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Panel: Note to Self: Why I Write What I Write (2)

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John Nkemngong Nkengasong

*Glory is he who perceives the Truth
and speaks it plain;
or he becomes the snake that refused fewer legs
because it claimed it was bigger than the millipede
and died having none. (Black Caps and Red Feathers 7-8).*

Many times I have asked myself the questions: why waste the candles of the night and the beams of the day poring upon the universe and wondering whether the world was strutting forward in beatitude or slouching backward in despair? Is it of any worth spending a lifetime dreaming of unknown worlds and tediously scribbling WORDS at a writing desk in a little corner of the world? Perhaps the great contradiction is that I don't understand myself not to talk of the world in which I live. Maybe I am just a Sisyphean hero assigned to some awesome task by some unknown fate and I have turned to writing as a way of reconciling the soul with the self and the universe.

What I write is a different matter all together. I know that anyone who communicates with the verbal image or what Harold Bloom calls the "splendour of figurative language" is a poet be it verse, prose, drama or any other form. For, the poet is not just a singer of mellifluous verse but a legislator, an instrument of justice and the pathfinder for meaningful existence. As for me, I am uncertain about what I write. Let the critic judge. It is the critic who is the real author, who writes and unwrites a work, who determines its tone, pulse, and spirit. It is the critic who illuminates the meaning or blurs it; it is the critic who builds monuments of praises and brings them down again with a destructive phrase. Let the critic get to task according to his/her valued judgements. I am only an agent of creativity, and I write in order to start an argument and not to conclude it.

The twenty-first century is a dynamic and an enchanting one enriched by unprecedented strides in science and technology, not necessarily to make life better for all things living, but most evidently to prove human ability to survive without cosmic intervention. But is there happiness? Is there happiness for the one who stands at the center

and talks boastfully about his or her achievements? Or the other who cringes at the periphery in resignation and oblivion? We can hardly answer in the affirmative because we have shunned, in Friedrich Nietzsche's words, the "holiest and mightiest of all that the world has yet owned." In the 19th Century Nietzsche declared: "God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him" (95-96). In the 20th century, we dug and built His grave with concrete, and in the 21st Century we are burying Him. Our ancestral shrines have been desecrated, our stone gods crushed to build mansions, our totems slaughtered and eaten for supper and the towering temples and churches deserted or have become curious sights for distressed tourists all because of the mad rush for modernity. And since religion can no longer serve the purpose for which God was born, poetry must of necessity take its place.

If I have mentioned modernity it is because the concept seems to be grossly misconstrued. In practical terms it refers to improved and more comprehensive ways of life. In other words, modernity should be a polished form of culture and not a rejection of it. The very root of culture does not change; in fact, it should not change. It is culture that gives one a sense of being, that takes one into the heart of the universe and links one to the very roots and essence of existence. It is culture that stops the world from breaking into pieces. And of course, it is culture that provides the pulse and rhythm of poetry as well as its content. On the contrary, modernity has killed culture. Instead of improving ways of life in such a way that there is the greatest happiness for the greatest number, modernity has become a vast body of misconceptions interpreted by many to mean vulgarity and misdemeanour; the reason why we walk naked in winter and wrap ourselves in wool in summer.

The world is moving towards the dynamics of a world culture, what has been famously described as "globalisation." We are indeed moving towards a cultural globalisation, an important way to make the world and life more accessible and to bring the cultures of the world together so that humanity can partake in the pleasure of each other's cultural experience. But who is dominating the global culture? Who is losing in the global culture? Where is Africa's place in this global culture? What happened to Africa, a continent that was and is still bustling with life, energy and cultural diversity?

Therefore, I write in search of Truth, a search invoked by a naked Muse in a world that is getting steadily uglier, especially with the drama of hypocrisy, vanity and untruth which has left humanity in the first decade of the 21st Century sweating with the terror, fear

and uncertainty never experienced in human history. We are living in a world in which conscience is dead and humanity has sunk to the lowest depths of evil. As a result, the world continues to roll on, on the rails of an enchanting paradox towards an uncertain fate or some intractable destiny because it is thirsty of Truth. In these pervasive circumstances, therefore, the writer must not go to sleep if she/he must stop the world from going to sleep. Our world is a happy world if we embrace only the Truth. Thus the writer has the task of exploring the universe in search of Truth and to bring humanity to those realms where harmony, peace and happiness are attainable.

Let me conclude with a veneration of four poets, (aside the incomparable Shakespeare) who are accomplished Apostles of Truth. There is my late friend and compatriot, Bate Besong, whose laughter woke African tyrants from their sleep; there is the living, Wole Soyinka, whom excess of ritual has transformed into a myth; there is the most sincere of poets, William Butler Yeats, who climbed the imagination rung by rung until he reached God's home; and there is T.S. Eliot whom philosophy turned into a pack of "broken images." I am not worth a particle of dust around their graves. However, they remain the ingredients of my creative energy. And if my feeble effort as a writer won't lure anyone towards my convictions, or reanimate the cold dead world and bring it back to God's crafted beatitude, I will, when I shall wake from sleep one morning to find that I am dead, be happy all the same, that I lived to create monuments of WORDS.

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