistress. Juana's

profession, prior experience of the trauma of a wrecked marriage and keen observation of the life of the people among whom she has come to work as well as seek quietude, combine to pave the way for her spontaneous empathy with (perhaps) her first articulate patient. And when Baako tries to tell her about the family's contribution to his nervous strain, the picture that emerges is one of it (the family) becoming:

> ...only a closer, intenser, more intimate reflection of the society itself, a concave mirror, as he called it, and before long she was left in no doubt at all that in many ways he saw more small possibilities of hope in the larger society than in the family around him. (p.146)

In a rather paradoxical outburst of self-assuredness he concludes: "I know what I'm expected to be...It's not what I want to be." (p.147; my emphases) Thus with the artist's knack for depth, he translates what he is expected to be into the symbolism of the cargo-ferrying ghost - teased out of conflated Akan ghost-cum-heroic and Melanesian Cargo myths:

> "The voyage abroad, everything that follows; it's very much a colonial thing. But the hero idea itself is something very old. It's the myth of the extra-ordinary man who brings about a complete turn-about in terrible circumstances. We have the old heroes who turned defeat into victory for the whole community. But these days the community has disappeared from the story." (p.146)

The old "hero" becomes in contemporary morality a ghost—intermediary ferrying material, temporal survival needs from celestial or terrestrial benefactors. And unable to support his vision against the crashing splinters of a torpedoed morality, Baako suffers schizophrenic collapse. The spiritual malignancy which the inverted myths can assume is, then, brought into sharp relief against the backdrop of the primal (but receding) order and wholeness which Naana represents:

> It is so vague, the way I think I see them sometimes; and they, I know, see me as nothing at all. The larger meaning which lent sense to every small thing and

> and every momentary happening years and
> years ago has shattered into a thousand and
> thirty useless pieces. Things have passed
> which I have never seen whole, only broken
> and twisted against themselves. (p.280)

Any attempt to really see how Fragments works, it seems, must initially be able to tell apart the narrative 'voices' and the (authorial) consciousness shaping their lines of vision. Hence we observe two main such voices, one of which – first-personal narrative; indeed, only partly "narrative" and partly ritual invocation – belongs to Naana. It is split to form, as it were, the prologue and epilogue to the main incidents described by the other – omniscient narrative – voice. Naana's world-view is rooted in a firm religious faith in the eternal cosmic circle of existence in which:

> EACH THING that goes away returns and nothing in the
> end is lost. The great friend throws all things
> apart and brings all things together again. That is
> the way everything goes and turns round. That is
> how all living things come back after long absences,
> and in the whole great world all things are living
> things. All that goes returns. (p.1)

Such a continuity as she envisions is assured only by the correct observance of ritual mediation. It is a view antithetic to the spiritual apathy reflected by the society in which Baako finds himself. But it is not exactly accommodating of Baako's option either – opposed as he is to the "endless, virtiginous cycle" (p.112; and passim), preferring to savour, even if ambiguously, the "comfort" of "this sense of being so alone...connected...to no one..." (p.92; my emphasis) For, as the ancestral ritual proclaims:

> A human being alone
> is a thing more sad than any lost animal
> and nothing destroys the soul
> like its aloneness. (p.6)

Thus the essential community represented by Naana's primal circle is counter-pointed to, as we might say, the symbolic multiplicity or fragmentedness of the points of view from which the omniscient narrator tells his story. And, paradoxically making up for its lack of unity in variety, the omniscient narrative voice takes us successively into the socially critical minds of the two leading characters (Baako and Juana), in conflict with the pragmatic views of others (Efua/family-cum-society) intent upon surviving as best they could in a changing world. Even the narrative styles of the two main voices underscore the mutual exclusiveness of the worlds for which they stand. The one (Naana's) belongs to an oral tradition - oracular, alluring and almost soporific; it depicts a stable, confident but inexorably vanishing virtues of a cultural heritage:

> My spirit is straining for another beginning in a place where there will be new eyes and where the farewells that will remain unsaid here will turn to a glad welcome and my ghost will find the beginning that will be known here as my end. (p.280)

The other narrative style exhibits the sophistication we normally associate with the literate elite tradition; but the general rapidity of its flow, especially, indexes the anxious and haunted states of mind of the characters it focuses. And the following characterizes the imagery and temperament of the narrative consciousness:

> Images of men with guns hunting frightened birds flying above savana trees and the killing embrace of enemy insects crushing each others' exoskeletons and squeezing out the pulp of life within in the unending destructiveness of life were filing across his mind...(p.128)

Behind these voices however, we also become aware of a controlling, interested (non-narrative) sensibility which can only be attributable to the author himself. It is apparent in the sympathy and facility of

expression with which, especially, Juana's and Naana's points of view are rendered. The same authorial intervention can also be detected in the ways in which Baako's perspective is, for example, juxtaposed with Juana's or contrasted to the Efua-family-Brempong complex and, particularly, in the choice of such incidents and imagery - the rabid dog (pp.23-30); the lone yellow flower (p.40 and p.282); and the man-in-his-closed-world (pp.73-4) - that prefigure the hero's fate.

Baako's agony is due as much to an awareness of the insidious value structure which his people support as it is to a personal sense of impotence in the face of the earnestness of their commitment to it. Social conventions have decreed a role - of the "been-to" - which he is not only unwilling to play but also incapable of really ignoring. For, in his eyes, to be the ideal "been-to" means to accept an invitation to a "pretended life", losing one's essential individuality or self-hood and to abjure any potential creativeness in which process one embraces the ambiguous 'power' of the ghost-intermediary or zombie. It is therefore in this context that we might seek the actual purpose of the analogy Baako draws between the Akan (Ghanaian) belief in ghosts and the Melanesian cargo myths - a process which leads us back to the authorial intervention or creative design.

What Armah seeks to achieve in Fragments is to interpret a contemporary social and ethical attitude through the parallel media of Akan ghost-cum-heroic myths and the Melanesian cargo myths. But as it will become obvious presently, Armah's far-sighted preoccupation within this framework of mythology is the proposition which engages his creative attention in his subsequent novels - Why Are We So Blest? (1972), Two Thousand Seasons (1973), and The Healers (1978) - namely: the question of the viability and, indeed, validity of the solitary vision or individualistic approach to socio-cultural problems in Africa. Thus Baako, the hero of

Fragments does not only provide the clue to the mythological dimension of his contemporaneous experience, but also emphasizes the importance of our seeing the myths he has chosen as the key to a proper understanding of his own circumstances as well as the entire novel.

The belief in ghosts among the Akan derives from a tradition-based cyclical perception of life-death relationship. It is the medium through which the relationship between the living and the dead is explained and kept alive. For example, it is believed that the dead continue to live on a higher plane of existence (after a departure from the earth's surface) from where, as ghosts or spirits, they are expected to wield powerful influences as intercessors between the temporal world and the world of the ancestors. And as Kofi Antubam explains:

> In the Ghanaian idea of life after death the spirit of the dead is conceived as travelling within a 'month' of forty days to Asamanede (the spiritual waiting place) of those who have completed their life in the flesh, according to the plan predestined by Odomankoma (the Creator). 3
> (original italics)

Hence, the newly dead person is not normally spoken of as 'dead' but as having gone on a journey to a "village". Obviously this view of death makes the sorrow and burden of bereavement bearable for those still alive. The "traveller" is therefore expected to return, a powerful ghost functioning as a 'carrier' of wishes to, and 'bringer' of material goods from the ancestors on behalf of the living - if they (the living) perform the ritual communication properly. The ghost's expected benevolence is thus made a recurrent theme in many of the Akan funeral dirges.[4] It is common for the mourners to ask favours of the ancestors through the newly departed relative (or even ask the new "traveller" himself when he has joined the ranks of the ancestral spirits) of such requirements as will ensure a comfortable living for those kith and kin they have left behind:

"Mother who sends gifts, send me something when
someone is coming/this way"

Or:

"Mother, if you would send me something,
I would like a parcel/ a big cooking pot that
entertains strangers". 5

And when the requisite rituals and libation have been performed, the hopeful waiting that the requests imply is made bearable and sustained by a correspondingly active expression of faith, as in the Cargo myths, that what is requested will come.

From the accounts of them by Peter Worsley, Vittorio Lanternari and Peter Lawrence[6], what came to be known as the "Cargo cults", on the other hand, were no more than ancestor-worships founded on the belief in the idea of reincarnation and benevolent powers of the ancestral spirits among the Melanesians of the islands in the South Pacific. It was not until early in this century that these traditional practices became organized into millenarian 'religious' movements whose active anti-colonialist undercurrents and materialistic bases were made manifest. In the "Cargo" creed, a leader or "prophet" announces the imminent end of the world (in which the expulsion of the European colonialists is anticipated) which will be followed by the bountiful return of the ancestors and a subsequent life of bliss. The ancestors on their part are expected to bring material goods or "Cargo" - the possession of which, as their proteges have seen, is responsible for the comfortable life and power of their European masters. But in order to ensure the arrival of the cargo, the worshippers are required to appease and lure the ancestors by destroying all their own farm produce, livestock and to throw away all money. Since the benefactors and cargo are expected to arrive, usually in a steamer, barge or (sometimes)

aeroplane, building of store-houses on the beach becomes the main object of devotion and active expression of faith. For, according to Peter Worsley, the Melanesian myths are so much concerned with material rewards that "...relationships are expressed and understood most easily in terms of giving or exchanging material goods and advantages".[7] However, it is not only the cultivation of a materialistic culture or the renunciation of traditional customs in favour of the foreign, but also the apparent uncreativeness (in dependency or consumer propensity) that makes cargo cultism a suitable analogy to the Ghanaian Society of Fragments.

In the traditional Akan belief, Baako is ritually dead to his family and community the moment he leaves for America. He has become, metaphorically, a "ghost". The ceremony and libation performed before his departure are reminiscent of true burial rites - except that they are skimped, owing to the greed of his uncle, Foli. And like the true ghost he is expected to return from the "lands of the ghosts", "white men's lands" and, "like rain bring... blessings and their fruits". (p.8) Just as the real funeral dirges are resplendent with invocation, supplication and even threats to the newly deceased, so is the ritual invocation at the ceremony marking Baako's travel abroad:

> 'You are a piece of us,
> of those gone before
> and who will come again...
> You will not be coming,
> when you come,
> the way you went away.
> You will come stronger
> to make us stronger,...(pp.5-6)

However, in its proper sense, there does not seem to be anything wrong in the requests and bounty which the ghost is expected to return with. As Nketia's collection of dirges shows, the mourners mainly request such things as "...a big cooking pot that entertains strangers",[8] -

materials usually needed to meet immediate subsistence requirements and enhance life. But it is such contemporary, alien and destructive twist given to the meaning of the tradition that drives a character in the short story by Ama Ata Aidoo (Armah's compatriot) to declare in frustration that "...cars and fridges are ropes with which we are hanging ourselves..."[9] Baako's mother and near relatives do not only agonize about his failure to return, but they are also obviously thrilled by the mere contemplation of the expected uplifting of the family to a position of affluence upon his eventual return.

Apparently there is nothing cynical about the family's wishes for Baako; we might even agree with Robert Fraser that "their love for Baako and longing for his return are undoubted; their absolute assumption that he will bring a car in his wake is one way of paying him homage."[10] But the kernel of Fragments cannot be found in appearances which, in the context, serve only as shibboleth for a more deeply entrenched message. And this awareness steers us towards the relevance of that analogy drawn between the spiritual state of the Ghanaian world of Fragments and the Melanesian cargo-mentality. For, if we stretch the analogy far enough (as we are meant to do), the millenarian characteristic of the family's aredent expectation and faithful hope in the benefits of Baako's return becomes clearer. When he fails to return as soon as is expected, for example, his mother joins a beach church in order to pray for his safety. Although she seems to be sure that: "'He will come back a man. A big man'" (p.50) her collaboration with the religious sect looks like an act to renew and buttress faith. She laments to Juana during their first meeting: "'All my hope went with him...I have prayed harder than any woman who has lost her most precious trinkets.'" (pp.50-51) Thus the paradox of a mother's care becomes noticeable as the "ghost"-image is interwoven

with Baako and the material boon he is expected to confer on the family. As Naana puts it succinctly:

> There should be dreams before returns, as before goings, before everything. That is only just. But these have been woven of such heavy earth that they will load his spirit down and after they have touched him it will never fly again.
>
> Two such dreams I have heard from the mouth of Efua herself. Oh great friend, a human mother should not have such dreams against the coming of her own flesh and her loved one's soul. Even cats have learned to turn the hunger for the newly born against their own entrails. (p.3)

This lends credence to Baako's view that, in the eyes of the society, he (like other "been-to-s") is a "factor", "ghost" or "transmission belt for cargo" (p.224). In his eyes also, Brempong symbolizes the been-to-cum-ghost par excellence. Brempong has not only actually brought back with him the inevitable cargo - two cars, suits and deep refrigeration plant - he also condescendingly tells Baako:

> 'It's no use,...going back with nothing....
> [Going abroad is] a big opportunity, and those at home must benefit from it too. I don't see the sense in returning with nothing.' (p.76)

The remark is given added punch when a customs man looks into Baako's suitcase at Accra airport and asks with an undisguised disgust: "'Paper, paper, is that all?'" (p.80) There is no let up on his anxiety and nausea as, just off the airport tarmac, he is treated to the extravagant fanfare being staged by the party that has turned up to welcome his fellow traveller, Brempong. And he wonders "whether there were any people here who had escaped the roles held out to them by powerless hopers close to them." (p.93) He becomes certain that his own family too will be waiting to receive him and wanting him to put up appearances that should leave no one in any doubt that he is a "big man".

Ironically, be braces himself for a fight in which he recognizes an imminent defeat even before it actually begins. A confrontation with his family becomes inevitable as the following unnaturally brief exchange (on a first meeting after years of separation) with his mother, as they are driven home in Fifi's shiny car, shows:

> 'When is yours coming, Baako?'
> 'What?' he asked surprised.
> 'Yours, your car, so that my old bones can also rest.' (p.101)

It hints at a conflict of interests which leads unresolvedly to his dementia. For, besides his suitcase that is full of only "papers" he has brought just a typewriter and guitar - about each of which a critical point will be made later. Meanwhile, as far as the family is concerned he has not returned with the coveted "cargo" after all. The general attitude of the society towards creativeness increasingly validates the Melanesian analogy where "...creation, the making of men and things, is by no means a proof of very great power or a ground for great reverence".[11] But sometimes the whole concept of "cargo mentality" is aborted as in the actual physical death (while carrying a cargo of foodstuff) of the driver, Skido; or the subversion of the laboratory assistant, Bukari's effort to deliver "cargo" by the sudden death of the beneficiary, his mother.

Nowhere else in Fragments is the frustration of the creative urge by the establishment more demonstrable than in Baako's time with "Ghanavision". We need only recall the satirical vignettes of the "Principal Secretary" who declares that it is a waste of time to insist on the smooth and efficient running of the country; the farcical "literary evening" manipulated by Akosua Russell; Asante-Smith (Baako's immediate boss and head of the production unit of "Ghanavision") who refuses to acknowledge the relevance of the facts of slavery and colonialism to the cultural

history of Ghana; or the pathetic scramble for the television sets meant for public use by officials of "Ghanavision." Indeed the poignancy of Armah's satirical power in this part of the novel is so overwhelming that some critics have been lured into a rather cheap game of identifying the real-life doubles of the fictional characters, and speculative evidence-hunting to explain Armah's own "self-exile" from Ghana.[12] Thus the critics carry-on, generally oblivious to the fundamentally questioning attitude of Armah towards the insular individualistic posture which Baako adopts vis-a-vis his family and society.

Perhaps the worst act of misinterpretation that any serious critic of Fragments can commit is to assume that Baako is Armah's mouth-piece per se. For, the greater reality of the total structure of the novel lies in its anti-heroic stance. In other words, the controlling (authorial) vision in the novel is also critical of Baako's existentialist consciousness - locked, as it is, in abstract opposition to society. And the build-up towards this effect is bifocal: the selective deployment of images and symbols, and the sensitivity with which Baako's response to his mother, compatriots and environment is handled. With respect to the latter point, we need not look too far to sense, for example, Baako's self-righteous unresponsiveness to his mother's (however tactlessly expressed) offer of truce; or the puritanism of his vision, shut-off (until the damage has been done) from "the touch of life around him". (p.221) However, the possibility of over-lapping vision between the hero and his creator cannot be discounted. For it might be said that Armah sympathizes with Baako's refusal to be drawn into the general moral and spiritual impotence in society and, to a large extent, his resistance to the family's pressure on him to toe the line. Armah might also be assumed to share (in some sense) Baako's paradoxical differences with the only individuals with whom he seems able to establish

any meaningful communication - Juana, Ocran (the art teacher), each of whom has taken measures to seek some form of reconciliation with the society; and grandmother, Naana who belongs to a different age.

The second (and perhaps more important) focus of authorial criticism of the hero's self-encrustation against the flow of life around him lies in the 'archetypal' prefigurative incidents and symbols which his fate is seen (retrospectively) to re-enact. Especially relevant here is the symbolism of the stories of the killing of the rabid dog (pp.23-30) and Araba's child (pp. 121-8; 134-41; 258-68) seen through Juana's and Baako's eyes respectively. These are reinforced by such image-clusters and symbols as the ducks in the lighted pool (pp.58-9), the lone yellow flower amidst lush greenery (p.40) and the guitar (p.93) - all of which flash warnings about the danger of aloneness on Baako's consciousness. (Indeed, the whole of the third, "Akwaaba" and incidentally, longest chapter consists mainly of images and symbols that prefigure Baako's eventual alienation and madness.) The incidents involving the mad dog and Araba's child corroborate each other, not only to prefigure Baako's eventual 'destruction' by an ostensibly uncaring society but, also to create depth of perception on the spiritual dearth threatening the entire world of the novel. For, the dramatic tension between, and ironic cohabitation of, docile creativeness and spiritual virility on the one hand, and active destructiveness and spiritual barrenness on the other are central to the dialectic of Fragments. As Juana watches the physical exertion of the men encircling the dog, she is struck by the ironic spectacle of:

> ...a lot of men around just one dying dog, and a fear could be seen in them whose strength was strange, seeing that the source of it was such a powerless thing. (p.26)

And of the man that actually kills the dog:

> ...she knew at once that this was a man
> who needed something like the first killing
> of the dog for reasons that lay within and
> were far more powerful than the mere outside
> glory open to the hunter with his kill. (p.27)

The man's genital deformity (like the fishermen who, despite their obvious physical strength, need the inner creative strength of the singer-boy to accomplish the task of hauling their catch and net ashore) is merely a physical symptom of a deep-seated spiritual deficiency. Apparently, the best he knows is to make up for his impotence in predatory bravado.

But in the characteristic see-saw operation of these images and symbols, the typewriter and guitar cast an equally negative shadow on Baako's immersion in his own sense of self. The two objects are the symbols of his rejection of society and ensuring a life of solitude for himself. And, as the student who sold him the guitar hinted, "his wanting a guitar means he had begun to run from human beings." (p.93) None other than Baako's mother (during the midnight conversation) could give a more terse rendering of the destructive symbolism of the typewriter:

> 'I kept you awake, didn't I?' he asked uncertainly.
> 'No', his mother answered, 'it wasn't the sound of your machine. I couldn't sleep myself. I have my own troubles, and they keep me up. Your door is closed, and mine. The noise is very little; I have to listen to hear it, far away. It makes me think of termites hidden in wood, talking'.
> 'Termites talking. Why talking?' He almost laughed.
> 'The noise you make is small like that, going on all the time. It isn't that I chose to think of termites, but that is what I thought of.'
> (p.222; my emphases)

Elsewhere in Armah's creative writing (Why Are We So Blest?), the idea of the lone quester is unequivocally rejected. Although the isolated soul of the individual may feel freedom and even radiate some measure of inner beauty it is like a fugitive speck of water broken from the parent

body which, in itself, can only "capture the light of the sun in a rainbow that does not arc over great distances or last any great length of time."[13]

The authorial position in Fragments seems to argue that insular individualism is not an acceptable alternative even to a corrupt community. Thus, it is against this background that the implication of the short conversation between Baako and Juana about "Catholic" and "protestant" views of life can be properly matched. Like Baako, Juana is also haunted by a sense of futility in her attempt to create order in life. She sees her job in terms of trying to "Salvage discrete individuals in the general carnage" (p.177) that is as much the reality of the life she has run away from as it is of the Ghanaian society she finds herself in. Fundamentally a salvationist, she finds herself caught up in the moral mesh of trying to restore to health the broken minds of the victims of a system she is paid to service; and she wonders:

> Where then was the justification for the long effort to push back into this life those who had found it harder than the woman [she had just heard lament the hopelessness of life here] and had fallen down into things set deeper within themselves? What justification for sending the once destroyed back to knock again against the very things that had destroyed their peace? (p.34)

And just as her sense of mission begins to give way to depression and self-doubt, Baako appears. His coming into her life reassures her while he is in turn strengthened by the discovery that, at least, she shares his awareness of the moral decadence in the society.

Deep down in their beings they both harbour catholic (self-less and communalistic) sympathies. But they have been forced to adopt evidently "protestant" (individualistic) outlooks by the circumstances of their environment. Of course they acknowledge that the catholic is the more

desirable and spiritually positive social vision. However, it not only involves total self-sacrifice towards altruistic ends but also greater personal risks than the relative safety of the protestant self-insulating withdrawal. Hence, though Juana could almost understand the inward flight of the protestant soul, nevertheless, "even if there were some ultimate peace in it, it would never reach her to change her from within." (p.177) Unlike Baako however, Juana has a pragmatic mind. For her, "salvation" also means survival and adjustment (physical and mental); it is a matter of "adopting a narrower vision every time the full vision threatens danger to the visionary self." (p.46) And she warns Baako: "'You are going against a general current,'"... "'it takes a lot of strength.'" (p.147) Perhaps the only character of an implacably protestant persuasion in the novel is the art teacher, Ocran. Inherently, he is closer to Baako's temperament than anyone else. But his intensely solitary view of the creative enterprise has reached such a cynical point that it alienates Baako's sympathy. Thus, when he counsels that his former pupil should not stake his creative gift or achievement on public acknowledgement, the other simply replies that one cannot create alone, without others. Even if Baako wants to agree with his teacher, he lacks the seasoning of time and experience which the older man can count upon for personal survival.

Certainly Baako is not as naive as the scene of his self-mortification in the lunatic asylum suggests. But it seems to be consistent with the long-term creative design of the author. For, even if it is granted that the sort of reductive 'resolution' of the internal dialectic of Fragments has a slight touch of the bizarre, Armah's novels since Fragments are renowned for their unequivocal rejection of the idea of aloneness. Like his grandmother, Baako is aware of the "larger meaning which lent sense

to every small thing and every momentary happening years and years ago..." (p.280) - an awareness which is contained in the unspoken bond between him and her. Naana's mythic perspective appears to hold promise for inter-personal and communal relationships upon which a healthy society could be founded. However, although Baako (like Armah) is concerned about the ethical and spiritual health of his society, he is aware also of the inefficacy (in the contemporary context) of Naana's intensely ritualistic and transcendental mode of perception. For Naana therefore, in the words of one of her closest relatives: "Night fell long ago,..." (p.2) But Baako does not see her and what she stands for in such a dismissive sense. For him, at a very profound level of consciousness, the preeminence of her way of seeing relationship as a series of connectedness is acknowledged; it puts his own failure and that of the other characters in sharp relief. The orderliness of her vision therefore provides the backdrop against which, eventually, the fragmented efforts of the others to establish authentic communication with one another are to be seen and judged.

So, we might ask, what vision of humanity and community informs Fragments - like Season of Anomy? We arrive at an answer only by induction and, of course, intelligent (we hope) speculation. It does seem that, in setting the 'ends' of their novels in lunatic asylums, Soyinka and Armah hint at a possible explanation: that a route to personal authenticity (and so, communal redemption) is via the loss of inhibitions - in 'madness' or degradation or that psychic depth of mythic perception - whereby Man becomes truly "conscious" of his state. It is then that the African man can reconnect himself to his history and find his place therein. Or is it? For, there is, not just one history and one way; but 'histories' and ways - as both Yambo Ouloguem's Bound to Violence and Armah's Two Thousand Seasons, as well as (especially) Ngugi's Petals of Blood seem to argue.

III,(iii)

NOTES

Fragments (Heinemann, London, 1969). All references to this edition.

1. Cultural Events in Africa, 40, (Mar.1968) p.5.

2. See especially C.R.Larson's criticism of Fragments in his book, The Emergence of African Fiction (Indiana,1971) and Armah's charge (among others) that Larson falsifies or merely invents usable biographical "evidences" about him (Armah) in order to minister to the prejudices of a European audience and also lend weight to or enhance his authority as a critic of African literature - see Armah's "Larsony or Fiction as Criticism of Fiction" in The Positive Review, 1, (1978) pp.11-14. Obviously, other autobiographical views of Fragments such as K.H.Petersen's in his "Loss and Frustration: An Analysis of A.K.Armah's Fragments", Kunapipi, 1,1, (1979) pp.53-65; and Robert Fraser's in his book, The Novels of Ayi Kwei Armah, (London, 1980) pp.30-47 take the cue from Professor Larson.

3. Ghana's Heritage of Culture (London,1963) p.62.

4. See J.H.K.Nketia, Funeral Dirges of the Akan People (New York, 1969)

5. ibid., p.196.

6. The Trumpet Shall Sound (Bucks, 1970), The Religions of the Oppressed (London, 1963), and Road Belong to Cargo (London,1971) respectively.

7. The Trumpet Shall Sound, p.248.

8. Nketia, op.cit. p.196.

9. "No Sweetness Here" in the book of that title (London,1972) p.6.

10. op.cit., p.33.

11. Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics, Vol.8, p.535.

12. See note 2 above.

13. Why Are We So Blest? (London, 1974) p.12.

PART FOUR

MYTH AND HISTORY

It is precisely because the 'spirit' of our epoch is materialistic, the very negation of anything spiritual, that the creative imagination (to fulfill its mission of representing the world as whole) has been compelled to sound an ethical warning. This warning, however, can no longer be uttered in the guise of mythic prophecy. In spite of its kinship with myth, the creative imagination also partakes of the spirit of the epoch, and must yield to it, if it is to develop into the logical prophecy of the future. It will achieve this by becoming poly-historic.

(Hermann Broch)

IV,(i) 'Myth of History' or 'Historical Myth'?

One of the most difficult questions to resolve for writers and critics alike is that of the appropriate posture to adopt in dealing with "myths" and "history" in the creation and appreciation of literature. With how much measure of "belief" could a myth (even when taken out of its traditional anthropological context) be approached? Or, with how much "factuality" could the artist's 'history' be credited? What relationship or relevance has the artist's method with myth and history to real-life experience which must ultimately be the reference point? Is the historical perspective in creative writing necessarily more important or acceptable than the mythic (or vice versa) as visions of society? These are the sort of questions which increasingly occupy critics of African fiction. Thus, a basic acceptance of the legitimacy of these critical interrogations and a desire to seek answers, wherever possible, shape the foci of the succeeding chapters of the present study.

The story of Africa has been a record of aggression, exploitation and denigration which have grown with, and have been underscored by, the colonial encounter with Europe. Since, socio-historically, the development of modern African literature has been conditioned by this caustic milieu, the "colonial factor" in the African experience has featured as its recurrent theme. Beginning as a protest literature (running through many modifications) directed against the colonial West, its rallying point has been the struggle to rid the African continent of not only the socio-economic and political encroachment of European colonialism but, especially, its more resilient psycho-cultural backlash. African writers have therefore sought the restitution of a battered racial psyche; to rediscover the true image or pre-colonial sovereignty of the continent. The challenge has always been looked upon as a matter of course and, its achievement, the patriotic dream of every African.

It is this challenge which often defines and is predicated by "commitment" in modern African literature. But the degree and thrust of 'commitment' vary according to the individual artist's psychological or ideological orientation and artistic vision. How much should the writer's perspective or private angst be mediated or governed by the collective social experience (past or present) and goal? Concomitant to this is the appraisal of how much legitimacy the literary products may claim as genuine works of art, as against cheap, artless propaganda. For, it is often pointed out that, given the sometimes invidious and Manichean twist that discussions of the "colonial factor" assume vis-a-vis the indigenous African culture, ethical and ideological interests take precedence over (if not obliterate) aesthetic consideration of a given piece of work. This largely governs - albeit ironically - Professor Gerald Moore's persuasion that:

> Only by liberating itself from this dialectical relationship with a particular colonial system and particular European civilization could African literature recover full creative freedom. 1

The paradox here however, is that the statement would seem truer of the critical parameter that is often employed in evaluating a literature which itself assumes different postures in a concerted effort to apprehend the multiple shades and textures of the alien encounter. And as Professor Ime Ikidde writes in his foreword to Ngugi's Homecoming:

> ...it remains true that there can be no end to the discussion of the African encounter with Europe, because the wounds inflicted touched the very springs of life and have remained unhealed because they are constantly being gashed open again with more subtle, more lethal weapons. 2

It is basically this kind of awareness that informs the conception of two of the most controversial novels to come out of Africa - Yambo Ouloguem's Bound to Violence (1968; English Trans; 1971) and Ayi Kwei Armah's Two Thousand Seasons (1973).

If, in spite of the "post-colonial" (or simulacrum of independence) era which the continent has entered since the past two decades African writers still produce works that deal with the "colonial question", fresh critical approaches must be sought for a proper understanding of the creative sensibilities which inform them. For, as that most perceptive priest-hero of Achebe's, Ezeulu sees the world, a literary artifact is also, "'like a Mask dancing. If you want to see it well, you do not stand in one place.'"[3] On this score, critical attention to Bound to Violence and Two Thousand Seasons so far leaves much to be desired. Indeed, one of the real challenges and thrill of reading both novels lies in the contrastive perspectives they hold on myth and history in the African experience. The one pursues, as we might say, a path of demythicizing towards historicalization, while the other de-historicalizes in order to remythicize; both aiming, paradoxically, at the same goal of rediscovering the reality beyond conventional historicists' much vaunted objectivity.

In his essay titled "Myth and History", Peter Munz posits an interesting idea (about the interdependence of the two phenomena) which recommends itself to our present endeavour. Munz proceeds from the premise that a myth, in certain ways like history, is a story of concrete events said to have happened at a certain time and involving concrete people. Assuming as well the imaginative substratum of any mythic cognition or historical knowledge, he attempts to show how the one needs the other not only to come into being, but also easily exchanges vestments with it. Thus, the traditional historian's 'history' may become 'myth' when seen against res gestae (or the totality of everything that ever happened and is happening), and a myth may lay claims on truth. The processes of the imaginative alchemy that yield this mutability Munz describes as follows:

> The two phenomena I have in mind when I am speaking of the mutual interdependence of myth and history, conceived as concrete stories, are the distension of myth into history and the telescoping of history into myth. The first process can be described as 'true myth issuing in significant history'; and the second as 'true history issuing in significant myth'. 5

"Distension" of a myth (normally a story located in unspecified time and place) is achieved by assigning temporality and spatiality to parts of the myth while simultaneously weighting it with factual evidence concerning its personages, event(s), location and period. "Telescoping" of history into myth, on the other hand, occurs when a historical narrative is subjected to an imaginative projection (not bound by the necessity of fidelity to time or space), 'leaching' it, as it were, in order to make it possible for its essence and universal qualities to be extracted and then strung into a new tale. For obvious reasons therefore, Munz's proposition will be kept in view and taken aboard (whenever possible) together with other considerations in our subsequent effort to interpret Ouloguem's Bound to Violence and Armah's Two Thousand Seasons.

IV,(i)

NOTES

1. "Colonial Portraits in a Changing Frame", Yale French Studies, 53 (1976) p.45.

2. Ngugi Wa Thiong'O, Homecoming (London,1972) p.xii.

3. Chinua Achebe, Arrow of God (London, 1958) p.23.

4. Philosophical Quarterly, 6, 22 (Jan.1956) pp.1-16.

5. ibid. p.2.

IV,(ii) Bound to Violence: The Euhemeristic Temper

During the first years of its appearance Yambo Ouloguem's Bound to Violence[1] enjoyed (especially among non-African critics) enthusiastic acclaim as a fresh and profound creative achievement: a significant diversion, that is, from the mainstream of African literature on the "colonial question". This initial success story was however not only short-lived, but, in the words of Professor Eric Sellin, turned into "a nightmare for publisher and author alike."[2] Having himself lavished praise on Ouloguem's "first brilliant novel" in an earlier review, Sellin stunned the reading public by his sustained effort in subsequent articles to dispute Bound to Violence's "authenticity" as an imaginative creation.[3] The Fall, 1971 issue of Research in African Literatures carried his discovery that the French novelist, Andre Schwarz-Barts' Le Denier des Justes provides the thematic and stylistic model upon which Ouloguem's novel was assumed to be copiously based. The chain of reaction which this allegation called forth culiminated in Robert McDonald's "proof" of plagiarised passages from Graham Greene's It's a Battlefield.[4]

However, Sellin's most recent article[5] betrays more than just a literary interest in Bound to Violence - any illusion of that seems to have ended with what he describes as "the scandal in which I and others became involved."[6] Although he seems to be virtually alone in his vigorous campaign against Ouloguem's book, Sellin's view nevertheless could be partly held accountable (until recently) for the studied silence or largely diffident critical responses to a novel whose literary authenticity has been called into question. For, under the vendetta-like sway of Sellin's argument and the subsequently protracted debate on the ontological status of plagiarism in the creative enterprise, significant questions about the specificity and character of the literary achievements of Bound to Violence tend to be obscured.

Hence, no critical assessment of the novel is complete which does not take cognizance of the scandal of "plagiarism" in which Ouloguem has found himself. Scores of articles in scholarly French and English journals, literary columns of magazines and newspapers since 1969, bear testimony to the rancour and intrepid intellectual muscle-flexing generated by the initial revelations, especially, by Robert McDonald.[7] However, the evidences of "plagiarism" seem to generate too much bad blood; so, many critics settle for "adaptation", "borrowing" and other less emotive quatifications for Ouloguem's intellectual adventurism. Professor Sellin, Ouloguem's most energetic prosecutor on that score, also seems to agree to shelving "plagiarism" in reference to Bound to Violence. But he has merely shifted the emphasis; he is no less adamant in his claim that "Ouloguem has committed a European faux pas",[8] and that "there may be dozens, even hundreds, of sources more or less faithfully plundered by Culoguem in his prize-winning opus."[9]

In furtherance of his argument, Sellin insists that (because of the"borrowings", especially from non-African sources) Bound to Violence is not the authentic product of Ouloguem's imagination, let alone its "Africanness". While Sellin thus focuses attention on the novel's "contents" (text), it may well be argued that literature is not all text. For, by itself, text (borrowed or not) is only a mere empirical entity capable of minimal independent life apart from an organizing imagination to animate it and provide an appropriate creative context for it. And, as Edward Casey rightly points out: "Beyond its explicit phonemic and graphemic texture, and beyond even its morphemic stratum, the literary work is also composed of an imaginative dimension which is also its world."[10] Arguing along similar lines, Professor D.I.Nwoga insists that creative originality is "a function of manner [and form] rather than of matter."[11]

It will seem, therefore, that the stamp of authenticity lies in the "borrower's" ability to infuse the "borrowed" material with new imaginative existence, independent of the original source. Recognition of this fact has been largely responsible for redeeming Camara Laye's creative achievement in his The Radiance of the King, despite its resemblance to Kafka's The Castle[12] and, latterly, Ngugi's originality in his A Grain of Wheat; even though critics have been sometimes tempted to over-dramatize its indebtedness to Conrad's Under Western Eyes.[13] Ironically, the passages that Ouloguem has chosen to take from Graham Greene's novel do not seem in any way to enrich or, for that matter, exert any visible impact on the total effect of his creative vision in Bound to Violence.

However, while Euro-American criticism of the Prix Renaudot winning novel straddles the terrain of unreserved acclamation and disappointed disparagement, African critics have mainly regarded it with wounded pride. In the mild words of Professor Emmanual Obiechina:

> ...So much ignorant, mischievous and fulsome praise has been heaped on it, and so much anti-African propaganda made out of it on both sides of the Atlantic, that the reaction of African readers has been to treat it with suspicion and veiled hostility. 14

Another African critic, Mbelolo ya Mpiku, is less charitable towards the author of the "gloomy, contemptuous book",[15] as he denies the truthfulness or relevance of Ouloguem's vision to African reality. The sense of incredulity and disgust which often characterizes the 'African point of view' is made articulate when he concludes that:

> ...no African critic who loves his people and is proud of them can agree with Ouloguem's view that the Black man's predicament today is the result of an ontological flaw, an innate collective proclivity to slavery and spoilation, or an inveterate inability to work out adequate solutions for his own problems. 16

From the foregoing it becomes obvious that the vicissitude of critical fortunes that have dogged Bound to Violence has been largely conditioned by different kinds of ethnocentric, cultural polemics to which the novel has been little more than a sacrificial offering. Therefore, any meaningful criticism of Ouloguem's book must need to contend with, reassess and seek to penetrate not only the ideological blankets that shroud it, but, especially, its manner of using words and symbols to order experience as well as its conflated narrative perspectives.

Bound to Violence is the saga of the reign of terror which spans the life of a fictional medieval empire - Nakem - in the heart of Africa and what remains of it in the modern (equally fictitious) republic of Nakem-Ziuko. The empire is ruled by a usurping Afro-Semitic Saif dynasty which, having successfully mystified a hero-seeking populace (by its imputed mythical descent from King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba), maintains itself in power for seven and a half centuries by political-religious chicanery and naked violence.

The story focuses mainly on the twentiet century reign of one of the most 'successful' and revered Saifs, Saif ben Isaac al-Heit. Heir to seven centuries of feudal despotism, he re-enacts its sadism and perfects the art of diplomatic subterfuge and clandestine elimination of the opposition. By playing various groups against one another, enlisting the services of henchmen and sorcerers, the Saif holds his bastardized "niggertrash" subjects in a perpetual state of fear and servitude. The christian ministers and colonial administrators with their slave-trader precursors, are successively murdered, blackmailed into exile and repatriation or, like the anthropologist, Shrobenius, deluded, compromised and forced into silence by the wily Saif. So horrendous does his power become that the intrigues of the French colonial incursion are absorbed with minimal effort, manipulated and turned to the Saif's advantage.

The plight of the herded and terrorized serfs over whom the Saif presides is revealed through the intimately explored ghastly fate of the slave-family of Kassoumi and Tambira. This family personalizes the horror of sex and violence to which the lower-caste, "niggertrash" majority of Nakemians are subjected. Kassoumi's wife is first raped by the Saif, humiliated by the lecherous sorcerer, Dougouli whose help Tambira seeks on behalf of her children, and then eventually driven to suicide (by drowning in a lavatory) as a result of sexual violation by the enemies of her husband. Kassoumi is himself eventually sent to a labour camp while his remaining family disintegrates. The pervasive atmosphere of despair in the novel remains unabated as the eldest of the Kassoumi quadruplets, Raymond-Spartacus (the promise of whose education raises some hope of relief from the nightmarish experience), emerges as no more than a caricatured antithesis of the Saif. His election as the Nakemian Deputy to the French Assembly having been prearranged by the Saif, Raymond-Spartacus's revolutionary zeal (upon his homecoming) is reduced to isolated intellectual protest:

> Kassoumi the shrewd calculator had miscalculated:
> armed with his degrees and the support of France,
> he had expected to become his old master's master,
> when in reality the slave owed his election
> exclusively to the torch of Saif, more radiant than
> ever after a momentary lapse. (p.167)

Paradoxically, however (as we shall endeavour to show in due course) it is this victim-family (while it lasts) that constitute the peaceful oasis of genuine familial - indeed, human - relationships in the surrounding desert of cleavage and violence.

We could not hope adequately to account for either the aesthetic or dialectic of Bound to Violence until the mechanics of Ouloguem's vehicle of communication have been properly apprehended. The first challenge in this respect (deceptively simple as it appears) is establishing the relationship of the omniscient narrator to the materials of the "griots",

"elders" and "chroniclers" transmitted through him. In other words, we must be able to keep track of the manoeuvres and thrust of the authorial point of view through the labyrinthine narrative perspectives on the "history" of Nakem empire. Failure to make the necessary critical discriminations in this regard has all too often led to misvaluations of Ouloguem's 'vision of Africa' and the authenticity of his art.[17] This is what S.H.Olsen means when he warns that:

> To understand what the subject and the tone of...[a] passage [or, indeed, the various units that constitute a novel] tell us within...[a] work as a whole, one must know to whom it should be attributed, and with what passages it is in contrast or parallel. Failure to stress that a passage presents the thoughts or speech of a character rather than those of a narrator, for example, may lead to a failure to appreciate that its subject and tone express only a limited vision, which is not endorsed by the work as a whole. 18 (original italics)

To begin with, even Ouloguem's bitterest critics acknowledge the inspired verve of his exploitation and rendition of the verbal artistry of the African epic tradition. The hall-marks of the traditional epic performance - euphonism, wistfulness, histrionics, hyperbole, and more - are everywhere brought to good effect by Ouloguem's synthesizing imagination in Bound to Violence. The novel opens thus:

> Our eyes drink the brightness of the sun and, overcome, marvel at their tears. Mashallah! [as God wills it] wa bismillah [and in His name]...To recount the bloody adventure of the niggertrash - shame to the worthless paupers! - there would be no need to go back beyond the present century; but the true history of the Blacks begins much earlier, with the Saifs, in the year 1202 of our era, in the African Empire of Naken south of Fezzan, long after the conquests of Okba ben Nafi al-Fitri. (p.3)

Then:

> The Lord-holy is His name! - showed us the mercy of bringing forth, at the beginning of the black Nakem Empire, one illustrious man, our ancestor the black Jew Abraham al-Heit,...
>
> The Most-High did this in His infinite mercy - prayer and peace upon it! - in order to bless the tradition of the Saif dynasty, rooted in the greatness of one man, the most pious and devout Isaac al-Heit, who freed a slave each day...

> And now behold: The brave and daring Isaac al-Heit knew hunger, thirst, fever, the tumult of battle and the sight of the dying. A hundred times he was given up for dead. Each time, thanks to the favor [sic] of the most-just and compassionate Master of the Worlds, he escaped, for his death would have been intolerable to God and to the righteous: wassalam! [and peace]
>
> And behold further: Amidst the mounds of corpses left by the passage of Saif Moshe Gabbai of Honain (God's curse upon him!) the noble ardor [sic] of Isaac al-Heit (God refresh his couch) awoke to new life. He drew his sword: the sun and the moon shone on its blade and in it the earth was reflected as in a mirror. (pp.6-7; original italics)

But the condensation of seven centuries of Nakem "history" into barely twenty pages in the first chapter of Bound to Violence makes so compulsive a reading that it is easy for a critic to fail to take adequate notice of the deliberate disjunction of empathy in the multiple perspectives that the omniscient narrator represents. And all too often critics tend to confuse the dominant, smooth-sailing omniscient narrative voice with those other voices it mimics. However, with greater attentiveness, we could distinguish the omniscient narrative consciousness by its intermittent punctuation of the exuberant litany of the griots and chroniclers with casual but subversively ironic comments, irreverent prayers and imprecations. And, while the epic modes of narrative train a diachronic focus on Nakem on the one hand, the ordering (omniscient) consciousness adopts a synchronic and analytical posture on the other. The diminishing intensity of the oral narrative style or flavour in the course of the entire novel, therefore, underscores stages of the disengagement of the authorial perspective from those of the griots and chroniclers as well as it lays the trail for Ouloguem's creative attitude towards the nature of historical consciousness and fairy-tale mentality.

Quite a substantial proposition of the reviews and criticism of Bound to Violence also accepts its historical character as a fait accompli. But while casual references are made to Ouloguem's "distorted" and "unorthodox" use of African history, only minimal efforts have been spared to understand or explain the peculiar "historicalness" of his deceptive emphasis upon "the true history of the Blacks". (p.3.) Professor O.R. Dathorne describes the novel as "...a tale intertwined with legend and history, interlaced with truth and fiction; it is difficult to tell where one ends and the other begins."[19] It is this quality of exploiting (consciously or not) the twilight region between myth and history which often bemuses many a critical attempt to come to terms with Ouloguem's imagination. Hence Ouloguem has been the victim of spates of largely misleading conclusions about his political intent and about the aesthetic potential of Bound to Violence. For example, an intolerably misinformed serialized essay by Ntongela Masilela (who, one is pleased to learn, is only marginally acquainted with literary scholarship) seeks with procrustean vengeance to locate the novel in "the tradition of great European [!] historical novels..."[20] On the other hand, Professor Sellin, arguing from a diametrically opposed position to Ntongela's, insists that "the basic content and method of composition [of Bound to Violence] are not spontaneously African...[21] He will certainly not accept it into the honoured ranks of "great" or genuine novels - European or African - although some other European and American reviewers see Ouloguem's book as a "great", if not the African novel.

This state of affairs calls for a really sober reappraisal of the much misunderstood novel. Bound to Violence is not an historical novel in the sense in which, for example, Ngugi's novels or Achebe's rural novels may be understood. It may, like these, create an awareness of temporal and spatial dimensions, and recognizable allusions to socio-historical experiences, but Ouloguem's concern could be considered 'historical' only

in the special sense that it presents an anti-myth countenance. And if (as indeed there is ample evidence to believe) Bound to Violence is a reaction against mummified totemism and the myths of the African 'Golden Age' - "the glorious era of the first States with their wise philosopher-King, whose history has called not only archaeology, history, and numismatics but also the natural sciences and ethnology to their highest tasks" (p.8) - it would be expected that Ouloguem has a historical rather than a mythic interest in the African past. The opening head-on rush into an account of seven and a half centuries of the legend of the Saifs and Nakem empire does, for sure, create an illusion of historicity. But the illusion is continually subverted by the narrator who, like an eaves-dropping cynic, interpolates the gratuituous epic tendency with corrosive witticism and uncannily reductive epithets:

> ...In anticipation of the great and not too distant
> day when a world would dawn in which a serf would be
> the equal of a king, the niggertrash - dogs that bite,
> leash them tight! - accepted whatever came their way.
> Forgive us, O Lord. Ambe, Koubo oumo agoum.(p.22; original italics)

Throughout the first two chapters, the manipulative hand of the author is thus pungently felt. It will therefore be a critical error to suppose, either that Ouloguem approaches his material with a traditional historian's frame of mind or that he seeks to reconstruct African history.

In fact no one could be left in any doubt - once the manoeuvre of the censoring perspective of the narrator (which also embraces the Saif's personal comportment) has been understood - that Ouloguem regards the materials which make up the first two chapters of his novel as, mainly, myths manufactured in nocturnal solemnity. The narrator cares little whether these stories spun, "/w/hen the Immortal One makes the sun - diamond of the house of His power - set ..." (p.6), are truth or invention. His concern lies with their mythic force not only to ensure the apotheosis of Saif ben Isaac al-Heit,

but also to inspire awe and reverence (among his subjects) for his dynasty. And this atmosphere of uncritical mythomania provides an appropriate context for Ouloguem's deliberate devaluation of the earliest African socio-cultural and intellectual movements (recognizably, Senghorian "Negritude" and the "African Personality"), referred to as "Black romanticism" and "dreamers of African unity". Accordingly, they are associated with the "Africanist school harnessed to the vapors [sic] of magico-religious cosmological, and mythical symbolism..." (p.95), inspired and fostered by the mercenary intellectualism of the German anthropologist, Shrobenius - presumably because of their well advertized over-valuation of Africa's cultural heritage.

When the operative imaginative structure in the two halves of Bound to Violence ("The Legend of the Saifs" with "Ecstasy and Agony" on the one hand, and "The Night of the Giants" with "Dawn" on the other) are then contrasted, the whole book is easily perceivable in terms of Munz's thesis: that the "distension of true myth yields a significant history,..."[22] (my emphasis). If, as we have suggested, the first two chapters are no more than a form of mythologizing, they provide the basic raw material (as myths) which Ouloguem distends in order to construct his own vision of racial history which we perceive preeminently in the third and fourth chapters. Thus the portrayal of the twentieth century chapters (third and fourth) is achieved by the intrusion (process of the "distension") of recognizable factual elements - the Africa-Arabia-Europe slave traffic, colonialism, and ethnological misrepresentation in (F) "Shrobeniusology" etc - into the mythogenesis of the preceding chapters. And as Munz further argues, the distension of myth into history occurs through the:

> ...endeavour to locate single parts of the myth in space and time...Thus there takes place a gradual process whereby more and more factual elements in the myth are clearly identified. The myth is gradually broken up into a large number of parts and each part is assigned its proper place in time and space. 23

Thus by a pointedly Euhemeristic method, Ouloguem progressively strips the Saif of his mythical insulation and brings him (and so, the cult of black mystique) into the full view of history - addressing his creative energy to that malevolent spectre of the unsung sage of bestiality and violence which has for too long been covered-up by the vibrant cult of Negro worship. For, "...human conflicts have consequences that are at first scarcely discernible; in the perspective of history we see them clearly." (p.123)

Instead of the magnificence and splendour of the Saif dynasty which legends seek to perpetuate, Bound to Violence focuses attention on the verminous era of Saif ben Isaac al-Heit - the contemporaneous heir to that multi-century age of so-called greatness. The thrust of the organizing consciousness can be measured, particularly by its deliberate predilection towards the ironic mode in interpreting the events of the history of Nakem and the reputation of the Saif. To recount the splendour of the empire would be empty folklore:

> What is more interesting, when the elders, notables, and griots, peering wide-eyed into the bitter deserts, speak of that Empire, is the desperate flight, before God's implacable 'blessing' of its population, baptized in torture, haunted...torn by internecine rivalries and warring with one another for the imperial power with a violence equalled only by the dread it called forth. (pp.3-4)

An effective rendition of the thoroughly critical temper evidenced in, especially, the third and fourth chapters therefore requires not only a readjustment of the narrative perspective - exhuming, isolating and enlarging successive incidents of the Saif's brutal excesses - but also the adoption of an appropriate narrative style. Thus the predominantly epical, over-drawn leisureliness in the preceding chapters (one and two) gives way to the mock-heroic. The narrative comes alive with devaluative innuendoes and the sharp sting of satire.

The "renaissance" of the empire, earlier associated with carnage, is now full-bloodedly personalized in Saif ben Isaac al-Heit as he is shown on a murderous mission to the colonial governor, Chevalier's residence:

> There was dignity and strength in Saif's long, slow strides. Smiling, he caressed the cutlass under his dashiki and, soothed by a light breeze from the plains, sponged his square forehead beneath his greying short-cropped hair - the head of a warrior far more than a religious leader. A few steps from the threshold, he removed his head covering with a somewhat theatrical gesture, revealing an aristocratic, dissolute, and handsome face and the bald crown of his head - a sign of weariness or of early debauchery. His thick lips, his aquiline nose, indeed his every feature smacked unmistakeably of vice. (p.58)

The satiric and reductionist intent of this passage becomes even more poignant when contrasted to the one immediately preceding it:

> A little cloud of implacable dust rose from beneath his feet and swirled like smoke around his wide gown, while somewhere in the distance a missionary could be heard at prayer: 'Come to Jesus. Come to the Lord.(ibid)

As the legend of the Saif is swamped by exotic anecdotes and annotated catalogues of slave raids, murder, debauchery and sexual orgies, iconographical mythicism is jettisoned in favour of a mundane, contradistinctiv relationship between an inert serf multitude (flotsam of history) and their manipulators - the Saifs, notables and colonialists - locked in a cauldron of violence:

> For two more centuries the heart of Nakem bore such humiliations and ignominies with patience; the Crown forced men to swallow life as a boa swallows a stinking antelope, and rolled from one inglorious dynasty and sibyline genealogy to another, falling lower with each new act of vileness...(p.5)

In the prevalent macabre drama of violence and suffering, resigned apathy becomes the refuge of the down-trodden against sudden death. Not even the most loyal of Saif ben Isaac al-Heit's henchmen escape the meticulous calculation of his Machiavellian ambition.

Through the drugged somnambulism and feigned madness of the sorcerer, Bouremi and the spy, Sankolo (erstwhile agents of the Saif, but now his victims), a harrowing catalogue of the evils of "many centuries of galloping inhumanity" (p.82) is revealed with stunning clarity. In their desperate ravings, they tell the inside-stories of how the Saif maintains a clandestine traffic of slave labour and the "accidental" deaths which he ordains for his adversaries. But through their own individual acts of violence, we see no less horrible examples of wanton bestiality. Bouremi has maliciously aided the Saif's treachery by training asps to kill on his behalf, and he murders his own wife; Sankolo slaughters his own fiance for no more apparent reason than that she discovers him masturbating. From the lengthy passages describing the fortunes of both men, we also perceive the uncannily complementary relationships into which the Saif has pushed drug, sex and religion as instruments of his power. Religion (Islam or Christianity) becomes a mystique - softener of the soul, intellectual questioning or resistance against the arbitrary definition of social relationships that places one man above (and so, superior to) another. The local drug "dabali", deadens the minds of the pauperized subjects, making them amenable to forced labour and slavery; while sex is made cheaply available to titillate their bodies, providing an illusion of well-being. But that is just one level of the novel's dialectic of violence. Physical violence - love relationship, as expressed in sexual intercourse, is another.

We encounter the crudest examples of sex and violence when Chevalier sets his dogs on Awa; when the sorcerer and Saif's agents rape Tambira (leading to her death); or, as Sankolo murders his fiance, Awa. On the other hand, the love relationship between Kassoumi and Tambira (earlier on) contrasts these other sexual relationships that end in brutal murders.

But the contrast is merely suggested rather than developed. For, 'hard-case' iconoclast that he is, Ouloguem - by deft descriptive irony - insists upon our seeing the logical connection between love-making and violence when we least expect it. He creates an environment and prelude to Kassoumi and Tambira's sexual intercourse in the following words:

> Just above the banana tree, flitting over the dense screen of tall grass, a bird burst into song...An infinite yearning for happiness, a sudden tenderness came over her - revelations of unexpected poetry;...

But:

> Suddenly he kissed her lips. Furiously she recoiled....He toppled her over...He flung himself on her,...he was scratched, battered, harrassed by the leather of her heaving breasts... Then, maddened, she caressed him, clinging to his loins and returning his kiss;...she felt her resistance fall away as though crushed by too heavy a weight....The woman carried the man as the sea carries a ship, with a light rocking motion, which rises and falls, barely suggesting the violence below.... The man groaned, he allowed his weapon to go faster, deeper, stronger between the woman's thighs. The venom spurted; and suddenly they felt suffocated, on the point of explosion or death - an instant of intolerable joy, chaste and wanton - terrifying. (pp.42-43; my emphases)

Thus, the ecstasy of love-making inexorably merges with (or degenerates into) another kind of unsuspected violence. Rather than indulge our all too human complacency, Ouloguem deliberately slides the event into that pattern of horror which is the reality of the world of Bound to Violence. And, Saif, the "moving" power of that world, is the first person to apprehend and to harness the various possibilities that sex and drug offer towards his own invincibility. Appropriately, he finds a phallic-drug symbol for his power:

> This union of eroticism and violence is found in the object of the poisonous vipers that become for Saif the ideal means to murder his enemies without detection. The viper, encased in its bampoo sheath and realeased to inject its venom into the victim, is at once an object laden with sexual symbolism and an object of furtive death-dealing. Moreover, in preparing the viper, one drugs it with dabali, which is used along with sex to control the morts-vivant. But here dabali is used to prepare a much more potent drug - the snake's venom...24

But again, beside the isolated individual acts of wanton violence, Saif's politically motivated crimes might seem'civilized', if selfish and guileful in the apprehension of power, liberation and freedom. As Bishop Henry summarizes it, as far as the Saif is concerned:

> 'The crux of the matter is that violence, vibrant in its unconditional submission to the will to power, becomes a prophetic illumination, a manner of questioning and answering, a dialogue, a tension, an oscillation, which from murder to murder makes the possibilities respond to each other, complete or contradict each other. ...The clandestine plotter was a god, hunted and free;...'(pp. 173-74)

The question that violence raises is one of purpose and morality, the latter part of which does not bother the Machiavellian temperament of the Saif. But Bound to Violence is structured (as we shall endeavour to explain presently) to restate the question further in terms of an African socio-cultural contingency.

Meanwhile (as we have hinted) the only concession of Ouloguem to our sense of humanity in the grotesquerie which he puts up for the benefit (or edification) of the African conscience, lies in his portrayal of that thoroughly authentic relationship that exists briefly in the Kassoumi family. The love and sexual relationship of Klassoumi and Tambira, for example, is founded upon genuine mutual affection. The serene environment of their love-nest (during courtship) immerses them in the rhythm of nature and contrasts sharply with the hot-bed of organized

mass-rape and incest that the Saifs promote. The couple are devoted to each other and their family. Tambira sacrifices herself for the sake of her children's future. And when she dies by drowning in a lavatory (having been raped), Kassoumi:

> ...pulled out the oozing body of his beloved, and washed it tenderly. Now and then, while washing it, he sucked the nose and spat out a worm. He made no complaint; resigned, without even the strength to weep, he picked up the body with its dangling arms, followed by the domestics in procession, went down to his banana tree by the Yame, where one hot afternoon he had seen her for the first time. There he buried her. (p.130)

But the familial affection of the Kassoumis and the cruel fate that overtakes them are, above all, an indictment of the sanguinary and ruseful raison d'etre of feudal despotism.

The abortive future ordained for Raymond-Spartacus - the eldest of the Kassoumi children - further underlines the depth of despair in Bound to Violence. His story fleshes out Ouloguem's perception of the essential link of the present and the future with Nakem's past:

> Kassoumi thought sadly of the legend of the Saifs, a legend in which the future seems to seek itself in the night of time - prehistory in a tail coat: there stands the African. (p.167)

It is also important in its reminiscence of the crisis of identity which plagued the early generation of African intellectuals whom an accident of history saddled with the problematic of relating their traditional heritage with their newly acquired European outlook. Symbolically baptized Spartacus, Kassoumi's career promises analogy with the pre-Christian leader of slave revolt in Italy. But the ironic abortion of that promise (symbolized in the assumption of an alien name) also prefigures the crisis of identity that the would-be hero suffers as an African seeking self-actualization in French culture:

> The white man had crept into him and this white presence determined even the moves that he, a child of violence, would make against it. Despising Africa, he took giant strides to diminish the gulf that separated him from the splendors [sic] of white civilization. But a simultaneous grasp of twenty centuries of history, or of their residue, was still beyond his reach: where he should have discovered - may the Evil One be banished! - he accepted. (p.137)

But his acceptance is also self-cancelling; for he is constantly haunted by his heritage as "the son of slave, the cornered alienated nigger..." (p.155) - an awareness which in turn generates a strong desire for rebirth, a conscious engagement "in being reborn well-born" (p.155) in order to expel the sense of guilt that destroys the will to action.

He cannot, however, be truly reborn until he has descended into the depths of the exorcizing ritual of despair and self-disgust acted out in the frustration of his educational ambition by poverty; the accidental incest with his sister culminating in the homosexual affair with the Frenchman, Gilberte, and finally, his humiliation as a combatant on the French side in the second world war. Curiously enough, Raymond-Spartacus does not conceive of or aspire to achieve self-discovery in terms of vertebrate intellectual efforts, but through a visceral involvement in homosexuality. But again, "his search was not so much for ecstacy as for the profound meaning of his own destruction, the stain on his face suddenly splattered by his name: Spartacus!" (p.156) Hence, his implied realization that he could be nothing else but a buggered black man who must come to terms with his own racial heritage and work towards the redemption of past vagaries, accepting that (for the sake of posterity): "...in spite of Saif his whole existence would be a protest...[;] for him and his Africa it was in a sense a duty to be revolutionary." (pp.167-68)

Around the fate of Raymond-Spartacus Kassoumi, therefore, Ouloguem implies that the existence of Saifs must be recognized as part of the historic burden of Africa. And it is in this context that we might begin to perceive Ouloguem's restatement of the question of violence in terms of intellectual and psychological assault on the complacent conscience of the European apologists and the African abettors of noble savagism. To this consciousness we shall therefore add the lone, unsung sense of genuinely patriotic defiance of the only maker-artist, Jean Barou the blacksmith, in the grotesque landscape of Bound to Violence. Blackmailed and threatened into murdering one of the Saif's adversaries, he confronts his assailants thus:

> 'Suppose I did what you're asking. Suppose I knocked off that slave trader before I kick in. Maybe I'd be saving the country. Then you could tell the white men that we niggers are civilized, that the slave trade is a thing of the past. A myth. But to kill. And to love. And to kill again. And to take rest. And start all over again. Funny way of loving your country...' (p.69)

Certainly, many African critics find Ouloguem's "pessimistic" vision - especially, his blatant conclusion that Saifs are not only part of Africa's legacy from the past, but are also "forever reborn to history beneath the hot ashes of more than thirty African republics" (p.182) - unpalatable. He is no less castigated for his apparent "diffidence" on, and "implied absolution" of, the French colonialism's contribution to the Nakemian violence. Nor is he spared for giving the privilege of "unveiling" the Saif to the French Bishop Henry. Perhaps these are voices of justifiable disquiet. Perhaps too they are manifestation of purely emotional reactions to a merely deceptive edifice. For it is not as if Ouloguem has (by the cast and countenance of his novel) committed an unmentionable crime. If the French colonial encroachment (and so, violence) was made to look secondary or a substructural movement in Bound to Violence, the reason may well be sought in the Afro-centric (as opposed to Euro-centric) focus

of Ouloguem's creative concern. And if the Bishop Henry was made to remove the Saif's mask, it could not be by the virtue of his being French or white or even Christian. Any temptation to look in that direction is cancelled by the Saif's successful elimination of his predecessors. The Bishop's best qualification would seem to reside in his essential, healing humanity, having first of all humbled himself before fellow humans:

> Indefatigably, tearing himself away from loudly lamenting families, Henry helped the people, begging his sustenance on the roads and trails of Nakem...he collected medicines, bandages, the old clothes of colonials or tirailleurs, loaded them on a donkey and brought them to the hamlets that had suffered most from the war. (p.121; original italics)

And that goes without saying that these are all acts of the priest's atonement for his earlier sin of silence which, perhaps, cost Barou, the blacksmith and Sankolo their lives: "One night at the village council in Toula, humility bade him say that he had let Sankolo die and had killed Barou, who had come to him to confess;..." (p.121) His courage lies in breaking the wall of silence and confronting Saif with his crimes. But the resolution of the challenge (through the metaphor of Chess) is as ambiguous and enigmatic as what makes the Saif 'tick'; or the reason behind the Bishop's silence for the previous forty years. Indeed, sometimes during the chess game, it is almost impossible to tell one adversary apart from the other. However, the battle of wills yields an acknowledgement of the prior claims of humanity over the evils of inordinate ambition to power - and as such, results in a form of rehabilitation for both 'players':

> 'Nakem was born generations ago, and only in the last fifteen minutes have men learned to discuss the state of its health.' (pp.180-81)

The basic assumption and historical (if any) praxis of Ouloguem may be contestable; and his creative vision pre-eminently refractive or reductive (really, iconoclastic), but a rejection or acceptance of

Bound to Violence as a commanding literary achievement is quite another matter. Before and since Ouloguem, African writers have produced works which are, in their own ways, no less 'pessimistic'. When, for example, a Wole Soyinka indicts the narcissist fascination with the glittering image of the cultural self and a decidedly lack of authentic historical perspectives in his A Dance of the Forests; and an Ayi Kwei Armah focuses upon the sour fruit of independence, betrayal and despair in his The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born, Ouloguem's preoccupation in Bound to Violence could then be seen to fall into a clear relief. For, if Bound to Violence offends it is because, as one of Soyinka's earliest protagonists has proverbially put it: "The eye that looks downwards will certainly see the nose."[25] And if Ouloguem has refused to celebrate or mention the virtues of Africa destroyed in the process of the ascendancy of violence and barbarism, in this too, it might be said that it is the prospective rather than retrospective fixation that becomes of primary artistic concern. Thus, Ouloguem's novel is not only an iconoclastic but also exorcist art - comparable in a sense to Armah's Two Thousand Seasons. Its recognition that the existence of the Saifs and betrayers of the authentic African genius is a part of the historic burden of Africa, which must be kept in perspective in the on-going dialectic of socio-cultural efforts to secure the total liberation of the continent. But unlike Armah's novel, Bound to Violence focuses on (and indeed, wallows in) cleavage, disintegration and dispersal, and so arrives at a pessimism which, by itself, is ultimately an incomplete vision.

But we might perceive tht total effect of Ouloguem's creative energy as a process of distending a myth into a signficant "history" - which could also be read as a truer myth. For, since "...history has mysteries compounded of silence, cowardice, and slow-moving tragedy, followed by appwasement and sudden about-faces...", (p.30) there is no greater tribute

to authentic history than the creative bursting of that wall of mysteries and silence. Thus are we drawn into a creative tour de force of pseudo-historicism adorned with the magnificence of a fairy-tale by which Ouloguem makes his case against an accepted history of Africa. The unique claim of his artistic consciousness and achievement is, perhaps, nowhere else more demonstrable.

IV,(ii)

NOTES

1. First published under the title Le Devoir de Violence (Editions du Seuil, Paris, 1968); translated by Ralph Mannheim (Heinemann. London. 1971). All references to the English edition.

2. "The Unknown Voice of Yambo Ouloguem", Yale French Studies, 53. (1976) p.138.

3. Review in French Review, XLIII, 1 (Oct.1969) p.164; "Ouloguem's Blueprint for La Devoir de Violence, Research in African Literatures, 2, 2 (1971) pp.117-20; Letter to the Editor, Research in African Literature, IV (1973) pp.129-30; and note 2 above.

4. "Bound to Violence: A case of Plagiarism", Transition, 41, 8 (iv), (1972) pp.64-68. Some editions of Bound to Violence now expunge the passages (pp.54-56) which were discovered to have been taken verbatim from Graham Greene's It's a Battlefield (London,1934).

5. Sellin, "The Unknown Voice of Yambo Ouloguem", Yale French Studies, 53 (1976) pp.137-62.

6. ibid., p.138.

7. McDonald, op.cit.

8. Sellin, op.cit., p.162

9. ibid., p.156.

10. "Imagination and Repetition in Literature: A Reassessment", Yale French Studies, 52 (1976) p.256.

11. "Plagiarism and Authentic Creativity in West Africa", B.Lindfors (ed.) Critical Perspectives on Nigerian Literatures (Washington D.C., 1976) p.165.

12. In an earlier article, "From a Common Back Cloth" in The American Scholar, 32, 3 (1963), Wole Soyinka derides what he considered to be Laye's poor and slavish imitation thus: "But most intelligent readers like their Kafka straight, not geographically transposed. Even the character structure of Kafka's Castle [sic] has been most blatantly retained...It is merely naive to transpose the Castle to the hut." (pp.387-88) He has however changed that opinion since, in his Myth, Literature and the African World (1976), he becomes persuaded that: "The Radiance of the King remains our earliest imaginative effort towards a modern literary aesthetic that is unquestionably African..." (p.126)

13. See for example: Ebele [Ben] Obumselu, "A Grain of Wheat: Ngugi's Debt to Conrad", The Benin Review, 1 (Jun.1974) pp.80-91; Professor G.Moore also shares the view that "the resemblances [between Under Western Eyes and A Grain of Wheat] are too strong to be purely coincidental": Twelve African Writers (London, 1980) p.279.

14. Review in Okike, 1, 3 (1972) p.53.

15. "From one Mystification to another: 'Negritude' and 'Negraille' in Le Devoir de Violence", Review of National Literatures, II, 2, (Fall, 1971) p.138.

16. ibid., p.145.

17. For example, quoting the following passage:
> "Cruel peoples whose speech is a kind of croaking - fierce killers, men of the jungle, living in a state of bestiality, mating with the first woman they find,... (p. [sic] 13-14)",

Mbelolo ya Mpiku comments thus:
> According to Ouloguem, this original primitiveness makes the Negraille incapable of reaching political consciousness, which might drive them to revolt or even revolution. As Ouloguem sees it, Black Africa's Negraille is characterized by a state of debasement which in a way is ontological. (op.cit., p.132; my emphases)

Thus, he undoubtedly finds the author's voice in the wrong place and accordingly draws the wrong conclusions about Ouloguem's view of the "essence of Africa".

18. The Structure of Literary Understanding (Cambridge, 1978) p.84.

19. African Literature in the Twentieth Century (London, 1976) p.305.

20. "Theory and History of Marxist Poetics in Yambo Ouloguem's Bound to Violence: A Monologue by Caliban on Prospero", Ufahamu, VII, 3 (1977) p.97.
See also the first part of this essay under the title, "Theoretical and Historical Forms in and of the Novel: Towards a Theory of Narrativity and Modality", Ufahamu, VII, 2 (1977) pp.97-117.

21. "The Unknown Voice of Yambo Ouloguem", Yale French Studies, 53 (1976) p.158.

22. Munz, op.cit., p.3.

23. ibid.

24. John D.Erickson, Nommo: African Fiction in French South of the Sahara (York, South Carolina, 1979) pp.240-41.

25. A Dance of the Forests (London, 1963) p.38.

IV,(iii) Two Thousand Seasons: The Apocalyptic Vision

In attempting to reach the core of Armah's Two Thousand Seasons[1] one is immediately caught in the task of having to cope with strong allusions to historical realism and voluble mythic thinking in one breath. In it Armah moves furthest from the conventional realistic setting and mode of characterization with which we have grown familiar in his earlier novels as well as the bulk of African fiction. His recourse to extensive mythology in this fourth novel is by no means, however, to suggest that he is abandoning the historic responsibility which has devolved on the African artist - responding truly with vision to the socio-polical moment of his society - as espoused at the Stockholm conference of African writers in 1967.[2] Rather, Two Thousand Seasons should be seen in the context of the same continuum of creative consciousness and social objective flowing from the preceding novels. For, as we suggested in the previous chapter, the underlying perspective in Fragments is trained on the search for community. The authentic spirit of community is aborted in that novel mainly because of excessive materialism and the absence of a genuine basis for interpersonal relationships. We particularly remarked the different ways in which the author undermines the individualistic option.

It is in Two Thousand Seasons therefore, that Armah seeks the blossoming of his views on the true meaning of community and the basis for the ideal individual-community relationship. And the ambition is carried several steps further into the dialectic of racial retrieval, drawn against a background of historical deracination which has pock-marked the African experience over many centuries. One cannot agree more with Wole Soyinka when he identifies qualities in Two Thousand Seasons consistent with his idea of a "literature of social vision", namely, a:

> creative concern which conceptualises or extends actuality beyond the purely narrative, making it reveal realities beyond the immediately attainable, a concern which upsets orthodox acceptances in an effort to free society of historical or other superstitions...3

Thus, the focal lense in Two Thousand Seasons extends beyond microcosmic representations (as in Fragments for example) to constitute the entire African continent and its 'received' history into one vast territory straddled by a piercing imaginative energy. In order to achieve this end, however, Armah has had to abandon realism as a technique of the portrayal of character, location or time, in favour of the mythic metaphor. In the new configuration, otherwise recognizable landscapes and peoples (the black and white races) assume symbolic or 'archetypal' forms. There is no room for existentialist individualism, or privilege, but only "connected" minds, perceiving, sharing experiences and moving towards a common destiny founded upon a vision which is both primordial and prognostic.

Two Thousand Seasons opens with a mixture of eulogy and lament to the authentic African cultural virtues lost in the course of two millennia of tapering vision and mindless ostentatious pursuit of destructive alien values. Inveighing against the abandonment of cultural essence and urging the present generation of Africans to resume the broken communication with the ancestral hearth and spiritual sustenance, the Cassandra-like narrator scours primordial memories for (as it were) the 'history' of histories of the African peoples. Thus, Africa (prior to the present fragmentation) is portrayed as a land of peace, harmony and plenitude; hospitable and generous to every kind of stranger wily enough to appear impoverished and pitiable. In the wake of Anoa's prophecy, the eponymous land is inundated with generations of Arab and European adventurists (labelled "predators" and

"destroyers" respectively but collectively referred to as "white") who abuse and exploit their host's near pathological generosity. "A ruinous openness we had, for those who came as beggars turned snakes after feeding." (p.3) laments the narrator. The "beggars" turn internal rifts among their hosts to damnable advantage. They found a power base (with the collaboration of factions of their feuding hosts) to deprive the Africans of their land and freedom and, above all, to swamp the spiritual foundation of their culture with alien religions or, "shrieking theologies". The steadfast but powerless groups of the host race are therefore forced into constant migrations in the course of which further rifts and fragmentation ensue owing to sheer strain, or ambition and lack of foresight of a few doubters.

However the main focus of the narrative turns upon a new generation of youths (many centuries later) whose representative consciousness, and unflinching "remembrance" of the valiant exploits of the earlier resistance to the desecration of ancestral value systems, flesh out the details of the racial epic. Having regained their freedom after previous successive sales into slavery (to Arab and Europeans) by their own king (Koranche, later captured and executed by them), the group of initiates resume the banner of the liberation of their land. Both as acolytes of the communal rites of youth-initiation and, later, proteges of the outcast patriarch, Isanusi, the protagonists have acquired mastery of various arts of survival and creative vocations as well as thorough knowledge of their racial history. And, inspired by the "utterances" of the Sibylline Anoa and Noliwe, the courage, wisdom and resilience of Isanusi, and the steadfastness of Idawa (the mother-figure), the group rededicate themselves to the vocation of finding "the way" again. This involves taking up arms against both slaves and the "ostentatious cripples" (kings and middlemen)

among themselves:

> It is our destiny not to flee the predators' thrust, not to seek hiding places from destroyers left triumphant; but to turn against the predators advancing, turn against the destroyers, and bending all our soul against their thrust, turning every stratagem of the destroyers against themselves, destroy them. That is our destiny: to end destruction - utterly; to begin the highest, the profoundest work of creation, the work that is inseparable from our way, inseparable from the way. (p.246)

Even when they discover that it is impracticable to bring a total end to the influx of the destroyers and predators (with the attendant entrenchment of alien evangelism and colonial exploits), much gain is recorded in the successive victories gained over the enemy forces and in the swelling number of strayed compatriots, salvaged and restored to the original essence of themselves. Collectively they survive the worst effects of the demise of an egalitarian heritage and the ascendancy of a society structured on bigotry, greed and privilege. And despite the open violence unleashed on them by the alliance of external and internal aggressors, the youths (ever conscious of the essential humaneness of their cause) refuse to be brutalized:

> We do not utter the praise of arms. The praise of arms is the praise of things, and what shall we call the soul crawling so low, soul so hollow it finds fulfilment in the praising of mere things? It is not things we praise in our utterance, not arms we praise but the living relationship itself of those united in the use of all things against the white sway of death, for creation's life. (p.320)

Perhaps the most remarkable feature of Two Thousand Seasons lies in the symbiosis Armah plies between technique (narrative style and characterization) and theme. Besides its distinctive flavour of African oral narrative traditions that Isidore Okpewho treats with great perceptiveness and expertise,[4] the ineluctable consciousness of the omniscient narrative (The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born, Why Are We So Blest?,

and, to some extent, The Healers), or a mixture of the omniscient and first-personal narrative (Fragments) is entirely dispensed with. Instead we have the collective, participatory "We" narrative. And rather than the familiar individual protagonist with a biography (and residential address, if you please), we encounter corporate heroes - bearing generic names - identifiable only by their common devotion to an ideal, "the way". Thus the technique is entirely apposite to the thematic focus - the attainment of community for the re-establishment of Africa's pre-colonial polity and conscience.

"We are life's people" (p.13) declares the narrator, "people of the way." In its codified but non-discursive form, the socialistic ethos of "the way" comes through, and it is unmistakeably an attempt to identify with the authentic genius of the African world before the coming of the slavers (Arab predators and European destroyers) from the desert and the sea. However, the questers' commitment to "the way" is so overwhelming that the emotional response it calls forth largely leaves one only a faint aperture from where to glimpse its real meaning. By this quality therefore, "the way" strikes one, and might be best understood, not in the sense of another nebulous philosophy but, as an active mode of living. It is not an ideology (it may turn out to be one) but it will appear that Armah's refusal to blow it up may be traceable to his own personal distrust of " -isms " to which his article, "African Socialism: Utopian or Scientific?" eloquently testifies.[5] The vocation of "the way" becomes gradually revealed through the practical lives of the protagonists and by the repeated insistence of the narrator that it stands fatally opposed to the life-negating principles upon which all forms of exploitation and oppression are founded.

> Our way is reciprocity. The way is wholeness.
> Our way knows no oppression. The way destroys
> oppression. Our way is hospitable to guests.

> The way repels destroyers. Our way produces before it consumes. The way produces far more than it consumes. Our way creates. The way destroys only destruction. (p.62)

The strength of the questers' ethical stance vis-a-vis the spiritual bankrupcy of the community of gullible elders from which they flee rests firmly in their own possession of unified vision: a historic consciousness which perceives the necessary connection between the present mindless ostentation, the earlier betrayal of "the way" and an iminent collapse of moral and ethical systems in the future unless "the way" was found again. Already bruised (physically and morally) by a hostile world, they seek regeneration in a symbolic recourse into the archetypal womb, waiting to be born again - in this instance, the "fifth" grove": "What we sought was darkness, the darkness of forests, darkness to let broken things grow whole again, darkness, origin of life." (p.137) It is not only a gesture of solidarity and life principles but also a bid to retain the purity of their vision:

> So in the forests we found a carefully created way of growth where, following our urge to reach the height of the fundi's art we came at length to a greater understanding of our soul - our gift along the way.
>
> Then began that initiation beyond initiations of which the fundis had spoken. We whose dedication had not yet been drawn to any of the particular arts, we were left to float to the knowledge of a craftsmanship of the soul, the vocation of those who used to be the soul guide of our people,... (pp.138-9)

Their life in the grove (the traditional community's sanctuary for initiation rites) manifests characteristics comparable to Arnold van Gennep's concept of "rites of passage"[6] in his book of that title. The concept emphasizes the transitory and preparatory roles of rituals in a graduated, hierarchical existence. But V.W.Turner expatiates on the idea of "liminality", (originally van Gennep's) with illustrations from the puberty rites among a central African tribe, the Ndembu.[7]

Turner's observations will seem particularly auspicious as a way of explaining the threshold existence of the neophyte personages that inhabit the world of Two Thousand Seasons. According to Turner, "liminality" is characterized by lowliness, absence of sexual polarity, egalitarianism and endurance in the face of exposure to humiliation - all of which Armah's protagonists espouse. Thus, their liminal existence would seem less and less fortuitous when we retain perspective on the myth-making propensity of the informing (authorial) sensibility in the novel. Rather, we might become more inclined to see a conscious artistic design intended to protect the group's vulnerability. The liminal status is exploited by Armah who lifts the initiation group out of the traditional milieu, transposing the essence of the rites on to a secular scale. The spiritual energy derivable from the traditional ritual (in its unpoluted form) is reinvigorated by a new imaginative power and transformed into the ingredient for a secular re-ordering of society. But in doing so, Armah does not strip the neophytes of the reverence temporarily granted to them in the traditional hierarchical society. It's preservation might therefore be deemed to be largely responsible for the fugitive protagonists' potency as agents of social change. Protected from the pestering moral blight of the parent community, they constitute the source and vanguard of a creative alternative to it.

An acephalous liberation movement thus emerges, held together by a common bond of transcendental love and harmony. It realises that unconnected individuals are mere biological freaks without any survival value. Their liberation struggle is immeasurably aided by a strong dedication to "connectedness":

> For in the absence of that necessary connectedness of the soul that will live, what is any slave body's freedom but the destroyers' license contemptuously given to the slave to dance the jiving dance of his own death agony? Against the death brought by whiteness only the greatest connecting force will prevail: the working together of minds connected, souls connected, travelling along that one way, our way, the way. Connected thought, connected action: that is the beginning of our journey back to our self, to living again the connected life, travelling again along our way, the way. (p.209)

It is this kind of bond, in the transitory phase towards a state of 'Being' that Turner calls "communitas". According to him,

> ...communitas has an existential quality; it involves the whole man in his relationship to other whole men... The notion that there is a generic bond between men, and its related sentiment of 'humankindness', are not epiphenomena of some kind of herd instinct but are products of 'men in their wholeness wholly attending.' 8

Communitas therefore offers an apt structural description of the vocation of the finders of "the way". The secret power of their survival lurks beneath and finds expression in the emphatic charm of the first personal-collective ("us", "we") and selfless, possessive pronouns: "'<u>There is no self to save apart from all of us</u>.'" (p.174; my emphasis) The egalitarian spirit that is thus amply generated and kept alive among them is a kind of surety against disintegration as well as it protects their vision from an ever present threat of despair.

But the evident rapport among the path-finders also underscores the ethical-ideological divide and conflict between "us" and the world 'out there'. This polarity is mainly expressed in terms of colour symbolism by which blackness becomes synonymous with the beauty, creative and regenerative vitality of "the way" (the authentic genius of Africa). On the other hand, whiteness becomes associated with the ugly, barren and destructive alien forces of imperialism (Arabs and Europeans). Thus, on

almost every page of Two Thousand Seasons, we encounter references to the fecundity of the black earth and values counterpointed to the parched whiteness of desert sand. This contrastive play of colour and symbolism is epitomized in the portrayals of the black girl, Idawa and the white wife of the prince, Bentum - renamed - Bradford George:

> Idawa had a beauty with no...disappointment in it. Seen from a distance her shape in motion told the looker here was co-ordination free, unforced. From the hair on her head to the last of her toes there was nothing wasted in her shaping. And her colour: that must have come uninterfered with from night's own blackness. (p.109)

> Now from the gate to the falling /of the sun; westward/ came...an apparition exactly like a ghost: a pale white woman in white clothes moving with a disjointed, severe, jerky walk, like a profoundly discontented walker....As she came in...everything aggravated the sense of aloneness, created a desolation so thorough that it would have been easy to imagine that this singular apparition had blighted all surrounding life into rigidity; that the white creature in fact existed only to perfect this general petrifaction before regaining some previous stony existence more proper to herself. (pp.186-7)

It is especially the alternating relish and venom (heightening the racial overtones) with which Armah renders "black" and "white" that many of his critics resent. With considerable justification too, it is often alleged that Two Thousand Seasons is especially a flawed work of art because it betrays a lack of artistic balance by its simplistic view of 'good' and 'evil' - making moral rectitude the exclusive preserve of one (the black) race.

However (with the benefit of hindsight) if we took another lingering look at Armah's earlier novels we could not miss the consistency of his particularly strong penchant for chromatic (among others) imagery - not just as decorative props but as indices to moral and spiritual states. To take a few examples, "the gleam" in The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born

is not only a concrete structure (a hotel) with an imposing white colour, it is also a socio-economic institution whose symbolism can be best arrived at through its epicurean morality amidst massive deprivation in society:

> Sometimes it seemed as if the huge building had been put there for a purpose, like that of attracting to itself all the massive anger of a people in pain. But then, if there were any angry ones at all these days, they were most certainly feeling the loneliness of mourners at a festival of crazy joy. Perhaps then the purpose of this white thing was to draw onto itself the love of a people hungry for just something such as this. The gleam, in moments of honesty, had a power to produce a disturbing ambiguity within. 9

In the same novel also, the colour of rust is used in association with excremental brownness to illustrate not only physical and material, but also moral and spiritual degeneration. Likewise, the moral indignation of the hero of Fragments is swamped by a maze of "shiny", brightly coloured material possessions upon which he turns his back. Besides the symbolism of the lone, bright yellow flower lost amidst an immense surrounding greenery, (illustrating Baako's relationship with his family and society) the narrator particularly takes great care to catalogue the predominance of "green" which becomes synonymous with sickness and corruption. For example, the psychiatric and maternity hospitals carry greenness like badges of an epidemic disease;[10] while the house of the "Principal Secretary" is suffused in green light of a "weird, sickly glow."[11]

Although a certain anti-Europeanism tends to supply a parallel tenor to the racial threnody that characterizes Armah's art, we cannot escape its philosophical relevance to the on-going debate on African aesthetics or its socio-political import for the efforts to reinstate in every sense the precolonial sovereignty of Africa. It would therefore appear that the critical stress often placed upon the "racialist" thrust of

Two Thousand Seasons is merely diversionary. For it might be said that for all their postures of objectivity, there is hardly one of the critics of Armah's "racialism" who has made any reference to that record of a most humane (if forboding) welcome extended to Aimeé (the white lady companion of the murdered African youth, Modin) in Why Are We So Blest?, by an African matriarch:

> You call yourself by a different name, but I see you. You are a European. The name you have taken for yourself is ours. It would say nothing to your ancestors...
>
> There would be no reason for me to talk to a European as to a human being, but Ochieng has taken you into his family; his family is our family - all of us here. His life has not been happy; he has known loneliness. Whoever helps to take him out of his suffering we shall treat as an honoured [sic] guest. Guest of Ochieng, your arrival is a good event. 12 (my emphasis)

Against this background, it might be said that until we really endeavour to seek and relate the total pattern of imagery (black and white being only part of a whole), metaphors and symbols to the central philoscphical hiatus between African and European world-views - the fundamental assumption and thesis of Two Thousand Seasons - it will remain impossible to adequately account for Armah's or the novel's aesthetic. It is in this context that we find Robert Frazer's comment most apposite:

> That Mr.Armah's point [in Two Thousand Seasons] is a racial one there can be no doubt. In the context of a naturalistic narrative, such divisiveness is evidently a decisive flaw, and hence must be criticized.... In an artistic enterprise where one expects a rich ambivalence or generosity, such wilful blinkering strikes one immediately as unacceptable. In Two Thousand Seasons, on the other hand, these objections do not apply, for the paradoxical reason that Armah carries his condemnation that little bit further, so that it no longer occupies the domain of realist art. 13

The venom of Two Thousand Seasons is aimed as much at the alien intruders as it is against the Africans' acquiescence and active collaboration in the spread of the socio-political and ethical blight that characterize colonialism and exploitation. The major African culprits are identified as the kings whose record of dastardly deeds against the racial conscience accounts for a substantial portion of the narrative. Armed with allegorical innuendoes and a powerful arsenal of demonic imagery, the narrator traverses the carpet of history smashing up all iconographical facade of kingly privilege and abuse of power:

> ...among us had risen a division between producers and the parasites. Chief among the parasites were the ostentatious cripples, men who for no other reason than the need to veil their own atrophy of spirit wanted to be raised higher than everybody else even if that raising was merely the pushing down of all of us. (p.92)

Unimpressed by even the celebrated feats of the medieval Savannah empire-builder kings, the narrator focuses on the damnable. There is a particular interest in the king, Koranche, the account of whose birth and rule reads so weird that the picture of him that emerges is one of a sub-human being. The fruit of an incestuous relationship between brother and sister, Koranche is born an idiot but excessively wily and mischievous. He is slow witted and fails to reach physical maturity until very late:

> Yet Koranche did have one formidable gift: a genius for obliterating the proofs of other people's superiority to him. He did not care to push himself to excellence in any craft....On one point alone he found it worthwhile to assert himself: that others should not go unmolested in the practice and the enjoyment of their skill. In finding means to destroy the efforts of people more skilful than himself he now and then displayed a truly uncanny talent. (p.106)

Armah's invective against the African institution of kingship (like white colonialism) must however be seen in the wider context of the logic and thrust of the argument against any privilege-supporting system, rather than

as a denial of the historical status, or the anthropological evidence, of the kingship institution as a part of the pre-colonial political structures. Therefore, the polemic against kingship and privilege could be best appreciated, as a metaphor and, the institution itself the personification of all the vices that undermine the racial march towards self-actualization.

There is a certain consensus among its critics that Two Thousand Seasons is, in a general sort of sense, a "myth". But, with (probably) the only exception of Isidore Okpewho, few have made any real effort to account for the kind of myth it is, or by what special process it becomes one at all. Okpewho has sought to explain (quite rightly, and as we have assumed all along in this discussion) that Two Thousand Seasons is certainly not an anthropological myth, because:

> Though the prospective vision respects the deep seated religious conscience and metaphysical urges of the race, it is not pronounced on the authority of any well-advertised pantheon. 14

However, in accounting for the mythic quality of the novel, Okpewho prefers the universalist theory of mythopeosis: that a myth is a fictional narrative, unlocated in time or space, which employs the medium of symbol and mimesis to transmute reality into fancy. He gives the following definition of myth:

> It is that quality of fancy which informs the symbolistic or configurative powers of the human mind at varying degress of intensity; its principal virtue is that it tends to resist all constraint to time and experience to the end that it satisfies the deepest urges of a people or of mankind. 15

All this we certainly must take into account, but there is also a need to endeavour a little more to determine the nearest possible approximate of the mythic process of Two Thousand Seasons. In the immediate and specific context of the novel therefore, our effort must proceed from that grey territory between histriography and historical legends that Armah deliberately counterpoints against each other.

Although the consciousness of history serves as a kind of mooring for its narrative, Two Thousand Seasons makes no pretension towards historical exactitude:

> We have not found that lying trick to our taste, the trick of making up sure knowledge of things possible to think of, things possible to wonder about but impossible to know in any such ultimate way. (p.4)

Nevertheless, the ontological status of history is of major concern in the novel. It is, indeed, an issue raised in its very first pages:

> We are not a people of yesterday. Do they ask how many single seasons we have flowed from our beginnings till now?...
> The air everywhere around is poisoned with truncated tales of our origins. That is also part of the wreckage of our people. What has been cast abroad is not a thousandths of our history, even if its quality were truth. (pp.1-2)

The assertion is founded upon an obvious but unstated assumption: that what is now commonly believed to be "African history" is fashioned after (and ministers to) the racial prejudices, economic and imperial ambitions, as well as the ideological and political expedience of justifying Euro-Berberian exploitation of Africa. There is an astringent concern with the distortions and misrepresentations which African history is deemed to have suffered over the centuries, focussing upon 'received' history - that is, recorded or produced by, or at the instance of Arab and European historiographical sources. The narrative consciousness is particularly incensed by the silent complicity of historical records about the truly horrific impact of slavery, the slave trade and colonialism on the African body and soul.

But Two Thousand Seasons also shows an awareness that the distortions of African history have equally been aided or abetted by the complacency of liberal African intellectualism - at which identity we are also left to make intelligent guesses.

> We who hear the call not to forget what is in our nature, have we not betrayed it in this blazing noon-day of the killers?...We too have drunk oblivion, and overflowing with it, have joined the exhilarated chase after death...
> We cannot continue so. For a refusal to change direction, for the abandonment of the way, for such perverse persistence there are no reasons, only hollow, unconvincing lies.(p.xii; original italics)

Hence, read along the allegorical thrust of the narrative, these words point in one direction - the myopic political expedience that gave rise to the nationalist "reconstruction"(s) of African history in the period preceding the attainment of political independence from the colonial powers, and shortly afterwards. There are especially strong allusions to such intellectual and ideological movements as Senghorian 'Negritude' and the "African Personality" as the guilty promoters of the legend traditions in modern African historiography. Indeed, such blind valorization of the African past (and signal lack of vision) which these movements tend to promote has previously been castigated in Soyinka's much publicised play, A Dance of the Forests (1963) and caricatured in Yambo Ouloguem's Bound to Violence (1968). Armah's criticism of African historiography and the distortions by the indigenous intellectual, therefore, is also their rejection. Thus, as History they are no good; and, as myths they are false and negative. The true history of Africa, he seems to be saying, lies elsewhere; but his own route to it is via a mythic projection aimed at uncovering the real meaning of the African historical experience.

If we accept Munz's proposition that history may be telescoped to yield significant myth, and that telescoping could be positive or negative,[16] we could not fail to see its relevance to an understanding of the mythopoeic canvas of Two Thousand Seasons. We shall not only gain further insight into Armah's assumption of certain negative aspects of the "nationalists" resort to cheap anti-colonial sentiments and atavistic nostalgia, but we might also appreciate better the relative positiveness

of his own way of looking at history. For, what Munz cryptically calls "telescoping" of "true history" into "significant myth", could be simply understood - in the context of Two Thousand Seasons - to be no more than imagination projected into, or functioning simultaneously as (so to speak) a 'leach-fork' and 'sieve', on the body of historiography. Thus, the historical narrative is worked loose (firstly by denying it spatiality and temporality), making it possible for the individual facts to be amended, exaggerated, devalued, refurbished or discarded - according to the creative preference and goal - so that only their abiding and universal qualities are retained and then fed onto another narrative loom to fashion a single tale. The resultant story is not thus faithful to the original facts as such, but it may lay claims to true-ness, albeit only in an archetypal sense.

Thus, when Armah tells his story from the perspective of partisans and calls it "remembrance" rather than history, we could not miss the selectivity of his approach. He not only situates the story in no specific time or place, but all the characters are depersonalized - heroes and their adversaries become merely representative of particular values. Against this background therefore, Bernth Lindfors's anxiety that the novel "assumes that entire races of people can be reduced to the level of primal forces"[17] can be absorbed without much stress - offering the reminder that Two Thousand Seasons, after all, is the product of a mythic imagination which, by its special character, feeds on symbolism. Its aim, we might add, is not so much the pursuit of Cartesian or literal truth as "to find our larger,...healing self..." (p.13; my emphasis) It aspires, however, towards creative potency as an instrument intended for tearing off the historic blinkers that man-in-Africa has been forced to wear through successive centuries of indoctrination, self-abnegation and, imposition of alien structures - a challenge which Yambo Ouloguem's Bound to Violence has also taken in its own idiosyncratic, if flamboyant, and ironic stride.

There are certain ways, however in which Armah's book recalls Ouloguem's. On the stylistic level the degree of derivation of both from the oral narrative form is self-evident. But while Ouloguem prefers the eulogistic heroic formula of the traditional bard, Armah drives his material towards a prophetic and apocalyptic goal. Excepting that Ouloguem (albeit in an indirect manner) also edits his oral narrative sources, Isidore Okpewho could well have been comparing and contrasting the styles of both Bound to Violence and Two Thousand Seasons when he writes thus of the latter:

> The narrative voice of the novel is that of 'remembrance' or chronicling; so to a large extent we are right in seeing the entire performance (such as it is) in the light of the classic legends of the Sunjata type. But we soon realise that the two lines run only parallel to one another, largely because many of the stylistic techniques which Armah borrows from the oral tradition are far less attuned to delight than they are to sadness and criticism: instead of a historical song of glory, that is, what we get in a song of sad condemnation...We have a good deal of repeated phrases; but where in most oral traditions there is a lyrical feeling to these repetitions and an urge to please the ears, in Armah's novel there is either a condemnatory ring to them...or else a harsh admonitory din so as to burn the message indelibly into the minds of the audience...18

Aspects of the themes of both novels also recall one another. (They are undoubtedly sanguinary). Each sets out to tell its own kind of 'truth' about African history. While agreeing somehow on the evils of slavery and oppression, there is no accord on the real identity of the villain, or on the acceptable interpretation of the colonial experience and racism. However, while both Ouloguem and Armah could be seen to hold different perspectives on myths and legends in relation to history, the power of either writer's mythic imagination is compelling.

In summing up the likely effect of Ouloguem's creative achievement in Bound to Violence on the intellectual and political scene in Africa (in so far as the social purpose of art and literature is concerned), Robert Fraser opines that:

> A polyglot intellectual of Ouloguem's stature may feel a need to inoculate himself against an over-compensating reaction, [against the distortion of African history and cultural image by European historians and anthropologists] yet to the majority of his countrymen together with the beleagured [sic] masses of the Third World the fresh emphasis is still news. Ouloguem's enterprise only possesses cogency within the charmed circle of the over-informed: to the average reader his book is more likely to cause confusion, even anger. 19

Besides this point, even within the "charmed circle of the over-informed" critics, new questions are being asked. They are asking (in the light of contemporary reality of social experience) about the relevance of the artistic vision - of Ouloguem and Armah alike, as well as of Soyinka and Awoonor, for example, - which focuses on colonialism and racialism but fails to seek their roots and raison d'etre in purely socio-economic, exploitative class-based terms. Just as Atta Britwum becomes impatient with Armah's "metaphysical-idealist world outlook, the sentimental attachment to fictitious racial virtues...[which] block the scientific vision which alone can guide to liberation",[20] so do others, like Biodun Jeyifo, Femi Osofisan and a host of radical African critics, get exasperated by some African writers' tendency towards "obsessive concern with myth and history [,]...subject[ing] social reality, or historical struggles to mythic interpretation, to the archetypes of human motivation and behaviour..."[21] And, in an interview, Ngugi captures most vividly (and rather more coherently than many others) the critical mood, in the following Fanonian terms:

> Because racism does not emanate from some biological arrangement, I must assume that it can be changed. We can see racism as a phenomenon that has social, political, and economic bases and origins and is thus, subject to social, political and economic solutions. Black people have been victims of double exploitation. They have been exploited on the level of class because they constitute the majority of the working class and the labouring masses. They have also been exploited on the dimension of race because of the whole colonial context in which Black and White people have met. Thus, Black people must realize themselves on the level of class and take anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist positions. 22

Ngugi's comments could have been meant, as a critical judgment on the writings of such other writers like Ouloguem and Armah, as much as an eludidation of his own creative preoccupation in, especially, two of his novels: A Grain of Wheat and Petals of Blood.

IV,(iii)

NOTES

1. (East African Publishing House, Nairobi, 1973: Heinemann. London,1979) All references to the former edition.

2. The proceeding and representative papers read are edited and published under the title, The Writer in Modern Africa (Uppsala,1968) edited by Per Wastberg.

3. Myth, Literature and the African World, (Cambridge, 1976) p.66.

4. "The Meaning of Myth: A propos of Armah's Two Thousand Seasons, (University of Ibadan, English Department Staff Seminar Paper, 79/80: Unpublished) pp.6-10.

5. Prescence Africaine, 64, (1967) pp.6-30.

6. Rites of Passage (Chicago, 1960) translated by M.B.Vizedom & G.L.Cafee.

7. The Ritual Process (Suffolk,1969).

8. ibid., pp.114-16.

9. The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born (London, 1969) p.12.

10. Fragments (London, 1974) See especially pages 17,107 & 108.

11. ibid., p.117.

12. Why Are We So Blest? (London, 1974) p.37.

13. The Novels of Ayi Kwei Armah (London, 1980) p.72.

14. Okpewho, op.cit., p.20.

15. ibid.,

16. Philosophical Quarterly, 6, 22 (Jan.1956) pp.6-8.

17. "Armah's Histories", African Literature Today, 11, (1980), p.90.

18. Okpewho, op.cit., p.8.

19. Fraser, op.cit., p.68.

20. "Hero Worshipping in the African Novel", Asemka, 3 (1975) p.16.

21. "Class Ideology in Contemporary African Literature and Criticism: Some Provisional Workshop Notes" (Unpublished Paper read at the December 1977 Ibadan conference on African Literature) p.4.

22. Bette J.Parker, "BBB interviews Ngugi wa Thiong'O", Black Books Bulletin, 6, 1 (1978) p.51.

PART FIVE

MYTH AND THE FICTION OF "SOCIALIST REALISM"

The most ideal future has no meaning for us unless we can imagine the best of our own experience, and of that of our forefathers, making sense in it; humanism cannot be abstract.

(Angus Calder)

We must repeat, it is absolutely necessary to oppose vigorously and definitely the birth of national bourgeoisie and a privileged caste. To educate the masses politically is to make the nation a reality to each citizen. It is to make the history of the nation part of the personal experience of each of its citizens.

(Frantz Fanon)

V,(i) Ngugi as an Artist

Two main critical fallacies (or, at least, polarities) have dogged Ngugi wa Thiong'O's[1] reputation as a creative artist, namely: that he is an essentially "historical" novelist and that he is an essentially religious" (Christian) writer. So firmly entrenched have these views become (as a result of sheer repetition) that, together, they now seem to constitute, so to say, the permitted territory around which the majority of opinion on Ngugi's art may wander. The state of affairs is not so much objectionable because of the labels, "historical" and "religious", as because critics tend to treat the two concepts as if they were mutually exclusive or antagonistic.

In broaching the potential internal contradiction of the first label, Professor Ime Ikiddeh cites an example of two opposing views on the concept of "historical" interpretation as applicable to Ngugi's fiction.[2] He writes thus: "while one regards the historical element in the novels as unartistic and objectionable interventions, the other complains that the writer is not always faithful to widely accepted historical 'fact'."[3] The premise of the latter point of view is what immediately interests us here. It would appear that, erroneously persuaded that Ngugi is (or ought to be) engaged, through his art, in the reconstruction of Kenyan history, some critics have labelled him a "historical novelist". To these, he not only evokes history, he must also be seen to be recording it correctly. So, some are impatient with his factual inexactitude and are sometimes anxious to put the record straight on his behalf.[4] An interesting comment on The River Between goes thus:

> ...this is a full historical novel - a novel, that is, about contemporary society which examines certain features of that society by exploring their origin and development in the past.../But/ the exact historical period of the events...is never revealed, at least to the reader unversed in the details of European

> penetration into the various regions of Kenya. The social structure of the tribe and its political organization, although the plot turns on these matters, is never demonstrated to us in such a way that we can understand their [sic] operation in the action of the novel. 5

Who asks for a more illiterate reader-critic? More recently, S.N.Njoroge devotes the whole of the fourth chapter of a thesis[6] to the same theme. He not only writes that: "Ngugi [is] one of the writers on the continent of Africa whose work is so deeply embedded in history that very often, especially in his early writing, his fiction amounts to little more than thinly disguised history."[7] Further on: "As a historical novelist Ngugi has the advantage of the basic unity and logic inherent within the movement of historical events themselves"[8]; therefore, his "work must quite strictly be seen in a historical perspective."[9]

On the other hand, consciously de-emphasizing the historical interpretation (in an unusually sensitive criticism[10]), Govind Sharma argues against the tendency to regard Ngugi's A Grain of Wheat as a "political novel, depicting the ups and downs of Kenya's struggle for freedom"; and opines that: "To interpret Ngugi's novel in this way is to miss its extraordinary richness and complexity..."[11] After identifying the "real theme" of the novel as rebirth and regeneration to which the author gives a full embodiment by an imaginative use of christian myths, Sharma concludes that Ngugi:

> ...is a religious writer, and A Grain of Wheat is not merely a religious novel but also a Christian one, for his vision...is essentially Christian. More than political freedom, Ngugi's interest is in moral and spiritual freedom, without which the former can have no real meaning. 12 (my emphases)

While either of these points of view may explain a great deal of Ngugi's artistic vision, it will be obvious that any monolithic interpretation belies the fullness and promise of his creativity.

With this in mind, it may well be emphasized that, contrary to common assertion, Ngugi is neither a historical or religious writer in the exclusive senses in which those terms are bandied about. In order for them to make critical sense, the terms cry out for serious qualifications without which Ngugi's novels stand in danger of being seen merely as repertoires of sociological and anthropological data, rather than imaginative literature (albeit possessing socio-political contents) with its own internal aesthetic vitality.

Although the novelist is a historian in the most general sense of the word, to fashion for him a specifically histriographical role is nothing short of a contradiction of his craft. As any one who has studied Homer would testify, being aware of history and being historicist are two different things which call certain faculties of the writer to task rather than others. In a way, the artist (novelist) is singularly interested in history and its process and meaning. But, to be sure, the conventional historian and the novelist are not often interested in the same kinds of historical events and, when they happen to be, the accounts rendered by each will be miles apart from the other - even though both may be telling the "truth". And one cannot help remarking that the essays of the proponents of an "historical" interpretation of Ngugi's novels give the impression that true creativity issues only from a conscious and cerebral immersion of the artist in the objective history of his people. But objective histories rarely tally well with the artist's prerogative of selective use or treatment of whatever material at his disposal. Thus it may be asked, like Charles Swan in his article on Faulkner's Absalom:

> To what extent does the character-narrator [or artist] approximate the strategies the historians employ to obtain their knowledge of the past? And are we able to absorb and articulate the pattern of historical interpretation in such a way that the form of the novel can be compared with the form of the historian's interpretation of the past? 13

It is quite logical, in the milieu in which Ngugi writes, to interpret his works as advancing a Socialist vision - therefore - historically conscious. But even when it is accepted that he is a 'historical' novelist, his circumstance is not germane to the kind of secularized history often encountered in Western fiction. Otherwise, the cause-and-effect character of the purely historical approach should logically lead to a conclusion of despair and disillusionment in, say, A Grain of Wheat. But the outcome of the actions and expectations in the novel is actually more creatively positive than many a critical opinion on it often suggests. The positivism is clearly proclaimed by the final symbolism of the stool which Gikonyo promises to carve in honour of Mumbi.

By the same token, Ngugi is not a Christian writer in the same sense in which one may describe, say, Graham Greene.[14] In his novels the latter is preoccupied with the question and meaning of sin and salvation, of conscience and pity within the context of a Catholic universe. He creates characters who are, in the main, slaves of conscience - whose bleeding souls often incapacitate the will to action, and are torn between self-actualization in accordance with private morality and the demands of orthodox Christianity. Perhaps more fundamentally (apart from the fact that there are, for example, no Major Scobie-type characters among Ngugi's protagonists), the difference between the two writers is that Ngugi is always focussing on a total community; Greene does not. Moreover, even the most evangelically inclined Christians among Ngugi's characters often appear as zealots who, in blind fervour, read their Christianity upside down like Joshua in The River Between or ironically like Munira in Petals of Blood. And usually, they do not tend to see moral choice in terms of the Christian Conscience; rather, it is a

question of responding to the dictates of the immediate, physical and material survival needs in an alienated and benighted world.

Thus, to propose "Christian vision" as the frame of reference in interpreting Ngugi's novels - especially A Grain of Wheat and Petals of Blood, is not only to place one's judgment in a vulnerable position but also to be guilty of perpetrating what Soyinka has described as "externally induced fantasies of redemptive transformation in the image of alien masters."[15] Certainly, to assume that the christian characters are representative of his "vision" or interpretation of Christianity is to drive the evidences too hard. To insist upon a one dimensional, Christian interpretation of A Grain of Wheat (as Sharma seems to do) will be no more than a subtle regression into palliatives about abstract universalism and, to lose sight of the particular, concrete humanity of the ordinary Kenyan African folks and their own virile ontology. Yet, to banish the Christian factor in Ngugi's creative writing is to distort the elements of historical realism in them - since the Missions played more than an accidental role in Gikuyu history. Above all, there is a remarkable convergence of some central elements of Gikuyu myths with some central elements of Christian myths. And no one has been more readily aware of the rivalry and struggle between Church and Tribe in Kenya than Ngugi himself. Commenting about The River Between, he reveals that he has been preoccupied with "trying to remove the Central Christian doctrine from the dress of Western Culture, and seeing how this might be grafted on the central belief of our people."[16] In spite of this, however, the objective world of his novel shows his concern as being no more than wishful thinking - at least, given the dismal failure of Waiyaki the enthusiastic, conciliatory educationist. It is an experiment, the failure of which not only culminates in his rejection (in succeeding

works) of the Mosaic vision, but also in Ngugi's advocacy of a resumption of the broken dialogue between the African and his gods. The call is explicit about the need to recapture those societal internal dynamics which have existed from time immemorial, adapting these to the new needs of the struggle towards attaining an equitable free and humane society of the future.

The main point is that the representative critical positions examined above have, inexcusably, conveniently ignored or misconstrued the import of Ngugi's own unequivocal view about the interrelatedness of history, culture and literature. "A cultural assertion was an integral part of the political and economic struggle",[17] he not only writes, but also that:

> In a novel the writer is totally immersed in a world of the imagination which is other than his conscious self. At his most intense and creative the writer is transfigured, he is possessed, he becomes a medium... Nevertheless the boundaries of his imagination are limited by the writer's beliefs, interests, and experiences in life, by where in fact he stands in the world of social relations. 18

Besides, Ngugi's view point suggests further relevant questions which have always puzzled literary criticism in general: What constitutes historical thought? How can any sure claim be made in isolating the sociological, political, anthropological or mythological from the historical consciousness and process in creative literature?

V,(i)

NOTES

1. Ngugi wa Thiong'O is the author of the following novels:
Weep Not, Child (Heinemann. London. 1964)
The River Between (Heinemann. London 1965)
A Grain of Wheat (Heinemann. London. 1967)
Petals of Blood (Heinemann. London. 1977)

All references to these editions.

2. Ime Ikiddeh cites the following articles by W.J.Howard (erroneously referred to as W.H.Jordan) and S.N.Ngubiah respectively:
"Themes and Development in the Novels of Ngugi", E.Wright (ed.), The Critical Evaluation of African Literature (London, 1973) pp.95-119; and
"Ngugi's Early Writings: The River Between and The Black Hermit", C.L.Wanjala (ed.), Standpoints on African Literature (Nairobi,1973) pp.62-71.
For further views on this point, see, especially:
John Reed, "James Ngugi and the African Novel", The Journal of Commonwealth Literature, 1 (1965) pp.117-21;
S.N.Njoroge, "The Influence of Tradition and Western Religion on the Cultural and Political Thinking of Ngugi wa Thiong'O and Okot p'Bitek" (Unpublished M.Phil.Thesis. Leeds University 1978) pp.172-247; and
Peter Nazareth, "Is 'A Grain of Wheat' [sic] a Socialist Novel?", P.Nazareth (ed.), Literature and Society in Modern Africa (Nairobi, 1972) pp.128-54.

3. "Ngugi wa Thiong'O: The Novelist as Historian", B.King & K.Ogungbesan (eds.), A Celebration of Black and African Writing (London,1975) p.204.
Ikiddeh has been rather unfairly dismissive of W.J.Howard whose essay offers one of the most perceptive criticism of The River Between - even, despite his objection to the so-called infusion of historical element in the novel. And perhaps Ikiddeh should have addressed his attention more to the insidious critical dilettantism of Ngubiah.

4. See Ngubiah, op.cit.,p.63; and
Njoroge, op.cit.

5. Reed, op.cit., p.119.

6. Njoroge, op.cit., pp.172-247.

7. ibid;, p.176.

8. ibid., p.204.

9. ibid., p.243.

10. "Ngugi's Christian Vision: Theme and Pattern in A Grain of Wheat", African Literature Today, 10 (1979) pp.167-76.

11. ibid., p.167.

12. ibid., p.174.
For further views on this point, see, especially:
Leslie Monkman, "Kenya and the New Jerusalem in A Grain of Wheat", African Literature Today, 7 (1975) pp.111-16;
Lloyd Williams, "Religion and Life in The River Between", African Literature Today, 5 (1971) pp.54-65; and
P.Ochola-Ojero, "Of Tares and Broken Handles, Ngugi Preaches", C.L.Wanjala (ed.), Standpoints on African Literature (Nairobi, 1973) pp.72-85.

13. "Absalom, Absalom: The Novel as Historiography", Literature and History, 5, (1977) p.42.

14. Sharma's further comment that "A Grain of Wheat is really a religious novel in which the whole concept of sin and salvation is derived from Christianity", (op.cit., p.175; n[11]) suggests the analogy.

15. Myth, Literature and the African World (Cambridge, 1976) p.xii.

16. Union News (Leeds University, 18th Nov. 1966)

17. Homecoming (London, 1972) p.26.

18. ibid., p.XV.

V,(ii) A Grain of Wheat

In A Grain of Wheat, the problem of historical knowledge and mythic perception in the literary imagination is not in any way mitigated. Mugo, the central character (because his personal crisis is a microcosmic index to the psychic, spiritual and political state of the Kenyan nation at independence), is portrayed as a hero only in folk imagination. And, as Micere Gi[illegible]thae-Mugo comments:

> In Ngugi's eyes, Mugo has become a 'redeemer', not in the sense he [Mugo] or the people have dreamt of - for the heroic career laid out for him by Thabai's villagers means little to Ngugi - but in a humble, painful way through self-denial and not glory. 1

Mugo is a 'hero' only in a kind of religious sense; but in a historical sense, he is an anti-hero. Indeed, his career increases one's suspicion that Ngugi has deliberately structured the novel as a sardonic comment on the concept of idyllic, visionary (lonely and so, ultimately tragic) hero-ism. One only needs to contrast (as we shall, presently) the different kinds of 'heroic' acts to the symbolism of the "stool" which ends the novel. But simultaneously, Ngugi is also making a criticism of the "historical" conception of "character". For, if as some critics have tended to do, Mugo was elevated to the status of the conventional historical figure such as Kenyatta or Harry Thuku (also mentioned in the novel), we would be forced to condemn his a-historical role. There will thus, inevitably, exist a strain between our conception of the historical character and the subjective mode in which Ngugi casts him. Yet, while some critics emphasize the historical character of the novel they also insist upon eschewing polarized moral judgments which conventionally fictionalized historical personages often elicit. Peter Nazareth is very much aware of this problem when he cautiously states that "A Grain of Wheat could not be explicitly socialist because of historical reasons"[2] and, because of its subjective nature.

The awareness of these and other related questions makes it worth the critic's while to continually shift perspectives again and again, like the beholder of Achebe's dancing mask, and try to discover anew the significance of those pervasive and telling allusions to Gikuyu myths and legends which Ngugi uses with considerable success to bring hitherto nameless anxieties and hopes into focus in his two major novels - A Grain of Wheat and Petals of Blood. For, as Irving Howe proposes in his Politics and the Novel,[3] the business of the critic, in circumstances like this, should be with "perspectives of observation" rather than with "categories of classificatication". And our approach to Ngugi's novels should be, according to an undeveloped suggestion of Nadine Gordimer, how he relates the African past, "not just historical but also mythological - to the present-day life of the Gikuyu."[4]

Thus it will be appreciated that in order to portray a living and virile cultural awareness - such that the Gikuyu demonstrate in their mythic reading of history - a simple consciousness of history on the part of the creative writer is not enough. The Gikuyu themselves, as Ngugi portrays them, are a very creative people: how can it then be suggested that he allows his own imaginative ferment to be constrained by some bogus fidelity to historical 'facts' when the people live both history and myth? In order to give depth and the human touch to the cold face of historical factuality, the creative artist often finds it necessary to create and deploy significant metaphor. The metaphors of myth happen to be appropriate for Ngugi's representation of historical experience and its subterranean, psychic and spiritual movements in his novels. It is not difficult then to see that, in spite of his predilection for a "Christian" interpretation, Sharma's point that the real theme of A Grain of Wheat is "...rebirth and regeneration, the end of brokenness

and alienation and the restoration to wholeness and community"[5] offers a positive leverage to appreciating the aesthetics of Ngugi's socio-cultural and political vision.

The colonial history of Kenya (as indeed of Africa) is too well known to make a summary necessary. However, the historical events that brought about the demise (physically at least) of the colonial domination of Kenya is quite unique at that time. The Kenyans engaged the colonial overlord in a protracted war of resistance, the memory of which has been immortalized in history books as well as in the heroic lore and songs of the people. In supplying historical evidence as background information and the context in which Ngugi's novels should be seen and appreciated, Ime Ikiddeh writes thus:

> Historically, land as the source of man's life, the basis of any social community and the foundation of all human culture, remained the sensitive factor in the connection between Africans and Europeans in Kenya...It was primarily over land that the Mau Mau War was fought. 6

Thus, at the opening of A Grain of Wheat, European colonial domination, economic exploitation and the Presbyterian Mission have all combined to deprive the Gikuyu of their land, and involved them in devastating physical and spiritual turmoils from which the people have not fully recovered. Ngugi could therefore be seen to discharge his duty to history by establishing the present crisis against the background of colonial violence. But he is much more concerned with a creative healing of past wounds and enhancing the Gikuyu's sense of community, guiding it towards his own vision of a post-colonial society that (without any illusions) poses the problems of unity, justice and equitable distribution of wealth. Ngugi himself comments thus: "Literature is of course primarily concerned with what any political and economic arrangement does to the spirit and the value governing human relationships."[7] (my emphasis)

Thus his immediate preoccupation in A Grain of Wheat could be summed up as the restoration of the alienated body and spirit (of individuals and community) to their authentic forms.

The resonance of the sense of alienation and aloneness which Professor David Cook identifies in Ngugi's technique and likens to a recording of events with a cine camera[8] is further amplified by Peter Nazareth when he writes that "Ngugi presents us with a situation in which there are several participants and we are given the thoughts and feeling of each participant in turn."[9] Further more, the curt lamentation of the lame Githua: "'The Emergency destroyed us'" (p.6) - even if it becomes known later on that he did not lose his leg to the white man's bullet in the nationalist war - is indicative of the violence which both the Mau Mau war and the white man have done to the Gikuyu's body and soul. Of course the European characters too (the Thompsons, Drs Lynd and Van Dyke and Mrs Dickinson) do not escape their fates of spiritual brokenness as a result of the cataclysmic events, but failure to discuss them in any detail may be explicable in terms of James Olney's observation that:

> Ironically and without his knowing it, the white man, as one can discover in Kenyatta, in Charity Waciuma, and in James Ngugi, was only playing a part in the mythic history of the Gikuyu people and fulfilling the prophetic vision of Mugo wa Kibiro, a Gikuyu seer. Rather than being, as he supposed, the chief actor in his own drama on the stage of the world, the white man was all the while a player, with minor if despised role, in the providential destiny of the Gikuyu people and in the story that unfolds to become that destiny. 10

Their fates may be more strongly bound to those of the African protagonists in A Grain of Wheat and the central political event than Olney assumes, but that is not the thrust of the present exercise.

The disjointed existence of all the African protagonists (except Kihika and Mumbi) can be perceived in the author's externalization of their innermost thoughts. The symbolic orphanage of Mugo, and his withdrawal from the political fortunes of his society - in spite of his inherently good and harmless nature - is reinforced by the recurrent image of him as the lonely biblical Moses tending the flock of Jethro. Haunted by the ghost of the murdered Mau Mau hero, Kihika, whom he betrayed to the white administration:

> Mugo was deeply afflicted and confused, because all his life he had avoided conflicts...His argument went like this: if you don't traffic with evil, then evil ought not to touch you; if you leave people alone, then they ought to leave you alone. (p.221)

Reflecting on his estranged relationship with his wife (Mumbi), and his experiences and contacts in detention, Gikonyo breaks down in despair: "One lived alone, and like Gatu, went into the grave alone...To live and die alone was the ultimate truth." (p.135) And unable to keep rein on his own aimlessly drifting life, Karanja seeks to justify his subversive, unpatriotic role during the Emergency to Mumbi: "As for carrying a gun for the whiteman, well, a time will come when you too will know that every man in the world is alone, and fights alone, to live." (pp.165-66) Thus, to both Cook's and Nazareth's comments it may be added that the reader is led (usually by Mumbi) into the life of each character as if into a secret shrine where the subject confronts and wrestles with his conscience. Not until the very end of all the actions (when Mugo has confessed his betrayal of Kihika) is any other character afforded the opportunity to see himself in the 'mirror' held up by the confessant and realise that his was only a part of a communal malaise.

But, however thorough-going the solitude and the abyss of meaninglessness at the heart of each individual story, the overall effect of the novel is strongly motivated by the need to find images of communal renewal in which the "grain" can be broken open into a new life. Thus we might surmise that Ngugi sees true freedom at the deeper level of individual, then, communal spiritual purgation. Mugo is welcomed by Githogo's mother only after he has performed a spiritual purification by public confession. The old woman who symbolizes the silent, unmartyred suffering, deliriously welcomes Mugo: "'I knew you would come, I knew you would come to fetch me home,...'" (p.268)

In order to achieve the goal of restoration of alienated individuals to the authentic communal spirit, Ngugi undertakes measured imaginative uses of traditional African myths, legends, images and symbols which often find analogies in Christian symbolism. Beside the immediately conspicuous fragments of and allusions to traditional aeteological, millenarian and prophetic myths, one encounters also references to the Mosaic and Messianic myths. In these, as well as in Ngugi's creative deployment of nomenclature, one perceives the fullness and cross-fertilization of group belief and community history. When the prophecy of Mugo wa Kibiro about colonial occupation has come to pass the recurring allusions to the story of Gikuyu and Mumbi (founding parents of the nation) is not just a mere reminder of origins but a historico-political affirmation - in the face of alien forces - of the premordial right of the Gikuyu over their ancestral land. In The River Between Waiyaki's father retells the story of the tribes origins: "'Murungu [the Creator] brought the man [Gikuyu] and woman [Mumbi] here and again showed them the whole vastness of the land. He gave the country to them and their children and the children of their children, tene na tene, world without end.'" (p.21) This affirmation is also a moral resistance to the occupying power of colonialism. And the concomitant prophetic tradition that a liberating

Messiah will arise among the people to drive out the enemy and restore to them the ownership of their land provides a seminal ground for the apotheosis of tribal heroes.

Far from being atavistic or starry-eyed romanticism the recurrence of these myths in A Grain of Wheat proves politically and morally auspicious. They serve to counter the myth which the colonial authorities invented: - that the Mau Mau movement was evil and retrogressive. Besides, they invigorate the forest fighters as well as create a supportive base of mass identification with the spirit of the independence struggle. On the long run, however, Ngugi's accent on a "self-authenticating culture as the basis of hope and solidarity is unmistakeable. This awareness has continually formed the backdrop of not only his creative universe, but also the main focus of his essays (published as Homecoming - Heinemann, London 1972) which elucidate the fictional world of his novels.

In spite of the fact that the impending Uhuru celebrations in A Grain of Wheat link each individual participant surreptitiously to the nation, the private guilt which haunts each one has prevented a living sense of community and shared responsibility. It is this crippling guilt consciousness that Ngugi seeks to exorcise creatively. In this connection it is important to see the portrayal of Mumbi in a greater detail. She links the fates of all the other characters and their otherwise disconnected existence. Apart from her roles as Kihika's sister, Gikonyo's wife, Mugo's confidant, saviour of Karanja and mother of his child, Mumbi is the archetypal mother-figure. She is the earth-symbol, with all its attributes of regenerative power and resilience; she is the centre of all the other characters' universe and its unifying force. It is no wonder then that Karanja and Gikonyo interpret their participation in the public races (pp.104-6 and 234-44) in terms of how close it brings them to Mumbi's

affection. The races could also be seen as symbolic races for life and the desire to identify with the essence of the Gikuyu spirit. As Sharma puts it, once again, Mumbi is:

> ...the spirit of Kenya; its beautiful and bountiful earth, ancient yet ever young; dark, deep and mysterious; patient and long-suffering, which, in spite of being ill-used by unscrupulous adventurers, has retained its goodness, fecundity, and warmth. 11

But the two races are ridden with irony. In the conscious thoughts of the two adversaries, each of the races is not quite anything like a grandiose symbolic act. Rather, both of them see each occasion as one of out-doing, and so, confirming personal (selfish) superiority over the opponent. And there is another edge to the ironic twist in the first "race for Mumbi" (p.104) - especially as it also foreshadows Karanja's sell-out to the colonial administration. Mumbi (as we do accept) is the symbol of cultural essence; but the immediate object and first cause of the race is the "train" which could equally be seen as a symbol of the colonial penetration of Gikuyu heartland. Karanja wins that race but he loses Mumbi to Gikonyo who wins her because, ironically, he is not as quick as Karanja. The second race (now a symbolic honour to the nation, but also invigorated by Mumbi's presence) metaphorically confirms the common guilt of both Karanja and Gikonyo. The latter falls and brings down his adversary with him. (p.243)

The challenge of restoration to wholeness and community is left to the final chapter - "Harambee" - and finds resolution in the symbolism of the stool which Gikonyo promises to carve in honour of Mumbi. After long debates with himself and a succession of changing visions:

> He would now carve a thin man, with hard lines on the face, shoulders and head bent, supporting the weight [of the seat]. His right hand would stretch to link with that of a woman, also with hard lines on the face. The third figure would be that

> of a child on whose head or shoulders the other two hands of the man and woman would meet. (p.279)

The stool is an ideographic symbol of authority in many African societies. And to whom could the honour and reverence devolve in A Grain of Wheat other than the acolyte of the founding-mother of the race? Only that, now, the "stool" ceases to be hierarchical and authoritarian. It has become a symbolic expression of reconciliation and healing restoration to community, through mutual spirit of give and take. And with Gikonyo's reconciliation to Mumbi, the symbolic ritual of the spiritual restoration of the nation (towards authentic community) reaches a climax." His reunion with Mumbi would see the birth of a new Kenya." (p.121) The evolution of his creative idea culminates in his decision to alter the woman's figure: "'I'll change the woman' figure. I shall curve [sic] a woman big - big with child.'" (p.280) The unborn child will symbolize the future, but Gikonyo's vacillation about the image into which he would work the beads on the seat of the stool - "A field needing clearance and cultivation? A jembe? A bean flower?" evinces the uncertainty of the future. Whether or not that future justifies the optimistic expectancy of the present is quite another matter. But, notice the inclusion of the image of the "bean flower" among the possibilities that lie ahead. Indeed, it is the bean flower plant that a child innocently christens "petals of blood" in (and from which) Ngugi's succeeding novel derives its title.

V,(ii)

NOTES

1. Visions of Africa (Nairobi, 1978) p.180.

2. P.Nazareth, "Is 'A Grain of Wheat' [sic] a Socialist Novel?" P.Nazareth (ed.) Literature and Society in Modern Africa (Nairobi, 1972) p.151.

3. Politics and the Novel (Greenwich: Connecticut, 1957).

4. The Black Interpreters (Johannesburg, 1973) p.25.

5. G.Sharma, "Ngugi's Christion Vision: Theme and Pattern in A Grain of Wheat", African Literature Today, 10 (1979) p.167.

6. "Ngugi Wa Thiong'O: The Novelist as Historian", B.King and K.Ogungbesan (eds.) A Celebration of Black and African Writing (London, 1975) pp.210-11.

7. Homecoming (London, 1972) p.xvi.

8. African Literature: A Critical View (London, 1977) p.107.

9. Nazareth, op.cit., p.147.

10. Tell Me Africa (Princeton, 1973) p.87.

11. Sharma, op.cit., p.173.

V,(iii) Petals of Blood

The main virtue of Petals of Blood[1] lies in a creative vision which not only subverts ready categorization, but also seeks to transcend the obvious limitations of realistic fiction while retaining social realism as its core. It engages reality on two simultaneous levels, each interacting with and complementing the other. Beneath the apparent socio-historical and political thrust of the narrative, a mythic consciousness can be perceived - "what indeed made history move" (p.123) - which orders the moral and artistic world of the novel. Because of this deliberate creative fusion of the historical and mythic consciousness in its total structure (content and form, as we shall soon find out), nowhere in Ngugi's previous novels has the tendency toward exclusively "religious" or "historical" interpretation been more frustrated. Thus impelled by an obvious desire to explore creatively the totality of experience, Petals of Blood elicits glowing tributes to its epic stature.[2]

The novel opens with the arrests and subsequent interrogation of four suspects - Munira the Calvinist village headmaster; Wanja the inscrutable, sensuous bar-maid and village belle; Abdulla the lame shop owner and Mau Mau veteran; and Karega the young revolutionary idealist - following a recent murder by arson of three members of the business and political elite of Kenya. The subsequent story is told largely in the form of Munira's written 'confession' to the police, interlaced with an anonymous collective narrative perspective. But it is also interspersed with a number of "first person" narratives - so that the form is both collective and more 'subjective' than ever before. The anonymous narrative clarifies and supplies the broad socio-historical, economic and political as well as moral context of the protagonists' actions. Thus, in recalling

the events of the night of the fire, Munira reveals the complex web of professional, amorous and patriotic relationships that binds the fates of the four protagonists one to another; to the three victims and to Ilmorog, the microcosm of the entire nation. Although Munira's written statement to the police lasts only ten days, his account (complemented by the collective narrator) spans the events of the last twelve years and further back, drawing upon salient information from the participants' childhood as well as racial origins.

Each member of Munira's circle of friends has experienced the painful frustration of idealism and hope of finding economic security and moral equity in the newly independent Kenya. Munira cannot make a home in the city "against the shadow of his father's success compared to his own failure, and so admitting to failure".(p.11) Neither Karega's passionate search for "a lost innocence, faith and hope" (p.46) nor Wanja's quest for freedom, material success and, later, fulfilment in motherhood could find succour in the existing national ethos: his rebellious temperament sends him out of school to roaming the streets while she is driven to making a living from prostitution. And Abdulla's fate recaptures the pervasive anxiety of the general populace - he is demoralized seeing that the fruits of Uhuru he and his compatriots fought for have been appropriated by those who had merely stood-by or actively collaborated with the ousted colonial masters.

Having been thus variously thrown against the destructive force of the new order and temporarily defeated, they escape in order to seek spiritual refuge until they have, in the words of Wanja, "defeated the past through a new flowering of the self"; (p.107) moving toward the attainment of a new sense of community. Assembled by fate in the deserted and dusty Ilmorog on the brink of a devastating drought, they discover one another, at first through fragile personal relationships which

consolidate into an involuntary self-identification and bond with the evident bastardization of life in the moribund outpost. Except Abdulla, the rest of the band indulge in brief but unassuaging escapades only to be confronted on their return by the accusing and fear besought eyes of the famished population. Thus, at the instigation of the restless Karega, backed by the old woman Nyakinyua, a decision is reached on a mass protest march of the villagers to the capital in order to seek their MP, Nderi wa Riera and force attention on the plight of Ilmorog. The journey executed on a grand epic scale, offers a profound experience of the elusive but steadily burgeoning communal spirit.

More significant,however, is the spiritual ramifications of the mass trek which Munira succinctly describes thus: "'We went on a journey to safe Ilmorog from drought. We brought back spiritual drought from the city!'" (p.195) Conceived as a last desperate effort for material salvation, the journey results not only in the imminent destruction of Ilmorog's rural autonomy by attracting a deluge of comprador capitalist opportunism, but also threatens the spiritual ferment and moral rectitude which have so far sustained it. The promise of rejuvination heralded by the rains is also fraught with forboding of a new disintegrative socio-economic order. The police, missionaries and land speculators flock to Ilmorog. The new brewers move in to complete the desecration of the then'eta plant from which, traditionally a potent liquor that inspired seers, poets and prophets is produced - a process begun, ironically, when Wanja first turned it into a commercial product in Abdulla's bar. It is the original potency of theng'eta that Nyakinyua desperately attempts to revive (unsuccessfully) after the trek. For, associated with Ilmorog's "pristine Traditional splendour", the Nyakinyua-led revival of theng'eta, symbolizes "a decision to return to the purity of [the Ilmorogians'] traditional values."[3] But as the tentacles of comprador capitalism spreads to Ilmorog, changing the traditional life

pattern, it also witnesses the birth of a new, but progressively exploited, disenchanted and militant workforce. In due course, a spate of massive workers' protests - inspired by the march to the capital, Nyakinyua's staunch resistance to the forcible acquisition of her land, and her self-sacrifice in the process - grips the rest of the nation. And, through his trade union activities, Karega becomes the resistance——tradition's new hero and symbol of the alternative, strongly humane and corporate ethic that, it is hoped, will replace the destructiveness of monopoly capitalism.

There can be no denying the wry intimacy with which Petals of Blood assails the reader's consciousness as a record of social history. Certainly, this is the effect which the political rhetoric of much of the novel achieves — as, particularly, represented in the Lawyer's analysis of, and Karega's musings on the socio-economic ills that stalk the post-independence Kenya. The build-up to this end takes root from the narrative perspective held on the general malaise in the newly independent nation, revealed through an artful probing of the individual personal histories of the leading characters. Thus, the novel's poignant tone of political commitment becomes so irresistible that it manages to induce such critics as S.N.Njoroge to throw overboard the normal restraint which distinguishes serious literary criticism from cliche-ridden sloganeering when he claims that Petals of Blood is"'steeped in the ideas of Marx and Engels, especially as expressed in 'Principles of Communism' and 'Manifesto of the Communist Party'"(!)[4] There is really little to choose between Njoroge's 'analaysis' and the monolithic methods of those critics who seek to explain Ngugi's art through a "religious" (Christian) framework. For no keen student of Ngugi's works would miss his strategy designed to produce multiple consciousness and perspectives, through the structural and prefigurative deployment of multi-dimensional symbols and imagery in Petals of Blood. It is geared

toward a creative statement which, while its aspects recall and even reach convergence with archetypal truths revealed in Christian and Marxist ideologies, attains an original intelligence of its own.

At the thematic level for example, one might point to the manner in which the whole concept of the economic basis of social relationships is interpreted through the symbolic fortunes of theng'eta, the mysterious plant with "petals of blood". Around the theng'eta image alone, Ngugi has built a dense network of realistic and mythic symbolism. At one level it is the simple luxuriant, wild-growing plant of the plains used in the distillation of a local spirit, but which has become debased following its discovery and exploitation as an "economic" plant by capitalist interests. In this sense, as Ngugi reveals in an interview (for "Sunday Nation") with John Esibi, it is a symbolic representation of the exploited victims of capitalist monopoly:

> 'I took...[the title, "Petals of Blood" which derives from Derek Walcott's poem "The Swamp"] as a symbol of the contemporary African situation where imperialism and foreign interests are preventing little flowers (the workers and peasants in Africa) from reaching out into the light.' 5

It is also in the same sense that Munira's suggestive reference to plants which prevent others from reaching the light and flower-destroying worms could be understood:

> 'This is a worm-eaten flower...It cannot bear fruit. That's why we must always kill worms...A flower can also become this colour if it's prevented from reaching the light.' (p.22)

This links with the combined mythos of the Walcott poem that Ngugi uses to prefix his novel, and Josh White's blues song that the lawyer hums:

> Southern trees
> Bear strange fruits
> Blood around the leaves
> And blood at the roots

Black body swaying
In a Southern breeze
Strange fruit
Hanging from poplar trees. (p.165)

A sense of decay and unnatural, aberrant growth is evoked, which captures an image of the Black man (and all Third World communities) as victim and sacrifice to the "monster-god" of capitalist materialism.

But there is a certain optimism to the overall thrust of the novel which mutes the original bleakness of either the song's or the poem's view of man and history. For, beside the sanguinary images and eerie sense of inevitability that each conveys, we also observe that Ngugi quotes generously (as epigraphs to one or the other of the four parts into which the novel is divided) from Amilcar Cabral, Walt Whitman and William Blake to complement Yeatsian and biblical allusions of the "Part" titles. Leaving aside the Yeatsian and biblical suggestions for the meantime, the quotations from Blake, Whitman and Cabral - in relation to Ngugi's thematic design - speak for themselves. Part two of Petals of Blood - which deals with the march on the capital by the pauperized Ilmorogians and describes, not only their misery but also their endurance that witnesses the apotheosis of Abdulla, Wanja and Nyakinyua - is prefixed with the following from Blake:

'But most thro' midnight streets I hear
How the youthful Harlot's curse
Blasts the new born Infant's tear
And blights with plagues the Marriage hearse.' (p.119)

and

'Pity would be no more
If we did not make somebody Poor.' (p.119)

Quotations from Whitman and Cabral prefix the fourth part of the novel and underscore the essential optimism of Ngugi in the belief that continuous but collective resistance against oppression is the only source of hope for a better, more humane world:

'Those corpses of young men,
Those martyrs that hang from the gibbets -- those
hearts pierc'd by the gray lead,
Cold and motionless as they seem, live
elsewhere with unslaughter'd vitality.

They live in other young men, O Kings!
They live in brothers, again ready to defy you!' (p.261)

and

'If we are brothers, it is not our fault or responsibility
But if we are comrades, it is a political engagement.
...It is better to be a brother and comrade.' (p.261)

Thus Ngugi's choices pay tribute to the universal reaches of the authentic creative imagination.

At another symbolic level, in the words of Eustace Palmer, theng'eta is "a plant that is associated with Ilmorog's pristine traditional splendour."[6] But it is a "splendour" that precedes the events happening in the novel, and at which we can only guess from the legendary excursus of the omniscient narrative voice. From this we deduce that - as the source of the liquor which induces the visions of traditional seers, poets and prophets, and relaxes the tired muscles of the tillers of the soil - theng'eta is a symbol of purity and truth, creative industry and self-reliance. It is against all of these traditional virtues that the ruses of capitalist exploitation blaspheme. The elaborate ritual preceding the administration of theng'eta on Nyakinyua's acolytes testifies to the degree to which its mythical potency is taken seriously:

They sat in a circle according to their ages.
...They all removed their ties, their shoes,
anything which might prevent their bodies from
being loose and at ease. She commanded them to
remove all the money in the pockets, the metal
bug that split up homes and drove men to the
city. She took all the money and put it away
on the floor outside the ritual circle. (p.211)

It is at such a subterranean, mythic level that the spiritual dimension of Ngugi's creative search for authentic community (upon which A Grain of Wheat ends in a muted note of optimism) can be perceived with greater coherence.

Two main narrative movements become discernible in Petals of Blood. Social history personalized in the four leading characters relating to the socio-economic crisis brought about in post-independent Kenya by an overpowering materialistic ethic constitutes the outer structure. And an inner density is provided by the largely mythic perspective on the omniscient narration which extends into antiquity and revives the memory of a society in its pristine purity. Eventually both movements coalesce to illuminate the author's vision of society. But in the meantime a line of distinction is drawn between one and the other. While Munira's story (which dominates much of the first movement) reveals the socio-economic and hints at the moral state of the nation, the anonymous collective narrative voice aligns the reader's perspective, with a subtle insistence, to the strong consciousness of an existing moral and spiritual 'wasteland' below the surface. Munira's ambivalent perception of events is contrasted to and balanced by it. Thus the listlessness of the protagonists may be measured against the mythogenic confidence of Nyakinyua who emerges as the paradoxical symbol of the link between cultural roots and the contemporary drive to refurbish that link for a new sense of community.

The theme of 'wasteland' (physical and spiritual) is not only established through a system of contrasting images of the degenerate present and heroic, legendary past, it is also reinforced by the imagery of drought and putrefaction. Munira's lament about bringing spiritual drought back to Ilmorog from the city instead of the expected relief for an actual ecological disaster is re-echoed by Wanja when she remarks:

"...we were all like Abdulla but instead of our limbs it was our souls that were maimed." (p.297) And a striking correspondence of physical and spiritual aridity is achieved as Munira's state of spiritual limbo confronts the derelict school yard and its "moss-grown two-roomed house" which he is destined to inhabit. Trying to gain entry into it, he "crashed through into a room full of dead spiders and the wings of flies on cobwebs on all the walls, up to the eaves." (p.5) Henceforth, excremental images take over to give a pungent edge to the portrayal of a consuming moral decadence in the entire society. In a characteristic suspicion of strangers, the village oracle, Mwathi wa Mugo prescribes a "mound of shit" in the school compound in order to deter Munira from spreading urban profanity into the sacred shrine of Ndemi the founding patriarch of Ilmorog. Later on, the stench from a rotting apple nauseates Munira, producing an involuntary streak of "mucus" which strikes the curious Nyakinyua in the face and sends her fleeing with revulsion; Wanja expels her first pregnancy into a lavatory and Abdulla watched half-naked children fighting and "asserting their different claims to territories of rot and discarded rubbish" (p.317).

Just as the imagery of putrefaction, grime and stench underscores the thematic progression of Armah's The Beautyful Ones, so does it become integral to a total appreciation of Petals of Blood. But Ngugi's work is optimistic to an extent which Armah's does not approach. Indeed while nothing survives the ravenous power of rot in The Beautyful Ones, decay yields significant life in Petals of Blood.

Joseph (the erstwhile shop-boy who later distinguishes himself academically and as a budding revolutionary) was actually salvaged from a refuse dump at Limuru. Abdulla found him:

> ...at the place where the big shoe company throws the factory waste...where the shopowners who had taken over from the Indian traders threw their rubbish...He was a child... scrounging for something to eat in the rubbish heap...(pp.285-286)

Besides this significant allusion to the promise and possibilities of new life emerging from decay, there occurs a widespread symbol cluster of fire, rain and harvest which gives strong clues to the spiritual rehabilitation-rebirth-community theme.

Fire symbolism occurs at different levels of significance especially as it relates to Munira and Wanja both of whom get involved in four fire incidents between them. And with the eventual disclosure of Munira's involvement in the fire which killed Kimeria, Chui and Mzigo, the prefigurative relevance of the previous incidents falls into perspective. He has always regarded fire as a symbolic medium of exorcising evil and of moral cleansing. He could not bring himself to confess his first adolescent act of fornication with a prostitute; instead, desiring divine forgiveness, he burns an effigy of the 'evil' woman. "He watched the flames and he felt truly purified by fire." (p.14) Thus his concept of personal purification extends to his interpretation and reaction to the "moral state of man." He had been "so convinced that this world was wrong, was a mistake, that he wanted all his friends to see this and escape in time." (p.232) What represents the wrongness of the world in his immediate perception is Wanja's "whorehouse" which must be burnt down. As he completes what he thinks of as his divinely ordained mission he retreats, like a monk, to the mountains. Ironically however, every thought and action associated with him on the fateful night have actually been suggested to him and prefigured in an earlier soul-searching encounter with Wanja. She tells him about a fire in which her aunt died:

> '...I have liked to believe that she
> burnt herself like the Buddists do, which
> then makes me think of the water and
> fire of the beginning and the water and
> fire of the second coming to cleanse and
> bring purity to our earth of human cruelty
> and loneliness...There are times...when I
> have felt as if I could set myself on fire.
> And I would then run to the mountain top so
> that everyone can see me cleansed to my bones.' (p.65)

And without his knowing it, in destroying Wanja's whorehouse he also destroyed those three men whose representative activities in society have defined them as its enemies. His action thus brings to full circle his earlier prescription of destruction of the oppressor and parasites to his young, curious students. With the action also, the looming suggestiveness of the red tongues of flame which theng'eta's "petals of blood" conveys is resolved.

With Wanja on the other hand, fire symbolizes an invincible, destructive power which she consciously dreads. But more significantly it constitutes, at an abstract level, a symbolic ritual of baptism - a kind of rite de passage which tests and enhances her capacity to survive the gruelling ordeals that chequer her turbulent life. She experiences a kind of rebirth after every disaster only to be consumed by another. And Munira says of her: "'She is that bird periodically born out of the ashes and dust.'" (p.281) This phoenix image links with the dynamism and resilience suggested by her association with fertility rites, the fields, harvest and rain.

All these images of fecundity are particularly concentrated in "Part Three" of the novel which is titled 'To be born...' This section virtually constitutes the one unmistakeable bright spot in the presiding gloom that previously envelops Ilmorog, its inhabitants and, indeed, Ngugi's own prose style. The sudden downpour of the rains releases spontaneous and infectious euphoria. And Ngugi's taut and pained narrative style becomes relaxed in proportion to Ilmorog's relaxed expectancy following the excruciating monotony of a long drawn drought. As the school children look to the heavens in supplication:

> The rains seemed to hear them. The earth swallowed thirstily, swallowed the first few drops and gradually the ground relaxed its hardness and became soft and sloshy. The children splashed their feet in muddy pools and slid smoothly on slopes and hills. (p.196)

And about the reaping time for whatever the earth has yielded Ngugi writes:

> There was something about harvesting, whether it was maize or beans or peas, which always released a youthful spirit in everyone. Children ran about the fields...even old men looked like little children, in their eyes turned to the fields...thrilled by the sight of children...Women winnowing beans in the wind was itself a sight to see...Later it was the turn of the cows...they would run about, tails held up to the sky...the male would run after a young female, giving it no rest or time to eat, expecting another kind of harvest. (pp.203-4)

This feeling of being-at-one-with-nature is an essential factor in any elucidation of Ngugi's creative design. And it is no accident that in this section, and thenceforth, the narrative is dominated by the collective (communal) voice increasingly aligned with authorial perspective.

Leslie Monkman has argued that the thematic preoccupation in A Grain of Wheat lies on potential rather than realised achievement.[7] In it, Ngugi's artistic vision can be perceived to focus on the rediscovery of a true sense of community through a rather exorcist release of the protagonists from their crippling guilt-complex. It is thus appropriate that the symbolic trial (especially the shock and self-recognition which it engenders in those present) of Mugo and the 'stool of reconciliation' which Gikonyo promises to carve, envision the birth of a potentially humane society. Further more - without of course straining the apprently sequential relationship between A Grain of Wheat and Petals of Blood but, none the less, taking advantage of hindsight - it could not be difficult to recognize that Ngugi's renewed effort in the latter is substantially geared towards the on-going dialectic of aloneness and community. And this finds ample expression in the compelling contrast of the vulnerable,

unconnected existence of Munira's motley group; and the incipient but secure feeling of collective strength that they discover during the "big march" to the city, culminating in the communal soul-cleansing theng'eta experience.

A measure of the promise of a nascent sense of community may be sought in the strategically positioned 'Journey' which Munira christens "The exodus towards the kingdom of knowledge." (p.118) Its symbolic character is established in the part titles dividing the novel into four thematic movements which, strung together, reads: "Walking...Toward Bethlehem To be Born Again...Ia luta continua!" But meanwhile, there is an allusive quality about this 'subtitle' that must be resolved, since it bears significantly upon the way we ultimately translate the symbolism of the journey. Indeed, there is a multiple score on the allusion: it recalls the christian myth of the apocalypse; the last line of Yeats' poem, "The Second Coming" (a poetic interpretation of history in the light of a reversal of the christian myth); as well as the Marxist conception of the historical experience.

The relevance of some kind of religious interpretation of Petals of Blood suggests itself and seems impossible to ignore. But as we have tried to argue previously (in discussing A Grain of Wheat) a "christian" interpretation could be acceptable only in so far as Ngugi's allusions to certain biblical myths are seen as the natural result of their pointed convergence with Gikuyu ontology. It would then be more useful to say that the Christian myths provide his creative impulse with a handy expressive medium for the relatively recondite Gikuyu mythopoesy. In fact, the Bethlehem metaphor would seem nowadays (like many others such as Babylon, Exodus, New Jerusalem) to attract connotations that are only remotely religious - more so in the context of the twentieth century socio-

cultural and literary philosophy of the black peoples of the diaspora in which Ngugi is evidently interested.[8] It is therefore instructive to note that he could not have intended that his biblical allusions be strained beyond the creative expediency of their archetypal validity.

It is thus in the context of imaginative expediency that we find Ngugi's allusion to the Yeats' poem apposite in structuring the dialectic of myth and history and, his own vision of the struggle to liberate Africa and the Third World from the clutches of capitalist exploitation. Yeats' poem ends as follows:

> And what rough beast, its hour come round
> at last,
> Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?

But we can scarcely pursue the similarity between Ngugi's sub-title and the last line of Yeats' poem beyond the level of suggestiveness. Both artists' conception of history differs significantly enough to make such an effort fruitless. On his own part, Yeats prophesies (in his poem) the imminent reversal of the world's "gyre" and symbol of Christian order in the birth of an Antichirst "anarchy" (symbolized by the Bolshevik revolution and the rise of Communism) which will destroy two millennia of Christian civilization. The poem conveys a sense of protest and horror at the prospective anscendancy of the "rough beast" and loss of "innocence".

While mindful of the Yeatsian position, Ngugi seeks to transcend its latent cynicism. By appending "Again...La luta continua!" to the last words ("to be born") of Yeats' poem, Ngugi underscores his own positive acceptance of the necessity for change, and optimism (or faith in Marxian millennialism) which he also expresses on the acknowledgements page of Petals of Blood:

...
Knowing that
However long and arduous the struggle
Victory is certain.

Towards the end of the novel, one of the protagonists, Karega muses thus:

> The true lesson of history was this: that the so-called victims, the poor, the downtrodden, the masses, had always struggled with spears and arrows, with their hands and songs of courage and hope, to end their oppression and exploitation: that they would continue struggling until a human kingdom came: a world in which goodness and beauty and strength and courage would be seen not in how cunning one can be, not in how much power to oppress one possessed, but only in one's contribution in creating a more humane world in which the inherited inventive genius of man in culture and science from all ages and climes would be not the monopoly of a few, but for the use of all, so that all flowers in all their different colours would ripen and bear fruits and seeds. (p.303)

This reflects the maturing of the young idealist hero. But it is a maturity attainable, not through a complacent aping of ideas fashioned by others but, only after a thorough interrogation of attitudes and options in the effort to get at the meaning of the past (cultural heritage preserved in recorded history, myths and legends), the contemporary socio-economic and political experience; of suffering and endurance; the sense of community and co-operation - indeed, "what it meant to be human..., alive and free." (p.197) "The Journey" which is one of "search and exploration" (p.237) is just the most appropriate platform upon which Ngugi tests the potential of both his protagonists and his own vision of society.

The journey of the Ilmorogians is thus infused with an epic vitality. It is a symbolic re-enactment of the primal wanderings by the founding fathers of Africa, their confrontation with the elements, in search of self-knowledge and self-definition. Conceived in strenuous circumstances, the massive response that it draws forth, the test to which it puts hitherto

untapped collective will-power of all the participants, demonstrate qualities that no other myth can illustrate with such penetrating, sympathetic particularity or immediacy. The story of the journey is suffused with evocations of a qualitative inner propulsion which recreates for us, not any ordinary protest-march of a pauperised and disgruntled people but, an enlivened collective Spirit:

> The trek to the city had attracted many people carried on the waves of hope and promises, and had awoken a feeling that the crisis was a community crisis needing a communal response. (p.123)

The collective remembrances, hope and idealism, individual pet dreams, intimate confessions and soul-purging which it induces are equalled only by the many physical ways in which the participants excel themselves.

Despite his physical handicap, Abdulla emerges as the hero of the journey; his "stoic endurance infused strength and purpose into the enterprise." (p.134) The inspirational force of the folktales with which he cheers his younger compatriots and his recollections of the heroic wars of resistance against colonial aggression by earlier generations of patriots bring back the awareness of:

> a new relationship to the ground on which they trod: the ground, the murram grass, the agapanthas, the cactus, everything in the plains, had been hallowed by the feet of those who had fought and died that Kenya might be free: wasn't there something, a spirit of those people in them too? (p.143)

This pervasive sense of oneness and community foreshadows and contrasts the fragmenting influence of the "Trans-Africa road" (built through the heart of Ilmorog instead of the waterway promised by their MP; to which Abdulla's donkey is 'sacrificed'; and which brings in its wake the final demise of old Ilmorog):

> The Trans-Africa road...was built, not to give content and reality to the vision of a continent, but to show our readiness and faith in the practical recommendations of a realist from abroad. The master, wily architect of a myriad division; jealous God against the unity of a continent, now clapped his hands and nodded his head and willingly loaned out the money to pay for imported expertise and equipment. And so, abstracted from the vision of oneness, of a collective struggle of the African peoples, the road brought only the unity of earth's surface...(p.262)

But, viewed against the aftermath of the journey, the marchers' vision of communal unity also carries a hint of irony.

Meanwhile, unbeknown to him, Abdulla's extraordinary exploits not only create spontaneous unity among the people, but also make him look to them "like a god of the plains." (p.139) Wanja, the erstwhile good-time girl of the city bars has lost her vengeful thirst for "power...over men's souls" (p.45); caring for the weak and the children the sight of whom arouses in her "an excruciating love" and a desire "to embrace and give milk to all the little ones of the earth." (p.144) Even Munira's state of "'being without involvement'" (p.20) momentarily recedes and he "felt for a time freed from that overwhelming sense of always being on the outside of things." (p.139) And according to him, the whole experience is indeed a journey "toward the kingdom of knowledge" (p.118) - especially of authentic spirit of community.

Thus it represents a symbolic communal psychic excursion into the secrets of the heroic past of the tribe. And they perceive themselves as proud heirs to a past whose spiritual strength must be harnessed in a markedly different (or "wrong" as Munira would put it) world of the present in their vision of a wholesome tomorrow of posterity. In this sense, the symbolic role of Nyakinyua and the creative purpose of her mytho-legendary version of history (which Ngugi endorses to a very considerable degree) will, perhaps, alleviate Professor Gerald Moore's (apparent) disquiet

on behalf of "strictly naturalistic standards."[9] Ngugi does not seem to conceive of or intend her to be seen in terms of historical realism. The image of her that emerges is rather archetypal. Known to the protagonists as just the "old woman", "mother" or "mother of men", Nyakinyua strikes one as the mother-figure of the tribe. Together with the seer-oracle, Mugo, she is the acknowledged custodian of ancestral memories. Her passionate identification with the land and eventual death for it underscore her symbolic function. And during the mass trek to defend the land she "was the spirit that guided and held them together" (p.123 and my emphasis); the "strong sinews forged by earth and sun and rain... the link binding past and present and future." (p.212)

Just as the Abdulla-Nyakinyua essence gives a physical and psychic impetus to the journey to Nairobi, the march in itself constitutes the structural 'soul' of Petals of Blood. Like a similar one in Sembene Ousmane's God's Bits of Wood (1960) it confers an epic aura on the total creative achievement of Ngugi. But Ngugi's novel does reveal a qualitative humane sensitivity superior to the compulsively promethean, mechanized and detached view of life which largely permeates Ousmane's. Particularly striking in the "exodus" of Petals of Blood is the entrancing vigour with which the many traditional legends and songs are infused. On one occasion, for example, Abdulla tells about the exploits, betrayal and capture of the Mau Mau hero, Dedan Kimathi: the forest fighters wait with trepidation for report on his trial (by the colonial authorities) from their spies:

> 'And when they finally came, early on the morning of fourth day, we needed no words from their mouth: how shall I tell it? You know when there is an important death. It is hot and it is not hot. It is cold and it is not cold. A lone bird flies in the sky, you don't know where it is going because it is going nowhere. We all returned to our places determined to continue fighting and the struggle but things were no longer the same! My friends... no longer the same.' (pp.142-3)

And as they discover a new awareness of the power of collective struggle and experience the birth of a community through the shared trauma of the immediate journey, things are also "no longer the same." Ilmorog is no longer the same in two main senses: the negative result of the 'development' programmes it attracts and, more importantly, the consciousness of its destiny at the vanguard of the battle for moral and spiritual rearmament of the entire nation.

Indeed, very appropriately the novel is structured as an investigation of murder which is also a literary mode of inquiry (witness Shakespeare's Hamlet for example) into the moral and spiritual state of a nation or the human condition. Thus, Inspector Godfrey's investigation of the protagonists is important, not so much for the prospect of catching the criminal, as it is Ngugi's creative medium of revealing the different kinds of relationships among all the actors in Petals of Blood; and how their lives - their moral and socio-economic options - (individually and collectively) illustrate the past and present condition of their country. But Ngugi's investigative approach is motivated by, as it were, a prophylactic vision. And when the heat and physical trauma of the immediate experience of the trek to the city subsides, the protagonists face the challenge of the real purpose of it all:

> ...brooding not too far below their tranquil existence was their consciousness of the journey and the experiences which spoke of another less sure, more troubled world which could, any time, descend upon them, breaking asunder their rain-filled sun-warmed calm. They did not talk about it: but they knew, in their different ways, that things would never again be the same. For the journey had presented each with a set of questions for which there were no ready answers; had, because of what they had seen and experienced, thrown up challenges that could neither be forgotten nor put on one side, for they touched on things deep in the psyche, in their separate conceptions of what it meant to be human, a man alive and free. (p.197)

The outer journey now leads to an inner journey into the depths of themselves. Henceforth, the arduous task of giving voice to the nameless communal fears devolves upon the budding revolutionary, Karega - perhaps because he is the energetic youth; but, especially, as he personalizes the promise of a critical and self-critical awareness. In the meantime, his "education" or revolutionary consciousness remains incomplete. Still ahead of him are the experience of the mysteries of his race symbolized by the theng'eta ritual; then a re-experience of the gutter life: "'All over the republic...'" (p.287), and a real confrontation (with consciousness and purposeful alertness) of the rough claws of "the monster" which he has hitherto 'known'only through the Lawyer's well-meaning but naive rhetoric. So far, he has known oppression and exploitation only, as it were, through fairy tales and fossilized history or, as an adventurous juvenile.

Whatever may lie in the future after the trek, Ilmorog has experienced (albeit in paradoxical senses) some form of rebirth. Under the proprietorship of the traditionalist Nyakinyua, the celebration of a rebirth into community finds expression in the fertility rites, planting and harvest, circumcision ceremonies and, particularly, the symbolic theng'eta-drinking session. Perhaps an adequate perception of the effect of theng'eta on the communal psyche would be enhanced by references to Victor Turner's idea of "spontaneous communitas." [10] Of the personae in spontaneous communitas, he writes:

> What they seek is a transformative experience that goes to the root of each person's being and finds in that root something profoundly communal and shared. [11]

It is the same kind of idea that Ngugu himself commends to the creative artist when he says:

> By diving into himself, deep into the collective consciousness of our own people, he can seek the roots, the trends of the revolutionary struggle. 12

And in Petals of Blood Nyakinyua tells the acolytes:

> 'Theng'eta.It is a dream. It is a wish. It gives you sight, and for those favoured by God it can make them cross the river of time and talk with their ancestors. It has given seers their tongues; poets and Gichandi players their words; and it has made barren women mother of many children.' (p.210)

Thus the wave of externalized, semi-conscious wish-dreams and confessions which overwhelms the theng'eta-drinking atmosphere is expressive of a symbolic inward journey into the soul, of commitment and preparation to enter into authentic communal relationship. And under the guidance of Nyakinyua as the presiding spirit, the experience of mutual self-discovery induces a voluntary communal soul-cleansing. It could not, then, be an exaggeration to remark that it is an ideal which Ngugi himself has pursued consistently throughout his creative career, but never before limned with the passion and success achieved in Petals of Blood.

But there is something incomplete about the assumed magical efficacy of the ritual. And Ngugi knows about it. Spreading from the preceding "opera" of erotic abuse, an aura of disjunctive sensibility hangs over the administration of theng'eta. After Karega's "confession" of his undying love affair with Munira's late sister - that on top of the fact that Wanja is showing increasing preference for Karega's company rather than Munira who, ironically, is already feeling really "involved" with her; moreover, Karega's revealed past links him with a dead brother and Mau Mau veteran who in his turn is rumoured to be responsible for the loss of Munira's father's ear:

> Munira sighed, something between a cough and a choked cry. He then stood up and went out. He was unable to understand the hatred that had suddenly seized him. (p.220)

Two nights later, he reminds Karega of the intended aim and achieved result of the night of theng'eta:

> '...you'll agree with me that such a sense of common destiny, a collective spirit, is rare. That is why the old woman rightly called it a drink of peace. Now it has turned out to be a drink of strife.' (p.240)

The element and potential force of divisiveness (as represented by Munira) during the celebration of communal rebirth is muted at the relevant moment - just as Munira's dissonant interruption of Nyakinyua and Njuguna's song is good-humouredly passed over, abetted by Abdulla's intervention. But the recognition of the existence of a Munira is relevant to our appreciation of Ngugi's creative vision, as indeed he would probably agree. It would therefore appear - perhaps rightly so - that, despite the fact that the apparent devaluation of Munira's misdemeanour might be consistent with the portrayal of him as a solo, "false consciousness" in a Marxist sense, his subjective inwardness is a necessary complement as well as a contrast to Karega's development and, sometimes, careless disregard of other people's feelings. Thus, in the figure of Munira, we perceive elements of the deep concern with the psyche that always represents a major aspect of Ngugi's art. But we also notice that, if pursued to the exclusion of community, it becomes a destructive negation.

Our emphasis on the mytho-cultural aspects of Ngugi's novels is not intended to propose that he is a traditionist. References to these in any discussion of his works become relevant to the extent that they elucidate and underline the primacy of the creative sensibility that informs them. Moreover, he himself decries any exclusivist preoccupation (creatively or politically) with culture. In a prefatory note to his book of critical essays, Homecoming,[13] he makes the following quotation from

Kenyatta's Facing Mount Kenya: "A culture has no meaning apart from the social organization of life on which it is built."[14] A re-creation of the spiritual strength of tradition is therefore not, for Ngugi, a return to the fascination of antiquarianism. Rather, it is a kind of launching-pad for a forward-looking, socialistic vision. Characteristically, the authorial attitude in Petals of Blood raises significant questions about certain cultural assumptions such as the efficacy of the heroic myths and minor superstitions in combating the problems of contemporary society. Karega reviews the mythical transcendence of the theng'eta experience thus:

> It was really very beautiful. But at the end of the evening Karega felt very sad. It was like beholding a relic of beauty that had suddenly surfaced, or like listening to a solitary beautiful tune straying, for a time, from a dying world. (p.210)

Prior to this occasion however, Ngugi has deliberately created contexts and episodes for trying and enhancing Karega's potential of critical consciousness.

The narrator charts the exploratory route of Karega's critical awareness thus:

> ...there are many questions about our history which remain unanswered. Our present day historians, following on similar theories yarned out by defenders of imperialism, insist we only arrived here yesterday. Where went all the Kenyan people who used to trade with China, India, Arabia long long before Vasco da Gama came to the scene and on the strength of gunpowder ushered in an era of blood and terror and instability - an era that climaxed in the reign of imperialism over Kenya?...The story of [Kenyan people's] resistance: who will sing it? Their struggles to defend their land,...wealth...lives; who'll tell of it? What of their earlier achievements in production that had annually attracted visitors from ancient China and India?
>
> Just now we can only depend on legends passed from generation to generation by the poets and players of Gichandi, Litungu and Nyatiti supplemented by the most recent archaeological and linguistic researches and also by what we can glean from between the lines of the records of the colonial adventurers of the last few centuries, especially the nineteenth century. (pp.67-8)

Then, both Abdulla and Nyakinyua are held before Karega's impressionable, curious mind. The one symbolizing the interminable cycle of betrayal and disillusion of lived history - a link between the dead heroes of the historic Mau Mau war of resistance against colonialism and exploitation, and the contemporary selfish opportunism of its privileged survivors; as well as between the true spirit and idealism of all oppressed peoples. The other (Nyakinyua) is the symbol of the vitality of premordial African legendary tradition of optimism. Thus positioned, Karega's innocent or bewildered self-dissolution in the heroic past is often counterpointed with, for example, Wanja's down to earth realism.

At an anticlimatic point of the journey to the city the following conversation ensues between Wanja and Karega:

> 'Tell me, Karega, do you always think about the past?'
> ...
> 'To understand the present...you must understand the past. To know where you are, you must know where you came from,' /replied Karega/ 'don't you think?'
>
> 'How? I look at it this way. Drought and thirst and hunger are hanging over Ilmorog! What use is Ndemi's story? I am drowning: what use would be my looking back to the shore from which I fell?'
>
> 'The fact that they did things, that they refused to drown; shouldn't that give us hope and pride?'
>
> 'No, I would feel better if a rope was thrown at me. Something I can catch on to...'...
> 'Sometimes there is no greatness in the past. Sometimes one would like to hide the past even from oneself.' (pp.127-8)

And to the very end she never ceases to startle Karega with her realistic cynicism, even as she is genuinely sympathetic towards his apparent "faith in people": "'I ask neither pity nor forgiveness nor any understanding excuse. This world...this Kenya...this Africa knows only one law. You eat

somebody or you are eaten. You sit on somebody or somebody sits on you.'" (p.291) Hers is essentially a despairing and negative stance which, because it is a true reflection of the prevailing, decadent socio-economic mores in her society, is all the more compelling.

However, in the overall context of the dialectical thrust of Petals of Blood, the Wanja phenomenon (like Munira) is another hurdle in the process of Karega's maturation. In this light (excepting her symbolic redemption in the baby she carries for Abdulla), her career in the novel has come to a dead-end. This fact is subtly hinted at by the contrasting portrayal of her and Karega in Nairobi:

> They walked on,...She stopped by a fence and looked to the plains of Nairobi Park. He also stood beside her and looked at the Ngong Hills in the distance silhouetted against a misty sky...(p.161; my emphasis)

Battered and defeated as she is by the ascendancy of a materialistic ethos, her role serves (as it were) merely to give eloquence and depth to the moral decay that has overtaken her society:

> She had been, it seemed to her, the warrior in the story who came home to tell and catalogue his defeats, not in shame but in pride, as if defeat was itself an achievement. She, Wanja, had chosen to murder her own child. In doing so she had murdered her own life and now she took her final burial in property and degredation as a glorious achievement. (p.328)

But, for Karega, the search for the New Earth must continue. He must bear, unrelieved, the burden of making sense and solving the mysteries and ironies of history; (p.127) "...he would not, he could not accept the static vision of Wanja's logic. It was too ruthless, and it could only lead to despair and self or mutual annihilation." (p.303)

It may be said (given his energetic commitment to a Socialist vision of society) that the ultimate concern of Ngugi's creative writings - especially A Grain of Wheat and Petals of Blood - lies in probing the

objective historical causative factors and basis of the real lopsided socio-economic relationships that reduce Man's potentiality to be. And so, he might be seen to be projecting an alternative, neo-Marxist egalitarian vision. But, his works show sufficient awareness of the missing links in either 'received' ideas or African history to discourage any literal Marxist interpretation.[15] In this knowledge lies Karega's dilemma and disillusion with the imperialist version of African history parroted by the so-called African Professors:

> He had involved himself in books, in literature, in history, in philosophy, desperately looking for the meaning of the riddle at the meeting-point of the ironies of history, appearance and reality, expectation and actual achievement. (p.127)

And in the absence of satisfying explanation, the only thing that makes sense or, at least, recreates the nearest approximate of truth for his inchoate and bewildered vision of society (besides the glaring drought and mass poverty and the ostentatious affluence of a few) is the splendour of the heroic past given life and vitality in the mytho-legendary stories told by Nyakinyua and Abdulla. In the circumstances (Ngugi seems to be saying), it is a healthy education for Karega to be schooled in the Nyakinyua ideal. Thus:

> ...he was Ndemi felling trees in the forest, building a nascent industry...but his mind, as if being challenged by the vastness of the space, went beyond Ndemi, beyond Ilmorog. It was to a past he could not know but which he felt he knew...(p.124)

However, as a result of rededication and conscious learning - prompted largely by the Lawyer's curt exhortation: "'If you would learn look about you: choose your side'" (p.200) - he comes to the awareness that: "Africa, after all, did not have one but several pasts which were in perpetual struggle." (p.214) Significantly, he learns that the past is relevant:

> '...but only as a living lesson to the present. I mean we must not preserve our past as a museum: rather, we must study it critically, without illusions, and see what lessons we can draw from it in today's battlefield of the future and the present. But to worship it - no. Maybe I used to do it: but I don't want to continue worshipping in the temples of a past without tarmac roads, without electric cookers, a world dominated by slavery to nature.' (p.323)

But meanwhile, he is driven from Ilmorog by Munira's jealousy - as well as his own lack of understanding. He loses his secure job as a village teacher and finds himself in the city, wandering from job to job among workers toiling, unrecompensed, under the grinding wheels of mercantile capitalism. There, among the wretched of the earth (to borrow the Fanonian phraseology), sweating and talking to his compatriots, he becomes a trades union activist urging the unity of workers against the priests and god of commercialism. In the growing strength of a united trade unionism, he discovers that "'There must be another way...there must be another force that can be a match for the monster and its angels.'" (p.288) And one could not agree more with Eustace Palmer when he points out that:

> Appalled by the capitalism and materialism he sees around him with its consequent injustice and inequalities, Karega comes to the conclusion that for a proper and equitable reorganization of our society we must go back to our African origins and learn lessons from the way in which the African peoples produced and organized their wealth before colonialism. 16

And, like Palmer, one also notes that while Karega and his lawyer mentor embody the moral and social positives in Petals of Blood; as well as the contemporaneous need of Karega's revolutionary role, Karega himself could not be said to be wholly representative of Ngugi's vision - even as he (Ngugi) lauds the "stubborn youths - who can do something" in Homecoming.[17] But to stop at that is to fail to account fully for the intricate richness and interplay of "points of view", as technique, on the one hand, and as aid to the interplay of myth and history in shaping Ngugi's vision of society in the novel on the other hand.

It is on this score that John Chileshe's article entitled "Petals of Blood: Ideology and Imaginative Expression"[18] is, on the whole, a thoroughly misplaced 'critical' commentary on Ngugi's novel. Having complained about "the contradictions inherent in Ngugi's authorial ideology and his objective position in the Kenyan situation...",[19] he concludes that:

> ...there are literary contraditions in the ideological presentation of the situations that lead to the development of a revolutionary consciousness among the workers and peasants. The ideological necessity for this imaginative construction does not lie far beneath the surface of the text; and it is a necessity that diminishes even the success of the attempt to develop an original narrative technique.[20] (my emphasis)

The first sentence hardly makes any sense. The first half of the second is not in dispute; but the rest of it is absolutely unfounded and false. The misleading brevity of the article (more so because it is based upon extrapolation and distortion of isolated parts of a whole imaginative construct), is symptomatic of the naive simplifications into which the critical tendency that over-plays the ideological against the aesthetic aspects of Ngugi's art could degenerate. In its own particular context, Chileshe's opinion derives from an obvious misinterpretation of Karega's role (which, opposing it to Munira's, he identifies unconditionally with the "authorial ideology") as well as a misunderstanding of Ngugi's comment which he quotes in support of it. He quotes Ngugi thus: "'Ngaahika Ndeenda [a play written in Kiguyu and produced in conjunction with the peasants of Limuru] showed me the road along which I should have been travelling all these past 17 years of my writing career.'"[21] One would have thought it obvious enough that Ngugi's comment in no way diminishes his own achievement as a seasoned novelist. And, although he admits that the novel form, for him, has proved inadequate as a means of conveying an ideological message with the required immediacy, that comment is more relevant to Ngugi's concern about the need to employ African languages

(as against alien, 'colonial' ones) as medium of artistic creation.

That there is an ideological consideration in Ngugi's choice of characters and what they represent in relation to the kind of society envisioned is not in any doubt. Indeed, the onus of laying the foundation of that new community of the future rests upon the protagonists' perceptions and actions and what sense these make or help to make of the "present" in Petals of Blood. Thus, Ngugi's vision of a humane community needs the interacting points ov view of all the leading characters - Karega, Munira, Wanja, Abdulla, including Nyakinyua - how they respond to one another and to their environment; how they recreate the constant engagement of the hisorical with the mythic consciousness and how these assist the way we see the relationship between the past and present defining the future. This is where (as we have tried to show) the opposing perspectives of Karega and Munira become relevant. Karega's consciousness is non-mythic (except in his early, bewildered search for the meaning and relevance of "the ironies of history"), while Munira's is non-historical (except in his account of his father's memories). Between the two extremes lie the essentially realistic/cynical, and historical/optimistic perspectives of Wanja and Abdulla respectively. Both form, as it were, a possible middle ground between the aggressive insensitivity of Karega (especially to the personal feelings of Munira and Wanja - preoccupied as he is with ideology and the class struggle) and Munira's negative withdrawal. From these emerge the symbolic role of the young Joseph and Wanja's unborn child in Ngugi's creative vision.

Just as the workers pledge their support to the imprisoned Karega, the continuing growth of Joseph's social and political consciousness is suggested as he holds Sembene Ousmane's God's Bits of Wood in his hands; and Wanja breaks the news of her coming baby to her mother. The figure she sketches:

> ...began to take shape on the board. It was a combination of the sculpture she once saw at the lawyer's place...and images of Kimathi in his moments of triumph and laughter and sorrow and terror - but without limb. When it was over, she felt a tremendous calm, a kind of inner assurance of the possibilities of a new kind of power. (p.338)

In that simple sketch is contained a forceful evocation of all the positive virtues of the true, fighting "spirit of resistance" that Petals of Blood strives to recapture - a quality to which Ngugi pays tribute in Mwangi Kariuki's Mau Mau Detainee.[22] Thus together the images of Joseph (salvaged by Abdulla from the society's refuse dump) and the unborn child (also by Abdulla) seem to underscore Ngugi's creative passion for regeneration and re-birth - while focusing on the present situation and Karega's role in it - of a new society that is humane, just and free from the distressing heritage from the colonial past.

V,(iii)

NOTES

1. Ngugi wa Thiong'O, Petals of Blood (Heinemann, London 1977) All references to this edition.

2. See, for example: G.Moore, Twelve African Writers (London 1980) pp.279-86, Eustace Palmer, "Ngugi's Petals of Blood, African Literature Today, 10, (1979) pp.153-66.

3. Palmer, op.cit., p.155.

4. "The Influence of Tradition and Western Religion on the Cultural and Political Thinking of Ngugi wa Thiong'O and Okot p'Bitek" (Unpublished M.Phil.Thesis: Leeds University, 1978) p.231.

5. ibid.,

6. Palmer, op.cit.

7. "Menya and the New Jerusalem in A Grain of Wheat", African Literature Today, 7, (1975) pp.111-16.

8. See "Part Three" of Homecoming (London 1972) pp.81-127.

9. Moore, op.cit., p.281.

10. V.W.Turner, The Ritual Process (Suffolk, 1969) pp.121-28.

11. ibid., p.126.

12. "The African Writer and His Past", C.Heywood (ed.), Perspectives on African Literature (London, 1971) p.8.

13. op.cit.

14. ibid., p.ii.

15. Although, evidently, he could be seen to share Marxian millennialism, together with its belief in the justness (and faith in their ultimate victory) of the struggle of all oppressed peoples against oppression, Ngugi differs significantly from certain assumption of Orthodox Marxism. For example, Marxist aesthetics has no room for the kind of sympathetic sensitivity with which Ngugi handles the question of private guilt, confession and purgation of his protagonists. Even in Petals of Blood that could be considered to be nearest to the Marxist ideal, such 'negative' characters as Munira and Wanja are not really denounced. And rather more significantly (as in A Grain of Wheat), Ngugi's approach is a comment and criticism of the (classical) "historical" conception of character. In this sense, his method is closer to the spirit of "Democratic Humanism" which Georg Lukacs espouses in defining the proper aim of the historical novel:

> First, it is to portray the kind of individual destiny that can directly and at the same time typically express the problems of an epoch.
>
> (The Historical Novel. [London, 1981] p.342.

16. Palmer, op.cit., p.163.

17. Homecoming, p.19.

18. The Journal of Commonwealth Literature, XV, 1 (1980) pp.133-37.

19. ibid., p.135.

20. ibid.

21. ibid., n[13]; p.137.

22. One of the most important themes of Kariuki's book for Ngugi is: "The Spirit of Resistance: It is this more than anything else that gives the book its enduring quality, as a prose of praise to an epic struggle."
(Writers in Politics [London, 1981] p.91; original italics)

CONCLUSION

That African writers have, in general, embodied materials from traditional folklore, myths and legends in their works is, without any doubt, a socio-cultural and political option in the first instance. The underlying motive for this option is, of course, the desire among African intellectuals to redeem racial self-hood which the historic encounter with Europe (through the slave trade and colonialism) has severely undermined. The pattern can be traced from the Negritude (Francophone) African writings. And the fact of this more or less deliberate conjunction of cultural assertion with imaginative expression also reproduces itself in the sphere of criticism - engendering that protractedly acrimonious debate on "critical standards", and contesting claims of "commitment" and "non-commitment", in African literature since the sixties and seventies. But, whereas for certain (mainly Francophone) intellectuals, the espousal of African cultural values through its myths and legends was basically complementary to the formulation of a 'Pan-Negro' cultural philosophy, and the articulation of an anti-colonial, anti-racist ideology; others (mainly Anglophone writers), at least in principle, 'return' to traditional mythological sources for symbols and motifs in order to procure psychological and 'religious' effects, beyond static cultural imperatives.

However, even granted a 'purely' literary interest in traditional mythology (African and non-African alike), we have identified three possible attitudes or creative relationships to it in contemporary African novels. These we have called "mythological", <u>preservative</u>; "folkloric", <u>reificatory</u>; and "mythic", <u>exploratory</u> respectively. The last also engages 'tradition' in profound dialogue and characterizes the renewed interest in traditional artistic forms and aesthetics that we

have identified in the novels of Armah, Awoonor, Ngugi, Ouloguem and Soyinka. This study has, therefore, focussed on the mythic imagination as it relates to mythology because we believed that it is the perspective from which one could hope to render as complete as possible an account of the aesthetic of the individual novels themselves. Besides, it would point the direction of the African novel which, while engaged with the socio-political concerns of the day, refuses to stake its artistic claim on any prefabricated ideology that absolves itself from moral and spiritual responsibility, or, from the truly African contribution in pushing the frontiers of the novel form into new areas of creative expression. For, the degree of success that any given African novelist who 'returns' to traditional mythology achieves is, first and foremost, commensurate with the quality of imaginative insight with which he approaches his material as well as the technique of fiction; and how, thereby, he attains a creative authenticity that is valid both on personal and social levels. Thus, we find that the aesthetic functions and value of mythology in contemporary African fictions - as structural and motif-patterning techniques, and as thematic foci for the creative quests for the spiritual or psychological basis of communal renewal - tend to converge most strongly where there is the strongest engagement of the mythic consciousness also with the historical, as in the case of Awoonor, Soyinka and Armah; and vice-versa, as in the case of Ouloguem and Ngugi.

Although the common denominator in the novels that form the central focus of our investigation is the mythic imagination, that imagination is also predicated by what may be described, in the most general sense, as the 'ideological' perspectives of the writers. So, we might approximate the fundamental thrust of the individual writer's creative orientation along the following lines: the 'Ideal' thinking of Awoonor and Soyinka, the 'Colour' thinking of Armah, the 'Sanguinary' thinking of Ouloguem, and the class-

based, ergo, 'dialectical materialist' thinking of Ngugi. Nonetheless, the past and future of Africa as much as its present, occupy a central position in all these forms of 'thought'. And it goes without saying that any one of the novels might also be seen to include, to a more or less degree, more than one consciousness that is not its essential feature.

But, apparently under the impression that any myth necessarily involved the ritual drama of gods or god-like heroes; and confusing the ways of the mythic imagination with the pursuit of mythological archetypes for its own sake, a phalanx of "radical" critics[1] reject the continued use of mythology in contemporary African fictions as the throw-back of a moribund era of cultural revivalism. This renewed critical militancy, (Marxist and 'Pan-African' in outlook) sets out, in the words of Biodun Jeyifo, to "reconstruct the lopsidedness, the uneveness [Sic.] and distortions of our intellectual cultures"[2] in the light of a Socialist programme. In other words, it engages in (as it were) a revision of the existing creative orientations and the critical parameters employed in elucidating them. It specifically reacts against any creative emphasis on the poetic rather than the dialectic, as well as against "formalism" as critical technique. Logically, its point of departure is the question of the political-economic dimension of the dialectic of social purpose in literature - particularly as it relates to the fictional portrayal of the African peasants and proletariat in the Class Struggle. Thus, "radical" criticism perceives that the re-emergence of mythological figures and archetypes in modern African fictions is (especially in the novels that we have been studying) a distortion of the "reality" of the contemporary African experience, namely, the capitalist exploitation of the masses. It claims that, by turning attention away from the realities of oppression, poverty, ignorance and disease toward inscrutable idyll, such fictions (excepting an uncertainty about the appropriate stance to adopt

toward Ngugi's later novels) pretend to a "trans-class, trans-historical validity";[3] and so, encourage conformity while ministering to bourgeois complacency. While the socio-political objective is laudable, its means, through literature and literary criticism, might be questionable. How valid could it be as a method of literary criticism directed without discrimination at the existing body of African fictions?

Any honest attempt to answer that query will begin by accepting that, as it now is, the 'method' is only a rag-bag of ideological good-will, clever talk and vilification with just occasional glows of literary critical insight. As a method of literary criticism it is, as yet, inchoate, incoherent and riding more on sentiment than any clearly definable literary discipline that is as attentive to aesthetic forms as it is to ideology. Perhaps the main fault lies in trying too hard to load particular works of art with more ideological weight than might be appropriate to their essential forms. While one acknowledges the possibility that the 'shock-effects' of this critical impatience (or intolerance) might bring about a new generation of revolutionary writers, one could only, sadly, liken its current advocates to the proverbial Chiefs without (as yet) their Indians. But sometimes too, one can only marvel at the ridiculous lengths to which the "radical" critic is prepared to push his impatience. For instance, in criticizing Ngugi's A Grain of Wheat and Petals of Blood, Kole Omotoso (himself a creative artist of some standing) demonstrates a less admirable side of "radical" criticism when he writes thus:

> If one accepts that radical social change can best be achieved through the mobilisation of the whole community, and that a work of art has a role in this, it means that individuals have to be typecast while the community becomes the active agent in the action of the novel.4 (my emphasis)

How better to illustrate that a prior commitment to ideology leads the critic into untenable positions of prescriptiveness, failing to

appreciate the variety of ways in which the African novelist may contribute to the common goal of the material, as well as spiritual, liberation of Africa. Therefore, we could not state too often that we cannot hope to account adequately for the dialectic of a novel until we have learnt to come to terms with its aesthetic. Extrapolation and smart corner-cutting cannot be a substitute for the painstaking process of reading.

CONCLUSION

NOTES

1. Notably the "Ibadan-Ife Group" of which Biodun Jeyifo and Femi Osofisan are among the leading spokesmen. And the following from Jeyifo - in a paper presented at the Ibadan Conference in December 1977, the theme of which was: 'Radical Perspective on African Literature and Society'- could be taken as its manifesto:

> As socialists and dialectical materialists we have powerful, integrative intellectual tools. The imperative now is that we must immerse ourselves completely in the history and realities of our national social structures and cultures, and from there define the intellectual tasks appropriate to the moment. Only thus can we reconstruct the lopsidedness, the uneveness [sic] and distortions of our intellectual cultures. Literary creations and literary criticism stand to benefit and be beneficial from such directions.

("Class Ideology in Contemporary African Literature and Criticism: Some Provisional Workshop Notes", p.9).

2. ibid.

3. ibid., p.5.

4. "Radical Content and the Sense of Form: The Case of the African Novel". (Paper presented at the Ibadan 'Workshop on Radical Perspectives on African Literature and Society'; Dec.1977) p.10.

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