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# "The World Adrift in Emptiness": Crossing the Abyss of Transition in Four Tragedies by Wole Soyinka

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“The World Adrift in Emptiness”:

Crossing the Abyss of Transition in Four Tragedies by Wole Soyinka

(TITLE)

BY

Michael H. Lake

**THESIS**

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS  
FOR THE DEGREE OF

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IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL, EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY  
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## ABSTRACT

1986 Nobel Laureate, Wole Soyinka, Nigerian dramatist, poet, essayist and novelist, names the Yoruba god, Ogun, as his tragic muse for ritual theatre in "The Fourth Stage," his early artistic manifesto. In this essay Soyinka maintains that in contrast to Dionysus, Nietzsche's hero in *The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music*, Ogun balances within himself elements that could be described as Dionysian, Apollonian, and Promethean. Archetypally, Ogun thus constitutes a destructive-creative unity which overcomes the dyad of good-versus-evil of Europe's Christian civilization.

For this reason, Soyinka upholds Ogun not only as a natural patron of tragedy but, furthermore, as a native alternative to the West's religions and ideologies. Still, in his later essays, Soyinka is careful to distance himself from the nativistic ideologues of so-called "Négritude." Ogun for him does not retreat into a reactionary vision of the glories of an Africanist past but advances boldly into a future place within world culture, because Ogun, after all, is a universal archetype, even if particularized within his Yoruba context.

But behind Soyinka's mythopoetic Ogun lies a deeper substratum of Nietzschean philosophy. Soyinka identifies crossing the abyss of transition as the metaphor for transforming consciousness in his dramaturgy. To cross the abyss is to overcome "weak" nihilism with "strong." This thesis examines *The Strong Breed*, *The Road*, *Madmen and Specialists*, and *Death and the King's Horseman* in terms of this Ogunnian "overcoming." The most important question to be asked, however, is whether Soyinka's Nietzschean "aufheben" ("overcoming") succeeds in crossing the abyss of nihilism in an ontology without transcendence.

# DEDICATION

*To Kayoko,*

*Thaddeus & Anastasia,*

*Who have crossed the Abyss of Transition with me:*

*Thank you for putting up with the chaos of Graduate School.*

*Dad.*

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## INTRODUCTION

According to the Nobel laureate playwright Wole Soyinka in *Myth, Literature and the African World*, the ideologists of Négritude are trapped in Europe's racist dialectical determinism. Where Europeans had previously claimed racial superiority because of their intellectual and technological prowess, Africans should counter, Négritudists maintain, with their own claim to superiority based upon their racially determined artistic creativity. Soyinka points out that this counter-claim unfortunately assumes Europe's racist premise that Africans are mentally inferior, even if musically and artistically gifted. Négritude is therefore a "movement founded on an antithesis which responded to the Cartesian 'I think, therefore I am' with 'I feel, therefore I am'" (135), a position which, in Soyinka's opinion, too closely mirrors Europe's own *Angst* about its actual existence. This ideological bondage "to laws formulated on the European historical experience" thus dooms the proponents of Négritude to "share the history of civilizations trapped in political Manicheisms" (136), a psycho-social, political, and spiritual disease not properly African, according to Soyinka. On the contrary, Soyinka claims that his own mythopoesis stands outside this Eurocentric dialectic. As a literary theorist and practitioner, Soyinka has mythopoetically appropriated Yoruba myth to create a ritual drama of opposition to the currently nihilist phase of world-wide European "Manicheism" with a dramaturgy of existential transformation.

Even though his art's roots are African, however, Soyinka has actually subverted the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche to serve his own metaphysics, ethics, and esthetics. His essay, "The Fourth Stage," one of

Soyinka's earliest theoretical explorations of ritual theatre, begins with Nietzsche's vision of Dionysian tragedy in *The Birth of Tragedy* in order to describe the role of the Yoruba god, Ogun, as a ritual archetype and founder of traditional Yoruba tragedy. But according to Soyinka's interpretation, since Ogun combines aspects of Dionysus, Apollo, and Prometheus in his person, he remains a multifaceted and more balanced figure compared to Nietzsche's Dionysus, whose passionate frenzy must be joined with Apollo's reflective reason to synthesize Greek tragedy. Still, Soyinka's Ogun also subsists "beyond good and evil" where existential authenticity lies. He unifies in himself the creative and destructive forces of the cosmos and acts as a revolutionary psychopomp to liberate the community from social imbalance through mythopoesis.

As Soyinka has interpreted one Yoruba creation myth, of which there are many versions,<sup>1</sup> Orisa-nla, the god who, for Soyinka, embodies the "primal oneness" (or *die Ur-Eine* in Nietzsche's parlance), shattered into pieces when his resentful slave pushed him into the abyss. All beings, gods, humans, animals, plants, and the Earth herself, are fragments of this original unity. Out of all the gods (or *orisas*), however, Ogun most retained the unity of good and evil original to Orisa-nla. Also like Orisa-nla, he passed over the abyss of transition. He alone of the gods braved disintegration of the self so that the others might reach the human world.

In the Yoruba cultic mysteries of Ogun, the god-possessed choric revelers plunge "straight into the 'chthonic realm', the seething cauldron of the dark world will and psyche, the transitional yet inchoate matrix of death and becoming." All actors in the mysteries therefore form "the communicant chorus, containing within their collective being the essence of that

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<sup>1</sup> see Appendix, p. 58.



transitional abyss" (Soyinka, *Myth* 142). This shared essence restores the community to balance and heals the wounds of psychic and social dismemberment which human life daily suffers.

Because of the ubiquitous presence of this "chthonic realm," Soyinka maintains that just "to be" is an act of hubris. Conscious existence is a victory wrested from the chthonic powers that constantly threaten humanity with annihilation. By the same token, to die is also an act of hubris, inasmuch as the three worlds--of the living, the ancestors, and the unborn--interpenetrate one another in time and space and importance. The "fourth stage" then is the nullifying and transforming abyss that must be traversed to move from one world to another. Not only is temporality not unidirectional in such a cosmos, but age and social hierarchies become fluid, not static. According to Soyinka, Wordsworth's statement that "the child is father to the man" is therefore literally true in Yoruba cosmology, since each of the three worlds is in some way prior to the others. Disintegration and reintegration are therefore organically one process.

Still, Soyinka adapts more than just Nietzsche's concept of Dionysian Tragedy to his dramaturgic purposes. In fact, much of Nietzsche's onto-poetic philosophy pervades his world-view. For example, a Nietzschean dialectical progression of "overcoming" (*aufheben*) transforms Soyinka's protagonists as they cross the abyss of transition, *das Zwischenstadium* of negation and destruction. Also like Nietzsche, Soyinka is a philosophical or "strong" nihilist. He readily admits in *Myth, Literature and the African World*, for example, that the human "essence-ideal, fashioned in the shape of gods," has ever become the substance of repressive orthodoxies and competing heresies which support differing social and economic hierarchies (12). With William Blake, Soyinka would say, "All deities reside in the human breast" (127), or, as

a Yoruba proverb says, "*Bi o s'enia, imale o si* (if humanity were not, the gods would not be)" (*Myth* 10). I believe that, in Nietzschean terms, Soyinka's "strong nihilism" strives to overcome "weak" and/or "incomplete" nihilism by opposing the moral chaos of "man's inhumanity to man" with an existentially transformed consciousness of the "essence-ideal" in its authentically human, that is, communitarian, context. Soyinka therefore lacks the European obsession with the "Superman" as a heroically self-absorbed and self-actualizing egoist. For him, the "protagonist ego" does not act outside the life of the community, any more than Ogun exists apart from the cosmic matrix of "primal unity."

Soyinka therefore argues that African religions are more "authentic," that is, integral with human life in the earth, than the succeeding religions of Africa's conquerors and more able to adapt to the modern world (Beier online). Soyinka contrasts a primitive Hindu myth of Shiva penetrating all the elements of the cosmos with his engorged phallus (a god-image intimately integrated with material reality) with the Gospel story of Jesus walking on the water (a god-image transcendently alienated from matter). Soyinka argues that the mythologies of pre-Christian and pre-Islamic Africa, like those of early India, were free from the ontological diseases of the Platonist-Christian or even the Buddhist "Manichean" (anticosmic and dualist) denial of the material universe and the integrity of human life within it. But he claims that his celebration of what he considers Africa's "authenticity" is not romantically chauvinist, as is Négritude's. Soyinka's "strong nihilism" does not permit him the comforting illusion of any sort of racism. Ultimately, he recognizes that the chthonic abyss of transition is a human experience, though long lost to so-called "advanced" cultures.

But we must never approach Soyinka's mythopoesis as "naive," in

Friedrich Schiller's sense of the word. It is entirely "*sentimentalisch*." Like Nietzsche's use of the Dionysian myth to express his tragic-heroic philosophy of "strong" nihilism, Soyinka uses Yoruba myth not only to craft his art but to wage war upon those Westernized or Islamicized forces that would enslave African culture in what he considers an inauthentic ideology.

Because Soyinka identifies archetypal aspects of a Promethean rebellion in the Yoruba god Ogun, his "Ogunnian" mythopoesis seeks to transform consciousness through a revolutionary dramaturgy of "overcoming." Soyinka's "gods" are metaphoric representations of existential human "essence-ideals," fully secularized and adaptable to the exigencies of the modern world yet faithful to the cultural traditions from which they sprang. So Soyinka explores crossing the primal abyss from within a completely modern context. This transit must transform the consciousness of "communicant" audience, if not the "protagonist egos," whether this crossing be where the urge of the self to survive clashes with preserving the integrity of the community in *Death and the King's Horseman* or where the absurdist nihilist hell of the Biafran War returns combatants to the "As of the beginning" practice of cannibalism in *Madmen and Specialists*.

For Soyinka, after all, there is no dichotomy in ritual theatre between the "inner world" of the individual and "communal life," insofar as transformative participation is concerned. Discounting as "Eurocentric" the description of the "inner world" as "fantasy," Soyinka maintains that such integrating journeys "to embrace . . . primal reality" are made for common empowerment:

The community emerges from ritual experience 'charged with new strength for action' because of the protagonist's Promethean raid on the durable resources of the transitional realm; immersed within it, he is

enabled empathically to transmit its essence to the choric participants of the rites--the community. (*Myth* 33)

But although the community benefits from this "Promethean raid," the artist, an *imago* of the god Ogun, is the true "protagonist ego," the "psychopomp" of communal transformation. Soyinka in a recent interview made his self-identification with his image of Ogun explicitly clear:

I was using *Ogun* very much as an analogue: what happens when one steps out into the unknown? There is a myth about all the gods setting out, wanting to explore and rediscover the world of mortals. But then the primordial forest had grown so thick, no one could penetrate it. Then *Ogun* forged the metallic tool and cut a way through the jungle. But the material for the implement was extracted from the primordial barrier.

This I took as a kind of model of the artist's role, the artist as a visionary explorer, a creature dissatisfied with the immediate reality--so he has to cut through the obscuring growth, to enter a totally new terrain of being; a new terrain of sensing, a new terrain of relationships. And *Ogun* represented that kind of artist to me. (Beier online)

For Soyinka, dramaturgic art then exists in and for the community, but it is also forged by the artist's act of will clearing a pathway to a new world, like Ogun forming his tools out of the very stuff he must hack through. As I understand him, Soyinka's intent is to strip away the self-told lies of postcolonial autocracy in order to "overcome" the European disease of self-loathing and political oppression still gripping his homeland. Of course, Soyinka's imprisonment and exile signify the extent to which his art as well as his politics have threatened the *status quo* of the Nigerian elite.

Communally crossing the abyss of transition, then, is a didactic experience through which Soyinka entreats his audience to restore that traditional African world fragilely balanced between both reciprocal obligation and hierarchical fluidity which, in words borrowed from *Death and the King's Horseman*, "our hands had wrested . . . adrift in emptiness" (15).

Because Soyinka's theory so imbues the praxis of his art, his implicit existential ontology must be addressed in any criticism of his work. In this thesis I shall explicate four of his tragedies from the perspective of his mythopoetic manipulation of Yoruba religion to support his existentialist call to return to authenticity, to "negate the negative" of the Western "weak nihilism" within post-colonial Africa, and to restore its social and ethical life upon a basis both progressive and traditional. In Soyinka's words, there "must come a reinstatement of the values authentic to [African] society, modified only by the demands of the contemporary world" (*Myth x*).

*The Strong Breed* (1964) and *Death and the King's Horseman* (1975), though separated by more than a decade, both deal with the choice between oneself as a sovereign individual and the duties of one's station and vocation within the tribe. Both *The Road* (1965) and *Madmen and Specialists* (1971) confront us with the deadly legacy of "modern" political corruption and genocide in a surreal parody by madmen who are frighteningly "normal." All four plays invite the audience to experience the abyss of dissolution and reintegration where death reveals life's authenticity, earthly and organic, to counter the West's rationalist and logocentric "Manicheism" which alienates the self from both community and earth. Still, the most important question remains to be answered: whether without the transcendence of being as being one can really cross the nihilistic void that lies at the center of Soyinka's implicit ontology.

## THE STRIFE BETWEEN THE "BLOOD" AND THE SELF

In choosing between self and community, both protagonists, Eman of *The Strong Breed* and Elesin of *Death and the King's Horseman*, must decide whether to preserve themselves as autonomous beings or to release themselves and fulfill their ritual places within the matrix of the tribe. Both elect to serve their own selfish interests and then must suffer the consequences of their choices. Despite thematic similarities, the plots of the two plays actually contrast startlingly with one another.

Eman is a somewhat Westernized youth who turns his back on the role he is to inherit from his father as a "carrier," that is, as a kind of human "scapegoat" for his tribe's offenses, and precipitates the events which fulfill his sad father's prophecy that he would eventually answer the "call of his blood" for an alien tribe which would neither appreciate nor use his gifts properly.

Elesin, proud horseman to the dead king whose familial office, whose "blood . . . call[s] out to" him (*Horseman* 46) to follow his master into the "fourth stage" after a period of mourning and preparation, allows his fleshly attachment to his young bride to keep him from crossing the abyss of transition. His failure forces his own son, recently returned from studies in Europe where he had come to appreciate his people's culture (in comparison), to take his father's place.

But even though one play portrays a son who fails to follow his father's vocation and the second a father who fails to fulfill his own, both plays seek to vindicate traditional African practices as properly fulfilling the needs of a world inwardly and outwardly balanced, that is, authentically maintaining

the needs of the individual within the natural and communal *Gestalt* of interpenetrating obligations.

*The Strong Breed*

On one level, *The Strong Breed's* Eman struggles between the traditional world of his "blood," his ancestral office as a "carrier," and the "mental world" of the Western culture he has adopted during his travels seeking after knowledge and personal power. But on a deeper level, Eman must choose between his ruthless selfishness and his obligations to others. The abyss he must traverse destructures the "rationality" that has so thoroughly put him out of touch with what is truly human, that is, to keep faith with the love of a woman and with one's kin and destiny. Almost "classical" in its economy of characterization and unified action, this play actually follows Aristotelian conventions to reveal that Eman's *hamartia* ("fatal flaw") had long lain within him. He had become alienated from his people long before he left them to seek after knowledge in the Europeanized world. His desire for freedom and independence certainly leads him to reject his place as one of the "strong breed," but, more importantly, it impels him to abandon his lovers, his father, and even his son.

Set on a partially darkened stage without scene changes, as the stage notes direct, *The Strong Breed* is a quick-paced masterwork of dramaturgic design. This play's staging, in fact, creates a circular world of interpenetrating dimensions. In a single space, skillful lighting carves out of darkness startling time-shifts and location changes. Eman's night flight as a "carrier" from pursuers of an evil alien tribe flings him into confrontations with truths he had long failed to face. Through these encounters, Eman passes into "the transitional yet inchoate matrix of death and becoming" (*Myth* 142), but

unfortunately he himself experiences no personal enlightenment from this passage, just a self-imposed retribution for his past failure to be “authentic.”

The play begins with Sunma nervously telling Eman, a stranger living in her village, that she wants him to leave the area before her village celebrates its new year festival. Eman strangely ignores her requests but instead lightheartedly interacts with Ifada, a retarded deaf-mute he has befriended, asking him about his plans for the evening’s celebrations. A strange Girl shows up dragging an effigy, her “carrier,” behind her and asks if Eman will give her an article of his clothing for her ritual object which she will abuse to get rid of her illness. When Eman moves to touch her, she leaps away warily and tells Eman just to throw the clothing to her. Sunma viciously drives off both children but especially abuses Ifada as “unwholesome.” Eman perceives that she is making herself hate the child but fails to heed her increasingly more hysterical demands that he leave. When the last passenger lorry has left the village, she admits that her whole tribe is evil but does not explicitly tell Eman what she fears will happen.

Soyinka establishes Eman’s character deftly and economically from the beginning of the play. From his interactions with Ifada, it is apparent that he does not really understand people. His “kindness” towards the boy is in reality not kind at all, insofar as he never acknowledges Ifada’s existential situation. If he did, he would never suggest that Ifada make his own mask for the new year’s celebration Sunma’s tribe is to celebrate that night or start a farm for one unable to keep it up. Eman also fails to pay attention to Sunma’s nervousness about leaving the village, her forced hostility to Ifada, or her warning about the Girl’s inherent evil. He doesn’t even notice the Girl’s strange affect or understand the significance of her words that her mother would punish her if she were to touch him. The fact is that Eman is utterly



out of touch with everyone, but especially with Sunma. He has withdrawn from her because of her “weakness,” her desire to have an intimate (that is, human) relationship with him. Still, her level of nervousness and evasiveness should alert him that Sunma wants him out of the village for more than just selfish reasons. Keeping faith with his “ideas” about people and reality is what has actually made him “inhuman.” He must transit the void of his own self-absorbed intellectualism to affirm what is truly human within himself and to contact what is truly human in others. But this he fails to do.

Still, Sunma must also cross over the “abyss of transition” and recognize that she too suffers from her tribe’s “unwholesomeness” despite her conscious rejection of its evil. The fact that she refuses to name the danger that threatens Eman is a measure of her shame and dishonesty about a disease that is also really her own. Yet her lack of honesty matches Eman’s, and their shared inability to communicate with one another speeds on the coming disaster. In exasperation, she complains to Eman after the lorry pulls away, “Now the thought will not leave me, I have a feeling which will not be shaken off, that in some way, you have tonight totally destroyed my life” (123). The fact is that her need for a stranger to save her from her people and from her fear of the evil she shares with them equals Eman’s need to remain a stranger among strangers to hide his grief for his lost love and his guilt for deserting her:

SUNMA. What brought you here at all, Eman? And what makes you stay?

*[There is another silence.]*

SUNMA. I am not trying to share your life. I know you too well by now. But at least we have worked together since you

came. Is there nothing at all I deserve to know?

EMAN. Let me continue a stranger--especially to you. Those who have much to give fulfil themselves only in total loneliness.

SUNMA. Then there is no love in what you do.

EMAN. There is. Love comes to me more easily with strangers.

SUNMA. That is unnatural.

EMAN. Not for me. I know I find consummation only when I have spent myself for a total stranger.

SUNMA. It seems unnatural to me. But then I am a woman. I have a woman's longings and weaknesses. And the ties of blood are very strong in me.

EMAN [*smiling*]. You think I have cut loose from all these--ties of blood.

SUNMA. Sometimes you are so inhuman.

EMAN. I don't know what that means. But I am very much my father's son. (125-126)

Eman's calling himself his "father's son" sets in motion his father's prophecy, already referred to above. Immediately outside the hut, there is the sound of pursuit as Ifada, escaped after having been kidnapped and dressed up as a "carrier," rushes to Eman's hut and pounds on the door for help. In spite of Sunma's pleadings that he not open the door, Eman gives sanctuary to Ifada and must face the wrath of Jaguna, Sunma's father and chief of the new year ceremony. Turning to Sunma, Jaguna tells her to inform her friend of the tribe's customs in these matters. When she falters, he says he no longer trusts his daughter and orders one of his henchmen to take her back home lest she become a hindrance. Oroge, Jaguna's more diplomatic assistant, tries

to soothe the situation by assuring Eman that if he gives them Ifada without hesitation, they will make sure no one in the village finds out that his hut has harbored the carrier, for should they discover his house has become contaminated with the carrier's pollution, they will surely burn it down. Eman demands to know why they are picking on a helpless and unwilling boy. Jaguna does not understand why Ifada should have to be willing when such a victim is surely a "godsend." Eman counters, "In my home, we believe that a man should be willing" (128).

Little by little, Eman backs himself into a corner from which he will have no choice but to answer the "call of his blood." Oroge explains that anyone who acts as a carrier in their village would be driven from his home because the people would never endure him after his performance of the office, so the village people allow orphaned or abandoned idiots, like Ifada, to wander in and live until they should have need of their services as carriers. Eman counters that in his tribe a carrier must be willing to perform the ritual for his own people and is respected for his willingness and strength. Before leaving with the dumb-moaning Ifada, Jaguna turns and contemptuously taunts Eman:

You see, it is so easy to talk. You say there are no men in this village because they cannot provide a willing carrier. And yet I heard Oroge tell you we only use strangers. There is only one other stranger in the village, but I have not heard him offer himself [*spits.*] It is so easy to talk is it not? (129-130)

Of course, Eman accepts Jaguna's challenge. When the lights come back up from blackout, we see Ifada and the Girl struggling over her "carrier." Sunma, who has apparently escaped her guard, realizes that Ifada is free and Eman gone, turns fiercely on the boy, and asks him where they have taken

Eman. Dragging him off in the direction to which he points, she upbraids him, screaming "Take me there at once. God help you if we are too late. You loathsome thing, if you have let him suffer . . ." (131).

Lighting transforms the scene, and we see Eman crouching in a passage-way, dressed as the "carrier" and covered with a flour-like substance. Just as he convinces himself that he is safe, a woman tosses a bucket of slop out her window onto him and reveals his whereabouts. After he flees, Jaguna and Oroge enter speculating as to why Eman had bolted and why he wouldn't let Oroge "prepare" him with drugs to endure the beatings and insults. Countering Jaguna's blunt assertions of Eman's cowardice, Oroge opines that Eman has broken more from the insults than from the beatings the people have afflicted him with. The rest of the play reveals that Eman's inward wounds have driven him to break from the conventional ritual of merely bearing beating and curses to embrace a self-imposed reparation for having shunned the duties of his "blood."

Four visions, or, "plays-within-the-play," overwhelming Eman as he flees in dire exhaustion and thirst from his pursuers, reveal the secrets of his previous life. In the first three visions Eman the "carrier" becomes an observer of himself (although the same actor may play both parts) involved in scenes from his earlier life while in the fourth he himself engages the vision in his "present." The first vision presents his father (the "Old Man") who is himself dressed as a carrier preparing to carry his tribe's "evils" one last time. The Old Man tells his son that despite his personal grief over losing his wife, Omae, he must remain faithful to his heritage as a "carrier" for his people. The second vignette shows Omae and Eman during their adolescence when Eman abandons her and his home to gain secret knowledge in the large towns. The third portrays Omae's funeral after her fatal birth-giving to

Eman's son, another of the "strong breed," who, like Eman and the Old Man before him, has caused the death of his mother. In the last vision, Eman the "carrier" follows his father's apparition, again outfitted as a carrier, to what seems to be Eman's destined death among the "sacred trees." Between these sketches, the lights shift to intervening scenes of the "present": Jaguna and Oroge hotly pursuing Eman and plotting his death to remove the mounting "contamination" his flight has caused, Sunma attacking her cruel father for his crime against her beloved and abjectly despairing when he beats off her crazed assault, Ifada loyally attending and supporting Sunma in her grief, and the Girl ever presaging evil in remote but cunning malice. Together the "flash-backs" provide a non-chronological insight into Eman's spiritual plight, the remorse and guilt he himself carries for all the desertions he has perpetrated in his life, for failing to keep faith with what is truly "authentic": love, family, and place in the larger social matrix.

The last scenes of the play recapitulate the traumas Eman has inflicted on those who love him, only this time he is the victim. When Eman encounters his father in his fourth vision, the Old Man, dressed as a carrier and carrying a boat on his head, does not turn to acknowledge his joyful salute of "Father." As Eman draws nearer, the Old Man rebuffs him because the Old Man is carrying the boat full of the past year's evils. Eman protests that he is his son. The Old Man rejoins, "Then go back. We cannot give the two of us." But Eman insists that he tell him where he is going, and when the Old Man responds that he is going to the river, Eman rejoices because now his thirst will be assuaged. The Old Man, however, rejoins that the stream lies in the other direction. Eman is confused:

EMAN. But you said . . .

OLD MAN. I take the longer way, you know how I must do this.

It is quicker if you take the other way. Go now.

EMAN. No. I will only get lost again. I shall go with you.

OLD MAN. Go back my son. Go back.

EMAN. Why? Won't you even look at me?

OLD MAN. Listen to your father. Go back.

EMAN. But father!

*[He makes to hold him. Instantly the old man breaks into a rapid trot. Eman hesitates, then follows, his strength nearly gone.]*

EMAN. Wait father. I am coming with you . . . wait . . . wait for me father . . .

*[There is the sound of twigs breaking, of a sudden trembling in the branches. Then silence.]* (145)

The scene shifts back to Eman's house where the Girl's effigy hangs from the sheaves. Sunma, still supported by Ifada, enters and "stands transfixed as she sees the hanging figure" (145). Ifada becomes wild when he sees it, rushes over, and rips it down. At this, Sunma loses the last bit of her will-power and "crumbles against the wall." At some remove and, in part, concealed, the Girl stands eyeing them with her usual unemotional gaze. Ifada clasps the effigy tightly to himself standing above Sunma. The Girl keeps her station watching them, as villagers, wordless and silent, subdued with guilt, file past the hut giving it wide berth. Eventually Jaguna and Oroge emerge, but when Jaguna espies his daughter, he stops short and retreats a bit. To Oroge's nearly whispered question of concern, Jaguna fumes, "The viper" (146). But Oroge observes that he does not think she will even see them. Jaguna complains of the cowardice of the people who could not even raise one curse when they saw the carrier hanging from the tree. After all, he goes

on, "We did it for them. It was all for their common good. What did it benefit me whether the man lived or died. . . . Not one could raise a curse." Oroge adds that he has also noticed that none of the villagers will have anything to do with either him or Jaguna, who seethes, "There are those who will pay for this night's work" (146). Sunma, Ifada, and the Girl in a silent triangle of both communion and estrangement create an eerie tableau as the lights fade, the play closes with some hope that at least some have learned wisdom from "this night's work."

Eman's rejection of his tribe and "blood," his father and his son, not to mention the women who love him, mocks him at his end. He follows his father's retreating figure crying out to him pitifully just as Omae had done when he first left his home village. Ever restless and yearning, Eman seeks out knowledge, strength, and peace everywhere but where it truly resides: in his family and his destiny. He is ever ready to take flight from difficult situations until doing so is his only hope for survival. He prodigally expends his "love" and talents on strangers who do not or cannot appreciate his efforts while failing to keep faith with those who truly love him. Sunma's remark to Eman that "[k]eeping faith with so much is slowly making you inhuman" (122) is actually quite ironic because his "tragic fault" lies in his failure to keep faith not only with his "blood," but, more importantly, with those who love him. He keeps faith only with an intellectual image of who he thinks he ought to be.

We see Eman's tendency to "intellectualize" in his flashback with Omae in adolescence. He has obviously thought long and deeply about where he belongs in the world because his decision to quit his village when the Tutor tries to abuse Omae seems terribly well thought-out. He does, of course, support the male hierarchy of authority that the Tutor represents;

otherwise he would not have defended him so vehemently against Omae's charge that he chases young girls. But when Omae is proven right by the Tutor's actions, Eman seems to act on a plan he had already devised during his hours deep in thought within the seclusion of his hut. He betrays the fact that he had already considered the social advantages of anonymity and freedom the larger towns afford when he tells Omae that escape from the Tutor's power "is a small thing one can do in the big towns." He tells Omae that he is going on a journey now because "[n]othing ties me down," but when Omae offers to go with him, he tells her he would only abandon her along the way. He tells her to live with his father until either he comes back or she can wait for him no longer (141).

But Eman's twelve-year sojourn in "the big towns" drives him back to seek peace in his village, a peace he finds waiting for him in Omae's simplicity of heart. Once he loses Omae, however, he again rejects the simplicity and integrity of his home village. He ends up dwelling with aliens who haven't the goodness to use the tradition of the carrier in its truly sacral, that is, "human," form. But when he disobeys his father in his last vision and refuses to "go the other way," back towards the village and away from the river, Eman fails to make the only reparation commensurate to his crimes of desertion. Eman would have successfully crossed the abyss of dissolution and transformation if he had returned to Sunma and learned how to keep faith with a woman in a truly human relationship.

Sunma, on the other hand, succeeds in crossing the abyss of transition in *The Strong Breed*. Despite the fact that she renounces her father and her tribe for their evil, she, like Eman, is really her father's child. She viciously attacks Ifada to protect herself and Eman from confronting the evil practices of her tribe. Eman's choice to take the boy's place is at least consonant with



“keeping faith with reality” and signifies his answer to “the call of his blood” that his father has prophesied. But Sunma successfully transits the moral abyss of her tribe by uniting with Ifada at the end of the play and restoring at least an image of the family unit Eman himself had abandoned. She alone out of all her tribe will keep faith with what is essentially true and right.

But keeping faith with the call of one’s “blood” conjures images of reactionary racism. Such, of course, lies at the core of any “fundamentalism’s” attempt to preserve cultural traditions by waging war on an intruding alien culture. Soyinka, however, unlike the purveyors of Négritude, considers himself not to be a “traditionalist” in a negative sense. His personal reaffirmation of traditional African cultural values comes from his own transit across the abyss of Europe’s so-called progressive civilization. Europe’s inherent nihilism has brought Soyinka to uphold the validity of a moral order that is, in his opinion, authentically “human,” not just African. Where the European civilization had once placed its faith in Christ as its universal “carrier,” some traditional African cultures have relied on people strong enough and willing enough to play this archetypal role. *The Strong Breed* strongly affirms the need for this role to be played, but it must be played with integrity with its intrinsic humanity, not perverted into an excuse for sadistic cruelty.

#### *Death and the King’s Horseman*

As in *The Strong Breed*, Soyinka supports the authenticity of ancient Yoruba customs over against a “fallen” European culture in *Death and the King’s Horseman*. But the custom he exalts and defends in the latter play is ritual suicide. According to the philosophy of Martin Heidegger, another of Nietzsche’s disciples, *Dasein* (that is, temporally conditioned human

existence) could only have “the possibility of a life of ‘authenticity’ if it could ‘resolve’ to live up to its ‘being-unto-death’” (Grange 516). This complicated statement means that humans must consciously will to live (cf., Nietzsche’s “will to power”) their contingent and mortal lives until, in spite of, and even because of, their approaching deaths in order to be true to their metaphysical “being-in” in the world. In *Death and the King’s Horseman* Soyinka contends that preserving African communal “authenticity” depends upon the “resoluteness” (*Entschlossenheit*) of individual wills literally to embrace an African cultural “being-unto-death” in order to preserve the metaphysical life of the community and its world.

This play, like *The Strong Breed*, rejects narcissistic rationalism that inherently empties human culture of its sacral connection to communal traditions and the earth. Soyinka, acting as Ogunnian psychopomp, didactically adjures his “choric-audience” to spurn Europe’s cultural colonialism to free themselves from alienation and to reintegrate themselves with their spiritual connection to the interpenetrating worlds of the living, the ancestors, and the unborn. But the play is more than an Africanist propaganda piece against Europe. It is a tragedy in which Elesin’s “fatal flaw” lies in his selfish choice to continue his earthly existence and not to commit suicide despite his obligation to his ancestral “blood” and to his position in Yoruba society. To choose self over the community, to boast brave deeds and not to perform them covers Elesin with dishonor, a shame more deadly than the “guilt” of the European Christian tradition. This shame can only be expiated by the death of his son and himself.

Many critics, of course, would object to the suggestion that Soyinka is calling here for an actual return to human sacrifice in modern-day Nigeria. E. M. Birbalsingh, for example, sees the sacrifice in the play “as asserting ‘cosmic

totality'" and demonstrating "the efficacy of self-sacrifice" (210-11). Soyinka himself is quite anxious that producers of the play focus upon "the play's threnodic essence" and not create a reductionist production about a "clash of cultures" (*Horseman* vii-viii). He avers that the "confrontation in the play is largely metaphysical, contained in the human vehicle which is Elesin and the universe of the Yoruba mind" (viii). Yet while we may agree that these were Soyinka's conscious intentions, his text and dramaturgy conveys a different message. Soyinka structures his play to manipulate the audience's antipathies against the doltish colonialist Pilkingses and to sway their sympathies in favor of the charismatic and "authentic" Elesin. In this way, Soyinka maneuvers his audience to succumb uncritically to the "euphoric security" of his dramaturgic myth. But the audience's "willing suspension" of moral discernment, in critic James Booth's opinion, is actually "the product of ideological double-think" (143).

The sheer power of Soyinka's poetry instills the "euphoric security" of his myth into his audience and gains their consent to his stage-world as well as to his world-view. An English rendering of Yoruba formal and proverb-rich language in acts one and three dominates the imagination and sympathies of the audience, especially when contrasted with the secular *parole* of the colonial world in acts two and four. When the two worlds finally collide in the fifth act, the audience is prepared to accept as poetically fitting Olunde's suicide in his father's place. His mute corpse vindicates his father's vaunting promises and redeems his father's failure to live up to his words with honor.

The play opens upon a Yoruba market in the process of closing where women are folding up their wares and making ready to leave. The *Elesin Oba* (the "King's Horseman," an honorific title) enters, full of vitality and exuding

an “infectious enjoyment of life” (1). He is attended by drummers and praise-singers. In a formal language rich with proverbs and formulaic honorifics, the Elesin and his chief praise-singer (*Olohun-iyo*) engage in apparently light-hearted banter. In answer to the praise-singer’s query, Elesin explains that he is going to the market-place to bask in the admiration of the market women who will cover him with the rich fabrics of damask and *alari* to show him honor.

The praise-singer boasts that since he does not know whether Elesin will meet his departed father in the next world, he himself really ought to follow him into death “to sing these deeds in accents that will pierce the deafness of the ancient ones” (2). Telling him to stay behind in this world to sing his praises here, Elesin brags that he will enjoy being spoiled by the market women. To the praise-singer’s warning the “hands of women also weaken the unwary,” Elesin explains that in his last night alive in this world he craves “the smell of their [the women’s] flesh, the smell of indigo on their cloth, this is the last air I wish to breathe as I go to meet my great forebears” (3).

But Elesin’s mentioning the “forebears” causes the praise-singer to warn Elesin to perpetuate the examples of the ancestors in whose time “the world was never tilted from its groove” or “wrenched from its true course” (3). In richly stylized language, the *Olohun-iyo* warns Elesin not to forget his duty because of the allurements of his sensual desire:

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 the boulders of the great void, whose world will give us shelter? (4)

To counter the praise-singer's impugning his honor, Elesin, accompanied by a drummer who "moves in and draws a rhythm out of his steps" (5), begins his chant and dance of the story of the "Not-I bird." In a series of folkloric vignettes, Elesin describes the folly of various characters whose denial of the inevitability of death subjects them to the dishonor of fear before the unavoidable. Unlike those whose fear of dying elicits a foolish "Not-I," Elesin stands firm and intact and proudly proclaims to the admiring crowd of women who have gathered to enjoy his display, "You all know / What I am" (9).

In a dialogue of structured verse, Elesin, the praise-singer, and the choral market women "call and answer" to confirm Elesin's fixed will to fulfill his duty to his lord, the departed king, and to follow him into death. In exquisite verse, Elesin makes a series of declarations of his sense of duty and his disdain for death as horseman to the king. "Master of [his] fate," Elesin challenges his audience to watch him "dance along the narrowing path" towards death, "[g]lazed by the soles of my great precursors" (10). Recognizing the finitude of life, he avows that the only criterion for living one's life well is to live it honorably:

What elder takes his tongue to his  
plate,  
Licks it clean of every crumb? He  
will encounter  
Silence when he calls on children to  
fulfill  
The smallest errand! Life is honour.  
It ends when honour ends. (12)

Thematically, of course, these words exactly foreshadow the coming

crisis that Elesin fails. In the Yorubas' circular world of interpenetrating obligations, it was customary that the elder male eat first from the communal plate and then allow his family to eat in order after him. But to exceed the limits of one's position's privileges brings not only personal shame but social disequilibrium. To survive, this world balanced over the void depends on the self-restraint that comes from honorably fulfilling one's obligations. The elders must show respect to the young and leave them enough to satisfy their own hunger. Contrary to this duty, however, Elesin takes advantage of the fact that on his last day alive, the "whole world" is to be at his disposal (20), and he demands to have the hand of a girl betrothed to the son of Iyaloja, head of the women's market-place. She also reminds him that the "living must eat and drink. When the moment comes, don't turn the food to rodents' droppings in their mouths. Don't let them taste the ashes of the world when they step out at dawn to breathe the morning dew" (24-5).

Still, Iyaloja fulfills her obligations to the Elesin on his day of metaphysical triumph, the day in which the world of the living and the world of the dead join together in his person. In fact, she finally sees the fitting wisdom of Elesin's leaving behind his "excessive load" [his semen] (21) to "travel light" (22) into the next world. Elesin's begetting a child on this of all days will unite all three worlds of the Yoruba "cosmic totality," the living, the ancestors, and the unborn:

And then, think of this--it makes the mind tremble. The fruit of such a union is rare. It will be neither of this world nor of the next. Nor of the one behind us. As if the timelessness of the ancestor world and the unborn have joined spirits to wring an issue of the elusive being of passage . . . (24)

Reciprocity and keeping the social-cosmic world in balance, then, demands

that all moral choices be made with a view to preserving Yoruba traditions, for, as Elesin himself says, “[p]leasure palls. Our acts should have meaning” (21). But Iyaloja suspects Elesin’s true motives for pressing the limits of his rights to possess “the world.” She declares, “Elesin, even at the narrow end of the passage I know you will look back and sigh a last regret for the flesh that flashed past your spirit in flight” (24). In order to accomplish his literal transit of the abyss, therefore, Elesin must first cross his personal moral abyss. He must choose duty to the “cosmic totality” over his personal pleasure.

In sharp contrast, the play’s European world emphasizes the primacy of personal autonomy over communal duty. In act three, Jane expresses her shock that a local sea captain would have sacrificed his life to save coastal residents from his ship’s explosive cargo. Where Olunde finds the story “inspiring . . . an affirmative commentary on life,” Jane pontificates that “[l]ife should never be thrown deliberately away” (71). Earlier in the play she asks her husband if Olunde’s departure to England for medical study were motivated by fear of taking his father’s place as Elesin to the next king. She vehemently declaims, “I wouldn’t stay if I knew I was trapped in such a horrible custom” (35). To her, preserving and abiding by such a custom is more than “barbaric . . . it’s feudal” (74). In a world predicated on “self-actualization,” there is no place for feudal customs of loyalty and honor.

Jane has mistakenly convinced herself, however, that Olunde has been Europeanized by his modern scientific training. When she asks him the reason for his coming back from England, he tells her that a relative sent him a cable of the king’s death weeks previously and that, understanding the cable’s implication, he has returned to bury his father. He says that her husband’s attempt to “save” his father from fulfilling his duty is a waste of time because his true “protection” lies in the “honour and veneration of his

own people" (73). In comparison, Olunde has learned in England that despite the "mass suicide" of the war, Europe's "greatest art is the art of survival" (75). But Europe's survival depends on its being able to describe a thing as "the opposite of what it really is" (75). In his opinion, the lying propaganda that turns defeats into victories for palliating the home front is a "blasphemy" for which there ought to be "mourning in the home of the bereaved" (75). To Olunde's thinking, Europe's ability to survive without honor on a diet of self-told lies is not a mark of its cultural superiority over "barbaric" Africa.

Where Olunde acts as Soyinka's *raisonneur* in this exchange, Jane portrays a rather vacuous foil, hardly worthy of taking on the role of the "ugly European." If the sea captain's war-time heroics mean nothing to her aside from being a waste of life, then she is alienated from even the last shreds of Europe's own chivalric culture, which generally becomes most evident in times of war. If she hasn't the imagination to recognize the Elesin's self-sacrifice as a kind of "martyrdom" or witness to his people's religion, then she has shed even the remembrance of Christianity's early history of dramatic self-immolation. Yet despite the shallowness of her character, Jane, as Europe's representative "straw man," does make a telling point about the danger of feudalism. Soyinka himself admits that we should not "jettison our cynical faculties altogether":

Economics and power have always played a large part in the championing of new deities throughout human history. The struggle for authority in early human society with its prize of material advantages, social prestige and the establishment of an elite has nowhere been so intensely marked as in the function of religion, perpetuating itself in repressive orthodoxies, countered by equally determined schisms. (*Myth* 12)



The fact is that the Elesin Oba has ever luxuriated in his secure and pampered social position in the “heart of life, this hive which contains the swarm of the world in its small compass . . . where I have known love and laughter away from the palace” (*Horseman* 54). His feudal status, validated by his cultic office within the tribe’s religion, has guaranteed him access to the sweetest honey of the “hive.” Drinking deeply of its sweetness on his last day of mortal existence causes him to regret having to leave such pleasure and prestige behind. But he can’t both enjoy the benefits religion and custom afford him and violate the premises that have protected his enjoyment.

As a socially powerful and personally charismatic male, however, Elesin actually represents a minority of those who would normally become “sacrifices” at a ruler’s death. In fact, countless other cultures from all over the world have had customs similar to the Yorubas’. But in very few cases, have sacrificial victims been volunteers or come from privileged classes. “Quite frequently . . . the victims were wholly unwilling and were chosen arbitrarily” (Booth 139). How would Soyinka’s audience then react to his mythopoesis if, instead of Elesin Oba, Simon Pilkings had to rush in to save an unwilling child, woman, or slave? Usurping Soyinka’s own terminology, Booth levels the damning accusation that “Soyinka relies on an unexamined Manichaeism about ‘African’ and ‘Western’ values in his audience to secure acceptance for this totalitarian myth” (142).

Although I agree with Booth that promoting a “cosmic totality” can lead to a cosmic totalitarianism, I would, however, like to qualify his blanket condemnation of Soyinka’s message in *Death and the King’s Horseman*. The truth is the West’s capitalist culture does exalt selfish hedonism over communitarian interests. Jane Pilkings’ incomprehension of self-sacrifice is at least representative of a portion of the complacently selfish “survivalists”

of the post-modern era. And life within the protection of an all-encompassing social matrix and metaphysical certitude does appear to be more “authentic” when compared to the European decadent alienation and nonchalant sacrilege the Pilkingses exemplify. The problem is that “negating the negative” may fail to establish a positive. Nietzsche himself betrays an irreconcilable dualism in his thought. While denying transcendence, he calls for the Superman dialectically to “overcome” his own nihilism with a strong nihilism. While consciously repudiating Romanticism, he poetically creates a mythology to express his philosophy. How then can the disciple be greater than the master? After repudiating Négritude, Soyinka in turn creates a work suffering from “perverse romantic primitivism” (Booth 146) and promoting a nativistic return to a feudal patriarchal order.

Soyinka’s apparent self-contradiction parallels Nietzsche’s and Heidegger’s philosophical self-refutation. Soyinka nostalgically manipulates the imagery of myths in whose essential reality he can no longer believe to create new myths by which to move the African world’s will to social and political action. But as with the so-called self-overcoming Superman, nihilist ontology dictates that Soyinka really has nowhere to go, just as he has nowhere from which to flee: there is no way out (cf., *No Exit*) from one’s temporally conditioned *Dasein*. Once caught in the web of nihilism, one can affirm “alternative realities” only by acting on one’s arbitrary choice with a “will to power.” Without transcendental being (which Plato names “the Good”), there is no objective measure of “true” and “false,” “good” and “evil.” Earth-bound, self-bound, one can only escape through what a “Eurocentric” commentator might call “fantasy.” But in reality, one can never transit the abyss. One can only divert oneself with mythic fantasies while adrift within ontological nothingness.

## ADRIFT IN THE ABYSS OF NOTHINGNESS

Both *The Road* and *Madmen and Specialists* show us prisoners of the void for whom no transit is possible. Lost in the abyss of modern nihilism, *The Road's* Professor and *Madmen and Specialists's* Dr. Bero and his father, the Old Man, are psychopomps who can only lead their "choric revelers" circling recursively around within the "HOLE IN THE ZERO of NOTHING" (*Madmen* 116). Their collective spiritual state exemplifies all that Soyinka sees as wrong with the pervasive European nihilism afflicting Nigerian life in the post-colonial era. *The Road* satirizes the pandemic corruption of Nigerian political and social life, while *Madmen and Specialists* portrays the fratricidal bloodlust that consumed Nigeria in its genocidal war against Biafra. While *The Strong Breed* and *Death and the King's Horseman* put their audiences at the flash point of culture shock where traditional African and modern European cultures clash, these latter two plays reveal life beyond the cultural border where Africa has finally succumbed to the European disease.

Despite their contemporary settings, the plots of both plays depend on *orisas* of traditional Yoruba belief to bring about a resolution to the action. In *The Road*, Professor's search for the Word, which for him is actually a search for death, leads him to the discovery and possession of Murano, an Ogun-possessed *egungun* dancer killed in a road accident while leading a festival for lorry drivers. Caught in the *agemo* phase, that is, adrift in the "fourth stage" between life and death, Murano in *egungun* raffia slays Say Tokyo Kid, Professor's inadvertent murderer. In *Madmen and Specialists*, Iya Agba and Iya Mate, who appear to be two aged herbalists and healers, are in reality earth goddesses who execute judgment on the pollution and abomination of Dr.

Bero, the Old Man, and their chorus of crippled mendicants. Si Bero, both disciple to the earth-mothers and daughter and sister to the “madman” and the “specialist,” respectively, clings to the delusive hope that she can save her family from their spiritual disease. By failing to recognize the wisdom of her mistresses’ realistic assessment, she loses their blessings in the magical herbs they have taught her to glean from the earth. In the final scene of the play, they set fire to the herbs in an act of summary judgment and repudiation.

Like *The Strong Breed* and *Death and the King's Horseman*, these two plays also seek to vindicate the traditional Yoruba belief that people, like the earth, must be inwardly and outwardly balanced in both social mutuality and individual fulfillment. This vindication is established by way of contrast with the violation of these principles. Professor, excommunicated from the Anglican Church for heresy and theft, continues his heretical and dishonest activities in the literal shadow of the church where he had once acted as a lay-reader. He actualizes his egoistic need for knowledge and power by manipulating Murano, the Ogun-possessed “living-dead” in the *agemo* phase of flesh dissolution, and the simple lorry drivers who depend on him to survive the bureaucratic corruption of the Nigerian state.

Dr. Bero is even further alienated from the African spiritual origins he has perverted. A thorough-going fascist, he actualizes his need for power and control by cannibalizing the testicles of his fallen enemies. An act of sympathetic magic from primordial times, his cannibalism actually represents a further estrangement from “authenticity” because, as a thoroughly modern savage, he sees no life or essence in anything, just opportunities for the exercise of his disjunctive will. The Old Man, his father, is an enemy of the state because his anarchist nihilism has led him to a consummate vision of human nullity. Regrettably, he cannot transit the pervasive void he has

discovered in order to find meaning. But the question still remains whether such “overcoming” is possible in a world without transcendent being.

### *The Road*

*The Road*, from the perspective of genre criticism, can only be called a “tragicomic tragedy.” Its characters are distortions, caricatures, the grist for Soyinka’s biting satire of Nigerian life. In my opinion, the audience’s emotional response to the play is riven between overwhelming hilarity with the play’s absurdist lampoon of Nigerian social and political corruption and shocked sobriety before the *danse macabre* of Professor’s Faustian quest to suspend and transcend death through magical mastery over the “Word.”

*The Road*, however, does not fit the Aristotelian criteria for tragedy that both *The Strong Breed* and *Death and the King’s Horseman* broadly adhere to. Certainly we can say that hubris and not *hamartia* in itself precipitates Professor’s fall. But, speaking objectively, Professor has no place from whence to fall since he himself has no inherent nobility and no position within any recognized social order, whether traditional or modern. He is merely king of a world of his own creation. And because of Professor’s madness and utter unconsciousness of his personal moral “abyss,” the *epiphany* or *anagnorisis* (that is, the critical moment of recognition of the tragic hero’s true situation) can occur only in the audience’s reflective memory long after the lights have gone out on the play’s last scene. But considering the consummate chaos of *The Road*’s world, what lessons can the audience draw from Professor’s ruin? Is there even a *kathartic* cleansing that discloses a glimpse of new social order? In other words, does the “choric-audience” cross the abyss of transition and grow from its collective communion with its essence?

The world of *The Road* is the "AKSIDENT STORE." Across from the church, hard by the cemetery, the AKSIDENT STORE serves up cheap alcohol and provides haven to destroyed lives (lorry drivers and their touts, layabouts and thugs) and to wrecked trucks, all victims of the road. The patron deity of this world is the god Ogun because roads, iron, and alcohol fall within his suzerainty. But there is no evidence of Ogun's creative side in this world. Death predominates here filling this world with what Benedict Ibitokun calls the "presence of absence" (3), an inner vacuity that yearns for *plenum*, spiritual fullness and connectedness to "meaning," if not "being." Over this world of "broken words" (*Road* 195) presides Professor, ever on a Quest for the Word:

PROFESSOR. Come then, I have a new wonder to show you . . .  
 a madness where a motor-car throws itself against a tree--  
 Gbram! And showers of crystal flying on broken souls. . . .

.....  
 PROFESSOR. My bed is among the dead, and when the road  
 raises a victory cry to break my sleep I hurry to a disgruntled  
 swarm of souls full of spite for their rejected bodies. It is a  
 market of stale meat, noisy with flies and quarrelsome with  
 old women. The place I speak of is not far from here, if you  
 wish to come . . . you shall be shown this truth of my  
 endeavors--

SAMSON. No thank you very much. I don't willingly seek out  
 unpleasant sights.

PROFESSOR: You are afraid? There are dangers in the Quest I  
 know, but the Word may be found companion not to life, but  
 Death. Three souls you know, fled up that tree. You would

think, to see it that the motor-car had tried to clamber after them. Oh there was such an angry buzz but the matter was beyond repair. They died, all three of them crucified on rigid branches. I found this word growing where their blood had spread and sunk along plough scouring of the wheel. Now tell me you who sit above it all, do you think my sleep was broken over nothing, over a meaningless event? (158-159)

But despite his self-acknowledged quest to unveil death, Professor is also seeking profits. His seemingly mystical language is quite equivocal about what he really considers the “Word” to be. The expression, “broken words” (195) quoted above, for example, refers to the truck parts that he, Sergeant Burma, his deceased partner, and Sampson, his new partner, loot from demolished lorries before the authorities arrive at the accident scene. The fact that none of the touts is quite sure whether he was thrown out of the Church because of heresy or theft extends the ambiguity about the exact nature of his quest. His “customers” and “chorus,” the semi- and unemployed, are prize sheep he eagerly fleeces for the “services” they so desperately need. But given the corruption of government officials, Professor’s corruption is cheap by comparison. The lorry drivers would much rather pay Professor for forged driving licenses than pay off Nigerian officialdom for legitimate documents.

When Samson and Salubi discuss what they would do if suddenly they became millionaires, the two touts fall into a comic satire of official corruption:

SAMSON. As for Professor, I will give him special office with air-conditioner, automatic printing press and so on and so forth, so he can forge driving licenses for all my drivers. The man is an artist and, as a millionaire, I must support culture.

SALUBI. The day the police catch you . . .

SAMSON. Which kind police? They will form line in front of my house every morning to receive their tip. No one will touch my lorry on the road.

.....

SAMSON. E sa mi. ("Sing my praise.")

SALUBI [*down on his knees, salaams.*]. African millionaire!

SAMSON. I can't hear you.

SALUBI. Delicate millionaire!

SAMSON. Wes matter? You no chop this morning? I say I no hear you.

SALUBI [*in attitude of prayer.*]. Give us this day our daily bribe. Amen. (154-155)

But in my opinion, Professor's spiritual disease derives from a particularly Christian, or, better, post-Christian source. When he served as lay-reader, he could watch through the open window next to the reader's lectern that place of reprehension he now lords it over. Much as he then looked with disdain upon the AKSIDENT STORE as a den of iniquity, he now looks back across the cemetery longingly upon the lectern with its brazen eagle upholding the Word. It remains for him a forbidden place of inward pilgrimage. The eagle, carved on the reader's lectern in many churches of the Anglican communion, is an emblem of the evangelist, St. John the Divine. St. John's Gospel, of course, begins with a doxology celebrating the Word-made-flesh which was with God "In the beginning."

In Johannes Goethe's tragedy *Faust*, Part I, ll. 1224-1237, Faust sits down in despair to translate this very line from St. John's Gospel. He rejects "Word" as an appropriate translation as well as "reason" or "intellect" and



“power.” He chooses instead “*die That*,” the “deed” or “act,” that is, the effectual act or intentional deed or, perhaps better, the consciously willed action (Goethe 56-57). Although Soyinka may not have directly borrowed from Goethe in crafting Professor’s character or *The Road*’s plot, I believe that in terms of intellectual historical background, Faust’s choice of *die That* has everything to do with Professor’s existential situation. It is significant, for example, that Faust rejects “Word” (*logos*) and “reason” (*Sinn*) because, by doing so, he rejects the entire intellectual patrimony of the West. But his rejection of the word “power” (*Kraft*) as well signifies that he spurns inchoate and undirected energy. By affirming the willed “deed,” Faust implicitly embraces philosophical nihilism because volitional acts divorced from reflective reason or informed conscience (*logos*) exist in an ontological void. If the validity or “authenticity” of one’s actions rests solely on the basis that they be freely chosen, then one cannot and, indeed, need not discern the worthiness of those actions relative to any transcendental standard we might call “the Good.” Like Faust, Professor quests for personal power over cosmic forces without regard for the goodness of his quest or, especially, the worthiness of himself.

But Professor’s lack of awe before the “sacred” runs much more deeply in him than in Faust because, for him, everything in the world, even the cosmic force of the Word, is “dead.” In other words, every being is merely a reified object for his will’s arbitrary disposal. For example, he keeps Murano in the *agemo* phase and will not release him just for his ego’s gratification, dispatching him to tap palm wine and then having him dance as an *egungun* in his blasphemous parody of the Ogunnian rites. But he holds the mystery he is desecrating in no more awe than Jane and Simon Pilkings do when they wear *egungun* masks and raffia at the Prince’s ball in *Death and the King’s*

*Horseman*. Like the “broken words” of smashed trucks or the “broken souls” of impaled bodies, the Word is just an object to be possessed.

Interestingly, this attitude towards the sacred exactly parallels that of Simon Magus in the Acts of the Apostles. Witnessing St. Peter wielding the power of the Word over new converts in miraculous ways, Simon approaches Peter with money trying to purchase the power of the Holy Spirit. Simon Magus, therefore, has become synonymous in Christian tradition with both greed (simony) and heresy (gnostic magic), proclivities Professor also shares. (He was caught by the Bishop teaching Sunday School children that just as God had created the rainbow as a sign He would never again destroy the earth with rain, He also created the palm as a sign that no one should ever want because of thirst.) But when he was a practicing Christian, Professor could not fulfill his quest to expose death’s essence in Christ, the Word-made-flesh, “because Christ is life, and *mors mortis*. He who dies in me, says Christ, shall live forever. . . . [But] Professor is not interested in this spiritualistic elucidation of death. He wants, instead, a materialistic explication” (Ibitokun 32).

Professor, then, represents the European legacy still possessing the soul of Nigeria, egoistic, decadent, materialistic, manipulative, and anti-life. He holds the lower classes in thrall by his cultural advantages. They admire his practical power over the Word (his ability to forge authentic-looking documents), and, even though they recognize that he is mad, they both respect his style and “intellectual” deportment and fear his uncanny power as a kind of wizard or shaman. In this vein, Samson and Salubi discuss Professor’s history and his trouble with the church over “the matter of church funds.” Samson recoils at Salubi’s suggestion that such a man of quality as Professor would ever go to jail for his crimes:

SAMSON. You think they just put somebody in prison like that? Professor his very self? Of course you don't know your history. When Professor entered church, everybody turned round and the eyes of the congregation followed him to his pew--and he had his own private pew let me tell you, and if a stranger went and sat in it, the church warden wasted no time driving him out.

SALUBI. Dat one no to church, na high society.

SAMSON. You no sabbe de ting wey man dey call class so shurrup your mout. Professor enh, he get class. He get style. That suit he wears now, that was the very way he used to dress to evening service. I tell you, the whole neighbourhood used to come and watch him, they would gather in this very bar and watch him through the windows, him and his hundred handkerchiefs spread out on the pew in front of him. . . . (162)

In my opinion, Soyinka's "didactic" message in *The Road* is simply that the culture clash that produced the amalgam of post-colonial Nigeria has preserved what is worst both of traditional culture and of the new European admixture. In the quotation above, for example, we see Professor's pretentious classism, a controlling factor of European culture surviving to dominate post-colonial Nigerian life. But in the AKSIDENT STORE, caricatures of the post-modern Nigerian world gather to make themselves into a mockery of the "personal liberty" independence has brought them. They are: Say Tokyo Kid, in Eldred Jones' words, a "near-hysterical, fast-talking, gun-pulling Nigerian stage cowboy and timber truck driver" (87), and his gang of layabout thugs who act as "enforcers" for anyone with sufficient cash or

marijuana to meet their price; Chief-in-Town, the corrupt local politician who buys their services with hemp in order to have his way in a local meeting of his political party; Particulars Joe, a corrupt policeman who is ever on the look-out for bribes or smoldering pot on which he himself heartily drags along with the thugs; Kotonno, the washed-up former driver of the passenger lorry, "No Danger--No Delay," who has given up his career driving because of all the accidents he has seen, caused, or narrowly escaped; Samson, his tout, comic mime and raconteur, who is earnestly trying to get his partner Kotonno back on the road and away from collecting wreckage for the AKSIDENT STORE; and Salubi, comic foil to Samson's art and a tout who would be a driver if only Professor would finish his forged license. This menagerie of misfits inhabits Professor's world of the Word's hypostatized death. The drivers and touts combine all the superstitions of the past with the superstitions of modernity to create new myths about themselves, their lorries, and the drivers who have died before them in accidents on the road.

The climactic scene in which most of the characters gather for Professor's nightly palm wine "communion" feast, timed to coincide with the Anglican church's service, exemplifies this sad world of cultural confusion and unremitting nihilism. Professor begins the ceremony by lecturing his captive "communicant chorus" with contempt for their bloodied heads and bodies after the thugs' afternoon job for Chief-in-Town:

If you think I do this from the kindness of my heart you are fools. But you are no fools, so you must be liars. It is true I demand little of you, just your presence at evening communion, and the knowledge you afford me your deaths will have no meaning. Well look at you, battered in pieces and I ask no explanation. I let you serve two masters, three, four, five, a hundred if you wish. But understand that I would

live as hopefully among cattle, among hogs, among rams if it were Ramadan, I would live as hopefully if you were antheaps destined to be crushed underfoot. (221)

Particulars Joe is on hand to make inquiries about the missing palm wine tapper killed while in *egungun* leading a lorry drivers' street festival for Ogun and, of course, to stay for the palm wine about to be served. Kotonu and Samson, who were responsible for the *egungun's* (Murano's) death, say nothing, but Professor threatens the policeman, saying, "Be careful. If my enemies trouble me I shall counter with a resurrection" (221).

Later, after he has brought them the palm wine, Murano picks up the very *egungun* mask and raffia in which he died and tries to remember their significance. Professor tells Kotonu to help him get into the costume back inside the store. When the *egungun* appears from behind the store's canvas, Say Tokyo Kid, whose attitudes resemble Professor's in many ways, such as his exhilaration over controlling spirits captured in the timber he hauls and his general disdain for human passengers as mere objects, erupts in fury:

SAY TOKYO. I reckon this has gone too far. I ain't scared like all these people so I'm telling you, you're fooling around where you ain't got no business. . . . I'm Say Tokyo Kid and I don't give you one damn!

PROFESSOR [*explosively*]. Do you cringe because you are confronted by the final gate to the Word? My friends, Murano is dumb and this creature suffers from gutturals like a love-crazed frog and yet you let the one sustain your spirits and the other fill you dead with awe. [*Shouting at the band.*] Play you croakers, play! Or have the blessings of Murano's daily pilgrimage dried already in the hollows of your cheeks? Play

and burst your flooded throats before I draw the bowstring of the Word and the veiled shaft bores paths of faith across your cowering mind. Do I feed you for nothing? Play you foul-mouthed vermin of the road! (236)

As the *egungun* falls into writhing possession, Say Tokyo Kid leaps up and tells his gang to “stop playing along with this sacrilege” (227). In the scuffle between Say Tokyo Kid and the *egungun*, Professor is fatally stabbed in the back, and Say Tokyo Kid is smashed onto a bench and killed. As the *egungun* slowly spins down to the dirging of the thugs into airy nothingness, Professor grants his “chorus” his final benediction, telling them to be

the road. Coil yourself in dreams, lay flat in treachery and deceit and at the moment of a trusting step, rear your head and strike the traveller in his confidence, swallow him whole or break him on the earth. Spread a broad sheet for death with the length and the time of the sun between you until the one face multiplies and the one shadow is cast by all the doomed. Breathe like the road, be even like the road itself. . . . (228-229)

And so the lights fade to black, and the audience is left in the dark to sort out what exactly has happened, what they are to make of all that has transpired before them. Dare we call Professor’s death “tragic” when we consider that he has at last found what he has been seeking--the essence of death? But Professor in actuality is a very cheap Faust, almost a cartoon Faust. His experiments in sorcery desecrate both Christian and African traditions but bring him no real vision or power at all. Femi Osofisan, one time student and actor under Soyinka’s tutelage, best describes Professor’s personality in his essay, “Wole Soyinka and a Living Dramatist”: “Professor’s schizoid personality, his demonic searching and criminality, his predatory

expeditions and near cannibalistic relationship with his abject clients and road denizens, are aspects of a private necromancy" (56). But is there any transit across the post-modern world's abyss of blasphemy and trivialization of the sacred when the only character astute enough to recognize Professor's perversion as "sacrilege" dies because he himself commits a sacrilege when he attacks the *egungun*? One merely spins in circles within the abyss without overcoming the modern world's nihilism and finally reaching authenticity.

### *Madmen and Specialists*

Just as with *The Road*, the play, *Madmen and Specialists*, resists easy categorization as to genre. If we call the play a "tragedy," then Si Bero alone comes anywhere near fitting the criteria for its "tragic hero," although the Old Man, not she, dies in the action. She surely comes closer to fulfilling that role than even Professor or Say Tokyo Kid do in *The Road*. Still, in some ways, the play's structure is simpler, more "classical" than *The Road's*, but it remains firmly within the absurdist school. There also seems to be a "classical" unity of time operating in the play, but the drama's events float within vague time-references which do not allow the audience to fix them exactly. In fact, the language of the play also withstands any fixity. Osofisan, who played the Blindman in the original complete version of the play, says that the purpose of *Madmen and Specialists* was not to narrate a story *per se* but to involve the audience in a macabre and frightening "historical situation" (italics in the original), an experience which does not lead to "catharsis . . . but shock and psychic wounding; an attempt to confront the audience with its own mirror of horror, to immerse it in the excretions of its own prevailing brutalities, the sanious nightmare of its *condition humaine*" (51).

After viewing the play's performance, however, none of Osofisan's audience realized that the purpose of the play was to communicate collective guilt for the atrocities in Biafra. In all honesty, even when one reads the play, its meaning proves difficult to grasp. Soyinka's style is entirely evocative, almost to the point of replicating a collective dream-state or even of conjuring an episode of schizoid paranoia. But again we must ask, as in *The Road*, whether so much ambiguity and diffuseness work to fulfill Soyinka's didactic purpose and allow the audience to cross the moral abyss to find a new social order.

If *The Road's* AKSIDENT STORE presents us with a circular void from which none can escape, the world of *Madmen and Specialists* places us in the lowest circle of hell. Still, it is not really a "hell" after all but a purgatory because it is not entirely without the possibility of redemption. Iya Agba and Iya Mate, *orisas* or living incarnations of the earth-mother, offer a way out, a cure for their disease (*Madmen* 85). But those who cannot or will not recognize their own disease will never seek healing.

For example, Dr. Bero, the "specialist" who rules the "hell" of *Madmen and Specialists*, sees no essence in anything, just empty objects for his will's arbitrary control. Unable to acknowledge himself to be diseased, he has surrendered to visions of grandiosity, delusions of personal Godhead. Dr. Bero vaunts his new nihilist anti-life creed to Si Bero: "Control, sister, control. Power comes from bending Nature to your will" (43). In his "will to power," he merely "apes," in the Old Man's words, "nothing"--"the nonexistent one" (102), the Bible's God, long declared dead by Nietzsche.

Similarly, the Old Man, father to both Dr. Bero and Si Bero, cannot see his own disease. He is a devotee and mad prophet of the "new god and the old--As" (49), his personal "essence ideal" of non-essentiality, the existential



“nothing” of brutal meaninglessness. Unlike his fascist son, living absurdly has made him into an anarchist, an “anti-Socrates,” whose greatest crime against the state has been teaching mangled survivors of the war to “THINK!” (51). But he was also his son’s and the state’s greatest teacher. When the Old Man fed the leaders of the fascist regime the flesh of war-slaughtered corpses, Dr. Bero crossed the final, liberating frontier to “[p]ower in its purest sense” (50)--completely conscienceless nihilism. But he cannot be reconciled to his father as a son, any more than he can overlook his father’s crimes against the state, because, as the Old Man reminds him, his father is “the last proof of the human in you. The last shadow. Shadows are tough things to be rid of. . . . How does one prove he was never born of man? Of course you could kill me . . .” (73).

Certainly the mendicants cannot seek healing either. They are, in fact, already “patients,” human “objects” under the “treatment” of their so-called healers, Dr. Bero, the specialist turned Intelligence Officer, torturer and executioner, and the Old Man, their “rehabilitator” who has brainwashed them all into the religion of As. In turn, they treat themselves and each other as objects as well, taking turns playing the roles of victim and victimizer. Although at times some of them display real human sentiments, they are the foot soldiers, the cannon-fodder spiritually annihilated in the modern war against the earth and humanity.

Of all the mortals in *Madmen and Specialists*, Si Bero alone could have been saved by the earth-mothers, but she chooses blind loyalty to her family over keeping faith with the way of the earth and the ancestors (her “fatal flaw”?). She very much resembles *The Strong Breed’s* Sunma. She indeed is as much her father’s child as her brother is. Also like Sunma, she abhors the unwholesomeness of the mendicants and abuses them for it. In deliberate

denial, she already “knows” that her father and brother were involved in war crimes but will not confront the evil in them or herself. In this way, she represents Soyinka’s “Everyperson,” an exemplum of all the willfully unconscious co-perpetrators of crimes against humanity that wait “innocently” at the “home front” and believe whatever their leaders tell them. But there is also much that is good in her. As the Blindman reports to Dr. Bero, who now commands him and the other mendicants as secret agents, he felt when he was inside the house with Si Bero and her herbs “--in that room where I stood with her. There is more love in there than you’ll find in the arms of a hundred women” (31). The presence of love permeating her and her herbs touches even this member of the walking wounded. As Si Bero describes herself: “I like to keep close to earth” (37).

In truth, the love the Blindman feels actually comes from the “earth” itself, hypostatized in the herbs as well as in Si Bero. It is the love that embraces all beings and informs them with integrity and meaning. An initiate into the mysteries of Iya Agba and Iya Mate, Si Bero bears the *plenum* of the natural world within her. And like the earth herself, she is a unity of good and evil. According to the traditional African view of the world, as Soyinka so often reemphasizes throughout most of his works, authentic existence lies beyond such “Manichean” categories. When Si Bero brings in an herb to the old women, they discover that it is poisonous (it turns out to be hemlock, which Dr. Bero later offers to his “Socratic” father). Si Bero has a typically “dualist” reaction:

SI BERO. I’ll throw it in the fire.

IYA MATE. Do nothing of the sort. You don’t learn good things  
unless you learn evil.

SI BERO. But it’s poison.

IYA MATE. It grows.

IYA AGBA. Rain falls on it.

IYA MATE. It sucks the dew.

IYA AGBA. It lives.

IYA MATE. It dies. (20-21)

All of these expressions sound extremely “inclusive” and affirmative of the natural worthiness of all “existents,” but the earth-mothers do not “include” the “abomination” of Dr. Bero and the Old Man as “natural” to the earth. In a most dualist and apocalyptic fashion, they reject the poison in their midst. They will not let Dr. Bero keep the power of generations of herbal lore they have taught his sister, so he cannot turn the good unto evil purposes. Realizing that they have trusted him because of the integrity of his sister, the old women “demand payment” (79), that is, the return of their herbal secrets whose power “has fallen in their hands” (103). In a confrontation with Bero, Iya Agba holds her own against the threatening “specialist.” She refuses to elucidate what exactly the nature of her religion is but, instead, taunts him with his own emptiness:

Your mind has run farther than the truth. I see it searching, going round and round in darkness. Truth is always too simple for a desperate mind. . . . Don't look for the sign of broken bodies or wandering souls. Don't look for the sound of fear or the smell of hate. Don't take a bloodhound with you; we don't mutilate bodies” (87).

The truth is that Dr. Bero can fathom neither the earth-mothers' nor his father's rival religion. In fact, his only apparent motive for incarcerating his father at home in his surgery is to learn the secret meaning of “As.” By the end of the play, the members of the audience also really want to know the answer to Dr. Bero's oft-repeated question, “Why As?” (74). The closest

approach to an explanation for why the Old Man chose the name “As” comes when the Old Man tells Dr. Bero about how one of the mendicants said one day that they ought to send their “gangrenous dressings by post to those sweet-smelling As agencies and homes.” This word-choice brought about his epiphany. The Old Man merely tells Bero, “I understood” (95).

Drawn from the end of a Christian Trinitarian doxology, “As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end,” the word “As” is a subordinating conjunction comparing the Trinity of “the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost” with itself as a never-ending and never-changing state. With nothing to or with which to compare, As comes to signify in the Old Man’s “anti-doxology” the “presence of absence,” the pervading void. It is the nothingness that underlies all being, and, in the Old Man’s mind, it is the will to destroy that maddens those who would be “As” God (his son). The atrocities of his son and the new absolutist junta drove the Old Man into the madness and revelation of the religion of As. Eating human flesh is only an act of consistency that the fascists have overlooked, so the Old Man serves them his specially prepared feast, but first he pronounces his skewed “grace” over the anti-Eucharistic “communion”: “As is, Now, As Ever shall be . . . world without. . . .” (50).

For all his pretensions to Divinity, Dr. Bero miscalculates the power the Old Man still wields over the mendicants, whom he has charged to watch over him. The mendicants perform “playlets” for the Old Man, parodying the lies and posturing of the fascists in power. The Old Man begins to orchestrate their associational streams of speech that sometimes veer off towards psychotic glossalalia. Collecting themselves, the mendicants comment that it was just “like old times.” Aafaa asks, “So why risk putting us together?” And the Old Man answers, “Because . . . we are together in As”

(109). At this, he rises slowly and takes over the frenetic “liturgy” of As:

As Is, and the System is its mainstay though it wear a hundred masks and a thousand outward forms. And because you are within the System, the cyst in the System that irritates, the foul gurgle of the cistern, the expiring function of a faulty cistern and are part of the material for reformulating the mind of a man into a necessity of the moment’s political As, the moment’s scientific As, metaphysic As, sociologic As, economic re-creative ethical As, you-cannot-es-cape! There is but one constant in the life of the System and that constant is AS. . . . (110)

As Iya Agba and Iya Mate approach the storeroom full of herbs with a pot of coals, Si Bero begs them to spare all their work. Dr. Bero approaches to intercept them with his pistol, but he is distracted by the rising voices of the mendicant chorus and the frenzied Old Man. The Old Man’s shouted words seem to be directed at him:

. . . you cyst, you cyst, you splint in the arrow of arrogance, the dog in dogma, tick of a heretic, the tick in politics, the mock of democracy, the mar of marxism, a tic of the fanatic, the boo in buddhism, the ham in Mohammed, the dash in the criss-cross of Christ, a dot on the i of ego an ass in the mass, the ash in ashram, a boot in kibbutz, . . . (116)

Dr. Bero enters the surgery just in time to find the Old Man about to make an incision into the breast of the Cripple, so he can find out just what makes a heretic tick. Just as the Old Man raises his hand to make a slice, Bero shoots him. As Si Bero rushes in to see what has happened, the old women set fire to the herbs.

Unlike *The Road*, this play at least provides a “way out of hell.” The herbs which Si Bero treats like children, according to the mendicants, really

are living and spiritual beings. They are the fruit of countless generations of lore vouchsafed to Si Bero because of her integral goodness. The earth-mothers insist that there are unqualified, universal standards of right and wrong, even though they recognize that everything living is intrinsically good. In spite of Soyinka's anti-Platonism, his two *raisonneurs* tell us that there is such a thing as an absolute, one would almost be tempted to call it a "transcendental," good. But his other *raisonneur*, the Old Man, also tells us that all human associations (Systems) subsist on abuse and mutual cannibalism, that all religions are mockeries because God is "non-existent." Humans, having formed God in their own images, the traditional Nietzschean argument runs, now try to imitate their imitation. How do we reconcile these two points of view?

To tell the truth, there is no reconciliation possible. If for Soyinka the earth-mothers are merely esthetic expressions of his "essence-ideals," then no real transcendence is offered in this play. Artistic artifacts cannot redeem anyone from "hell," only living deities can. And if one counters that the real purpose of mythopoesis is to persuade people to action by "entertaining" them with images that have no basis in fact, then the Old Man's religion is vindicated because all that has been created is just a variant on his own religion, the belief in "As if." In trying to describe an authentic Africa, Soyinka must ask his modern audience to play a game of make-believe and celebrate traditional religion "as if" it were true.

## CONCLUSION: AFRICAN "AUTHENTICITY," A CURE FOR NIHILISM?

According to two different critics, Soyinka's art transforms Yoruba mythology to express his esthetic vision and to promote a melding of what he believes is best in traditional and modern culture. Robert Wren notes in his essay, "Last Bridge on *The Road*," that "[t]he Yoruba world view does not control Soyinka. Soyinka controls the Yoruba world view in so far as he can manipulate it to his æsthetic purpose" (109). Through this manipulation, David Cook claims in his essay, "The Potentially Popular Playwright," Soyinka offers Nigeria the possibility of choosing the best of the traditional and the modern in his plays. Cook maintains that in Soyinka's works:

both the destructive and creative aspects of tradition and of modernity are dramatised. Before we can think of choosing between past and present, we are forced to arbitrate between the positive and negative elements, first of earlier times, and then of contemporary life and from this complex pattern of contradictions we are offered the chance to form a new vision. (93)

But I believe that Soyinka fails to establish a firm basis for determining right from wrong from within either the traditional or the modern world, so his audience can "form a new vision." Like Ogun, as he figures in Yoruba religion and as Soyinka has transformed him, the ethics of Soyinka's abyss are entirely ambiguous, both creative and destructive. Femi Osofisan writes of the change in his perception of Soyinka's dramaturgy after acting in *Madmen and Specialists*:

I began to see that the real problem with Soyinka's theatre was, and is, not so much its 'obscurity', but rather its ambiguity, its refusal, after

many scenes of candid exposure, to proclaim a formal stand in the conflict it ceaselessly enacts between the forces of evil and of good, of death and life. Therefore, examined from this basic perspective, it becomes superfluous to draw a line between his 'serious' and 'lighter' plays, for all are linked by this primordial bridge of ideological ambiguity. . . . , the fundamental thematic impulse is constant--namely, that there seems to be a continual, restless swing (once identified by Biodun Jeyifo as an *aporia*) between on the one hand a sincere and a passionate quest for modernising impulses and, on the other, a loving celebration of the exotic tropes of tradition; between a mordant censure of the destructive rituals of megalomania, and a simultaneous fascination for the masques of regal institutions and feudal structures. (53-54)

Of course, Osofisan's critique of Soyinka's work arises from his concern that Soyinka does not focus on what he calls the "third group of actors" of Soyinka's plays, the lower classes, such as Professor's touts, Bero's mendicants, and Elesin's market women (56). My own reservations lie with Soyinka's implicit ontology itself. But Soyinka's Nietzschean philosophy actually explains much of Osofisan's Marxist complaints about Soyinka's theatre. Although Soyinka tries to distance himself from what he repudiates as the darker side of Nietzsche's philosophy, Ogunnian "Supermen" do tend to dominate his plays (Elesin Oba is a fine example). They are ever opposed by "*Untermenschen*" who stand in the way of their mythic self-actualization. In such a heroic world, there really is little room for the lower classes.

In this study, I have traced crossing the abyss of death and transformation in four of Soyinka's tragedies, observing how Soyinka subverted Nietzsche's Dionysian tragedy to create his own Ogunnian answer



to European *Angst* in Africa. Transforming Yoruba myth to his own purposes, Soyinka spoke of the audience's choric communion with the "protagonist ego's" transit of the abyss leading to a transformation of consciousness, what I called in Nietzschean terms an experience of "overcoming" (I could just as easily have called it "transvaluation"). But I have discovered in this study that three of the plays provide no transit across the abyss, whether for the protagonist(s) or for the audience. The only play that seems to fulfill Soyinka's theoretical criteria is *The Strong Breed*, which, according to Osofisan, is not considered one of Soyinka's more serious works (53). In three of the four plays of this study, Soyinka's Ogunnian mythopoesis fails in its objectives. The reasons for this failure, I believe, lie in the Nietzschean roots of Soyinka's dramatic theory.

As I said above (page 28), Nietzsche's ontopoesis is fraught with "dualism," if not contradiction. Even his greatest commentators, Karl Jaspers and Martin Heidegger, couldn't agree in their interpretations of him. For both, however, Nietzsche's dictum that "all truths are fictions" proved problematical. Professor Richard Howey in his study of their interpretations of Nietzsche portrays Jaspers' dilemma as follows: "If the TRUTH is that there are no truths, then TRUTH is a great danger to life and results finally in the most extreme of all nihilisms. Thus, the heart of the conflict resides in the fact that TRUTH is death" (73). Indeed, death is the very truth Professor seeks to uncover in the Word. Death as truth informs the "extreme nihilism" of the Old Man in his religion of As. And if I may extend my application further, the truth that is death is also the destination of Eman and Elesin.

The greatest problem with such a self-refuting truth (meta-truth?), however, is that its uses cannot be accounted for. One need only remember that Hitler proclaimed himself the embodiment of Nietzsche's Superman and

that Heidegger himself was a mystical Nazi, who became disaffected with Hitler's regime only because of its suppression of Röhm's Brown Shirts, although he never repudiated Nazism *per se* until after the war. Joseph Grange, in his review of Victor Farías' book *Heidegger and Nazism*, notes how in his career Heidegger not only failed "in naming Being," but made a virtue of his inability and excoriated "those philosophers who misnamed Being and so contributed to its oblivion" (518). In contrast, Grange says that:

Plato begins by naming Being in a hypothetical fashion and then proceeds to work out its consequences by testing his theory against experience. Plato's name for Being is, of course, the good, and goodness becomes the normative and formative measure whereby humans participate in the world. The greater the goodness, the greater the reality. The great power of this type of thinking is that it forces ethical questions to the fore. It makes a word such as "values" and all other terms like it the primary topic of philosophic effort. (518)

If knowable "Truth" does not exist and if "Being" is not "the Good" by which moral choices are evaluated, then literally *nothing* precludes the mythopoesis of even an ardent political liberal like Soyinka from becoming the future racist ideology of a fascist regime. Although Soyinka lost his faith in the Christian God when he was ten years old (Beier online), I perceive in his work the "presence of His absence." If this were not so, he would not treat African myths as "objects" for manipulation; neither would he craft protagonists, like Professor and the Old Man, who act out primal Christian traumas with such demonic fury. But if African religion itself is "true," then it is more than a metaphor for a change in consciousness. If it is not "true," then the truth should be sought without relativizing and trivializing the myths of world religions as mere artifacts in the void.

## APPENDIX: SOYINKA AND YORUBA RELIGION

No one belief-system unites the Yoruba peoples of Western Nigeria. The tribal deities share many names and functions, even though names may vary from place to place. In some cases, gods become goddesses or vice versa, depending on the particular region in which they are worshipped. These variations arise as oral myths diffused widely across what was once relatively isolated regions. Ever adaptable, these various mythologies have combined and recombined with one another and eventually with Islam and Christianity to form a uniquely textured blend of syncretized elements. The chief characteristic that unites all the Yoruba mythologies, however, is their common belief in a single creator who presides over the hundreds of *orisas* (minor deities) who, in turn, govern various localized functions.

This chief deity is also named variously. For some tribes, he is called Olorun ("sky-ruler") or Olodumare (equivalent to "the almighty"). Even though he possesses significant similarities to the "One God" of the Muslims and Christians, his cult in Yorubaland has no temples or priesthood to honor him. This god has a growing cult of worshipers in the West, however, where African Americans are seeking a god-image they proclaim their own. Perhaps for the Yoruba themselves Olodumare's utter "otherness" makes him too remote from their everyday common concerns. Instead of worshiping the highest god of their hierarchy, the Yoruba prefer to deal with *orisas* closer to the activities of daily living and more suited to their tribal, familial, or personal predilections.

Some Yoruba mythic systems name two gods, Orishala (Obatala or Orisa-nla) and his wife Odudua, as creators of the universe. In others, Olorun

precedes these two in time and action. In still others, Orisa-nla ("high orisa") exists and acts independently of the creator god. Occasionally, myths describe Obatala sculpting the human bodies into which Olorun breathes the breath of life. Because drunkenness caused Obatala to make mistakes, all deformed people are thought to be sacred to him. His devotees are also to abstain from alcohol in his rites. Soyinka's system makes Orisa-nla the One God who suffered fragmentation when he was pushed into the abyss. All beings are pieces of his one being. Furthermore, Soyinka relates Obatala to the Greek god Apollo because of his patronage of the plastic arts. Soyinka also sees his kindness to cripples and his emphasis on sobriety marking him as a "good god," in contrast to Ogun, who is both good and evil.

In fact, of the 401 or 601 *orisas* (again, numbers vary from place to place), Ogun, god of war, the hunt, and iron-smithing, is one of the most important. Patron of blacksmiths, warriors, and all who use metal in their occupations, he also presides over promises, vows, and contracts. In fact, even the British colonial courts accepted as legal and binding oaths sworn to Ogun by kissing iron. Ogun's devotees know his vengeance is swift and merciless to troth-breakers. Soyinka relates the myth of Ogun cutting through the primordial forest to crossing the abyss of transition in his essay "The Fourth Stage." Ogun's victory over the forest led the *orisas* to proclaim him their king, but when he refused, Obatala took office. One legend tells of his drunken rage that caused him to turn on his human supporters. Yet others hail him as the protector of orphans. Unlike Obatala, however, he never repudiated alcohol despite the excesses it led him to. Palm wine intoxication remains part of his worship to this day. (Lucas 33-115)

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