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Creative Word and Cultural Self-Apprehension: Traditional Verbal Formulae in Wole Soyinka's play *Death and the King's Horseman* (1)

Abstract I: The Yoruba have a saying that "proverbs are the horses of speech". The real master of proverbs must also be an expert wrangler with words. Wole Soyinka, Nigeria's most talented playwright, is one of these. No other African writer has displayed so much agility in manipulating traditional verbal formulae. *Death and the King's Horseman*, Soyinka's major play, best embodies the multiplex dimensions of the playwright's construct of an African poetics simultaneously polarizing the conflict between a traditional African, organic vision of life and an alien system of discrete laws and social policy, with tragic results for the indigenous system.

The Yoruba have a saying that "proverbs are the horses of speech; if communication is lost, we use proverbs to find it" (2). In actual practice, of course, the Yoruba, like any other people, command a whole stable of gnomic horses and groom them to serve a variety of rhetorical purposes. They can be employed not only to retrieve communication gone astray but also to speed it up, slow it down, convey weighty messages, deliver lighthearted jests, sharpen arguments, blunt criticism, clarify difficult ideas, and disguise simple ones beyond easy recognition. The same proverb, in fact, can be an ordinary beast of burden or a rare racing thoroughbred, depending on its use and user. The real master of proverbs is one who is able to summon the entire cavalry at will and make them spontaneously perform precisely those tricks he has in mind. To do this, he must be in complete control of their movements at all times,

harnessing their versatile energies with such skill that they cannot bolt off in directions he did not intend. He must be an expert wrangler with words.

Wole Soyinka, Nigeria's most talented playwright, is one of these. No other African writer – except possibly the late Chinua Achebe – has displayed so much agility in manipulating traditional verbal formulae. *Death and the King's Horseman*, Soyinka's major play, best embodies the multiplex dimensions of the playwright's construct of an African poetics. This is so not only in its character as a ritual tragedy – Soyinka's privileged form – but also in its concern with the historic issue of the African encounter with Europe. Described by the dramatist as an attempt to "'epochalise' History for its mythopoeic resourcefulness" (Soyinka 1988: 128), the play is based on events which occurred in 1946 in the venerable Yoruba city of Oyo, Nigeria. Part of the final funeral ceremonies for the late king demands the ritual suicide of the commander of his stables, Elesin. This is the tradition, but the Oyo of 1946 is not the Oyo of old. Ultimate political authority has changed residence. Simon Pilkings, the white colonial district officer, motivated by an unreflective, egoistic quest to stamp out 'barbaric customs', intervenes and arrests Elesin before the sacrificial act. When Olunde, Elesin's eldest son, returns from his studies in Britain to bury his father, as the rites command, he is faced with an abomination: his father has not performed the one important duty he has all along been living for. To keep familial honor indoors and affirm the continuity of his people's way of life, Olunde calmly assumes the father's duty and kills himself. Stung by this tragic reversal, Elesin swiftly strangles himself in the cell where he was imprisoned by the white man, while the people lament the passing of a world, the tumbling of their world "in the void of strangers" (Soyinka 1975: 75).

That a tragedy and a tragic hero can express, symbolically, the basic myths and the psychic experience of a culture, has been amply demonstrated by great examples in Western literature. One thinks particularly of *Oedipus Rex*, in an extensive field which includes, apart from the great Greek classics, others

such as Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* and Brecht's *Galileo*. How can the personal disaster or tragic destiny of one character come to express the collective destiny of a people or a race? The question has never been wholly resolved. But, to refer back to our theoretical model, it seems that we are here at a point between Aristotle and Hegel. The actions and fate of a protagonist hero assume an 'essentiality' and representativeness both by virtue of 'his' nature and the potentiality of symbolic reverberations carried by his goals and aspirations – which of course are defeated in the course of the tragic action. In other words, both in his person and in the enterprise which he comes to assert and defend, a tragic hero of the kind we are discussing must embody the basic emotions and the collective will of a people.

In *Death and the King's Horseman* both Elesin Oba and other African characters of the play, excepting the native functionaries of the colonial machine, are made to express, consciously and with considerable lyrical force, the redemptive nature of Elesin Oba's intended ritual suicide. The lyrical and rhetorical aspect must be emphasized. The play never really dramatizes either the force of Elesin Oba's personality or the inevitability of his actions. We are simply presented these matters as given realities and the playwright compels our acceptance of them by the lyrical brilliance of his dramatic language, perhaps unsurpassed by any of his plays. In the following dialogue, consider, for instance, the metaphorical language which expresses the relationship between Elesin Oba and the Praise Singer (one of the major characters of the play), a relationship that is much like that between Elesin and the other characters in the play:

> PRAISE SINGER: Elesin O! Elesin Oba! Howu! What tryst is this cockerel gos to keep with such haste that he must leave his tail behind?
>
> ELESIN (slows down a bit, laughing): A tryst where the cockerel needs no adornment.

> PRAISE SINGER: O – oh, you hear that my companions? That's the way the world goes. Because the man approaches a brand-new bride he forgets the long faithful mother of his children.
>
> ELESIN: When the horse sniffs the stable does he not strain at the bridle? The market is the long-suffering home of my spirit and the women are packing up to go. That Esuharrassed day slipped into the stewpot while we feasted. We ate it up with the rest of the meat. I have neglected my women.
>
> PRAISE SINGER: We know all that. Still it's no reason for shedding your tail on this day of all days. I know the women will cover you in damask and *alari* but when the wind blows cold from behind, that's when the fowl knows his true friends (Soyinka 1975: 9).

Eleisn Oba is the flamboyant, zestful cockerel and his retinue and praise-singers are his adorning and protective tail: an ingenuous, disarming image but it nevertheless expresses a relationship crucial for the action of the play. However, we are not left without a more telling, more passionate expression of the stature of our tragic hero or the essentiality of his action. The following altercation between Amusa, the police sergeant, and the market women who block his attempts to arrest Elesin and who mercilessly satirise Amusa's servitude to the white colonial administrator, illustrates this point well:

> AMUSA (shouting above the laughter): For the last time I warn you women to clear this road.
>
> WOMAN: To where?
>
> AMUSA: To that hut. I know he dey dere.
>
> WOMAN: Who?
>
> AMUSA: That chief who calls himself Elesin Oba.
>
> WOMAN: You ignorant man. It is not he who calls himself Elesin Oba, it is his blood that says it. As it called out to his father before him and will to his son

> after him. And that is in spite of everything your white man can do.
>
> WOMAN: Is it not the same ocean that washes this land and the white man's land? Tell your white man that he can hide our son away as long as he likes. When the time comes for him, the same ocean will bring him back.
>
> AMUSA: The government say dat kin' ting must stop.
>
> WOMAN: Who will stop it? Tonight our husband and father will prove himself greater than the laws of strangers (Soyinka 1975: 35-36).

In *Death and the King's Horseman* Soyinka polarizes the conflict between a traditional African, organic vision of life and an alien system of discrete laws and social policy, with tragic results for the indigenous system. In other words, it is a confrontation at the level of categorical super-structures wrested from their economic and social foundations. Thus, Soyinka can totalize the conflict such that a man like Amusa, otherwise a zealous servant of the colonial regime, is, in his mental universe, as resolutely opposed to the foreign cultural penetration (or aggression) as either Olunde or Elesin himself. This is perhaps why Soyinka is anxious, in his prefatory notes, to tell us that "The Colonial Factor is an incident, a catalytic incident merely. The confrontation in the play is largely metaphysical […]".

Elesin Oba's 'honour' – and the honour of the 'race' – in the play hangs on his performance of the ritual suicide. However, as the sections of the altercation between Amusa and the women quoted above indicate, the notion of honour (and integrity and dignity) for which Soyinka in the play provides a metaphysical rationalization rests on the patriarchal, feudalist code of the ancient Oyo Kingdom, a code built on class entrenchment and class consolidation. The superstructures can never totally free themselves of their material foundations. Elesin Oba is lauded, feted and celebrated by his retinue and the women, and all this is presented by Soyinka as 'naturally' due to a man on whose personal destiny rests the integrity and maintenance of a vision of life

which holds society together. But that vision is not a natural outgrowth, like trees and leaves, not an effusion of metaphysics, but an elaborated system of human social relationships in a precise form of society. It is useful to recall here Hegel's description of the use, in tragic writing, of the notion of honour deployed by Soyinka in *Death and the King's Horseman*, a notion of honour based on rank, or 'blood' or nature:

> The difference of rank is, from the nature of the case, something necessary and predetermined. If now, secular life has not yet been regenerated, through the infinite comprehension of true freedom, in virtue of which the individual can himself choose his condition and determine his vocation, it is, on the one hand, and in greater or lesser degree, nature, birth, which assigns man to his permanent position; on the other hand, the dimensions which thus appear are also, through honour […] held fast as absolute and infinite (Dukore 1974: 530).

In the process of polarizing the conflict of *Death and the King's Horseman* between an alien, and an indigenous African world view, Soyinka has suppressed the real, objective differences between conflicting groups and classes within the indigenous system. It is illustrative of the gaps and dents in Soyinka's present ideological armour that he selected this particular metaphysical and philosophical order to symbolize pre-colonial African civilization and NOT other more egalitarian African cosmogonic and metaphysical systems, the erosion of which ideological and political progressives can, with greater reason, regret. A metaphysics which idealizes and effaces the conflicts and contradictions in African societies, which rationalizes the rule of the dazzling FEW (such as Elesin) over the deceived MANY (the women, the retinue, Amusa, etc.) is an extension, in the ideological sphere and in the realm of thought, of class rule in the economic and political spheres. Marx has demonstrated clearly the manner in which this extension takes place:

> The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e., the class which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force [...]. The ruling ideas are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relationships, the dominant relationships grasped as ideas [...] (Marx 1979: 64).

To end this study on the creative word and cultural self-apprehension we must invoke the Praise-Singer's words in Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* again:

> PRAISE-SINGER: In their time the great wars came and went, the little wars came and went; the white slavers came and went, they took away the heart of our race, they bore away the mind and muscle of our race. The city fell and was rebuilt; the city fell and our people trudged through mountain and forest to found a new home but [...] our world was never wrenched from its true course.
>
> There is only one home to the life of a river mussel; there is only one home to the life of a tortoise; there is only one shell to the soul of man: there is only one world to the spirit of our race. If that world leaves its course and smashes on boulders of the great void, whose world will give us shelter? (Soyinka 1975: 10-11).

I have not invoked the Praise-Singer in Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* only for his arresting lyricism and characteristic rhetorical élan. Noteworthy in it as well is what appears to be a distinctive feature of Soyinka's articulatory practice in fashioning the specificity of a collective, cultural self: a complex subtlety. The Praise-Singer evokes in stirring, even nostalgic terms a solid, self-assured auto-dynamic organic community, a community that holds tightly to the essence of itself and whose authentic values survive the ravages of temporality. This is navel-gazing, the aesthetics of the pristine and the naive – the aesthetics of 'expressive identity'. Only, of course, this reading is inaccurate. Not even the rhapsody of the Praise-Singer could hide the dispersed

complications located at the heart of his formulations. His 'organic' community is baked in the kiln of disorders and disruptions, the great and little wars; the 'authentic' values have the unbleachable smear of experience, or reconstruction and relocation and refashioning; and the community's essence is shot through with rays from the torch of history. This 'complex subtlety' suffuses Soyinka's cultural theory and practice, marked by a combative refusal of subjection to imposed or debilitating norms, local or alien, and the simultaneous exploration of an indigenous African dramatic subjectivity.

'Race retrieval' is Soyinka's term for the composite project, a project designed to apprehend and register the presence of a culture "whose reference points are taken from within the culture itself" (Soyinka 1976: viii). Although this has been the focal point of Soyinka's career since he started in the late 1950s, his now famous formal (re-)statement of position came decades later, in the preface to an important collection of essays, *Myth, Literature and the African World*, published in 1976. "There has [...] developed in recent years" Soyinka writes, "a political reason for this [in the essays] increased obsession with the particular theme". An aspect of the politics involves the presentation of the essays that form the book. They were delivered when Soyinka held an appointment as Fellow of Churchill College, Cambridge. He no doubt believed himself to be discussing literature, but Cambridge thought otherwise. So rather than in the Department of English, the presentation took place entirely in the Department of Social Anthropology - that is, the department responsible for collecting, documenting and theorizing the deviant, exotic cultures that populate the periphery of the Universal = Western Norm. "Casual probing after it was all over", Soyinka says, "indicated that the Department of English (or perhaps some key individual) did not believe in any such mythical beast as 'African Literature'" (Soyinka 1976: vii).

At a related but larger, global level is what Soyinka identifies as the then recent birth and widespread circulation of an insidious colonialist discourse

which hides its denial of the existence of an African world under the guise of sophistication. Add to this the discourse's appropriation of Soyinka's well known stance against Negritude's narcissistic cult of the African world as part of its own project of repudiating the actuality of that world, and the dramatist's "increasing sense of alarm and even betrayal" can be understood: "[W]e black Africans have been blandly invited to submit ourselves to a second epoch of colonization – this time by a universal-humanoid abstraction defined and conducted by individuals whose theories and prescriptions are derived from the apprehension of *their* world and *their* history, *their* social neuroses and *their* value systems" (Soyinka 1976: x). This sounds forbidding but the paradox we are faced with in Soyinka is that the difference being defended is rarely absolutist. Here then lies the political rationale for the task of 'insubjection' (refusal of subjection) and racial self-retrieval,

> 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 whose temporary dislocation appears to have persuaded many of its non-existence or irrelevance (= retrogression, reactionarism, racism, etc.) in contemporary world reality (Soyinka 1976: xi).

The rehabilitation of a ruptured continuum of self-apprehension does not mean a call for some mystical, unsoiled pristinism but a "reinstatement of values authentic to society, modified only by the demands of a contemporary world" (Soyinka 1976: x). The 'nodal point' that Soyinka passionately elaborates and aggressively defends is the "African world", though the quest is not for a closed, unnegotiable particularity – difference, after all, is relational and problematic. Soyinka's warnings needs no gloss in its intimations of performative identity:

> Nothing in these essays suggests a detailed uniqueness of the African world. Man exists, however, in a comprehensive world of myth, history and mores; in such a total context, the African world, like any other "world" is unique. It

> possesses, however, in common with other cultures, the virtues of complementarity. To ignore this simple route to a common humanity and pursue the alternative route of negation is, for whatever motives, an attempt to perpetuate the external subjugation of the black continent (Soyinka 1976: xii).

NOTES

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2. This proverb was collected in 1968 from Oyekan Owomoyela, a Yoruba doctoral candidate in Theater Arts at UCLA. Printed versions can be found in Delano 1966, 109.

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