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CRITERIA IN THE CRITICISM OF
WEST AFRICAN FICTION

by

A.R. Gurnah

A THESIS

Submitted to
the University of Kent at Canterbury
for the degree of PH.D.

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ABSTRACT
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A.R. Gurnah

This study attempts to identify the major preoccupations of the criticism of African fiction, and to observe how these preoccupations have influenced readings of selected West African novels.

The controversy that surrounded the négritude movement in English-speaking Africa has tended to discourage critics from acknowledging its influence in the development of the criticism and the literature. This influence can be seen both in the continuing racial assertiveness of the criticism, and more importantly, in the manner in which some criticism defines itself and its criteria for judgement in terms of concepts of racial and cultural "authenticity."

It is one of the contentions of this study that this preoccupation with the "essence" of what it is to be African has contributed to the misreading of the early novels of Ayi Kwei Armah. The discussion of these novels in Chapter III attempts to demonstrate this, while at the same time conceding that the interest of the writers in social problems discourages a wholeheartedly "formal" approach to criticism. By comparison of the early novels of Armah with Achebe's No Longer At Ease and A Man of the People, an attempt is made to demonstrate that the controversy surrounding the work of the former, and the generous praise for the work of the latter, arises from the contrasting manner in which the two writers view society, and from the critics' response to this.

The efforts to define an African tradition are discussed in Chapter IV, and the discussion indicates the problems that occur when the desire for definitive norms overcomes the need to acknowledge complexities. The discussion of Soyinka's The Interpreters is intended to show both that the novel suffers at the hands of critics who equate ease of syntax with tradition, and that Soyinka's vision of the past as in dynamic relationship with the present offers a more profound understanding of tradition than some of the more facile and general descriptions of it.

The language of expression is a live issue in the criticism of African literature. This is discussed in Chapter V, along with the efforts that some writers have made to get round the restrictions that the use of English places on their work.

Chapter VI discusses the attempts that some critics have made to define the qualifying attributes of the critic of African literature, particularly in relation to Western critics. This is followed by a brief conclusion which attempts to consider the main issues discussed in the study.

PREFACE

I would like to thank, first of all, Dr C.L. Innes, for the encouragement and assistance that she offered me throughout the various stages of this study, and for reading the manuscript and offering indispensable criticism in its preparation. I wish to thank, also, Professor Emeritus, Molly M. Mahood, of the University of Kent at Canterbury, without whose help it would not have been possible to enter into this undertaking at all.

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I

Introduction

This study attempts to identify and explore the criteria that are influential in the criticism of West African fiction. It will attempt to evaluate the extent to which such criteria have obscured or revealed the strengths of the works being considered. On the whole, this study will concern itself with the problems in criticism that the use of such criteria as "African authenticity," the role of literature in the community, the implications of the use of European languages, and the relationship of knowledge and critical function, have raised. The discussion of the novels in the study is intended to show how these criteria have influenced readings of selected West African novels, and to demonstrate that a less problematic approach is possible, and, in fact, leads us to a better understanding of the novels. The general line of argument will show that a preoccupation with such criteria has distracted the criticism from a proper appreciation of the works to which it is addressing itself. The discussion of the novels, therefore, is as detailed as it is in order to show what is missed through allowing these preoccupations to pre-empt analysis and judgement, and also to reveal the novels' strengths and weaknesses.

On the whole, the focus will be on African critics. This is because they have shown more interest in defining the criteria for the criticism that the literature "needs," and therefore have been more likely to raise, and at times create, critical problems. Also, the criticism of African literature is, generally speaking, more

firmly in the hands of African critics now than it was a decade ago. It seems reasonable to assume that this will continue to be so, and therefore it seems wise to consider just what problems critics of African literature have chosen, or are forced to address themselves to.

This study will not be a survey of the African critical climate, in the strict and even-handed sense of the word. It will attempt to identify specific critical problems that have come about as a result of the manner in which certain criteria have become accepted in the criticism of the novel in Africa. It will be concerned to show how these criteria have influenced critical opinion, and this will be counter-balanced with detailed readings of selected novels.

"Literary criticism" is being used in the broad sense of the term here, to include statements that refer to literature, as well as to the more specific analyses and reviews of literary texts. In some cases, these statements are very wide-ranging and might more accurately be described as "history of literature" or "sociology of literature" or just "plain junk" rather than "literary criticism." However, except where there is an obvious conflict of methods or ends, these statements will be treated as "literary criticism," in order to bring them within the scope of this study. The term "critic," therefore, will be used equally broadly. The seriousness with which the various critics are to be taken, it is hoped, will be clearly implied in the arguments that will be offered in response to their positions. Since it is the critical problems that are the preoccupation of this study, rather than the relative merits of the critics, there may not always be overt and evaluative comparisons between various critics. It is hoped that such comparisons and evaluations will be discernible in our response, even if not always baldly and deliberately framed. The justification for this squeamishness is that in this way it will be possible to concentrate

on issues rather than on drawing tentative conclusions about the critics' abilities. Wherever it appears to be necessary, comparisons between critics will be made.

The following summary of this study may indicate more clearly its scope and approach.

Chapter Two, "Négritude and Its Influence," will attempt to describe the background to the development of African literature, and to show that its early development has to some extent determined the nature of the present concerns of the literature and its criticism. We will attempt, in the first place, to understand what négritude meant, and how, later on, its own excesses contributed to the controversy that surrounded the movement. The influence of négritude on the literature and criticism of Anglophone Africa has tended to be discounted, or has generally been played down. Yet, in some very significant ways, the rhetorical and polemical stance that négritude theorists adopted has its parallels, and on occasions is the indirect source, of the attitude of confrontation that informs some Anglophone criticism. For the importance of the movement is not only that it challenged the literary and psychological stereotype of the Negro, but that it also, through the indefatigable efforts of Léopold Sédar Senghor, attempted to describe the distinction between the Negro and European concepts of culture. The dialectic of Senghor's theory of the "civilisation of the universal" relies on the oppositional qualities of the two cultures, as will be seen later. For the moment it will be sufficient to recognise that Senghor's anxiety to establish the unique independence of Negro culture from the European provided an early platform for a discussion of the function and appreciation of the arts in African society. The influence of this early interest can be seen in the continuing discussion of the issues in the criticism of African

literature. Furthermore, Senghor's attempts to describe the role of literature in an African community have been followed by others, including Chinua Achebe, whose conception of the positive role that literature can and should play in social progress have led them to condemn as defeatist and contemptuous of Africa the writers who, in their opinion, are too critical of the community. It is out of a similar preoccupation with the contribution of criticism as well as literature to social awareness that some critics have felt that there is an urgent necessity to describe an "African aesthetics," an elaborated code of responses that will make the critic consciously aware that he has to operate within an "African tradition."

A major obstacle in the way of such a description is the problem posed by the language of expression. Is it possible to talk of an "African aesthetics" when African writers are using European languages as the medium of expression? Does the use of these languages not affect the literature's "Africanness," both because its writers are thus forced into the literary conventions of another culture, and also because the literature thus remains inaccessible to a lot of Africans? In any case, how seriously can we take the assumption that there is enough of an "African tradition" to allow the critic to generalise an "aesthetics" from it? And does the critic know enough to be able to do so?

These issues will be discussed in more detail in the chapter, and an attempt will be made to indicate their connection with négritude.

Chapter Three, "The Novel and the Community," explores specific texts in the light of Chapter Two's discussion of the role that literature should play in the community. In an attempt to define a positive role for literature, it will be argued, some critics have been happy to condemn African novels which they consider pessimistic

and defeatist. One of the most consistent victims of this condemnation has been Ayi Kwei Armah's The Beautiful Ones Are Not Born (1969). Several critics, though by no means all, have found this novel to be unjustifiably critical and contemptuous of Ghana, and by implication, of Africa. One of the harshest critics of the novel is Chinua Achebe, who in his essay "Africa and Her Writers" finds the novel "sick."¹ In this section, an attempt is made to demonstrate that such a view of the novel represents a misreading and a misunderstanding of what the novel does do. This section advances the proposition that a preoccupation with defining a positive social role for literature is largely responsible for the misreading of Armah's early work. It is because of this preoccupation, it will be argued, that the crucial distinction between "the man's" perspective in The Beautiful Ones and what this implies about Armah is allowed to blur to non-existence. This reaches the point where it seems that "the man" is being taken for Armah, and in the process the clues that we are given that "the man's" position is not to be accepted at its face value are missed. The discussion of the novel attempts to point to these clues and to indicate the nature of the misreading.

In order to emphasise the distinction between author and the character, a brief discussion of Solo in Why Are We So Blest? (1974) is undertaken. The novel is a problematic one, but it is felt that with this acknowledgement a useful point can be served by its inclusion in the discussion at this point. The discussion of Fragments is also meant to show that our response to Baako Onipa has to take into account that Baako is seen as a criticised character. His failure has to be seen as both a result of personal inadequacy and as the inability of the community, engrossed as it is in its conception of the value of the individual in terms of his material worth, to gather him in and help

him overcome the fear for his individual integrity that he perceives in the community's greed. Without this distinction we can only see Baako as a self-justifying indulgence on the part of the author.

Whereas Armah's early novels have been criticised for their pessimism and contempt for Africa, Chinua Achebe has been praised for his positive conception of the community and literature's role in it. There are, however, several thematic similarities between Armah's early novels and Achebe's novels set in contemporary Nigeria, No Longer at Ease (1960) and A Man of the People (1966). An attempt is made to compare the contrasting approaches of these two authors to the depiction of the relationship of the individual and the community. What makes the contrast particularly interesting is that while the condemnation of Armah as defeatist is not justified, ^{either,} it is not entirely the case, that Achebe depicts the community positively. No Longer at Ease depicts a community which is confused, and to some extent, in decay. A Man of the People, especially, offers the possibility of subverting the view that Armah discusses the decay of the community while Achebe discusses its strength.

Nevertheless, it is clear that Armah is more pessimistic about the community than Achebe. It is also fairly clear that a substantial school of critical opinion prefers Achebe's view of the community as dynamic and capable of severe sacrifices when the circumstances demand it. This depiction of society is more attractive to the critics who are keen to describe a positive social role for literature. Equally, the response to Armah's early novels is so hostile because the novels are seen as unnecessarily critical, to the point of being exaggerations and distortions; in short, to the point of being without integrity. The implication of this is that there is an approach to literature which can be described as inauthentic to African realities.

The implication is taken further by those critics who argue that there exists a peculiarly African approach to writing and appreciating literature, an "African aesthetics," and that this "aesthetics" has its sources in an "African tradition."

Chapter Four, "The Use of Tradition," follows up these arguments, and attempts to demonstrate that often a call for a return to tradition is an expression of undisguised parochialism and a racial-cultural self-flattery. It is in this section that the critics under review seem to demonstrate a lack of any real sympathy and understanding for the literature that they announce themselves so keen to protect. Mostly they are not convincing critics, but nevertheless, they seem able to force a hearing by the vigour of their polemic and their hostility. It seems important to demonstrate in just what ways a crude understanding of "tradition" is mistaken. It is for this reason that many critics in this section are treated with the seriousness they may not seem to deserve. However much these critics may seem like "paper tigers," they are so often mistaken for the real thing that a proper discussion of the position they occupy seemed justified.

In this section we will examine some attempts to define the criteria for an "authentic" African literature, and also the kind of critical response which this literature is meant to elicit. Amongst the critics whose positions will be examined in some detail are Chinweizu, Jemie and Madubuike, and Ossie Enekwe.² These critics have identified Wole Soyinka in particular as the chief offender against "the African tradition" of writing. Soyinka's main offence appears to be that he has adopted a Western "modernist" technique in his poetry, and especially so in his novel The Interpreters (1965). In the process he is said to have created an obscure, un-African body of work, which Enekwe finds has no integrity. An attempt is made to discuss Soyinka's

The Interpreters with this criticism in mind. It will be shown that, on the contrary, The Interpreters is both accessible to the careful reader and relies considerably on an understanding of Yoruba culture. The discussion of the novel will demonstrate that the crucial theme of the novel is the dynamic relationship of man's potential and his achievement, of past and present. It will be argued that the flash-back technique of the novel is itself a manifestation of this relationship. The use of the Yoruba pantheon in the novel provides links in the transition, and, in addition, is the means for exploring yet another relationship, that between man's "apostacy," his nothingness in cosmic terms, and his potential for approaching his own ideal conception, that of being god-like. The discussion of the novel will demonstrate that Soyinka has a more subtle and profound conception of the use to which tradition can be put in literature, and has a deeper understanding of tradition, than the critics who are so mercilessly harsh in their demand that African literature be "rooted" in tradition.

Any discussion of the use of tradition in African literature must take account of the problem raised by the fact that this literature has, more often than not, appeared in English or French. Clearly the choice of language is not governed by artistic judgements in this case, but by the practical difficulties of audience and publishers which would be posed by the use of an African language. It would not be an unreasonable argument that one of the factors that justifies the term African literature is that the literature is accessible to Africans from different parts of the continent, in the way that it would not be if it were Yoruba, Hausa or Kiswahili literature. However, the problems raised by the use of European languages as the medium of expression for African literature are serious. Chapter Five, "The Language of Expression," considers these problems as they are raised and discussed by African

critics. Obiajunwa Wali and Juliet Okonkwo, on different occasions, have argued very soundly that the fact that European languages are the medium of expression for African writers has far-reaching psychological and linguistic implications.³ Both critics advise a bold abandonment of European languages and an assumption of the task of making viable the use of African languages for literary ends. Their arguments and conclusions will be considered in some detail, as will those of other writers and critics on the subject.

We will also consider the argument, offered most notably by Chinua Achebe, that it is possible to develop a form of English that is appropriate to African ends. In this connection we will examine the attempts that three African novelists have made to create an English that reflects African experience. In the first place we will examine Achebe's Arrow of God (1964) and the manner in which it attempts to create, and distinguish between, the out of the way Ibo village of Umuaro, the colonial government station, and the transitional society of Christian converts and colonial employees. It will be argued that it is Achebe's skillful "adaptation" of the language that enables him to make these distinctions. In the second place, we will consider Gabriel Okara's "experimental" novel, The Voice (1964). Okara's attempts at "literal translation" from Ijaw speech-rhythms, it will be argued, create greater problems than felicities, and these will be discussed in some detail. In the third place, we will examine briefly Ayi Kwei Armah's Two Thousand Seasons (1973), mainly from the point of view of its linguistic inventiveness. This, however, cannot be entirely separated from other issues that the novel raises: its racial and historical imbalance, the uncritical seriousness with which the narrator addresses us and which indicates self-righteousness rather than conviction. These factors contribute to making the novel

problematic, and they will be discussed towards the end of this chapter.

However, if we accept that the problems raised by the use of English and French are serious ones, we also have to concede that no obvious solution offers itself. The possibility of translation or of bilingual literatures exists, but a serious examination of these options is beyond the ends, and the means, of this study. One suspects that a profound and deliberate change of attitude will be necessary before these options can be accepted as serious alternatives.

One outcome of the fact that African literature has been written in English or French has been that from its infancy, modern African literature has been available to non-African critics. Indeed, the early critics of African literature were themselves mostly not Africans. This has led to the state of affairs which is discussed in the next chapter.

Chapter Six, "The Critic," attempts to identify the arguments that African critics have used in their "counter-attack" against the influence of the non-African critic in the development of the literature. It is suggested that this "counter-attack" is needlessly hostile, and implies a relationship between knowledge and critical response which does not appear to be defensible. Clearly there is no substitute for knowledge of the culture from which the work of literature derives. Without such knowledge one would not be able to understand the work, although, admittedly, this has not always stopped the more rash critic from throwing in his penny-worth, and this is not only in connection with African literature. The point, however, is that the African critic himself is not always in a position to claim the necessary knowledge. He too, if not perhaps to the same degree as the non-African critic, has to go to the trouble of learning enough

about the specific background to the work before he can say anything intelligent. What is clearly and rightly demanded of the critic, by Irele for example, is that he must consider the very specific circumstances out of which the literature comes to life, and not operate at a "universal" level that is at the same time a denial of the reality which gives meaning to the work.⁴ Irele's demand is for an approach to literature that is both serious and intelligent, neither appealing to "inside knowledge," which some African critics assume to be a necessary qualification,⁵ nor allowing a shoddy understanding of "universal" criteria to draw the literature's teeth with its bland insights.

The African "counter-attack" has made some non-African critics rather defensive about their role. This is made worse by the attempts of some non-African critics to define new roles that allow African critics to address Africans while they themselves address their fellow outsiders. In this connection, we discuss Povey's article "The Criticism of African Literature: Options for Outsiders."⁶ Although Povey's article is rather extreme in its abdication of critical responsibility, it is a useful indication of where non-African critics will be forced to retreat to if they allow the African "counter-attack" to dictate the terms. For it seems that the best argument that African critics can put forward in support of their greater suitability as critics of African literature is to show, in performance, how much more perceptive and informed their commentaries on the literature are than those offered by outsiders. At that point there would be no further need for intemperate and unnecessary hostility to the outsider's efforts, since it will be clear that the African critic is so much the better qualified of the two. Although this happy state of affairs has not yet come to pass, this has not prevented some African critics, a few of whom will be discussed in the chapter, from arguing that the

non-African contribution to the criticism of the literature is both ignorant and harmful. It is our belief that this is far from the case.

The final section of this study will be an attempt to draw some tentative and modest conclusions on the issues that have been discussed.

It has not always been possible, nor would it have been desirable, to mention all the important critics. Partly this is because the areas of their concerns have not coincided with the aims of this study. It would have been distracting, and ultimately self-defeating, to have allowed the detailed inclusion of critics merely to demonstrate that not all African critics are poor critics. It is not our contention, in any case, that this is so. The study attempts to identify problems in criticism, and therefore is more likely to dwell on problematic criticism. This protestation is meant to anticipate the criticism that the approach such as this study has adopted will give the impression that all African criticism is problematic. A detailed bibliography is appended to indicate that the criticism that has been dealt with here is not all-inclusive but is only what is relevant to the attempt to identify and explore some of the problematic aspects of the criticism of West African fiction.

Notes

¹ Chinua Achebe, "Africa and Her Writers," Morning Yet on Creation Day (London: Heinemann, 1975), p.25.

² Chinweizu, Jemie and Madubuike, "Towards the Decolonization of African Literature," Okike 6 (Dec 1974), pp.11-27; Okike 7 (April 1975), pp.65-81.

Ossie Onuora Enekwe, "Wole Soyinka as a Novelist," Okike 9 (Dec 1975), pp. 72-86.

³ Obiajunwa Wali, "The Dead End of African Literature?" Transition 10 (1963), pp. 13-15.

Juliet Okonkwo, "African Literature and Its Language of Expression," Africa Quarterly, XV, 4 (1975), pp. 56-66.

⁴ Abiola Irele, "The Criticism of Modern African Literature," Perspectives on African Literature, ed. Christopher Heywood (London: Heinemann, 1971), pp. 9-24.

⁵ Ernest Emenyonu, "African Literature: What does it take to be its Critic?" African Literature Today 5, ed. Eldred Jones (London: Heinemann, 1971), pp. 1-11.

Joseph Okpaku, "Culture and Criticism -- African Critical Standards for African Literature and the Arts," Jonala 3 (Spring 1967), pp. 1-7.

J.K. Agovi, "Towards a formulation of Critical Standards for Modern African Literature," Universitas 3, 3 (June 1974), pp. 128-133.

⁶ J. Povey, "The Criticism of African Literature: Options for Outsiders," West African Journal of Modern Languages 2 (1976), pp. 27-33.

II

Négritude and Its Influence

At its simplest and in its earliest form, négritude was an expression of resistance to the "assimilation" of the Negro into French culture. In the rhetoric of "assimilation" the African was a savage whom Europe would guide out of his dark childhood. That "assimilation" was not completely successful can be seen in the angry manifestoes black students produced in Paris in the 1930's. One of these was L'Etudiant Noir, a journal begun by Aimé Césaire, Léon Damas and Léopold Sédar Senghor among others. These three are generally acknowledged to be the founders of the movement that later became known as négritude.

In many respects Aimé Césaire's famous poem Cahier d'un retour au pays natal (1939) symbolises the early phase of négritude, when its stance was an aggressive rejection of the black image created by "assimilation." The poem is an exploration of this image, most of whose characteristics contributed to the myth of black inferiority. The exploration becomes an opportunity of working out the ancient myths of black ugliness and bestiality. Césaire wallows in the known and invented crimes and shortcomings of the black race. He faces himself with the horrors of black history, condemns himself for cowardice, seeing his weakness as "the tadpoles of my prodigious ancestry hatched inside me." But in the very depths of this self-condemnation, he discovers a "strange pride," pride in a race that had been mutilated by history but had never lost its closeness to its

sources, had never lost its roots. It is at this point that Césaire declaims the famous lines:

Heia for the royal Kailcedrate!
Heia for those who have never invented anything
those who never explored anything
those who never tamed anything
those who give themselves up to the essence of all
things
ignorant of surfaces but struck by the movement of
all things
free of the desire to tame but familiar with the play
of the world
truly the eldest sons of the world
open to all the breaths of the world
fraternal territory of all breaths
undrained bed of the waters of the world
flesh of the flesh of the world pumping with the very
movement of the world.¹

Césaire has employed the same categories and experiences that had been used to describe the backwardness of the black race to boast and assert its "humanism" and warmth. What he had been told was their "childishness" he now sees as their spontaneity and warmth. What was seen as their "stupidity," that they had made no contribution to learning, to science, he sees as their intimacy with the sources of life, "the essence of all things," responsible for their reluctance to "tame" the complexities of their world. These famous lines have been quoted as being the essence of négritude, both by those who wish to see it as a movement for the assertion and self-discovery of black culture, as well as by those who see négritude as an acceptance of a position of intellectual inferiority.

The obvious, and perhaps predictable irony of this turn of events is that it was the attempt to force the black assimilé to

abandon his blackness that drove him to its assertion. It also drove him to an emotional and rhetorical rejection of white culture. Ulli Beier and Gerald Moore in their introduction to the Penguin Modern African Poetry (1968) speak of this assertion as a "gesture" of rejection that did not necessarily imply complete rejection of French culture. They argue, however:

The fact that the gesture itself was often made from the genial surroundings of a Paris cafe, that it was often an affair of the intellect and emotions rather than of manners or ways of life, does not alter its cardinal importance in the development of modern African poetry.²

It is easy to forget that until about forty or fifty years ago, the blacks who came into extended contact with white civilisation came to know the crushing racial arrogance that saw their race as stupid, depraved, savage half-men, and almost came to believe it themselves. As Abiola Irele has summarised:

For in the early years of this century, the black man's worth was low indeed, not only in the eyes of his white overlord, but also (and as consequence) in his own eyes. He was on the lowest rung of the racial hierarchy which western civilisation had established.... This was a situation which black intellectuals were to combat with all their strength, particularly those who were in direct contact with the whites. The contest was to infuse a passionate vigour into their movements, which acquired the character of a counter-offensive.³

A matter of a few decades later, this "counter-offensive" seems to Beier and Moore, and others, to have become a "gesture." The implication that the "gesture" had more to do with romantic and self-deluding poses actually finds more explicit expression in Ezekiel Mphahlele's

criticism of négritude. To the early disciples of négritude, one feels, it was a great deal more than that. To them, especially to the Caribbean blacks, it was the unashamed expression of a communal and racial identity, whose initial purpose was to counter the complacent and destructive prejudices of white civilisation. In rejecting the image that white civilisation had of the black, the latter was simultaneously involved in exploring his own and his community's view of itself. In this sense, Césaire's Cahier symbolises this phase of négritude in its most militant aspect.

The importance of Cahier to the confidence of the négritude movement, and consequently to the development of African literature, cannot be overestimated. In its acceptance and eventual rejection of the black image, in the rolling defiance of its tone, it made it possible for black writers to look at their world without those complexes of inferiority that Fanon later analysed in his Black Skin White Masks.⁴ This had to be done at the price of the crude contrasts of the black and white archetypes that Césaire offers.

Senghor too shared this view of the contrast between the black and white archetypes, and in both his poetry as well as prose, he made of it an elaborated philosophy that skated very near the thin ice of racialism. This may seem harsh on Senghor, and some qualifications are necessary. Senghor, it seems, confuses culture and race at will, defining what he sees as attributes of race as expressions of culture. His discussions of cultural philosophy, more often than not, are speculations on racial character, especially in his early writings. It is true both for him and for a number of négritude writers, that the historical experience out of which they were writing required them to be positive about the blacks' achievements, and that this forced them into a posture of exaggerated defence, the obverse of their "counter-

offensive." This is an important consideration and provides us with a perspective from which to view this "racialism." In addition, Senghor's descriptions of the contrasts between black and white were not meant to exclude whites from human civilisation, as whites had done to blacks, but to include blacks, and to define a role which only they could play, that is, put the "salt of humanity" back into civilisation.

In his poem "New York," he successfully achieves a brazen display of this contrast, brazen because the oppositions are a little too clearly differentiated, a little too crude. However, the poem itself is very successful, mainly because it has this internal balance of two completely opposed qualities being contrasted. In his description of Manhattan, Senghor opposes the artificial life of white New York with those qualities that are the essence of being human - love, happiness, motherhood. As this section draws to a close, the images become more harsh, hinting at a deeper malaise than loneliness and alienation in the sterility of Manhattan life. This is a world that has almost killed itself off:

No smile of a child blooms, his hand refreshed in my hand,
No mother's breast, but only nylon legs. Legs and breasts
that have no sweat nor smell.

No tender words for there are no lips, only artificial
hearts paid for in hard cash

And no book where wisdom may be read. The painter's
palette blossoms with crystals of coral.

Nights of insomnia oh nights of Manhattan! So agitated
by flickering lights, while motor horns howl of
empty hours

And while dark waters carry away hygienic loves, like
rivers flooded with the corpses of children.⁵

As a complete contrast to this world without mother's love, without

sweat or smell, without human warmth or care - is it worth the bother of saving? - are the vibrant, living streets of Harlem:

Harlem Harlem! Now I saw Harlem! A green breeze of
corn springs up from the pavements ploughed up by the
naked feet of dancers
Bottoms waves of silk and sword-blade breasts, water-lily
ballets and fabulous masks. (p 57)

Manhattan has swaddled itself with hygiene, keeping not only the body free from contamination but keeping the soul away from its communal roots, its human roots. In Harlem, on the other hand, people are still close to the earth. Like growing plants they gather strength from the soil, to which they constantly return. In the final part of the poem, Senghor indicates the direction in which New York's salvation, and by implication that of the whole white world lies:

New York! I say to you: New York let black blood flow
into your blood
That it may rub the rust from your steel joints, like an oil
of life
That it may give to your bridges the bend of buttocks and
the suppleness of creepers. (p 58)

This is a finely realised poem, and it is the fact that the images are so vivid and apposite in their contrasts that largely contributes to this. It is interesting also because it demonstrates so clearly what Senghor believed to be the racial and cultural differences between black and white.

Senghor believed that the close communion with the natural world enabled blacks to reflect and feel the curious rhythms of natural forms.

You are the slime and plasma of the green spring of the
world

.....

The great song of your blood will vanquish machines and
cannons

Your throbbing speech evasions and lies

No hate in your soul void of hatred, no cunning in your
soul void of cunning.

O Black Martyrs immortal race, let me speak the words of
pardon.⁶

This ability to feel an intimacy with life is also seen in the black's
appreciation of the arts, and is a significant factor, Senghor argues,
in differentiating the approach of the black compared to the white:

The European finds pleasure in recognising the world through
the reproduction of the object, which is designated under the
name of "subject"; the African in becoming vitally acquainted
with the world through image and rhythm.⁷

According to Senghor, then, the African's view of art arises out of his
metaphysical intimacy with the world. On the other hand, Western
civilisation was obsessed with the supremacy of the intellect. The
contribution of the black race to human civilisation will be to force
new sap into the tired old body of Western culture. In another poem,
"Prayer to Masks," this idea is made quite explicit:

For who else would teach rhythm to the world that has
died of machines and cannons?

For who else should ejaculate the cry of joy, that arouses
the dead and the wise in a new dawn?

Say, who else could return the memory of life to men with
a torn hope?

They call us cotton heads, and coffee men, and oily men,
They call us men of death.

But we are men of the dance whose feet only gain
power when they beat the hard soil.⁸

Once again, the contrasts of racial qualities are quite stark. The same image of naked feet on the soil is used here as it was in "New York" to symbolise communion with the natural world. Senghor does not believe that Western civilisation is capable of surviving on its own. It became a characteristic of much of his best known poetry to look to a coming apocalypse of Western culture, and to forecast its resuscitation by the infusion of black vitality, bringing about a new dawn in human civilisation.

Alongside this redefinition of the relationship between Western and African civilisations was an absorption in and an identification with the culture of the Africans themselves. This can be seen in poems such as "You Held the Black Face" and "I Will Pronounce Your Name." In other poems, such as "In Memoriam" and "Paris in the Snow," the two themes are combined, so that the ever-present ancestors give strength to the exile, to hold on to his nature and simultaneously to extend a hand to the civilisation that had destroyed the ancestral land.

Senghor is able to reject the self-conceits of Western civilisation, embrace "African" civilisation and still rationalise himself into a position of compromise honourable, as he believes, to both cultures. Few of the other African poets generally considered to belong to the négritude movement managed this rationalisation quite as well. David Diop speaks fiercely of the harm and hurt that colonialism had inflicted on Africa, and looks forward confidently to the beneficent changes that will occur "under our bright steps." David Diop's best known poems are poems of self-discovery and poems of rejection:

Africa my Africa

Africa of proud warriors in ancestral savannahs

Africa of whom my grandmother sings

On the banks of the distant river

I have never known you

But your blood flows in my veins⁹

In your presence I have rediscovered the memory of my
blood

And necklaces of laughter hung around our days

Days sparkling with ever new joys.¹⁰

In "Listen Comrades" the struggle of "the Negro from Africa" is identified with the struggles of all oppressed peoples. Their "clamour" is seen as "the sign of the dawn/The sign of brotherhood which comes to nourish the dreams of men."¹¹ In "The Vultures," Diop is quite unequivocal in his choice of the image to describe colonial presence in Africa:

In those days

When civilisation kicked us in the face

When holy water slapped our cringing brows

The vultures built in the shadow of their talons

The blood stained monument of tutelage¹²

His conception of the civilisation that will rise out of this suffering differs from the "mulatto" civilisation that Senghor anticipates. Diop ends his poem with words to cause misgiving to the colonialist:

But we whose hands fertilise the womb of the earth

In spite of your songs of pride

In spite of the desolate villages of torn Africa

Hope was preserved in us as in a fortress

And from the mines of Swaziland to the factories of

Europe

Spring will be reborn under our bright steps. (p.64)

In the poem "Nigger Tramp," Diop advises the black tramp:

Have patience the Carnival is over
I sharpen the hurricane for the furrows of the future
For you will remake Ghana and Timbuktu¹³

It is clear that David Diop's conception of the relationship between European and African civilisations is not as enthusiastic about the kind of compromise that Senghor favours. What Diop and Senghor share, as do many of the poets considered to belong to the négritude movement, is the belief that Western civilisation was on the path of self-destruction because it was a civilisation which "knew all the books but did not know love." ("The Vultures," p.64). Senghor said more or less the same thing in "Paris in the Snow": "They felled Africa's forests in order to save civilisation that was lacking in them." They also share the belief that African communities have retained the warmth and spontaneity that Western civilisation has lost or never possessed.

In the fierce racial nationalism of David Diop, in the dignified syncretism of Senghor, in the ancestral obsessions of their countryman Birago Diop, there is a proud assertion of freedom from the complexes of "assimilation." This assertion, or "gesture," as Ulli Beier and Gerald Moore call it, has been a formative event in the development of African literature.

... Claude Lévi-Strauss, Frantz Fanon, 1957

In his book The African Image¹⁴ Ezekiel Mphahlele describes négritude poetry as aspiring to a passionate outcry of self-vindication, achieved by an intensity of style and imagery. Its characteristic quality, according to Mphahlele, was not only the theme of black

"humanism," but also its style. We have seen that the theme was indeed a motivating force of the movement from its early stages. If we take Césaire's Cahier as a characteristic example of the style of négritude, then we might agree with Mphahlele. Césaire's poem achieves its potency by a fierce self-exploration, drawing out of the despised image a sense of pride and resolution. There is not the same intensity of self-doubt in the poetry of Senghor. The passion in Senghor's poems derives from the certainty with which he speaks of his culture, and is enhanced by the simultaneous rejection and pleading that he addresses to the French. In addition, the vigorous but rather crude racial nationalism of David Diop offers yet another stylistic variation from the measured effects of Senghor's sonorous lamentations. It is clear from the few examples discussed so far, that similarities of theme do exist. However, to be able to find a characteristic style of négritude carries in it an implied criticism of the movement, that there was a definable conformity about its poetic output, both thematically and stylistically.

It has, indeed, been a persistent criticism of négritude that it fostered and encouraged a complacent conformity. There may be something in this, but the hostility to the movement among English-speaking critics has created for it a coherent and monolithic character which disregards the well-meaning confusions that harboured under négritude. That the movement should have attracted to it, at one time or another, Cheikh Hamidou Kane, Claude McKay, Franz Fanon, Aimé Césaire, Richard Wright, Cheikh Anta Diop, Senghor, Mahamadou Kane, David Diop, Robert Hayden and Sekou Touré should indicate how varied a group of supporters it had. Nevertheless, it is clear that at the core of the movement were French-speaking assimilés from Africa and the

Caribbean. But this is hardly enough to explain the critical hostility to négritude among such a number of English-speaking critics.

Mphahlele's comment, mentioned above, contained an implied criticism that there was a conformity of style and theme in négritude poetry. His suggestion that this conformity is achieved by a passionate outcry and an intensity of style hints at another possible criticism - that the style is exaggerated for effect and that this suggests a romantic self-absorption. Thus Mphahlele speaks of négritude poetry as containing an element of romantic posing, a self-consciousness about the way in which it expresses noble thoughts. Mphahlele is a severe critic of négritude, but his stand, on the whole, is in line with the hostility that a number of English-speaking critics have expressed. Such adjectives as romantic, intense, exotic, have come to be applied freely in descriptions of négritude poetry and philosophy.

In his chapter on Senghor, in Seven African Writers (1966), Gerald Moore argues that négritude was a Caribbean response to "genuine alienation" brought about by French education and "assimilation":

The black man living in a continent of black men, embedded in his own society, does not need constantly to trumpet and proclaim his blackness. But the black man who finds himself in the bottom stratum of a society dominated by colour gradations; without a language, a culture or even a name distinctively his own; separated three thousand miles and a couple of centuries from his origins; that man will wish to justify and exalt his blackness, to thrust it in the teeth of his society, to cultivate a nostalgia for an Africa he has never seen and probably has no intention of ever visiting. It is from this genuine alienation that négritude springs.... In Africa itself it will always seem a somewhat strained and exotic fashion.¹⁵

Moore's argument, then, is that Africans have not suffered this

"genuine alienation." Clearly they have suffered some kind of alienation from their culture. This can be seen from the number of African writers and critics who are preoccupied with the relationship of black and white cultures. Part of this preoccupation was due to the influence of négritude, but only because the assertive aggression of the movement coincided with the cultural self-appraisal that was the beginning of the educated African's resistance to European domination. What is it that makes it so obvious that the African version of négritude is an "exotic fashion"? In most African countries, colonialism did not merely involve a temporary change of ruler after whose departure everything returned to what it was, but included the thorough destruction of alternative sources of power and authority. Even where "Indirect Rule" was allowed to exist, it was very much a discredited and humiliated authority that now carried out the wishes of the European administrators. Achebe writes about this breakdown of communal authority in his novels set in the past, and writes about its aftermath in his novels set in contemporary times. Soyinka writes specifically of this destruction of the authority of the community in Kongi's Harvest (1967). Ngugi wa Thiongo in A Grain of Wheat (1967) portrays the uncertainties and confusions that African experience of colonialism had left in the minds and the lives of the people. The point is not that these writers derived their view of the alienation of the people from their culture from négritude. All three, and certainly the latter two, are hostile to the movement. The point is that there is nothing "exotic" about African racial self-assertion. The view that Africans are contented with what they are and therefore do not need to assert their racial identity assumes that they have not been exposed to their history, or indeed to the present state of their

people. The educated Africans, more of an elite at the time when négritude was a live issue than now, had learned to accept the European monopoly on culture. Abiola Irele again summarises:

The fact of political domination created areas of contact between Africans and Europeans all over the continent under conditions that constantly underscored racial and cultural differences... and nationalist movements were in fact efforts at cultural as well as purely political autonomy. It is in this sense that one can speak of "cultural nationalism" as a distinctive part of the liberation movements.¹⁶

To the African intellectuals of the 1940's and 1950's the self-assertion of négritude must have been as liberating as it was to the poets themselves, and as Achebe and Ngugi and Armah are to the educated Africans of today.

It is perhaps true that to the African who had never doubted or been taught to despise everything his culture stood for, the rhetoric of négritude would seem unnecessary, even an affectation. But to imply, as Moore does, that a Caribbean négritude is understandable but an African one is an "exotic" pose is to be unjust. The psychological damage to the African self-image is real, as several African writers demonstrate, and not just an imagined nightmare suffered in the garrets of Paris. In addition, manifestoes of black cultural assertion still make a regular appearance in the literature and the criticism— from assertions of an African "style" of life, to speculative philosophies about the distinctive religious and world views of the African. In the novels of Soyinka, Armah and Achebe the alienated African invariably appears, generally to be mocked for his cultural myopia but nevertheless to demonstrate quite clearly that

Africans did not escape the self-contempt that is the corollary of cultural domination. To suggest that theories of black acclamation are acceptable for the Caribbean but unnecessary for Africa is simply to be inaccurate.

It is worth noting, in connection with this discussion of the Caribbean and the African forms of négritude, that whereas the beginning of the movement was the same rejection of the conceits of "assimilation," the ends to which this self-assertion was put differed. For Césaire the exploration of the image of the black man led him to an acceptance of his people, to a "return" to his native land. It led to his acceptance of their pain and suffering and of his oneness with them:

....I would arrive sleek and
young in that country, my country, and I would say
to that country whose clay is part of my flesh: "I have
wandered far and I am coming back to the lonely
ugliness of your wounds." (p.50)

This is the reverse of the alienation that Moore speaks of above. Thus the metaphor which lies at the heart of Césaire's poem, the return, is here given concrete shape. The assumption of the neglected burden of a "return" to his people is achieved through an awareness that his assimilé education had taught him to despise them and to despise himself. Out of the exploration of the black image, thus, comes a sense of belonging and a new awareness of history.

For Senghor, négritude was not so much the means of the discovery of a sense of belonging, as of a discovery of his true relationship with his tradition. It was a means with which to redefine

the relationship between his people's civilisation and the civilisation of the West. It is out of these differing purposes to which négritude was put that the argument arises that whereas the movement was necessary for the Caribbean black, it was unnecessary for the African because he never questioned his blackness or felt the need to justify it. It has already been indicated that this is a problematic argument.

A number of English-speaking critics are happy enough to accept négritude as a movement of historical importance, but of rather limited lasting value.¹⁷ Mphahlele, for example, praises the founders of the movement but insists on seeing négritude as a political platform, and platforms, he feels, must be treated suspiciously by the critic because they are likely to impose conformity on the literature. Other critics of négritude have been able to see the positive contribution that it has made to the development of African literature, but they too are insistent that its impact was only "transitional." This denies négritude the central influence that its defenders claim for it. The "transitional" phase is seen to comprise mainly a poetic gesture of defiance, an attempt to smash the links of European cultural dominance. This is to see the movement as principally a psychological act of liberation, and simultaneously to deny it the sound and defensible philosophical basis that it claims for itself. (Sartre's definition of négritude as "anti-racist racism" implies that he too saw the movement as "transitional." His essay "Orphée noir" would appear to have Senghor's endorsement, since it appeared as an introduction to his anthology of poems Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre et malgache.¹⁸ However, Senghor's later writings on négritude most definitely reject the idea that it is a passing movement, for he sees it as an expression of black civilisation.)

In other words, to see négritude as a "transitional" phase is to see its relevance only to a moment in the development of an African self-identity, and to see its excesses as manifestation of a liberating frenzy, interesting only as aspects of a historical phenomenon.

Critics of the movement have also, and much more successfully, questioned the philosophical basis of négritude, the theory of black "essence." It will be recalled that in Césaire's Cahier and in Senghor's "New York" the contrasts between the races and the cultures hinged on the "humanism" of the blacks on the one hand, and on the "rationalism," or in Cahier on the rational cruelty, of the whites on the other. It is to be noted here that it is not only cultural differences that are being emphasised, but primarily racial ones. It seems at times that négritude speaks for "humanism," without necessarily awarding this quality pre-eminently to blacks, as in Césaire's:

Heia for joy
heia for love
heia for the reincarnation of tears and the worst pain
brought back again (p.76)

But the implied reasoning is that it is the intervention of the blacks that will bring about this human state of affairs. In Cahier and in Paris in the Snow it is black toil and the black leaven that will mould a new humanity. From Cahier again:

All I would wish is
to answer the universal hunger
the universal thirst

to prescribe at last this unique race free
to produce from its tight intimacies the succulence
of fruit

Look. The tree of our hands is for all. (p.78)

In "New York," Senghor gives a circumstantial justification for assuming the fate of human civilisation to lie in the hands of the blacks. Left to itself, Manhattan would destroy itself. Its salvation lies in rediscovering its humanity by a transfusion of black blood.

As a metaphor for depicting the contrasts between what Césaire describes as the "appallingly weary" white world, and the burgeoning "humanity" of the blacks, this may be justifiable. But to make it into a rational philosophy is to expose its exaggerations and its simple-mindedness, regardless of the historical necessities that made it seem well-advised.

Senghor himself has done his fair share in the promulgation of theories of black "essence." In speaking of the "humanism" of the black races and the "rationalism" of the whites, he wrote:

This is not to say that the Negro is traditionally devoid of reason, as one would have me believe. But this reason is not discursive; it is synthetic. It is not antagonistic but sympathetic. This is another path to knowledge. Negro reason does not impoverish things. It does not mold them into rigid categories, eliminating the juices and the sap; it flows into the arteries of things, espouses all their contours and comes to rest in the living core of the real. White reason is analytical through use, Negro reason is intuitive through participation.¹⁹

The elements of racial "essence" fit in to make a complete and balanced pattern, and the rhetoric is fine. But as with the poem "New York," the balance is internal, the reality is hardly as clear-cut. In addition, as Wole Soyinka has remarked, the apportioning of racial characteristics does nothing to undermine the European's sense of

superiority, as we shall see presently.

Chinua Achebe comments that however "quixotic" Senghor may sound, there is at least "a positive awareness of self" in his work.²⁰ By this Achebe means that Senghor has "a positive awareness" of the African self, and is attempting to counter-act the effect of European colonialism on the African mind by speculating on the deep-rooted and independent nature of African culture and the African character. It is not surprising that Achebe should approve this aspect of Senghor's négritude. It has been one of the declared aims of his own work. Achebe has not said very much that is directly to do with négritude, although what little he has said would imply a suspicion of literary movements and their influence on the writer's creative freedom:

We are all anxious that more and better writing should come out of Africa. But experience and instinct would suggest that the way to achieve this is not to enthrone pontiffs with powers to announce on what should be valid but to leave writers free to experiment in their different ways.²¹

Achebe's words were meant as criticism of Ezekiel Mphahlele's suggestion that African literature can only be "valid" if it "interprets contemporary society." Achebe was not necessarily objecting to this idea but to the assumption that the critic can determine what is "valid" for the creative writer to pursue. He remarks on Mphahlele's well-known opposition to négritude, and accuses him of putting forward another "orthodoxy" equally objectionable. The implication of this for Achebe's view of négritude is fairly clear.

One writer and critic whose opposition to négritude is well-known, indeed almost legendary, is Wole Soyinka. His "tigritude" remark will always remain a devastating mockery of the movement.

Soyinka complains that his opposition to négritude has been distorted to mean that he "actually repudiates the existence of an African world." He attempts to correct this misapprehension in his book Myth, Literature and the African World.²² He remains unconvinced by the arguments of négritude, believing that however praise-worthy the original intentions were, the movement really went wrong from the start. It "proceeded along the route of oversimplification," praising the obvious without itself being part of the systems of values of the African world. Because the founders of négritude were resisting specific elements in the categorisation of blacks, they failed to see that what they were resisting was not the categorisation itself but simply the explanation given for it. In other words, instead of challenging the whole concept of describing a culture by speculating on the psyche of the race to which that culture belongs, they sought to put a different interpretation to the characteristics that European culture had allocated to the black. They did not question the basic tenet of European "racism," that it is the European's ability, and the black man's incompetence, in analytical thought that makes one "highly developed" and the other "undeveloped." They chose instead to compensate the black's lack of analytical thought with "intuitive" understanding:

Négritude trapped itself in what was a defensive role, even though its accents were strident, its syntax hyperbolic and its strategy aggressive. It accepted one of the commonplace blasphemies of racism, that the black man has nothing between his ears.... (p.129)

Senghor's words about "Negro reason," quoted a little earlier, make Soyinka sound remarkably near the mark. To the early fighters for

black dignity like Senghor, this must seem like ill-usage. Senghor has modified his position again and again to come to terms with the criticism that has been levelled at négritude, moving further away from the idea of black "essence" to one that limits itself to the cultural activities of the black race.

Senghor's has been a magnificent rear-guard action in defence of négritude. His speeches and comments of later years have attempted to dampen a little of that "liberating frenzy" that had contributed so largely to the hostility of many English-speaking critics. He has defended what has been seen as the self-delusion of being able to withdraw from the influence of Western civilisation by arguing that négritude was always intended to^{do} the very opposite, that is, to draw the black African into making a contribution to other civilisations, in order to create a human civilisation. He has argued:

I think all the great civilisations were civilisations that resulted from an interbreeding, objectively speaking.... In my opinion, and objectively, this interbreeding is necessary. It is a result of the contact between civilisations. Indeed, either the external situation has changed and cultural borrowing enables us to adapt ourselves to the new situation, or the external situation has not changed, and cultural borrowing enables us to make a better adaptation to the situation.²³

This is Senghor's "Half-Caste" view of culture, and indeed his poetry bears out the contention that négritude was never meant to be withdrawal but participation. In the poetry, the metaphor of blacks teaching the white world to be human again does not sound quite as racially naive as it does in prose, and it is significant that as in later years Senghor spoke more about négritude instead of writing

poems, so he was forced into a more rational and less metaphorical description of the contribution that blacks could make to human civilisation.

In a speech to the Ghanaian Parliament in 1961 he described négritude as "the awareness, defence and development of African cultural values."²⁴ In rhetoric and ambition this is some way from:

You are the slime and plasma of the green spring of the
world

.....

The great song of your blood will vanquish machines and
cannons

Your throbbing speech evasions and lies. ("The Dead," p.53)

His hope is now that Africans will be "there at the meeting place" as "the Civilisation of the Universal" is being created. And it is being created "thanks to scientific discovery, technical progress, the increase in international and intercontinental exchanges." The role of the African now is to be there to "season it with salt," to give this Civilisation "the savour of humanity." (p.98). Again this is a far cry from:

For who else would teach rhythm to the world that has
died of machines and cannons?

For who else should ejaculate the cry of joy, that arouses
the dead and the wise in a new dawn?

Say, who else could return the memory of life to men with
a torn hope? ("Prayer to Masks," p.54)

Now Senghor says: "we have rejected atheism and violence, which are contrary to our genius, but we have accepted research and technology, which we have been without because we have neglected them." (p.100).

Senghor, of course, is aware of the need for these changes

of position. He has described the early phase of négritude as "a weapon of defence and attack and inspiration rather than an instrument of construction." Of the later phase of négritude he has said: "It is the sum total of the values of the civilisation of the African world." (p 99). Indeed, Senghor has gone a long way to meet the critics of négritude, because the situation now no longer demands the cultural self-defence of the early phase of the movement. The damage, however, has already been done, in the sense that the idea of a black "humanism," in contrast to a white "rationalism," has become fixed as the expression of what négritude poetry is, and this has made critics suspicious and hostile.

That the debate has got a little out of hand, and respective positions have hardened, can be seen in the examples below. Senghor praises Abiole Irele for his remarks on négritude in the following way:

Irele's remarks are particularly pertinent here because he is an English-speaking African and England —that Great White Imperialism —has constantly tried to use English-speaking Africans ... to fight the Négritude movement.²⁵

It is clear that Senghor is being anything but fair to his critics here. It is because he considers négritude to be a movement of black liberation that he is tempted to think of those who oppose it as agents of European domination. The point is that few English-speaking critics have taken issue with négritude as a movement of cultural liberation. The historical importance of the movement is rarely questioned. Even Soyinka's criticism is aimed at the philosophical weakness of the movement not at what he calls its "laudable" motives. But it is especially as a literary movement that négritude has failed to satisfy critics that it ought to be regarded as a force of

continuing importance. This is the burden of Mphahlele's criticism. He argues that:

négritude can go on as a socio-political slogan, but it has no right to set itself up as a standard of literary performance; there I refuse to go along.²⁶

Its failure as a literary movement, in Mphahlele's view, is that it romanticises Africa, "as a symbol of innocence, purity and artless primitiveness." Mphahlele finds this picture of Africa "sentimental and insulting." It presents only half of the truth about Africa, "often even a falsified half" and "reflects a defective poetic vision."²⁷

The lack of subtlety that Mphahlele finds in the poetry has also been remarked on by Clive Wake in his essay "Nigeria, Africa and the Caribbean: A Bird's Eye View" :

Nearly all the poetry in French belongs to the polemical type — poems attacking the white man, poems in praise of Africa, poems extolling the black man's suffering. The preoccupation with the theme takes precedence over any sense of form, and the result is a kind of repetitive doggerel almost entirely lacking in inspiration....²⁸

Even though Clive Wake makes an exception of Tchicaya U'Tam'si, David Diop and Francis Bebe, the condemnation still seems too general and a little too harsh. The list of exceptions needed to be longer. One assumes that Senghor is excepted from this stricture. However, the point that the polemical nature of the theme, and the poets' preoccupation with it, has encouraged a disregard for structure and complexity in négritude poetry is well-made. Clive Wake discusses the same point in a more general way in another essay, when he says:

"Protest poetry is not very subtle, since subtlety would cancel out the polemical effect of over-simplification."²⁹ In other words, the crudeness is the price that has to be paid in order to make the contrasts as clear-cut as possible.

A writer who does not share Mphahlele's devoted opposition to négritude but who is nevertheless concerned by what Clive Wake calls the "enforced conformity" of the movement is Cheikh Hamidou Kane. He is uncertain about the notion that black writers can be summed up by a description of their racial "essence," and he is quite convinced that to describe this "essence" as négritude is to overstate the meaning of the latter word:

I believe there to be a Negro aesthetic, and perhaps black artists also have their own characteristic sensibility or way of approach; but to say that these permanent factors represent the whole dimension or characteristics of négritude seems to me to be confusing the container with its contents. Once again I do not reject négritude in any way.... But it seems to me, the time is coming when, without wishing to deny any of that, we must nevertheless give up trying to bring everything down to it, unless we wish to become hidebound.³⁰

Cheikh Hamidou Kane insists, in other words, that being a Negro artist must not be confused with being a writer of the négritude movement. Senghor was a victim of this confusion when he described the English-speaking opponents of the movement as agents, wittingly or otherwise, of England's "Great White Imperialism." The implication of Senghor's accusation is that to be opposed to négritude is to be opposed to the cause of black people, a position arrived at by the assumption that his definition of négritude as "the sum total of the values of the civilisation of the African world" finds universal

acceptance and approval, or indeed that négritude poetry reflects this position. That it does not is clear from the comments of a sympathetic critic, Cheikh Hamidou Kane, when he tries to distinguish "the container and its contents." In other words, Senghor would make négritude the generative concept, when to other critics it appears to be a specific manifestation of quite specific circumstances.

We have seen that the critics of négritude have opposed themselves to two things. They have questioned the philosophical basis of the movement, the apportioning of "essences," and they have been suspicious of the limiting effect of négritude in its nature as a literary movement demanding conformity. Critics have made other objections. Taban Lo Liyong, for example, speaks of négritude as "camouflaged hatred,"³¹ failing to see the paradoxical position the founders of the movement were in, defying France and courting her at the same time. He fails to see that the division of "essences" arises out of a desire not to be excluded from "civilisation" rather than out of a sense of bitter and absolute rejection of Europe and France.

Another objection is that indicated by Kofi Awoonor. He was asked: "What do you think of the négritude movement?" and he replied in the following way:

I use only one yardstick about the failure of négritude and what a humbug it really is. Senghor goes back to Africa, he becomes a President of a country, yet what you see in Senegal is a continual rule of the French ... Dakar is a divided city with the black Africans locked in the ghettos and the whites in the beautiful houses on the other side.³²

Awoonor's comments are a devastating criticism of Senghor but they offer no substantive rebuttal of négritude as a philosophy or

movement. It can be argued, perhaps, that Awoonor is right to identify Senghor and négritude to the extent that the failure of one is seen as the failure of the other. However that may be, it does not take us very much further in our understanding of the movement.

Two final, contrasting examples will demonstrate just how far from a dialogue some of the opposing critics have gone. In an address to the Algiers Festival of 1969, Stanislas Adotevi spoke of négritude philosophy as "the frenzy which, it appears, is to regenerate the world."³³ In his address he entirely dismissed the idea that négritude is in any way necessary to the African, "African negroes know they are negroes." The need to define their "essence" and their "vision" he sees simply as an attempt to make them forget the present day by "tickling a morbid sensitivity":

The artificial quest for tradition is, as Fanon says, a "mere study of exoticism."

Négritude, hollow, vague and inefficient is an ideology. There is no further place in Africa for literature other than that of the revolutionary combat. Négritude is dead. (p.73)

A few years earlier Paul Joachim had written in A Handbook of African Affairs:

Each African, on his arrival in this world, is imbued with the gift of poetry. It flows in his veins from morning till evening, infusing meaning into his every act — the greeting, the farewell, ritual ceremonies, and the declaration of love to a woman. L'homme noir possesses incomparable emotional power; when his soul expresses itself, poetry gushes forth like a bubbling spring.³⁴

This is clearly no more than racial fantasy, and in no sense something peculiar to the négritude movement. It would be unkind, however, to

judge the movement by the excessive rhetoric of its lunatic fringe. The point worth emphasising is that regardless of the rhetoric, it would be mistaken to judge the literary value of the movement by the weakness of its philosophical position alone. It is not intended that the literature and the philosophy should be seen as two autonomous components of the movement, but, as can be seen from some of the examples already quoted, the tendency was to promulgate general theories of culture and race rather than to participate in the criticism of texts. In other words, the philosophical weaknesses do not necessarily discredit the literature, but they do, to an extent, reflect on the criticism of the négritude school. Writing in 1964, Clive Wake could remark:

In general we find that all a critic looks for in the works he is reviewing is evidence of the author's loyalty to Négritude.... The result is that most critical essays deal with aspects of Négritude and not with the books and writers in themselves. The truly creative aspect of literature is neglected....³⁵

Clive Wake's comments here emphasise the point he was quoted on earlier about the dangers of conformity that a movement such as négritude is prone to. Here the preoccupation with the philosophical questions of the movement have distracted the critic from any sensible criticism of the literature.

It is left to Abiola Irele to put the discussion in its perspective. Irele has been a consistently sound critic of négritude, and although his sympathies with the movement are clear, his criticism is both balanced and perceptive. Irele's assessment seems at first to echo that made by a number of English-speaking critics, some of whom we have discussed above:

... I take négritude to mean not the philosophical idea of a Negro essence, which appears to me not only abstract but untenable — Senghor himself has moved away from this point of view — but rather an historical phenomenon, a social and cultural movement closely related to African nationalism.³⁶

In many respects this seems a similar position to that described earlier as characterising négritude as a "transitional phase." What Irele emphasises, however, is the quality of that transition, its nature and its effect. He argues that the absorption with blackness and with Africa was more than a "purely compensatory mechanism," it was "a rebirth of the African idea of the black self." He argues that any assessment of négritude has to take into account this critical contribution to African cultural development:

This opening up of the African mind to certain dimensions of its own world which western influence had obscured appears to be in fact the most essential and the most significant element in the literature of négritude as the principal channel of the African Renaissance. For the way in which the best of these poets came to root their vision in African modes of thought has given a new meaning to the traditional African world-view.³⁷

Irele is not suggesting that négritude has meant a return to tradition. Extensive contact with Western culture and ideas had made Africans into "half-castes," to use Senghor's phrase. Négritude enabled these writers to turn to traditions of their culture, partly as a way of defending their claim to possess a complex and elaborate culture, and partly out of the desire for genuine exploration and re-assessment of their relationship to their traditions, and of the relationship to that tradition to Western civilisation.

Irele, then, considers the importance of négritude to be greater than its achievements as a literary movement. He is aware of the

movement's limitations, its "racial exaltation," its "black ethnocentrism," and its rhetorical and polemical excesses. Nevertheless, he recognises that it has contributed to the existence of that enduring state of racial consciousness by which the African has come to regain some sense of cultural equilibrium.

It will be interesting to note, later on, the development of the arguments for an African literary tradition and an "African aesthetics," and to note also the family resemblance to négritude. What is clear for the time being is that it would be unwise to dismiss négritude as merely a moment in history, with little to mark its passage but many bad poems and a few good ones. Its influence may have been limited to those Africans who had come under close and overpowering contact with European culture, but that influence was considerable. Its search for roots may have been a romantic quest for the innocence and accomplishments of a ravaged culture, but in the very quest were the elements of self-discovery. It was in the tactics that it adopted that négritude laid the foundations of the future controversy. Once the idea of Negro "essence" had become established it became impossible to resist the temptation to embellish and fantasize, and always along lines that flattered the African's capacity for "feeling" while depriving him of a sense of intellectual equality to the European. The romantic search for roots became sententious self-indulgence. As Mbella Sonne Dipoko put it, with a neat turn of phrase: "There is a certain emptiness in retrospective dreams when, created, they are in their turn, incapable of being creative."³⁸

Négritude, however, was not just a movement concerned with the description of racial "essence," descriptions that have largely been rejected, even by the sympathisers of the movement. Négritude was also concerned to assert the black race through literature, and to

reassess the relationship of black traditions with the cultures of the West. It is in these latter concerns that the influence of négritude can be observed in the development of the criticism.

Literature and Society

One of the ways in which négritude has been influential is that its interest in affirming what it saw as the uniqueness of African culture has found a powerful echo in African writers and critics. Négritude critics, and, in particular, Senghor attempted to describe the role of literature, and the arts in general, in an "authentic" African community. This has been an issue that has concerned African writers from the very beginning of the cultural self-consciousness that preceded the fight for independence. Négritude writers had shown an earlier and absorbing interest in the issue, but this interest is also apparent in the discussion of the function of literature that writers and critics are regularly drawn to. Isidore Okpewho discusses "The Aesthetics of Old African Art" (Okike 8, July 1975, pp.38-55) partly from the point of view of the purposes to which the art is put. In their "Towards the Decolonisation of African Literature" Chinweizu, Jemie and Madubuike base their critique of modern Nigerian poetry on the manner in which the poetry fails to live up to the communal functions of "traditional" African poetry. (See note 17). From a different perspective, Wole Soyinka, in his Myth, Literature and the African World (1976) discusses the functions of drama in Yoruba culture from the point of view of the ideal rather than the actual role that drama plays in the community's self-apprehension. Ngugi, in his The Writer in Politics (1981) clearly

states the role that he sees the African writer playing in the transformation of the community.

In other words, the interest in explaining the "place" of literature in the community continues to concern African writers, as much as it concerned négritude writers. It may be stretching a point to see the concern of Soyinka and Ngugi in the function of literature as having been influenced by négritude, but as with the rhetoric of cultural and racial categorisation, the rhetoric of definition of functions of literature undertaken by négritude critics has familiarised readers and critics to the large claims that are sometimes made for literature.

A concern with defining a role for the arts in the African context, permeates the prose writings of Senghor. Senghor sees it as a distinguishing feature of African arts that they are "functional and collective" and therefore "committed."³⁹ He rejects for Africa the idea of art as "object," a thing of beauty entirely self-sufficient. Senghor speaks of the African's conception of beauty in the arts in this way:

The beautiful mask, the beautiful poem is the one which awakens the desired emotion in the public, sadness, joy, hilarity, terror. (p.83)

The idealism of this position is that it assumes each mask or poem contains in it the indications of what the response to it should be. Now of course every work contains in it indicators of the response that the artist is working for. Such indicators may not be successfully communicated to the audience, or they may be misunderstood or they may be re-interpreted in the light of the audience's own experience.

One of the characteristics of criticism is to identify and enlarge upon the ambiguities of these indicators — to place, as it were, the metaphorical logic of the work on a level that makes it amenable to discussion. If we accept that criticism enlarges upon ambiguities of works of art, we have to expect a plurality of responses, if for no other reason than that the context in which ambiguities can be viewed will impose its own imperatives. The notion that a work of art begs an inherently specified "desired emotion" seems a far more rigid criterion for critical evaluation. The result of accepting that there is a "desired emotion," would be to allow the debate to be dominated by the idea that there is a right response.

Problematic though the argument seems, there is a level at which the contradictions appear to coexist. Senghor appears to be allowing for a plurality of responses, that is, allowing for the autonomy of the work of art, at the same time as he is suggesting that there is a "right" response which the community arrives at by its emotional involvement. Senghor gets round the contradiction by suggesting that Africans are able to feel in significantly different ways from the Europeans. By this enhanced sensitivity, the African can feel the "desired" effect without denying autonomy to the work, whereas the European would seek to capture the work by rational means:

The European finds pleasure in recognising the world through the reproduction of the object, which is designated under the name of the "subject;" the African in becoming vitally acquainted with the world through image and rhythm. With the European, the line of sensation leads to the heart and the head. With the African it leads to the heart and the belly, to the root of life. (p.83)

The European concept of what art is, then, is a "rectified imitation"

of nature, or at least an ability to recognise nature in art. For the African, it is an altogether more involving and metaphysical experience. He finds pleasure "in becoming vitally acquainted with the world through image and rhythm." This arises from the African's closeness to "the root of life," from his greater sensitivity to the "rhythm" of life.

Senghor's distinction between the European and the African concept of the arts derives from the doubtful procedure of defining art or culture as the outcome of the psychic make-up of a race. The Europeans are at odds with the natural world, therefore they conceive art as an intellectual activity, a matter of imitation and recognition, largely an "objective" pursuit. The Africans are in harmony with the world around them and therefore "feel" art to the root of their being. Senghor saw the manifestation of this harmony in what he considered to be the tendency in African arts towards the depiction of the concrete, towards an absorption with the everyday realities of the community. In his view, what formed the basis of the arts were "the materials that are at hand and the everyday things that make up the texture of ... life." (p 81). From the community's point of view, the arts become "an explanation and understanding of the world, a sensitive participation in the reality which underlies the world, that is, ... in the vital forces which animate the world." (p.83). Thus, for Senghor, the creation of and participation in the arts enables the community to find its "essence," and indeed he describes African literature and art as "techniques in essentialization."

Senghor has often been quoted saying that "in Africa, art for art's sake does not exist. All art is social." (p.82). It can be argued that indeed there are very few other places where it does. Since

giving pleasure is one of the ways in which art is "social," it is hard to imagine an art that does not, being able to flourish anywhere. It has to be kept in mind that Senghor was motivated, at least partly, by the desire to advance a description of the African arts that demonstrated their independence of European conception. This sometimes led him to define too neatly the distinction between the African and the European views of the world, and to rely for his descriptions of culture on speculations about racial characteristics. What comes out clearly in Senghor's commentaries on literature is a belief in its importance in the expression of the community's sense of being, its identity. It is in this sense that literature is "committed." Its place in the African community becomes inseparable from a conception of what it is that constitutes an "authentic" community.

Apart from Senghor's speculations on the subject, a number of other writers and critics have devoted some effort to describing roles for the literature. At the heart of the efforts is the belief that literature has an important part to play in the development and progress of society. In the criticism of African literature there are few disagreements on the basic aspects of this notion, although there is some unease that social responsibility is being emphasised at the expense of creative excellence. Accepting the importance of literature to the community, as most critics and writers seem eager to do, how much restraint or guidance are the writers to accept as justified from the community's representatives? The question is not an easy one, and it essentially demands the existence of a sympathetic relationship between the writer and the critic. In the normal course of things one would expect that the writer and critic would accommodate each other, critical notions helping to shape literary creations and vice versa.

However, where critical notions have acquired a life of their own, as we saw in the case of négritude, the accomodating relationship breaks down in favour of the critic. Armed with a social theory of literature, can the critic be trusted to be modest enough in his criticism? There are enough examples to indicate that not all critics can. Thus the fears of unnecessary restraint on the creative artist are not wholly imagined, as we shall see. On the other hand, the danger of emphasising social responsibility over creative excellence opens up a whole argument about the populist versus the elitist approaches to literature. Not that many critics have argued for an elitist approach, that is to say, having in mind only a small audience for the literature, comprising mainly the highly educated, but writers whose works are not easily accessible have been criticised by those who favour a populist approach. This criticism has taken the form of pointing out the irrelevance of obscure works to the "needs" of Africans. The disquiet felt by some critics over the matter of the social responsibility of the writer has its basis in the fear that African literature will be made to conform too closely to a facile understanding of what the "needs" of African society are.

We have remarked that it rarely seems to be questioned that literature has a potential contribution to make to social progress.⁴⁰ Two main arguments can be cited as justification for this confidence. Firstly, as we have seen, it is held that the arts in traditional African society were always "functional." To ask, therefore that writers concern themselves with the needs of the community is not to ask for anything new, but to encourage Africans to continue the traditions of their society. In serving the community's needs, the writer at the same time fulfils his artistic ends. There need be no conflict. The conflict only arises as a result of "alienation," the

estrangement of the individual from his community, a condition held to be foreign to Africans, both in its origins and in its causes.

Secondly, it is held that the major part of the oppression that Africans suffered was the imposition of foreign systems of values on their cultures, to the extent that some communities and some cultures were destroyed. The legacy of this domination continues to distort African societies today, and to undermine the identity of the African. Thus the writer has a duty to re-establish the self-confidence of the African, especially with regard to his culture.

It is worthwhile pointing out the difference between these two positions in order that the commitment to a "functional" literature be understood. The first reason hinges round the belief that in order for the African to find himself as he truly is, he must re-orientate himself towards those concepts of existence which represent a traditional and essentially African world-view. Given the view that traditional literature is "functional and collective" and therefore "committed," the writer will find his "authentic" voice in the need to make his writing more attuned to the concerns of the community. The second view sees it as the role of literature to combat the legacy of European cultural domination, a legacy that has left the African anxious and self-despising. The interest in roots, therefore, is not an end in itself but a way of enhancing the African self-image. Perhaps it is Chinua Achebe who best exemplifies this view in his writings.

In his essay "The Novelist as Teacher" he says what many critics have praised him for in his fiction:

Here ... is an adequate revolution for me to espouse — to help my society regain belief in itself and put away the complexes of the years of denigration and self-abasement.⁴¹

This has often been quoted as the definitive utterance of Achebe's

artistic motivation. It is this, to some extent, that has led many critics to emphasise those aspects of his fiction that appear to be seeking to repair the damage to African cultural self-esteem. His own declared purpose in writing Things Fall Apart (1958) was to offer an African perspective on the encounter with European colonialism, an encounter which had received a partial and unbalanced treatment in European literature. The novel, however, succeeds in being more than just a counter to the distortions of the African that Achebe had found in Conrad's Heart of Darkness and Joyce Cary's Mister Johnson. It explores the extent of the adaptability of a community and individuals to violent change. The central theme of the novel is the contrast of the social organisation of Umuofia before the arrival of the forces of chaos, and the disruption of its values by the ignorance and intolerance of the zealous Christians and the District Commissioner, the religious and the secular arms of the new dispensation. A crucial part of Achebe's method is to show how a community integrates what are conflicting facets of its existence by a mixture of tolerance and institutionalised sanctions. The world of Umuofia is never allowed to deteriorate into a romanticised symbol of innocent Africa before the arrival of the Europeans. Achebe makes Umuofia real exactly because he does not depict it as a lost, Eden-like existence. The community is revealed in contrasts of harmony and brutality, inflexible superstition and cruelty, but without making it appear anything less than fully human. A strong criticism that Achebe has offered against Conrad's Heart of Darkness is the way in which the racial presumptions of Europeans had succeeded in creating a literary stereotype of the African, by representing him as the savage and bestial prehistory of the human psyche. Things Fall Apart successfully tackles this image, at the same time as it explores the internal tensions that hold a

community together and the response that it makes to what it sees as the forces of chaos beating down the gates.

Achebe believes that African writers have a duty to play their part in the "re-education and regeneration" of their societies. The duty arises not out of the need to be true to a concept of what it is to be African, but because the circumstances demand it. In contrast, those who believe that social concern in literature is a traditional and essential feature of African culture, are demanding of the writer and critic that they recognise this as an "aesthetic" standard.

It has been argued that the African writer has little choice but to do what he can to repair the damage done by colonialism. This lack of choice arises not out of a conscious decision but because out of the very process of finding his voice, the writer finds also the need to protest and demand against the injustices of his circumstances. For the African to write realistically about his society is to "grapple" with the aftermath of European domination. There is something of a contradiction in assuming both that the African writer will inevitably protest, and that it is his duty to do so. In the essay already referred to, Achebe insists that the African writer must not seek to be excused from "the task of re-education and regeneration that must be done." (p45). Yet at an interview at the University of Texas at Austin, when he was asked whether he believed that literature should carry a social or political message, his reply seems to suggest that the anxiety expressed in his statement above is unnecessary. For in his reply he says: "I believe it's impossible to write anything in Africa without some kind of commitment, some kind of message, some kind of protest."⁴²

Achebe clearly emphasises that this "commitment" finds expression in the "message" of the literature, in the way that the

writer attempts to right the balance of colonial wrongs. Of course, "commitment" as a critical word is more often used by critics who approve the concept than by those who do not. It becomes clear in the context of the interview that Achebe is referring to a fairly specific kind of "commitment" in this case. He was talking about the African writer's response to his colonial experience. The writer's protest in this case is specifically against the stereotyped image of the "backward African." Achebe sums up what he believes to be the writer's inevitable response to such circumstances in this way:

I should say all our writers, whether they are aware of it or not, are committed writers. The whole pattern of life demanded that you should protest, that you should put in a word for your history, your traditions, your religion and so on. (p.7)

Achebe allows no question to exist over this kind of "commitment." On the other hand, he is not adamant about the "place" of literature, suggesting that the writer should be "in the thick of" communal events, but not being too specific about what such a "commitment" should entail.

In his many essays Achebe has consistently reiterated the belief that African literature must find its own path and not follow, for the sake of following, the well-trodden ruts of European literary traditions. That Achebe has a specific social role in mind for African literature, or at least for his own writing, we have already seen. The principal aspect of this role is that literature should contribute towards making the African value his culture, and towards ridding him of the sense of anxiety he has been made to feel by its disadvantageous

comparison with European culture:

One big message, of the many that I try to put across, is that Africa was not a vacuum before the coming of Europe, that culture was not unknown in Africa, that culture was not brought to us by the white world. (p.7)

But Achebe's view of the writer's role does not stop with rehabilitating the past and with giving modern Africans a sense of pride and dignity. The novel A Man of the People (1966) makes it quite clear that Achebe is equally deeply concerned with the betrayal of the promise of freedom and prosperity that the events of post-independence Nigeria proved to be. In the same interview from which the quotations above have come, he spoke of the changes these developments forced on the writer:

We started off — and this was necessary — showing that there was something here — a civilisation, a religion, a history. Then we had to move on to the era of independence. Having fought with the nationalist movements and been on the side of the politicians, I realized after independence that they and I were now on different sides, because they were not doing what we had agreed they should do. So I had to become a critic. (p8)

A Man of the People bears out Achebe's description of himself as a social critic. The disillusion that is evident in this novel was shared by several other writers of the time. Soyinka, for example, has given sustained attention to this sense of betrayal in his writings, as has Ayi Kwei Armah.

As late as 1968, Wole Soyinka did not feel that this general disillusion with the direction of African societies was being reflected in literature. In his paper "The Writer in a Modern African State"⁴³

he criticises the African writer who devotes his energies to "rehabilitating" the past to the exclusion of pressing social and political concerns of the moment. Achebe had argued that it is the writer who must rescue the cultural self-respect of the African, "all but lost in the colonial period," by showing that African history was not one long night of darkness brought to an end by the arrival of the Europeans. Many West African writers followed Achebe's example and wrote, generally less successfully, of the old Africa that European distortions had reduced to an age of unrelieved barbarism. Soyinka questioned this exclusive responsibility to roots, seeing it as a romantic, cultural narcissism which did nothing to prevent "the movement towards chaos" that was overtaking modern Africa. (p.17). In his view, the African writer had submitted too readily to the stresses of consolidating the new-found cohesion of post-colonial nations. The role of the writer in this new stage of social progress became the retrieval of that dignity which colonialism had undermined. But the writer had allowed himself to become "content to turn his eye backward in time," to look to the past for signs of the soundness of modern African society instead of taking note of the cracks that were appearing in its foundations. Out of a sense of loyalty he found it difficult to write about contemporary ills. His involvement with the forces that managed society made it impossible for him to step back far enough to criticise the obvious mismanagements of the group to which he now belonged. The historical novel became both the writer's contribution to cultural self-confidence, as well as an escape from his responsibility of exposing society's ills. Soyinka describes the predicament in the following way:

When the writer in his own society cannot function as conscience,

he must recognise that his choice lies between denying himself totally or withdrawing to the position of chronicler and post-mortem surgeon. (p.21)

The implication here is that if the writer denies himself the responsibility of being the conscience of his society, he denies himself any real integrity as an artist. To see a "chronicler" as necessarily an artist who has beaten a retreat from his responsibility as a social critic is to have a very specific view of what the functions of literature are. On the face of it, it appears to be a view that narrows down literary activity not only to what is socially "relevant" but to what is relevant to the social events of the moment. If this were so it would be a little unkind to those writers who see a sense of pride in the past as crucial to the self-identity of the African. In any case, Soyinka's own work clearly indicates an absorbing interest in the influence of the past on the present. His irritation with the "chroniclers" may have been partly due to the rash of predictable novels of "traditional" Africa that were beginning at the time to become established as the standard, and that Soyinka saw as escapist.

Fundamentally, there is not much difference between Achebe's and Soyinka's positions on this issue. Achebe may emphasise the value of tradition a little less critically than Soyinka does, but they are both aware that Old Africa was not a time of unrelieved harmony. Also, they both see the writer as a social critic. They emphasise different approaches but it is clear that they both require the writer to be "relevant." Indeed the distinction that Soyinka maintains between the writer as a "chronicler" and as a social critic proves to be inadequate when one considers how closely the two are combined in Soyinka's own work. It comes as no great surprise to find that in his book Myth,

Literature and the African World Soyinka is drawing these two strands quite carefully together. He writes in the preface to the book:

[This volume] is engaged in what should be the simultaneous act of eliciting from history, mythology and literature ... a continuing process of self-apprehension whose temporary dislocation appears to have persuaded many of its non-existence or its irrelevance ... in contemporary world-reality. (p.xi)

It is clear enough in this short quotation, and more so from the rest of the book, that the "process of self-apprehension" includes an understanding of the complexities of what it is to be an African in the modern world, politically and culturally. Later in the book, he discusses what he calls the process of "race retrieval" and describes it as comprehensive process, involving not only the rejection of "one self-assertive set of values," a Eurocentric one, but also "an attempt to re-discover and re-examine the matrix of society that preceded the violent distortions." (p.108). There are strong similarities between this and Achebe's comment that his contribution as a writer is intended to help his society "regain belief in itself and put away the complexes of the years of denigration and self-abasement."

The critics have, on the whole, echoed and amplified these positions, but few with the consistency and skill, in both their critical and creative writings, of these two. However, there are some quibbles. Kolawole Ogungbesan, in his "Politics and the African Writer,"⁴⁴ speaks of the sense of detachment which it is necessary for the writer to possess if he is to be an effective social critic. He argues that too deep a commitment to an ideal of social organisation, or too emotional an involvement in the "material" that the writer deploys in his work equally incapacitate the ability of

literature to examine society coolly enough to be effective. It is unavoidable under such influences that the writer will distort reality in order to make polemical points. This would throw into doubt the credibility of the criticism. Ogungbesan is suggesting, therefore, that the writer maintain an objectivity in his criticism, and avoid the self-conviction that he is in the vanguard of a crusading mission. Without this restraint he would not have the sense of perspective that would allow him to perceive actions in their real contexts.

The "objectivity" that Ogungbesan describes cannot be anything absolute, of course, since the analytical and descriptive tools that the writer uses are facets of the society he is examining. Perhaps the term as it is used here refers to that quality which successful literature of social criticism has of containing a significant reality that convinces the reader that the criticism is credible and even-handed, that the writer understands the problem he is tackling. It is quite possible that this credibility or plausibility may be based on false concepts which the writer and his readers share. The concept of objectivity has its own possibilities of meaning in criticism. Theories of criticism that have been concerned with the concept, the American New Critics and Marxist criticism, from different ends of the political spectrum, have meant different things by it. For the New Critics, objectivity referred to the self-sufficiency of a work of art. Critical contemplation, in other words, took account only of those qualities and aspects to be found in the work. Marxist critics, on the other hand, start from an objective analysis of society, so that their view of literature refers to a system of values outside the work they are considering. It can be seen

that Ogungbesan's plea for "detachment" does not arise from a wish to see literature in either of these two extremes. His concern might be said to be more traditionally "literary," that is, that in order for a work to be effective as art, it must "harness" its "anger." This position begs some questions, principally, how does one determine the effectiveness of a literature of social criticism as art, if not from a set of principles about the nature of art and the nature of society? If this is so, then to speak of balance in literature of social criticism is to have a view of society to which literature is referred. Unless that view has as its basis an "objective" set of criteria, unmistakably verifiable, how is the critic to know that his plea for balance or plausibility is not an expression of group misapprehensions? To take the argument much further would be to arrive at that area of uncertainty where we admit that every critic's view of the sense of balance a work demonstrates is equally valid, which is the very contrary of what Ogungbesan is after. His plea for "detachment" has to be understood to be one that is qualified by what the critic understands to be the proper balance between all the elements that a work of art fuses into a whole. This seems a sensible restriction on the critic of literature, since it concentrates his attention on those areas in which he can be assumed to have competence.

Ogungbesan does not argue that the writer should not be "committed," but that he must retain some perspective on his "material." His position recognises the intense interest of African writers and critics with social concerns. It is the absorption with these concerns that led Lewis Nkosi to complain that the writer's main "commitment" should be to language and its renewal and not to unrealistic ambitions

as a social reformer.⁴⁵ He is not convinced that writers have a crucially influential role to play in social development. In his view, their social function can at most be "to be bad-tempered, to grumble and to protest, but there is not very much they can do about the real direction of society." (p.39). It seems clear that Nkosi is not suggesting that social problems should be ignored by the writer, rather that the aggressive rhetoric of a "committed" literature should not obscure from view the one thing which the writer has implicitly accepted responsibility for.

Other writers have emphasised a commitment to language, but Nkosi is one of the few to have denied the writer an influential social role at the same time. Chinua Achebe, in his essay "Language and the Destiny of Man,"⁴⁶ speaks with protective concern of the human heritage of language. He quotes, approvingly, W.H. Auden's remarks in the New York Times (October 19, 1971). Auden had said in an interview that: "As a poet — not as a citizen — there is only one political duty, and that is to defend one's language from corruption." (p.35). We have to take Achebe's endorsement of this view with caution since we already know that he invests the writer with a high social mission. But it seems clear from the approving way that he quotes Auden that his understanding of "commitment" is not quite as clear-cut as his own comments would suggest.

It can be argued that Achebe expresses what he means by "commitment" less crudely in his fiction than he does in his criticism. His depiction of the pre-colonial African community in Things Fall Apart succeeds because the formal structures in the novel are integrated with the action and the "message." The proverbs and the wisdom of the clan on the one hand, the spiritual dread and the

brutality on the other, both contribute to the complex image of a community that is neither "innocent" nor symbolic of man's savage beginnings. The representatives of the "civilising" race are not monsters either, but ignorant and arrogant men. Achebe shows the essential humanity of those involved in the "colonial encounter," and it is in this way that he attempts to re-habilitate the African's view of his past. His concern with the use of language enables him to pass on this "message" with more effectiveness.

Such a reading of the novel does not contradict the view that literature has a progressive social function. Nor does it conclusively advance the view that African literature is always functional. Nevertheless, Things Fall Apart is a novel that demands to be considered in the context of its social motivation.

A critic who holds the view that African literature is characteristically "in pursuit of public ends" is Donatus Nwoga. In his article "The Limitations of Universal Critical Criteria"⁴⁷ Nwoga contrasts the African and the Western ideals of art, in the latter of which, aesthetic rather than social considerations are paramount. He argues that it is because of its ethnocentric arrogance that the West had always considered its view of literature as the universal one. The social "orientation" of African literature demonstrates the limitations of this "universal" view of literature. Nwoga explains this "orientation" towards the "pursuit of public ends" in the following way:

Events of a traumatic nature have taken place and are taking place. There are concerns felt, not so much by the individual in his personal capacity but shared by the generality of the people. (p.13)

Nwoga subscribes to the view that in the present state of affairs the

writer has no choice but to seek to contribute to social progress, in the specific way that we discussed earlier in relation to "commitment" The writer's contribution is held to be important not only because it is a moral duty, but because of its effectiveness. Nwoga argues that people in Africa are still idealistic enough to believe in "the perfectability of human societies," and they only need to be shown the right ways of achieving their ends. The writer at his best, therefore, is a sort of visionary reformer, the inspiration and the good sense of whose words will guide the people to the betterment of their lot.

Such confidence in the effectiveness of literature as a social tool is shared by Nkem Nwankwo. In his short piece "The Artist's Place in Modern Africa," he writes:

[The writer] is or should be the most sensitive point of his community. His greater awareness and perception are values which his society needs badly in their [sic] desperate effort to build a better life. If he is good, there is no way in which he can escape the burden of moral leadership.⁴⁸

The proposition is naively expressed but it does not originate with Nwankwo. That does not make it any the less absurd. It is not made clear here on what grounds it is that the writer can be judged "the most sensitive point of his community." Nor is it made clear of what the writer's "greater awareness and perception" consists. Furthermore, it is not obvious by what reasoning the writer can be placed in the position of moral leadership. There is nothing in the logic of this proposition that prevents the same thing being said about lorry drivers, nurses, carpenters or actors. There is nothing that prevents a lorry driver from being more "sensitive," more "aware" and "perceptive" or more "moral" than a writer. What differentiates the writer from the lorry driver is that the former can shape his responses linguistically

and imaginatively to express his sensitivity, his perception and his morality. To be sensitive to, aware and perceptive and even to hold a moral position about these concerns may entitle one to moral leadership, but for the writer to achieve his purpose, there must be an awareness of the relationship between language and imagination to the concerns being expressed. His success or failure then is not to be measured by the degree of moral fervour he can arouse, or at least not by that alone, but by a number of other more complex responses which take account of the linguistic and metaphorical coherence that he has created.

What Nwankwo wishes to make of the writer is the authoritative mouthpiece of the community. It is not being suggested here that Nwankwo wants the writer to ignore the linguistic and imaginative aspects of his work. That, however, is what an absorption with the self-flattering picture of the writer as moral paragon would achieve.

Both Nwankwo and Nwoga share the assumption that the writer and the community have the same social ends in mind. This identity of social ends is very useful for the writer who considers himself "committed" to social progress. The writer then believes himself to be not an isolated voice, but the mouthpiece of the people against the mismanagements and misdirections that those in authority are prone to. Such a commitment from the writer, however, need not necessarily obtain our sympathy unless we approve of its morality. From the point of view of making critical judgements, even this is hardly the crucial criterion.

It is uncertain in some critics' minds just how much a writer becomes a "mouthpiece" and how much he is concerned to project an individual voice. This may seem a rather contrived distinction since it would be unreasonable to assume that however much the writer

may be speaking for the masses, he still remains an individual putting forward a view which he believes the people to share, or will come to share when they are aware of it.

The twin propositions that African arts are traditionally committed to social progress, and that the African community has a moral cohesiveness lost to the West, have had two related effects. Firstly they have created a climate of critical opinion that bestows praise on novels of social realism. One possible argument is that the critics are merely responding to the prevailing interests of the writers, which appear to be inclined towards social realism. On the whole, critics have praised this trend, seeing in it a revival of the concept of literature as an instrument of public ends. With its emphasis on social forces, this kind of novel does not attach primary significance to individual character. It is more common that the individual will be presented as a victim of social forces, than that his importance to the novel will be an intrinsically significant subject for exploration. This is at least one of the reasons why African novelists have not been too concerned with "characterisation." More often it has been the clash of social forces that has formed a stronger element in the novels than the exploration of individual motives. It is not always advisable to see the two as disparate elements, but the relative indifference of African writers to the exhaustive exploration of character has led some critics, Larson for example, to the conclusion that this is a characteristic of African society as well as its literature.⁴⁹ Secondly, the belief in the communality of African society has led other critics to the conclusion that the depiction of individuals who are disillusioned with the values of their community, and the author's apparent sympathy for such characters, demonstrates a lack of integrity. We shall

examine this second view in greater detail later, in connection with Achebe and Ayi Kwei Armah.

In brief, generalisations about the nature of traditional concerns of African arts and about the African psyche have come as near as possible to defining a standard for African literature. In addition to this, there is the argument that conditions in Africa require a literature that is committed to social change. These arguments have created a climate of opinion that makes the acceptance of this as a "standard" hard to resist. The "standard" may not yet have been satisfactorily defined as a critical manifesto, nor may it be a uniformly prevailing one, but its influence on the criticism is considerable.

African Aesthetics

The urgency in tone of much of the criticism of African literature, and the accompanying warnings of its imminent destruction, emasculation and absorption into Western culture can be explained in terms of the threat that many African intellectuals feel to be hanging over their culture. In this the influence of négritude should not be underestimated. The followers of the movement combined a tone of racial aggression with a systematic, if ultimately over-confident, descriptions of African cultural traditions. The special insistence with which they pursued the ideas of "essence" and "authenticity" have familiarised the critic and the reader to the rhetoric of racial and cultural categorisation. Senghor argues that the specific function or "commitment" of négritude altered as circumstances demanded a new approach, but the basic idea of the movement remained the same. It

remained the idealisation of the cultural and racial distinctiveness of black people. That this attempt at idealisation should be accompanied by fears of the imminent destruction of the culture need occasion no surprise, since the former is a consequence of the latter. As a general statement it might be justifiable to say that as a culture feels itself more threatened, then its intellectuals become anxious to demonstrate the special qualities that demand its preservation. In this particular case, it is held that African culture is dangerously at risk from Western ideas and values. It is not necessary to prove or argue that Western ideas are themselves bad, but that for the African to accept them to an extensive degree would result in a distortion of the values of African societies.

The "urgent" criticism being described here, in its rhetoric, recalls the stridency of négritude. The emphasis on such ideas in the literature and criticism since négritude, has familiarised us to the aggressive rhetoric of racial and cultural idealisation. It can be said that this is not before time, that these are "props" to help the African find his feet again and that as soon as they are no longer useful they will be discarded. Achebe argues this in his essay "The Novelist as Teacher," speaking of a special kind of "commitment" which is necessary for the times. This also explains why many African intellectuals are keen not only to protect and preserve a sense of values wholly African and admirable, but to do so aggressively and provocatively, to demonstrate that they have no wish to be patronised or tolerated. In other words, it is not only what is said that is liberating, but the manner of saying it as well. In a fundamental way, this emphasis on African approaches to culture has put the issue of "relevance" very much in the forefront of discussion.

The need to define the way in which this literature can be observed to be different has become, for some critics, a matter of some urgency. Their anxiety takes the form of a call for a theoretical exposition of a system of values in the arts that is authentically African, an "African aesthetics."

The importance of an "aesthetics," as seen by some critics, will be to guide the African writer and critic away from the Western tradition. The fact that many African writers use English and French as their media of expression, keeps them continually under the influence of the traditions of those languages. Thus European traditions will be exerting a powerful influence on the development of African literature. Even if we do not wholly agree with Obiajunwa Wali that the use of European languages is a "dead-end" for African literature, we will have to admit that several peculiar problems arise out of the use of these languages in African writing.⁵⁰ For example, using European languages cuts off a large majority of literate Africans from reading the literature. Reading African novels becomes either an academic pursuit, or restricted to the ^{? educated} academic elite who are proficient enough in these languages. If the majority of African readers cannot read novels in European languages then this literature is clearly not intended for them.

Juliet Okonkwo has argued in her essay "African Literature and its Language of Expression"⁵¹ that by the use of European languages the literature is both placed out of reach of most ordinary Africans while at the same time African languages are denied the possibility of enrichment by literary use. Because European literature has been so long and so well established in its traditions, African writers, however innovative, come in at the end of a well-advanced process and can hardly expect to be more than curious accretions on

the well-developed bodies of European literatures. In contrast, their exploration of literary forms and manners in African languages would be of importance to their language as well as enabling them to advance their own concept of the arts. Okonkwo agrees with Wali in defining literature in terms of the language used in its expression. It strikes Obiajunwa Wali as absurd to speak of African literature in English. By his definition of literature, a work written in English is part of English literature. Thus, we should only be able to speak of African literature in relation to those works written in African languages.

There are some powerful reasons for the existence of the state of affairs that Wali and Okonkwo object to so eloquently. While it is true that the majority of Africans will not read novels written in European languages, it is also true that there is no other African language which could have such a potentially wide readership across the continent. This may have its weaknesses as a theoretical argument, but it makes practical sense to writers who cannot be expected to take a chance on posterity adopting Hausa or Kiswahili as the African literary language. To many writers now, with the problem of obtaining a wide readership, writing in European languages is one way of extending their audiences. These are problems that Wali and Okonkwo recognise, but their point remains that while writers use European languages, African languages will not be able to develop to the point where they are viable alternatives to English and French.

At another level, as Lloyd W. Brown has argued in his "The Moral Significance of European Languages in African Literature,"⁵² the continued use of these languages is a manifestation of European domination on the cultural life of the African educated elite. It is out of the need to resist this domination that critics like Mphahlele

have consistently encouraged the view that African writers must "do violence to standard English." By "doing violence" on the language, they would appropriate it, make it their own. Achebe puts forward a similar view when he writes of the need to "fashion" an English that is "able to carry his [the African writer's] peculiar experience." In other words, what this point of view recognises is that while the use of European languages is dictated by practical considerations of audience and publication, there is pressure on the writer to adapt the literary use of these languages to his specific requirements. The twin advantages of such an adaptation would be to create something recognisably African, at the same time as the grip of a purely European literary tradition would be weakened on those writers who are forced to employ these languages. Clearly this would not satisfy Wali, because it is precisely by such adaptations that the European languages will be enriched, to the relative impoverishment of African languages. We shall be examining these arguments in greater detail later, but the matter of language of expression raises some fundamental questions for African literature, as we have seen. The principal questions, perhaps, are the ones that involve audience. Whom does the African writer write for? Assuming that the educated elite are the most likely readers of the literature, how is the influence of such readership likely to effect the direction of the literature? Is it, as some critics have argued, elitist in its present "orientation?"

The objection to what is seen as the "elitism" of some of the works is an important factor in the arguments for an "African aesthetics." Soyinka is a popular victim of these attacks on "elitist" literature. The objection usually takes the form of an impatience with "obscure" literature. This can be seen in the crude attempts

that some critics have made to equate simplicity of "diction" with a notion of an authentic, traditional African style. (A particularly crude example of this point of view is to be found in the article by Chinweizu, Jemie and Madubuike entitled "Towards the Decolonization of African Literature,"⁵³ which will be discussed in greater detail later.) The arguments that are offered against this "elitism" constitute an objection to a literature that is "privatist" rather than "public" in its concerns on the one hand, and on the other they extend the idea of what it is that constitutes the "essence" of being African. The influence of the rhetorical pioneering work of négritude in this is clear, even though the controversy that has surrounded the movement has made it unfashionable to see its connections with current critical preoccupations. There is a similar urgency to establish the distinguishing characteristics of the literature and its appreciation. It is interesting to see that the word "aesthetics" in such a context is used not only to refer to a philosophy of the appreciation of the arts, but to a re-affirmation of the idea of an authentic, independent and traditionally African culture.

The need for an "African aesthetics" is generally justified by its advocates along the two lines sketched in above, the necessity to halt the "elitist" trend of the literature, and the wisdom of recalling the African writer from the fleshpots of European literary philosophy. We have already discussed these ideas in some detail in connection with négritude and with the concept of "commitment" in African literature. In connection with an "aesthetics," there is an awareness that the basic materials for its construction, that is, a large body of literature and a variety of critical responses, are not yet indisputably available to the critic of African literature. However, there is at the same time a reluctance to accept that this

would make wide-ranging generalisations about those qualities which Africans appreciate in literature fairly inconclusive. The demand for a theoretical system that would describe the aspects of literature that Africans would consider successful has been insistent. It is important to emphasise that this demand rests largely on the idea that there are qualities characteristically African in the appreciation of the arts. It would make no sense, therefore, to use "formal" arguments that emphasise the independence of the literary text in an attempt to discredit such a view. Such "formal" arguments could be dismissed on the grounds that they do not take into account the distinctive nature of the African's appreciation of the arts. Nor would it be sufficient to take the approach suggested above, that the shortage of basic materials for the construction of an "aesthetics," literary texts and critical responses in a large enough variety, would make the "aesthetics" ill-informed and inconclusive. A crucial part of the demand for an "aesthetics" is the assumption that the matter is urgent, necessary to save the authentic quality of African arts from contamination by other influences. Since the authentic nature of the arts must in some measure be a reflection of the African's view of his world and his culture, so the argument goes, the necessary ingredients for an "aesthetics" are to be obtained by a knowledge of those qualities which are the "essence" of being African, not necessarily by an analysis of a sizeable body of literature and criticism. From such a position it becomes not only possible to work out an "African aesthetics" but it becomes a task of some urgency, for to wait too long would be to yield the field to influences that are "alien and deleterious."⁵⁴ Since the aesthetics is not to be based on observed responses to successful works of modern, written literature, Chinweizu, Jemie and Madubuike suggest that the "oral tradition"

would furnish a reliable source. They are not careful enough to justify the use of "oral tradition" as the only critical means of evaluating written literature. Nor do they feel it necessary to explain their assumption that there is an "oral tradition" which would be representative of all African cultural groups. "Oral tradition" recommends itself to them because it is "uncontaminated" by foreign influences. It is an expression of "authentic" African culture, expressive of qualities which they hold to be unchanging in African society.

The arguments for an "African aesthetics" are not conclusive. There is a suspicion that such a theoretical system may only be a superficial description of what is a very much more complicated reality. For example, it remains largely a matter of faith that traditional societies were homogenous enough to provide us with a coherent body of artistic norms. To speak of an "oral tradition" is to gloss over a great deal of possibly contradictory complexity. It is possible to argue that, like négritude, the call for an "African aesthetics" is basically a political response, justifiable on proper grounds but relying mainly on ideas of racial and cultural "essence," not on demonstrable literary criteria. The idea of an "aesthetics" is useful in its attempts to fill in the theoretical gap behind the criticism, but it is questionable just how useful generalised comments on the future course of a literature are likely to prove in our appreciation and criticism of specific texts. This is especially so if the generalisations rely largely on ideas of "authenticity." Plainly, if the purpose of the "aesthetics" is descriptive, a general tool to help the critic observe the patterns of literature in Africa, there are no grounds for precipitate urgency. Indeed, the contrary would seem advisable. If the purpose is prescriptive, the creation of a

body of theory that sets the limits beyond which a piece of writing ceases to be "African," then the argument can only rely on metaphysics and idealist conceptions of race and culture. In any case the discussion then falls out of the area that can be fruitfully explored without appeal to faith and gut-feelings, an area with its own brand of highly questionable "authenticity." There is a middle ground which does not seek to establish a complete system but attempts to identify "standards" where these "standards" appear to be beyond question and demonstrable. We will be discussing this in greater detail in later chapters.

These preoccupations with the relationship of literature and the community have contributed to some critical problems. In the remaining sections of this study we will attempt to observe the implications of these preoccupations and consider their critical consequences in relation to specific works.

Notes

¹ Aimé Césaire, Return to My Native Land, trans. John Berger and Anna Bostock (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969), p.82.

² Ulli Beier and Gerald Moore (eds), Modern Poetry from Africa (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963; new edition 1968), p.16.

³ Abiola Irele, "Négritude or Black Cultural Nationalism?" Journal of Modern African Studies, 3, 3 (1965), pp.321-48. This reference on p.329.

⁴ Franz Fanon, Black Skin White Masks, trans. C.L. Markmann (London: Paladin, 1970).

- ⁵ L.S. Senghor, "New York," this translation from Modern Poetry from Africa (1968), p.56.
 - ⁶ L.S. Senghor, "The Dead," Modern Poetry from Africa (1968), p.53.
 - ⁷ L.S. Senghor, "The General Nature of African Art," (1956), in Senghor: Prose and Poetry, ed. and trans. John Reed and Clive Wake (Oxford University Press, 1965), p.83.
 - ⁸ L.S. Senghor, "Prayer to Masks," Modern Poetry from Africa (1968), p.54.
 - ⁹ David Diop, "Africa," Modern Poetry from Africa (1968), p.63.
 - ¹⁰ David Diop, "Your Presence," Modern Poetry from Africa (1968), p.62.
 - ¹¹ David Diop, "Listen Comrades," Modern Poetry from Africa (1968), p.61.
 - ¹² David Diop, "The Vultures," Modern Poetry from Africa (1968), p.64.
 - ¹³ David Diop, "Nigger Tramp," Modern Poetry from Africa (1968), p.67.
 - ¹⁴ Ezekiel Mphahlele, The African Image (London: Faber, 1962; new edition 1974).
 - ¹⁵ Gerald Moore, Seven African Writers (Oxford University Press, 1962; reprinted with corrections 1966), p.10.
 - ¹⁶ Abiola Irele, op. cit., p.321.
 - ¹⁷ Richard Rive, "Images of Drums and Tom-Toms," Contrast III, 1 (July 1964), pp.53-54.
- David Rubadiri, "Why African Literature?" Transition 4, no.15 (1964), pp.39-42.

Chinweizu, Jemie and Madubuike, "Towards the Decolonisation of African Literature," Okike 6 (Dec.1974), pp.11-27; Okike 7 (April 1975), pp.65-81.

Ezekiel Mphahlele, Introduction to Modern African Stories (Faber, 1964).

¹⁸ L.S. Senghor, Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre et malgache, preceded by "Orphée noir" by J-P Sartre (Paris: P.U.F., 1948).

¹⁹ L.S. Senghor, "African Negro Aesthetics," trans. Elaine P. Halperin, Diogenes, No.16 (Winter 1956), p.24.

²⁰ Chinua Achebe, "Africa and Her Writers," Morning Yet on Creation Day (London: Heinemann, 1975), p.24.

²¹ Chinua Achebe, (A letter on Janheinz Jahn), Transition 8 (March 1963), p.8.

²² Wole Soyinka, Myth, Literature and the African World (Cambridge University Press, 1976).

²³ L.S. Senghor, "We Are All Cultural Half-Castes," Senghor: Prose and Poetry, ed. and trans. Reed and Wake (1965), p.75.

²⁴ L.S. Senghor, "An Address to the Ghanaian Parliament," Senghor: Prose and Poetry, ed. and trans. Reed and Wake (1965), p.97.

²⁵ L.S. Senghor, Contemporary African Literature, ed. Edris Makward and Leslie Lacy (New York: Random House, 1972), p.438.

²⁶ Ezekiel Mphahlele, in Makward and Lacy (1972), p.436.

²⁷ Ibid., p.434.

²⁸ Clive Wake, "Nigeria, Africa and the Caribbean," Introduction to Nigerian Literature, ed. Bruce King (Lagos and London: University of Lagos and Evans Bros., 1971), p.197.

- ²⁹ Clive Wake, Review of National Literatures, 2, No.2 (Fall 1971), St. John's University, p.116.
- ³⁰ Cheikh Hamidou Kane, African Literature and the Universities, ed. Gerald Moore (Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1965), p.60.
- ³¹ Taban lo Liyong, 13 Offensives Against Our Enemies (Nairobi: EALB, 1973), p.97.
- ³² Kofi Awoonor in Palaver, ed. Bernth Lindfors (Austin, Texas: African and Afro-American Institute, 1973), p.62.
- ³³ Stanislas Adotevi, "Nigeria Is Dead: The Burial," Jonala Nos. 7 & 8 (Combined Issue), p.72.
- ³⁴ Paul Joachim, "Contemporary African Poetry and Prose 3. French-Speaking Africa's Poètes Militants," in A Handbook of African Affairs, ed. Helen Kitchen (New York: Praeger, 1964) p.298.
- ³⁵ Clive Wake, "African Literary Criticism," Comparative Literature Studies, 1/3 (1964), p.201.
- ³⁶ Abiola Irele, op. cit., p.322.
- ³⁷ Abiola Irele, "Negritude — Literature and Ideology," Journal of Modern African Studies, III (1965), p.510.
- ³⁸ Mbella Sonne Dipoko, "Cultural Diplomacy in African Writing," The Writer in Modern Africa, ed. Per Wästberg (Uppsala, The Scandanavian Institute of African Studies, 1968), p.69.
- ³⁹ L.S. Senghor, "The General Nature of African Art," Reed and Wake (1965), p.81.
- ⁴⁰ Lewis Nkosi offers a dissenting view in "Individualism and Social Commitment," Wästberg (1968), pp.45-49.

⁴¹ Chinua Achebe, "The Novelist As Teacher," Morning Yet on Creation Day (1975), p.44.

⁴² Chinua Achebe in Palaver, Lindfors (1973), p.7.

⁴³ Wole Soyinka, "The Writer in a Modern African State," Wästberg (1968), pp.14-21.

⁴⁴ Kolawole Ogungbesan, "Politics and the African Writer," Critical Perspectives on Chinua Achebe, ed. C.L. Innes and Bernth Lindfors (Washington D.C.: Three Continents Press, 1978), p.45.

⁴⁵ It may well be that Nkosi's view of the writer's ineffectualness as a social reformer derives from his background as a South African black, where he would not have been in a position to have anything like a sympathetic hearing from those people in a position to bring about change. This would not be true of all other African societies, where, out of a sense of pride in their achievement, some writers have gained enormous prestige and a little influence. This can be made too much of, and it is pointless and probably impossible to try and determine just how much influence writers do have, but the fact that Nigerian national newspapers as well as such international journals like West Africa will pick up and editorialise the pronouncements of Achebe and Soyinka indicates something of their influential position.

⁴⁶ Chinua Achebe, "Language and the Destiny of Man," Morning Yet on Creation Day (1975), pp.30-37.

⁴⁷ Donatus Nwoga, "The Limitations of Universal Critical Criteria," Exile and Tradition, ed. Rowland Smith (London: Longman, 1976), pp.8-30.

⁴⁸ Nkem Nwankwo, "The Artist's Place in Modern Africa," Ufahamu,

IV/1 (1973), p.9.

⁴⁹ C.R. Larson, The Emergence of African Fiction (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1972), develops this idea and contrasts the novels of "situation" with the novels of "character." He finds that the "typical" African novel is more likely to be the former than the latter. He explains this in terms of the African character.

⁵⁰ Obiajunwa Wali, "The Dead End of African Literature?" Transition No.10 (1963), pp.13-15.

⁵¹ Juliet Okonkwo, "African Literature and Its Language of Expression," Africa Quarterly, XV, 4 (1975), pp.56-66.

⁵² Lloyd W. Brown, "The Moral Significance of European Languages in African Literature," Today's Speech (Spring 1971), pp.3-11.

⁵³ Chinweizu, Jemie and Madubuike, "Towards the Decolonization of African Literature," (1974 & 1975). See note 17.

⁵⁴ Ibid., p.72

III

The Novel and the Community

It has been suggested that a number of African writers and critics see a specific relationship between literature and the community. In the light of this discussion it will be seen that critical responses to Achebe and Armah have tended to support the contention forwarded in the discussion that the depiction of individual disillusion is seen as demonstrating the author's alienation from his community. Since such disillusion is also seen to be unrealistic with regard to African communities, the author's integrity is then brought into question. This raises the issue of the relationship between the author and the "character." The intention of this section is to advance the proposition that a preoccupation with describing a positive relationship between literature and the community has fudged the distinction between the "character" as an element in a conceptual and artistic construct, and the extent to which its conceptualisation defines the relationship of the author to his community.

The discussion will focus on specific novels, exploring briefly critical responses to them, but concentrating largely on offering readings of the novels that demonstrate the misreadings that came about as a result of an over-emphasis on the positive role of literature. The novels under discussion will be the first two novels of Ayi Kwei Armah, The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born (1968) and Fragments (1970), and Chinua Achebe's novels No Longer At Ease (1960) and A Man of the People (1966). All four share an interest in the

attempts of the individual to cope with the demands of the community, and give some indication of the novelists' understanding of the relationship between the individual and the community.

The choice of Achebe and Armah recommends itself because of the contrasting responses they have elicited from critics. Achebe, on the whole, is praised for his positive conception of the community. Armah's first two novels have had a more mixed reception, but on the whole, have been criticised for being unjustifiably pessimistic and critical of the community they describe.

Achebe's novels have been praised for reflecting "the African environment," and for giving utterance to the African self-image. Achebe has been commended for achieving in his fiction what he himself has described as the duty of the African writer, that is, to retrieve the dignity of African societies, so severely undermined by colonialism. Also, the social dynamism that Achebe depicts in his fiction reveals a conception of the relationship between literature and the community that is attractive to critics who believe that literature has a responsibility to contribute to social progress.

On the other hand, although Armah's early work has received sympathetic attention from a number of critics, notably Kolawole Ogungbesan, Dan Izevbaye, Eldred Jones, Eustace Palmer and Margaret Folarin,¹ it has also attracted a great deal of adverse criticism. It is significant that where the sympathetic criticism has tended to concentrate on teasing out the metaphorical and structural substance from beneath Armah's merciless depiction of urban squalor and disillusion, the adverse criticism has generally not been able to get beyond a sense of outrage at Armah for describing the problems of Ghana, and by implication, those of other African countries, in

what appear to be such pessimistic and defeatist terms. The Beautiful Ones has come in for particularly harsh treatment in this respect. The pessimism and the savage social criticism of The Beautiful Ones has been seen as a demonstration of Armah's lack of sympathy with his community, of his alienation from his people and their values. It will be shown that the sense of outrage that a number of critics feel with The Beautiful Ones has allowed them to blur the distinction between the novel as a linguistic and imaginative construct, depicting the experiences of "the man," and what a reading of the novel implies about Armah. A few examples of such criticism are cited below. It is not intended that this should be seen as representative of the entire body of critical response to Armah's novels. None of the sympathetic critics have addressed themselves to the question in the manner proposed here, and it is for this reason that they do not make as frequent an appearance in the discussion as they might be expected to.

The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born

The Beautiful Ones has been the subject of controversy from its publication. It has been praised for the uncompromising boldness of detail in its depiction of the squalor of modern, urban Africa. It has been seen by others as a regrettable and entirely reprehensible exercise in self-contempt. Eustace Palmer finds it "the most thoroughgoing exposé of corruption" in African literature.² Margaret Folarin sees the novel as "bold and cleansing": "It accepts life as it may be observed at its very worst and then still unravels, if in a rather humourless way, much of the value of human existence."³

Kofi Awoonor describes Armah as epitomising "the anger and frustration" of some contemporary African novelists, but, he also finds him "removed from a basic perception of the African scene...by years

of overseas living."⁴ The implication here is that Armah does not understand the society that he is describing. In an essay on Armah, Charles E. Nnolim discusses what he calls Armah's techniques in "pejorism" and concludes:

He is one of those writers who articulate in bold language what others are too modest or too nice to put in print. At the same time one must express revulsion at the insensitivity of Armah's language in which there is a lack of discriminating taste and, one must say, a lack of class.⁵

Nnolim writes of his distaste with enthusiasm. He finds that in The Beautiful Ones Armah had found it necessary "to spill vomit on white paper" (p.223) "to everyone's disgust." (p.207). He sees Armah as "a writer whose creative vision reveals a delight with scenes of defeat, frustration, disappointment and loss," and one who also "seems to be unusually excited by images of decay and corruption." (p.207). Nnolim suggests that Armah's depiction of his homeland amounts to saying "Ghana is one giant, stinking lavatory." (p.208). In the same essay Nnolim echoes, and indeed refers to, Chinua Achebe's comments on Armah in his essay "Africa and Her Writers."⁶ Achebe had found The Beautiful Ones "a sick book." In his essay Achebe chides Armah for "squandering his enormous talents and energy." (p.25). Leonard Kibera speaks of Armah's "contempt for Africa," finding that he "cultivates pessimism as meticulously as the undertaker touches up a dead face for the viewing procession."⁷ He describes the novel as "the unyielding statement that the world remains static, unfeeling." He finds "the man" so emotionally castrated that to describe him as "one of us," presumably as a human being, "is to hunger after sentimentality."

Achebe takes exception to what he sees as the novel's preoccupation with "the human condition," and by that he means the depiction of the defeatist self-obsession which has become the mode of enquiry into society among some members of the modern movement in Western literature. In particular, he mentions the writing of Jean-Paul Sartre. The "sickness" of The Beautiful Ones, he finds, is the hero's total passivity:

The hero, pale and passive and nameless — a creation in the best manner of existentialist writing, wanders through the story in an anguished half-sleep, neck-deep in despair and human excrement of which we see rather a lot in this book. (p.25)

Achebe quotes one example from the novel to demonstrate its "sickness," and to demonstrate that Armah is "clearly an alienated writer...complete with all the symptoms":

Left-hand fingers in their careless journey from a hasty anus sliding all the way up the banister as their owners made the return trip from the lavatory down-stairs to the offices above. Right-hand fingers still dripping with the after-piss and the stale sweat from fat crotches. The callused palms of messengers after they had blown their clogged noses reaching for a convenient place to leave the well-rubbed moisture. Afternoon hands not entirely licked clean of palm soup and remnants of kenkey.⁸

Even this short passage hints at Armah's virtuosity. By the use of apparently trivial, and certainly disgusting details he impresses upon us the horror of urban filth and neglect. The novel abounds with examples: the campaign to keep the country clean which ended with the unemptied litter bins becoming centres of rubbish heaps, the stench of the streets and the lagoon, the dereliction of the buses and the

incredible squalor of the latrine walls. The above passage is not untypical of the descriptive style of the other examples. Armah's adjectives are cruelly apposite, (no wonder that Mphahlele described the effect of his first reading of this novel as "cutting me up"), which has given some critics the impression that the adjectives are used with scornful relish. The effect is to leave the reader weak with disgust and revulsion, defeated by the thought of such squalor. That sense of helplessness that we feel when confronted by such impregnable filth, Armah is suggesting to us, is the reality that grinds down the spirit of the people. Achebe says of this passage that it is "scornful, cold and remote," and is a clear indication of the "enormous distance between Armah and Ghana." He suggests that we would have "to go to the early European writers on Africa to find something of the same attitude." (p,26). He quotes a passage from Mister Johnson, which describes Fada as "the ordinary native town ... one stage removed from the rabbit warren and the badger burrow; and not so cleanly kept as the latter...."⁹

The effect of these brief snippets from Mister Johnson, (Achebe quotes rather more of the passage), is to express the cultural difference between the European observer and "the natives." This is an example of that benevolently contemptuous disdain which European administrators felt was their right to express, seeing as they had already shouldered "the white man's burden" and proven their credentials. The description of Fada is by an observer who looked at "the natives" from the vantage of an organiser, an administrator, a person whose task is to bring a kind of order to what he sees as chaos. The observer finds "the natives" scurrying around in the filth and assumes that this was their chosen way of life, because like

rabbits and badgers, they do not know any better. Clearly this is an example of what we might mean by "distance." But, this quality is not to be found in Armah's novel, certainly not in the passage that Achebe has quoted. As he himself had earlier said, Armah's "man" is to be seen "neck-deep in ... human excrement." The fact that Armah rolls his "man" in shit while Cary sniffs away from it might be a difference between the two books well worth keeping in mind while comparing the two writers' attitudes towards Africa (and towards shit as a whole). More importantly, Armah makes very effective symbolic use of the filth he describes. The passage that Achebe has chosen, for example, describes a banister in the railway office where "the man" works. One of Achebe's complaints is that in this passage Armah is "scornful, cold and remote," and obsessive about the "filth of Ghana." Achebe does not use "remote" in an affective sense, that is, that the passage fails to move the reader, but rather an ideological sense, that is, that it reveals in Armah an attitude of contempt for Ghana. The depiction of filth is, as he complains, only too successful.

It is hard to see how Armah could have been less "cold" about "the filth of Ghana." The filth serves a clear symbolic purpose, and even if its realism is in question, it would still be a valid argument that within the limit of the structures the novel creates, it makes coherent sense. It is indicative of the moral state of the community, and "the man's" obsession with it demonstrates his painful awareness of that state, not only by the expression of moral outrage but also by an unavoidable physical response. Furthermore, there is not only the filth that man makes, hinting at his inner corruption, there is the natural tendency of things to rot and decay and confound the feeble efforts of man to halt the process. The banister is an image

of the unequal struggle between the natural corruption of the wood, allied to the remnants of human waste, and the ineffectual cleansing powers of wood polish:

Of course it was in the nature of wood to rot with age.... In the natural course of things it would always take the newness of the different kinds of polish and the vaunted cleansing powers of the chemicals in them, and it would convert all to victorious filth, awaiting yet more polish again and again and again. And the wood was not alone.

Apart from the wood itself there were, of course, people themselves, just so many hands and fingers bringing help to the wood in its course towards putrefaction. Left-hand fingers in their careless journey from a hasty anus sliding all the way up the banister.... (p.12)

What follows (from "Left-hand fingers....") is the passage that Achebe has quoted. It can now be seen in better perspective, not simply as a description of a banister, but as an image of the difficulty, even impossibility, of avoiding corruption, when both man and nature are allied to advance it. The novel is not only about the kind of corruption that involves a clandestine exchange of money for favours, but of the kind that has become so deeply ingrained in social behaviour that it seems to have eaten its way into the will of the people to fight it. The community's moral decay has become as "inevitable" as the natural decay of the wood. The images of putrefaction show us the extent of the damage, and emphasise an awareness of the difficulty involved in resisting the "tendency" of the community's momentum towards corruption.

It is one of Achebe's contentions that Armah had made a mistake in setting the novel in Ghana. He argues that it is more descriptive of "some modern, existentialist no-man's land" than Ghana. (p.25). Achebe finds that Armah's attempts at realism simply expose

the fact that he is talking about some "universal" man rather than about Ghanaians. Thus, he sees the "existentialist" justification for "the man's" behaviour as "grossly inadequate in a society where even a lunatic walking stark naked through the highways of Accra has an extended family somewhere suffering vicarious shame." (p.26). Whether Armah's justification for "the man's" actions, his passive non-involvement, more or less, in the corruption of the community, is "existentialist" is open to question. Achebe does not explore the issue, but he seems to be suggesting that "the man's" actions are justified only to himself in a society where extended kinship creates ties and obligations that just would not allow this. This, in fact, is a central theme of both The Beautiful Ones and Fragments. That there are "loved ones" to consider is a recurring thought to "the man" :

Many have found it worthwhile to try the rotten ways, and in truth there was no one living who had the strength to open his mouth to utter blame against them. Many have tried the rotten ways and found them filled with the sweetness of life.. .. Even those who started out with a certain wholeness in their persons, it was funny with what predictability they got themselves ready eventually to give up and go. Men have thought they have no use for sweetness, their own personal selves. But for all such men there have been ways to get to the rotten, sweet ways.

For the children.

.....

In the end, was there anything done for the children's sake which could really be seen as a crime. (p.145)

The irony is obvious, the love of the family provides the necessary impetus into corruption that all recognise to exist, and accept to be inevitable. Even the quality of caring for others, for "the loved

ones," has become distorted into the means of pressing the more stubborn members of the community into immorality. "The man" himself feels this tension. In conversation with his friend Teacher, who has withdrawn from "the race" into solitary asceticism, "the man" describes the pain this tension creates in him :

"I only wish I could speak with your contempt for what goes on. But I do not know whether it is envy that makes me hate what I see. I am not even sure that I hate it, Teacher."

"It should depend on what a person wants himself, no?"

"But, Teacher, what can I want? How can I look at Oyo and say I hate long shiny cars? How can I come back to the children and despise international schools? And then Koomson comes, and the family sees Jesus Christ in him. How can I even feel like a human being? (p.92)

Nothing could be further from an "existentialist" self-justification than this pathetic confession of inadequacy. Not only does "the man" feel his inadequacy in the eyes of his family, but he wonders, rather melodramatically, if this inadequacy does not impair his humanity. The exaggerated fear alerts us quite clearly to the intensity with which "the man" feels his failure to provide what his family would be glad to have. It is clear from this that Armah does not intend "the man" to be simply the righteous, moral eye, as Obiechina suggests in his Culture, Tradition and Society in the West African Novel.¹⁰ Armah indicates that "the man" too is tempted, that he too feels the tension between the pressures of the family to participate in what the community considers the norm, and his own recognition of the immorality of such "rotten, sweet ways." Clearly, as Obiechina says, the characters of The Beautiful Ones have representative roles in a drama of social corruption, but it does not follow that the exploration of such social themes precludes "the exploration of individual

psychology." Obiechina is rather harsh when he describes the novel as filled with "numerous cardboard characters" who "are either good or bad, and represent virtue or vice." (p.105). "The man's" anxious self-examination hints that he suffers from temptation. He is aware of the immorality of corrupt acquisition but he is also troubled by materialistic cravings, as is his wife. When they go to Koomson's house, husband and wife stare around them with "keen desire." On the journey home in Koomson's car, we find "the man" reflecting on the prosperity he had just witnessed:

The man closed his eyes, and like a piece of twine the thought ran round and round inside his head that it would not be possible to look at such comfortable things and feel a real contempt for them. (p.151)

"The man's" temptation is never carried through into action, but it remains throughout the novel as a potential, a dramatic manifestation of the tension between family demands for a share in the fruits of communal immorality and individual integrity. It is clear that "the man" is not secure in the belief that the individual is the sole and ultimate moral arbiter of behaviour. Even when he recognises the demands to be unjustified, he still feels a sense of inadequacy in being unable to meet them. He is deeply aware of considerations other than the simple morality of actions. He is aware that actions also have to be seen in relation to what the needs of his family are, to what the community expects of him, and to the sanction it is willing to give in return. On the other hand, he is also aware that these considerations will not turn a dishonest action into an honest one. The family does not see, or refuses to see the immorality, but "the man" realises that he is the one who will have to bear responsibility

for his actions, not his relatives. He refuses and suffers the feeling of inadequacy and rejection, a combination largely responsible for his anguish and solitariness. As he says of his family's discontentment with his inability to participate in "the sweet, rotten ways," "the loved ones are in the lead when we are stripped of the little self-respect that remains at this age." (p.96). Armah is quite aware that "the man" is not an "existentialist" in the sense that Achebe suggests. His very awareness that the demands of others are influential in his choice of actions, that their views of him are important, is another way of saying that he is not free to act in the way that he thinks right, and feel that he has done right.

Both Obiechina and Achebe find "the man" to be a figure of despair. Obiechina describes his solitariness as a withdrawal into "tortured passivity." (p.110). Achebe sees Armah as "in grave danger" of being seduced by the sophistications of "the human condition," which he identifies with "a phase of despair." He does not find that there is justification for such "despair" in Africa, and he puts down the adoption of such "sophistication" to a sense of "ANXIETY." The symptoms of this "ANXIETY" are a wholehearted embrace of Western ideas and a rejection of the African self, in the mistaken belief that this is the same thing as becoming "the universal man." The idea that "despair" is a Western disease relies on the argument that the growth of capitalism in post Industrial Revolution Europe destroyed the bases of the communities, depriving Western man of tradition and a sense of belonging. He has become the victim of his own technological inventiveness. He has acquired what Achebe calls "technical achievement without spiritual growth." Thus, this arguable argument follows, while it may make sense for the European artist to write about the "despair"

of the alienated individual, an African writer has no justification for adopting such an attitude when writing about Africa, where conditions are different. The argument only stands if we accept "despair" to mean not any complete loss of hope, but of that particular kind that has come about in the West as a result of the weakening of communal bonds. To see the relationship as so rigidly causal is, in any case, to simplify matters too much. Even if we do not accept that "despair" really means the sense of alienation that Western artists depict in their writing, is it justifiable to describe "the man" in The Beautiful Ones as a figure of despair?

Kolawole Ogungbesan, in his "Symbol and Meaning in The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born," has argued that "the man's" wanderings are a dominant motif of the novel, and are symbolic of the notion that life is a journey. A journey involves movement, and in symbolic terms, change. In his journey "the man" sees "the disease of the times," and he offers a perspective from which to view the community. As we follow "the man" on his journey, so we are made to see the things he sees. We see "the sickness of Ghana" through his eyes. It is worth emphasising this, for it is on this issue that the confusion of Armah and "the man" occurs. It can be argued that Armah is clearly sympathetic to "the man's" view of his community, and there is probably much truth in that argument, but we still have to be sure that we understand what "the man" does in the novel before we conclude that he is merely the means for the expression of Armah's prejudices. To refuse to see this, is to deny that a "character" has any independent life in a novel, and this is not a position that can be seriously defended.

As we follow "the man" on his journey we find that he sees with compassion and understanding, not just with condemnation and scorn:

Nothing was left beyond the necessity of digging oneself deeper and deeper into holes in which there could never be anything like life. But perhaps the living dead could take some solace from the half-thought that there were so many others dead in life with them. So many, so frighteningly many, that maybe in the end the efforts one made not to join them resulted only in another, more frustrating kind of living death. (p.22)

This amounts to a recognition by "the man" that the isolation that is an inevitable consequence of opposition to the communal will has its dangers. The sense of frustration spoken of here is compounded by the suspicion that "the man" voices from time to time, that the exercise in integrity is a pointless, self-inflicted burden.

On another occasion, "the man" fails to win his wife's approval for having turned down a bribe, and has to suffer a comparison of his poverty with Koomson's prosperity. He does not feel the self-righteous anger and scorn of the misunderstood idealist at this, he feels regret and a sense of failure that his "loved ones" are reduced to such an "unbearable heaviness":

The man moved from the table and lay down on the bed pushed into the far corner of the hall and closed his eyes, but failure would not let him rest in peace. Arguments and counter-accusations that had run many times round and round just underneath the surface of his mind now rose teasingly and vanished again beneath his confusion after they had multiplied it and deepened it beyond the point where it could be endured. A man, even a man who has stumbled once, ought to be able to pick himself up and hurry after those who have gone before.... (p.46)

The self-doubt and self-awareness give greater credibility to "the man's" anguish, and demonstrate the inaccuracy of Obiechina's observation that "the man" is no more than a moral "cardboard" character who once his incorruptability has been established wanders through the story, righteously.

Nor is Achebe correct in describing "the man's" condition as "an anguished half-sleep." He is, if anything, only too awake to the horrors that constitute the daily routine of life for himself and for many of those that he meets. "The man" is only one of the silent travellers through the streets of the city :

... no one had spoken and when they were inside [the train] the silence remained unbroken all the way to the station. Everyone alone with his troubles. Better.

At the station, getting down from the train the man slipped on a patch of slime near the entrance. Looking down he saw the mess of some traveller's vomit. Though not fresh, it had not had the time to get completely dry. He went round it and descended carefully onto the concrete of the station platform.... From the shadows two lean figures emerged as if to threaten him, but when he came up to them they saluted stiffly and said "Mornin', sah." Two men from far away, lost in the mazes of the south.... What could men like the two have found down here, if anything? What kind of misery was here that they could not have found at home? Or could it be the same escape for them also? Possible. It is possible that far away somewhere, young men sigh in the night and dream of following those, but they certainly do not know the end of the journey. Quiet, anyway. These may be envied men, not to be pitied, not to be wept for by people uncertain of themselves. On the way, other night figures are encountered, like the latrine man just coming round the corner from the downstairs lavatory, the junior men's latrine. There is not much light, but not much light is needed to tell one that the man with the shitpan heavy on his head has an unaccustomed look of

deep, angry menace on his face, and his eyes are full of drunken fury. (p.103)

"The man" is in the middle, in the thick of the weary and despairing, and it would be a wonder if he were nothing worse than "passive." The only expression that Armah allows the silent travellers is the uncontrollable reflex of nausea and the latrine man's "unaccustomed look of deep, angry menace." The rest of the travellers are silent and brooding, holding the bile of their frustration and misery in check by some unacknowledged effort of will. In his journey and in his wanderings, "the man" gazes not only inwards at his own self-inflicted wounds, but watches and inwardly sympathises with the agonies of his fellow travellers. He watches too, and knows the meaning of the easy ways to prosperity that a demoralised community has sanctioned.

"The man's" worst moments of self-doubt occur at the renewal of hostility from his family, and when hunger has become unbearable in the heat of the day. Yet these moments are followed by lucid self-appraisal, out of which comes the strength to continue. One example of this occurs when "the man" leaves the office for his lunch break and wanders by the loco-yard. The passage of intense pessimism quoted on page 92 immediately precedes the one quoted below. In the following passage, the transition from the images of defeat and frustration to the images of clarity and purity can be seen :

Thinking of the endless round that shrinks a man to something less than the size and the meaning of little short-lived flying ants on rainy nights, the man followed the line of the hard steel tracks where they curved out and away from inside the loco yard and straightened out ahead

for the melancholy piercing push into the interior of the land. On the gravel bed beneath the metal the mixture of fallen ashes and stray lumps of engine coal and steamed grease raised somewhere in the region of his throat the overwarm stench of despair and the defeat of a domestic kitchen well used, its whole atmosphere made up of malingering tongues of the humiliating smoke of all those yesterdays. Out ahead, however, the tracks drove straight in clear shiny lines and the air above the steel shook with the power of the sun until all the afternoon things seen through the air seemed fluid and not solid anymore. The sourness that had been gathering in his mouth went imperceptibly away until quite suddenly all he was aware of was the exceedingly sharp clarity of vision and the clean taste that comes with the successful defiance of hunger. (p.22)

It would not be too fanciful to compare the euphoria "that comes with the successful defiance of hunger" with a feeling of well-being at having defied the temptation to sacrifice principles to expediency. At the beginning of the passage, "the man" is thinking of the futility of living when people become like "little short-lived flying ants on rainy nights." The comparison here is to suggest that the frantic and hysterical haste of Accra is one of the same order as the mindless, if purposeful, swarm of ants on a rainy night. The steel rails that "the man" is following "curved out" round the corner, a swelling-out pregnant with possibilities, but they only "straightened out" "for the melancholy piercing push into the interior of the land." "Melancholy" and "piercing" seem odd adjectives here. They do not refer to the movement or to the sound of an engine, they refer to the rails. They suggest at the same time the predictable futility and the unnecessary hysteria of such a push — there will be nothing worth the trouble in "the interior of the land." Also, the "bed" on which these rails rest, the ashes and the steamed grease,

hardly encourages optimism as the ground on which better things are to come. The stench of the mixture of ashes and grease raised in "the man" only "the overwarm stench of despair." His despondency is almost palpable. "The hard steel tracks" are themselves an image of clarity, pushing into the unknown that is ahead, but in his misery "the man" can only see them as images of defeat and futility. Significantly, the feeling that these images conjure up in him are of the "defeat of a domestic kitchen," a reminder of his sense of inadequacy in his home. The home to him represents an arena in which he has failed. The atmosphere of the kitchen is "made up of malingering tongues of the humiliating smoke of all those yesterdays," a reminder of the times when "the man" had to suffer the anger and the blame of his wife. "The man's" despair and sense of defeat seem complete. In the next few lines, however, as if he had lifted his head defiantly, we see him looking "Out ahead" and the images here are clear, pure and full of hope. The tracks are now no longer "melancholy" but "clear shiny lines" and they have risen out of that same filth that gave "the overwarm stench of despair." Then, even more unambiguously, we are told that "the man" standing there felt the "sourness" in his mouth going "imperceptibly away until quite suddenly all he was aware of was the exceedingly sharp clarity of vision and the clean taste that comes with the successful defiance of hunger." The hunger is more than the need for food, its defiance more than the defiance of physical pain. Armah shows us "the man" defying the feeling of personal futility and defeat that had seemed on the point of overwhelming him as it had done so many others. The price he has to pay is isolation and a certain self-absorption. The point is, however, that "the man" is able to defy despair by thinking of what lies "Out ahead" in the journey.

It may be argued that it is an indication of "the man's" neurosis that he should be able to swing so wildly between abject misery and an "exceedingly sharp clarity of vision," that Armah is showing us "the man's" capacity for self-delusion, that in the euphoria of the "successful defiance of hunger" he begins to manufacture impossible hopes. The shift that Armah makes, however, seems too clear-cut and calculated to allow for ambiguity. Furthermore, several images that occur in the novel, including the central one of the title itself, indicate the possibility of the same transition taking place within the community as well. The next image that we are given after the self-sustaining episode in the loco-yard suggests just this. "The man" crosses a little bridge and sits on an embankment flanking a ditch in which a "thick stream" runs. The ditch is caked with filth, "though underneath it all some water managed to flow along." The water, with "the mud sliming alongside," goes under the little bridge and through the cement blocks which used to be part of the embankment but have collapsed into the stream, forming "a kind of dam" across "the thick stream" :

Behind it [the dam] all the filth seemed to have got caught for a hanging moment, so that the water escaping through a gap made by the little dam and the far side of the ditch had a cleanness which had nothing to do with the thing it came out from. (p.23)

The water is, of course, still dirty even if not with the dirt that "the man" can see, but the change from "the thick stream" to the clean water on the other side of the rocks alerts us to the possibility of dramatic change that has "nothing to do with the thing it came out from." This is not an image of "the man's" hunger-influenced "sharp clarity of vision," but a physical transformation for whose reliability we do not need to depend on "the man's" feelings.

The possibilities suggested by these two images are optimistic. They suggest a struggle not to be defeated, a struggle to believe that there will be change. There are other occasions, of greater ambiguity, when this struggle is evident in "the man." When he returns home to the passive hostility of his wife and children, with "the flat look" in their eyes "that is a defense against hope," he is grateful for their silence. While they are resentful in silence, at least "the man" can allow himself to hope that there will be "time to change the silent curses of resentful loved ones and the deeper silent questions of those in whom pain and disappointment have killed every other emotion...." (p.46). Realistically that change can only occur if "the man" becomes corrupt, or if the society changes to allow it. The latter is the implication of Armah's early novel. "The man" suffers at the hands of a society that has come to believe the worst of itself, and can see integrity only as foolishness.

"The man's" achievement is that he has recognised that it only takes "a little effort, scarcely noticeable," to keep moving, to stay on the road. Rama Krishna and Teacher, "the man's" friend, had sought to cope by withdrawing from the world in search of an inner purity. Teacher retires into an ascetic seclusion, aiming to please only himself but failing because he cannot cut himself off. Rama's withdrawal was far more radical. It was, as Armah tells us, "a tortured flight from everything close and everything known." Rama went to the Eastern sages for sustenance, plunging "with all his body into the yoga others take to be a mere aid to this life." The rottenness of society was a "threat of decay" to him, and it was through fear of this contamination that he withdrew from the community.

The fear came so to debilitate his will that he could find security only in the pursuit of bodily purity. This reached the absurdity of rejecting the act of sex in order to save his semen, "to rejuvenate his brain by standing on his head a certain number of minutes every night and every dawn." Ironically, at his death he was found to be "rotten" inside, giving greater symbolic weight to "the man's" dismissal of such tactics in the pursuit of purity. Indeed, the character of Rama and "the man's" response to him indicate a rejection of "flight" as a viable escape from the dilemma. "The man" asks of Rama: "And what would such unnatural flight be worth at all, in the end?" (p 49). It is unnatural because it denies man the possibility of changing his environment. The question that "the man" poses with regard to Rama is a significant clue to his sense of responsibility. It is obvious that actions and their worth are still being seen by "the man" in relation to others, in relation to the community. Armah uses Rama to show us that "the man" is not given over to despair, is not a helpless victim of "tortured passivity," but a man who has decided on a choice of actions. His choice is to keep "walking," albeit with a heavy heart. He recognises the tension between his wishes as an individual and his responsibility as a man with "loved ones." In contrast, Rama and Teacher have given up these choices. For their withdrawal, in different degrees, is a denial of their own freedom to act. It is because they have "despaired" that they deny those very qualities that make man human, the sense in which he feels a responsibility for his actions, actions which are meaningless outside the community. Koomson, who has "succeeded" by way of fraud, has blinded himself to the immorality of his actions with the glitter of his misbegotten booty. "The man," with greater integrity, despite

his feeling of inadequacy and despite the hostility, chooses to act within a morality that takes account of fellow men. That does not seem like the action of a man "neck-deep in despair."

How could the "pale and passive hero" that Achebe describes have found the will and the strength to help Koomson escape? Koomson's disaster should have made him self-righteously jubilant if he was as pathetically self-obsessed as Achebe suggests. One explanation for "the man's" actions in assisting Koomson is given by Dan Izevbye in his "Ayi Kwei Armah and the 'I' of the Beholder.":

Because of his loyalty to family "the man" identifies too closely with Koomson's motives, if not with the means he adopts.... Perhaps it is this sympathy for Koomson's motives which moves "the man" to help Koomson out of a tight spot during the coup.¹¹

This implicates "the man" too much in Koomson's guilt and is hardly fair. Perhaps "the man" recognises that those who will be replacing Koomson will be no different from their predecessors, and therefore Koomson's capture would only provide them with an irrelevant pawn in the game of power. This is probably unlikely, partly because its retributive callousness seems out of character, and partly because there was no time to consider Koomson's plight coolly. It is more likely that "the man" helped Koomson because Koomson had come to him in fear and in need of help. Armah spares us not at all as he describes Koomson's terror. It is the relish with which Armah reduces the big man that distracts us from appreciating "the man's" response. Koomson is a ridiculously pathetic figure at the end, too ridiculous, perhaps, to deserve the risk that "the man" takes to assist him. If

we were to see Koomson only as the symbol of the greed of the community, such a view of his final terror might be acceptable. We might even see his end as just deserts, and rejoice. But what would be the worth of morality when "the man" could not find the will to help another man in such mortal terror? This is the moment of "the man's" vindication. He too is forced to make his way out through the latrine box, for him a necessary self-abasement to help another man. For Koomson the exit through the hole is yet another means of debased survival at whatever cost. In another way, Koomson's exit is a demonstration of the value of his "success." Armah denies us any opportunity to sympathise with Koomson's fall, as first he makes him fulminate with terror and then forces him to crawl out through the latrine hole. His reduction in the eyes of Oyo, "the man's" wife, is the means by which his "success" is shown to have been of insubstantial worth. In this "the man's" actions are vindicated, and it is clear that his wife realises this:

She held his hand in a tight grasp. Then in a voice that sounded as if she were stifling, she whispered, "I am glad you never became like him." (p.165)

The device that Armah uses to restore to "the man" his family is a little unsubtle here, but it is unmistakable. Koomson, we suspect, knows that "the man" will help him — as does his wife. It is, in fact, as if they had known "the man's" integrity all along but had doubted his wisdom.

In the end nothing much has changed, but "the man" reflects:

Someday in the long future a new life would maybe flower in the country, but when it came, it would not choose as



its instruments the same people who had made a habit of killing new flowers. This future goodness may come eventually, but before then where were the things in the present which would prepare the way for it? (p.160)

The question is both self-mockery in "the man" and a reluctant hope that some change is possible, a change that has "nothing to do with the thing it came out from." In any case, the contemplation of change is not something that suddenly occurs to "the man," for his every action in refusing to become corrupt is an avowal of the belief that something better is possible.

Achebe's objections to Armah's "modernism," and to the "modernism" of other African writers, depend on the argument that it is a sophistication irrelevant to African conditions, and reprehensible because it carries with it a contempt and scorn for the community. He traces the source of this sophistication to the "ANXIETY" to cut away from the "liability" of being African. This is what he means by "the modern alienated stance." Armah, by the same reasoning, is "the alienated native" forced to write with contempt of his people in order to appear sophisticated. Achebe sees this as a self-betrayal, for the African, he argues, can only be "alienated" out of choice, not out of necessity. Having made the choice he can only write of life as degrading, distorted and "sick." In the case of Armah it leads him to the ignoble end, according to Achebe, of "writing like some white District Officer."

An aspect of this argument which Achebe does not mention, is that the writer's hostility may be due more to the unacceptable cruelties of the community than to an anxious egotism, that the writer may be seriously attempting to depict contemporary social life

with what Lukács calls "uncompromising verisimilitude," out of a desire to see those cruelties ended. The serious realist who finds himself in opposition to the beliefs and aspirations of his community, and who finds in addition that the community is destroying itself for values that make no sense, has a major pitfall to avoid; that is, that his opposition should not degenerate into frenzied howls of personal pain. His opposition to specific ills may become a general rejection of the community that tolerates those ills, and eventually a rejection of the human community. His depiction of social cruelties and confusions may lead him to reject as worthless any notion of harmony in social relationships. Clearly this is an extreme that few writers are able to reach with success (although Swift approaches it).

We might describe such a writer as "alienated," in that for him those qualities that make man human, the possibility of harmony in social relationships, the potential for change, have become suspect. In the context that Achebe uses it, the concept of "alienation" is left a little vague. It appears that Achebe's assessment of Armah as an "alienated native" is arrived at through an impatience with "the man's" oversensitivity to the filth and squalor of Accra, and his passivity in the face of the social corruption which this squalor represents. The crucial distinction which Achebe and other adverse critics of Armah fail to make is that between the character who is depicted as out of step with his times or with his community, and the author who creates that character. Literature abounds with "alienated" characters, who while they may have the sympathy of the author who creates them, do not necessarily describe the author's own relationship with his community.¹²

The distinction between the "character" and the author is

blurred in the adverse criticism of Armah's The Beautiful Ones, because the criticism responds to the novel as a social event rather than as a literary one. In that sense, the novel is seen as exaggerated and defeatist — a condemnation of Africa that hints that no means of redemption from its squalor and corruption lie at hand. The discussion of the novel above attempted to demonstrate that to see the novel as defeatist and despairing is to miss crucial clues, and indeed, to miss the central metaphor of the novel, that of the possibility of the "beautiful" flower rising out of the filth that appears so inauspicious for its growth. Undoubtedly the general tone of the novel is pessimistic, but not to the extent of precluding any possibility of growth and change.

More importantly, to see the "exaggeration" of the urban squalor as simply an expression of Armah's dislike and contempt is to miss the structural role that it plays in the novel. "The man" is depicted in conflict with the corruptions of his society, and his perception of the corruption has become obsessive and unrelenting. His response to the rottenness of his community is both moral and physical disgust. To respond to the novel as merely an exaggerated condemnation of Africa, and therefore to condemn Armah for being an "alienated native" who writes like "some white District officer," is to miss what is in the novel itself. Out of a desire to define a positive role for literature, the emphasis has shifted, in the case of Armah's novels, from what the literature does do to a sense of outrage at its unflattering descriptions of urban Africa and the demoralisation of the urban dwellers.

Armah's third novel, Why Are We So Blest? (1971) further illustrates the distinction between the author and the "alienated" character. The novel is a problematic one, both because of its structure, with the diary and commentary form, and also because of its identification of white and whites with death. In the latter sense it anticipates Two Thousand Seasons, which will be discussed later. In connection with the "alienated" character, however, it does offer us a striking example in Solo, whose name already guides our judgement. Of course Nodin is by no means an integrated character either, but in his case there is at least a hint of growth and decline, and he does not reach the mind-numbing sense of demoralisation that characterises Solo.

Solo says of himself:

Always my thoughts have remained impotent, unable to give birth to anything I might offer. I do not blame anyone for this. When I have looked within myself I seldom have enough blame left over to shower on anyone else. Perhaps I could safely blame the time we live in. That is safe because it is an impersonal thing, so impersonal that when you really think about it, it is nothing. To blame our time is merely to blame all of life.¹³

Solo believes not only that he is incapable of finding meaning in his senseless existence, but that there is none to be found. His isolation is almost complete, even though he has spasmodic physical contact with people. His life has become an extended spasm of nausea, and he has neither the strength to change anything in it nor the will to end it. He is isolated in this mental squalor, in self-indulgent self-scrutiny. His inner struggle to make sense of the contradictions of his existence has cut him off from the existence of others, from

the community and its struggles:

Life has lost the sustaining swing: it is a long time since it became one long downward slide. Along the way, everything turned ashen, barren, white. There are stops, not to get refreshed — but to let the enveloping sterility cover the desperate mind more completely.

In my mind there is no space left for flight. This filth is no mere station. It is my terminus. The journeys that should have had meaning are behind me. Here is physical space to wander in, space not for life's movement, space in which to turn in circles, again, again, again. (p.84)

There is here, as in The Beautiful Ones, a rejection of "flight" as a viable escape out of the dilemma. Also, Solo understands that to blame "the time" without accepting responsibility is not enough. In this again, Why Are We So Blest? recalls The Beautiful Ones, where the same understanding is implied in "the man's" refusal to absolve himself of the responsibility for his inability to give "the loved ones" what they desire. But Solo is reduced to being a spectator to his misery, cataloguing and describing his own destruction and the chaos around him as if it were something final. "The man" in The Beautiful Ones never loses the sense that he has responsibilities, nor does he entirely give up the possibility of something "beautiful" coming out of the rottenness of his society. Solo's dejection is, ultimately, a personal one, a sensitivity to his inadequacy, an inability to cope with the horrors of what reality has become for him. The reality that he sees has only one dimension, ugliness:

I am surrounded by this ugliness, insistent and grim, and yet the only occupation I desire is with beautiful truths. When I have had a day's fill of looking at what goes on, I wonder if anything exists that is at the same time both

beautiful and true. (p.15)

This one-dimensional reality allows no room for alternatives. Solo's rejection of any notion of worth in social or human relationships has thrown him entirely on his own personal resources, and these are insufficient to cope with the injustices he sees around him:

Where in confident youth we said we would go after the long preparation in this slaver's world, I have been. I had not the courage to stay. I came back denuded of my lies, my head stored with nightmares, my remnant energy drained into endless, useless contemplation of my single, personal self. (p.85)

From that contemplation of self there comes guilt, self-disgust and resignation. There is, of course, a certain relish in Solo's self-flagellation, a morbid absorption with his distress. Armah allows him to exaggerate and romanticise this agony, and the diary structure of the novel makes this possible without necessarily requiring that we take note of the author's sympathy for him. But Armah also makes it clear that Solo's dejection is a personal failure, and that that is how Solo himself sees it. It is his resignation in the face of a life that has become uniformly ugly that makes him a victim of his limitations, for his resignation requires that there be no lost qualities to be regained and hence no possibilities for redemption. It is this conception of his isolation that enables Solo to indulge his agony to the point where that has become the only thing he feels with confidence. He has degenerated into the delusion that all humanity is unworthy and ignoble. This is the alienated individual. It is, therefore, the writer who believes that man has no integrity to defend and no nobility worth preserving who is alienated. His work will degenerate into personal screams of defeat, much like Solo's

jottings, and might even deserve to be called "sick." But it is the basic assumption of man's unworthiness that would make that work "sick" not its depiction of the horrors of urban Africa, however disgusting that depiction might be.

Where in The Beautiful Ones the events are viewed through the perspective of "the man," in Why Are We So Blest? the diary form attempts a multi-faceted perspective. That this device fails ultimately is more to do with the suspicion that we are meant to accept Nodin's self-obsessed desire for significance without questioning it too seriously, rather than with an inherent failure of the form. Solo is meant to be the counterpart to Nodin, and to demonstrate the potential that Nodin's position has for disillusion. For Solo, a search for significance has long since been ground down by an overwhelming sense of failure. His daily existence is a recurrent purgatory of ugliness and despair. The diary form allows Armah to indulge Solo to the extreme, and still retain the distinction between author and character. In the process, Armah creates the alienated character, whose self-obsession and self-absorption contrast vividly with "the man's" sense of responsibility and his sense of involvement with the community.

Fragments

Fragments, Armah's second novel, has suffered less from adverse criticism than The Beautiful Ones, possibly because it is less obsessed with the theme of corruption, and allows Armah to explore less censoriously a wider slice of Ghanaian life. Ezekiel Mphahlele remarks in The African Image¹⁴ that Fragments has more of the "dance," more of the zest of life that he finds so typical of

Accra. Possibly, also, the novel is on familiar ground for the genre, since it explores the conflicts of aspirations and expectations that arise between the returning "been-to" and his family and community. Achebe deals with the same theme in No Longer At Ease, as does Soyinka in The Interpreters with greater success.

In Fragments, Baako Onipa breaks down under the conflicting stresses of individual needs and the materialistic expectations of his family. Baako's refusal to play the role of the returning "hero," laden with "cargo," and his unwillingness to accept the deeply-ingrained greed and corruption as the norm, puzzles, and in the end estranges his family. We are made aware that Baako has suffered a breakdown abroad, what his mother Efua calls "a sickness of the soul." The name itself, Baako Onipa, meaning solitary man, gives us a clue of his unease in the community. His second breakdown at the end of the novel is a mutual symbolic rejection, of Baako by his community, which sees him as mad, and of the corrupt values and "heavy" hopes of the society by Baako. Naana, the old grandmother, who is used throughout the novel to portray the integrity and propriety of the old ways, and also to comment on the decay of the community, is the only one in Baako's family who recognises in him "so much of good hope," and refuses to accept his madness.

Naana's role is important. Because she is sympathetic to Baako, she reinforces his status as an individual with integrity. In addition, her measured and dignified reminiscences are a clue to what the community has lost, "all belief in the wisdom of those gone before."¹⁵ The sensitive individual, like Baako Onipa, can only succumb to the greater unity of a corrupt society. For he is without the resources to defend himself. Like his society, he too has lost

the way, that reliance on the sanctioned wisdom of the community that might have enabled him to resist the insistent demands of relatives. Naana, to the very end, is calm and secure, knowing the powers that have guided her life and the lives of those who had gone before would not abandon her. It is not surprising that Armah's fourth novel, Two Thousand Seasons (1973), is concerned with a historical African community that has lost "the way" and is in search of it. The presence of Naana in Fragments, and the unflappable calmness and security of her soliloquies, anticipates the technique of the plural narrator that Armah uses in Two Thousand Seasons to suggest the indivisibility of communal purpose. Fragments dramatises the conflicts of individual and communal aspirations in a way totally absent in Two Thousand Seasons. In the later novel, Armah identifies the individual will in opposition as anti-social and self-serving. Hence the askari who participate in the depravity of the Arabs, and the African kings and effendis who turn slave raiders for the European trade serve the "white people" for personal gain and are actively hostile to the community.

These two apparently contradictory views of the relationship of the individual with the community are closely related. Fragments assumes that the community has lost the will to find its authentic self, and that therefore the individual with integrity has no choice but to place himself in opposition. Two Thousand Seasons, on the other hand, sees the community as actively in search of itself, and therefore the individual can only find himself in opposition in pursuit of selfish ends.

The earlier novels, The Beautiful Ones and Fragments, dramatise the need for social change by the depiction of the effect

of existing social conditions on sensitive individuals. Baako Onipa is a victim, to some extent, of a Ghanaian version of that rapacious Melanesian cult that demands "cargo" from the "voyager." As Naana says at the end of her life:

The return of this one traveller had held out so much of good hope. But there were those left behind who had their dreams and put them on the shoulders of the traveller returned, heavy dreams and hopes filled with the mass of things here and of this time. (p.282)

The "good hope" that Naana speaks of is clearly a spiritual one, and hence to her, of significant nature. But Naana's "good hope" and Baako's inclination run counter to the dreams of the astonished kin. Baako's conversation with Juana in the "Osagyefo" chapter describes his fears, and hints at the possible outcome of the conflict he feels. He speaks to her of "the myth of the extraordinary man who brings about a complete turnabout in terrible circumstances." The "modern form" of this myth is to expect the returned "hero" to transform the poverty of the family "into sudden wealth," "mainly at the expense of the community." (pp.146-147). Juana, who at this point is the psychiatrist and not yet a mistress to Baako, tries to encourage him to speak by remarking on the strength of character required to go "against the current." With hindsight we can hear the prophetic ring behind Baako's facetious answer:

"Does all this leave you confused?"

"It's not confusion. I know what I'm expected to be." He paused and she kept herself from interrupting. "It's not what I want to be."

She was expecting him to go on, to add something, but he did not, and she noted her own embarrassment at the small silence.

"Well, it's a good thing," she said, "you know where you're going. Your mind is made up."

"I don't know," he said.

"You're going against a general current," she said, and he nodded, his face showing practically no emotion. "It takes a lot of strength."

Now he laughed, a laugh like a cough, as though he had tried hard not to laugh, but the reaction had forced itself out against all his efforts. His face was trapped in a smile so sick-looking that she was embarrassed into looking away. "If it were a current," he said. Again he left the thought incomplete.

"You don't think it is?" she asked.

"Yes, I see it," he said, relaxing. "Yes. As a matter of fact it's beginning to look like a cataract to me." (pp.147-148)

The self-dramatising tone of his words hints at his hysteria. The effect is to alert us to the possibility of Baako's paranoia, a factor in Baako's make-up that comes to have a crucial bearing in the development of events. The psychiatrist attempts to flatter Baako into speaking by implying the strength of character that he must possess to wish to take on his community. But Baako recognises the dramatic image as the one that he has of himself and is embarrassed. The weak joke that he makes turns out to be a truer prophecy of his fate, and a hapless admission of his real fears.

For most of the novel Baako convinces us that there are sensible and rational reasons for his actions, and that the sense of values, the morality that informs his reasoning is not one that we would be unsympathetic to. At the same time, because of our perspective on events we become impatient with his inability to see the danger he is in long before he becomes fully aware of the effect he has produced in his people. It is Baako's self-absorption that

contributes to his misfortune. For Baako's over-sensitivity to his own feelings allows him to be insensitive to the responses of his relatives. He is concerned to resist the demands that are made on him by the community, but in the process he does not explain himself to those whose dreams have been invested in his return. As their joy at his return becomes surprise and then perplexity at his refusal to act like a "been-to" come to raise his family to new prosperity, Baako makes only feeble attempts at explanation. Before his return, Baako's neurosis had taken the form of flight from the demands made on him. On his return, he watches almost helplessly as his fears are realised. His fears and self-absorption unnerve him to the extent that he watches the decline of his relationship with his mother to the point where perplexity turns to resentment and eventually into a conviction of his madness without, apparently, understanding the changes her conception of him were undergoing. When the worried mother tries in some desperation to seek reassurances from him, that he knows what he is doing, and that what he is doing makes sense, Baako replies to her questions with brief, evasive answers. While he is ill, she looks at some notes he had written on the "cargo cults," drawing some comparisons between them and the demands for booty made on the Ghanaian "been-to." She asks him to explain what "cargo cults" are. Baako, in the depths of his own misery, feels only "disgust" at the childish voice she has put on to humour his odd behaviour. Without answering her question, he asks to be left alone. (p.226). To the mother, Baako's behaviour seems a manifestation of the return of the mental breakdown he suffered abroad, and with his every refusal to explain his actions, her fears are further confirmed.

In another respect, Baako's self-absorption manifests

itself in his unwillingness to accept the responsibility that belonging to a family places on him. This can be seen most clearly in the preparation and conduct of the "outdooring" for the prematurely born baby. He is present when Araba and his mother plan to advance the day of the "outdooring" in order to make the most money out of their guests. He knows that in a matrilineal community his objections as the baby's uncle to participate in such a materialistic distortion of the traditional ceremony would carry some weight. Yet he merely makes one or two sarcastic comments and withdraws. Even when Kwesi, the baby's father, seeks Baako out to discuss his unease over the advancing of the day, Baako responds facetiously. Naana rebukes him for not intervening to stop the event: "So what has [the baby] done, that you will fold your arms and let them destroy him?" (p.140). It is only when Efua, Baako's mother, in her folly and her vanity turns the table fan on the feeble and prematurely born baby, in order to impress her guests, that Baako intervenes and yanks the cable out of the fan. But, he realises later, this was too much, too late. Towards the end of the novel he reflects on those he feels he has let down:

Naana, Juana, Ocran. There had been the other, the child that was to have grown to become like him, but they had killed him, or had he also helped in the murder after all? You are so sudden, Naana had told him, but that was because she had given up. Save him was what she had said, and then he had done things too suddenly, too late, and some things he should have done he'd never done. (p.258)

It is clear that Baako is meant to be "criticised." His neurosis is his oversensitivity to the threat on his individual integrity. In a society that has come to value the individual for his "cargo," his

fears are justified. But in the sense that in his self-absorption he does nothing to enable his family to understand his fears, his oversensitivity has made him insensitive to them.

It is, of course, a criticism of the community itself that it cannot gather Baako in and provide him with a means of coming to terms with his fears. On the contrary, the community literally chases Baako out. The chase through the streets of Accra, led by Baako's relatives, recalls us to the scene which Juana witnesses earlier in the novel, the slaughter of the terrified "mad" dog. In that incident, Armah's descriptive powers are at their most grotesque, giving us a picture of twisted and sadistic people, slaughtering a whimpering puppy out of a need to assert a manhood which their circumstances and their struggles daily deny. Baako, fleeing through the streets is another "mad" dog, his end less brutal because he is a man, and has relatives who feel shame. The image of Baako as the "mad" quarry of an excited crowd, unable to understand or listen to a defence, forcefully illustrates the irony of the sane, frightened individual being chased by a crowd of the temporarily deranged community.

It is, obviously, a pessimistic vision of society, but its effectiveness arises from the way in which Baako's sensitivity is explored. For Fragments depends on the realistic depiction of the psychological conflicts that Baako feels. Baako's oversensitivity is established in his responses to events in the community. His lassitude and reluctance to act decisively until too late demonstrate the extent to which the threats that he perceives to his individuality have unnerved him. Also, his oversensitivity is unequivocally established by the fact that he has had treatment to suppress it, and is undergoing treatment on his return to Ghana. Baako's oversensitivity

is his neurosis. Because of it he "exaggerates" his fears, and therefore unwittingly defines the responses of his people to him. In a sense then, Baako's neurosis not only helps to establish the psychological reality of the conflicts he feels, but also becomes a significant technique in exposure. It is through the depiction of Baako's "exaggerated" responses that his relationship with his community is explored. We see the rest of the novel's action in relation to this. Armah convinces us of the high hopes, the disappointment, the perplexity and the rising resentment of Efua. It is through Baako's challenge that Armah depicts the cool self-interest of Asante-Smith. Also, to some extent, it is the return of Baako and the disappointment he brings that prompts the disregarded but calm reassurance offered by Naana. These characters are representative of ways of thought and do not really succeed in achieving an autonomous existence in the novel. They are most effective when seen as symbols of the forces that are pulling the protagonist towards the conflict that his integrity will not allow him to bypass.

It might be a criticism of Armah that he over-indulges Baako, that he tries to win over our sympathy for Baako's "exaggerated" fears. Indeed, in a thinly-veiled, fictionalised attack on Armah, Kofi Awoonor sees Fragments, whose title he changed to Shattered into Madness: Or An Attack Upon My Mother, as a self-indulgent attempt by Armah to justify his "hatred for everybody and everything."¹⁶ But this is to confuse Baako with Armah and to miss the essential movement of Baako's exploration, from the self-obsessed neurotic, poised for flight, to the captive man who has been forcefully made aware of other people's responses to him, and who is now in the process of defining anew his relationship to the community.

The question arises and deserves to be considered: What happens to all the other Ghanaians who return from abroad? Clearly they cannot all end up having nervous breakdowns. Is Armah saying that all the "heroes" return to play their part unquestioningly in the materialistic cult? The novel would seem to suggest that most of them are probably under pressure to do so. Baako responds to this pressure in the way that he does because of his "exaggerated" fears, his neurosis. In this respect, while he wins our sympathy for his refusal to satisfy the community's expectations of a "been-to," he is also open to criticism for his self-absorbed insensitivity. Nevertheless, the point is made early in the novel that Baako is not the only "been-to" to chafe under the demands of booty which the community imposes on the returning "hero." What is different about Baako is that his response to those demands leads him to greater estrangement from his people, to the extent that in the end he is seen as mad.

Early in the novel, Juana, the sympathetic outsider, reflects on the ways that people have found to insulate themselves from the horrors around them. She compares the response of the expatriate community to that of the Ghanaian elite. In both cases she finds a tacit conspiracy not to see the horrors that occur in the community. She had at first found it difficult to understand:

the willingness with which the expatriates kept themselves imprisoned in their little blind incestuous groups. With more looking and understanding she saw it was not really blindness, but a decision quite consciously made not to see, or to see but never to let any real understanding intrude.... And the one or two who somehow found their way to the meaning and the suffering found their food turning bitter in their mouths.... (p.36)

Juana's view of the expatriates applies to some extent to the fortunate Ghanaians too. She realises that those with "the power given them to do something to change all this" were:

only concerned with digging themselves a comfortable place within a bad system. People with their eyes deliberately closed against the knowledge that their own useless lives were part of the dissolution of their peoples.... (p.46)

As Juana realises, in both cases the "blindness" is necessary to avoid the guilt of personal complicity in the "dissolution" of the people. Baako, as a patient, had discussed with Juana the myth of the traveller who returns from a sojourn in foreign parts, using the wisdom he had gained in the succour of his people. The modern "hero" was expected to bring wealth into the family, and was thus forced into corruption to supplement what he earned. The justification for corruption becomes the need to maintain the prestige of the "been-to," both in the eyes of the family and of the community. Between the greed of the family and the vanity of the "hero," the community suffers. Baako thinks that most of the "heroes" feel the conflicts that he experiences so "fiercely," although the symptoms of their anxieties may be different:

I have seen some of these fellows. They talk some, and do a lot of drinking. Purposeless, like to keep away things they daren't face. Spend money like some kind of suicide. (p.47)

We meet Baako's old friend, Fifi Williams, whom the taxi-driver describes admiringly as a "Swinging nigger. That means a tough guy.

Plenty of good time." (p.90). We first meet him in his office, with his beautiful mistress, Christina, who is "ready any time" for a "been-to." As she leaves Fifi Williams' office, having made an

arrangement to meet him at a club later, she does not ignore Baako:

"Oh, by the way," she said at the door, "if you can't escape, send the new been-to to see me. I hope he brought his car." The door closed behind her.

"Who is she?" Baako asked.

"Christina..." Fifi laughed uneasily, "just one of the girls."

"Man," Baako said softly, laughing back.

"There'll be dozens like her after you the moment they smell you out. You heard her saying it; the new been-to."

"They'll run backward when they see I have no car."

Fifi's eyes narrowed in surprise. "It's coming by sea?"

"What's coming?" Baako asked.

"Your car," Fifi answered in a patient tone.

"I haven't got one."

"I see." Fifi looked embarrassed. (p.98)

The effect is too heavily laid on, Fifi being a little too crass and Baako a little too innocent for the scene to be altogether successful. However, it carries enough conviction to make us aware of the kinds of expectations that Baako will disappoint by his self-denial.

In his essay "The Crisis of the Sensitive Ghanaian: A View of the First Two Novels of Ayi Kwei Armah,"¹⁷ A.N. Mensah speaks of the scene depicting Baako's arrival in Fifi's office in this way:

The fact that there is a girl in Fifi's office during working hours is typical — the girl is his mistress, he is married, and it is all quite usual.... It should impress no one, except the delicate stranger, Baako. (p.14)

A.N. Mensah confirms, both in this case and in general, that Armah's view that the African elite adopts this self-indulgent selectiveness of vision about their community. Armah's view of the "heroes" would

seem to be that most of them are also under pressure but they react in more successfully defensive ways than Baako does. In some cases they are more resilient. There is the example of Ocran, Baako's friend and former teacher, who is disillusioned but is unable to be completely cynical. He describes himself as clinging to "those little bits of hope" which "stick to our old brains no matter what we see." (p.158). In most other cases, the "heroes" simply learn not to see, they learn to be less sensitive. A.N. Mensah asks whether Armah has not "exaggerated beyond acceptability" in describing Ghanaians as greedy and corrupt. He answers himself in the following way:

Perhaps one answer is that most of us so-called decent Ghanaians are in fact guilty of covert acts of moral compromise without which we would not have got anywhere in this country.... [Ayi Kwei Armah] exaggerates only in the sense that he nearly completely excludes the brighter elements of Ghanaian life. The problems themselves that he deals with are very much germane to the Ghanaian situation. (p.17)

A.N. Mensah describes this need of "compromise" as the necessity to be "practical," and is a little suspicious of Armah for making Baako so unwilling to meet the demands of the circumstances. Thus, to him, Baako's breakdown was entirely predictable, if regrettable.

This blurs the issue to some extent. It is not that Armah "exaggerates" by making Baako unwilling to "compromise" and be "practical" but that Baako's neurosis makes him "exaggerate" the danger he is in, and makes him adopt the lassitude of a condemned victim. Within the novel, such a view of Baako makes sense, for the responses to his position then allow the exploration of the community. The attempt to justify Armah's "exaggerations" is, again, to confuse the author with the character, and to miss the possibility that

Baako is meant to alert us to the dangers of this self-obsessed defence of individuality.

In his essay "Ayi Kwei Armah and the 'I' of the Beholder," Dan Izevbaye suggests that in order to understand the result of the demands of the community on the gifted individual, we have to see H.R.H. Brempong and Baako as victims of the same disease. In order to follow this theme through, Dan Izevbaye asks us to ignore the "hints within the novel that Baako had neurotic tendencies before his return to Ghana." Baako's withdrawal into madness can then be seen as the fate of the "sensitive and intelligent" Ghanaian's refusal to participate in "the sacrifice of his personal talents." However, we are told enough in the novel about Baako's previous breakdown to make it difficult to ignore Baako's "neurotic tendencies." We know that Baako had been given drugs to suppress the effects of consciousness-expansion, in itself a kind of over-sensitivity. Exposed to the demands of his family and his community Baako withdraws into "full madness," as Izevbaye puts it, because he feels too intensely. His fate, therefore, should not be seen as a representative one, for it is through his neurosis that Armah explores his character. The causes for the condition that Baako so acutely dramatises are also making victims of others, but Baako's response derives from his "exaggerated" fear for his individuality, and thus he loses the sense of balance that would have allowed him to understand the fears of others.

H.R.H. Brempong, in his own way, is also "mad," in the sense of having lost the balance of values that lie behind the morality of actions. The other "been-to heroes" that we meet, "Purposeless, like to keep away things they daren't face" (p.47),

remain sane because they are sturdy enough not to be unhinged by the demands of society. Baako's "madness," the others' "drinking" and "swinging," and Brempong's frantic materialism are all reactions to the same greedy and corrupt society that values man for the "cargo" he can bring back.

Baako's rejection of his society is withdrawal, what his family sees as selfish sulks. The rest is intensified and exacerbated by the lack of any real sympathy or understanding from his kin, except Naana, who is blind. But Naana's age and infirmity make her an unlikely champion. It is necessary that we should see Baako's "sensitivity," the cause of his previous breakdown, as unsuited him for battle against these demands. He is, from the beginning, uneasy about his heroic role, (the reference to "cataracts," for example, and his embarrassment at the suggestion that he was a man of strong character). He suspects that he is a natural victim of a society that does not value the expression of individual integrity. Juana it is, the outsider who had come to the land to find a sense of wholeness, who is left with the shattered Baako, helping him to regain a sense of wholeness.

Fragments explores at greater length, and from a more varied perspective, similar themes to those Armah addresses himself to in The Beautiful Ones. In The Beautiful Ones "the man" is also solitary. Like Baako, his loneliness is not lack of kin, but lack of a sympathetic support. Like Baako, "the man" tries to be scrupulously moral in a corrupt and materialistic society.¹⁸ His counterpart in this is Koomson, the "Minister Plenipotentiary," another Brempong, and happy to use his position to enrich himself first. As with Baako,

"the man" has to contend with the demands of his family, demands that require that he go against what he believes to be right. These demands increasingly depress him, as much as the thought of corruption disgusts him. Baako's consciousness was sensitive to the point where he required drugs to lessen his capacity for feeling. "The man's" sensitivity is manifested in his acute vulnerability to smell and filth. Baako's sense of persecution reaches a climax with his chase through the streets of Accra, pursued by a crowd informed of his "madness." "The man" passes through a latrine box in order to help Koomson escape the soldiers, an experience that must have been excruciatingly painful to a man with such an overdeveloped sense of smell. But perhaps the crucial theme of both novels is the description of a society that has confused its values and has lost the ability to recognise the value of integrity in individuals. "The man" refuses to be corrupt and earns the contempt of the corrupt as well as the hostility of his family.

To see Armah's novels as expressing a hatred or a contempt for the community is to confuse the distinction between author and character. In The Beautiful Ones "the man" offers a perspective on the decay of the community by dramatising the individual's obstinate desire for self-belief. Baako, in Fragments, dramatises the conflict of individual and communal aspirations, and the dangers from within that a self-obsessed defence of individual integrity can create.

No Longer At Ease

In the first two novels of Armah we see the relationship between the individual and the community as a destructive one. The

individual is, in both cases, unusual and sensitive, and is unable to feel part of a society that has taken to corruption and materialism as a way of life.

Chinua Achebe is also concerned to explore the relationship of the gifted individual with his community. In Things Fall Apart (1958) and in Arrow of God (1964), the gifted individual is destroyed because he is unable or unwilling to adapt himself to the changing needs of his people and to changing circumstances — in this case the arrival and consolidation of European power. No Longer At Ease, set in contemporary times, explores a similar theme to that of Armah's Fragments, that is, the pressures and demands of the family on the "been-to." Obi Okonkwo's treatment, however, is a great deal more ambiguous than Baako Onipa's. With Baako we are made aware from the beginning that he does not fit the general pattern of "been-to" behaviour, and this alerts us to the likelihood of his rebellion, or at least resistance. Our attention is drawn to the strangeness of his name, Baako Onipa, solitary man, by the reaction of Brempong:

"It's an unusual name," Brempong said.

"My family name," said Baako. "I think of it as a very common name myself."

"Ah, yes," Brempong laughed. "I see what you mean, yes, yes." (p.63)

Brempong is not at all impressed by the symbolism of Baako's name, treating it as an embarrassing joke. For we are also told that Brempong had noticed early that Baako was not quite as he should be. Every answer that Baako gives to his questions goes to confirm a feeling that Brempong had had about him:

"You didn't see me wave to you — before we came on board."

"I did," Baako answered. "A bit late. And I wasn't really sure it was me you were waving to."

"I wasn't sure either. That you were a fellow Ghanaian. You look different, somehow."

"I never thought I looked so different."

"I don't mean facially. But, you know, how you're dressed, how you walk — you don't give the impression that you know you're a been-to. When a Ghanaian has had a chance to go abroad and is returning home, it's clear from any distance he's a been-to coming back."

"Oh well." Baako heard himself laugh, and the sound was weak and hollow.... (p.69)

The dialogue is, again, rather unconvincing, straining too hard to make the point. Brempong is clearly being set up to say the kind of crass things we would expect of someone like him. Nevertheless, the dialogue demonstrates that our attention is being drawn to the fact that Baako is different from other returning "heroes." We can imagine the mixture of contempt and pity that Brempong would have for this foolish young man. He puts it down to a lack of experience. Armah uses Brempong, the exaggerated "big man," "uncle H.R.H. to his family," the man who has profited from his knowledge of the ways of corruption, to show us the contrast with Baako, the sensitive and troubled young man.

Obi Okonkwo too is described as lacking experience. At a meeting of the Umuofia Progressive Union, convened to decide whether to support Obi in his fight through the courts, the President says that:

it was a thing of shame for a man in the senior service to go to prison for twenty pounds.... "I am against people

reaping where they have not sown. But we have a saying that if you want to eat a toad you should look for a fat and juicy one."

"It is all a lack of experience," said another man. "He should not have accepted the money himself. What others do is to tell you to go and hand it to their houseboy. Obi tried to do what everyone does without finding out how it was done."¹⁹

To state the obvious, Obi's crime in the eyes of the Union was to get caught, and for such a paltry sum too. Through the words and reactions of other characters in the novel, Achebe demonstrates to us the perceived morality on taking bribes. The expatriate Mr Green makes his stereotyped club-bar racial comments — "they are all corrupt." The judge "cannot comprehend" that a man of Obi's "education and promise could have done this." This appears to be what hurts Obi most, that he should have betrayed himself and the other people who had made sacrifices to provide him with "education and promise." He seems to have forgotten his earlier interest in the reasons for the corruptibility of government officials. His view then was that it was the poorly educated and long-serving officials who were the main culprits. When disaster strikes for him, he is only able to see it as personal tragedy. The rest of the novel is an exposition of the fall of Obi Okonkwo, from the smug, "idealistic" young man who returns from England with the discovery that Nigeria was "more than just a name" to him, to the corrupt government scholarship official who accepts bribes from ambitious parents and offers of sexual pleasures from anxious young school-girls. It is more or less at the end of the novel that Obi becomes corrupt. For most of it we see him attempting to cope with the demands of his position and the expectations of his people.

Achebe is explicit about these expectations, and his depiction of the Umuofia Progressive Union hints at the many indirect ways that a community can bring pressure to bear on the individual. It was at a great sacrifice from the members of the Union that Obi was able to go to England. Now, at his return, they feel, with some justice perhaps, that they have a certain claim on him. This claim does not take the crude form of a financial return alone, for the Union is proud of its first "been-to," and is anxious to share in Obi's glory at possession of "the book," and even more importantly, his possession of a "European post." Achebe intervenes in his depiction of Obi to make sure that the point is not lost on us. He emphasises that it was not only the financial aspects of the "European post" that made it attractive:

... the disparity in salary and amenities [between a junior clerk and a Senior Civil Servant] did not tell even half the story. To occupy a "European post" was second only to actually being a European. It raised a man from the masses to the elite whose small talk at cocktail parties was: "How's the car behaving?" (p.92)

The essential difference, of course, is that the African in the "European post," by virtue of his new-found prestige and affluence, also discovers enormous financial responsibilities to needy kin. The fabulous wealth that proud kin boast of in praise of his achievement does not really exist. Achebe shows how difficult it would be for the "been-to" to convince his community that he too was having a struggle to make ends meet. We can see this in the response of the Union to Obi's request that he be allowed four months' grace before he began to repay the money he had been lent for his education. The Union agrees but not without mutters and grumbles. The President even begins

to harangue Obi for wasting money on "sweet things," on pleasure and women. Obi storms out of the meeting in anger at the reference to Clara's ancestry, insisting that he would begin his repayments immediately. This increases the financial pressure on Obi, and it is clear that Achebe means us to see Obi's position as the breeding ground for corruption. In order to maintain the prestige that he is held in, the Senior Civil Servant has to supplement his salary with bribes, and in this way continue to honour the financial obligation, and social-status expectations, that the community imposes on him.

Achebe's depiction of Obi, however, is of a young man with some integrity, and we see him refusing bribes and getting into arguments with his friend Christopher over the issue. Obi believes that corruption is endemic in the Civil Service because there were too many people with a meagre education, who had risen through the ranks through bribery, and who now felt it was their turn to "eat bribe." He feels that when these officials are replaced by University graduates, corruption will gradually disappear. Subsequent events prove how naive his position was. But it is from this belief in the necessity to regain integrity for the servants of the state, and to maintain a sense of self-respect, that Obi adamantly refuses the offers that come to him from the Marks. He seems safe at this point, vigorous and collected, at least with regard to this matter of integrity.

As the novel progresses, however, Obi's affairs become much more complicated. His engagement to Clara, an osu, a descendant of those sacrificed to serve a god, in effect a shrine slave, angers his family. It is here that the acceptance of Christian values, and those of the culture that brought Christianity, are seen to have established a precarious and selective hold on the lives of the people. This is a consistent theme of the novel, and Achebe depicts it in

specific events such as these, as well as in the implications of the variety of languages that he uses.

Obi's inability to convince his parents about Clara surprises him. After all, they are devout Christians, and the osu had been among the first Ibo to become Christians. This is perhaps the first real test that Obi's idea of an individual morality receives. He feels that being an osu is no hinderance, and the arguments with which he tries to win over his father stress that there are no "bond or free" in Christ. However, the whole matter is beyond rational argument so far as the parents are concerned. It is Obi's mother who has the last word on the subject:

"I have nothing to tell you in this matter except one thing. If you want to marry this girl, you must wait until I am no more. If God hears my prayers, you will not wait long."

.....

"But if you do the thing while I am alive, you will have my blood on your head, because I shall kill myself." She sank down completely exhausted. (pp.135-36)

He has no answer to this, of course. He returns to Lagos and tells Clara, who ends the engagement. He discovers that she is pregnant, but now that marriage is impossible, she has to have an abortion. He feels this to be wrong, but by the time he decides to stop the operation, the doctor and Clara have already left for an undisclosed destination. Yet again, he had acted ineffectively to prevent a situation he felt to be wrong. Clara nearly dies from the operation, and even after she recovers, she refuses to see him. Obi's mother dies, and her death becomes for him the crucial event that completes the wreckage of his emotional life.

These personal misfortunes are paralleled by accumulating

financial difficulties. He has to find money for the repayments to the Union, for an allowance to his parents. He loses a lot of money which he had thoughtlessly left in the glove compartment of his car. An insurance demand arrives, and then he has to find money for Clara's abortion.

At the point where he has lost both Clara and his mother, Obi appears to undergo a transformation. He suffers intense guilt because he cannot go to his mother's funeral. He had felt it would be better to send what little money he could find, rather than spend the money for the journey, but the Union saw his absence as callousness. In a way Obi did not want to go: "The thought of going home and not finding her!" makes him burst into tears. As the guilt begins to lessen in intensity, Obi feels a change in himself. He "felt like metal that has passed through fire." (p.165). The result of this passage is that: "He no longer felt guilt. He, too, had died. Beyond death there are no ideals and no humbug, only reality." (p.166). In the next few paragraphs, this "reality" takes the form of an acceptance of a bribe. The implication is that the death of his mother had demoralised Obi to the extent that he abandons all sense of morality. Once he had started it became a lot easier to see the advantages of an increased income, and to enjoy the illicit pleasures offered by anxious, female scholarship-seekers. It is this transition in the novel, from the embattled young man with a sense of social morality, to the corrupt official, which lacks conviction. It is not that the course of events is implausible. We have seen Obi fail before when events demanded that he stand firm on some issue that he felt to be important. His treatment of Clara after the parents' refusal to allow the marriage on grounds of prejudice is a case in point. Obi's transition lacks

conviction because the psychological leap that he makes into corruption is not explored. Abruptly, painlessly and almost without thought, he accepts fifty pounds from a man with "a very expensive agbada." We do not have much insight into Obi's state of mind immediately after this incident or after subsequent ones involving his corruption. One day, about a page and a half later, "Obi realised that he could stand it no more." There is no attempt to explore official corruption as if it were symptomatic of the community's lack of direction in the way that we find in Armah, or indeed in Achebe's fourth novel A Man of the People. Clearly Obi is meant to appear naive, to dramatise the pitfalls that the young and misguided new elite had to face. We are made aware of the pressures Obi comes under, but the movement from the harassed young man to the corrupt official is a little too abrupt to be convincing. The material motivation for Obi's actions is clear enough, but the psychological motivation, and aftermath, is hardly there at all. His demoralisation after the death of his mother, it is implied, provides the motivation, but this creates further ambiguities. Is it that the death of the mother has disorientated Obi, so that his action in accepting bribes was an aberration? If so, what implications does this have on the endemic corruption in the community?

The novel does tackle to some extent, the theme of the loss of the traditional values of the community, and the adoption of superficial Western ones. Obi's confusion can be seen to be the result of a loss of a real sense of belonging. His vision of Nigeria is, on his return, idealised in the language of the English Romantic Poets. The sloughing off of "humbug" that he feels he has undergone at the death of his mother, is also a rejection of the vision of Nigeria free from corruption. Obi now feels allegiance neither to his community nor to the sense of morality which had been acquired, at least partly,

through a Western education. What prevents the plight of Obi from being seen as symptomatic of the larger confusions in the community is that Obi's failure is seen as a personal tragedy, a personal failure. In this respect, the novel only half-heartedly attempts to place his fate against the living background of the community. It is at times tempting to consider that the real tragedy of the novel is Obi's hapless involvement with crime rather than the moral disarray of the community.

One of the novel's successes is its subtle and complex use of language styles to explore different attitudes to life and the community. Obi's sense of cultural confusion is seen in the discomfort that he feels with both the English and Ibo languages. The discomfort is impressed upon us again and again, both because we see that Obi's English does not express the Nigerian reality, as in his poems about Nigeria, and also because we see the difficulty that he finds in expressing his thoughts in Ibo. At critical moments, his language becomes a confusion of the two. Too much can be made of this, of course. Obi had spent many years absorbing the language and its values, and it would be too much to expect that he would not share some of these values. Nevertheless, his discomfort in both languages is clearly meant to be seen as a further manifestation of his unease in both the old and the new "dispensation." And certainly the novel's epigraph draws our attention to this aspect of Obi's unease.

At the same time as language indicates the cultural confusion of Obi, it also shows the cultural cohesion that the sharing of a language makes possible. A crucial moment in the development of the relationship between Obi and Clara, is the evening when Clara calls on Obi to offer him some pills for his sea-sickness, and speaks

to him in Ibo. This becomes a turning point in their relationship, for as Obi says:

He had taken a firm decision not to show any interest in her. And yet when he had opened the door and seen her, his joy and confusion must have been very plain. And she had treated him just like another patient. "I have enough for all the passengers," she had said. "I gave some to Mr Macmillan and Mrs Wright." But then she had spoken in Ibo, for the first time, as if to say, "We belong together: we speak the same language." And she had appeared to show some concern. (p.25)

Also, when Mr Mark approaches Obi in order to ask him to "help" with his sister's application for a scholarship, he speaks to him in Ibo. The policeman who approaches Obi and Clara as they sit talking in the car by the beach becomes much less peremptory when they speak to each other in Ibo. The same cohesion that is suggested by the sharing of language motivates the creation of the Union, as on the other side, the Club, for all its admission of African members remains an English enclave that shares certain values, and these values are manifested partly in the linguistic nuances with which the members' discussion of Africans is spiced.

The novel also parodies the use of English as an expression of status. The speech of welcome that the President of the Union makes, with its "quest of the Golden Fleece," "political irredentism" and "nothing short of axiomatic," adequately expresses that language, in this case, has ceased to be a means of communication of meaning, but of attitude and social values. Obi's reply, while it expressed his gratitude and his pleasure at his welcome, did not impress the Union members, who no doubt knew their virtue in sending Obi to study abroad, and in turning out to welcome him on his return, and now wanted him to demonstrate his ownership of "the book." They

wanted him, simply, to baffle them with bombastic and high-flown rhetoric. Instead he spoke "is" and "was." Another aspect of this use of language is that the language itself comes to lose its relation to reality. In this sense it becomes a barrier to understanding experience rather than an aid to it. This becomes much more obvious in Achebe's fourth novel, A Man of the People, which will be discussed presently.

Yet another style that we find in the novel is the one that Achebe had used so effectively in Things Fall Apart, and was to use again in Arrow of God, of representing Igbo dialogue in English. It is not such a central device here as it is in the other two novels, but where it occurs it attempts to establish the confidence and the certainty that its users feel in their ability to understand and describe experience. Obi describes his delight in listening to "the masters of language," and clearly we too are meant to be impressed in the same way as we contrast the cultural confusions implied by the Union's use of English, and its mastery of Igbo speech and Igbo values. This linguistic and cultural confidence also contrasts with those aspects of modern Igbo society which have come about as a result of its syncretic experience with Western and Christian values. This is perhaps seen most spectacularly in the prayer that Mary offers at the gathering to wish Obi farewell on his departure for England. In this case, Mary's prayer demonstrates the extent to which Christianity had been indigenised, but it also suggests the robustness of Igbo society, that it had not succumbed quite as completely as the ending of Things Fall Apart seemed to suggest.

This linguistic picture is further complicated by the existence of an urban Nigerian English, which, Emmanuel Obiechina

says, "the lowly characters such as messengers, house-servants and artisans speak...."²⁰ In fact the use of "pidgin" serves a more subtle purpose than this. It too serves to demonstrate the discomfort of the Nigerian elite within the new dispensation. The Hon Sam Okoli, the urbane Minister of State, demonstrates his own sense of resentment and uncertainty by breaking into "pidgin":

"White man don go far. We just de shout for nothing," he said. Then he seemed to realise his position. "All the same they must go. This no be them country." He helped himself to another whisky, switched on the radio and sat down. (p.69)

We are given no hint that the Hon. Sam Okoli breaks into "pidgin" self-consciously. Indeed, the opposite is the case, that is, he remembers "his position," and returns to standard English. In this economical way, Achebe suggests, it would not be justifiable to go further than that, that the Hon. Sam Okoli's urbanity, an aspect of which is his use of English, contains an element of play-acting, of unreality.

No Longer At Ease does not satisfy as a study of the psychology of a "been-to" who finds himself turning to corruption against his better judgement. However, it hints at the possibilities that a subtle use of language makes available in the depiction of the individual and communal confusions in post-colonial Africa. These possibilities are explored much more effectively in the depiction of Odili in A Man of the People.

A Man of the People

Odili Samalu is the narrator of A Man of the People. This in itself is a departure from Achebe's method in his previous three novels. In those novels, Achebe had been able to intervene at crucial moments in the narrative and offer us a reasoned perspective on the events we are witnessing. In A Man of the People, Odili is left the entire responsibility for the narrative, and thus our response to Odili the commentator is of some importance to our understanding of the novel.

On the face of it, Odili's account describes the corruption and decay of the community during the years of the first civilian government in Nigeria, and tells of the ineffectual attempts that some individuals made to offer an alternative leadership. Odili himself became one of these individuals, and in his case, the man he sought to replace was the "man of the people," Chief M.A. Nanga, M.P.. It becomes clear from the very beginning of Odili's account, however, that we cannot entirely rely on him as a commentator. In the very first few pages of the novel we become aware of a degree of posturing in Odili's language. The novel begins with a description of the visit of Nanga to the school where Odili is working as a teacher. Odili describes the crowd that is awaiting the Minister's arrival, and establishes at once his favourite image of himself as a man above it all. He also establishes his fondness for the ready phrase, the slick cliché, that is a self-conscious attempt to suggest that he has more grounds for his assessments than he really does:

As I stood in one corner of that vast tumult waiting for the arrival of the Minister I felt intense bitterness

welling up in my mouth. Here were silly, ignorant villagers dancing themselves lame and waiting to blow off their gunpowder in honour of one of those who had started the country off down the slopes of inflation. I wished for a miracle, for a voice of thunder, to hush this ridiculous festival and tell the poor contemptible people one or two truths. But of course it would be quite useless.²¹

It is not that Odili's disapproval does not make sense, rather that his manner of expressing it arouses our suspicions. There are a number of other, perhaps better examples of this self-conscious and self-dramatising language in the novel, and some of them will be discussed presently, but this tone of Odili's narrative is established from the very beginning of the novel. Its purpose is to alert us to the fact that Odili's account is not going to be "objective" or entirely reliable, that we must take into account that it is his perspective that is being projected. This is immediately demonstrated in the ironies of Odili's response to Nanga. He describes an incident which he witnessed involving Nanga, who was at the time a back-bench M.P.. The government had rejected the advice of the Minister of Finance to lower the price of cocoa, because it felt this would jeopardise its chances of re-election. Out of the subsequent controversy within the government, the Prime Minister denounced the Finance Minister in Parliament, and Nanga elected himself the pack-leader of the government supporters that bayed for the blood of the university-educated economist and his team, now transformed into the "Miscreant Gang." Odili reports his sense of outrage at the behaviour of the Members of Parliament, in particular at Nanga's blood-thirstiness, and resigns from the Student Branch of the Party in disgust. He says of Nanga:

Throughout the session he led the pack of back-bench hounds straining their leash to get at their victims. If anyone had cared to sum up Mr Nanga's interruptions they would have made a good hour's continuous yelp. Perspiration poured down his face as he sprang up to interrupt or sat back to share in the derisive laughter of the hungry hyena. (p.5)

He makes his response to Nanga very clear when he concludes his description of the incident with the remark: "... I had no reason to be enthusiastic about Chief the Honourable M.A. Nanga who, seeing the empty ministerial seats, had yapped and snarled so shamelessly..." (pp.6-7). We have no reason to doubt that this is how Odili felt, that he was disgusted by the politicians' performance, and that his resignation from the party was motivated by the disgust. This assessment of Nanga, however, occurs before the Minister's arrival at the school. When Nanga arrives, recognises Odili as one of his former pupils and invites him to come and see him in the capital, Odili finds himself adjusting his assessment of Nanga:

I became a hero in the eyes of the crowd. I was dazed. Everything around me became suddenly unreal; the voices receded to a vague border zone. I knew I ought to be angry with myself but I wasn't. I found myself wondering whether - perhaps - I had been applying to politics stringent standards that didn't belong to it. (p.9)

The reassessment of Nanga is, of course, a self-serving attempt to suggest that his recognition of Nanga's qualities was to do with a rational reappraisal rather than with the vision of self-advancement that Nanga's interest in him suddenly presents. The vision left him "dazed," and everything "became suddenly unreal" while he pictured himself "a hero in the eyes of the crowd."

The image is a self-dramatising fantasy, and a clichéd one at that, and it is ironical that in his self-absorption Odili forgets that the crowd whose admiration he is now happy to have is the same one that he had dismissed as consisting of "silly, ignorant villagers." But it is his developing response to Nanga that further establishes his unreliability. Within a few minutes of having been "dazed" by Nanga's notice of him, he says of the Minister:

Somehow I found myself admiring the man for his lack of modesty. For what is modesty but inverted pride? We all think we are first-class people. Modesty forbids us from saying so ourselves though, presumably, not from wanting to hear it from others. Perhaps it was their impatience with this kind of hypocrisy that made people like Nanga successful politicians while starry-eyed idealists strove vaingloriously to bring into politics niceties and delicate refinements that belonged elsewhere. (p.11)

Nanga's synthetic political sincerity and his brazen self-publicity, his swagger, are seen as admirable, and this admiration is to some extent understandable, in the same way that we might admire virtuosity of any kind while we might reject the ends to which the skills are put to use. But in his conversion to Nanga, Odili approves Nanga's rejection of "niceties and delicate refinements" in the conduct of political affairs. Once again he seems to have forgotten his disgust with Nanga's behaviour over the denunciation of the "Miscreant Gang." The greatest irony about the transformation that Odili's assessment of Nanga seems to have undergone is that he does not seem to be aware of it. By the end of the first chapter then, it has been clearly suggested, by the degree of linguistic posturing and by the self-serving self-justifications that Odili is a narrator who is open to criticism.

As a character who takes us through the moral minefield of power, Odili can only be examined from a critical distance, although as he becomes less self-absorbed, it becomes possible to see in him a potential for an awareness of the community. His analysis of events is either falsely self-justifying or superficial. One example of this is his depiction of a central incident involving Nanga and Elsie, an incident which becomes the justification for Odili's attempted revenge against Nanga. When Odili realises that Nanga is in bed with Elsie, he describes his reaction in this cliché-ridden manner:

I sat on my bed and tried to think, with my head in my hands. But a huge sledgehammer was beating down on my brain as on an anvil and my thoughts were scattering sparks. I soon realised that what was needed was action; quick, sharp action. I rose to my feet and willed myself about gathering my things into my suitcase. (p.70)

It may even be understandable that his reaction should be as vague as this to begin with, but after his night-long walk, when he congratulates himself for noticing the derelicts and the rejects of society abandoned in the streets — "It was strange perhaps that a man who had so much on his mind should find time to pay attention to these small, inconsequential things" (p.71) — his feelings and his thoughts about Elsie's betrayal of him are still without expression. He "tried in vain to find the kind of words" to say to Nanga. Later in the day, Odili tells us that he was beginning to feel "the full weight of the previous night's humiliation." The result of much mental activity, we are told, is "a brief moment of blinding insight — just like that, without warning!" He would get his own back on Nanga. He would "seek out Nanga's intended parlour-wife and give her the works." It is this petty revenge that is transformed into

political opposition to Nanga. Odili's politics, until perhaps towards the end, were not based on political conviction, but on the need to pay back an old lecher for seducing an altogether easily seducible young lady, as he himself had found.

Odili's confused analysis is best seen in his description of his political activity. He sees this as "part of a general scheme of revenge." He asks:

How important was my political activity in its own right?

It was difficult to say; things seemed so mixed up; my revenge, my new political ambition and the girl. (p.108)

It is a symptom of his self-absorption that out of motives as confused as this he should ask the people to risk their livelihood and well-being (especially in the political atmosphere of Nigeria of that time). Clearly we can only take Odili's political convictions lightly. The meeting to found the new party, for example, is seen as a joke, a parody of the self-important messianism of radical social reformers who are themselves being exploited by cynical ideologues. Odili frequently reminds us of his lack of conviction in the viability of the party. He feels that in most people's view "the mainspring of political action is personal gain," and not "the high-minded idealism of fellows like Max and I." (p.114). It is only a mark of Odili's "swagger" that he should describe his motives as "high-minded" when a few pages earlier he had spoken of the "mix-up" of "revenge, my new political ambition and the girl." He recognises that the main asset of the new party is its "moral position," which had the "ability to inspire that kind of terror which I had seen so clearly in Nanga's eyes despite his grandiloquent bluff." The irony is that Odili's "moral position" is itself just another bluff. For, later on the

same day, he returns to his indecisiveness about his political "position," in contrast to his personal ends:

A thought sneaked into my mind and told me it was futile to try and go through with my political plans which in all honesty I should admit had always been nebulous — until Edna came along. (p.130)

It might be argued that this admission of lack of commitment to politics is an indication of his growth, a demonstration of his growing self-awareness. To an extent, this is fair, but Odili's growth is not so complete that such awareness should demand that he act in its light. Not only does he continue to believe that he holds a "moral position" about political conduct, but he fails to see the contradictions of his actions in relation to this "position." His "position," for example, does not prevent him from "borrowing" CPC funds after the coup to pay off Edna's bride price. We shall return to the ending presently, but the discussion so far has sought to establish Odili's criticised status in the novel. This can be seen both in the way Odili blurs the distinctions between moral positions, and in the way that language becomes for him a way of disguising rather than revealing reality.

In his book Chinua Achebe,²² David Carroll writes of the unreliability of Odili as an individual, contrasting this with his "idealism" in public matters. It is hard to see how Odili's "idealism" can be taken seriously, since from what the narrator tells us, his "immaculately high-minded" political views, as David Carroll describes them, are generally at the mercy of fluctuating and egocentric equivocations. It becomes clear that the emphasis on Odili's "idealism," which David Carroll also finds ambiguous, is in order to observe a

paradox which Carroll believes Achebe to have set up:

At the public level, the self-interest of the political opportunist is contrasted with the ideals of the disillusioned narrator; at the private level, the opportunist's warmth and vitality are contrasted with the alienation and selfishness of the idealist. The choice seems to be between idealism protected by irony and detachment, and involvement denied a wider view of political realities. (p.261)

The contrast is rather too cut and dried here, since it seems to take Odili at his word, when, as Carroll himself shows, the terms in which Odili describes himself do not necessarily describe the reality. However, he does draw attention to the depiction of Nanga's "warmth and vitality." Odili's description of Nanga carries in it an unmistakable admiration for "the big man." We may not wish to go as far as David Carroll who finds that Nanga "becomes increasingly attractive as we move from his doubtful political ideas to his personality." (p.261). Indeed, it is clear that Nanga declines as the novel progresses, from the "handsome and youthful-looking" politician, whose sense of political security allows him an expansive munificence to his constituency, to the ruthless and petty thug of the final days of the campaign. In his final appearance in the novel, Nanga's degeneration is clear. Odili, rather foolishly in the circumstances, had gone to Nanga's inaugural campaign meeting and was recognised. Nanga had him forcibly brought up to the platform and there berated him and Edna, his intended "parlour-wife," who was also on the platform. Carried away by his rhetoric, he invites Odili to speak. The action was, as it were, a "rhetorical" gesture, to demonstrate to the crowd that Odili had nothing to say in answer to Nanga's accusations. Odili, however, speaks:

"I came to tell your people that you are a liar and..." He pulled the microphone away smartly, set it down, walked up to me and slapped my face. Immediately hands seized my arms, but I am happy he got one fairly good kick from me. He slapped me again and again. Edna rushed forward crying and tried to get between us but he pushed her aside so violently that she landed on her buttocks on the wooden platform. The roar of the crowd was now like a thick forest all around. (p.140)

It could be argued, perhaps, that this is another instance when Odili shows signs of growth, that he did not submit to Nanga and chose to speak when he must have had a good idea of what it would lead to. It would be difficult, however, to make distinctions between Nanga's politics and his personality here, and both have shown an unattractive decline.

Nevertheless, it is undeniable that Nanga is drawn with life and zest, a man living his brigandage and corruption to the full. Armah's big men, Koomson and H.R.H. Brempong are shadowy figures in comparison. Koomson has the grace to be embarrassed as he asks "the man" and his wife to become involved in the fiddle on the boat. Nanga, one imagines, would be far too oily a customer to allow such a thing to happen to him. The sure and strong realisation of Nanga is one of the strengths of the novel. David Carroll's point that Nanga is both a corrupt, self-serving public figure as well as a real "man of the people" is well made, and it is part of the strength of Nanga's depiction that these paradoxical qualities carry conviction. Nanga, of course, also bullies, blackmails and intimidates his constituency. In itself, the depiction of Nanga comments on the community that selects him for its leader. For Nanga makes no secret of the fact that his hold on the community derives from his control of the network of nepotism and corruption. It is because the community has accepted

the simple cynicism of "you chop, me self I chop, palaver finish," that it allows the Nangas to rule over it. It is in the way that Odili's eyes have been forcefully opened to this reality that he has shown signs of growth. He understands now that the battle is not between the corrupt politician and his more honest counterpart, but that the community itself had so degenerated that it demands cynicism and corruption from its leaders, for in that way it can be sure that its chosen representatives will bring it its share of the spoils. The change that occurs, the coup, does not do so as an expression of the community's disgust with its leaders, but despite the community's wishes. The real cause of the coup, as Odili tells us, and here we are inclined to believe him, is not the will of the people: "The people themselves, as we have seen, had become even more cynical than their leaders and were apathetic into the bargain." (p.144). It was the unnatural appetites of the thugs, now "out of hand," that forced the army to act, for fear that the community would not survive under such conditions. The army intervenes to save the degenerate community from itself.

It is no surprise in Achebe's fiction that the community is forced by circumstances into dynamic change. Whether the change will arrest the degeneration is another issue, but it offers the potential for progress. Certainly the early response of the people does not necessarily indicate a sudden cessation of cynicism and a conversion to a sense of political responsibility: "Overnight everyone began to shake their heads at the excesses of the last regime, at its graft, oppression and corrupt government ... it became public opinion the next morning." (p.148). The ending of the novel, then, is left ambiguous, as indeed is the growth of Odili into a responsible and perceptive individual. At the end of the novel he admires Eunice

for having shot Chief Koko in retaliation for Max's death. Once again, the swaggering tone of the earlier Odili comes through to leave us with the feeling that he may have grown in his understanding of his community but he still is too self-absorbed to see his own faults. Eunice's gesture appeals to him for its ["]machismo["], and although he sees that such a blind act of personal vengeance is yet another expression of the community's degeneration, he observes it without the detachment that would explain his admiration of it. Also, the "borrowing" of the CPC funds to pay Edna's bride price is glossed over. By a deft, but all too familiar pretence of rational argument, Odili convinces himself that because the military government has banned political parties, this allows him to "borrow" the funds for his personal use.

The ambiguity of Odili's characterisation is achieved through the technique of making him the narrator, and then providing him with the language that allows Achebe to maintain a distance from him. It is this that allows us to see simultaneously Odili's flaws as an individual and the community's degeneration. Because Odili is shown to be, to some extent, confused and lacking perception, the deeper implications of what he is describing are left to the reader to arrive at himself. This avoids the uncompromising catalogue of horrors that Armah details to support his depiction of the decay of the Ghanaian community, and which has led to the suspicion that he has "contempt for Africa." We saw that this suspicion arises from a blurring of the distinction between the author and the character. In A Man of the People, the confusion is made less likely to occur by the distance that Odili is kept from the author by his language.

Nevertheless, both the novels of Armah and Achebe discussed in this section, depict the community in decay, and

dramatise this degeneration through the responses of an individual out of step with his time. Clearly Achebe appears less pessimistic about the community than Armah does. Partly this is because Achebe's depiction of communal decay is not as single-dimensional as Armah's. We see more of what it is that makes Achebe's communities cohesive and viable. We see, in short, what it is that makes them communities. In No Longer At Ease the Umuofia Progressive Union provides a glimpse of the rivalries and the pressures that the larger Igbo community can bring to bear on the individual, but it also shows how the community gathers to support its errant members. In A Man of the People, the people's corruption and greed has a dimension of shrewdness and humour, and Odili's unconvincing equivocations take some of the sting out of his blatant self-centredness. In Armah's first two novels, the depiction of communal decay is uncompromising, and even though Fragments offers greater variety than The Beautiful Ones, the essential drama remains the response of the individual to the decaying community.

Another way in which Achebe appears less pessimistic than Armah is in his conception of the community as a dynamic, changing force, which when threatened with disintegration adapts itself to the changing circumstances. This can be seen in Things Fall Apart and in Arrow of God, and to some extent, it can be seen in A Man of the People. Even though A Man of the People shows the degeneration of the community, it leaves the military takeover ambiguous enough to allow the possibility of an optimistic future. For example, the new authorities abolish the old parties, not just out of a desire to remove all potential opposition to the army's assumption of power, we are led to believe, but in order to end the destructive relationship between the people and the parties. At this stage, it is the army that

is "idealistic," for by its willingness to put corrupt officials on trial, it accepts that the authorities must be accountable for their actions.

The coup in The Beautiful Ones changes nothing. It is something of a non-event for the community, a changing of the guards rather than a portent of social change. On his way back from the beach, "the man" sees two children robbing the dead, "chipping marble off the headstones" in the cemetery. Further on he comes to a road block and there observes a police officer receiving a bribe from a bus driver. Nothing has changed, apart from the main beneficiaries of the same corruption. "The man's" last thought as he walks home to his wife and children is "the never-ending knowledge that this aching emptiness would be all that the remainder of his own life could offer him." (p.183).

Armah's social vision, at least in the early novels, is of a society that has undermined itself so effectively that it cannot recognise itself for its perversions. In the event it can only destroy the individual who has a vision of what social life means. Yet, and this is one of the ways in which Armah has been misread, "the man" and Baako are not despairing heroes, utterly defeated. "The man" returns home to his wife and children, certain of greater understanding from Oyo, his conviction to avoid corruption further strengthened by the support of his family. Baako has a breakdown, or as Izevbaye put it, progresses "to full madness." He talks lucidly of his failure in the eyes of the community, and accepts the blame for it. In other words, it is a symptom of his "madness" that he accepts the guilt that his family accuse him of. The implication of Baako's conversation with Ocran at the hospital is that he will not get better except by recognising that his actions have to be justified to himself as well,

to his conscience, and not just by a notion of duty that does not make moral sense. What we know of Baako convinces us that this self-abdication is contrary to what he believes to be the responsibility of the individual in the community. It is a symptom of his insecurity that he has been forced to commit it. Baako's self-retrieval is clearly hinted at in the ending of the novel. From the hospital yard, where Baako had been taken to meet his visitors, Ocran and Juana, they hear the singing from the cathedral nearby:

Over the wall the murmur from the cathedral swelled into a sung phrase that sounded at that distance like one inexorably rising cry, first of pure, impossible longing, then the fearful pain of impending disappointment understood, open sounds of hope still continuing in the face of every despair, and a long note of calm at the end. (p.276)

To Juana the singing recalls the message of hope for salvation that the words contain, but the passion of their delivery transcends their liturgical significance, and symbolises a belief in man's capacity to vanquish despair by an insuppressible hope for change.

Naana also, on the threshold of her return to Nananom, the spiritual land of the ancestors, speaks of Baako:

in all that noise I thought he would surely die, but there must be strong spirits looking after him. Happy event if in his future there is something yet hidden that will reveal itself with time, though that will be long after I am dead. I do not know where he is, and they tell me nothing. I know no way of reaching him and letting him know as I go that my spirit has been filled with thoughts of his happiness, that I have wished for him a life of good things done and a great peace at the end. (p.284)

Armah uses Naana throughout the novel as the one character whose

words and whose thoughts we take to be well-judged. It is Naana who understands that it was the pressure exerted by "those left behind who had their dreams," that destroyed the hope that Baako represented to her and to the community. Of the others, as Juana says, "no one seemed to understand." It is not that Armah wishes us to see Baako's family as naturally callous and heartless, rather that they are themselves victims of the materialism that was behind their rejection of their kin.

Odili is different, able to accomodate himself to social ills, and able, therefore, to overcome a crisis in his life by acting in the way his enemy would respect, by seeking revenge. To Achebe, the survival of the community is the central issue, even if this does not always mean desirable progress. Okonkwo in Things Fall Apart and Ezeulu in Arrow of God are ultimately destroyed by their communities, because they are unable to adapt to the changes which the community sees as necessary. Odili survives to fight another day, but in the process he has to see the futility of his vanity and selfishness, as well as to recognise quite forcefully the immorality of the political life of the nation. Obi Okonkwo is the odd one out in that the handling of his tragedy is indeterminate. We are led to see his misfortune as a personal one, but the context of his errors is social. In the end Obi stands condemned by the community for committing a crime which the social ethos sanctions. It is hard to escape the conclusion that Obi's misfortune was one of indiscretion. We know very little about how he felt with regard to his inability to resist corruption, but we know a lot more about how he felt in the aftermath of the humiliation of being caught. Neither Obi nor the community are forced to face the immorality of corruption itself. Obi is arrested

for his clumsiness and the community stumbles on to the fate that we see described in A Man of the People. As readers we are expected to see that the community is in disarray, but the characters themselves are not made to face this, nor are they made to examine their consciences for the morality which we can undoubtedly assume they are aware.

The heroes of Armah's two early novels are awkward individuals in a society that does not wish to change, or that has reached the point where it cannot recognise the possibility of change. "The man" recognises his inability to change anything, his powerlessness is realistically enough evoked for us to be able to conclude that, but his survival and his determination are a triumph of a kind. The hostility that The Beautiful Ones has aroused is at least partly a misunderstanding of the vision that Armah has of society and of the individual's role in it, and it is partly a confusion of the distinction between author and character. So the fact that The Beautiful Ones offers "the man's" perspective on the decay of his community is confused with what the novel implies about Armah. What the novel does do becomes secondary. In Fragments Baako's response to his community has to be seen in terms of his "exaggerated" fears for his individuality, and this, to some extent, is a criticism of Baako. For in his self-absorption he fails to take account of others. The same distinction between author and character is necessary to an understanding of Odili's criticised status in A Man of the People, without which Odili's confusions can only be seen as Achebe's.

As his later novels show, and as Naana hints in Fragments, Armah is concerned at the extent to which Ghanaian society, and other African societies, have lost their way and have embraced values that

make no sense. The "sensitive" individuals, "the man" and Baako, dramatise this social dislocation. We see them suffering as a result of the senselessness of the society's confusion of its values. Because Achebe's emphasis is different, that is, on the ability of the community to regenerate itself, the presence of the gifted individual at times of change serves to dramatise the choices that are open to the community. Umuofia is not just defeated by the British, it is able to see what defiance of the British will bring to the whole community, by witnessing Okonkwo's tragic end. Ezeulu's anger with his people, however tortuously arrived at, is a way of challenging the legitimacy of "the new dispensation." His loss becomes the community's survival, and the abandonment of Ulu as the god of Umuaro. The challenge of Ezeulu dramatises the sacrifices of its values and traditions that the community is willing to make in order to survive. Achebe is not saying, of course, that survival is worth any price, but both Things Fall Apart and Arrow of God are set at times of change. It was the ability of the two communities to adapt that prevented their destruction. Nevertheless, Okonkwo and Ezeulu are both presented as characters of real nobility, whose sense of dignity and whose vanity does not allow them to be modest enough, or humble enough, to accept defeat. Many critics tend to emphasise the tragic aspects of Things Fall Apart and Arrow of God, and this is fair enough, but in an important way both novels are optimistic about the community.

To the critics who demand that literature should contribute to social progress, and Achebe himself is one such critic, the general effect of Armah's first two novels appears to be a negative one. Part of the reason for this is the uncompromising detail with which Armah depicts the decay of the communities in which his

"sensitive" individuals seek for change. We have seen, however, that it is mistaken to see Armah as despairing over the community's ability, and the individual's desire, for change. Undoubtedly his first two novels offer a pessimistic view of society, but to see them as the contemptuous efforts of the "alienated native" is simply to misread them.

It is clear that in the general critical and political atmosphere that favours a literature of social optimism, the social dynamism that Achebe depicts in his fiction would be attractive to critics. But this is to underestimate the extent to which No Longer At Ease and A Man of the People chart the community's decay. Because Achebe's depiction of this decay also includes a depiction of the qualities that make the community viable and cohesive, the two novels discussed in this section do not give the same overwhelming sense of the community's degeneration that the early novels of Armah do. Achebe, quite as much as Armah, depicts the individual in conflict with a community that has debased its values, even if he does not depict this debasement with the same insistence as Armah. For Armah, the "exaggeration" of the degeneration is the means of exploring the character's obsession with his own sense of being out of step, and with his sense of inadequacy. It is not, as some of the adverse criticism seems to imply, a way of romanticising his self-contempt.

We saw in earlier discussions that a climate of critical opinion does exist which requires that literature perform a positive social function. This opinion is not restricted to the less perceptive and more assertive critics alone, although they tend to put the matter more crudely. More than two decades ago Senghor spoke of

African arts as "committed," a decade later the duty of the writer had become to "rehabilitate" the African. More recently Soyinka has spoken of "race retrieval," and Armah has been engaged in rediscovering "the way" back to the essential African. The discussion in this section has attempted to show that, when indulged without care, this preoccupation with the positive role of literature can lead to a misunderstanding of the works of literature themselves. The discussion has also attempted to show that there are greater similarities between Armah's and Achebe's conceptions of the relationship between the individual and the community. They both depict the community in decline, and they both do this, to varying degrees, through the responses of the individual not wholly overwhelmed by the degeneration. We have seen that Armah's communities are more uncompromisingly in decay, and this has led to the kind of adverse criticism of Armah that describes his attitude to Africa as contemptuous. It may also be this same criticism that has led Armah to put his "essential Africanity" out of the question by writing such "positive" novels as Two Thousand Seasons and The Healers.

The preoccupation with the positive social role of literature has taken some critics beyond the discussion of the relationship between literature and the community and into attempts to describe or endorse a favoured literary approach as "authentic." These attempts have sought to appeal to racial and cultural justifications for excluding contrary approaches. This can be seen in the arguments that are put forward to support the idea that there exists a peculiarly African way of writing and appreciating literature, an "African aesthetics," and that this "African aesthetics" has its sources in an "African tradition." This will be discussed in detail in the next chapter.

Notes

¹ Kolawole Ogungbesan, "Symbol and Meaning in The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born," African Literature Today 7, ed. Eldred Jones (London: Heinemann, 1975), pp.93-110.

Dan Izevbaye, "Ayi Kwei Armah and the 'I' of the Beholder," A Celebration of Black African Writing, ed. B. King and K. Ogungbesan (Zaria and Ibadan: Ahmadu Bello University Press and Oxford University Press, 1975), pp.232-244.

Eldred Jones, "Review," African Literature Today 3, ed. Eldred Jones (London: Heinemann, 1969), p.55.

Eustace Palmer, An Introduction to the African Novel (London: Heinemann, 1972), pp.129-142.

Margaret Folarin, "An Additional Comment on Ayi Kwei Armah's The Beautiful Ones," African Literature Today 5, ed. Eldred Jones (London: Heinemann, 1971), pp.116-128.

² Palmer, op.cit., p.142.

³ Folarin, op.cit., p.128

⁴ Kofi Awoonor, The Breast of the Earth (New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1975), p.303

⁵ Charles E. Nnolim, "Dialectic as Form: Pejorism in the Novels of Armah," African Literature Today 10, ed. Eldred Jones (London: Heinemann, 1979), p.222.

⁶ Chinua Achebe, "Africa and Her Writers," Morning Yet on Creation Day (London: Heinemann, 1975), pp.19-29.

⁷ Leonard Kibera, "Pessimism and the African Novelist: Ayi Kwei Armah's The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born," Journal of Commonwealth Literature, XIV, 1 (August 1979), p.71.

⁸ Ayi Kwei Armah, The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born (London: Heinemann, 1969), p.12. All further page references will be to this edition.

⁹ Joyce Cary, Mister Johnson (London: Michael Joseph, 1939, 1947), p.95.

¹⁰ E. Obiechina, Culture, Tradition and Society in the West African Novel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975).

¹¹ Izevbaye, op.cit., p.234.

¹² To select only a few examples, we might mention Heathcliff in Wuthering Heights, Ahab in Moby Dick, Bartleby in Melville's Bartleby, Jude in Hardy's Jude the Obscure and the woman in Doris Lessing's The Grass is Singing. All of these "characters" clearly have the sympathy of their creators but none of them describe the author's relationship with his community, although there might be some ambiguity in Hardy's depiction of Jude.

¹³ Ayi Kwei Armah, Why Are We So Blest? (London: Heinemann, 1974), p.14. All further page references will be to this edition. (First published in New York by Doubleday, 1971).

¹⁴ Ezekiel Mphahlele, The African Image (London: Faber, 1962), 2nd. Ed., 1974.

¹⁵ Ayi Kwei Armah, Fragments (London: Heinemann, 1974), p.284. All further page references to this edition.

¹⁶ Kofi Awoonor, "From Here Comes the Voyager at Last," Okike 7, (April, 1975), pp.31-57. This reference to p.44.

¹⁷ A.N. Mensah, "The Crisis of the Sensitive Ghanaian: A View of the First Two Novels Of Ayi Kwei Armah," Universitas, 2, 2 (New Series, Dec.1972), pp.3-7.

¹⁸ Much has been made of "the man" advising Koomson to give the watchman a bribe. For "the man" to have refused would have been to make a moral gesture in a matter that involved someone's life, even a corrupt someone. This would hardly be a powerful demonstration of morality. "The man" agreed to the suggestion that the watchman should be given the money that he wanted. Koomson was clearly receiving a fair return for it. By helping Koomson, "the man" is already endangering his life. He advises Koomson to increase the bribe because he recognises that his principles are not endangered by a suspension that involves saving a human life, however contemptible.

¹⁹ Chinua Achebe, No Longer At Ease (London: Heinemann, 1960), p.6. All further page references to this edition.

²⁰ E. Obiechina, "Chinua Achebe's No Longer At Ease," Okike 13 (Jan.1979), p.142.

²¹ Chinua Achebe, A Man of the People (London: Heinemann, 1966), p.2. All further page references to this edition.

²² David Carroll, "A Man of the People," this chapter included in Critical Perspectives on Chinua Achebe, ed. C.L. Innes and Bernth Lindfors (Washington D.C.: Three Continents Press, 1978), pp.255-78.

IV

The Use of Tradition

It has already been remarked that the aggressive rhetoric of négritude, with its insistence on ideas of "essence," has familiarised the critic and the reader of African literature with the concept of racial and cultural categorisation. It has also enabled the critic to be over-confident about the value, and the nature, of the qualities in the literature that he chooses to describe as "traditional." This section will attempt to consider some aspects of the arguments concerned with the need to define literary criteria for African literature. It will also attempt to observe the influence of these arguments on readings of Wole Soyinka's The Interpreters.

We have attempted to show that a number of African critics feel a concern that literature should perform a positive social role. In this chapter we will observe how this concern is extended into a rejection of "sophistication," for the purer verities of "authentic" and "traditional" forms of expression. It will be shown that this position is highly critical of "obscurity" and "elitism," both of which are seen to be anti-progressive and anti-social manifestations of literature's function in the community. Because this rejection is expressed in terms of "authenticity," it assumes specific and rather limited ends for the literature. By such assumptions the critic defines both the literature and the audience for whom the literature is intended. Thus, from the assumption that

literature should perform a positive role in the community comes also the assumption that the most effective and "authentic" means of achieving this is by observing a radical shift in emphasis in order to arrive at an unmistakably African cultural identity.

It is as well to begin with the obvious. Calls for the formulation, analysis or re-discovery, depending on the view of the critic, of an African "aesthetics," "tradition" or "world-view" have been appearing regularly over the years. Some do not attempt more than a general harangue, stirring up the "intellectuals" about an issue they feel to be important. Omalara Leslie's paper, "African Aesthetics and Literature," is one such example.¹ Leslie suggests that:

The African artist should begin to respect the African audience and its essence. [*Italics mine*]. The African writer does not as yet aim his effects at African sensibilities. (p.6)

The paper is a self-confessed "call for the development of the discipline of African aesthetics." It does not attempt to do this itself, but it expresses the general hope that the achievement of such a task would enable the contemporary African artist to "portray a truer Africanity than heretofore." Many of the suggestions that she makes to combat the un-Africanity "of contemporary African art" assume, and Leslie is quick to acknowledge this, an African culture. While conceding that such an assumption "will of course raise immediate clamor," she clearly feels that the common Africanity of Africans is self-evident enough for her to proceed with her nostrums. Indeed she does this with some spirit. She suggests the kinds of questions that "the African intellectual and artist" has to address himself to in order to be "persuaded ... that a cultural self exists; that it exists in history; that it is important to know or rediscover

that self without rejecting a universal humanism." (p.7). The questions themselves are very general, but in the process of setting them, Leslie establishes her dissatisfaction with the Africanity of "the poetry of Okigbo, The Road of Soyinka, his Interpreters [sic], Achebe's novels, Armah's The Beautiful Ones are not yet Born [sic], Ousouloguem's Bound to Violence, and Ngugi's A Grain of Wheat." (p.5). The editor of the journal prefaces the paper with a warning that the "format" is intended to allow the expression of "opinion and insights" "unencumbered by the paraphernalia of the scholarly paper." (p.4).

Aloys U. Ohaegbu in his "The African Writer and the Problem of Cultural Identity"² explains "the emphasis ... on the assertion of black African cultural identity by African intellectuals" by their fear of being "swallowed up" by "the world," by which quite clearly he means the West. Ohaegbu believes that African literature "has a vital role to play not only in the assertion of African cultural identity but also in its formation." (p.29). He is certain that in order to achieve the rescue of African culture, the writer "must draw inspiration from the past." (p.30). There is little need to explore the argument in detail, it is a very familiar one. It inspired the poetry of négritude and continues to provoke much learned speculation. Indeed, as Aimé Césaire's Cahier demonstrates, the protest against and rejection of Western culture and Western values was a necessary stage for the Negro before he could achieve the liberation of his psyche. Fanon describes the protest stage of "negro-ism" in this way:

In order to ensure his salvation and to escape from the supremacy of the white man's culture the native feels the need to turn backwards towards his unknown roots and to

lose himself at whatever cost in his own barbarous people.... He not only turns himself into the defender of his people's past; he is willing to be counted as one of them, and henceforward he is even capable of laughing at his own cowardice.³

Fanon, however, takes care to warn against being "content with delving into the past of a people in order to find coherent elements which will counteract colonialism's attempts to falsify and harm." He requires that "men of culture" "collaborate on the physical plane." The "physical plane" that Fanon had in mind was the active involvement of intellectuals in the struggle for liberation from colonialism. Out of the interaction between the proletariat and the intellectuals, the masses and the elite, would be born a national identity and a national culture. We may feel, with hindsight, that Fanon was being too optimistic, but obviously what he meant by liberation is not what has occurred in most ex-colonies, where often the word has come to stand for the displacement of a colonial elite by a black one.

Ohaegbu's argument does not go as far as this, and his prescriptions add nothing to those of négritude poets of the 1940's and 1950's. His article has the single merit of calling for a special kind of commitment from the African writer. In his view, the work of an African writer "has to be functional and not gratuitous, dynamic and not dormant; it has to comprehend man in his total environment and explore all the regions of African life where cultural manifestations can best be perceived." (p.29). Senghor, of course, said more or less the same thing over twenty years before. But whereas Senghor sought a synthesis of cultures, Ohaegbu fears absorption by "the world." Hence his interest in the past is an identification of the means with which the African artist will resist

the threat to his self-identity and self-fulfilment.

In another essay, J.K. Agovi identifies the main failures of the criticism of African literature in three areas.⁴ Firstly he finds that it is too concerned with European models and is therefore condescending about the quality of African works. Secondly he sees the critics as having accepted too willingly European critical values. Thirdly he finds that critics of African literature have failed to explore the link between "modern" and "traditional" literatures. Agovi argues that this last failure is the most crucial since "unless this 'vital aesthetic link' is sufficiently explored and its assumptions sufficiently established there cannot be any authentic and meaningful formulation of critical standards for African literature." (p.131). Agovi has no doubts that "modern African literature is a continuation of the oral literary tradition of the past," although he is not too specific about the connections. (p.131). The critics, in his view, have so far failed to account for this "continuation" in their analyses because of their "great reluctance to examine African writers in their own right without reference to these so-called 'Western models'." (p.130). The main part of Agovi's article is an attempt to put forward a brief "formulation of critical standards" derived from "traditional" sources. Before we examine this "formulation" in a little more detail, it is worth recalling that négritude critics had tried to do the same thing, and the criticisms that were applied to those speculations are relevant here also. A major assumption behind Agovi's references to "tradition" is that he is speaking of one tradition which is common to all African societies. Other critics, mainly from West Africa, have consistently done the same, without being totally convincing. The claim seems unnecessary and excessive;

for why should it be necessary to ignore the complexities of African cultures in order to make comparative, and generally uninspired, distinctions from European traditions?

Agovi begins his "formulation" by observing that "traditional" society "had a predominantly organic conception of life," a puzzling statement since it is clearly meant to distinguish this society from others which do not have "an organic conception of life." It appears that by this distinction Agovi means to point out that in such a society, all corporate activity reflected "the total experience of the community." Literature, as an aspect of this experience, "deeply involved" "the community as well as the individual," although the artist always "occupied the centre of attention." Senghor had arrived at a substantially similar conclusion when he spoke of African literature and art as the means by which the African community found and expressed its identity, its "essence." He had spoken of the community's gain from the artist as "an explanation and understanding of the world."⁵ In other words, Senghor speculated that artistic expression was representative of the people's understanding of life. The inescapable implication is that the community did not have "an identity" or did not possess "an understanding of the world" before the artist provided the means. It is the kind of artistic hubris that provoked Wole Soyinka into mocking the African artist/intellectual for seeking "to give society something that the society had never lost — its identity."⁶ It is also because Senghor is keen to describe a distinctive African aesthetic approach to the arts that he attempts such a definitive account of their functions. Without going as far as Senghor, Agovi attempts to perform a similar task.

As we have seen, he saw it as the primary failure of literary criticism that the "aesthetic link" between "traditional" and "modern" forms had not been made. His first task in his essay becomes to describe the major features of "traditional African literature." After a few introductory remarks on the "organic conception of life" in "traditional society," Agovi arrives at this:

For, as a matter of fact, it was assumed in traditional society that the real artist who was worth his salt was one whose artistic mode of expression was essentially symbolic. (p.131)

We are given no indication whether this is unusual or peculiar to "traditional African society" or whether it is an aesthetic mode that has parallels elsewhere. It is a little uncertain, therefore, whether Agovi is generalising from his knowledge of African history or from his understanding of human nature. The casual, confiding, "as a matter of fact," invites us to accept the speculation as an item too well-known and established to require detailed discussion. As a matter of fact, nothing that Agovi has said has prepared us for the statement, and little that follows attempts to explain it, for he continues:

Of course it goes without saying that in traditional society there was a great deal of emphasis on and respect for symbolic communication. Consequently, the traditional artist or performer always conceived his mode of transmitting ideas and emotion largely in terms of symbolism. (p.131)

Unless Agovi is making "symbolic communication" a distinguishing "traditional African" technique, which would contradict the facts, it is difficult to see the point of what he is saying.

It is hardly surprising that artists should employ

symbolism, but the further point that "the traditional artist as performer always conceived his mode of transmitting ideas and emotion largely in terms of symbolism" need not be the consequence. Further discussion might have made the point more concrete, or conversely, exposed its illogicality. As he develops his argument, however, it becomes clear that Agovi has no interest in evidence but in generalising about the African concept of mind, an intellectual pursuit well-loved by négritude critics as well. It is interesting to note the rhetorical flourish with which he ends the paragraph. It is so reminiscent of the precipitate haste of Senghorian speculative conclusions:

There was, therefore, on all occasions, a pervasive atmosphere of latent symbolism which was consciously or unconsciously woven into the text of each performance. And it was through this latent symbolism that meaningful ideas, values, beliefs and emotion were communicated. (p.131)

Many questions arise, but Agovi's vagueness makes it difficult to follow them through sensibly. It is not clear, for example, what the "pervasive atmosphere of latent symbolism" might be, and it is a little puzzling to see the word text in this context, italicised presumably to indicate that it is being used in a different way from the way the word would normally occur in a discussion of literature and criticism. The difficulty arises in trying to be certain how the "pervasive atmosphere of latent symbolism" was "woven into the text" when neither are properly related to each other. More importantly, what does Agovi see as being different and distinctive about the "traditional African" mode of "symbolic communication" from other forms of "symbolic communication?" This is not made clear, but one possibility is suggested.

Irritated by the view expressed by Ulli Beier that African novelists were becoming more interested in the use of symbolic devices, in contrast to their earlier novels which had mostly employed "strict realism,"⁷ Agovi writes:

African literature whether old or new has always maintained, in its delineation of dramatic situations, an integrated balance between realism and symbolism. Every significant dramatic situation is real, only because it is invested with symbolism. In fact, one can almost say that there is nothing like a significant dramatic situation which has no corresponding symbolic overtone. (p.132)

The logic is breathlessly tautological. It is interesting that Agovi argues the inseparability of "symbolism" and "realism" in African literature "whether old or new" while he sees the European literary tradition as "different" in this sense. Presumably, and this is clear only by implication, in European literature "symbolism" and "realism" are traditionally separated devices. In any case, Agovi implies, they are not quite as integral to dramatic development in European literature as they are in African literature "whether old or new." The distinction is spurious, unless by "realism" Agovi means that very specialised and modern movement of photographic realism that hardly made any impression on "the critical assumptions of Eliot, Leavis and other English critics" whom he mentions as being typical of the critical approach of the West. (p.129). There have, indeed, been movements and tendencies from realism in European literature from time to time, towards a formalism of technique that is unfavourable to the depiction of reality in "its full breadth and depth," but this is with reference to a written literature available to a restricted readership. As George Steiner found with French

classical tragedians in The Death of Tragedy⁸ and Eric Auerbach commented on in relation to the passing of courtly literature, formalistic correspondences of style begin to break down when the "literature is addressed to a wider circle."⁹ The development of the novel itself is an example, from the long poem with its strict requirements and conventions, accessible to the well-versed, to the relative freedom of prose and its appropriateness for the expression of quotidian concerns lies also a movement from a cultivated rhetorical style, to a more flexible and on the whole more "realistic" voice. The process that Agovi describes in racial and cultural terms would be better examined from the point of view of the peculiar demands of the written as opposed to the oral mode of expression. Quite clearly the written form is vulnerable to experimentation as much as the oral form, but the former is open to a wider range of influences than the latter, which is restricted both geographically and in the sense that it has to be remembered from one performance to another, altered to some extent, perhaps, but not required or expected to suffer fundamental change. To speak of "symbolism" and "realism" as two separate entities in the European literary tradition would only be accurate where these are recognisable formal categories, but even this does not preclude their dual presence in a "significant dramatic situation."

Agovi's intention in defining African literary tradition, and distinguishing it from the European traditions, is to argue that only critics who are sensitive to the special process of "dramatic progression" found in African literature are in a position to pronounce on the critical value of the literature. In other words, he suggests that the requirements for competence in the criticism of

this literature are fundamentally distinct from those expected "in the study of the European or American novel." The speculation on "traditional African society" was meant to prepare the ground for this piece of polemic:

... for a proper formulation of the critical standards of African literature, it is absolutely necessary that foreign participation in our literary criticism be reduced to the minimum in a way which would make it possible for us to develop pride and confidence in the assessment of our own literature.... this can be properly done only if a real attempt is made by Africans, possessing authentic African sensibility to determine the aesthetic continuity between traditional and modern African literature in a way which would establish quite clearly and logically that there has been a continuous literary tradition stretching from the past to the present.... (p.133)

Thus, Agovi defines the "qualifications" that a critic requires as "an authentic African sensibility." It is interesting that Agovi develops his argument to this conclusion from a description of literary techniques. His attempt to describe the peculiar nature of "dramatic progression" in African literature, and his claim that only Africans are sensitive to this "progression," are unconvincing at almost every level. There are more effective arguments, as we shall see later.

S.A. Dzeagu in an article that was obviously intended to put forward an opposing view, refuses to be impressed by what he calls "a nationalistic approach based on a supposed authentic African sensibility."¹⁰ He offers some cogent reasons for his scepticism, not least of which is his dissatisfaction with the evasive ambiguities in Agovi's article. There are many critics, however,

who share Agovi's view, or who sympathise with his wish to reduce "foreign participation" to a minimum. It needs to be stressed that the whole point of discussing the specific and laughable weaknesses of Agovi's argument is to reveal not so much the failure of one particular critic, but rather to argue that such confusions will unfailingly occur when the critic attempts to simplify the complexities of the problems of criticism with rhetorical flourishes. Indeed, in this respect, Agovi's failings are typical.

It is tempting, of course, to dismiss Agovi as a fringe, eccentric critic, "a paper tiger." But often enough critics of Agovi's calibre are mistaken for the real thing. It seems necessary to take them to task and demonstrate their weaknesses, since to leave them alone in disdain is to allow the impression that they make sense and to run the risk of allowing their position to gain influence. This can be seen more spectacularly in the case of Chinweizu, Jemie and Madubuike, whose position will be discussed presently. It does not seem to us that it is adequate to leave such critics alone, and to wait for time to sink them like dross. The influence of Chinweizu, Jemie and Madubuike can be observed both in the attention they receive in scholarly publications (see Alastair Niven's review of their new book in The Times Literary Supplement, 6th. Nov. 1981, p.1310a) but also in the interest and discussion, largely favourable, that they have stirred in academic circles in Nigeria. Like Agovi, Chinweizu, Jemie and Madubuike feel that "foreign participation" in the criticism of African literature does not end with faulty criticism of African works but, more importantly, influences the African artist away from his real concerns, away from his roots.

In their articles "Towards the Decolonization of African

Literature,"¹¹ they address themselves to what they see as the failure of Nigerian poetry and its criticism. It has to be kept in mind that their comments are on the whole concerned with poetry; nevertheless it is clear that their more general remarks are relevant to the novel and its criticism. They begin by distinguishing the "authentic" voice of Amos Tutuola from Wole Soyinka's "imitative obfuscations." They commend Tutuola as an example of "the high peak attained by Okigbo" and Okot p'Bitek, and condemn Soyinka for having committed "voluntary cultural servitude." An example of the latter, they find, is the "inauthentic cursing" in the poem "Malediction":

Giggles fill the water-hole
Offsprings by you abandoned,
And afterbirth, at crossroads

So when the world grieves, rejoice
Call to them in laughter....¹²

Chinweizu et al. find this reminiscent of a "16th. and 19th. century" Englishman cursing, and they find it unacceptable. "The poet is saying in effect that our cultural style is not good enough to curse in." (p.17). They offer what they consider to be a better, more "authentic" version of the same lines:

May you give birth to monstrosities in the streets
And when the world comes to commiserate with you
May you burst out laughing in joy. (p.16)

Aside from the value of such an exercise as criticism, or its success in recreating the "atmosphere" of Soyinka's poem, it gives us a clear idea of what Chinweizu et al. would consider to be the qualities of a successful poem. For it is the rather obvious implication of

this new version of "Malediction" that to be "authentic" African poetry must be transparently accessible, its syntax must be simple and its imagery non-allusive. Indeed, the example of what Chinweizu et al. consider to be a successful, "authentic" poem bears this out. They quote Matei Markwei's "Life in Our Village" as a "simple and vivid poem," conveying "the experience of moonlight play." (p.20). It is quoted here in full because it makes the implication of the three critics' hostility to Soyinka more clear than a commentary on it would:

In our little village
When elders are around
Boys must not look at girls
And girls must not look at boys
Because the elders say
That is not good.

Even when night comes
Boys must play separately,
Girls must play separately.
But humanity is weak
So boys and girls meet
The boys play hide and seek
And the girls play hide and seek.
The boys know where the girls hide
And the girls know where the boys hide --
So in their hide and seek,
Boys seek girls,
Girls seek boys,
And each to each sing
Songs of love. (p.20)

It is easy to understand that critics who find this a "vivid" experience would have little patience with Soyinka's complexities. As well as this simplicity of syntax, the "authentic" poem, it appears,

must contain a number of other ingredients. These include "parables, fables, paradoxes, myths, legends" and of course proverbs, (none of which occur in the example they have quoted).

Chinweizu et al. identify one of the causes for the inaccessibility and inauthenticity, as they see it, of some Nigerian poetry as the desire to impress the West with its sophistication, ignoring the need to address an African audience. They feel therefore that it is becoming an urgent task to formulate "an African aesthetics" because the danger of the Western form imposing itself on the Nigerian mind is real and imminent. Such an "aesthetics" will celebrate the virtues and excellencies of an "uncontaminated" traditional African culture, derived from the pure sources of the African oral tradition. They recognise that there are problems with carrying out the task, and they write:

Usually a poetics is an after-the-fact codification of exemplary devices and characteristics extracted from an already established and acclaimed body of masterpieces — the classics of a given culture. Some might say that there is at present not a sufficient body of contemporary African writing.... However, because contemporary African culture is embattled and, in addition, is patently being led astray by apers of alien traditions, African writers and critics can no longer postpone the investigation necessary for the formulation of a poetics. Otherwise the field will, before long, be pre-empted by an alien and deleterious one. (p.72)

They adopt a very similar line to that mentioned earlier in connection with Aloys U. Ohaegbu, that African culture faces an imminent threat from the West, and must therefore take active steps to assert its cultural autonomy. The position is also similar to that adopted by the later philosophical champions of the négritude movement, as in the

work of Cheikh Anta Diop and in the editorials of Présence Africaine. The assertion of identity and the interest in roots is at the same time a taking up of defensive positions, a rejection of any suspicion of reliance on Western culture. Thus, the suggestion that Chinweizu et al. make for getting round the unavailability of an "established and acclaimed body of masterpieces" is to turn to the "African oral tradition," because it is "the incontestably uncontaminated reservoir of African sensibility." (p.72). They disclaim the "romanticism of the négritude kind" and commend "a modernity that has emerged from a clearly African poetic tradition," a tradition that they argue still survives.

The adjective that Chinweizu et al. use here is interesting and consonant with their demand that "an African aesthetics" can be derived from those qualities that they consider to form a genuinely African tradition. It is less certain if the concept of an "uncontaminated sensibility" is of any value at all. What can it mean? How far back would Chinweizu et al. have to go before they discover this pristine "sensibility"? Before the coming of the Europeans, or the Arabs, or the Romans, the Greeks; or on the east coast of Africa, before the Hamitic migration into the Horn of Africa, before the Persian and Indonesian settlement of the coast and the islands off the coast, before the arrivals of the Indians — before the Pharaohs? Even pretending for the sake of argument that we can go back far enough to the point when all Africans shared an identical culture and, necessarily, language, how will that assist the "aesthetics" engineer into forgetting what has happened since then? For millions of Africans have contaminated their sensibilities by becoming Muslims or Christians and have developed an authentically contaminated culture.

One can see how the diversity of languages and cultures would also create problems for the cultural pan-Africanist. It is something of a pious bluff that all African cultures are really variations of one. Clearly many African commentators feel this, but that does not seem a conclusive reason to assert the oneness of "African oral tradition," African languages and African culture. The suspicion remains that the need to establish the existence of an "authentic" African oral tradition stems from a parochial pan-Africanism rather than from the logical imperatives of African literature. It would have been interesting to consider whether the similarities that exist in the oral traditions of different cultures in Africa are peculiar to Africa, or whether they are oral rather than African features. However, an even more basic question arises: To what extent can we legitimately speak of an oral technique as being the only justifiable form for a written literature? A distinction can be made between the point of view that cultural traditions inevitably and necessarily inspire and influence the artist, and can be observed in his work — and the other point of view that there is a technique that can be distilled from the "essence" of what it is to be part of a culture. The former acknowledges that the artist will respond to his environment, and that ultimately these largely analysable responses may comprise a cumulative aesthetic convention. The latter seeks to establish that the racial and cultural nature of a community will generate a unique aesthetic response. In the case of the former, the critic can depend on analysis, in the latter he will certainly be forced into metaphysical speculation. The latter view, in our present context, is complicated further by the fact that it is race, rather than culture, that seems to be the primary common

factor. However, what critics have significantly failed to do is to establish this aesthetic link between African traditions, in the way that it is possible to do for African literature written in English.

This failure is not surprising, since it seems to be flying in the face of the facts to claim that such an aesthetic link exists in a homogenous enough form to provide us with a set of artistic norms. The critic's search for connections and aesthetic links has, at the moment, the broad sweep of idealistic conjecture. More concrete enquiries might seem more likely to produce results, but so far only a few critics, among them Wole Soyinka, have tried to trace the influence of specific traditions on modern African literature. Most critics of African literature prefer to consider, and comment on, modern literature. This is clearly ascertainable both by any examination of the critical material published in academic journals, as well as by the kind of concerns that University teachers choose to bring to the notice of their students in connection with the study of African literature. It is not too unlikely that this is because in the modern African literature they find clearly accessible common factors that they are not even linguistically equipped to search for in the variety of African oral literatures. Perhaps that will become easier as our knowledge of African oral cultures increases but the reservation remains that such knowledge need not amount to a coherent and unified tradition. This is not to discount the influence of traditions, but to acknowledge this is different from attempting to derive an "aesthetics" for contemporary Africans from confused notions of what it is that constitutes the "essence" of an African tradition.

It has become part of the received wisdom of the criticism of African literature that the early criticism of the literature was more concerned with identifying the thematic features that preoccupied

the educated African. One such feature was "the clash of cultures" — the uprooted African, his eyes opened to new lights and to new desires after contact with European civilisation, unable to feel at home in either his own or the European way of life. There is enough literature and criticism to support this contention without another rehearsal here. The reception of much of the early novels from Africa emphasised the discomfort that the writers were trying to depict as being the result of the contact of European with African cultures. This would be true of the reception of Achebe's early novels, Ekwensi's novels, and was true, and remains so, of the readings of Ngugi's early works as well as Soyinka's The Interpreters. There are grounds for this reception, in that the literature was concerned to explore the consequences of the contact between European and African cultures. However, the preoccupation with this theme has also led to some problematic assertions. It is partly out of the dissatisfaction with the consequences of European influence on African societies that the depiction of pre-colonial Africa has been of a time when the African was "complete," in harmony with his environment. In its mawkish moments négritude did this. While this simple correspondence of the African before the arrival of the European, and the integrated man, has, on the whole, been rejected as too romantic, there is nevertheless a school of thought that maintains a similarly speculative if less romantic golden age. The speculations describe Africa's past as a time when the individual was integrated in the community, and they tend to speak of "Old Africa" as of a time of cultural stability and unanimity. Senghor found the topic absorbing, as have a number of other commentators. Kofi Awoonor, for example, has this to say in his book The Breast of the Earth:

Art is as old as the African peoples. Its function as stated earlier, was primarily religious, emphasising the people's need for magic and charm through talismanic objects and amulets and other such carvings that become the media of communication and contact with the spiritual world.¹³

This is a long-held gem of anthropological wisdom but it is worth glancing briefly at the assumptions that lie behind it. The first assumption is that in Africa, (and it is said of "primitive" communities in other parts of the world), art is essentially a function of the community's understanding of itself. This self-conception finds structure in religious rituals, which rather than being submission to gods are a celebration of the living link with the spiritual world. Art is an aspect of this religious celebration, thus Awoonor's "Its function ... was primarily religious."¹⁴ The reservation here is about the emphasis that is given to the religious function of art, to the exclusion of other functions of art. It is to make art into a self-conscious group therapy when less rational and more hedonistic ends might have been envisaged. The second assumption, and this is rather obvious, is that this was a view shared by "all African peoples." Art for the "Old Africans" then was an aspect of religious ritual, rather reminiscent of Senghor's description of art as "techniques in essentialization," the means by which the community finds its identity, its "essence."

Isidore Okpewho, still adopting the "broad-sweep" tone of voice, offers another view:

The moonlit square has for countless ages been the setting for songs and stories whose primary interest was entertainment, more so it would seem than edification. A large number of proverbs and quips survive today, and in many of them the outstanding feature is more the style than the content: they

impress us more for their technical appeal than as fossils of a complex world view.¹⁵

Okpewho does well to mention the "entertainment" aspect of communal arts, for at times it is in danger of being forgotten under the weight of more ambitious speculations. Of course Okpewho is speculating as well, but his restraint helps to give his words greater balance and credibility. Moreover, his reminder that survivors of this tradition are interesting because of their "technical appeal," however vague that term may be, rather than as raw material for an identikit of the African psyche is timely.

As well as descriptions of the "nature" of the arts, there have been attempts to describe the artist and his functions in the integrated "Old Africa" community. He did not, for example, feel any divisive stresses between his duty to his community and his integrity as an artist. Awoonor describes what happened to the traditional African artist whose "individuality" was becoming troublesome, "creating fear and apprehension for him":

... the ultimate shaping spirit of the wider world construct of the community returns him to a resolution, to an integration (which perhaps was briefly threatened but never really in danger), to a restoration of calm and quietude which is necessary for the widening of the circle into waves that ultimately will constitute the only human progress.¹⁶

In brief, the threatened artist can always find safety in the "shaping spirit" of the community. Such was the measure of his integration that he was never in any real danger of being alienated. Stanley Macebuh, arguing for a similar state of "quietude," concedes that there might have been some disagreements about quality even if not about the commitment of the artist and his work:

Inevitably, there were occasional disagreements but generally, conflicts of judgement in the realm of art were settled in much the same manner that other controversies were disposed of in the community — that is through some form of consensus in which the opinion of the elders and the artists was given more weight than of the young and inexperienced.¹⁷

Once again, no attempt is made to consider specific examples of this process, or what it has led to in contemporary appreciation of the arts. There are reasons for this vagueness that can be detected in the pronouncements about tradition. They are basically romantic assertions of faith, romantic in the sense that they are selected to demonstrate the harmony and integration of the African community, when contemporary evidence suggests otherwise. Like other romantic beliefs they are concerned not with tracing developments, but with identifying the unique racial and psychic "essence" of a people, in order to claim an ancient and coherent cultural harmony and achievement. Thus, the history of cultural development in Africa is not really of interest, since it can only indicate divergence and variety. Indeed, it is one of the ironies that it was the colonising powers that began to unify, for arbitrary and self-serving reasons, various cultural groups from different parts of Africa. The discussion of specific moments of arts appreciation do not appear often in critical writings about tradition. This may be partly because the critic just does not know enough about African cultures to make intelligent comparisons. In any case, the general vagueness of the pronouncements about tradition, however much dictated by the ignorance of the critic, is also a matter of choice. It allows the critic the room to speculate more imaginatively about the unity of African cultures.

We have argued that the interest in tradition arises from

a desire to assert African values, to prevent the substitution of African cultures with some hybrid form of Western culture. Literature is seen as one of the arenas of this culture conflict. Out of the assertion comes the necessity to describe the essential qualities of African culture, based, more recently, less on racial qualities ("Emotion is negro," etc.) as on what has become known as "the African world-view," or what Awoonor calls "the ultimate shaping spirit of the wider world construct of the community." In relation to literature, as we have seen, this has taken the form of calls for the return to the values of "the oral tradition," assuming these to provide a coherent and impressive body of artistic norms.

Allied to such calls are attempts like Kofi Awoonor's The Breast of the Earth and Soyinka's Myth, Literature and the African World to provide the philosophical bases for some of these assumptions.¹⁸ Soyinka speaks of the purpose of his book in this way:

It is engaged in what should be the simultaneous act of eliciting from history, mythology and literature, for the benefit of both genuine aliens and alienated Africans, a continuing process of self-apprehension.... (p.xi)

However ambitious the intention of his task may sound, the manner of Soyinka's achievement in this book is relatively modest, for he is careful, on the whole, not to generalise from Yoruba culture to "African tradition" without due cause. Nor does he see "the process of self-apprehension" as requiring the denial of the influence of European cultures on African societies. His discussion of the crucial issues in African culture is conducted at many levels, in relation to African culture itself and in relation to European culture.

The articles by Chinweizu et al. and Agovi attempted to

define, in the one case "an African aesthetics," and in the other, African "critical standards." Chinweizu et al. in particular make no attempt to derive their "aesthetics." Obviously they are irritated and can only manage a rather impatient "recipe" of what "authentic" literature ought to be. Ultimately, their purpose is exclusive. They do not want "imitative obfuscations" like Soyinka's. They argue that whereas "authentic" African literature has always been accessible, its language a "public" one, Soyinka writes in a "privatist" language, imitating Western models. His work is, therefore, in an important sense, "inauthentic." Their argument that the justification for holding this view can be found in "the African oral tradition" just lacks conviction. Firstly, it is hardly the case that all oral literature is accessible to the casual audience. Not only has the existence of esoteric oral literature been well documented,¹⁹ but it seems reasonable to assume that the very specific conditions that give rise to this form of literature may not be at all familiar to an audience outside of the culture. Secondly, the argument that the only way in which modern poetry can survive the ravages of Western domination is by turning to a concept of traditional values is not self-evidently true. Thirdly, the burden of the argument presented in the paper seems to amount to a rejection of one idea in preference for another, difficult poetry out, simple poetry in, without being too clear why one is preferable over the other. The choice of Matei Markwei's poem as somehow exemplary should have alerted us to the three critics' bizarre taste if nothing else had.

In his article "Neo-Tarzanism: The Poetics of Pseudo-Tradition"²⁰ Wole Soyinka rejects this poem as an example of "the traditionalism by which the modern poet is to regulate himself." He says of it:

This trite, prosaic, coy, kindergarten drivel which my seven year old daughter would be ashamed to write is extolled by the troika critics.... In what line do Markwei's verses achieve a moment of "vividness"? ... Where does it engage the imagination? (p.40)

Soyinka's article, for all its lack of "restraint," makes some powerful points. Not only does it question the assumption that "traditional" poetry is simple and transparent, it demonstrates the "simplistic insults" such an assumption implies, denying Africans the capacity to handle complex poetic ideas and devices. Soyinka also objects to the idea that to be "authentic," African writing should be free from the "contamination" of other cultures, that African writers should not, to quote Chinweizu et al., "drag in Spring, snow and other Arctic paraphernalia" into their work. Speaking of his poem "Massacre, October '66,"²¹ which Chinweizu et al. had picked out as an example of slavish borrowing, Soyinka said:

This delimitation of poetic provinces has not only been exactly proposed by Chinweizu but has been decreed in other ways, largely through the pronouncements on religion and its metaphors, symbolisms and imagery. In African countries where at least sixty per cent of the population are either practising christians or moslem, it is proposed that the intrusion into poetry [of] associations from non-traditional religion is retrogressive and colonialist. (p.41)

The burden of Soyinka's answer is that it makes no sense to condemn aspects of contemporary culture because they have come about as a result of the influence of non-Africans. Thus, he defends Christopher Okigbo from the same charge that had been levelled at him, borrowing from Europe without any real need to do so, by refusing to accept that a poet should be condemned for suffusing "his poetry with symbols

of his faith." The specific criticism that Chinweizu et al. make of "Massacre, October '66" is that its imagery is inappropriate because of its foreignness. In his defence Soyinka points out that the sub-title of the poem, "Written in Tegel," should have indicated that the poem was in the manner of a nightmarish reminiscence:

Of course it could be that Africans, being Africans and victims — among other disasters — of a mass leucotomy from some forgotten age — are not even permitted to reflect their immediate environment, unless that environment happens to be 2000 B.C. Africa. It may be that to stare in a lake in Germany and see reflected, side by side with the immediate physical borders of that lake, the events which have taken place four thousand miles away is "privatist" etc., that the authentic African voice should immediately substitute thatched huts and bonga fish for the stained glass windows and motorboat exhaust. (p.41)

Soyinka's answer does not require expansion. It effectively demonstrates the position that Chinweizu et al. occupy. Their need to exclude certain kinds of poetry from the "authentic" has quite simply made them insensitive readers.

If Soyinka is considered to be vulnerable, or at least suffers attack for the apparent "inappropriateness" of his language, one of Chinua Achebe's many strengths is held to be the "appropriateness" of the language of his fiction.²² Eldred Jones, for example, has described Things Fall Apart as reflecting "the African environment":

One of the significant successes of the book is the author's sensitive use of English so that it reflects the African environment. This he achieves by drawing his images out of his surroundings and from traditional African sources

instead of plucking them ready-made from British literary tradition.²³

Enough has been written on Things Fall Apart and Arrow of God to demonstrate the justifiability of Eldred Jones' comment. Quite clearly Achebe aims at creating an "African environment" in the two novels, to the extent that he does not in his other two novels, and he succeeds comprehensively. There may be some uncertainty in some critics' minds about the relish with which Achebe provides us with "anthropological" details, and whether these details are integrated into the novels, but one of the reasons for the popularity of these two novels is the success with which they recreate the "African environment."

On the other hand, as far as Chinweizu et al. are concerned, Soyinka is doing anything but "reflecting the African environment." We might argue that this is not what Soyinka would want to do anyway. We have seen how Soyinka is seen by some critics to represent a direction in African poetry which is held to be leading away from the "authentic" African sources. Ossie Onuora Enekwe considers Soyinka's performance as a novelist and comes to largely the same conclusions as Chinweizu et al., but by a different route.²⁴

Enekwe finds Soyinka "obscure in diction" and "unable to achieve intensity of action and vivid characterisation" in his novels. We shall examine both these claims in the discussion of the novel The Interpreters later in this chapter. Enekwe quotes Ime Ikiddeh on The Interpreters: "The novel does not belong to the society."²⁵ He rejects the idea that Soyinka's "obscurity," what Enekwe calls his "abstractitis," can be treated as if "it had only a nuisance value," and agrees with Ime Ikiddeh that Soyinka's novel does not "belong to the society." He contrasts Soyinka's "obscurity" with Achebe's "aim

to communicate, rather than mystify." He also contrasts what he considers Soyinka's inability "to achieve intensity of action and vivid characterisation" with Elechi Amadi's success "in presenting vivid experiences" in his fiction. (p.82). He quotes the following passage from The Concubine as an example of the kind of writing from which Soyinka could "learn a lot":

A hair-raising cry rent the air as Agwoturumbe pulled out the arrow. There were pieces of flesh clinging to its barbed points. The hole in Ekwueme's belly dripped dark red blood which stained the upper part of his wrapper and the mat on which he was lying. Large beads of perspiration hung on his face and as he turned his head slowly this way and that the larger drops fell on the mat.²⁶

Enekwe does not make it quite clear what the qualities are that he admires in the above passage. It can hardly be the imagery, which is stale and unoriginal. The wounded man's "hair-raising cry" that "rent the air," for example, is an image that has obvious and immediate effect, but it has also suffered much for being something of a predictable cliché for horror. Ekwueme's blood is described as "dark red," and hangs around superfluously like a symbolic red herring. This may be part of what Enekwe describes as "a way of creating verisimilitude." There are other examples that are also unconvincing. The blood "dripped" from Ekwueme's belly, while he lay on his back. "Large beads of perspiration" is a tiresomely distancing cliché. The effect of this short passage, which is left stranded rather unfairly in Enekwe's paper, is not to make the events "vivid" in the sense of bringing the scene to life and enhancing and accentuating the special qualities of the events we are witnessing, in this case the pain of the wounded man — for Amadi does not succeed in making us know what

the wounded man feels. Thus when Enekwe finds this bland passage from Amadi "successful in presenting vivid experiences" and finds Soyinka's descriptions a failure, what we see is his preference for the uncluttered prose of Amadi over the complexities to be found in Soyinka.

Enekwe finds that Soyinka fails not only with description but that his depiction of dialogue is "artificial, and uneven." The point is made by lengthy quotations from Season of Anomy and Arrow of God, with little comment or analysis, the failure of one and the "genius" of the other being held to be self-evident. Given that Soyinka fails with dialogue, and that he fails with description, "his failure in character delineation is understandable," Enekwe finds.

In attempting to demonstrate Soyinka's major fault as a novelist, his "obscurity," Enekwe compares him to James Joyce. He is not the first critic to do so. He responds to the comments made by John Povey and Bernth Lindfors, both of whom see Joycean influences on The Interpreters.²⁷ Enekwe promises that his paper "seeks to find out whether this claim is verifiable," (p.73) and without much ado he proceeds thus:

Soyinka seems to lack Joyce's linguistic sophistication and discernment. Whereas Joyce usually prefers simple words, Soyinka is consistently obscure and muddled. When Joyce is obscure in diction it is deliberate or inevitable. Soyinka, on the other hand, often seems incapable of achieving clarity. (p.73)

It is hardly the case that "Joyce usually prefers simple words," as even a cursory flick through any of his novels will reveal. The point does not need to be demonstrated here since it is so clearly ascertainable, and is, in any case, irrelevant to Soyinka. The

argument that Joyce's obscurity is "deliberate or inevitable" while Soyinka's demonstrates his incapacity to write clearly, begs all the questions — primarily, how does the critic know whether the obscurity is meant to be there or whether it is a demonstration of the writer's inability to express complex designs more simply? At the very least, the critic should demonstrate how he has arrived by this knowledge. If Enekwe objects to obscurity in works of literature, the end result, whether arrived at through the writer's perversity or inadequate control of language, is the same. One fears that Enekwe is suggesting that because Joyce's obscurity is meant that this somehow makes it less obscure, more justifiable, or something confused like that.

To make his point, Enekwe quotes the opening paragraph of A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man and sets this alongside the opening paragraph of The Interpreters, with instructions that we compare the two passages "in terms of clarity and choice of words." (p.74). What we are meant to see is Joyce's passion for simple, "cute" words contrasted with Soyinka's obsession with obscurantism. There is no attempt to analyse either structural or stylistic reasons why these are opening paragraphs of the respective novels, nor is any attempt made to provide a justification for placing these two passages alongside each other in this way. The point is simply made that one passage is easier to read than the other. To anybody with any knowledge of A Portrait the comparison is clearly absurd — the opening paragraph is in baby-talk to portray the perspective of a little child. The novel is an evocation of Catholic boyhood in Ireland. As Stephen achieves self-expression, his perspective in the novel grows progressively more complex. The baby-talk of the opening paragraph has a structural relevance which we cannot simply ignore while we look at the "clarity"

of the words. Similarly, the opening of The Interpreters serves to establish the social "sophistication" of the characters -- we find them drinking in a night-club, self-consciously intellectual and "relaxed." Stylistically, we are taken swiftly into the compact syntax of most of the novel. It would be foolish to claim that the passage yields all its treasures at a first reading but it presents no real difficulty. It is certainly not "obscure."

Along the way to arriving at these conclusions, Enekwe makes other observations. He observes, for example: "Any work of fiction or poetry whose words are too obscure for the so-called simple, but literate audience is not suitable for human consumption...." (p.76). He finds also that Soyinka "seems incapable of going beyond the lexical meaning of words," which seems a little odd since earlier in the paper the same writer had been described as "capable of writing great fiction." Enekwe finally pins down the major weakness of The Interpreters as the inappropriateness of the "impressionistic form" to the material, that is, the African psyche. The passage quoted below includes the half-hearted attempt that Enekwe makes to explain what he means by the word "impressionistic":

One gets the impression that Soyinka is imitating the impressionistic form for its own sake, and with little integrity or originality. To begin with, complication, as we have noted, is suited to the theme of despair resulting from materialism. Although Africa is part of the world, her metaphysical view of the world is still cohesive. Africans are not overwhelmed by facts or spiritual doubts. (p.85)

Thus, by a longer route, Enekwe arrives at the same position as that held by Chinweizu et al., that Soyinka is pandering to a Western

aestheticism that is "foreign to Africans." While such an aestheticism may be suitable for the despairing West, it is by definition not suitable for the integrated African. It will be recalled that Achebe's critique of Armah's The Beautiful Ones was based on a similar argument.

The "imitative obfuscations" that Chinweizu et al. find in Soyinka's poetry, and the imitation of "the impressionistic form ... with little integrity or originality" that Enekwe finds in The Interpreters, amount to a similar rejection. In both cases the implication is that there is a way for an African to write — to reflect the influences of "the African oral tradition," and to reflect the cohesive nature of the African's metaphysical view of the world. In both cases there is the assumption, explicit in the first, implied in the second, that there is a tradition which sanctions the criticism of African works like Soyinka's. However, both the views of Achebe's novels as representative of the quality of being African, and Soyinka's The Interpreters as "inauthentic" in its reflection of the African psyche, are reductive distortions of what is a more complex state of affairs. The representative status reflects the importance that Achebe's fiction has attained, in excess of the critics' concern with the texts of his novels, but at the same time it glosses over the complexity of Things Fall Apart and Arrow of God. Achebe has made clear his concern for language and has recognised the problems posed by the "second-language" culture in which he writes. He has not been satisfied, in his fiction, with making the problems of culture-contact as simple as Chinweizu et al. and Enekwe have done. The circumstances that visit his Igbo community have their parallels elsewhere, but the very concreteness of the depiction of Igbo life militates, at least at

a superficial level, against seeing Umuofia or Umuaro as the archetypal African community, much less an African Eden. Clearly, the dignity and the self-apprehension of the community carries a polemical as well as an aesthetic charge. Whatever value we attach to Achebe's intentions in writing Things Fall Apart, which were to offer an alternative and more faithful picture of the life of an Igbo community before and during colonialism, the result is neither a clear-cut "defence" of Africa, nor a picture of unrelieved harmony in pre-colonial Africa.

In a more obvious way, to describe Soyinka's The Interpreters as "unfit for human consumption" is to go too far. Enekwe's reasons for the rejection of the novel are astonishingly bold in conception — no less than the inappropriateness of form to the depiction of a racial psyche. To this we can offer no argument, since in itself it does not constitute a defensible position. However to Enekwe's criticism that Soyinka is unable to depict character or action because of his "obscure," "muddled" and "abstract diction" it is possible to offer a defence. The criticism that Enekwe raises so vociferously has been raised by other critics as well, and it deserves consideration. How justified is the view that Soyinka's novel is irredeemably undermined by its "obscurity"? Is it fair to describe its structure as "chaotic," or indeed to describe it as lacking structure altogether? How "modernist" are its concerns? What does the novel imply about the relationship between tradition and the present state of the community?

The Interpreters is not an easy novel, on a first or second reading, and its difficulties can be summarised as arising from

its language and its structure. The language is dense with significance, requiring some alertness but containing little that is inaccessible to the careful reader. Its difficulties of language are less to do with an impenetrable "obscurity" than with condensation of the links between one image and another, between one symbol and the next. The distinction between "obscurity" and condensation of language may seem to beg the question. "Obscurity" here is meant to describe an inherent inaccessibility of the material. The difficulties of The Interpreters arise out of Soyinka's tendency to overload his language with a density of images and ideas, and are, in this case, amenable to exegesis.

The novel begins nervously, Sagoe's language only coming to have a consistency and significance when we read it with the hindsight of greater knowledge. Egbo's few remarks, desultory and uninventive, seem like poor jokes. Dehinwa's relationship to Sagoe is suggested, and Bandele's extraordinary skeleton put to good use. But, the opening has a staged texture, lacking real vitality amidst the climatic chaos. What is established is that the group of friends is at a night-club — "try our Club Cambana Cubicles" —, that the sudden rains had not interrupted the group in any significant way since none of them seemed to be doing anything. Dehinwa moves to protect her hair, Bandele pushes the tables and chairs out of the rain, and Egbo broods over the water dripping into his beer, which he throws away with some disgust, "polluted." With hindsight we see the consistency with which these characters have been developed, so that even these early, very brief glimpses can give hints of the kinds of people the interpreters are. Sagoe's preoccupation with verbal jugglery, saying things cleverly to disguise a greater inadequacy, the lack of will to act, can be seen from the very beginning. Egbo's

edginess and moodiness is suggested by his reaction to the "pollution" of his beer, and his obsession with the past and its effect on the present is shown by the jump in time that he makes, from the filling "pool" by their "Club Cambana Cubicle" to the journey through the creeks that the friends had made to his ancestral land. Bandele, significantly, moves the tables and chairs out of the rain, suggesting at once his ability to think of others, an aspect of him that we observe with mounting respect as the novel progresses.

There is hardly enough to establish all this in the opening section without the benefit of hindsight. This becomes an important part of Soyinka's technique in the novel. The characters forage in their past for the significance of present events, and take their present knowledge back to their interpretation of past events. The reader is forced into the same pattern, as first one character and then another launches off abruptly into a reminiscence. This dynamic mode of enquiry implies Soyinka's belief that an interest in the past should not merely satisfy a narcissistic self-indulgence, but should enable the community to see the complex interdependence of present and past. To put the matter this way is to simplify the complexity of the relationship that Soyinka explores in The Interpreters.

Out of the night-club scene we are transported abruptly to the journey the interpreters had made to see Egbo's ancestral creek-town. Egbo returns to the creek-town to test out his response to the invitation from the elders that he should succeed his grandfather as their leader. The invitation tempts him to some extent because "he knew and despised the age which sought to mutilate his beginnings."²⁸ At the same time, he recognises that dissatisfaction with the present does not make the hand of past times less heavy with its demands. The

evocative language describing Egbo's immersion in his past has an entirely different quality to that of the opening, far richer in imagery and without the jerky edginess of the night-club scene. Egbo sees the creek-town as "an interlude from reality" and this points to the paradoxical relationship that he recognises to exist between the past and his age. The past has apparently ceased to matter to the interpreters, except in the degree to which it can be utilised to advance individual aims. That is part of its unreality, and part of its attraction. The creek-town seemed to them like an escape from "real life," a return to a simpler and more wholesome existence. This is largely an intellectual conception, since none of them, apart from Egbo, are in a position to consider the choice in any practical sense.

For Egbo, the illusion of unreality is difficult to maintain, since to him the creek-town represents the need to make a decision between a return to it and his life in the city. But he too participates in the illusion of unreality, even encourages it, for while he remains at that self-deluding distance from the creek-town he can continue to see it as the archetypal community, content with its silence and its ancient peace. The appearance of a man on the bank "breaks the crust of time," making it impossible for Egbo to continue the illusion. The timeless dream-world is replaced by specific images of his own childhood, dislocating the longing for a return to roots into a fear of the demands that the past and its survivors would make on him. In the end, he feels the pull of the past as the pull of death:

He acknowledged it finally, this was a place of death. And admitted too that he was drawn to it, drawn to it as a dream of isolation, smelling its archaic menace and the violent undertows, unable to deny its dark vitality. (p.12)

Egbo's ambivalence about the past and its relation to the present reflects the novel's structure. The shifts in time allow us to contrast the view of a past event by offering a new vantage on the present. The aimless brooding during the night-club scene enables us to see Egbo's attraction to the "dream of isolation." There is no real likelihood that a return to roots will be sufficient for Egbo. He feels the narrowness of the demands of the past too keenly to risk his freedom for the satisfaction of a "dream of isolation." For with the shattering of the illusion of unreality comes also the acknowledgement that the image of the community as languishing in peace and contentment was another illusion. The creek-town depended on the "vital smuggling routes" which it controlled, and to which it owed its prosperity. The flash-back from the night-club to the creek has allowed Soyinka to expose the inadequacies of Egbo's present by probing the potential of his past action, while at the same time allowing Egbo to question the assumption on which the perception of that potential is based.

A similar use of time-switch is used to reveal Sekoni as a character. When we first meet him, he is offering a different interpretation of the past from the negative one held by Egbo. Egbo demands to know, a little provocatively, why the dead should not be forgotten if they "are not strong enough to be ever-present in our being." (p.9). Sekoni is the least articulate of the interpreters, and yet it is he who is given the most optimistic messages. The Alhaji, or at times the Sheikh, is hardly able to make himself understood through a terrible stutter. Soyinka does not spare us either:

"Ththat is why wwe must acc-c-cept the universal
d-d-dome, b-b-because ththere is no d-d-direction. The

b-b-bridge is the d-d-dome of rreligion and b-b-bridges
d-d-don't jjjjust g-g-go from hhhere to ththere; a bridge
also faces backwards." (p.9)

The protest Sekoni is struggling to make consists, at one level, of a demand for continuity, for connections. Where Egbo sees the past as parasitic on the present, Sekoni sees it more idealistically, as unified with the present and the future. The unifying force is "rreligion," faith. The prophet of continuity is remarkably incoherent, and his conception of what the "b-b-bridge" is, remains an intensely felt experience that never quite achieves lucidity. Soyinka handles the character of Sekoni with considerable sensitivity. He avoids the facile categorisation of the man of faith as either a self-deluding fool or as a moral paragon. Nevertheless, Sekoni's idealism is treated as a real potential whose contradictions are symbolised by the character's inability to utter it with confidence.

Sekoni's protest is also an assertion of the necessity to struggle for connections, and this aspect of his protest finds true and lucid expression in his carving of "The Wrestler." Unlike the ejaculations on the "d-d-dome," on the continuity of human experience, which remain intense but incoherent and explosive outbursts, "The Wrestler" depicts man in the archetypal struggle to make sense of his world. With "The Wrestler" Sekoni has moved beyond any of the other interpreters, beyond the sham of the arrogant satire and the self-indulgent rage of Sagoe and Egbo, beyond the detachment and the tentativeness of Kola and Bandele. Sekoni's discovery that the "b-b-bridge" is also man's struggle to understand his world, was arrived at after a shattering failure.

His "experimental power station," built with civilising

zeal in the remote station where he had been assigned to cool his idealistic heels, is officially condemned as "junk," a verdict arrived at through greed and cynicism. At one level, this is^a bitter satire on another breed of interpreters: the corruption and the lack of vision of the black power-elite combining with the "expat. expert's" pliability in the service of greed, to destroy the idealistic and albeit naive reformer. At another level, Sekoni's failure and subsequent "discovery" of the necessity to wrestle some sense out of life, contrasts with his naive idealism as a returning engineer:

Sekoni, qualified engineer, had looked over the railings every day of his sea 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 water channels of his palm, directing it against the primeval giants on the forest bank. (p.26)

Obi Okonkwo in No Longer at Ease gazes towards Nigeria with a similar burning naivety. Obi is forced into corruption by his own perception of the demands his position in his society make on him. Sekoni is thwarted into madness. His failure is already hinted at in the impractical piety of what he sees as his role in social progress. Soyinka invites us to question Sekoni's idealistic self-importance. The inflated rhetoric and the abstract nature of Sekoni's dream make this clear enough. On the other hand, we are left in no doubt about the importance of his "discovery." The self-expression that comes about with this knowledge makes the carving of "The Wrestler" an act of "frenzy and desperation, as if time stood in his way." (p.100). The "discovery" indicates his potential in real human terms compared to the idealistic day-dreams of the returning engineer, a potential he is

never able to realise fully. For, like his friends, he too is evasive and never quite confronts himself with the implications of his new knowledge. In the end, it was his "short-sightedness" that contributed to his destruction. The "discovery" had come a little late, to a man who had learned to be afraid of the world:

The Dome cracked above Sekoni's short-sighted head one messy night. Too late he saw the insanity of a lorry parked right in his path, a swerve turned into a skid and cruel arabesque of tyres. A futile heap of metal, and Sekoni's body lay surprised across the open door, showers of laminated glass around him, his head one fastness of blood and wet earth. (p.155)

Sekoni himself becomes the victim of the technological progress he had sought to bring. His achievement never quite fulfilled, he is nevertheless the most positive of the interpreters. His exploration is active, his life is without the destructive spite and pointless cynicism of Egbo and Sagoe. Significantly, his friends mourn him deeply, but without thought of comforting others. Egbo "fled to the rocks by the bridge until the funeral was over where unseen he shed his bitter, angry tears." (p.155). Sagoe's self-indulgent cynicism is seen for what it is as he is "locked in beer and vomit for a week," agreeing to be quiet only when Dehinwa read to him from his book on the philosophy of shitting. Kola worked "blindly in spasms of grief and unbelieving," leaving to Bandele "the agony of consoling Alhaji Sekoni," the grief-stricken father.

Bandele we know little about to begin with. Sekoni's death allows us to compare his response to that of the others. In Part Two of the novel we become aware of Bandele as the one who is becoming critical of the relative callousness of his friends. After the visit

to Lazarus' church he mocks his friends for having thought only of what they could get out of the prophet, and chides them for having made no effort to understand what the man could have wanted out of them. Sagoe, the man with a cynical turn of wit, accuses Bandele of being "so fuckin' superior," while Kola expresses Bandele's stance more accurately when he says:

"Damn it, Bandele, what's going on anyway! You have become so insufferably critical and interfering."

It was as if Bandele was a long praying mantis. Visibly he retracted into a hole, feelers trodden on like an incautious ant; and he only said, "None of you minds much what suffering you cause." (p.179)

Sekoni hinted in Part One that it is not enough to arrive from abroad with ideals, see them dashed and retire into an arrogant, satirical contempt for society. Bandele, in Part Two, in a more overtly critical way, probes the actions and motives of his friends, drawing attention to their inadequacy. It is no coincidence that Sekoni's "The Wrestler" "was unmistakably Bandele," for not only is Bandele's "unique figure" appropriate for the depiction of the human struggle to wrestle with life, but in Part Two we recognise him as symbolically appropriate as well. Sekoni and Bandele between them alert us to the inadequacies of the interpreters, and of the stance they have adopted towards their society. It would not be enough to see Soyinka's novel as only an attack on the corruption and crass greed of the old guard, for it is not shown that the new interpreters are able to offer something significantly better. Indeed, in Part Two we are led quite clearly to their failure as individuals.

Sagoe, whose fanciful verbalising opens the novel, has no alternative to offer to the rottenness of the old guard. His very

language denies him the possibility. His wit is satirical, destructive, and we appreciate its full effect in the carnage that occurs at the Oguazor party. The incident sparkles with unrestrained mockery of the stuffed shirts, the hollow men of the new elite. "A buzz of wit, genteel laughter and character slaughter welcomed them from the drive and they entered the house of death." (p.139). There is more to try Sagoe: the fruit is plastic. He wonders if the brains of his hosts are equally "petrified," for the fruit clusters are generously scattered in large bunches and in a range of patterns all over the house. The depiction of Professor Oguazor and his wife, the tone of voice they are given to speak with, their pathetic attempts at ceremony and "etiquette" make the satire uninhibitedly savage, and enjoyable. The Oguazors and their friends have been set up, like targets in a shooting gallery, then righteously and hilariously knocked down. The effect, however, is also to give us no possibility of understanding their motivation, of perceiving the qualities that must underlie their crassness. We are led to believe that this is all there is to them. It is interesting that it is Sagoe, the least responsible and the most self-indulgent of the interpreters, who actively wages war against the Oguazors, hurling the "petrified" fruit as missiles. Sagoe is unlikely to want to make the effort to understand the Oguazors, as he himself recognises, since he does not "have to live with them." His actions are obviously influenced by this. He scourges the Oguazors as if they were the scapegoats for the "elite" of the society, but the act remains only marginally symbolic since Sagoe's obvious, personal relish for his task succeeds in the end in emphasising his contempt for social form rather than leading us to a clearer understanding of the confused elitism of the Oguazors.

The description of the scene is hilarious. The last few thoughts of Pinkshore, the sacrificial expatriate sketched in for ritual slaughter, bring the chapter to an end. It is part of Soyinka's satirical skill that with a few deft lines he can give us a view of the European expatriate's underlying mistrust and fear of Africa, as in a moment of panic his mind grasps wildly at the stereotypes of savagery:

Sagoe flung the lemon. It took Pinkshore full on the mouth, soft, wet from the grass and sudden. His brain spinning instant solutions found mysterious terror — witch-moth, bat-shit, murder,, knobkerry, death, africa at night... (p.152)

Neither Sagoe nor any of the other interpreters question their right to condemn the Oguazors. It is right, however, that we should question the ends of this chapter. The satirist has a limited objective but is always in danger of mocking what is apparently grotesque rather than pointing to what is morally objectionable. We have already seen that Soyinka's ends are more than satirical. He invites us to explore and question those he has placed in a position to voice a social dissatisfaction. Sagoe's actions, therefore, have to be seen critically. They are an uninhibited expression of his disgust with the Oguazors and their friends, carried out in a kind of voidante frenzy, albeit a moral one, evacuating the anger out of his mind. He is, of course, primarily expressing his contempt, the same kind of feeling that lay behind the Book of Enlightenment. In that, he mocks academic earnestness by writing a thesis on shit. At the same time, these extreme forms of expression establish his status as a wit. He deflects Dehinwa from seriously scrutinising him by constant references to this status, emphasising his eccentricity and his "irrepressible" humour.

The Book is evidence of Sagoe's predilection for the gesture that satisfies his sense of justice and does not commit him further. The eruption at the Oguazors' is another example, as is the article on Sekoni which he knew would not be accepted but would allow him to feel a righteous anger. He joins the train of "the boot coffin mourners" "automatically," out of a feeling of sympathy for their ridiculous show. In his sympathy he is unable to resist taking one of the wreaths from Sir Derinola's train and putting it on the "poor" coffin, but he cannot stay to speak to the grateful mourners. He tells himself that he is fleeing from them for fear that he might be tempted to use them in his newspaper column. One cannot help feeling that he feels himself justified in his flight because he has made the gesture of sympathy. His excremental obsessions, like his "drink lobes" and his "emotional stomach" are the necessary props for his idiosyncrasy and eccentricity, an unwillingness to be responsible. Seen in such a light, as a gesture of disgust, the Oguazor incident serves both a satirical purpose and is at the same time consistent with Sagoe's character. Motivated by injustice and hypocrisy to act, he is yet unwilling that demands should be made of him.

Egbo is a "stronga-head," a violent, obstinate man. He is both astonishingly daring, and surprisingly weak and uncertain. We see him exploring his feelings and his thoughts more assiduously than any of the other interpreters. In his case, the flashbacks actually seem like Egbo trying to understand his past. His obsession with "roots" gives us a chance to measure him up against them, and to find him short of the early daring and curiosity. He now thinks of himself as an apostate, absolutely neutral. He allows others to make decisions and carry him along "with the tide." We can contrast this with the

Egbo who had gone to spend the night by the water of the Oshun grove at Oshogbo as a child, and who had found eventually a confinement in the stillness and depth of the quiet water:

I loved life to be still, mysterious. I took my books down there to read, during the holidays. But later, I began to go further, down towards the old suspension bridge where the water ran freely, over rocks and white sand. And there was sunshine. There was depth also in that turbulence, at least I felt down into darkness from an unfettered sky. It was so different from the grove where depth swamped me; at the bridge it was elusive, you had to pierce it, arrowed like a bird. (p.9)

This tension that exists between the need to feel the unity of experience and environment, and a revulsion from the quiet "depth" of the grove might be read as a contrast between the silted calm of tradition and the new turbulence, and relative freedom, of a changing world. Egbo's ambivalence is clear. His return to the creek-town is a testing out of his desire to return to the quiet "sources." His discovery that it was "a place of death" is a reassertion of his reluctance to lose his freedom, an expression of his discomfort at the thought of being "absorbed." His "apostacy," if we believe in it, is the only sense of equilibrium that he can afford, and still maintain the tension. It amounts to an unwillingness to commit himself, either to the constraints of custom, or to the indecency of propping up "the herald-men of the future." He sees the choices ahead of him as kinds of death, "merely a question of drowning... resolving itself always into a choice of drowning." (p.120).

But, he is not as unnerved as such neutrality would suggest, rather he is a "predator on nature," unwilling to concede to, only able to exploit his circumstances. His "apostacy" is both a

weakness, it is a giving up of choices, and a strength, it allows the fiction of an impending decision. Held in this tension, he acts out of a personal hedonism, daring himself to deeds of self-assertion and unwilling to be tolerant of weakness. His disgust with Joe Golder makes the point. His use of the dancing woman, for all the gasps of "the Black Immanent," is exploitative and intended only to satisfy a jaded lust. His seduction of the unnamed girl, the earnest, independent young student is another example of his predatory selfishness. He takes the girl to his "shrine," apparently with honourable intentions, probes and examines her for his own needs and finds himself lonely and wanting. The "stronga-head" takes the girl with "eager hands." "The centre pure ran raw red blood, spilling on the toe of the god, and afterwards he washed this for her, protesting shamefacedly, in the river." (p.134). He agrees not to see the girl again. He discovers later that she had become pregnant and had had to leave the University. His anger at the mockery of her by Dr. Lumoye stirs him to a murdering hate. His eyes had "the glare of a savage dog" as he approached the doctor. It is only Bandele's "interference," showing up the Oguazors and the doctor for the callous hypocrites that they are, while at the same time reminding Egbo that it was his action, indulged in to satisfy a personal need, that had brought about the "tragedy," that prevents the working out of the scene into some violent echo of the Oguazor party. Thus, Bandele, at the end of the novel, confronts the Oguazors with their selective "morality," and reminds Egbo that his "apostacy" is only a kind of licence to live off the decisions of others without accepting his share of the responsibility. The true "apostate" hangs not torn between two choices, but has no need of choices. Like Noah, the thief rescued from the mob and groomed by Lazarus into a latter day saviour, the "apostate" is vacuous, empty

rather than tense between two courses as Egbo is.

At the end of the novel, Simi re-approaches Egbo. Simi is the image of sensuous womanhood and it was through her that Egbo had discovered a profane ecstasy of the senses as she had led him through his first act of sex:

For exquisite though it was, it meant pain, and he who had been ready so long and was ready now found that the fight lay in retaining the moment in hanging by the fingertips to a sharp-edged precipice while the blood coursed sweetly down his mouth. And his mind flew over his life, wondering what this meant within what he ever was or would become.

... Good God, in darkness let me be ... (p.60)

In contrast to those ecstatic moments, Egbo no longer feels a reassurance in Simi's presence. As Simi approaches him he feels only a renewal of the demands on his freedom. His "disgust" is beginning to turn into a kind of self-hate, the extreme distortion of self-blame. Simi, we realise, no longer answers his needs. In the calm depths of her eyes he sees only the stillness that had threatened to "swamp" him at the Oshun grove in Oshogbo. He now watches her as "she walked towards him, eyes ocean-clams with her peculiar sadness ... like a choice of a man drowning he was saying ... only like a choice of drowning." (p.251). The novel ends with those words. They leave an echo of Egbo's real fears. He is not an apostate, he is afraid to choose, and that is the "stronga-head's" greatest weakness.

The Interpreters, as we have seen, goes beyond satirising the old guard. A few, brief brush-strokes are enough to reveal the "Managing Director" — the stock character of West African fiction — another Nanga, Koomson or H.R.H. Brempong. Chief Winsala receives

rather more detailed treatment and comes out a pathetic drunken man, led away by Sagoe from the taunts and insults of the waiters. Sir Derinola is a little more complex; behind the grasping hand we glimpse the human being every now and again. These and the Oguazors are the old interpreters, the elite of the "establishment," whose self-serving hypocrisy — Professor Oguazor condemning the "moral decay" of the young, pregnant girl while his own illegitimate child is very dear to him — has unfitted them as moral leaders and examples. The new interpreters expose these men, men whose age should have demanded respect but whose greed and corruption has made them unfit for it. Sagoe walks away from Winsala with "the smell of the new order" following him out, "and he longed for a strong drink of lemon." (p.85). Later on, Sagoe goes further when his condemnation of the new order becomes more sweeping. The bridge that separates the cemetery from the rest of the city, the dead from the living, also leads to the Ikoyi suburb "where both the white remnants and the new black oyinbos lived in colonial vacuity." (p.111). Yet at the same time as we accept the justice of much of what the new interpreters say, we are conscious of their inadequacies too. The novel probes these, alerting us from an easy identification and too compliant a reading.

Part One explored the potential of the interpreters by a dynamic, contrastive technique, where shifts of time allowed us different perspectives on the characters. This exploration establishes the evasions and the inadequacies of the interpreters in terms of their inability to accept the challenge of living up to their potential. The contrast gives us some understanding of the interpreters' unease in their community, and at this level, their disillusion and

disgust with their time seems to mark them out as caring and aware. However, we also understand the interpreters' unease with themselves and with each other. They resent Bandele's critical stance, not because they fail to see from what it derives, but because it was "interfering." It disturbs the self-sustaining bond of silence that allows the friends to evade speaking too critically of each other. It is only by not seeing this unease that we can be satisfied with seeing the interpreters as primarily the vehicles of Soyinka's social criticism. For to see them in this way is to ignore the manner in which they are shown wanting. It falls to Bandele to perform this critical function in the novel, but this aspect of Bandele's role is made possible by our understanding of the interpreters' misgivings about themselves. It is significant that Bandele's critical role does not become overt until Part Two of the novel. By then we have been put in possession of the main facts of the interpreters' inadequacies. This was done, as we have seen, by contrasting the potential of the past with the reality of the present, thus throwing new light on the conception of the past's potential and altering the perspective on the present "reality."

In Part Two of the novel, the interpreters are not explored in the light of their own pasts any more, although the past does not go away. Rather what had come out in the interaction of past and present in Part One, becomes a composite "past" in Part Two. Essentially, the mode of enquiry changes in Part Two, from the contemplation of the dynamic relationship of past and present, to an attempt to view the interpreters through a mythic perspective. Where in Part One man was measured against himself, against his past, in Part Two he is also measured against a mythic dimension, against the gods.

Like Part One, Part Two begins with a rain storm, but the languages in which the two storms are described hint at the shift of focus. At the beginning of the novel the rain is "long chameleon tongues of the cloudburst," "cascades from the roof," and in human terms, the roof of a house torn off. In Part Two, the storm has become an altogether more sombre, ritual re-enactment of an ancient rite:

The rains of May became in July slit arteries of the sacrificial bull, a million bleeding punctures of the sky-bull hidden in convulsive cloud-humps, black, overfed for this one event, nourished on horizon tops of endless choice grazing, distant beyond giraffe reach. (p.155)

This more sombre cloud-sacrifice requires a reciprocal blood-letting on earth. The floods and the torn roof of Part One, the human cost of the storm, are now replaced by death. "The blood of earth-dwellers," and the life of Sekoni, "flow into currents eternally below earth." It is not clear at this point what this shift of focus is to lead to, but the death of Sekoni and the sombre nature of the rains leave the interpreters depressed and preoccupied. As in Part One, we meet them all again, except Sekoni, at the Club Cambana night-club in the first chapter of Part Two. Only now they are listless and miserable, in Kola's phrase, "wet, bedraggled." His image of their misery derives from his painting of the Yoruba pantheon, and references to the painting increase quite dramatically in Part Two, and the painting itself, and its subject, come to play a crucial role in the development of events. This is Kola's view of his friends and himself as they watch the fire-eating dancer stumble and douse his act in a puddle:

But they all felt a little like that, flat. Sekoni's death had left them all wet, bedraggled, the paint running

down their acceptance of life where they thought the image was set, running down in ugly patches. They felt caught flat-footed and, Kola thought, not a bit like the finished work tonight, more like five figures from my Pantheon risen from a trough of turpentine. (p.158)

It is significant that the comparison, facetious as it is here, is to the gods of the Pantheon. The comparison will occur insistently as Part Two progresses. Kola's image suggests his awareness that the interpreters' facade of self-knowledge was, in reality, self-flattery. Sekoni's death had left them all uncertain, "the paint ... running down in ugly patches" to reveal the superficiality of their self-awareness. Rather than being like gods, they are more like half-finished images struggling to achieve clarity. However, the crucial point is that the comparison is made at all. In the light of the development of Part Two, this can be seen as yet another hint that the mode of enquiry has changed.

Sekoni's death also results in a change in Bandele's stance. In a sense it is Sekoni's death that raises the question of mortality and the gods. By his death he disturbs the apparently stable equilibrium between self-knowledge and knowledge of death, which in another sense is knowledge of life. For to Sekoni, death is part of the continuity of life. The "b-b-bridge" is "rrreligion." "Rrreligion" here is not used in the conventional sense of an institutionalised faith, but a belief in man's immortality over and above the distortions of history and accidents of the past. Sekoni, the pilgrim, did not stop with circumambulating the Kaaba, he left "far behind him the madly running smocks of white thousands on their run of forty times around the black solid shrine" of Mecca, and went on to "the ruins of Old Jerusalem" where he stood "awed, so wholly awed" by his human

heritage. (p.99). It is after his return from this pilgrimage that he frenziedly undertakes his carving of "The Wrestler," depicting man's struggle to make sense of his world -- in reality to release the "bunched python" of man's grasp of his other-worldliness, his connection with "life" outside of himself and of his immediate present. Sekoni, however, had not been able to express coherently this intense knowledge of the human self, which is knowledge of the immortality of man. With his death, he leaves his friends uneasy, and makes some of them sensitive to their ignorance of his intense insistence on connections. Bandele, in particular, is clearly moved to question more openly their understanding of themselves. Thus, it is Sekoni's death that leads to Bandele adopting an overtly critical stance, but this stance itself is described in mythic terms. Bandele, in Part Two, becomes a "death-still figure," (p.156). He is "a palace housepost carved of iron-wood." He is "like the staff of Ogboni, rigid in a single casting." (p.244). As he pronounces the curse on the Oguazor clique, which is more like a prophecy than a curse, he is "old and immutable as the royal mothers of Benin throne, old and cruel as the ogboni in conclave..." (p.251). Before the end, unmistakably, he "sat like a timeless image brooding over lesser beings." (p.244). This is the cumulative picture of Bandele that builds up as Part Two develops. In the opening chapter of this section, however, it is Lazarus who holds the centre of interest.

Lazarus we had met earlier as the albino who was at the wheel of the cortege of the "shameful" funeral procession that Sagoe had witnessed. We also met him intervening to rescue the young thief, Sagoe's "Barabbas," from the crowd. Lazarus tracks Sagoe down at the night club, and he makes the astonishing claim that he had died and

risen again:

I fall dead in the streets of a strange village. The kind people bury me the following day, only, as they are lowering the coffin into the grave, I wake up and begin to knock on the lid. That is all that is open to the eyes of mortal witnesses. (p.160)

Bandeale and Kola are interested because of the coincidence of the albino's approach to them so soon after Sekoni's death. Sagoe's journalistic appetite is whetted by the strangeness of Lazarus and his story, and by the possibility of Lazarus being another fake prophet to be exposed. Dehinwa is repelled by the albino's leathery complexion. Above all, they are struck by the albino's intensity. Egbo, who throughout the novel is alternately attracted and repelled by the knowledge of immaterial experience, stared at the albino "with morbid intensity, seeking like the rest to extract from his face the essence of man's experience." (p.161). Bandele tries to question Lazarus, asking what it felt like when he "woke and began to bang the coffin." Lazarus' refusal to tell his story contains perhaps the first overt criticism of the interpreters, in the sense of being spoken openly by a character. He refuses to tell his story in the night-club, "where life looks cheap." (p.161). He invites them to attend a service in his church the following Sunday, where he would tell them the story of his death.

Lasunwon, the lawyer, has reservations about Lazarus and his return from death, but his reservations are mocked by Kola who accuses him of having no imagination. Lasunwon angrily describes them all as "religious gawpers," and this too, coming after Lazarus' comment on the night-club, is another open criticism of the interpreters.

Both these criticisms, coming so soon after the start of Part Two, anticipate the more sustained criticism that the interpreters will be subjected to in this section.

Lazarus can be contrasted with Sekoni. Sekoni was brought to life by a discovery of his human heritage, the discovery of the connection between human lives, past and present. He was unable to articulate this knowledge for it seemed to him "beyond all concrete grasp," (p.99), although "the Wrestler" expresses the continuity of human experience in terms of the struggle of the human psyche to burst out of the limitations of its individual experiences. Lazarus comes to life by the discovery of a force outside man, and by this discovery feels himself closer to God, and removed from the machinations of man. Lazarus' experience, like Sekoni's, is intensely felt, and Lazarus' gift is to be able to articulate this experience where Sekoni stammered. Lazarus gives utterance to the mystical sense of belonging to or of knowing God. In this lies an essential distinction. Sekoni saw human life as the "Dome of experience," in which human endeavour merged over time into a continuous activity of self-knowledge and self-expression, in the profound sense of both those phrases. Lazarus saw man's potential as both evil and good, human and divine. Man had to overcome his humanity to come closer to the divine. The power for this transformation comes from a knowledge of God, from a force, that is, entirely outside man. Lazarus sees himself as the living link between man's humanity and his divinity, between an aimless past and a meaningful present.

He attempts to effect this transformation in the young thief he had rescued from the crowd, and whom he baptises Noah, as an offering to God "because we fear that the Lord may have forgotten His

covenant with earth." (p.173). However, it is soon clear that Lazarus has ambitious plans for the young convert. For the moment, the interpreters are appalled at Noah's vacuity, his "apostacy," Egbo most of all. It was Egbo who had earlier toyed with the idea that their lives were "sheer creek-surface bearing the burdens of fools, a mere passage, a mere reflecting medium or occasional sheer mass controlled by ferments beyond you." (p.13). Now, faced with Noah's vacuity he is disgusted. Kola cynically suggests painting Noah as Christ, the blank faced prophet "promising with duplicity."²⁹ He wants Noah for his Pantheon, to sit as Esumare, the intermediary between the gods and the earth-dwellers, "the apostate Covenant." Bandele is the first to comment on Lazarus' ambition for Noah: "I saw his face when Kola mentioned painting Noah as Christ." (p.178). He attempts to restrain his friends from "scoffing" at the self-proclaimed prophet, to give the man credit for his faith. Sagoe, however, can only see "a gold mine" in him, seeing the features he could write on the prophet and his followers "stretching for weeks." Sagoe is carried away by the possibility of the "scoop," he would have been there from the "redemption" of Noah, which he had witnessed, "right through to the nurturing of yet another Christ." (p.180). Dehinwa mocks Sagoe's enthusiasm, and we do not get the sense here that it is the same mildly indulgent mockery with which she treated Sagoe in Part One. She earns herself a warning about taking over Bandele's role.

As the momentum their cynicism generates increases, Sagoe suggests finding a previously discredited "Christ" and stirring him up as competition for Lazarus — that would make even better copy. Bandele is the only one who claims he had gone to the service to hear what Lazarus had to say. His curiosity arose out of Sekoni's recent

death. In a way, he had hoped that Lazarus would be able to tell him something about death. Bandele here is reaching out for the sense of continuity that sees death as the link between man and god, that sees death as having the potential both for extinction and apotheosis. For if one is to take Lazarus' death and return with any seriousness, then death does not extinguish but transforms man into a closer knowledge of God, into something more god-like. As Lazarus himself explains, his activities are concerned with the community's outcasts, the symbolically dead, whom he helps back to life with a knowledge of God. This knowledge is also knowledge of themselves, of how they could become more god-like. It is this potential in man, and in Lazarus, that the interpreters deny with their cynicism.

Kola finds in Noah's vacuity the meaninglessness of the link between the human and the divine. He sees the link, in other words, as only an empty promise, a neutral connection that has no power of realisation. Thus Kola cynically sees Noah as the perfect model for Esumare, or for the apostate Christ, the spurious link between man and the vision of his godliness. He comes to see before the end of the novel how this cynicism limits his imaginative vision, but that comes later and we shall deal with it presently.

Egbo is touched differently by his experience of Lazarus. Lazarus provokes in him an envy for his power. For he recognises in Lazarus the potential to transform other men, and he now feels that his own rejection of the kingship of Osa was "thoughtless," and that perhaps another time he would stay. It is Lazarus' performance that arouses this change in him: "If you seek to transform, you must not be afraid of power. Take Lazarus." (p.182). His interest, however, is essentially competitive, envious. When later he witnesses Lazarus'

failure to transform Noah through a trial of fire and water, he felt no pity for Lazarus' defeat, but he was also, once again, able to push the need for a decision on Osa away in the background. For Lazarus' failure is also a demonstration of the limitations of the power to transform. Noah balks at the trial because the fire and water do not arouse in him the possibility of gaining strength through the conquest of his fears. His fears have no numinous quality that can be translated into the symbolism of man's fear of his own potential. To him, the fire and water remain material and real, without the symbolic and metaphorical qualities of passage and apotheosis. As Egbo walks away from the scene of Lazarus' defeat, he also, we suspect, walks away from the responsibility of using power to transform others, for what would this be but the denial of his own nature, which values an individual freedom to the extent that it would reject power for fear of the demands that would be made on freedom by such a choice. This was mentioned in the earlier discussion of Egbo's fear of choice, and here his alternatives are again presented, but in terms that no longer suggest the opposition of old and new in the community, rather in terms of the responsibility to the potential for transformation. If power has the capacity to transform, should it be accepted even at the risk of individual failure and individual constraint? Typically, Egbo walks away from the scene.

We have seen how Kola cynically sees Noah as the link between heaven and earth, between the gods and man, and that he intends to use Noah's vacuity to show the insubstantiality of that link. This is to deny man's potential for divine knowledge, as it is to deny the dynamic relationship that Yoruba religion sees as existing between the gods and man. For the gods return to earth not only to be present

at their worship, but to renew the human side of their divinity. As Soyinka explains in his Myth, Literature and the African World (1976), the gods need to return to man:

The journey and its direction are at the heart of ... the relationship of the gods and man. Its direction and motivation are also an indication of the geocentric bias of the Yoruba, for it was the gods who needed to come to man, anguished by a continuing sense of incompleteness, needing to recover their long-lost essence of totality. (p.27)

Or again, in the same discussion of the relationship of gods and man, and of Ogun's role in facilitating it:

Yet none of them, not even Ogun, was complete in himself. There had to be a journey across the void to drink at the fount of mortality though, some myths suggest, it was really to inspect humanity and see if the world peopled by the mortal shards from the common ancestor was indeed thriving. (p.28)

It is Ogun who effects the passage through the "primordial chaos" that separates man from the gods, and it is the rainbow, Esumare, that symbolises this joint of the earth and sky. To see Esumare as the mask of duplicity, the blank-faced symbol of the separateness of gods from man is to deny the union that lies at the heart of Yoruba religion, to make a nonsense of the whole of Kola's Pantheon. It is in this sense that Kola's cynicism limits his imaginative vision.

It is significant that it is to Monica Faseyi that he explains his mistake, because it is through the relationship between them that we observe Kola growing. Soyinka stages another "after the crisis" lunch at the Faseyis. The crisis this time was Monica's refusal to "join the ladies" at the Oguazor party. Kola, on that occasion had been just ahead of Sagoe and Bandele in coming to the

support of Monica, making Sagoe mutter with mock-disgust: "This place is crawling with Sir Galahads." (p.146). It is only Bandele who is prepared to listen to Ayo Faseyi's anxious explanations of how his wife's behaviour will have damaged his social standing. Soyinka captures the self-justifying cowardice of the social climber with his customary mercilessness:

"You see how it is? I mean, I could understand if I was one of those who marry illiterate girls from London so that they can boast that they have a white wife. You tell me honestly, do I look that kind? (p.202)

Bandele mumbles and mutters, allowing Ayo to talk his anxieties out. Kola, who refuses to get involved by claiming that he was not at the party, and Egbo, who marvels at Bandele's ability to "stick" Ayo Faseyi, retire to the balcony. However, Kola's irritation that Bandele should be listening to Ayo "all that time," makes him return to the room and intervene in the conversation. He learns that Faseyi has decided to send Monica "away," to part with her. Kola "regrets" that Faseyi was going to give up Monica. He would have preferred to have humiliated him by taking his wife away from him -- so he seeks to humiliate him in other ways. His intervention makes him feel that he has had a hand in the outcome. He has persuaded Faseyi to demean himself. What Kola "regrets," of course, is that he will be seen to be taking up with a woman rejected by a man so apparently contemptible as Ayo Faseyi. His "machismo" would have been better satisfied with outright dispossession.

His conversation with Monica reveals another aspect of him, his reluctance to have his kindness acknowledged. He had earlier spoken of the tenderness he felt for Usaye, the albino girl,

as his occasional tendency to "suffer from fluffy emotions." Monica now gently rebukes him for this need to project a hardened image:

"Of course, I remember now. You like to reject kindness and ... what was it you called it again? ... oh yes, fluffy emotions." (p.207)

The criticism goes deeper than this, for in his desire not to be seen as weak and sentimental, Kola is cynical. At times this cynicism makes him unkind, or at least without the perception to see the need for compassion. Of course, this is a criticism that could be applied to Sagoe and Egbo as well, and it is what Bandele means when he accuses them of being callous. Kola's response to Ayo Faseyi, admittedly a rival in love and therefore not due for too much understanding, reveals how a fear of kindness and sentiment has made him simply not sensitive enough to Faseyi's anxieties. Monica can see that however much she may act according to what she sees as her principles, her actions hurt Ayo, and parting is therefore "the logical thing" to do: "After all this touches deep-seated attitudes and neither of us can change." (p.208). Kola, however, does not speak. He is still brooding over the way in which his "taking" of Monica is being made too easy.

For the first time in the novel we meet the magnificent Mrs Faseyi, Ayo's mother: "She belonged to the race of handsome statues, defiant, carved proud like a halted thoroughbred in a Durbar charge." (p.209). She wastes no time in acquainting Kola with her anger over his thoughtless and rude departure the last time he had been invited to eat at the Faseyis: "You artists seem to think you have a prerogative of bad manners." (p.209). As Mrs Faseyi talks of Ayo and the marriage, she makes it clear that she too feels it ought to end. She speaks openly and harshly about its failure, and acknowledges

the "shock" of her listeners by explaining that she does not like "unnecessary sentiment." A moment before Mrs Faseyi had drawn our attention to Kola's "bad manners," now Bandele gently reproves her — "Is it just sentiment, Mrs Faseyi?" — for her lack of consideration in openly discussing the personal affairs of an unsuited and unhappy couple. She acknowledges this when she asks Bandele: "You think I don't care enough don't you?" The critic quickly becomes criticised, but as Mrs Faseyi continues to speak, it becomes clear that in her view the marriage is finished and that Monica should leave Faseyi before children come to complicate matters. Kola feels "no elation," but he does become more open, "reckless of what information Bandele drew from it." (p.213). He looks "directly" at Monica. It may not seem much of a commitment, but considering that Kola is always evasive and tentative, it is an unmistakable signal to Monica that he wishes his interest to be acknowledged.

He is unable, however, to overcome his "regrets." His contempt for Faseyi begins to include Monica. How could she have married such a man? There is no acknowledgement that there may be aspects of Faseyi which he knows nothing about, and which may have attracted Monica to him. He begins to impute unkind and sordid motives to her as he wonders if it was "the desire to see Africa" or "the vitality that never ceased" that had attracted her to Faseyi. And as he thinks of Faseyi's motives, he can only conclude, again unkindly, "the prestige of a white wife." Admittedly, Soyinka gives few grounds for compassion for Faseyi, the social-climbing boob is allowed to overcome all other aspects of him, until the very end of the novel, when he is the only one in the Oguazor clique to feel "rather sorry" for the girl who has become pregnant. Yet it is with

a question, with uncertainty that Kola winds down his condemnation of Ayo — "... they said Faseyi was a brilliant man ... then why ...?" (p.214). And the final image of Monica saying grace before she and Ayo ate their meals, suddenly hints at a whole private life that we know nothing about. Kola leaves the house "defeated," unable to condemn quite so unequivocally, and now only resenting "this contamination of Monica." The transition has been a gradual shift of focus from Monica to Faseyi and back to Monica, finding in the end that his irritation with her for being Ayo's about-to-be-abandoned-wife has turned to a resentment that she should have allowed herself to be "contaminated." It is an understanding of a kind.

Kola's disgust with Faseyi, and his resentment of Monica, are an attempt to justify his tentativeness. He comes to realise this himself. For after his departure from the Faseyi home, he is left thoughtful and uncertain, and comes at last to something approaching accuracy in his self-analysis. Here he is thinking more specifically about his painting, but his analysis, as he acknowledges, applies to his whole character:

Fitfully, far too fitfully for 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 the intense fear of fulfilment. And this was another paradox, that he dared not, truly, be fulfilled. At his elbow was the invisible brake which drew him back from final transportation in the act. (p.218)

This is the same fear that Egbo has, except that Kola is more tentative. It is the same fear that denies man the potential to

transform himself and his relations with people by accepting the responsibility of that power. It is now, out of this acknowledgement of his tentativeness, that Kola can accept the divinity of the gods of his Pantheon, and charge his vision of them with the vitality and immediacy that his cynicism had prevented him from perceiving. This can be seen in that powerfully dense evocation of Yoruba mythology at the beginning of Chapter 16. (p.224). It is also seen in his recognition at last that it is Lazarus who should model Esumare, the link between heaven and earth, and not Noah. Lazarus now seems more appropriate because Kola recognises that Lazarus sees himself as the symbolic connection between God and man. Noah, as he explains, now becomes Atunda, "the first apostate rolling the boulder down the back of the unsuspecting deity." (p.224). It is also now that he has faced the fear of fulfilment that he can turn to Monica who "taking the initial step at last that would commit them both ... muzzled her long blond hair against his neck." (p.228).

The introduction of Lazarus in Part Two of the novel allowed the enquiry into the interpreters to shift from the dynamic inter-relationship of individual past and present to a more profound assessment of them in terms of their denial of the potential for transformation that links man to his conception of divinity. The fulfilment of Lazarus' sense of power contrasts with the tentativeness of the interpreters, whose cynicism is a form of justification for the evasion of responsibility of choice. We have discussed the way in which the presence of Lazarus in Part Two directly influences the manner in which we observe the inadequacies of the interpreters. Sekoni, in Part One, had arrived at the discovery of his human heritage

and thus saw the link between the past and present as man's creativity, his unending struggle to make sense of his world. Lazarus believes himself the link between man's sinful nature and his divinity, between his past and his future. The power of this transformation comes from a knowledge of God. His own transformation depicts the potential of man, under the influence of forces outside him, to change into a surer knowledge of divinity, to change into something more god-like. His failure with Noah, a failure he had expected to occur, demonstrates that the power of change lies within man and can only reach fulfilment with the acknowledgement of this potential.

Another means by which man's potential for transformation is explored is Joe Golder. Joe Golder is a bundle of contradictions. He looks white but wants to be black. He is a homosexual but is built like a boxer. He is generous but hates people. He hates violence but uses words viciously. He torments himself endlessly that he is only one-quarter black. He humiliates himself in order to make sensual contact with people. He sings superbly, yet he tells Sagoe "if there is one thing I cannot bear, it is some female voice singing in my flat." Sensitive to intrusions on his privacy, he is indifferent to intrusions on Sagoe's silence, and he carefully watches for Kola to leave his studio before sneaking in quietly to see what Kola had added to his Pantheon. His flat, furnished in an ultra-modern style, still looks to Sagoe "a remote world, ponderous, archaic."

Golder is dangerous with his neurosis. His loathing for his "almost-white" skin made him drive his father to suicide: "I was so ashamed of him and I did not hide it. I spat on my flesh to his face because it came from him ..." (p.188). He tells Sagoe of his friend from British Guiana: "We were great friends. I liked him a lot

and I hated his guts. God I hated his guts ..." (p.192). How, it might be asked, can such a neurotic hambejore be the means for exploring man's potential for transformation? Sagoe finds him "distasteful," "sick," and that is before he discovers his homosexuality. This in itself leads us to an understanding of Golder's function. For Sagoe cannot accept the contradictions that Golder represents, contradictions that lie at the heart of the nature of man and that are such a crucial element in Yoruba myth. Obatala, or Orishna-nla, "the lover of purity," and the god with the "large compassion" got drunk when charged with the task of creation and made "cripples and the dumb, the dwarf, the epileptic." (p.224). Ogun, "the lover of gore, invincible in battle" who had with his own hands slaughtered his men and his children was also "the explorer, path-finder, protector of the forge and the creative hands." Sango, the god of thunder and the agent of retributive justice was a tyrant whose machinations and intrigues to pit two of his rivals against each other ended in his discredit, and he hanged himself before joining the other gods in heaven. Oduduwa, both a primordial divinity and a deified ancestor, is seen in some legends as a male god, co-sculptor with Obatala of the human form, in some other legends as the female arch-divinity, the wife of Obatala. The contradictions continue and a number of others are mentioned in that short passage at the beginning of Chapter 16 where Kola at last acknowledges without cynicism the conception of Yoruba divinity as contradictory. He speaks of the co-existence of order and chaos, of the diviner god Orunmila and of the mischievous god Esu, the gods' messenger, whose stratagems are "eternally mocking the pretensions of the bowl of plan, mocking lines of order in the ring of chaos." (p.225). Most specifically, Golder models for Erinle in Kola's

Pantheon, for Erinle, "an animal spirit," the "Glossary" to the Heinemann edition rather coyly tells us, is bisexual, a fierce and violent killer and a healer.

The contradictions make sense if we recall Soyinka's description of Yoruba myth as having a "geocentric bias." It is not so much that man is made in the image of god, as that the gods have great power, great compassion and are victims at the same time of their natures. In these respects, they possess qualities which men share, and it is in this way that we can speak of man's inherent potential for divinity. The contradictions themselves emphasise this potential. For Ogun's love of gore does not discredit his daring and his labours in hacking down the primordial barriers between gods and men. If Ogun, the slaughterer of his own children, is capable of care and compassion, why should not a murderer, one of Lazarus' apostles, also aspire to the divinity that is the contradictory double of his nature? Or why should not Joe Golder be seen as dramatising man's potential for resolving the contradictions in his nature into the creative-destructive tension that the gods are capable of? In any case, Sagoe's failure to recognise that in the contradictions themselves lie also the seeds of man's capacity for self-transformation is another failure of perception. He responds to Golder, when he discovers his homosexuality, as to a "sick" man, and brings down the "cast-iron shutters" on him.

Egbo's reaction is even more extreme. He first meets Golder in Kola's studio. Golder had sneaked in for a peep at the canvas, as was his habit when he knew Kola was not around. Egbo too takes the opportunity to have a sneak preview. He disapproves of Kola's depiction of the primordial chaos as also the return of life to the

dead: "This is an optimist's delusion of continuity." (p.233). In his rejection of his previous cynicism Kola has made the connection between life and death too concrete, one follows the other in re-birth, and Egbo objects to this as too optimistic. Also, he is unhappy with the way that Ogun is depicted only as a blood-thirsty maniac:

Even the moment of Ogun's belated awareness would have been ... at least that does contain poetic possibilities. This blood spattered fiend is merely melodramatic. And then there is Ogun of the forge, Ogun as the primal artisan ... but he leaves all that to record me as this bestial gore-blinded thug! (p.233)

It is no coincidence that it is to Joe Golder that Egbo is saying all this. What Egbo is complaining of here is that Kola has only shown one side, the destructive side, of Ogun, giving no indication of his contradictory nature. Egbo does not yet know of Golder's homosexuality and he is amazed enough that Golder should be squeamish about the slaughter of the ram to mark the completion of the Pantheon: "What else do you do with rams? Milk them?" (p.233). When Golder insisted that he could not "stand the sight of blood," "Egbo looked at his hard-knit head, his strong, compact, muscle-tense body," and could not believe it. He is unable to perceive that the contradictions he insists on for Ogun are there in man too.

He discovers Golder's homosexuality on the night that Noah died. Bandele, to whom Golder had run for help, seeks out Egbo to help him. They both go to find Lazarus, who is sitting for Kola. It is then that Egbo finds out that Golder had taken Noah to his flat and frightened him by making homosexual advances to him. In his panic, Noah had fallen off the balcony and died. Golder is a nervous wreck

in the back of the car, and Egbo is patting Golder's knee comfortingly as he makes this discovery. His reaction is described without any ambiguity:

As from vileness below human imagining Egbo snatched his hand away, his face distorted with revulsion and a sense of the degrading contamination. He threw himself forward, away even from the back seat, staring into the sagging figure at the back as at some noxious insect, and he felt his entire body crawl in disgust. His hand which had touched Joe Golder suddenly felt foreign to his body and he got out of the car and wiped it on grass dew. Bandele and Kola stared at him, isolated from this hatred they had not known in Egbo, and the sudden angry spasms that seemed to overtake each motion of his body. (p.237)

What Egbo had demanded of Kola's depiction of Ogun, that he should not have ignored the poetic possibilities of Ogun's contradictions, he is unable to achieve himself in his response to Joe Golder. In this instance, Egbo fails by any standards of human compassion, but he also fails because he is shown to be inadequate to the creative contradictions that characterise the gods. Joe Golder, by the contradictions of his nature, has been the means of dramatising this inadequacy in Egbo.

As the novel draws to a conclusion, the criticism of Egbo mounts, and Bandele's status as the judge of his friends' actions gains emphasis. Bandele reproaches Egbo for having failed him: "Kola's house was nearer but I came and asked you." (p.241). The criticism establishes the potential that Bandele sees in Egbo, and therefore implies the great waste that his failure to live to that potential is. Egbo rises to leave in anger, but Bandele is not finished with him yet. He passes him a message from the girl, the student that Egbo had

made pregnant: "When you are sure what you want to do you are to tell me and I will pass it on." (p.242). Bandele allows Egbo no means of escape. He refuses to tell him where the girl is, and refuses to join Egbo in making Dr. Lumoye the scapegoat. Egbo complains: "Bande, Bandele, this torturer role does not become you ..." (p.242). But Bandele has become "a palace housepost carved in iron-wood," and he is unbending: "I wish to keep my involvement to the minimum. So please, only reply when you choose, nothing more." (p.243). The decision must come from Egbo, and Egbo, typically, is afraid to choose. Simi is waiting for him at the house, and the girl is waiting for him elsewhere.

Bande's stiffness with his friends does not derive only from the anger that he feels at their failure, but from the responsibility that he feels thrust upon him by those failures. He has to be "like the staff of Ogboni, rigid in single casting," (p.244), not because his friends have exasperated him beyond care, but because he attempts to force them to face their evasions. As he sat separate from them in the theatre: "It was as if he had neither pity nor indulgence, and yet the opposite was true." (p.244). As Kola watches Bandele brooding on their failures, he regrets that he cannot share Bandele's kind of judgement over "lesser beings." For to Kola, knowing and understanding the failures of others is to weaken the will to condemn as if nothing was owed to "the enslaving cords."

Egbo is drawn from his wanderings by the voice of Joe Golder, the rejected "cessation of nature." As Golder sings his agony, Egbo's compassion reveals itself in the "stream of consciousness" passage in which he begins to understand Golder's sense of exclusion and self-rejection. The "stream of consciousness" allows us a deep

glimpse into the Egbo whose conscious thoughts and acts would wish to deny, the Egbo whose potential Bandele and Kola recognise and admire, the Egbo whose failure is greatest in the novel because his potential is so much greater. The "stronga-head" in him almost gains the upper hand as he approaches the Oguazor clique, his eyes, with "the glare of a savage dog," fixed on Dr. Lumoye. It is Bandele who intervenes, allowing neither Egbo to escape the necessity of decision by a self-mollifying attack on the doctor, nor the Oguazors to get away with their hypocrisy and cruelty. The hypocrisy of the Oguazors is unmistakable, but Egbo's self-indulgent anger is also hypocritical. In what exactly does the doctor's crime consist? That he refused to perform an illegal abortion? That he made a pass at the girl? That he talked slightingly of her? How does that compare to Egbo's responsibility for his predatory use of the girl and his abandonment of her, and now his reluctance to return to her? Egbo's blind rage recalls his complaint that Kola's Ogun was only a "thug," and that Ogun's creative side is ignored. He too has forgotten to think creatively, and has decided to become a thug, like Kola's Ogun.

Thus when Bandele pronounces judgement, it is not only the Oguazors whom he addresses, for the interpreters too have ignored the creative side of their contradictory natures, have failed to understand that man's link with the gods is his potential to become more like them.

The novel ends with the expression of Egbo's real fears, and to some extent, the expression of the interpreters' failure, that they do not trust themselves to push off from "the enslaving cords" of their weaknesses. Egbo watches the approach of Simi, immobilised, unable and afraid to decide between the girl and Simi. As he watches,

he rehearses his fear of drowning.

Superficially, The Interpreters is a "difficult" novel. The changes in chronology, the density of language, the richness of imagery, do pose early problems, but there is no "chaos" in The Interpreters. There is a very clear structure, both in the sense of chapter construction and in the more dynamic sense of technique and method. We have remarked on the use of the past to probe the inadequacies of the present, and this is the most pronounced and a highly successful technique, especially in Part One. The technique not only allows us to explore the characters and their potential, but is symbolic of the community's need to place the events of the moment in the context of its traditions. The subtlety of the symbolism is that it recognises that the past has an ambivalent influence. While it illuminates the potential of the present, it also absorbs the energies of the present to resurrect itself. It is only thus that the past comes to have significance in the self-conception of the community. But unless the influence of the past is seen in dynamic equilibrium with the need for change in the present, it becomes merely a thing of "death" rather than a revitalising force. Egbo understands the dilemma but refuses to accept the challenge. In Part Two, the interpreters are held up against their capacity for transformation, and are seen to be evasive and unable to comprehend the dynamic contradictions that lie at the heart of man's very nature, and that are central to the traditions of their own culture and religion. It is with remarkable control that Soyinka uses the Yoruba religion both to point to man's capacity for self-transformation, as well as to measure the interpreters against it, and demonstrate their weaknesses.

In a less symbolic sense, The Interpreters has a simple and clear-cut structure. Part One begins at the night-club, takes us to eat with the Faseyis and introduces us to Simi as an image of female sensuality. This is followed by the long chapter which deals with the corruption of the old guard. We see Sekoni and Kola "creating." There is a funeral. We witness the chase of Noah. We see the "sacrifice" of the girl at Egbo's "shrine" and we attend the Oguazor party. Part Two also begins at the night-club. We meet Lazarus and hear his story, a contrast to the self-centred corruption of the old guard. We meet Joe Golder, an image of another kind of sensuality. We eat with the Faseyis again. We witness another chase, again involving Noah. There is a second funeral, this time of Sekoni. We see Kola at work on his canvas. There is another sacrifice, the death of the boy Noah, and the novel ends with a confrontation with the Oguazors once again.³⁰

Where Part One sought to establish the potential of the interpreters, Part Two shows them unable to meet the expectations they had raised. Kola's Pantheon is clearly disappointing, the work of an honest artist but without the power of "The Wrestler." Sekoni is dead. Egbo is still faced with "a choice of drowning" and Sagoe is still the joker, talking of burning the book to please Dehinwa. He has at least made a choice, to marry Dehinwa and burn the book, in some senses accepting the need for responsibility. Bandele has adopted a critical stance, and this represents some development, as does the Kola-Monica affair. On the whole, we see little change in the "character" of the interpreters. We come to understand them more deeply, but we do not follow their development from one personal crisis to another, to the point where self-knowledge confounds them or leaves them serene, as the case may be. Soyinka has chosen an approach, a form that allows

him to explore his characters, and finally to throw some doubt on the easy assumptions that they make about themselves and their community. At the same time he hints at the dynamic relationship between the past and the present, between religion and self-conception, in connection with both the development of the individual and the self-apprehension of the community.

What our discussion of The Interpreters has attempted to show is the need to distinguish between and understand a distinctively Yoruba tradition, as Soyinka uses it in his novel, and a vague "African tradition." It is clear that Soyinka has creatively used the traditions of the Yorubas to expand and develop the implications of the issues that he raises and depicts in The Interpreters. It is also clear that his understanding and employment of "tradition" in fiction is both more subtle and creative than the crude formulations and prescriptions of his critics.

In this section we have attempted to show that to criticise Soyinka for his inattention to "the African tradition" is to refuse to see his concern with, and his subtle use of tradition to illuminate and advance his understanding of the community. The objections of Enekwe and Chinweizu et al. to the "obscurity" of Soyinka may have less complicated reasons than the ones offered, that is, that Soyinka's form of writing is against "the African literary tradition," or that it does not truly reflect the nature of the African psyche. We have seen that these critics' preoccupation with Soyinka's "obscurity" has simply made them poor readers and insensitive critics. The reading of The Interpreters in this section was an attempt to show the novel responds to careful reading, and to indicate that Enekwe's discussion

of it was unnecessarily hostile and largely inept.

In objecting to the difficulty that Soyinka presents to his readers, critics like Enekwe are expressing an irritation with his inaccessibility to a wide public. What is implied by this irritation is complicated by the rhetoric in which it is expressed. At one level it can be seen as a concern that literature should not force itself into a corner, should not become "obscure" and "elitist" for purposes of "sophistication." That this concern is couched in terms of cultural "authenticity" only confuses what should have been a rational, and partly justified worry. However, the issue of "obscurity," and the "elitism" it implies has always seemed to elicit irrational responses in critics of African literature. This has to be understood, at least in part, as an expression of the consciousness that literature must contribute to the community's self-conception. But the irrationality also has other implications. In assuming that the community only wants a literature that is "public," in the sense that Chinweizu et al. use the word, the critics are also assuming specific and rather limited ends for the literature. This is in the sense that literature has a short-term contribution to make in "raising consciousness" and in facilitating a sense of cultural pride and identification. Such an assumption, of course, not only defines the kind of literature that is envisaged, but also defines the audience for whom the literature is intended. This matter will be taken up in greater detail in the next chapter. However, the examples that we have looked at in this chapter should have indicated that a number of problems are raised by the confidence with which some critics speak of an African literary tradition, an African aesthetics or African critical standards. While the discussion is based on the

concept of racial and cultural "authenticity," the outcome is always likely to be generalised and idealised explanations that are unsympathetic to the more specific labours of the artist.

The sense of vulnerability that prompted Ohaegbu to speak of his fear of being "swallowed-up" by "the world," has forced other critics to speak out in a similar manner, and some to suggest radical shifts in emphases in order to produce an unmistakably African cultural identity. The tendency in the articles that we have looked at is to imply that such an identity is already known and is simply waiting to be stated, or is not being stated for sinister reasons. Such does not appear to be the case, and the unnecessary abrasiveness and indignant name-calling only confirms the weakness of the arguments that justify such excess. We are reminded of the rhetorical irresponsibility of the négritude critics, whose over-confidence in the end outran their knowledge. What we can say with some confidence is that Soyinka's The Interpreters invites us into a more profound exploration of the value of the past to the community than the self-righteous criticism of the novel as lacking the integrity of an African work of literature.

Notes

¹ Omalara Leslie, "African Aesthetics and Literature," Ufahamu, IV/1 (Spring 1973), pp.4-7

² Aloys U. Ohaegbu, "The African Writer and the Problems of Cultural Identity," Presence Africaine, Nos. 101-102, 1st. and 2nd. Quarterlies, 1977, pp.25-37.

³ Franz Fanon, The Wretched of the Earth (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967), p.175.

⁴ J.K. Agovi, "Towards the Formulation of Critical Standards for Modern African Literature," Universitas, 3/3 (June 1974), pp.128-33.

⁵ L.S. Senghor, "The General Nature of African Art," in Senghor: Prose and Poetry, ed. and trans. John Reed and Clive Wake (Oxford University Press, 1965), p.83.

⁶ Wole Soyinka, "The Writer in Modern Africa," Wästberg (1968), pp.14-21.

⁷ Agovi does not indicate the original source but he gives his reference as: Alastair Niven, Literary Criticism and the West African Novel 1952-68, MA Thesis, Institute of African Studies, Legon, Ghana. Beier is credited with having made these comments in 1964.

⁸ George Steiner, The Death of Tragedy (London: Faber, 1961).

⁹ Eric Auerbach, Mimesis, Trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), p.161. First published 1946.

¹⁰ S.A. Dzeagu, "The Criticism of Modern African Literature," Universitas, 3/3 (June 1974), pp.134-40.

¹¹ Chinweizu, Jemie and Madubuike, "Towards the Decolonization of African Literature," Okike 6 (Dec. 1974), pp.11-27; Okike 7 (April 1975), pp.65-81.

¹² Wole Soyinka, "Malediction," Idanre and Other Poems (London: Methuen, 1967), p.55.

¹³ Kofi Awoonor, The Breast of the Earth (New York: Doubleday, 1975), p.56.

¹⁴ By Chapter 8, pp.129-45, Awoonor has seriously contradicted himself by insisting on the diversity of functions of African art.

¹⁵ Isidore Okpewho, "The Aesthetics of Old African Art," Okike 8 (July 1975), p.38.

¹⁶ Kofi Awoonor, "Tradition and Continuity in African Literature," Exile and Tradition, ed. Rowland Smith (London: Longman, 1976), p.167.

¹⁷ Stanley Macebuh, "African Aesthetics in Traditional African Art," Okike 5 (June 1974), p.23.

¹⁸ Wole Soyinka, Myth, Literature and the African World (Cambridge University Press, 1976). It is interesting to note that Soyinka talks of Yoruba drama in his first two chapters on tradition, and on Francophone and Anglophone literature in his two later chapters on modern literature. Even though his second chapter threatens to be about "the African world-view," it succeeds in being an impressive study of Yoruba dramatic culture and its off-shoots in the New World.

¹⁹ It does not seem necessary to give specific references to the massive amount of documentation that exists in this field. Any competent study of oral literature will give dozens of relevant references in its Select Bibliography. However, it is worth mentioning that the works of Ruth Finnegan and Jan Vansina contain some excellent studies of the esoteric in oral literature.

²⁰ Wole Soyinka, "Neo-Tarzanism and the Poetics of Pseudo-Tradition," Transition 48, 1975, pp.38-44.

²¹ Wole Soyinka, "Massacre, October '66," Idanre and Other Poems (London: Methuen, 1967), pp.51-52.

²² David Rand Bishop, Jr., African Critics and African Literature:

A Study of Critical Standards, 1947-66, Michigan State University, Ph.D., 1970, p.82.

G. Adali Mortty, A review of Things Fall Apart, Black Orpheus 6 (November 1959), p.49.

²³ Eldred Jones, "Language and Theme in Things Fall Apart," A Review of English Literature, V, 4 (october 1964), p.39.

²⁴ Ossie Onuora Enekwe, "Wole Soyinka as a Novelist," Okike 9 (December 1975), pp.72-86.

²⁵ Quoted by Enekwe on p.73 of his paper from Ime Ikiddeh, "The Novel and Reality in Africa and America," University of Lagos (Jan. 1973), p.28. Transcript of discussion edited by Theo Vincent.

²⁶ Elechi Amadi, The Concubine (London: Heinemann, 1966), p.280.

²⁷ John Povey, "Changing Themes in the Nigerian Novel," Jonala 1 (1970), pp.38-39; Bernth Lindfors, p.161.

²⁸ Wole Soyinka, The Interpreters (London: Heinemann, 1970), p.13. First published in London by Andre Deutsch, 1965. All further page references will be to the Heinemann edition.

²⁹ Mark Kinkead-Weekes, "The Interpreters — A Form of Criticism," presented as a paper at Ibadan, Nigeria, April 1973, p.23. The paper is to be published by the Three Continents Press, Washington, D.C..

³⁰ A more detailed discussion of this parallel structure can be found in the paper referred to in Note 29.

V

The Language of Expression

Perhaps the most obstinate obstacle in the way of attempts to simplify the relationship of the modern African writer to his traditions has been the fact that most of what is usually described as "African literature" has been written in non-African languages. In this section we will consider the arguments that are put forward in criticism of this state of affairs, and we will consider the options that are offered to the African writer.

It would be reasonable to argue that African writers who use European languages in their work, do so largely out of choice.¹ Few of them have justified this choice in terms of the aesthetic superiority of European languages over African ones, although Senghor has written in praise of the French language as an especially appropriate vehicle for the expression of African artistic ends.² Most African writers, however, have recognised the efficacy of European languages in reaching a wider audience, both in Africa and in the rest of the world. Chinua Achebe put it characteristically succinctly when he wrote:

There are not many countries in Africa today where you could abolish the languages of the erstwhile colonial powers and still retain the facility for mutual communication. Therefore those African writers who have chosen to write in English or French are not unpatriotic smart alecs with an eye on the

main chance — outside their own countries. They are by-products of the same processes that made the new nation states of Africa.³

Achebe was writing in response to Obiajunwa Wali's article in Transition which questioned "the whole uncritical acceptance of English and French as the inevitable medium for educated African writing."⁴ Wali is not convinced that "any true African literature" can be written in European languages. His basis, and he argues, the usual grounds for classification of literature is by their language of expression rather than by their geographical origins. Wali makes this his central argument. (He ignores here, of course, that American, Canadian, Australian, Caribbean literatures are referred to by their geographical rather than linguistic origins.) Wali argues that the efforts of African writers who write in European languages cannot advance African culture since their work will only be an irrelevant "appendage" to European literature, a position that will lead to creative "sterility" and "frustration."

Juliet Okonkwo, in her article "African Literature and Its Language of Expression," substantially agrees with Obiajunwa Wali.⁵ She stresses the obstacles that the use of European languages places in the way of the development of viable African literary languages. In addition, she argues that African writers using European languages inevitably operate within the literary traditions of those languages, using forms and devices already exhaustively explored by the native users, and which at the same time may not be really relevant to the African reader. She sees two choices open to African writers. One is to continue using European languages, always at a disadvantage in terms of the quality of their work in comparison to native European writers, and always in the knowledge that their

own languages are suffering for not being renewed through literature. The second option open to African writers is to take on the task of enlarging and employing vernacular languages, come to grips with all the attendant problems, and over a period hope to make them into effective tools for the writer.

Juliet Okonkwo attempts to provide an uncompromising answer to a question which was posed as a criticism of Wali, namely: What are writers supposed to do while they are waiting for African languages to become "viable"? Okonkwo's answer would seem to be that the writers should make them "viable." There is a third possibility which she does not take much account of, and one which several African writers claim to be open to them, that is, the possibility of using English in an "appropriately African" way. We shall consider this presently, as we will the attempts some African writers have made to adapt English to what they see as African demands. Before then, we need to examine further criticisms of the use of English in African writing.

One well-worn criticism, but nevertheless a strong one, is that the use of these languages demonstrates continued European domination of African culture. The argument is a very familiar one, and Juliet Okonkwo's summary here will be sufficient to indicate its main thrust:

There is ... no question about the significance of writing "African literature" in foreign languages. It is the most eloquent manifestation of the degree of cultural imperialism imposed by Europe on Africa. It is a symbol of the extent to which Europe has absorbed and annexed Africa. (p.59)

Fanon had discussed the psychological implications of this "annexation" in Black Skin White Masks, in which he had written:

"The colonized is elevated beyond his jungle status in proportion to his adoption of the mother country's cultural standards."⁶ In his analysis, Fanon comes close to identifying "the language of the civilising nation" with its "culture." To consider, therefore, the African's relationship with European languages is to be faced with the implications of the joint historical experiences of the two cultures, that is, the domination of one by the other. The moral and psychological discomfort of this position has figured largely in creating the charged climate that surrounds the language debate.

This is not to say that other arguments are less important. Juliet Okonkwo's point that the use of European languages as the literary medium directly impoverishes African languages is well made. Also, the argument that the use of European languages ensures a second-rate status for African literature, if it were true, would constitute serious criticism. But the "domination" criticism, by its very nature, compounds the psycho-cultural complexes out of which it arises. It would not be enough, in rebuttal of it, to speak of the practical advantages of an international readership. Its effectiveness lies in its attack on what it considers the self-betrayal of the African writer. It questions the morality of confirming the oppressor's boast of having brought civilisation to Africa, and the self-contempt such a position indicates. It plays upon the discomfort that some African writers feel in their continued use of languages which historical experience has associated with repression and domination.

Ezekiel Mphahlele and Chinua Achebe have both spoken of this discomfort. In some respects, both are defenders of the use of English for African writers, (although in recent years Achebe has

come to see English as one of several possibilities, and has become concerned with writing about and using Igbo as a medium). In response to Wali's article in Transition, Achebe has written of the "reality" of the African linguistic situation demanding the continued use of English. He concedes that "political action" might change this, and at that point a new approach would need to be adopted. It is clear that Achebe is evading Wali's objections, which amount to saying that there is a need for this "political action" now, by suggesting that "the scene as it is" is not unacceptable. He argues that English has enabled separate and diverse African communities to come together, to communicate for the first time:

Of course there are areas of Africa where colonialism divided up a single ethnic group among two or even three powers. But on the whole it did bring together many peoples that had hitherto gone their separate ways. And it gave them a language with which to talk to one another.⁷

Achebe's relative satisfaction with the use of English in African literature accepts the practical advantages of continental communication. Once these advantages are accepted as desirable, it is hard to see an alternative to the use of European languages for the time being. He quotes his own meetings with Joseph Kariuki, the Kenyan poet who writes in English, and Shaaban Robert, the late Tanzanian poet who wrote in Kiswahili, as a demonstration of his argument. With Kariuki there was an immediate rapport, "I had met him through his poems." (p.58). With Shaaban Robert "there was no real contact" even though Achebe was aware that he was "talking to an important writer." He knew nothing of "the nature of his work," quite simply because he could not read it. It is this kind of isolation which he feels

African writers using English have managed to escape. This does not counter Juliet Okonkwo's criticism, that in the meantime African languages are suffering through literary neglect. A weakness of this criticism, however, is the implication that the community depends on literature for linguistic renewal, rather than vice versa, and that implication needs to be established more convincingly before it can be so forcefully assumed. Nevertheless Okonkwo's point remains — that while it may be "practical" to use English now, in the process African languages are denied the chance to become "viable."

Achebe's defence of the use of English attempts to refute the notion that Africans writing in English will inevitably write second-rate work. This notion need not, in any case, be taken too seriously. Any sensitive and sympathetic reading of Achebe's own fiction, Soyinka's drama and novels, and Armah's early novels, to name a handful of West African works, will demonstrate its inaccuracy. A more significant criticism, which Achebe does not agree with either, is that by writing in English the African writer assumes most of the trappings of the English literary tradition. Eldred Jones warns against the assumption that a language could be learned without its underlying cultural values. In this, he echoes the fears of a number of African critics:

... for the bulk of his writing [the African writer] may wish to borrow only the language. (Indeed many writers have voiced their rejection of the values of an alien society in the language of that very society.)

This selective borrowing may be difficult particularly since the new language is generally learnt along with the ideas and beliefs of its native speakers. Full blooded Africans in French West Africa for several decades of French rule recited passages to the effect that their ancestors were tall,

fair-haired Gauls. It would not take too much reflection to reject that particular idea, but there may be others more insidious.⁸

Franz Fanon, one of those writers who had voiced his "rejection of the values of an alien society in the language of that very society," saw the adoption of the language of another culture as meaning to place oneself "in a position to use a certain syntax, to grasp the morphology of this or that language, but it means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilisation."⁹ Paradoxically, it is the very contradiction of this state of affairs, that an African should "assume" English or French culture that aroused the voice of rejection, that made Achebe, for example, seek to put right the imbalance in the depiction of the African in English literature, that made Césaire confront the stereotyped Negro image in French culture, and that made other African and Caribbean writers pursue the images of Caliban and Prospero as appropriate to their situation. It is, in other words, as a result of their absorption into the oppressing culture that they found the means to voice their rejection of its values.

To say that the use of European languages allowed African writers to reject the colonialist and racialist distortions of those cultures does not counter Fanon's argument that by then they had already assumed those cultures. The rejection is only part of a process that leads to an introspective national exploration, whose end-result is a dynamic reassessment of the role of culture in the community's "liberation." The irony of an African intellectual rejecting the influence of Western culture in a Western language is painfully obvious. Not only is he thus forced to talk in terms of conventions that have their origins and relevance in Western thought,

but his choice implies an acceptance of the necessary inaccessibility of his words to a substantial proportion of the African masses. There are grounds, however, for refusing to accept Fanon's analysis entirely.

Firstly, there are no compelling reasons to assume that the African intellectual and the masses have any more interest in each other than intellectuals and masses of other cultures do. Secondly, Fanon seems to assume that the native intellectual is somehow unaware that his view of his community has been radically influenced by his involvement with the culture of Europe. Or, if not unaware then he is at least totally powerless against the distorting influence of European culture. His analysis of the stages that native literature would go through as it establishes itself has certainly not been borne out. If for no other reason, it is that its development has not gone through the clear-cut stages he has charted, but is simultaneously pursuing a number of objectives. Senghor's interest has been in the interaction between African and European cultures, and in his writings he has attempted to describe the beneficial potential of this interaction. Achebe has been attempting to offer a more self-confident image of the African, while Soyinka's interests have ranged from the depiction of "the culture clash" in The Lion and the Jewel to the more complex critique of human corruptibility in Madmen and Specialists. Ngugi's writings have become increasingly concerned with making militant statements on the injustices that characterise contemporary Kenyan society, while Armah has gradually wandered towards the depiction of the historical African community in mythic terms. These are only a few examples; more are possible. What is clear is that African writers do not seem to feel that the route to "liberation" lies through an introspective

reassessment of the role of culture. The significance of Fanon's analysis, however, is not in the predictions of the growth of national culture, but in the brutal accuracy of his description of the native's state of mind as a victim of cultural colonialism, and the complexes this state gives rise to. The vulnerability of the African writer to such complexes of domination has an influence on the language debate, as has already been remarked.

Chinua Achebe faces the issue squarely when he asks: "Is it right that a man should abandon his mother-tongue for someone else's? It looks like a dreadful betrayal and produces a guilty feeling."¹⁰ Achebe answers the question in his own case by saying: "I have been given this gift and I intend to use it." His implication is that he has no choice but to use English. As he argues further in the article it becomes clear that he has in mind an English properly adapted to his own specific requirements as an African writer. This has become the major element in the counter-argument for the use of European languages: that there is a level of adaptation which would make English or French appropriate languages for African artistic expression.

There are many aspects to this simple assertion. Firstly, it is an attempt to get round the moral and psychological objections to the use of European languages, while at the same time achieving the advantageous goal of being comprehensible to a world audience. Secondly, it makes an attempt to achieve some degree of "authenticity," certainly some degree of "un-Europeanness" which would make the literature attractive and available to a larger African audience. For it has now become something of a critical commonplace to argue that in order to "reach" the African audience outside the elite of

University students and academics, the writer using a European language must "do violence" to it. In some cases, as might be expected, the adoption of this position arises out of simple bravado, either as an attempt to feel less acutely the "betrayal" implied in the use of English or French, or for the pleasure of setting off some polemical gunpowder. Few critics, however, have convincingly addressed themselves to identifying the means that African writers have employed in their attempts to achieve an "appropriately African" voice, or how successful these attempts have been.

The view that African adaptations of European languages are both possible and necessary to establish the identity of African literature as something outside the traditions of European literature is now well-established. Ezekiel Mphahlele wrote in the introduction to his Modern African Stories:

Although we cannot seriously claim that we have evolved new styles as African writers, still less un style négro-africaine — whatever its promoters may feel about it — we are doing violence to standard English.¹¹

Mphahlele wrote this in 1964, when he was deeply involved in his battles against négritude, and when not very much African writing in English had yet appeared. Since then, several attempts have been made to assume an "appropriate" style. Armah's Two Thousand Seasons has been seen by some critics as employing the narrative style most suited to African story-telling needs. Gabriel Okara's The Voice has tried to capture the essence of African thought by "almost literal translation" from Okara's own language into English. Both these novels will be discussed later in the chapter. It is clear, however, that Mphahlele's "doing violence" has changed into something less

histrionic, into something a little more profound. Mphahlele, to be fair, saw the use of English and French as both practically and politically necessary. Not only would the use of these languages ensure a continental audience, but these languages "have become the common language with which to present a national front against white oppressors."¹² In this respect, "doing violence" to the language is an act of defiance against the oppressors, whose languages they are, at the same time as the indigenised language is brought closer to its African audience. Mphahlele concedes that African states will "need to find" their own languages, but until they can support "an adult literature" he sees no alternatives to European languages.

Mphahlele's interest is clearly in an African audience, albeit a limited one for the present. Few critics have shown much interest in "a world audience" as opposed to an African one. The former is generally taken to be secondary to the latter, in rhetorical if not in practical terms. Some critics have favoured the use of European languages because they offer the chance of establishing "communication" with the rest of the world, and hence make possible an African contribution to a universal human civilisation. Senghor, of course, comes to mind. There are problems with this "world role" which need to be mentioned. At best, the African writer who deliberately and self-consciously addresses himself to the "world," is likely to adopt the stance that will flatter the interest of the "world," and hence excite its patronage. In a way, this has already happened in some novels that were meant to show how Africans lived, what they believe and how they organise their communities.¹³ These novels have rightly been criticised for their narration of customs in neglect of

historical and social forces, and for their stylistic tedium and incompetence. At worst, by addressing himself to the "world" the African might be forced into accepting a stereotyped role for his writing in "a universal culture." Such a role might not only place his work on the periphery (as the newest member of the "universal" fraternity) but would probably lead him to a position similar to that occupied by négritude, that of accepting the inferiority of Africans as rational people and compensating this with over-confident assertions about the black's monopoly on emotion.

But if it is to be accepted that the intended audience of the literature is African, the criticisms of Wali and Okonkwo have to be taken seriously. Is it the case that literature in European languages only reaches the "elite" of Africans? If not, then the consequences that Wali foresees "sterility, uncreativity, and frustration," are obviously exaggerated. If it is, then it forebodes a serious distortion in the direction that the literature is likely to take in its development.

A contention of the critics who oppose the use of European languages is that a foreign language will always be inadequate to express the "innermost feelings" of the creative writer. Its imaginative and symbolic genius is unlikely to correspond to African self-apprehension, especially, as in the case of European languages, where few cultural common factors exist. Obiajunwa Wali goes further than this in arguing that an African writer who "thinks and feels" in his own language "must write in that language." He suggests that to write in English or French is to produce "a copy" of the "original," which "is the real stuff of literature."¹⁴ The assertion that a writer must perform on paper as he "thinks and feels"

ignores the organising artistic intelligence that reshapes primary material in line with all manner of literary and social conventions. Thus, in a sense, few works are "original" in being red-hot outpourings from the writer's mind. Clearly a writer who has to perform this organising task across another language has greater problems, but why should we necessarily assume that an African writer who uses English "thinks and feels" only in his own language? Do we anticipate, for example, that an African scientist or engineer, also engaged in creative work, should "think and feel" about his work only in an African language?

Chinua Achebe seems to concede the seriousness of the problem of expressing "innermost feelings" through a foreign language when he writes:

He [the African writer] often finds himself describing situations and modes of thought which have no direct equivalent in the English way of life. Caught in that situation he can do one of two things. He can try and contain what he wants to say within the limits of conventional English or he can try to push back those limits to accomodate his ideas.¹⁵

Achebe has reiterated his belief that the use of English is a practical necessity for African literature, at least for the present, and that it is possible for the language to be employed in such a way as to "accomodate" the African writer. At the same time, such activity would inevitably enrich the language, a proposition that Wali and Okonkwo would also make, with the reminder that in the meantime African languages are suffering neglect. Unlike the two critics, Achebe is confident of the adaptability of English for African purposes. He argues that it is not necessary for the writer to use

English as "a native speaker" would:

It is neither necessary nor desirable.... The African writer should aim to use English in a way that brings out his message best without altering the language to the extent that its value as a medium of international exchange will be lost. He should aim at fashioning out an English which is at once universal and able to carry his peculiar experience.¹⁶

In some respects, Achebe's position seems a little too optimistic. The adoption of a language of expression so removed from the cultural experience of the adopting community must involve some loss, at least in the appreciative range which the community can bring to the work of art. The moral and psychological appropriateness of such adaptation of English is that the implications of cultural dominance through linguistic dependence can, to an extent, be made to appear less acceptable by a rejection of the linguistic norms of the dominant culture. Achebe's optimism does not answer the more profound criticism that adoption of English as a language of expression inevitably forces the literary conventions of that language into African writing.

On the face of it Wali has a strong point when he argues the importance of "language," by which he clearly means the literary form and its conventions, in judging the "aesthetic" success of a piece of writing. Wali insists that "aesthetic categories should be inherent in the structure of language and other elements of style dictated by such structure."¹⁷ There is something a little glib, and gratuitous, about such criticism, as if the creative writer is likely to forget. At such points the language debate becomes the means with which to torture the creative writer for using foreign literary traditions, (conducted with the racks and thumb-screws of foreign

critical clichés).

The most impressive argument against the use of European languages is put forward by Juliet Okonkwo, that in the meantime African languages are suffering through neglect. While conceding this, it would nevertheless seem that since the use of European languages appears for the moment a necessary practical alternative, the requirement made on them as vehicles for African expression should be different from those a native speaker would make. In this respect, Achebe's advice that the African writer should aim at "fashioning out an English ... able to carry his peculiar experience" is perfectly justified, and his own work is a successful demonstration of this. If the writer recognises the danger he is in, as Achebe obviously does, and the critic is alert to the possibilities that arise out of the use of a foreign language as a medium of expression, there is no reason why the literature should not perform a difficult balancing act successfully. For the moment, the alternative of African languages, while it exists and flourishes in some cases, Kiswahili being an outstanding example, lacks the continental accessibility which English possesses.

It is tempting to argue that much of the edgy criticism against the use of English has been shown to be exaggerated, that the literature has its own integrity outside the influence of European conventions, and that the critics who still describe it as "an extension of the European literary traditions" are confusing "literary" with "European." But the very intensity of the criticism against the use of English has forced a greater awareness on the African writer, of the pitfalls of his means, and of the legitimacy of his sources.

Possibly some of the issues that have at times preoccupied African critics would not have arisen at all but for the need to guard against a tame capitulation to the apparently irresistible, "seductive" powers of European literature. In any case, remarks such as these by Abiola Irele, quoted below, gain greater force for being directed at writers who are not using African languages in their writing:

It is impossible for the modern African writer to take his "African-ness" for granted; on the contrary, it is imperative for him to rethink and refashion his art with reference to his own heritage and in conformity with a native cultural authority.¹⁸

What might otherwise have seemed like "narcissistic" (in Soyinka's sense) parochialism in a native European speaker addressing his own community, now appears like a dignified and unbending demand for cultural integrity. As has already been mentioned in earlier chapters, the combative tone of négritude has, to some extent, familiarised the African critic to the use of a self-assertive rhetoric. In the above case it is also due to the vigilance which Abiola Irele obviously feels is required of the African critic. One of the intended effects is to put the writer under greater pressure. There is something worrying about "conformity with a native cultural authority," something narrow and complacent. And since neither the majority of writers nor of critics seem to know very much about what these might be outside their own communities, and would be better served finding out about them before demanding that they be conformed to, this seems gratuitous pressure. It undermines the credibility of the critic as a reliable and sympathetic commentator on the literature. The quotation indicates the special kind of critical language that has arisen, at least partly as a result of the use of European language in African

literature. That circumstance has forced the critic to greater vigilance against Western influences, and to some imprudence in language.

One writer who objects to the idea of "conformity" to a facile conception of "cultural authority" is Wole Soyinka, whose diatribes against too glib an interpretation of tradition have sought to combat the notion that tradition should mean the loss of artistic freedom. Soyinka is no carbon-copy modernist, a stray from the Western avant-garde camp, (as he has in fact been accused of being by Chinweizu)¹⁹. His interest in the past and its influence on the present of the community is central to his work. His objection to "conformity" is an objection to the loss of choice such a demand implies. Another writer, whose position implies opposition to that suggested by Abiola Irele was Christopher Okigbo. Okigbo's acknowledgement of a variety of sources for his poems in Labyrinths leaves one in no doubt about his views on cultural "conformity" (if a little suspicious of the high-faluting pretentiousness of his tone). He made his position more directly clear in an interview with Robert Serumaga when he said: "the truth is that the modern African is no longer a product of an entirely indigenous culture ... and I think that anybody who thinks it is possible to express consistently only one line of values, indigenous or exotic, is probably being artificial."²⁰ In the same interview Okigbo pressed his point by claiming the influences of "various literatures and cultures, right from the classical times to the present day." (p.III). We need not take Okigbo's word for the claims that he makes with regard to the "influences" on his work. The point is that he does not see anything amiss in claiming such varied influences. This is not to say that there is an invulnerable argument that requires us to agree with Okigbo, and

indeed it has been argued that from the evidence of his Paths of Thunder, his "influences" had narrowed a little before his sad death. His protest, at the very least, refutes the idea that an African writer should conform to a vaguely defined "authenticity" that takes no account of developments in contemporary culture.

It should be obvious by now that the language debate has thrown up some very complex problems, whose solution would require profound rethinking and reorientation on the part of the writers, the critics and the society itself. For the moment, it would seem wise to leave the matter there, and consider the attempts that some writers have made to write novels that are "able to carry" the "peculiar experience" of being African.

Of Chinua Achebe's novels, it is perhaps Arrow of God that best demonstrates his skill at creating an "African environment," and the degree to which he has been able to employ English to his ends. The novel is a masterly achievement in other respects as well, as a study of social transition under pressure of new power structures, and in the portrayal of the manner in which the temptation to exercise power comes to undermine the moral integrity of the spiritual leader of the threatened community.

Early in the novel, Ezeulu rebukes Obika for wishing to postpone work on "the woman's barn," part of the homestead that he is preparing for his new wife. Ezeulu's rebuke is followed by the reminder that "as long as we are there we shall continue to point out the right way."²¹ His words carry in them more than a memory of custom, or the reactionary's irritation, but indicate his conviction that there is wisdom in the ways of the community. The rebuke, he

feels, is called for because the community is beginning to depart the ways of old. Ezeulu's presentiment is that the new laxity portends the weakening of communal bonds. We are led to believe that Ezeulu is a little puzzled by this, to begin with. He shakes his head, as the archetypal old fogey, and complains about the young people, but this is a little hard to take seriously. By all that we know about him we are aware that he understands the changing nature of the times. The tension that is already suggested here, between the need to maintain "the right way" and the pressures brought about by new circumstances directly at odds with this "way," is central to the unfolding drama of the novel.

Ezeulu is both the chief priest of Ulu, the spiritual leader with enormous potential power, and a man of honourable integrity. It is his confusion of the two roles that brings about disaster. The shame that comes to him as a man, he takes to be a challenge to his god. He has forgotten himself to the extent that he has become Ulu. For the chief priest, we know from the very beginning, has something of the vainglorious in him:

Whenever Ezeulu considered the immensity of his power over the year, and the crops and, therefore, over the people he wondered if it was real. It was true that he named the day for the feast of the Pumpkin Leaves and for the New Yam Feast; but he did not choose it. He was merely a watchman ... If he should refuse to name the day there would be no festival — no planting and no reaping. But could he refuse? No chief priest had ever refused. So it could not be done. He would not dare.

Ezeulu was stung to anger by this as though his enemy had spoken it.

"Take away that word dare," he replied to this enemy. "Yes I say take it away. No man in all Umuaro can stand up

and say that I dare not. The woman who will bear the man who will say it has not been born yet." (p.3)

The passage achieves a number of purposes. Firstly, and very early in the novel, we are made aware of "the immensity" of Ezeulu's power by being told of what it consists. Presenting the information in this way, as part of the exposition of Ezeulu's character, avoids the effect of the obvious and rather clumsy "anthropological" passages in Things Fall Apart. Ezeulu's "fatal flaw" is revealed to us, and a hint is given of the tragedy that could occur should he choose to indulge the temptation to test his power. The information is provided not through authorial intervention but through Ezeulu's own self-examination. Because Achebe allows Ezeulu to play out his game, to dare himself and then to respond "stung to anger," he enables us to appreciate that Ezeulu's later exercise of his immense power is nothing to do with custom, nor is it simply a punishment against his people who had done nothing while he was in prison in defiance of the colonial authorities, but that it was also the consummation of that "dare." The second purpose of the passage then is to show the incipient rebellion in Ezeulu's mind against the constraints on his power, and thus to suggest his potential as a tragic figure. Thirdly, Ezeulu's immediate verbal response to his own dare is to assume an enemy from the community who might think him too weak, and in a boastful manner to speak of his contempt for "the enemy." Of course, "the enemy" is the community in Ezeulu's mind, and in his isolation in the prison, his need to demonstrate the community's weakness and his own strength, albeit in the name of Ulu, becomes a resolve. It is tempting to see his boastful speech as indicative of the insecurity that he feels about the reality of the power that he theoretically

possesses. There is some evidence for this. (He wonders, for example, about the value of power "if it could never be used," when he knows already that by its rational exercise it brings him, and Ulu, considerable influence in the community.) However, Ezeulu's boastful speech would hardly be the grounds on which to test out his insecurity, for we see other characters, whose inner life we know little about and about whom similar conjectures would be inappropriate, speak in a like manner. Indeed, examples of dialogue that has a degree of mock-violence and threat are numerous in the novel. Several characters make favourable comparisons of qualities they claim to possess with those to be found in nature, thereby impressing on their listeners their ferocity, patience or wisdom, as the case may be. Most characters are ungenerous in the acts they declare themselves ready to perform on their rivals. On occasions they are impressively inventive about the "abominations" they find their enemies guilty of.

The effect of the violence of the dialogue among the villagers, with its overtones of mock, ritualised contempt, contrasts vividly with the elders' speech, with the ostentatious wisdom of abundant aphorisms and polite conventions. By the violence of the dialogue Achebe hints at the way the community has ritualised aggression for purposes of co-existence. They give vent to the friction that arises out of living such interdependent lives by indulging in mutual excess of verbal violence. What it succeeds in doing for the reader is in creating a community that has an internal coherence, that has its recognisable mores and conventions. This is not done entirely by the dialogue, of course, but what we observe of the interaction between people dramatises the implied contention that Umuaro has a collective integrity, that it is a believable community.

This may seem rather an obvious point, but Achebe seeks to depict an out of the way Igbo village in 1920's, with the handicap that his choice of language forces him to make his villagers speak in English. To have succeeded in making that community believable is something of an achievement. For regardless of the fact that they speak a perfectly correct English, Achebe's villagers are clearly neither English nor self-consciously or "anthropologically" African. The crucial factor is not that Igbo or African communities conduct ordinary conversation with the superfluity of threats and proverbs that we observe in the people of Umuaro. Nor is it that Achebe establishes the integrity of his community with abundant recitation of the minutiae of Umuaro life, to the point where, like victims of "photographic realism," we collapse under the sheer weight of the description. It is that he employs a sustained and coherent dialogue technique that has clear structural purposes. The aggression of the villagers' speech, contrasted with the elders' formality, becomes the means by which we discriminate Umuaro speech from that of the colonial officers, and of the colonial hirelings. In addition, by the degree to which members of the community feel the necessity to readjust their speech we come to know more about their social relationships, and to appreciate the complexity of Achebe's use of them. We see, for example, that the women lower their voices when they speak of matters which are supposed to be the concern of men. We hear their change of tone when they speak to their children, to other wives or to their husbands. To take another example, Ezeulu's response to the news of Obika's flogging by the white man is quite different in his conversation with his sons from his restraint with Akuebue, his friend and "one of the very few men in Umuaro whose words gained entrance into Ezeulu's

ear." (p.93). The mutual respect they have for each other comes over clearly in their conversation, as does the deliberate formality of the elders' speech:

"Drink one horn more," said Edogo,
Akuebue rubbed his mouth with the back of his hand
before replying.

"The only medicine against palm wine is the power to say no." This statement seemed to bring Ezeulu back to the people around him.

"Before you came in," he said to Akuebue, "I was telling that little boy over there that the greatest liar among men still speaks the truth to his own son."

"It is so," said Akuebue. "A man can swear on that most dreaded deity on what his father told him." (p.98)

This rather guarded manner of speaking observes the formal mutual respect of the two friends, but it also serves as a dignified opening to the differences that surface during the conversation. To a certain extent, the formal dignity of the words of the elders succeeds in suggesting the security of their position. They are, after all, drawing on the wisdom of the clan.

On other occasions, when the technique does not quite come off, pomposity overtakes dignity, the frequent use of aphorism making the conversation stiff and rather forced. For example, Akuebue welcomes Ezeulu into his house and asks him to break the kola because his "hands are full." Ezeulu replies:

"A man cannot be too busy to break the first kolanut of the day in his own house ... "

"But this is not the first kolanut of the day. I have broken several already."

"That may be so, but you did not break them in my presence. The time a man wakes up is his morning."

"All right," said Akuebue. "I shall break it if you say so."

"Indeed I say so. We do not apply an ear pick to the eye."

Akuebue took the kolanut in his hand and said: "We shall both live," and broke it.

Two gunshots had sounded in the neighbourhood since Ezeulu came in. Now a third went off.

"What is happening there?" he asked. "Are men leaving the forest now to hunt in the compounds?" (p.111)

This is heavy-handed badinage. It is clearly not meant to be awkward, for no indication has been given yet of the disagreement between Ezeulu and Akuebue over the declaration of the New Yam feast. It is true that Akuebue had spoken his mind to Ezeulu about Obika, saying that he was too hard on the young man. It is also true that Akuebue is busy, and probably preoccupied with preparing his yams. None of this, however, excuses the flatness and the banality of this conversation despite, or perhaps because of, the pompous and unnecessary proverbs.

Apart from bad moments such as these, the technique comes off superbly. It is especially in contrast to the conversation of the European officials, native English speakers, that Achebe's creation of "an English ... able to carry his peculiar experience" can be appreciated. This fragment of a conversation between Clarke and Wright, over a few gins, clearly establishes the difference. The conversation is a little "loaded," in that it is meant to give us some background on Winterbottom, but nevertheless, the ease and the urbanity of speech marks them out as a completely different set of people from the inhabitants of Umuaro. It has to be admitted that their conversations are, on the whole, superficial. No doubt this was partly to indicate the vacuity of the minds of colonial officials, or perhaps it was meant as a blow against the myth of European powers of thought. In any

case, it betrays Achebe's lack of real interest in them except as symbols of the agents of change. It is Wright, the old hand, filling Clarke in on their superior who says:

"... You see during the war, while the poor man was fighting the Germans in the Cameroons some smart fellow walked away with his wife at home."

"Really, I hadn't heard about that."

"Yes. I am told he was very badly shaken by it. I sometimes think it was this personal loss during the war that's made him cling to this ridiculous Captain business."

"Quite possibly. He's the kind of person, isn't he, who would take the desertion of his wife very badly," said Clarke.

"Exactly, a man as inflexible as him can't take a thing like that." (p.103)

The quite marked difference between the superficial linguistic urbanity of the Europeans and the aggressive but more secure and expressive language of the people of Umuaro is seen clearly throughout the novel. An amusing example occurs in the scene in which the villagers pressed into road-building, compelled to make their contribution to "progress," are beginning to get a little restive. Wright is the supervising engineer and he innocently, or perhaps discreetly, fails to notice the incipient rebellion that is stirring in front of him. He gives his orders in English for the translator to transform into something a great deal more expressive. To Wright's order: "No more lateness," the translator improvises: "He says everybody must work hard and stop all this shit-eating." (p.82)

A final example in which we can observe Achebe's use of dialogue to distinguish the community from outsiders, occurs in the scene when the two policemen arrive to arrest Ezeulu:

Meanwhile the policemen arrived at Ezeulu's hut. They were then no longer in the mood for playing. They spoke sharply, baring all their weapons at once.

"Which one of you is called Ezeulu?" asked the corporal.

"Which Ezeulu?" asked Edogo.

"Don't ask me which Ezeulu again or I shall slap okro seeds out of your mouth. I say who is called Ezeulu here?"

"And I say which Ezeulu? Or don't you know who you're looking for?" The four men in the hut said nothing. Women and children thronged the door leading from the hut into the inner compound. There was fear and anxiety on the faces.

"All right," said the corporal in English. "Just now you go sabby which Ezeulu. Gi me dat ting." This last sentence was directed to his companion who immediately produced the handcuffs from his pocket. (p.152)

The narrative, as throughout most of the novel, is direct. The dialogue, as we have seen, is aggressive and understandably hostile on this occasion. But it is in the policeman's retreat to pidgin English, as confirmation of the power that invests him with authority, that Achebe's use of dialogue to indicate social relationships is seen at its best. What to us appears like clowning on the part of the policeman is intended to appear impressive. The people of Umuaro knew that the policeman did not only have a smattering of the white man's tongue but he also had "the most deadly of the white man's weapons," the handcuffs. They give what is required of them.

It is by such adjustments of the language that Chinua Achebe is able to make Arrow of God such a complex achievement. The cultural differences between the Africans and the Europeans, and within Umuaro itself, are shown a great deal less obtrusively in the dialogue than they were presented in Things Fall Apart, in which more often than not they were explained in the narrative. The variety

of language styles that Achebe uses, for the English, their hirelings, and most of all, the people of Umuaro, all come off. They carry with them a series of implications only a few of which it has been possible to discuss here. Indeed rather than the use of English precipitating Achebe into an unconscious cultural bondage, it allows him the chance to show how a language can be versatile in the hands of an accomplished craftsman.

Another novel that attempts an adaptation of English forms for African requirements is Gabriel Okara's The Voice.²² Okara's is a bold, and on the face of it, a more profound linguistic experiment than Arrow of God. Okara attempts to use English in such a way that it draws on the linguistic characteristics of his own Ijaw language. This seems to be the general critical opinion, and it is backed up by the novelist himself:

As a writer who believes in the utilisation of African ideas, African philosophy and African folk-lore and imagery to the fullest extent possible, I am of the opinion the only way to use them effectively is to translate them almost literally from the African language native to the writer into whatever European language he is using as his medium of expression. For, from a word, a group of words, a sentence or even a name in any African language, one can glean the social norms, attitudes and values of a people.²³

The sentiment expressed in the last sentence above is, to say the least, questionable. The responses of some of the critics discussed in the previous chapter would seem to suggest that it is quite possible to "glean" the wrong information about "a people," if the critical activity is not accompanied by sympathy and knowledge. The phrase "in any African language" implies a confidence in the ability

of Africans to understand each other's "attitudes and values" from an acquaintance with "a word, a group of words, a sentence and even a name." This confidence derives from the unspoken assumption that the common factors between African cultures are substantial enough to allow this cross-cultural gleaning. It is unlikely that this confidence would be borne out by the reality. If, on the other hand, the implication of Okara's sentence is that even in a few words, a sympathetic reader can understand something of another culture, then we need make no great fuss, so long as the understanding to be gained in this manner is not expected to achieve ambitious proportions, and is not expected to function independently of more substantial knowledge of that culture. Is Okara's use of the phrase "in any African language," therefore, only necessary to establish the context of his claim, or is it to distinguish the response of the reader to an African language as opposed to any other kind of language? Would we not resist a similar claim made by a European writer about European cultures, or at least seek to limit its scope? What could one possibly "glean" about the Ijaw, for example, if one were to come "cold" to The Voice, that would not stand a good chance of being mistaken? So it is right that we should question the ability of "vernacular expressions" to provide us with reliable and significant gleanings of "social norms, attitudes and values of a people," unless our response to these expressions is placed in context by our knowledge of the culture. It may be argued that this is what Okara meant, and that therefore these suspicions are making heavy weather of an acceptable argument, albeit sparsely expressed. To argue thus is to ignore the smugness of the position that language can provide reliable insights into a culture by the manipulation of stylistic

devices without requiring knowledge of the context in which the linguistic experience occurs, or equally arguably, by assuming that that knowledge exists in the nature of being African or of being human. In addition, there is a rational and linguistic confusion in the assumption that "the only way " of using "African ideas, African philosophy and African folk-lore and imagery" in literature is by a literal translation from the African to the European language which happens to be the writer's "medium of expression." Firstly, the assumption that cultures are conveyable in this sense is naive. It is to take the cultural relativist argument to an absurd degree of optimism. It is to assume that cultures are adequately self-sufficient to be self-revealing in any context. Secondly, the assumption minimises the distorting effect of the cultural prism which a cross-cultural linguistic experience entails. This is where knowledge would allow one to calculate the necessary adjustments that take account of the potential for cultural distortion. For a translator, especially, this would be a primary consideration. Thirdly, the assumption suggests an insensitivity to language, in the sense in which it can convey nuances and subtleties that are understandable fully only within the historical and cultural experience of which language is a manifestation. Thus, Okara's description of the most effective use that an African writer writing in a European language can put his culture raises far more questions than it answers.

The idea that "translation," both of the kind that Okara describes or a less radical form of it, could be a viable method of enabling the African writer to use a European language and still escape the demoralising implications of the choice has had only little support among writers and commentators on the literature.

There are some outstanding examples of what Izevbaye calls "creative translation."²⁴ There are, for example, Birago Diop's translations of Wolof folk literature into French, Soyinka's translation of Fagunwa's Ogboju Ode Ninu Igbo Irunmale, Okot p'Bitek's translation of his own poem, Ngugi's novel The Devil on the Cross, written while he was in prison, first in Kikuyu and later translated into English. There may well be a number of other, similar attempts at "creative translations" which are not well known because there is little critical interest in them. In most cases translation may be an attempt to expose the literature of say, the Yoruba or the Wolof to a wider public. In the case of Ngugi, the method is also an attempt to give the literature back to the community. This may well become more influential as a way of overcoming the barrier that European languages present. Certainly in East Africa publishers are taking the matter seriously. The East African Publishing House, Oxford University Press and Heinemann have all produced both translations of well-known African novels as well as original novels in Kiswahili. The governments and educational bodies have responded by creating literary prizes specifically aimed at encouraging writing in Kiswahili: Mashindano ya Afrika Mashariki and Kenyatta Prize for Literature being perhaps the most prestigious. The result has been a gratifying emergence of talented young writers, in particular, Mohammed Suleiman Mohammed from Kisiwa cha Unguja (Zanzibar), whose first two novels Kiu (OUP 1970) and Nyota ya Rehema (OUP 1976) have caused some excitement. East Africa is fortunate in being able to agree on Kiswahili as a common language for the region, even though originally it was only the language of the coast. In West Africa, and especially in Nigeria, such a straight forward solution as the encouragement of the language of

the community is not possible, for the present, in any case. With its large and clearly differentiated ethnic groups, any attempt to encourage, let alone impose, the use of the language of one of the groups over and above all of the others would have far-reaching political consequences and would certainly fail. Despite this, the viability of translation as a means of reaching the people, or of reaching across the various cultures, has not been seriously exploited. English provides a ready and flexible lingua franca, which at the same time avoids the complications of writing in Hausa, Igbo, Tiv or Yoruba.

Furthermore, the problem of "reaching out to one's own people" is complicated by the fact that the "people" may not be able to read. This need not apply to drama, as Yoruba folk drama and Ngugi's Ngaahika Ndeenda demonstrate. However, writing in an African language is a fairly sure way of receiving little or no critical attention, as apart from the occasional honourable mention, (as the example of Mohammed Suleiman Mohammed above demonstrates).

With rising literacy the problem of readership will diminish to some extent, and it waits to be seen whether this will result in the supplanting of African literature in European languages by African languages literature. That would seem to be likely in the long-term. Perhaps this will lead to the development of bilingual writing, as in the case of Okot p'Bitek and Ngugi, at least as an interim stage. The European precedent, however, where national languages gradually but determinedly supplanted Latin as the literary and academic language, suggests that in the long-term African languages will always have the stronger case to make over European languages.

For the moment, writers cannot be expected to take such speculations as reliable prophecies, and wait for posterity to vindicate their choice of African languages. Their appeal is to an international or at least a continental audience rather than a national or ethnic one. However it is clear in the case of the few examples discussed earlier that several writers are uncomfortable in the position they find themselves. We saw how Achebe described the use of English as a language of expression by an African writer as a "betrayal." We saw also Okara's attempt to describe a means of writing a more African literature while still employing English as "the medium of expression."

Okara's comments were made in 1963, his novel The Voice appeared in 1964, and it would seem likely that these comments were made while he was working on the novel, or soon after he had finished doing so. Whether the novel constitutes a literal translation from Ijaw is not the most crucial factor about it. Some critics tend to play down the "translation" aspect of the novel and to consider Okara's linguistic experimentation as an innovative literary device which has some links with Ijaw speech rhythms. Arthur Ravenscroft in his introduction to the Heinemann edition of the novel emphasises the metaphorical structure of the novel, and its "experimental" use of language, and, obviously, deliberately ignores Okara's indirect claim to have captured the Ijaw speech rhythms by literal translation. The word "Ijaw" only occurs four times in 24 pages of discussion, and in two cases, in descriptive rather than analytical contexts. Eustace Palmer in his book An Introduction to the African Novel (1972), glosses over the "translation" aspects of the novel, although he does claim, a little too confidently one feels, that "the strange linguistic

rhythms and the indeterminate setting are reminiscent of ancient myths."²⁵ His main interest in the discussion of the novel, however, is to show that "the mainspring of Okolo's actions in this novel are religious and moral, rather than social, technological or political." (p.155). Both Ravenscroft and Palmer emphasise the "universal" dimension of the novel. Ravenscroft remarks:

[The Voice] is clearly a political parable that applies equally to the political state of the Federation of Nigeria in the early 1960's ... as to any political situation in any country where government is incompetent and corrupt. (p.10)

and Palmer, along broadly similar lines, although by a different route, suggests:

Okara blames the disintegration of modern African society on spiritual sterility and materialism, and uses age-old myths to relate a local, African situation to the universal one. (p.156)

It is not entirely clear what "age-old myths" are being discussed here, except perhaps "the circular passage of the hero through a series of adventures involving a departure, initiation and return," (p.157) and this is not really enough to make Palmer's claim plain.

Ravenscroft pays some attention to the language of the novel, commenting on "the precision of thought and feeling which a careful use of language produces." (p.13). He argues that the attempt to understand the significance of things requires that the community "examine the ways in which they and their fellows talk about their lives." (p.14). In other words, part of Okolo's role in the "parable" is to dramatise the morality that exists in the use of language, in its purity and potency, and to dramatise the decline of the community by demonstrating its inattention to language and meaning. Thus, Okolo's

search for "it," by its indefiniteness, both allows a generous interpretation of "the meaning of life," as well as demonstrating that the community cannot understand the significance of "it" because they do not have the linguistic integrity that would enable them to ask the questions that would take them to "it."

One of the most notable features of Okara's The Voice is its language style. It is immediately arresting, both because it uses an unusual syntax and because it names concepts in a way different from ordinary English usage. This scene, for example, takes place early in the novel, as the community's messengers are on their way to Okolo to tell him "to cease forthwith his search for it." The first messenger expresses some sympathy with Okolo's position, begins to quote Tennyson's famous lines "the old order changeth," and is warned off by the other messengers lest he should jeopardise their jobs:

"Talk not like this, hold yourself. I tell you, yourself hold before this thing a big thing turns."

These teaching words their ears entered and their insides entered. So they locked every word carefully in their insides as they silently walked towards Okolo's house without their mouths opening. (p.26)

The inverted syntax of "yourself hold before this thing a big thing turns" does add a poetic dimension to what would have been a very simple statement. This occurs throughout the novel, though not always with the same degree of success. The inversion does on occasion add a surprising dimension to a simple image. "Okolo this man's spoken words stirred in his inside," suggests a more comprehensive response to the man's words than "He thought about what the man had said" would have done. Okolo's response implies an activity that is both rational and involving the whole person. Okara's sentence has extended

reflection into something more subtle than "thinking." On other occasions, the syntax gets to be unnecessarily complicated and clumsy, when very little appears to have been gained by the change. When Okolo is in the canoe, for example, and the storm comes suddenly upon them on the river, the woman who had "forty to fifty years killed" prays to Benikurukuru, the deity, in this way: "Will you in the river take me? A sign show." (p.62). Later in the same scene, when the woman discovers that her prospective daughter-in-law had snuggled up to Okolo, and had divested herself of her blouse in order not to make Okolo cold - are we really meant to see no sexual motives in this? - she assaults the girl in this manner: "Did he anything to you do?" she the girl asked. "Did he no part of your body touch?" It is hard to see what is gained by the inversion here. These may seem trivial examples, but their effect is cumulative, so the inverted syntax begins to take on an irritating resemblance to an affectation. This is not to deny that there moments when the inversions are effective. Perhaps a very good example can be seen in Okolo's denial of any sexual designs on the girl he had sheltered under his raincoat:

"You cannot a thing I have done not put on my head."
Thus strongly Okolo spoke. "How can you on my head put a thing that happened not? It is true I have spoken not to anyone since the canoe I entered. That was because my inside if filled with forcing thoughts up to my throat I dare speak not.... (p.67)

The emphasis of Okolo's defence is denial, and the syntactical inversion of the negatives suggests and justifies the description that Okara gives this speech: "Thus strongly Okolo spoke." It is the negatives that stand out in the speech, and give the denial its force. The inversions, however, do not always carry such force, and

cumulatively create a syntactical clumsiness which comes to get in the way of this reader's engagement with the novel's imagination.

The other notable linguistic feature of Okara's novel is the way in which concepts are named. A sentence that occurs in the second paragraph of the novel gives an early example: "[Okolo] was in search of it with all his inside and with all his shadow." (p.23). The meaning, or what is suggested by "shadow," has already been implied in an earlier sentence in the paragraph: "His chest was not strong and he had no shadow." (p.23). "Shadow" would seem to suggest an inner strength, a determination, a moral "presence," perhaps more. It, as Arthur Ravenscroft has argued, is revealed by "cumulative suggestion," so that as we read on, its meaning becomes clearer, without entirely removing the ambiguity of the concept or the manner in which it can be achieved. Okolo makes it fairly clear what the search for it means to him:

Spoken words are living things like cocoa-beans packed with life. And like the cocoa-beans they grow and give life. So Okolo turned in his inside and saw that his spoken words will not die. They will enter some insides, remain there and grow like the corn blooming on the alluvial soil at the river side. Is his meaning of life then to plan [sic] it in people's insides by asking if they've got it ... ? (pp.110-11)

By asking the question Okolo realises "the meaning of life," and this in itself is an aspect of it. For the meaning of it appears not to be abstract knowledge but a sense of integrity in the individual's relationship with others. To maintain the ambiguity of the concept is to allow its realisation by manifold means, as varied as the individual's perception of his "meaning of life." Thus, another aspect of it becomes clear as we follow Okolo's thought: "Each man to one meaning of life;

each woman to one meaning of life. Each one has his meaning of life." (p.111). To look for it, then, is also to allow for the integrity of each other's search for significance.

The use of "inside" is a little more problematic. It is clear that Okara is attempting to get away from what Ravenscroft calls "the emotional and intellectual associations" of words like "spirit" and "soul" in English. Ravenscroft remarks on the frequency with which Okara uses the words "inside" and "shadow" to impress upon the reader the propriety of their substitution for "spirit" and "soul" in this context:

... Okara uses "inside" and "shadow" very frequently, so as to establish as soon as possible a new set of reactions to them in the English reader, while speakers of most African languages will gather the "soul" or "spirit" connotations of the words immediately.²⁶

Okara appears to be using the word "inside" to connote not only "spirit" and "soul" but the whole internal life of man, conscious or unconscious, intellectual and emotional. Thus Okolo had "no fear in his inside" (p.41). At times he "talked to his inside," (p.63) and other people's words "stirred in his inside." (p.60). After Okolo's departure from Amatu, Izongo's "inside was sweeter than sweetness and he was with the spirit of kindness possessed." (p.71). Okolo hears "voices" in his "inside" (p.109). He smiles in his "inside" at the thought that he could be among people and not "touch anybody's body," for by now he has learnt that it is not possible "for your inside not to touch another inside, for good or bad." (p.110). Okara blurs the edges between these states, these responses, by naming them with one term. This is possibly to indicate their integration in the stable

man. It might be questioned whether the differentiation of the elements of man's inner life is an essential discrimination, or is any more valuable than Okara's depiction of that life under an inclusive term as "inside." This seems fair, and is a useful means of observing some of the subtleties of Okara's use of the word, at least in the case of Abadi, the Western-educated elder. Abadi defends his dissension within the council in this way:

"As I sit here with my mouth closed does not mean that I have not a strong inside or that what our leader has said does not enter my inside. A whiteman's parable says, 'Look before you leap,' and I was only looking into my inside to see how the problem is...." (p.124)

In the first sentence the word is used twice, in each case to mean different kinds of responses. In the first case the word seems to mean "will" or "courage" to speak one's mind, whereas in the second it seems to mean simply "sympathetic agreement." The manner in which Abadi perceives these responses is designated differently — he has "a strong inside" but Izongo's words "enter" his "inside." In the second sentence he "looks" into his "inside," when he is thinking over what has been said. In other words, the manner in which these responses are designated gives very broad hints of how the word is being used in each case. It might be argued that this differentiation points to Abadi's loss of that sense of integration that Okolo possesses, that the differentiation here carries a symbolic charge and is contrasted with Okolo's undifferentiated use of "inside" to describe his inner life. Okolo talks, listens and "smiles" in his "inside," Abadi enters and "looks" into his "inside," a different and more fragmented consciousness.

An example which demonstrates an effective use of "inside" to indicate an integrated consciousness occurs when Okolo has been offered sanctuary by Tuere, the outcast "witch." Okolo reflects on how the town had driven her out and how he had done nothing:

His inside then smelled bad for the town's people, and for himself for not being fit to do anything on her behalf. But this feeling in his inside had slowly, slowly died with each dying year under the mysterious might of tradition. (p.31)

The evil-smelling "inside" here seems to stand for a feeling like shame or possibly guilt, but it is more than that, for it suggests a greater contamination than shame or guilt would. It is the very sense of being a person that is corrupted by the memory of the injustices the town had inflicted on Tuere.

However, because of its frequent and relatively undifferentiated use, the word "inside" denies the reader the possibility of understanding the characters' responses to a finer degree. One is forced into crude symbolic approximations, more often than not. In the end, the too-frequent use of "inside," has the effect of suggesting a lack of imaginative discrimination, and of blurring the finer responses of the characters.

If the undifferentiated use of certain words to rename concepts creates problems, another problem is posed by the deliberate self-consciousness of the involved and inverted syntax. We have seen that this stylistic feature can add to the meaning of the words by altering the emphasis, but the technique is not uniformly successful. At times the narrative struggles with its own syntactical clumsiness and fails to gather any real pace. It is especially in dialogue that the deliberateness of the speech rhythms becomes most noticeable.

It would take too long to quote scenes of dialogue to demonstrate this conclusively. Two examples will have to suffice. On an errand to the Elders from Izongo, two messengers are discussing the money that they had been given as reward for their contribution to Okolo's banishment:

"On this cold cold ground we have been walking. Your money, what did you take to do?"

"Nothing I did with the money."

"Nothing, why?"

"It is bad money. Bad money never brings good to anyone."

"They are buying engine canoes with the money. Is that not good? My feet are not empty and this cold cold ground does not touch my feet anymore. Is that not good? Your money, what did you take to do?"

"Nothing I take to do."

"You are keeping it?"

"I do not know what I should take the money to do." (p.92)

Regardless of whether this is translation from Ijaw, or whether the syntax is meant to suggest "ancient myths," as Palmer would have it, as dialogue this is stiff and tedious. In this instance, there is no clear gain from this syntactical heavy-handedness. There are other examples of dialogue that similarly lack the pace of speech. In a crucial scene, Tuere facing the crowd outside her hut and refusing to give up Okolo, the dramatic impact is substantially undermined by Tuere's pseudo-oracular speech. It may be argued that Tuere's function in the novel is as a cross between the town's conscience and an avenging fury, and that her heroic speech in this scene advances her heroic role. This is fair, to some extent, but her language has a tendency to inelasticity and this prevents a full realisation of this role. The following quotation, which includes Tuere's long speech,

"scourging" the villagers for their hypocrisy and giving vent to her bitterness, will demonstrate some of the difficulties. The crowd surges irresolutely in front of Tuere's hut, held back by her reputation as a "witch." Seitu, the Christian, blusters his lack of fear of Tuere's supposed witchcraft, and it is he who urges the crowd to stand and not retreat before her. He defies her in this way:

"You can nothing do," said Seitu from the crowd's back.

"I say argue not with her," said the one who said this before. "Our time is finishing."

"I see ... You know time finishes. Yet when my father's time finished and he went away, you people put it on my head. And when the time of my mother finished and she went away, you said I killed her with witchcraft. Whose time finishes not? Whose time finishes not? Our time is finishing just as the time of some of your relations, your fathers and mothers finished and they went to the land of the dead. You did not kill them with witchcraft. But it is I who with witchcraft killed my father and my mother. Yes, you say I am a witch and so I am a witch be." The standing shadow with all her inside spoke and watched their reaction as a school mistress would the reaction of her pupils after delivering a few homilies. The crowd moved backwards and forwards, not knowing what to do. (p.31)

This does not strike one as the kind of speech that would make a riotous crowd halt in its tracks, although the ending might succeed in making the townsmen uncomfortable with the part they played in Tuere's condemnation as a witch. Once again, there are parts that work — "you say I am a witch and so I am a witch be" emphasises the injustice of her treatment. The movement from "say" and "be," in other words, suggesting that Tuere had been accused and condemned on the strength of the accusation, and not from any real evidence. For

most of the speech, the language seems too clumsy to hold the tension of the scene. The comment that follows the speech only further undermines it. Tuere, the injured and heroic woman, giving sanctuary to the idealist Okolo, defying a murderous mob, defying the absolute authority of Izongo in order to protect Okolo, stands "as a school mistress ... after delivering a few homilies." To say the least, the simile is a poor one.

Ultimately the novel does not quite work. It is the clumsiness of the language that is the main weakness. The simple "parable," as Arthur Ravenscroft calls it, that forms the narrative bones of the novel cannot make up for the failure of the language. Ezekiel Mphahlele, who disliked the novel, found the language too "strenuous."²⁷ Emmanuel Obiechina, who was also unimpressed, described it as "heavy-footed."²⁸ Wole Soyinka, with obvious relish, announced his dissatisfaction with the novel in the following way:

... Okolo is the questing hero of Gabriel Okara's The Voice, whose self-conscious language is the device of the narcissist, a subterfuge within which the hero can contemplate his creator's navel while remaining himself impenetrable in the barrier of contrived language.... Okolo has lost himself in animism of nothingness, the ultimate self-delusion of the narcissist.²⁹

Soyinka is right about the language not working, but he is too harsh and he is mistaken in seeing the fault as Okara's narcissism. Certainly to see Okolo as "lost ... in an animism of nothingness," is to ignore his deliberate and self-conscious search for significance, and to refuse to grant this search any integrity. Soyinka's hostility may, in part, be due to an irritation with the response of some critics to the experimentation of the novel, that is, that through the "medium" of English, Okara was able to take his readers nearer the "essence" of

what it is to be African. Lewis Nkosi expressed his dislike of the novel with a venom similar to Soyinka's, saying: "The Voice repels me with its contrived air of prophecy and portentousness."³⁰

If Arrow of God made successful "adaptations" of narrative style and dialogue to represent the difference between Igbo and native English speech, The Voice, attempting a more profound "adaptation," did not quite come off. What it has achieved is to demonstrate that the kind of "literal translation" of "African ideas, African philosophy and African folk-lore and imagery" that Okara had in mind as their most effective "utilisation" in literature, will have to overcome the problems that The Voice failed to come to terms with. The more recent attempts by Ayi Kwei Armah to develop a distinctively African voice while writing in English have avoided the "translation" technique altogether.

In Two Thousand Seasons, a novel that aroused controversy for its alleged racialism, Armah adopts a bold departure from his former style. At the back of this stylistic departure is a shift in emphasis from the suffering and aspirations of the individual to those of the community. In the earlier novels, Armah had allowed the individual to dramatise the injustices of the corrupt community. In the later novel, it is the communal voice that we hear, and this in a literal sense, because the narrator adopts a plural voice:

We came away from the desert's edge thinking we were escaping the causes of our disintegration. The causes running deepest were twin: among us had arisen 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 the pushing down of all of us.³¹

The theme of corruption and self-seekers is the same as in The Beautiful Ones and Fragments, Koomson and H.R.H. Brempong replaced by the "ostentatious cripples." But now it is they who suffer the condemnation of the community and not the individual who is too sensitive to the moral issues to join in the corruption. The critique has also become much more definite. It separates the workers, "the producers," from the parasitic rulers. It is the rulers, presumably kings and chiefs who had acquired their position through heredity or intrigue, who are undermining the unity of the community, to satisfy individual, selfish ends. The use of the plural narrator allows Armah to identify the needs of the individual member of the community with those of the group as a whole. "The ostentatious cripples," therefore, receive even less sympathy than Koomson and Brempong. "The man" and Baako were questioning their own positions, and therefore their view of the corruption was analytical, informed and at times tolerant. In other words, the depiction of "the man's" and Baako's responses is a complex one. In Two Thousand Seasons, the plural narrator does not question the ends of the community, or its means. The effect is to simplify the complexity of human inter-relationships, and to simplify human history into victims and "destroyers."

The community in Two Thousand Seasons is represented by the voice of the plural narrator, and the plural narrator is given an authoritative voice. Clearly we are meant to take the community at its word. This creates problems, for the narrator's voice is long-winded and intolerant, *concerned* only with its threatened survival. Through the narrator, the community sees itself as justified to undertake

unspeakable cruelties against those it seeks to fling out for being anti-social forces. The narrator entertains no doubts about the community's ability to condemn what is bad and praise what is good, without showing any concern as to how this absolutism affects the nature of the "good" and the "bad." The technique assumes, in other words, that there is unanimity on what constitutes right and wrong, what constitutes "the way."

The plural narrator also allows Armah to use a distinctive "epic" style which would have been totally inappropriate for the exploration of the individual psyche. Dan Izevbaye, in his essay "Ayi Kwei Armah and the 'I' of the Beholder," describes the style in the following way:

In this work Armah develops what promises to be one of the major literary styles in Africa.... The writing is not merely oral but oracular. Its imagery shows a preference for that which is fundamental and unchanging. The poetic effect of the prose is sustained without verbal inflation and dead metaphor.³²

While the oracular nature of the writing and the concreteness of imagery are borne out to some extent by reference to the novel, the claim that Armah achieves "a poetic effect ... without verbal inflation" is less credible. It is this very "inflation" which alerts us, from the very beginning, to the attempt at a mythic and epic effect of the cultural and racial history that Armah chooses to make of this novel. It is likely that Armah's "historical" intentions forced the style on him. The necessity to represent a people without disillusion, and not simply as a result of self-delusion, and to depict their heroic struggle to rediscover "the way," required that the narrator should have the broad vision and the indestructible faith of prophets and oracles. Furthermore, in order to encompass "Africa"

in his community, and in order to avoid having to invent and retail customs as opposed to describing a developing tradition with ancient historical roots, he had to adopt a suitably vague, visionary voice. He mixes experiences and names from various parts of black Africa to create an African community, and fires its zeal with suitably inflated rhetoric.

The first chapter, which is called "The Way," is meant to introduce the basic precepts of the black community, what it stands for and against. "The white road," which represents the way of the Arabs and the Europeans, "the predators" and "the destroyers" respectively, is the way of "unconnectedness," a blind individual hedonism and rapacity. The way of "reciprocity," "the cycle of regeneration" and other life-enhancing tendencies represent the way of the blacks. The equation is crude and ultimately quite unpleasant. The cruel relish with which the torture and mutilation of the Arabs and the Europeans is described goes beyond any formal needs of the novel, and spills over into quite specific and inexcusable racialism. The detail with which the varieties of punishments and sexual degradations that the Africans, the Arabs and the Europeans are made to undergo, doubtless have their justification, along the lines that the reality of foreign experience in Africa was brutal. But the racial pigeon-holing and the gratuitous sadism — can sadism ever be anything but gratuitous? — makes Two Thousand Seasons a rather unpleasant novel.

The use of the plural narrator allows no one to be held responsible for the inhumanity of these acts. Indeed, the horror of the acts is not even allowed to register on the narrator, the technique being to depict these acts of mutual barbarity as necessary

for safeguarding a sane, humane way of life. The plural narrator relieves individuals from bearing responsibility for their actions. At the same time we are distanced from an appreciation of what it would feel like to be in the position that is being described. Thus the reader too is deprived the chance of judging the morality of these acts within the structure of the novel. He has to step back unsympathetically in order to do so. The effect of this distance is a degree of disengagement. The "poetic effect" and the "oracular" tone seem in the end to be pompous and long-winded. The stirring acts of resistance and bravery that the group engage in in the end are ponderously predictable. Coupled with the moral one-sidedness of the whole novel, this stylistic distance makes Two Thousand Seasons a very unsatisfying novel.

As a new departure for the African writer writing in English, Two Thousand Seasons is hardly a success. Where The Voice aimed for the "essence" of "African ideas, African philosophy and African folk-lore and imagery" through translation from an African language, Armah attempts to chart the psychic history of the black African through a suitably solemn style:

For these first white men from the sea, like other white destroyers of our remembrance they too said they were searching for a hospitable place, they too said they were searching for a home.

That in the fullness of our continuing generosity we again laughed at the new ostentatious cripples and treated them like children needing to be humoured, that was another sign of the distance we had strayed from the way. In the unfolding of our destruction the presence of these ostentatious cripples has had a most terrifying effect. (p.96)

Dan Izevbaye may well be right in seeing Armah's stylistic experiments in Two Thousand Seasons as the discovery of a lasting technique in African literature, but it is unlikely. It is not easy to see how the laboured pomposity of this novel can be seen to be an improvement on Armah's own The Beautiful Ones and Fragments, let alone the equally accomplished novels of Achebe and Soyinka. Achebe's Arrow of God has coped better with the need to fashion an English that will carry the "peculiar experience" of an African writer writing in a European language, more effectively than Okara's The Voice or Armah's Two Thousand Seasons. The latter two are bolder, more profound experiments in style and technique, but both fail to come to terms with the problems raised by their chosen techniques. Arrow of God, on the other hand, is a comprehensive success, both in its use of language and in achieving the depth and complexity of the world it seeks to depict.

The success of novels like Arrow of God, Armah's early novels, and Soyinka's The Interpreters does not necessarily nullify the very powerful arguments discussed earlier against the use of English in African literature. What they do is indicate that it is possible to use English in a way that is recognisably different, without having either to absorb all the Western conventions and prejudices, or getting involved in ostentatious linguistic experiments that seek too strenuously to utter the "authentic" voice. For the rest, whether African writers will continue to find it "practical" to use English and French on a continental basis, or whether Africans would prefer to read their writers in these languages or in their own languages, it is as yet impossible to say. Perhaps a continental literature will survive alongside national ones, or perhaps national ones will never properly have a chance to develop. Conversely, perhaps

literatures in African languages will, within a decade or two, oust the Francophone and Anglophone varieties entirely.

Increasing literacy will create its own reading demands. The responses of the writers to the developing linguistic confidence in East Africa would seem to indicate the viability of Kiswahili and English literatures co-existing for a while, with translation eventually replacing original writing in English by East Africans. It is not only a "creative block" that has prevented the emergence of Tanzanian writers in English on the "African literature" scene, but an active communal conviction in the potential of Kiswahili. Kenya's most famous writer is Ngugi wa Thiongo, Tanzania's most famous writer is Shaaban Robert, the former writing mainly in English, the latter in Kiswahili. Perhaps, as in the case of Ngugi, writers will become bilingual, translating their own work into either an African or European language. One would have thought that this would only be true of a limited number of writers, for facility in one language need not imply an equal skill in another. It seems fairly clear, however, that translation offers the most likely first step out of the dependence on European languages. For the dependence on European languages, as we have seen, creates very difficult problems, inaccessibility to a large proportion of Africans, the cultural subordination to the West that it implies, the insidious socialisation that unavoidably goes with accepting a foreign language to the extent that it becomes a national language or a language of a literature. On the other hand, those who argue that for "practical" reasons there is no alternative, are in a strong position. One would only suggest that the possibilities of translation be considered more seriously than they have been done. It is odd that African novels are translated

into Italian, Danish, Japanese but not into African languages. Obviously, there is a larger reading public in Italy than, say, among Makonde speakers, and it is fair enough that publishers should be reluctant to sink their money into such worthy but quite unprofitable activity. In any case, African critics themselves have shown almost no interest in this possibility. It seems possible that increasing literacy will create the pressures that will force them to do so. For the moment, the most that the critic can do is to continue to comment on the literature as it grows and hope to influence its shape in this way rather than in demanding radical linguistic about-turns that the writers neither want nor are able to cope with.

Notes

¹ Caribbean writers, of course, have no such choice. It is a constant reminder of their cultural dispossession that they have lost this choice. A number of Caribbean writers, including George Lamming, V.S. Naipaul and Derek Walcott, have explored the implications of this loss and the resulting dependence of Caribbean culture on the West. It seems necessary to mention this because some critics have allowed themselves to imagine that the problems of the use of language that face the Caribbean writer are the same as those that face the African writer.

² L.S. Senghor, Liberté 1 : Négritude et Humanisme (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1964), p.225; p.399.

³ Chinua Achebe, "The African Writer and the English Language," Morning Yet on Creation Day (London: Heinemann, 1975), p.57. Further reference to this essay will be to "The African Writer".

⁴ Obiajunwa Wali, "The Dead-End of African Literature?" Transition No. 10 (Sept. 1963), p.14.

⁵ Juliet Okonkwo, "African Literature and Its Language of Expression," Africa Quarterly, XV, 4 (1975), pp.56-66.

⁶ Franz Fanon, Black Skin White Masks, Trans. C.L. Markmann (London: Paladin, 1970), p.18.

⁷ Chinua Achebe, "The African Writer," p.62.

⁸ Eldred Jones, "Nationalism and the Writer," Commonwealth Literature: Unity and Diversity in a Common Culture, ed. John Press (London: Heinemann, 1965), p.153

⁹ Franz Fanon, pp.17-18.

¹⁰ Chinua Achebe, "The African Writer," p.62

¹¹ Ezekiel Mphahlele (ed.), Modern African Stories (London: Faber, 1964), p.12.

¹² Ezekiel Mphahlele, Letter in Transition No.11 (Nov. 1963), p.8.

¹³ Examples of such novels might be Nzekwu's Wand of Noble Wood (1961), Flora Nwapa's Efuru (1966) and Nkem Nwankwo's Danda (1964).

¹⁴ The examples of Joseph Conrad and Nabokov, for both of whom English was not an "original" language, suggest one possible line of rebuttal to Wali's argument here.

¹⁵ Chinua Achebe, "The Role of the Writer in a New Nation," Nigeria Magazine, No.81 (June 1964), p.16.

- ¹⁶ Chinua Achebe, "The African Writer," p.61.
- ¹⁷ Obiajunwa Wali, A reply to Mphahlele in Transition No.12 (Jan.-Feb.1964),p.7.
- ¹⁸ Abiola Irele, Review, Journal of Modern African Studies, 2,3 (1964), p.468.
- ¹⁹ Chinweizu, "Prodigals, Come Home!" Okike 4 (Dec.1973), pp.1-12.
- ²⁰ Christopher Okigbo, An Interview with Robert Serumaga for Cultural Events in Africa, No.8 (July 1965),p.41.
- ²¹ Chinua Achebe, Arrow of God (London: Heinemann, 1964; Revised edition 1974), p.13. All further page references will be to the revised Heinemann edition.
- ²² Gabriel Okara, The Voice (London: Heinemann, 1970). First published in London by Andre Deutsch, 1964. All page references will be to the Heinemann edition.
- ²³ Gabriel Okara, "African Speech ... English Words," Transition No.10 (Sept.1963), p.15.
- ²⁴ Dan Izevbaye, "Criticism and Literature in Africa," Perspectives on African Literature, ed. Christopher Heywood (London: Heinemann, 1971), pp.25-30.
- ²⁵ Eustace Palmer, An Introduction to the African Novel (London: Heinemann, 1972),p.156.
- ²⁶ Arthur Ravenscroft, "Introduction" to The Voice by Gabriel Okara (London: Heinemann, 1970), p.16.
- ²⁷ Ezekiel Mphahlele, "The Language of African Literature," ed. Janet A. Ewig, James T. Fleming and Helen M. Pipp (New York: Harcourt, 1967), p.51

²⁸ Emmanuel Obiechina, "Darkness and Light," Nigeria Magazine, No.84 (March 1965), p.62.

²⁹ Wole Soyinka, "And After the Narcissist," Africa Forum, I, 4 (Spring 1966), p.62.

³⁰ Lewis Nkosi, "Where Does African Literature Go From Here?" Africa Report, XI, 9 (Dec.1966), p.8.

³¹ Ayi Kwei Armah, Two Thousand Seasons (Nairobi: EAPH, 1973), p.92. Further references will be to this edition.

³² Dan Izevbaye, "Ayi Kwei Armah and the 'I' of the Beholder," A Celebration of Black Writing, ed. Kolawole Ogungbesan and Bruce King (Zaria and Ibadan: Ahmadu Bello University Press and Oxford University Press, 1975), p.242.

VI

The Critic

For good or ill, what is described as "African Literature" is most usually taken to mean African writing in "world languages," mainly English and French. Where another kind of African literature is referred to, it is specified further, for example, Kiswahili literature, Yoruba literature, oral literature of the Xung! Bushmen, etc.. The issues that we have discussed so far are mainly to do with "African Literature," that is, African writing in English, and some translations from French into English. This use and understanding of the term can be sociologically and historically explained by the facts of colonialism and Western education, both of which allowed "Africa" to achieve a degree of cultural homogeneity, at least among the constantly expanding "elite," which was impossible before. The use of English and French became the means of communication, and therefore, to some extent, a unifying force. However, this use of European languages created its own problems, some of which were discussed in the previous chapter. It also created for "African Literature" a far-flung readership, in Europe, America, India, Australia and in other places where English or French were spoken, and where the interest in Africa could be satisfied and stimulated by reading its literature. European languages thus brought about a widely-scattered following for "African Literature," and also allowed non-Africans to participate in the discussion of the literature from a very early stage. Indeed, it would be true to say

that a great many of the early critics of "African Literature" were themselves not Africans. One of the most influential early comments on négritude, for example, has been Sartre's Orphée noir. Janheinz Jahn, with his Muntu (1958), made another early attempt to discuss "Neo-African Culture," with which term he attempted to distinguish traditional African culture from the Western-influenced contemporary variety. Ulli Beier with his Introduction to African Literature (1964), Gerald Moore with Seven African Writers (1962) and The Chosen Tongue (1969), Arthur Ravenscroft with Chinua Achebe (1969), are a few among many who responded to the works of Africans writing in English. Criticism by Africans was relatively thin on the ground until the early 1970's, apart from Senghor's prose writings on négritude and Mphahlele's The African Image (1962). It was the use of English and French that enabled non-African critics to have such an early and important influence on the criticism of African literature.

The participation of non-African critics in the discussion of African literature, and the existence, therefore, of an influential voice in the literature which does not derive from indigenous assumptions, has made some African critics uneasy. In addition, and partly as a result of this unease, some attempts have been made by African critics to define the functions of the literary critic in the context of African literature. In some cases, these attempts at definition have as their basis the need to protect the literature from what is seen as the unjustified confidence of the impetuous outsider. In other cases, the motivation is to exclude outsiders, in the belief that outsiders have little but confusion and misdirection to offer in the development of African literature. In both cases, the declared underlying aim is to establish and maintain the integrity of the

literature and the criticism.

A number of African critics have argued that the early Western criticism of African literature was, on the whole, misconceived or at the very least, limited.¹ It placed too much emphasis, it is said, on the informational content of the literature to the relative disregard of formal considerations. While this is partly true, it is at the same time a simplification that has, over the years, come to assume a largely unquestioned status. For it might be added that early Western critics were interested in "the form," but the implicit, and at times quite explicit, assumption was that they would have no need to re-examine the formal schema acquired through a knowledge of their own literature. In other words, the use of English as a medium of expression for African novels, allowed them to assume that they were simply having to discuss another English novel, interesting for its new content, whatever its formal problems. In this sense, African novels would take their place in the slipstream of Western literary tradition, and be judged accordingly.

Dan Izevbaye has described Gerald Moore's Seven African Writers, for example, as carrying "the assurance of one drawing his confidence from an accepted metropolitan tradition."² Izevbaye rightly praises Moore's contribution to the criticism of African literature, and it is because Moore is such a sensitive critic that the "assurance" that Izevbaye speaks of does not come to dominate his perception of the literature. Izevbaye finds Moore's emphasis in this book to be "often European." Thus Tutuola is linked to European folklore material, and is made to undergo a rather forced comparison to Dante, Bunyan and Blake when it is now generally acknowledged that it was Yoruba folktales that provided the more significant influences. Moore's "European" emphasis was perfectly understandable in the

circumstances; his was among the first English criticism of African literature to be published. In any case, Moore's book was a significant contribution to the early critical response to African literature, despite its emphasis. The same could be said of a number of the early Western critics of African literature although this is not to suggest that the criticism was uniformly blameless. Izevbaye speaks of Moore's The Chosen Tongue and Ravenscroft's Chinua Achebe as "among the finest studies of their kind," (p.3), and he discusses the contribution that such books as Bruce King's Introduction to Nigerian Literatures³ and Margaret Laurence's Long Drums and Cannons⁴ have made to the study of the literature. Although the criticism that some critics disregarded formal considerations in their discussions may be justified to some extent in the case of Long Drums and Cannons, this does not mean that it was deserved in all cases. The response of some African writers and critics seems to suggest that most Western critics of African literature were unable to transcend the conceits of their culture and wrote patronisingly and mistakenly about "our literature."⁵ Thus, Emenyonu's summary of the critical response to African literature can be seen to be harsh beyond justification. He wrote of the early criticism of the literature, and it is clear that he is here referring to Western critics, in this way:

Those who posed as its "judges" knew little or nothing of the existence and depth of oral literature in Africa, and therefore, little or nothing of the true roots of written African literature. Some of them were gaining their first insight into the African social scene, and approached African writing for its sociological rather than its literary interest. (p.1)

What makes Emenyonu's summary unjustified is not the claim that such

criticism existed, but the implication that it was the only kind of Western criticism that existed.

Chinua Achebe, who has also spoken harshly of the unrealistic confidence of Western critics in their discussion of African literature, has at least commended some of them for their "excellent and sensitive" response to the literature. A number of other critics, among them Abiola Irele, have spoken of the influential participation of Western critics in the discussion of African literature as of a rather unhealthy state of affairs.⁶ In some senses it was inevitable and right that African critics should begin to assert themselves in the discussion of a literature that they felt concerned them most, especially when they felt that the efforts of non-Africans were failing to reflect the true value of the literature. The point here is not whether this was really the case or not, the point is that because there was a desire for a more "African" criticism, it was the failures of Western criticism that interested African critics more. It was, in other words, the "danger" that Western criticism posed that concerned them, because it was the existence of this "danger" that provided the best argument for an "African" criticism.

In another sense, the Western critics themselves created the situation that demanded a vigorous counter-attack by African critics. Chinua Achebe in his "Colonialist Criticism" describes two examples of the kinds of crass criticism that his novels suffered at the hands of Western critics. These we may dismiss as the ignorant fringe of the novel-reviewing world, and Achebe's anger, while entirely understandable, allows him to suggest that such critics are the predominant variety, which is rather unfair. If we generalise wildly,

we might suggest that Western critics responded to the literature in roughly this sequence. To begin with there was an excited, perhaps condescending, interest in a "new" literature, accompanied by lavish praise for the act of literature rather more than for its achievements. This was followed, in a sense as a corrective, by an insistence on literary standards, which was another way of asking how this "new" literature compared with English literature. A number of Western critics, at this point, seemed convinced that African literature had to be considered as an offshoot of English literature. There was some agonising, both amongst African writers and the critics, whether there was any alternative to considering the literature in terms of Western values. Edgar Wright, for example, in his essay "African Literature I: Problems of Criticism," spoke of two separate critical hierarchies of values, "the local" and "the universal."⁷ He warned: "What is necessary is that the local standard, while encouraging its own ideas, is at the same time responsive to the basic principles and standards." The inescapable conclusion is that Wright has Western "basic principles and standards" in mind here. The conclusion is further confirmed by Wright's suggestion that African literature in English must "take its place in the total body" of English literature.

Two other critics, Paul Edwards and David R. Carroll, wrote in 1962:

It must be emphasised that the study of indigenous works can only be an interim stage because there is no extensive or established West African literature on which the students can profitably spend a great deal of time. The reading of these novels, while starting from the reader's immediate experience, should take him beyond it to an appreciation of the essential values of English and American literature.⁸

It is clear that it is the "English and American" variety that is the "essential" literature. The article ends with what the authors consider the potential achievement of the West African student of literature. Having persevered through the "interim" of the West African novel, he will be in a position to appreciate the "essential values" of "the African novels of Conrad, Joyce Cary, Graham Greene and Doris Lessing." (p.330). It has to be conceded that at the time the article appeared there were not many West African novels available to the West African reader. Nevertheless, the differentiation in literary merit underlies the assumption that however much the African novel breaks "new ground" it remains "an offshoot of the great tradition of the English novel, and must be judged accordingly." (p.322). As the warning note in the quotation suggests, Edwards and Carroll expect that Western African novels will be seen to be limited when held up to "the great tradition of the English novel." The misconception is not in regarding the novelists of "the great tradition" as more accomplished, but in assuming that they constitute an ideal, that the criteria by which their accomplishments are assessed are universally applicable and universally accepted. It is not even necessary to put forward a rival set of criteria for African literary "greatness" in order to question this. It is worth pointing out that the year the article appeared was also the same year that Gerald Moore's Seven African Writers appeared, and whatever the faults of that book, it was certainly not attempting to demonstrate the "interim" nature of the African works it was considering. As Izevbaye suggests, the book draws its "confidence from an accepted metropolitan tradition," and by its tendency to force comparisons with works of English literature, in an attempt, one feels, to flatter the works being considered, it weakens its own arguments.

That the two approaches to the critical value of the literature should appear from the same maligned Western critics indicates that the generalisations that are made about their ignorance or their cultural egotism have to be taken with reservations.

It is clear that the argument that African literature has to be regarded as a younger, and surely distant cousin of Bunyan, Dante, Blake, Conrad and Hardy is a difficult one to defend. This is not to deny that comparisons can be made, but the differences are spectacular enough to prevent the comparisons from being really significant. That some Western critics should choose to make these comparisons, however, is perfectly understandable. That is the frame of reference from which they acquire a literary perspective. To compare Yeats' idea of history as a cycle of destruction and regeneration, and Achebe's depiction of the Umuofian community and its near destruction and eventual survival, may well be to force the issue.⁹ The point, however, is not whether Yeats' understanding of history influenced Achebe, but whether the comparison helps to illuminate either writer's work. Nor is it the point that Achebe has denied any Yeatsian influences on his work, for these influences or these comparisons need not have been placed in the novel with the deliberateness of a disciple paying homage to the visionary. Ernest Emenyonu sneeringly remarks that Miss Stock's article shows how Western critics were always determined "to find godfathers for the successful or popular African writers," (p.3), because they could not admit their ignorance about the true sources of the literature. There may be something in this, although it need not be expressed in such a crass way. It may well be that some Western critics were more at ease seeing the literature in terms of Western values than in groping

for explanations from cultures they neither fully understood nor truly credited as being the real sources of the works they were considering. For it became an accepted article of faith, both among Western critics and African critics themselves, that the novel was a Western "form" which was foreign to Africa, and therefore its true sources and its real influences lay elsewhere. But, as Izevbaye has said: "Are cars and cameras alien to Japan because they were not invented there?" (p.5). In any case, it was clearly easier for a Western critic to find points of comparison with Western literature than to try and discuss an African novel entirely in the African context, assuming that such parochialism was desirable. It is clear also, that the greater the shift from the "local" emphasis or an emphasis on knowledge of background, the lesser the insecurity of the outsider. It was in the interest of the Western critic to stress the "universal" aspects of the literature, both because this was a critical technique he was familiar with and because it allowed him to manage, to an extent, without detailed background knowledge.

Unmistakably, the term "universal" is used to indicate an advance from "African," and closer to what the Western mind considers archetypally human. We can make too much of this, and Achebe has done so in his essay "Africa and Her Writers,"¹⁰ but the obeisance to "universal" aspects of literature tends to disguise an unwillingness to get to grips with the complexities of the work itself. It does not require great perception to be able to observe that once the "local" and specific significance of a work is understood, that it would be the work of a moment to draw its "universal" implications. For by "universal" we can only mean those areas of human understanding and human experience that we all share, not any aesthetic value or approach.

We would not begin a discussion of the novels of Jane Austen, for example, by emphasising their universality without having first understood their significance within their time and place. It would be foolish for us to claim that the "English information" is not important, since without that we would be forced only into a crude estimate of its wider implications. Yet John F. Povey, speaking of J.P. Clark, the Nigerian poet, finds that in his poems "the African information is not, at the obvious level, a very significant part of the problem in making a sensitive and just evaluation."¹¹ Povey argues that it is not even essential to know the "local" significance of a poem's symbolism. He concedes the relevance of these symbolic devices in "the African social context" but his interest is in the wider, "universal" implications. One of the poems he has in mind is Clark's "Abiku," which he finds "humane and familiar and ... available to all who read it sympathetically." (p.89).

It is not so much that the critic, by this approach, is unable to comment on the literature's depiction of reality, as he shuns the necessity to explore "the precise motivation" for the devices it employs. Nowhere is the superficiality of this approach seen more clearly than in Charles Larson's The Emergence of African Fiction.¹² Of Soyinka's novel, The Interpreters, he deludes himself that there is no pattern or chronology to the novel, that the complications are somehow simply a demonstration of modernist virtuosity. This is clearly not the case, as was shown earlier. Larson's interest, however, is in showing that a promising school of the African novel is "emerging." He sees this "emergence" to be in the direction of the Western modernist techniques, which, superficially, rely on such devices as complication of narration and interchangeability of parts and

chronology. Neither The Interpreters nor Armah's The Beautiful Ones, another of the novels he praises for their "modernism," displays this formal nihilism. In identifying the methods of these novels as "modern," Larson means to indicate his approval of the "emerging" direction of the African novel. Achebe comments on the criteria by which Larson praises Lenrie Peters' novel The Second Round (in his essay "Colonialist Criticism"¹³), and it will be instructive to look at the terms under which Larson grants approval to Peters' novel. He says:

That it is set in Africa appears to be accidental, for, except for a few comments at the beginning, Peters' story might just as easily take place in the Southern parts of the United States or, in southern regions of France or Italy. If a few names of characters and places were changed one would indeed feel that this was an American novel. In short, Peters' story is universal.¹⁴

Even if this were true of The Second Round, why should its universality suggest a similarity with an American novel except to imply that American novels are in their nature "universal" while only exceptional African ones are? Achebe was right to enquire if it would ever occur to a critic like Larson to substitute African names and places in a Philip Roth novel in order to test its universality. Povey's suggestion was that what is required of the critic of African literature is the ability to respond sympathetically to the "humane and familiar" qualities in literature. Larson demonstrates the logical conclusion to such a position, by seeing the greatest accomplishments in those novels that he thinks most resemble American fiction.

Such a conclusion has the clear advantage for the critic in that it does not require him to move from his cultural vantage

point, nor does it require from him a dramatic change of perspective. His method becomes to make enough of a critical case without having to delve too deeply into the African background. In short, he operates his critical apparatus with the help of "intuitions" derived from his own culture, and compensates for the African material by recourse to stereotyped images of African culture, whose importance he emphasises by a fussy and probably patronising praise. The terms in which this praise is expressed are themselves revealing of the critic's inability to move out of his cultural stamping ground. This, in any case, is largely Larson's method. The result is a lack of critical discrimination — so Lenrie Peters' The Second Round, an interesting novel but certainly not of the same weight and virtuosity as Achebe's or Armah's fiction, or Soyinka's The Interpreters, is treated as if it were just as important. It was in response to this kind of critical sloppiness that Irele in his paper "The Criticism of Modern African Literature" describes his "reaction" "against the uncritical acclaim of any and every African writer solely on the grounds of his origin, against the kind of blanket appraisal that is unable to make the necessary discrimination between what is valuable and what is not." (p.13).

In this very intelligent and thoughtful essay, Irele observes "the problem of evaluation" created by the fact that the early devoted readers and critics of African literature were mostly non-Africans. Because not all these critics were "flexible" and "subtle" enough, some were unable to grasp the literature "in all its peculiarities, in its specific relation within a cultural and historical perspective." (p.13). Irele sees the critic as concerned not only with analysis of the works themselves, but also to "see"

the relationship of the work's "consciousness" with the responses of the "larger audience of readers." Thus he sees the critic as a "mediator" who unifies the efforts of the writer and the responses of the reader. He argues:

If we accept the unifying role of the critical intelligence, we must accept the critic himself to possess as complete an awareness as possible of the entire range of all that has gone into the literary work, and his activity as one which brings into sharp focus the various directions within the work as well as the relations outside the work itself which have determined, or at least shaped, the imaginative process which brought it into being. This means that the critic's intuition ... must consist to a certain extent of some form of knowledge, of a common sensibility that unites him with the writer and that relates him instantly to his work. (pp.14-15)

It can be seen that this would be an argument against Povey's position that "local" information is not essential, so long as one can respond at a "humane and familiar" level to the work. In such a case, Povey would not be performing the critical function as Irele sees it but would be responding in a rather limited way, for he would not be taking account of the cultural context of the literature. This may seem unkind, or perhaps to misunderstand Povey, whose argument here, and in another essay which will be discussed presently, is that it is possible to have an intelligent response to a work of African literature without having to have a great deal of background information. This would be true only to some extent, and even then, the possibilities of misunderstanding and misconstruing are too real to allow the critic any conviction that his position is intelligent. One might as well ignore "the English information" in a novel like Middlemarch as ignore "the African information" in a poem like

"Abiku." In both cases, one's efforts at criticism, however intelligent, will remain limited by ignorance. Irele is emphatic when he argues: "Literature takes place within a cultural setting, and no meaningful criticism is possible without the existence of a community of values shared by the writer and the critic ..." (p.12).

It may be argued, of course, that "humane and familiar" may well describe this community of values, but it is clear that Irele is referring to a very specific kind of understanding of the culture. In order to grasp the literature, he argues, the critic must understand its context, and for this he needs the kind of knowledge that will enable him to observe the relationship of the "larger social context" of the literature and "the historical consciousness of the society." (p.16). Without this "cultural framework," he feels, the critic will miss the "finer modulations which give the best in modern African literature interest and value." (p.17). The critic needs to have the ability to "respond fully" to "references outside his own realm of experience" and to the "kind of sensibility" to which the work appeals. And in order to achieve this level of response the critic requires "some inner experience or some inner knowledge, either immediate or acquired, of the relations outside the work." (p.19). Irele insists that he does not intend that the criticism of African literature should be seen to be the exclusive activity of African critics, even though he accepts that such a position would seem to follow logically from his arguments. What he demands is "a serious and intelligent approach, which presupposes a minimum level of intellectual preparation, the acquisition ... of an adequate measure of foreknowledge, and its application to the task of critical interpretation." (p.21). This demand applies equally to the African

critic as it does to the Western counter-part. It is only in this way, argues Irele, that both the writer and the critic can take their work to "the live centre and the collective interest of experience" of the community, and in this way, an understanding of the cultural context will enable the critic to return the literature to "its place as a vital dimension" of the community's existence.

It is clear then that Irele sees it as part of the critic's function to "defend the living culture," to see to it, as far as this is within his means, that the literature "as part of the intellectual and cultural" life of the community develops "veritably." Other critics, less thoughtfully, and without the same appreciation of the difficulties involved, have also sought to see literary criticism as the means of a defence of a culture. In their partisanship these critics have failed to acknowledge the real contribution that non-African critics have made to the development of the literature, and assume, for the sake of argument one supposes, that Western criticism is mostly ignorant and patronising about "our literature" and "our culture." There are many such critics, and it would be foolish to ignore their existence because their arguments seem so feeble. For, their position derives its strength not from its rational defensibility, but from its racial and nationalistic punitiveness. Its polemic, as usually happens with polemic, simplifies the issues to a simple opposition between the criticism of African literature by African critics as a desirable, even a necessary good, and criticism by Western critics as a once necessary evil. This too, of course, is to simplify, but how little distorted this simplification is can be seen in the following examples.

Joseph Okpaku, for example, is unambiguous when he writes:

"The primary criticism of African arts must come from Africans using African critical standards."¹⁵ He argues that a compact body of artistic norms should be defined, to which African critics of the arts can refer. He describes how such values might be arrived at: "Critical standards derive from aesthetics. Aesthetics are culture dependent. Therefore critical standards must derive from culture." (p.1). We may leave aside for the moment what is meant by terms such as "critical standards" and "aesthetics," and observe the beguiling simplicity of Okpaku's formulation. The statement remains uncertain for all its simplicity, and its blind leaps across enormous chasms allow it to arrive at a position which seems to suggest that only an African possesses enough "African culture" to produce profound criticism of the literature. Neither of the terms, "critical standards" nor "aesthetics," are discussed by Okpaku. What is clear, though, is that Okpaku does not go along with the view that appreciation of the arts depends on the sympathetic recognition of the "humane and familiar." Okpaku's argument blurs rather than defines the issues. For, whether "critical standards derive from aesthetics" or not, they do not arise out of a created body of norms and values called "culture," as a separate and additional development. To derive "critical standards" from "culture" is merely to say the obvious, in a rather general way. Practically, such a statement is of no assistance to the critic or reader, apart from making a claim for the pre-eminent propriety of an African sensibility in the criticism of African literature. Later in the same paper, Joseph Okpaku confounds the whole issue by arguing that the "basis on which to build criticism" is "African life." By observing the emphasis given to social events in real life, argues Okpaku, the critic can create the beginnings of

"critical standards." The missing vital link in this whole argument is the work of art itself, of course. Okpaku does not consider how the work might respond to these manipulations, and what other skills and abilities, apart from the good fortune of being African born and bred, the critic requires in order to comment intelligently on the manner and means of the artist's imagination and skill. In addition, if this argument were to be consistently applied, it would prevent the African critic as well from discussing the literature of other African cultures, unless one were to take seriously the facile claim for an "African culture."

Okpaku does allow the Western critic of African literature a useful purpose. With characteristic emphasis he finds that his "only valid job is to interpret African literature and the other arts to Western audiences." (p.3). This is clearly a silly argument since it is an invitation to the critic to cultivate ignorance of the culture from which the literature derives, and this, whatever limitations we place on the audience, cannot lead to anything like intelligent criticism. In addition, Okpaku's suggestion would close off the whole dialogue on the literature, and this does not seem justified by any of the arguments that are put forward here. As we saw earlier, there is no doubt that some Western criticism has been both sympathetic and excellent, and indeed crucial in the early stages. Its influence in recent years has been, rightly, reduced, but to close off the dialogue goes against the grain of the humanistic concerns of literature itself.

If Okpaku's emphasis distorts his arguments, the basic position from which he starts has some support among African critics. Ernest Emenyonu, in his article "African Literature: What Does It Take To Be Its Critic?"¹⁶ complains of what he calls the ignorance of

"many Western critics." He finds that "what they issue on African literature is a reflection of a profound lack of knowledge about African cultural traditions." (p.9). He resents particularly what he sees as the spurious qualities that appear to be "enough to qualify one as an authority on African literature." Rather dismissively, he lists these qualities as "a Peace Corps sojourn, a spell of field work in Africa, a conference on African literature, a graduate studentship in African literature in a Western university." (p.10). He quotes Chinua Achebe and J.P. Clark, both of whom, he feels, share this impatience with the "great ignorance" of "many Western critics." Chinua Achebe has spoken of his weariness with "all the special types of criticism which have been designed for us by people whose knowledge of us is very limited."¹⁷ In his essay "Colonialist Criticism" he acknowledges the work of "excellent and sensitive" Western critics but complains that most of them lack the "humility appropriate to ... their limited experience of the African world." (p.6). Some of the blame, he feels, lies with "the owners of the corpse," the African critics themselves:

It is because our own critics have been somewhat hesitant in taking control of our literary criticism (sometimes — let's face it — for the good reason that we will not do the hard work that should equip us) that the task has fallen to others some of whom (again we must admit) have been excellent and sensitive. And yet most of what needs to be done can best be tackled by ourselves, the owners. (p.18)

To make his point Achebe cites the example of a European visitor to Benin in 1701, who was shown the sculptures and found them "wretchedly carved" and meaningless. He was surprised, but willing to concede, that his "guides were able to distinguish them into merchants, soldiers,

wild beast hunters, etc."¹⁸ Achebe argues that African critics should learn from this example and not allow the literature to be dependent on the critical judgements of people who are ignorant of its real value.

While Achebe urges African critics to claim the right to criticise their own literature, Chinweizu wants to be sure that it is the right kind of criticism. In his essay "Prodigals, Come Home!"¹⁹ Chinweizu devotes himself to a critique of Western "modernism," questions its appropriateness for use in African literature and criticism, and objects to the easy assumption that the "modern" in modern African literature indicates its connection with Western modernism. He attempts to identify the characteristics of Western modernism and finds that they include "Perversity — which is to say: surprise, excitement, shock, terror, affront," and "Nihilism — which is to say: a breakdown and accepted loss of belief in traditional values as guide to conduct."²⁰ These, argues Chinweizu, are the dominant themes and qualities of "modern Western literature." The point of his critique of Western modernism is to insist that it is Western, and its attributes need not be found and should not be looked for in non-Western literature. They are "culturally determined by the history of the Western tradition, and cannot be regarded as modern in any culturally neutral non-Western sense." (p.9). The burden of Chinweizu's essay is that African creative writers should adhere to their indigenous techniques and traditions, despite the temptation to believe that Western modes were also "natural" to them.

A subsidiary aspect of this cultural retrieval is the critic's recognition that Western habits of assessment are underpinned by a "trajectory of Western history" which is irrelevant to Africans.

Thus, Chinweizu argues, to imagine that a cultivated modernism, directly born out of Western history and culture, can provide the foundations of African critical values is to be "alarming." Chinweizu finds that such critics:

show little interest in the African poetic traditions; they disdain them, and make little effort to learn from them. If they have their way we must desert our habits and surrender ourselves at the altar of the West, there to be killed, skinned and repackaged under Western labels! (p.11)

Chinweizu exaggerates, to say the least, and in characteristic style.

His unsympathetic and rather dismissive summary of Western modernism is an aspect of the obvious hostility he feels towards Western culture and what he sees as its potential danger to Africa. But, his summary takes no account of the dissension within the modern movement, and certainly within the "Western tradition," about the effect and consequences of the literary innovations of the last three-quarters of a century. It is not the case that "Western modernism" and "Western tradition" are to any degree synonymous. It is also to simplify too much to find "Western modernism" no more than a petulant revolt against "tradition." It signalled and was part of profound political and cultural changes that cut deep into the heart of the Western way of life. To characterise "Western modernism" by the extremes of its avant-garde practitioners is to misjudge the real extent of its influences. However, Chinweizu is not really concerned with being fair to "Western modernism." His point is that attributes of a modern literature in one culture need not be found in the literature of another, "the trajectory" of whose "history and culture" followed a different path.

The hostility that Chinweizu demonstrates towards what he

sees as a dependent critical vision echoes the attitude of other critics, albeit Chinweizu is at several degrees of hysteria higher. His identification of the choice of literary techniques with an implied servitude to Western culture is an extension of what critics like Mphahlele had found objectionable about négritude poetry, for example. In The African Image Mphahlele criticises négritude poetry for what he sees as its orientation towards France. He was critical of both the psychological stance of the poets, their implied need for acceptance by the French, and of their preoccupation with the relevance of French literary influences in their works. Where Mphahlele objects to the disproportionate influence of Western literature on African poetry from the point of view of its psychological stance, Chinweizu goes further in arguing that Western influences undermine the "integrity" of African writing.

Chinweizu's argument is different from that put forward by Okpaku and Emenyonu. The latter two hold that only an African critic can have the necessary "inside knowledge" to comment meaningfully on the literature. Chinweizu attempts to identify the characteristics of modern literature in the West, and to connect these, rather vaguely, with the historical experience that gave rise to them. He then argues that for these characteristics to appear in African literature, whose development has followed a different historical "trajectory," demonstrates the extent to which African writers and critics have lost the integrity of real artists. Chinweizu goes further than this in his later articles, when he identifies Western critics as not only irrelevant to the development of African literature, but actually maliciously bent on undermining it and dominating it. This can be seen to best effect in his article "The Leeds-Ibadan Connection: The

Scandal of Modern African Literature," (written in association with Jemie and Madubuike), whose crassness is quite staggering.²¹ However, Chinweizu's point that the historical experience that gave rise to the modern movement in Europe and America should be seen in its context is well-made, and has been made by others, notably Dan Izevbaye, Wole Soyinka and Chinua Achebe, and offers nothing new.²² What Chinweizu does offer is that punitive variety of racial nationalism that is meant to flatter the partisans rather than question them.

In her review of Eustace Palmer's An Introduction to the African Novel, Adeola James also demands "commitment" from African writers and critics.²³ She refers to Abiola Irele's essay "Criticism of Modern African Literature," discussed earlier in this chapter, and approves Irele's emphasis on the "sociological imagination," by which term he meant that criticism must take account of the literature's "sociology." That is to say, criticism must be intelligently aware of the background that gave rise to the work of literature, and the manner in which they give it meaning. But James' idea of "commitment" in criticism goes a little further than this. Unlike Irele, she demands not only intelligent awareness from the critic, but a more militant involvement. She quotes Sekou Touré for a description of the kind of commitment that should be expected of intellectuals: "Intellectuals or artists, thinkers or researchers, their ability is valid only if it coincides with the life of the populace."²⁴ Adeola James argues that Eustace Palmer's book fails to demonstrate this kind of commitment to the cause of Africa. The review on the whole is rather harsh. The reviewer takes offence, for example, at the use of the word "natives" to describe Kenyans when Palmer is obviously not using the word in its colonialist sense. Adeola James makes much of

this word when it is clearly a trivial aspect of the book. The central argument of the review is that Palmer is not "conversant with the needs of the majority of the African public." (p.150). The argument is not very convincing, and this is partly because James does not show in what way Palmer's method has led him to misinterpret the novels he was discussing. Nor is it shown how exactly Palmer has failed the needs of Africans, nor indeed how James' authoritative assessment of these "needs" was arrived at. One thing that she speaks clearly about is the function of the African critic, as she sees it. She expects the critic, like Sekou Touré's intellectual, to integrate his ability "into the activity, thinking and hopes of the populace." She sees such "commitment" as a necessity forced on the African critic by circumstances, for in her view, "the African people are the most oppressed and the most dehumanised in the world," and the intellectuals have a responsibility to the retrieval of the community. Thus the African critic has no responsibility to be "universalistic." He has to be "subjective," that is, to operate from a self-centred stance, where the "self" includes a keen awareness of "the definite historical reality" of Africa's oppression. For Adeola James, the non-African critic has nothing to offer to "the development of the criticism of modern African literature" because he operates from "vague and glib universal criteria." (p.150). She finds Eustace Palmer's book to be no different from "many works of criticism by non-African critics.... His point of reference is entirely that of the Western critical tradition." For Adeola James then, the analysis and commentary method of criticism is insufficient. She requires that the critic be partisan, committed and "subjective," in his assessment of the literature, its sources and influences. Implied among the criteria for critical

propriety is a degree of hostility to "the Western critical tradition." By adopting so adamant a stance, James has forced the argument into a dead-end. How could one possibly move on from there except into more prescriptive and more crude variations of the same argument? The manner in which she describes the "subjective" stance of the critic suggests that it would be the means with which the African critic would be relieved the burden of justifying his response by argument and evidence.

In his article "African Critics on African Literature: A Study in Misplaced Hostility,"²⁵ Solomon Ogbede Iyasere argues that for all the criticism levelled at Western critics, African critics "have not provided significantly more insightful criticism." He continues:

In our developing criticism as in our developing literature we seem as yet uncertain as to what issues are of prime importance. This uncertainty is perhaps the reason for the excessive concerns [sic] we — like the Westerners we seek to repudiate — exhibit for dubious questions seldom of literary significance. For surely to argue which critic is "more African" and can produce "more African" criticism takes us far afield from any meaningful evaluation of the work itself. (p.21)

Part of the article is a response to Ernest Emenyonu's article discussed earlier. In his article Iyasere emphasises the importance of paying attention to the text, arguing that such attention is the best defence against misinformed criticism. The only effective way, he argues, to overcome wrong criticism is to tackle it on "textual grounds, not patriotic or racial ones." (p.24). The point would seem obvious to a critic accustomed to Western criticism, but is more controversial in this context. Iyasere mocks the critic who is keen

to identify "African" features in a work without bothering to assess the contribution these make to the effectiveness of the work. He describes this as critical "exhibitionism" and compares it to Onuora Nzekwu's efforts as a novelist — both see their respective tasks "as a jumping-off place for an exhibition of ... knowledge of African customs and traditions." Iyasere makes a distinction between criticism that attempts to identify cultural background sources, and criticism that applies this information in "explicating a text." The former he sees as descriptive, the latter as evaluative. He argues that many African critics are satisfied with the former because with their "inside knowledge," this part comes easily, but are not so keen on the latter kind of criticism. He comments: "Is it that novelists who do engage in formalistic experimentation, who present in verbal analogues the immediately felt experience through a rich use of images, symbols and metaphors baffle us?" (p.26). He has in mind writers like Soyinka, Okara and Awoonor. His concern seems justified to some extent, although Achebe's assessment that it is the "hard work" that such criticism requires that discourages the critic seems more likely to be the truth.

Of greater importance than the questioning of the skills of comprehension of African critics is Iyasere's insistence that it is the analysis of the text that should engage the attention of the critic. The self-doubt expressed in the above quotation contrasts vividly with the assertive self-confidence of Adeola James' demand for "subjective" criticism. Iyasere sums up his position most adequately in his concluding sentences, and at the same time indicates his sympathy, quite unmistakably, with the kind of criticism that Adeola James would describe as lacking "commitment" to "the definite historical reality" of Africa's oppression:

Perhaps it is time we came to the realisation that to be a perceptive critic of African literature demands more than the knowledge of the social realities behind the work or the fortuitous circumstances of one's birth. Literature, like music, requires for successful study a specific faculty, a keen aesthetic sensibility, and a thorough knowledge of the techniques of language. (p.26)

Iyasere's conclusions are, of course, very familiar. They might even seem self-evident to those who are sympathetic to the position. His preference is not only for a "formal" kind of criticism, he clearly relegates the "descriptive" criticism, concerned with information as opposed to evaluation, to some lower form of activity:

The information about cultural backgrounds is simply information, descriptive and not evaluative. Of itself it does not elucidate the work. As information, it can be ascertained by any careful study. But when we apply this information as an aid in explicating a text, we move from the descriptive to the analytical and evaluative, and it is here that the literary critic's task begins. (p.25)

Now it might be argued that Iyasere is creating an unnecessary distinction, for it would still require a critical intelligence to see the information in its literary context. The information is necessary before the critic can move on to consider what the writer has made of that knowledge. On the other hand, as we saw earlier, to attempt to evaluate without enough knowledge is to assume the existence of an aesthetic consensus for which there is no justification. However, Iyasere is addressing himself to African critics, and he feels that some of them, (he has in mind Ernest Emenyonu, in particular), do not go beyond the gathering of information. African critics are in a better position to do this, perhaps, but it is

because he feels they should not stop at this that Iyasere is arguing that "real" criticism would require that the information be used for "analytical and evaluative" ends, and not merely as a demonstration of one's "inside knowledge." In this sense, Iyasere's distinction can be seen to be justified as a comment on a criticism that arises out of a complacency with possessing, for example, knowledge of the elements of Yoruba culture in The Interpreters without moving on to an understanding of the ends to which these elements are put.

In another article, Iyasere attempts to describe the necessary approach to the criticism of African literature as "cultural formalism."²⁶ He reiterates the argument that a "descriptive" approach, or what he now calls a "socio-cultural" approach, is in itself an inadequate form of criticism. On the other hand, a "formal" approach, that is, one that assumes that a work of art is self-sufficient, disregards, in connection with African literature in any case, that most of its critics do not have the "immediate" knowledge of its context that would enable them to take its imaginative use of culture in their stride. He suggests that what he calls "cultural formalism" is the answer. This can be briefly described as a synthesis of the two approaches, where a "descriptive" approach teases out the information and the "formal" approach relocates it within its context. Clearly there is nothing revolutionary here. As Victor O. Aire argues in his "African Literature and the Problem of Evaluation"²⁷ this is what usually happens with a lot of critics anyway, including those that consider themselves "formal" in approach, "because the socio-cultural and the aesthetic are barely separable." (p.42). One might argue that to see "formal" as simply a concern with techniques rather than issues is to limit its meaning in any case, that the approach

does not seek to exclude the informational content from consideration but to insist on the pre-eminence of what is available in the text. Iyasere's "cultural formalism" is an attempt to defuse the issue, by allowing that information outside the text is a step towards evaluation. But this is surely obvious. It is interesting that Iyasere is so tentative in suggesting this emphasis. This shows the extent to which an insistence on "commitment" and a racial-cultural "orientation" has made ^{an interest} in "the text" seem suspect.

The impatience with the "inside knowledge" attitude is justified, and Iyasere's attempt to harness it here in the cause of a more textually-oriented approach seems admirable. For, although it is one of the more valuable functions of the critic to comment on the social relevance of a work of literature, the critic has no monopoly on accuracy and interpretation. It is irritating that some critics are able to dismiss views they do not agree with by condemning them for being examples of vestigial servility to Western values, or examples of a Western "condescending tone," without addressing themselves properly to the arguments. Even in less extreme cases, where the critic simply adopts a knowledgeable tone, and leaves it to the reader to assume that he is speaking from a position of authority, the complacency is unjustified. Victor O. Aire, for example, in the article that was mentioned above, disagrees with Eustace Palmer's reading of Achebe's No Longer At Ease. Palmer criticises the haste with which Achebe shows Obi's "descent into bribery and corruption." This seems fair criticism. Aire's answer is simply to say: "What the critic calls a hasty summary is actually an ironic twist, a dramatic technique which Achebe uses in this novel as well as in A Man of the People." (p.36). No attempt is made to demonstrate this. And although

a case may be made for A Man of the People, it would have required rather more substantial argument than this to show that Palmer's argument was mistaken. We are left to assume that Aire knows what he is talking about and Palmer does not. This may well be true but the onus is on the critic to demonstrate this.

Aire claims that he favours "the principle of cultural relativity" in the criticism of African literature. To demonstrate his point he picks the example of characterisation in African fiction. He responds to the criticism that many African novels have been "too little involved with the exploration of individual character," with what amounts to a suggestion that the individual in an African novel is always representative of society and its experiences rather than the means for the exploration of individual responses. It is a difficult concept to accept. Charles Larson, of course, had canvassed the idea in The Emergence of African Fiction (1971), as did James Olney in Tell Me Africa: An Approach to African Literature.²⁸ If one is to go along with Olney, one would have to accept that the individual character in African fiction has a technical effectiveness that is breathtakingly comprehensive. He "typifies," for example, "the family, the extended family, the clan, the culture; only incidentally is he himself or humanity." (p.167). (The reference to "humanity" is a little puzzling here. One would have expected the sequence to continue from "the family, the extended family, the clan, the culture" on to "humanity." Apparently it does not. Could it be that all these things the character "typifies" are not "humanity?" The possibilities are tantalising — but they will only be distracting.) Indeed, the character is not representative of an individual at all but "a sum of existing, informing forces." This really is rather far-fetched, however conveniently it may let African novelists off the hook. Where

characters succeed in African novels, they do so because they are convincing in the contexts in which they occur. In Things Fall Apart, for example, the success of Okonkwo is that he is more than an individual character. He is also representative of a force of history, an expression of one of the elements that played a part in the colonial drama. There is no question, however, that it is through Okonkwo that the tragedy is enacted and brought most powerfully to our attention. To speak of Okonkwo only as a representative force is to leap over the crucial preliminary step, that it is through an appreciation of the choice Okonkwo offers as an individual that the loss to the community is dramatised, that the changes that are to come are indicated. Part of the tragedy of Okonkwo is that he had too clear an image of himself and his role within the community, to allow himself to be persuaded to what he saw as cowardly and wrong. And what is this but a force-ful expression of individuality. In Arrow of God, where the community and the gifted individual are clearly cast as protagonists, the psychological progress of Ezeulu's hubris is even more carefully charted. Of course the individual character stands for more than himself, but this is not a technical device restricted to African novels. Nor is it true to say that characters in African novels stand for "a sum of existing, informing forces" and, by implication, characters in other kinds of fiction stand only for themselves.

It might be argued, charitably, that the characterisation in African fiction that might fit Olney's description was never intended to be more than a presentation of types, that the real interest of the literature was informational. This was certainly the case with some early novels, where possibly through design, there was

no interest in character exploration.²⁹ Many of these early novels are seen as limited achievements. The novels whose reputations have risen with the passage of time have, on the whole, refused to be restricted to the presentation of types.

Aire mentions Olney in particular as a critic who has put "the principle of cultural relativity" into practice. What Aire means by this "principle" appears to be that non-African critics must recognise that the basis for character construction in African novels will be conceptually different from that in Western fiction. As a general rule this would seem a sensible warning, but its justification in terms of the psychological inability of Africans to think of characters as individuals is probably nonsense. If we think of characterisation as a representative example of other techniques in the African novel, and this would seem to be Aire's intention, the emphasis on "relativity" can be seen to be an insistence that non-African critics disarm themselves before they embark on criticism. For if by "relativity" was meant simply a comparative method, a method which assumes that each literature and culture can be considered to be discrete, making its own demands on the student and scholar, while at the same time possessing enough qualities in common to make it possible for a diligent and sympathetic outsider to "grasp" it, "relativity" is a concept we would be sympathetic to. By granting each culture its own integrity we would be guarding against misconceptions and bias, while still having the ability to make critical comparisons. Indeed, we might argue that without this ability to make comparisons, our understanding of our own cultures and literature remains narrow. In addition, the term "relativity" itself implies a comparison, but we do not find any serious attempt to make these comparisons in Aire's

essay. We saw earlier that the attempts to adopt this method by critics like Gerald Moore, A.G. Stock and others came under heavy criticism, from Emenyonu in particular, but also from Izevbaye and Obumselu. Aire clearly does not see "relativity" as meaning comparisons between literatures and cultures, but rather that non-African critics should recognise that African literature has its own integrity and needs to be read from a different perspective from the one that we would adopt when considering say, English literature. This is unobjectionable in itself, but in order to make his point Aire attempts to make "the principle of relativity" into a form of special pleading for African literature. So, for example, he urges Western critics to assume "that the type of characterisation found in African fiction is a reflection of the realities of Africa," (p.41) and who would argue with realities? The critic will have to assume that his "understanding ... will be greatly enhanced only if he takes [the literature] for what it is." (p.43).

We might give Aire the benefit of the doubt and assume that he is simply emphasising that it is only by granting the literature its own integrity that we can fully appreciate it. Again, there is nothing objectionable in this. But, by emphasising that what is depicted in African fiction is "a reflection of the realities of Africa," Aire anticipates the critic in one of his most crucial functions, that is, to see how "the reality" the novelist depicts reveals the real world. If we were to accept this implication of Aire's argument we would be tending towards the assumption that African novels are a successful representation of African life, and this, surely, is to make too ambitious a claim for African novels, or indeed any novels. One suspects that the real implication of Aire's argument is that non-African critics should be prepared to concede that what

they see as a blemish in an African novel, like poor characterisation for example, might be an expression of the cultural difference between African and, say, Western culture. Whether by making such a concession the non-African will be a better critic of African literature is questionable. For Aire's whole argument is an indirect plea for a more knowledgeable non-African critic, and one does not become knowledgeable by bending over backwards but by moving in the opposite direction entirely.

That the African "counter-attack" has bothered some Western critics, can be seen in John Povey's article "The Criticism of African Literature: Options For Outsiders."³⁰ Povey speaks of his concern that the "African counter-attack to external literary standards" might deny outsiders the chance to participate responsibly in "the new literature of Africa," and would "render all their interpretations false and discreditable." (p.27). Povey concedes that the use of English by African writers had given Western critics a spurious confidence that by their command of the same language, they were in a position to speak authoritatively on the literature. This confidence, argues Povey, "has been the basis for the shallow critical methodologies that have often been employed by outsiders for the examination of African literature in European languages." (p.29). The question that exercises Povey is what part the external literary critic can usefully play. He speaks of the greater knowledge of the African about the "culture and geography" out of which the literature springs, but he maintains that this should not be enough to make the outsider's response worthless:

It is obviously arrogant and ignorant to challenge the value and utility of the knowledge of Africa for an appreciative

understanding of contemporary African writing, yet before the thought of the intellectual demands made by a total comprehension restricts all of us solely to the literature of our fathers, we should not give up the prospect of pleasurable reading in total despair.... No situation can be so localised in either geography or culture that the events can have no underlying identity with a broader revelation of human experience. (p.32)

In short, Povey suggests that the common knowledge about human responses and human motives that comes about with experience will provide enough common ground from which a non-African reader "can move towards an understanding of the specific African concern." Povey agrees that the critic will require some "external knowledge" in order not to feel "incompetent and deprived," but ultimately, he believes:

we may fall back on the accepted belief that literature provides its own truth unrelated to some external reality against which its facts must be measured. A work of literature contains an inner reality which it conveys regardless of the use or abuse that the author makes of his original data. (p.32)

Povey agrees that a critic's reading of a work of literature from this "external" position could well be "limited and partial" but that that in no way "invalidated" it as criticism, so long as the limitations are recognised. It is a curious position, and demonstrates the uncertainty some critics have been thrown into as a result of the aggressive partisanship of some African critics. It seems to accept that Western critics have nothing really important to contribute any more, but that nevertheless they should be "allowed," in the sense of being given approval, to respond to the literature in their own way. Povey's intended criticism accepts its limitations before it

begins, and requests the indulgence of African critics for holding to the position that it does.

There are two implications here. One is the assumption that Povey makes that most African critics hold to the position that criticism must be a "subjective" response to "the definite historical reality" of Africa's oppression. It is an easy, if inaccurate, assumption to make. The critics who hold to this view have appropriated for themselves a highly charged rhetorical style, as the few examples we have quoted should have indicated. They speak not only as literary analysts and commentators, but as cultural patriots. Because they have chosen to put the matter in this way, they have excluded the participation of outsiders from the debate. The effect has been to concede some ground to those critics who favour cultural patriotism as a critical style. The second implication is that the kind of "external" criticism that Povey has in mind is probably not meant for African readers. The most it can hope for is to share some common ground with the "subjective" criticism. This suggests an acceptance of the idea that Western critics should address their efforts to Western readers, and allow African critics to get on with the task of addressing African readers.

It is hard to see how anything useful can come of this. For if the criticism is based on insufficient knowledge of the cultural experience out of which the work arises, it is very likely to be misconceived. It would be just as misconceived whether it was intended for an African or a Western audience. It would, very likely, simply indicate that the critic has not understood the work that he is discussing. For example, it would be absurd for a South African critic to argue that Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man demonstrated the failure of multi-racial society and that Ellison, therefore, was implying that

the races must live apart, much as they do in South Africa. If he were to defend his position by arguing that his criticism was a response to the "inner reality" of the work, which he was able to respond to by his common-sense knowledge of human experience and human motives, and which, in any case, was meant for South African readers of the novel, we would have no hesitation in pointing out that his criticism showed no understanding of the black American experience and that what he had written was absurd nonsense. The very same argument would apply, say, to a Sierra Leonean critic who discusses the work of a Somali novelist, without adequate knowledge of Somalis and Somalia, and then argues that his response was meant for West African readers. If the critic does not understand the work he is discussing, because he does not know enough about its context, then regardless of who he means to read the criticism, it will remain bad criticism.

It is the hostility of some African critics that has brought about the increasing defensiveness of Western critics, which Povey so fully demonstrates in this article. Those who hold that Western criticism was misinformed and arrogant anyway cannot but applaud this. For the rest, it must seem a pity that more judicious means of silencing the stupid while allowing the "sensitive and excellent" to speak with freedom were not found.

By their very nature, the descriptions of critical functions in terms of the critic's cultural background are exclusive. In some respects this is necessary, in so far as "cultural background" in the study of literature is recognised to be available to the sympathetic and diligent researcher. By insisting on natal qualifications to this background, some African critics are making it

clear that they do not welcome the participation of foreigners in the criticism of "our literature."

As we discussed earlier in relation to "tradition," the need to withdraw from a position which leaves African arts vulnerable to Western influences assumes those influences to be potentially and actually malicious. This withdrawal from the Western "embrace" is at once the most immediate and the most effective means of putting the threatened integrity of the culture out of arms' reach. So far as the literary critic is concerned, it amounts to an assertion that only Africans have the necessary knowledge and the sensibility to comment meaningfully on African literature.

As Irele argues so persuasively in his essay "Criticism and Modern African Literature," the critic of African literature has an additional burden because he is dealing with a literature that, to some extent, demonstrates an "incoherence" with the cultures out of which it arises by being written in English or French. We need to recognise this burden and be aware of the extent to which it interferes with the artist's ability to express his "vision" adequately in a "linguistic medium" which he may not have complete mastery of. Presumably, the same argument applies to the critic, that his response may exhibit the same inadequacy. It is a great deal less difficult to make this adjustment in relation to the artist than to the critic, for we do not expect the artist to make his judgements and to support his evaluation in the clearly argued way that we expect of the critic. This is especially so if the critic wishes to take us on a radical departure to which we are unsympathetic. If, in addition, the critic also attempts to dictate to us in connection with works of literature that he does not appear to understand, or does not appear to have

taken the trouble to grasp the context of, we would be right to suspect and ultimately dismiss the work of such a critic.

The overconfidence of some African critics arose partly out of a felt need to respond to the sometimes imperceptive but self-assured criticism by non-Africans. The African critic at times felt the need to assert his ownership of the "corpse." But he too is misled at times by the term "African literature," which suggests a homogeneity which does not really exist. Being an African probably gives the critic some advantage in that the world depicted in the literature is familiar to him to some extent, but this does not relieve him of the necessity of knowing and understanding the subtle and specific manner in which the artist's imagination acts on the particular experience of the community he is describing.

At any rate, it needs to be said that the idea that literature should be closed off to interested readers, or at least that their responses should not be welcome, is difficult to accept. It denies that aspect of human experience that has allowed societies and individuals to progress by being able to profit from the cultures of others. This applies equally to the Western readers and critics as it does to their African counter-parts. The exercise of criticism requires sympathetic analysis of works of literature, over and above any partisan protection. Some critics of African literature have been too liberal with the latter and rather short of the former. Even assuming that the "exclusive" position is tenable, the proof of its performance would lie in its exercise, rather than in pseudo-theoretical prescriptions. The best argument for those who hold to the position that the criticism of African literature should lie solely in the hands of African critics would be by demonstrating, in commentaries on works

of literature, the superiority of their critical position over that of any other.

Notes

¹ In this connection see:

Chinua Achebe's "Colonialist Criticism," and "Where Angels Fear To Tread," both included in Morning Yet on Creation Day (London: Heinemann, 1975), pp.3-18, pp.46-48 respectively.

J.P. Clark, "Our Literary Critics," Nigeria Magazine, No.74, September 1962.

Ernest Emenyonu, "African Literature: What does it take to be its critic?" African Literature Today No.5, ed. Eldred Jones (London: Heinemann, 1971), pp.1-11.

² Dan Izevbaye, "The State of Criticism in African Literature," African Literature Today No.7, ed. Eldred Jones (London: Heinemann, 1975), p.1.

³ Bruce King, Introduction to Nigerian Literatures (London and Lagos: University of Lagos UP and Evans, 1971).

⁴ Margaret Laurence, Long Drums and Cannons (London: Macmillan, 1968).

⁵ In particular, see Ernest Emenyonu referred to in note 1 above.

⁶ Abiola Irele, "The Criticism of Modern African Literature," Perspectives on African Literature, ed. Christopher Heywood (London: Heinemann, 1971), pp.9-24.

⁷ Edgar Wright, "African Literature I: Problems of Criticism," Journal of Commonwealth Literature, No.2 (Dec. 1966), p.107.

⁸ Paul Edwards and David R. Carroll, "An Approach to the Novel in West Africa," Phylon: The Atlanta University Review of Race and Culture, XXIII, 4 (Fourth Quarter, Winter 1962), p.321.

⁹ See A.G. Stock, "Yeats and Achebe," Journal of Commonwealth Literature, No.5, 1968.

¹⁰ Chinua Achebe, "Africa and Her Writers," Morning Yet on Creation Day (London: Heinemann, 1975), pp.19-29.

¹¹ John F. Povey, "Canons of Criticism for Neo-African Literature," Proceedings of a Conference on African Languages and Literature Held at Northwestern University April 28-30, 1966, ed. Jack Berry, Robert Plant Armstrong and John Povey (Evanston, Illinois, 1966), p.87.

¹² Charles Larson, The Emergence of African Fiction (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1971).

¹³ Chinua Achebe, "Colonialist Criticism," Morning Yet on Creation Day (1975), pp.3-18.

¹⁴ Charles Larson, 1971, p.230.

¹⁵ Joseph Okpaku, "Culture and Criticism — African Critical Standards for African Literature and the Arts," Jonala, 3 (Spring 1967), p.3.

¹⁶ See note 1 above.

¹⁷ Chinua Achebe, "Where Angels Fear to Tread," Morning Yet on Creation Day (1975), p.46.

¹⁸ Achebe gives his source as Frank Willet, African Art (New York: Praeger, 1971), p.102.

¹⁹ Chinweizu, "Prodigals, Come Home!" Okike 4 (Dec. 1973), pp.1-12.

²⁰ The third literary attitude that Chinweizu finds "triumphant" in Western modernism is "Primitivism — which is to say: a fascination with what in Western tradition has been considered primal, decadent or atavistic (e.g. Negro art!)."

²¹ Chinweizu, Onwuchekwa Jemie and Ihechukwu Madubuike, "The Leeds-Ibadan Connection: The Scandal of Modern African Literature," Okike 13 (January 1979), pp.37-46.

²² Dan Izevbaye, "Issues in the Reassessment of the African Novel," African Literature Today No.10, ed. Eldred Jones (London: Heinemann, 1979), pp.7-31.

Wole Soyinka, Myth, Literature and the African World (Cambridge UP, 1976).

Chinua Achebe, "Africa and Her Writers," (1975), pp.19-29.

²³ Adeola James, A Review of Eustace Palmer's An Introduction to the African Novel, in African Literature Today No.7, ed. Eldred Jones (London: Heinemann, 1975), pp.147-52.

²⁴ Quoted by Adeola James above, p.151, from Sekou Touré, "The Political Leader Considered as the Representative of a Culture," Présence Africaine, XXIV-XXV, p.119. The source is quoted as given by Adeola James.

²⁵ Solomon Ogbede Iyasere, "African Critics on African Literature: A Study in Misplaced Hostility," African Literature Today No.7 (1975), pp.20-27.

²⁶ Solomon Iyasere, "The Liberation of African Literature: a revaluation of the socio-cultural approach," Présence Africaine 90 (1974), pp.215-24.

²⁷ Victor O. Aire, "African Literature and the Problem of Evaluation," West African Journal of Modern Languages, 2 (1976), pp.35-44.

²⁸ James Olney, Tell Me Africa: An Approach to African Literature (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973).

²⁹ Again, the most obvious examples would be Nzekwu's novels and Flora Nwapa's novels.

³⁰ John F. Povey, "The Criticism of African Literature: Options for Outsiders," West African Journal of Modern Languages, 2 (1976), pp.27-33.

Conclusion

The critical controversy that has attended the early novels of Ayi Kwei Armah reveals the disagreements that exist among critics concerning the purposes that literature should aim to achieve. The disapproval of Armah's early novels arises from a number of factors, but the most consistently cited have been the novels' pessimism, and the contempt that they are held to display for African society. We discussed these criticisms in Chapter III, and we found that the pessimism is not quite as comprehensive and definitive as the novels' detractors would have it. It was also shown that the "contempt" spoken of here arose out of the critics' desire to see literature perform a positive, rehabilitating function in the development of African culture.

A number of Armah's critics based their disapproval on the "dishonesty" of his depiction of Africa. It may be recalled that Achebe's criticism of The Beautiful Ones relied on the argument that the society depicted in the novel just could not be Ghana. "The man" did not display the sense of communal responsibility that would be demanded of him in an African society.

It was shown in Chapter III that this was a misreading of the novel. The misreading became possible because of the blurring of the crucial distinction between the author and the character. If we miss this distinction, then we fail to grasp the extent to which a character's perspective can operate independently of the author's sympathies in order to depict an aspect of reality. We miss, in

addition, the extent to which a character is meant to be criticised.

The misreading became possible, also, because Achebe, for example, was using descriptions of culture and race as the basis for critical judgements. It is not intended to rehearse the arguments yet again here, but it has been a consistent trend in the criticism of African literature that a conception of African culture and the African psyche has been allowed to overcome the necessity to obtain evidence from the text under scrutiny.

The beginnings of this trend can be found in the négritude movement. The eclipse of the movement makes it only the more remarkable that its critical self-indulgence should have survived in the method of critics who would consider themselves opposed to its "romanticism." Perhaps it is true that négritude was never really a force in the thinking of English-speaking African intellectuals and artists, but there are some features in common. This is not surprising, since the circumstances that gave rise to the movement in the first place arose out of the domination of black culture by the better-placed European. The irony is that it is out of the self-flattering "civilising" activities of European culture that the movement of rejection began. The "civilising" severity of French colonialists may have brought forth an earlier and more vociferous rejection than that which occurred in English-speaking countries, but that it should occur at some time was both predictable and necessary.

It is right that the rejection symbolised by négritude, and the mawkish romanticism of its self-indulgent speculations, should have advanced to an interest in African culture in itself as opposed to its contrasts with European culture. But the same authoritative voice that sought to do battle against the complacent "civilisation"

of European culture came to be employed in the descriptions of African culture. It has now become something of a rhetorical habit.

It is clearly the case that there is a desire among African intellectuals and "the generality of the people," to want to say that they all share the same "African" culture, that they share the same understanding of the world. It is the existence and the influence of this desire that has made possible a critical style that ignores complexity in favour of pan-cultural assertions. Some of the critical examples discussed in this study reveal the consequences of this self-indulgence. It should be clear that not all the criticism quoted and discussed in preceding chapters was handled with the severity that it deserved. On the whole, the reliance on notions of cultural characteristics has produced criticism that is more concerned with making polemical points than in responding sympathetically to the literature. As far as possible an attempt was made to avoid pursuing these polemical red-herrings and to try and observe the critical ideas and the criteria they assumed or implied. The inherent weaknesses of the polemic, we hoped, would be exposed in the readings of the novels that were attempted, in the sense that the limitations of the critical ideas would be obvious once we try to use them as the means of examining a text.

To put the matter as simply as possible, one of the intentions of this study has been to show that a reliance on cultural descriptions as the basis for critical judgements, can only result in generalised and unsympathetic readings of novels that are too complex and subtle to respond to such crude manipulation. Chapters III and IV contained examples of such criticism, and it was shown there that the appeal to "authenticity" was largely an attempt to put forward feeble

psycho-cultural explanations for literature when sound literary ones were available. It was shown in Chapters III and IV that the unsympathetic responses discussed there were misreadings of the novels. The discussions of the novels were meant to demonstrate that describing criteria for judgement does not relieve the critic of the responsibility of scrutinising the works themselves before arriving at any judgements. In other words, the critic needs to arrive at his criteria through criticism, and not before the act of criticism.

Such a position does not oppose the possibility of discussing the novels in terms of their social relevances or their wider implications. On the contrary, the novels themselves would seem to require such a response by their very preoccupations. Almost all the novels that have been discussed in this study are concerned to explore the implications of the choices and the problems that face African societies. The scope for the discussion of social questions, in other words, already lies within the literature itself. The critic does not need to arrive with pre-defined criteria in order to focus on the social ramifications of the literature.

It has been only too easy for the critics who choose to declaim on literature as an extension of the need to establish the racial and cultural integrity of black Africa to receive a hearing. By its very nature, such criticism flatters the African into a self-righteous complacency, and reduces the outsider to a nervous silence. This can be seen most clearly in the description of the criteria for the critic of African literature. It seems sensible that Africans should be the main participants in the criticism of the literature. However, there should be no need to exclude outsiders, since again it seems sensible to assume that African critics will be

able to demonstrate that their greater understanding of the issues involved in the literature will make them the more perceptive critics of the literature. This was bound to happen with time, and the panicky condemnation of the ignorance of Western critics has given some poor critics a notoriety which they no doubt welcomed. In the process, it has silenced the more responsible outsiders, and has restricted their freedom to participate in a literature they cherish.

The criticism of African literature has allowed itself to condemn too harshly and to praise too highly, in the interests of a literature that has now been forced into stylistic appeasement or complacency. It would not be too outrageous to speculate that the recent, grandiose, stylistic experiments of Armah, almost certainly one of the most gifted African novelists, were influenced in their conception by the savage and unjustified criticism of his early work as "inauthentic." Such speculation may be unkind to Armah, but it forces itself on us by the manner in which the later novels, Two Thousand Seasons (1973) and The Healers (1978), appear to have abandoned that fierce defence of individual integrity in preference for the communal consensus of an ancient African wisdom. It may yet be too early to speak with such conviction on this new departure of Armah, but at the moment it looks suspiciously like he has taken the wrong turning.

Equally, the deserved but over-indulgent praise showered on writers like Achebe and Soyinka (as a dramatist) has allowed the critic to settle into a comfortable rut that does not require him to pay any attention to the new writing that is appearing. (The most notable casualties of this critical complacency are probably Femi Osofisan and Isidore Okpewho, but Nigerian book-stores are burgeoning

with new publications, produced by both British as well as Nigerian publishers, and these receive almost no critical attention.) It may be that the new writers are not of the calibre of the two mentioned above, but that does not absolve the critic from the responsibility of acquainting himself with the general state of health of the literature.

In a sense, a literature is defined by its criticism, and the criticism of African literature has reached a hiatus. It is now largely concerned with regurgitating itself. One suspects that the hiatus marks the end of a period, and one can only hope that a different, more careful and less flamboyant criticism will follow. That however, is not a matter for prediction and prescription. The literature and the criticism has its own dynamic relationship with its readers, and it is out of this interaction that the direction of new developments will be determined.

What is likely to remain the major problem for the literature and its criticism is the language of expression. No facile solution, which involves the employment of African languages, really provides the answer. The advantages of Africans writing in African languages are obvious. If nothing else they will be able to do without the psychological discomfort of using the language of the oppressor. The practical difficulties of doing without English remain quite serious. At some stage, either because the linguistic balance is right, or because a writer (like Chaucer) brave enough to disdain the risk of being ignored by posterity will appear, a great literature in African languages will be created, and make nonsense of these fears. The case of Ngugi and his writings in Gikuyu might seem to be an example of this. Without wishing to detract at all from Ngugi's

achievement in undertaking the act of writing in Gikuyu - we can do no more since we cannot read Gikuyu - we have to keep in mind that Ngugi is writing from a position of great strength. He is already a writer of enormous reputation, and the interest shown in the fact that he has written in Gikuyu derives from this. It is not so easy to imagine that without his reputation anybody would have been at all interested in a Gikuyu novel, except those who understood the language. However, Ngugi's act of writing in Gikuyu is clearly an attempt to bring nearer the day when African literature will be written in African languages.

Certainly literature in Kiswahili is undergoing a new revival in East Africa. A number of the novels that are now being published in Kiswahili in East Africa are translations of well-known African novels which had been published in English or French. This has encouraged the appearance of original novels in Kiswahili, to join the already impressive corpus of Kiswahili poetry. This may turn out to be the trend that will take place, or that is already taking place, within other African languages. In any case, it represents a development that gives cause for some optimism regarding the problem of the language of expression. That, really, is the most that can be said at this stage. Such a drastic re-orientation as the choice of language is a matter that should occupy the whole community, and can only be made a realistic development by the acquiescence of the whole community.

If any brief summary is to be made of the intentions of this work, it is that criticism of literature should place itself firmly on the side of the writer. It should aim to labour the successes of his work with greater enthusiasm than to gloat over its

faults. Less vaguely, it is that the critic should address himself to the works of the writer and from there proceed to observe connections. The specific labours of the artist should be the basis from which the criticism obtains its motivation, though this might lead to more generalised analyses.

Clearly, the critical "counter-attack" carried out by African critics, and its "anti-colonial" emphasis has made an important contribution to the questioning of those assumptions which non-African critics had brought to the discussion of African literature. In this sense, the "decolonising" criticism has been both useful and creative. It has forced both writer and critic into greater self-consciousness with regard to the literature. We discussed this contribution in some detail in the study. However, in some cases, the critic has allowed the punitiveness of his rhetoric to carry him on in a kind of hysteria of cultural nationalism, and the contribution this has made to the criticism has largely been negative. This has been so both because the criticism that has resulted from this excess has been clumsy and inadequate, and also because it has had the effect of putting non-African critics entirely on the defensive about the contribution they can make.

Ultimately, the criticism of "cultural nationalism" has cast itself in a crusading role against the writer and the critic. It assumes that the writer and the critic are either ignorant or blasé about the potential for malice that is implied in the dominant influence of Western critical ideas on African literature. The assumption has allowed the critic to adopt a hostile attitude to the writers' works, in any case, to those writers that do not comply with loosely and self-indulgently defined criteria for "authenticity." In

the process, they have ignored the more important work of the critic,
 which is ^{to} address himself to what the writers create, and to do so
 sympathetically enough to draw the best out of those creations while
 demonstrating the faults and the weaknesses. It is this crucial
 "work" that the critic's obsession with cultural "authenticity" has
 prevented him from doing.

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