



Durban–Cape Town–Abeokuta–Austin

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ROUNDTABLE ON THE UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN FIRE OF APRIL 2021

Durban–Cape Town–Abeokuta–Austin

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The first academic project of any scale I attempted was an essay that arose from a BA (Honors) dissertation written for the University of Natal in Durban (as it was then) on Wole Soyinka. I was interested in the representation – in the terms of Soyinka’s self-consciously modernist prose – of shamanistic experience, and of the ways in which such experience came to define the meaning of *interpretation*, a concept that stood at the center of Soyinka’s enigmatic first novel, *The Interpreters* (1965).

The novel had been castigated by Ngūgĩ wa Thiong’o and others for its “flights into metaphysics,” for the “liberal humanism” with which Soyinka validated the heroism of the “lone individual,” for ignoring “the creative struggle of the masses” (“Satire” 68–69). With more than a little hubris, I was convinced that in his avid secularism, Ngūgĩ had missed the point, or at least, that he had no interest in taking Soyinka on his own terms. By the time I was reading the debate in the African Studies collection at the University of Cape Town (UCT), Soyinka had published *Myth, Literature and the African World* (1976), which contained some of his seminal essays on the Yoruba mythic matrix and how it determined the dramatic structure of Yoruba popular theater.

Immersed in these essays, it struck me that Soyinka’s purpose in *The Interpreters* was to subject his ensemble of characters – young, professional “been-to’s” who had returned to Nigeria to establish themselves in their home country soon after independence – to a rigorous test, which was both cultural and ontological, as to whether or not they were indeed fully prepared to become part of their social reality.

The origin myth to which Soyinka turned to give substance to this project was the creation of the Yoruba pantheon of gods, which is the subject of an ambitious painting being undertaken by the artist in the group, Kola, in which each member of the group is to represent one of the deities. The myth itself is a story of violent splitting:

And of these floods of the beginning, of the fevered fogs of the beginning, of the first messenger, the thimble of earth, a fowl and an ear of corn, seeking the spot where a scratch would become a peopled Island; of the first apostate rolling the boulder down the back of the unsuspecting deity . . . and shattering him in fragments, which were picked up and pieced together with devotion; shell of the tortoise around divine breath . . . (224).

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The splintering of the original deity allows the gods Ogun, Obatala, Sango, Ife, and others to come into being as individuated characters with distinctive roles. Ogun emerges as Soyinka's favorite, a polyvalent god of ironmongery, war, and creativity, a god of road-builders, a Promethean figure who creates the pathway that connects humanity with the numinous envelope of Being.

The story becomes the template for the group, whose moment of crisis comes with the death of the stammering visionary among them, Sekoni:

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 beard one fastness of blood and wet earth (155).

I remembered this passage many years later, in 2015, while traveling by road from Ilorin to Lagos to catch a flight back to the UK. I had been teaching for a month at Kwara State University as a guest of Abiola Irele. It was the week before Ramadan, and truckloads of goats were coming in the opposite direction, heading for Kwara State from the meat markets of Lagos. One of these trucks had overturned, strewing goats over the highway, some with hooves in the air, bleating. It was an Ogunist sacrificial image that Soyinka himself could have written.

In my reading, it was the "showers of laminated glass" from Sekoni's accident that had unlocked the novel's meaning for me. I saw in it the origin myth being repeated, and sure enough, Soyinka took me there: at the opening exhibition of his painting on the night of the accident, the bedraggled group of friends arrives looking to Kola like "five figures from my Pantheon risen from a trough of turpentine" (158).

Soyinka was asking a chastening question: as these newly minted, supposedly secular professionals take up positions of leadership in their supposedly free country, are they willing to become the people their ancestors want them to be – that is to say, initiates and exemplars of the founding narratives of their culture? If they are not truly embedded, they will surely fail. The novel is full of satire directed at the previous generation, the materialistic, comprador elite, but will the interpreters fare any better?

Having wrestled my way through Soyinka's quirky, wryly intelligent prose – aided by the philosophically challenging essays – I felt as if I had arrived. The structure of ideas, the novel's replaying of Yoruba myth, was like a cathedral, a west African, textual version of Gaudi's *Basilica de la Sagrada Família* in Barcelona. Each piece of the fabric was beautiful and meaningful. I followed Soyinka into his next phase, an ultimately tragic diagnosis of Nigerian independence, where an Orphean voice takes over from Prometheus and crafts *The Man Died* (1971) and *Season of Anomy* (1973) – books that rage against the violence of the Biafran War.

Along with the excitement of discovery there was a feeling – absurd, I now realize – of affinity, even of intimacy, with an oeuvre whose power and inner logic I was sure I had unraveled. But offsetting, and upsetting, this sense of triumph, there was also the discomfiting knowledge that the physical and cultural distances between Cape Town and Abeokuta were overwhelming – that perhaps I had just made it all up.

I began school teaching in Cape Town, paying off the government loan that had enabled me to go to university in return for the equivalent years in service, but I was not yet willing to give up on the Soyinka project, or where it was taking me. I knew that if

I were to continue, I would need to do a Masters degree and if possible, find a university position, perhaps just as a tutor, an adjunct of some kind. So I made an appointment to see J.M. Coetzee who, by this stage, had written two explosive novels, one of which, *Dusklands* (1974) I had read as an undergraduate in Durban. Coetzee taught African literature.

The idea I presented to him was to write a Master's thesis by research that examined a body of African texts using a range of approaches then current in English studies: liberal humanism (Arnold, Richards, Leavis), structuralism (Propp, Genette, early Barthes), Marxism (Lukacs, but more especially, Eagleton), reader response theory (Fish), and something slippery that spoke to me, called hermeneutics (Poirier). How did Western theory fare when applied to a body of African texts?

Coetzee was not convinced but he gave me some rope. The theory project was too ambitious, but in any case, the African texts that I had in mind were all from the Heinemann African Writers Series, and had I considered that the African Writers Series had constructed a version of what constituted African literature that suited its purposes of making a profit from texts that could be prescribed in African universities to the north?

Indeed, I had not considered it. On the contrary, the African Writers Series constituted a cultural quantum leap, in which I was still flying. But Coetzee was right in all respects, especially when he suggested that I might make a study of African critics, a study of the criticism that was informing the Africanization of the syllabus that had been under way in the English departments of the postcolonial universities, especially in Nigeria, Uganda, and Kenya. It was the first of several interventions from an astute supervisor.

I settled into this project and submitted it in April 1985. By then, I was a junior lecturer at the University of the Western Cape (UWC), an institution that was undergoing a radical transformation from within, from being a "Bush" college for coloured students to being a fully national institution, openly and determinedly positioning itself against its segregated past. The path I had embarked on coincided with an English department remaking itself in this environment, drawing on the canon of English literature insofar as it was necessary not to deny students access to world literature, while not disputing the call for relevance. I introduced a series of lectures for second-year students on the African novelists, the high points being Soyinka, Achebe, and Ngũgĩ.

The African Studies collection of the UCT library fueled the intensity of these years, as much in my teaching at UWC (whose library was a work in progress) as in the MA, which was stiffly entitled *Indigenous Tradition and the Colonial Legacy: A Study in the Social Context of Anglophone African Literary Criticism*. I spent long afternoons there, reading and preparing classes, often with the UWC campus in turmoil across the Flats but not forgotten.

The events that defined the critical debate of the years I was studying were the 1962 conference at Makerere University organized by Esk'ia Mphahlele on African writing in the European languages, and the abolition of the English department at the University of Nairobi, an "event" that actually took place over five years from 1968, when it was first mooted, to 1973 when the curricular changes were fully implemented. The Makerere conference had led to the founding of the same African Writers Series that I had been

reading, with Heinemann capitalizing on the conference call for African texts to be prescribed in the undergraduate syllabus. The Nairobi reforms brought to a head the critical debates around the meaning of literary decolonization.

The UCT African Studies library gave me access to this otherwise closed world. The critics who caught my attention in the monographs and collections on the shelves included Eldred Jones, Soyinka (as critic), Abiola Irele, the Nigerian *bolekaja* troika of Chinweizu, Onwuchekwa Jemie and Ihechukwu Madubuike, Emmanuel Obiechina, Micere Githae-Mugo, Peter Nazareth, Dan Izevbye, S. Iyasere, Mohammedou Kane, Kole Omotoso, and of course, Ngũgĩ (this was before his seminal *Decolonising the Mind*; the most recent work of criticism was *Writers in Politics*, 1981) – and many others.

The librarians combed the review pages of *African Literature Today* and *Research in African Literatures* to order the books that seemed important. Beyond the book-buying, they went out of their way to gather articles from journals that often looked inaccessible from Cape Town: *West African Review*, *Busara*, *Okyeame*, *Umma*, *Afriscope*, *The Journal of the Nigerian English Studies Association*. Some of these were faxed from SOAS in London. Full or near-complete runs of journals like *Black Orpheus*, *Transition*, *Présence Africaine*, *African Literature Today*, and *Research in African Literatures* were readily available. There was an air of seriousness and professionalism about building the library stock.

What I discovered, among other things, was that Africanizing the syllabus was one thing, but decolonizing *literariness* was entirely another. Notions of organic unity, in both literature and society, that had underpinned the rise of English studies in the UK, then in its dispersal first to India then on to the wider British Commonwealth, proved to be durable and extremely useful to the cultural nationalists of the 1960s and 1970s. Some of the most ferocious, like the *bolekaja* critics, had learned their lessons from American New Criticism, filling old vessels with new wine. Eldred Jones, the eminent Elizabethan scholar from Sierra Leone, and author of *Othello's Countrymen*, dedicated his book on Soyinka to “WS, *our* WS.” Said with a wink, of course, but the unspoken linkage that had always obtained between the traditional English canon and *race*, was being carried over to the African context.

The MA thesis became more and more Marxian, the further I delved. The backstory to this is worth reflecting on. The discipline was such that a young, white scholar of the 1980s in South Africa was awkwardly positioned between two critical imperatives: on one hand, to read with the theory cupboard open, to engage with the hermeneutics of suspicion; on the other, to try to understand and find a place in the critical debates about African literature. The problem was that in this period, the first imperative often undermined the second. For those debates, generally speaking, sought to take over intact the existing intellectual superstructure of organicism, anti-theoreticism, and empiricism that had been dominant in the West, and Africanize them. Arguments over identity, in this period, did not constitute *theory*. Marxism provided a way out, in the sense that in Marxism, racial nationalism was an excuse for the consolidation of a new bourgeoisie.

The epigraph to my thesis had, therefore, to come from Frantz Fanon's famous essay on the pitfalls of national consciousness: “We have seen . . . that nationalism, that magnificent song that made the people rise against their oppressors stops short, falters and dies away on the day that independence is proclaimed . . . If you really wish your country to avoid regression, or at best halts and uncertainties, a rapid step must be taken

from national consciousness to political and social consciousness” (“Pitfalls” 203). It was an ironic conclusion, because I had started with a defense of Soyinka against his Marxist detractors.

The intellectual journey that I underwent in the African Studies library took me on to the graduate programme at the University of Texas at Austin, to work under Bernth Lindfors where, as the journal assistant on *Research in African Literatures*, I was able to follow developments beyond the point I had reached in Cape Town. In Austin, studying again the major African novelists with Lindfors, I found a discipline that could no longer be pigeon holed, was no longer susceptible to an overriding metanarrative. And I enjoyed the networking: a highlight of my role as the RAL assistant was receiving a thank-you letter from Amos Tutuola in Nigeria after I had sent him typewriter ribbons for his ancient machine, which I had managed to source from a stationery warehouse in Austin.

The MA brought me to an impasse, which led me to abandon the doctoral project I had planned on Alex La Guma. Instead, I turned to (or was it on?) the work of my erstwhile supervisor, J.M. Coetzee, a story for another day.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributor

South African by birth, *David Attwell* was Professor of Modern Literature and Head of the Department of English and Related Literature at the University of York in the United Kingdom. He now lives in Cape Town where he is Extraordinary Professor at the University of the Western Cape. He has published widely on postcolonial, anglophone African, and South African literature, his most recent monograph being *J.M. Coetzee and the Life of Writing* (2015).

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