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Abstract

The opening pages of the text of Wole Soyinka's play *The Rooif* are taken up with several projects of introduction, offering the reader alternative ways into the work's mysteries. There is a note 'To the Producer' explaining the mask-idiom of the Agemo cult which is this work's central ritual model. There is 'Alagemo', a poem also centering on the 'Agemo' cult. Thirdly, there is a detailed description of the work's stage geography. I want to begin this paper by noting this de-scription exactly:

The Steeple and the Palm-Wine Shack: Wole Soyinka and Crossing the Inter-cultural Fence

The opening pages of the text of Wole Soyinka's play *The Road*¹ are taken up with several projects of introduction, offering the reader alternative ways into the work's mysteries. There is a note 'For the Producer' explaining the mask-idiom of the Agemo cult which is this work's central ritual model. There is 'Alagemo', a poem also centering on the 'Agemo' cult. Thirdly, there is a detailed description of the work's stage geography. I want to begin this paper by noting this description exactly:

Dawn is barely breaking on a road-side shack, a ragged fence and a corner of a church with a closed stained-glass window. Above this a cross-surmounted steeple tapers out of sight. Thrusting downstage from a corner of the shack is the back of a 'bolekaja' (mammy wagon), lop-sided and minus its wheels. It bears the inscription - AKSIDENT STORE-ALL PART AVAILEBUL. In the opposite corner, a few benches and empty beer-cases used as stools. Downstage to one side, a table and chair, placed in contrasting tidiness. (p. 151)

After defining the play's space, the text then elaborates in great detail a mime which serves as a type of overture for the whole dramatic score itself. Murano is the first of the 'sprawled layabouts', and he quickly departs to tap some palm-wine. Samson wakes during Murano's ablutions and watches Murano 'furtively'. He almost follows the tapper, but decides against it. He returns to his mate, only to rise to the call of the clock sounding 'five'. Samson, as the text puts it, 'ambles around aimlessly', going to the toilet and grabbing a snack. He then attempts his second brave action of the morning, trying to make himself enter the churchyard through the broken fence. The clock strikes again and Samson retreats, shaking his fist at the tower in rhetorical rage. Murano takes out his anger on his fellow idlers, kicking and shaking them. Samson's final attempt to amuse himself is to torture a spider. He retreats to his mat in frustration, only to be roused again when the clock strikes six and the verbal part of the performance begins (pp. 151-2).

I have spent a great deal of time on this overture to the dialogue because it raises in itself several of the broader theoretical issues I want to address in this paper. Firstly, why does a play like *The Road* need so many introductions, including, it must be added, the translations of the Yoruba songs at the end of the text? *The Road* is not unusual in this respect; indeed, in some of Soyinka's later plays these introductory notes expand into quite far-reaching theoretical debates. I want to suggest that these extra-textual factors are indicative of the fact that Soyinka, like other post-colonial writers in English, are producing at the margins of the inter-cultural space; that his plays speak with a language which is neither Yoruba nor English, but which, to use Homi K. Bhabha's term, is a 'hybrid' tongue.² This 'hybrid' tongue is difficult, knotty, many-textured; it speaks not just with two discourses, but with many. Soyinka is writing in the 'book', that miraculous colonial sign which is both symbol and instrument of ideological power, with all its attendant traditions of cultural theory and convention; he is also an African producing for Africans. He must explain for the reader and for the de-racinated Yoruba; yet for many of the local audience he needs no introduction.

Secondly, this transitional location is contained within the textual space itself. The setting of *The Road* is brilliantly suggestive of the hybrid nature of Soyinka's work. The steeple which towers above the lorry yard, frightening its inhabitants with the clock, encodes the power of the metropolis itself: its ideological as well as material pull over the new state, and over the new text. The lorry-park speaks of transition run 'off-the-road', just as the sleeping, drunken touts and their accompanying mess speaks of the chaos of post-colonial society itself. The 'contrasting tidiness' of the desk and chairs, as the play develops, becomes the site of institutionalized corruption; of a bureaucratic, organized chaos which receives much of its power and protection from the influence of the steeple itself. Finally, the 'ragged fence' is the 'hybrid' margin itself, separating the power of the churchyard, with all its magical threat, from the equally potent world of the palm-wine shack. I would suggest Soyinka's work, and much of post-colonial drama, is itself operating at the site of the 'ragged fence', between the churchyard and the palm-wine shack. The symbol of the 'fence' is especially useful, because, as I have already suggested, the performance of the 'inter-cultural' text is a difficult, complex, contradictory and, in a certain sense, unsatisfactory one. The crossing of the fence, is, as I shall argue later in the paper, an oppositional as well as a conciliatory enterprise.

Thirdly, the setting of *The Road* and Samson's mime which follows it introduces the specific role that the performance of drama, rather than the dramatic text, has in the crossing of the cultural fence. Soyinka, like

Brecht before him, has argued that theatre has the potential to be 'the most revolutionary art form known to man'. He argues that theatre, because it is necessarily a 'communal' enterprise, has the potential to change the 'awareness' of society: in the loss of individual identity that the blackening of the theatre brings, there is the chance of a 're-integration' of identity upon radical lines. In this process, Soyinka argues, the 'communal roots of theatre are made one with the liberating direction of the present'.³ This view of theatre which, in a manner similar, but not identical to Brecht's 'epic' theatre, seeks to combine ritual and revolution is typical of the 'inter-cultural' project itself. *The Road*, as we shall see, is especially significant in this context. Soyinka's Ife colleague and sparring partner, Biodun Jeyifo, has commented that the revolutionary potential of theatre also lies in what he has called its 'conflictual' structure.⁴ This structure is especially powerful in theatre because of the fact that theatrical conflict is always a spatial as well as a narrative one; the battle between colony and colonized, between margin and metropolis, is fought out in post-colonial drama on the stage itself. The ideological and aesthetic centre of a given work is a literal centre as well. In *THE ROAD*, this can be characterized as a struggle between the steeple and the palm-wine shack.

Perhaps even more importantly, Samson's mime shows us a route that theatre can travel to cross the colonial fence. The nature of the dramatic sign is unique in that it is primarily a non-verbal form of language; the power of the 'word' and its institutionalization in the colonial 'book' can be subverted by a more immediate, if not necessarily imminent, form of signification. I would argue that it is through this hole in the fence that Soyinka's work manages to connect the opposed colonial centres; a connection which is carried out through an eccentric use of Yoruba ritual, transformed as that ritual necessarily is through the material demands of a metropolitan stage.

I have used *The Road* as a way of access to many of the issues raised by the text which might be called 'inter-cultural'. I will use the play as a way of grounding my theoretical discussion in the actual performance of (in this case) a dramatic text. *The Road* has often been seen as Soyinka's supreme achievement, perhaps for the very reason that it seems such a complex, self-consciously literary play in the European style. It has been variously seen as a tragedy complete with its own tragic hero, the Professor; an absurdist, existential exploration of non-meaning; and a philosophical treatise in the style of Shaw. Not surprisingly, these views, concentrating as they do on the verbal score of the play, have their negative face as well: like other absurdist works, *The Road* has been seen as obscure and too 'metaphysical'.⁵

We can expand this critical orthodoxy on *The Road* to take in the mystification that has surrounded the whole of Soyinka's career-long theatrical project. Just as *The Road* has been seen as an African son of the classical Greek father, so Soyinka has been seen as the prime example of the Nigerian writer who, in the customary terms of the liberal critical establishment, has successfully 'bridged' two worlds; whose works manage to be both 'authentically' African and deeply 'universal'. Dan Izevbye argues this orthodox view of Soyinka in his usual articulate manner:

I think the most important element is the fact that Soyinka has been able to bridge the gulf, to borrow his own metaphor and use it in a slightly different way, between the Western and the African world, between the black and the white, the European and the non-European, worlds. And in his works, we find a mastery of both these worlds and both these values, and an ability to assimilate and accept, as well as to satirize and reject, aspects of either world.⁶

Izevbye notes that Soyinka represents the 'archetype of the modern African'.⁷ This has been a judgement often made about Soyinka. He has been variously described as essentially being an 'absurdist', as a 'tragedian', as a 'satirist', as an 'existentialist' and as a 'social critic'. Another critic, publisher Rex Collings, noted that he is an African version of the 'renaissance man', being a poet, dramatist, novelist, critic, theoretician, producer, director, actor, scholar, film-maker and pop-singer; he is able to discuss with consummate erudition Mozart and the talking-drum, the aesthetics of Brecht and Ifa, the sociological functions of Dionysos and Ogun.⁸ Just as *The Road's* celebrated depth has its inverse side, so does this celebration of Soyinka's virtuosity have an equally strident opposing view. Chief representatives of the dissident view have been the so-called 'decolonization' school of Nigerian criticism, who have labelled Soyinka as 'Euromodernist' and 'elitist', as being the 'Marshall Ky' of Nigerian literature, doing a 'cowboy sherrif' act on authentic, traditional literary forms.⁹

I want to suggest that the views of the 'decolonization' critics, while substantially misguided, are in a sense pointing us in the correct direction. Their scathing attack on Soyinka raises the whole question I have been rehearsing so far in this paper: in what way does Soyinka mediate between the colonial world of the steeple and the post-colonial world of the palm-wine shack? Is this mediation the unifying, reconciling project of the 'inter-cultural' bridge; or the more problematic work suggested by Chinweizu? The former description contains the ideological problems of the related 'inter-nationalism': it has connotations of peaceful cross-cultural marriage; of a world community of 'universal' concerns and ideological 'consensus'. The notion of 'inter-culturalism' is

reminiscent of a whole tradition of European critical approach to post-colonial literature: which sees such literature as the marginal product of the metropolitan centre; or, perhaps a better analogy for our purposes here, as a scene from the Great European Traditional Play. This naive view of 'inter-cultural' bridgework effaces the difficulty of such an enterprise; it is related ideologically to the notion that a nation like Nigeria, Kenya or Jamaica can easily, peacefully and simply move from colony to modern democracy as if such a movement was as natural as evolution itself.

We might express the complexity of the problem by saying that perhaps Soyinka bridges cultures better for the European culture than he does for the African world. Soyinka might be seen, as Jameson suggests of the French realists, as processor of raw materials into marketable forms: in this case, producing Nigerian ritualistic exotica for the Western theatre.¹⁰

What I have just argued, needless to say, implies a political view of the inter-cultural theatrical project. The notion of 'culture' is not just an aesthetic one; indeed, from its very theoretical roots in the writings of Matthew Arnold, the notion of 'culture' has always had an ideological function. Arnold argued that 'art' had replaced religion as the moral and spiritual leaven in the social bread. Education in mainstream English culture was the answer to the problems which already threatened the security of Arnold's organic society.¹¹ Contemporary theories of cultural contact have stressed the class-based nature of the notion of 'culture': the role it plays in cementing the bonds of the status quo. Edward Said has put it this way:

... it is the power of culture by virtue of its elevated or superior position to authorize, to dominate, to legitimate, denote, interdict, and validate; in short, the power of culture to be an agent of, and perhaps the main agency for, powerful differentiation within its domain and beyond it too.¹²

What then is the 'political' function of a concept like 'inter-culturalism'? The notion of 'inter-culturalism' implies the idea of two cultures joining to make one. In this case, Eliot's Great Tradition and the 'traditional', indigenous theatre, the Nigerian version of which Soyinka has himself played a large part in constructing. Scholars like Joel Adedeji, Femi Osofisan, and Soyinka have argued that the origins of modern Yoruba theatre lie in the ritual 'egungun' masque theatre.¹³ These critics trace a line through the ancestral rites, through the travelling Yoruba 'apidan' theatre, through the modern Yoruba 'popular' theatre, to university playwrights like Soyinka, Rotimi and Sutherland.

This latter indigenous 'culture' is just as much an ideological construct as the metropolitan brand. Whether we accept Soyinka's version of this

culture, or Chinweizu's alternative Soyinka-free variety, such concepts as 'orature' and 'ritual theatre' are implicitly nationalist in function: that is, they answer the metropolitan culture's attempts to 'other' the local society by affiliating themselves to an alternative, ideologically pure culture.

However, this indigenous culture is itself a theoretical one: the ritual roots of theatre can only be discovered by academic research, and survive only in a very fragmented, displaced and syncretized fashion in post-colonial society. Similarly, metropolitan discourses have much more powerful and insidious an effect on modern Nigerian theatrical forms than is often recognized. Rather than the artist supremely tying the opposed strains into a beautiful new 'inter-cultural' weave, the modern post-colonial text is always a ruptured one: a mixture of discourses and affiliations, a constant site of battle between the ideological pull of the steeple and the palm-wine shack. It is a text of the fence rather than the bridge.

If the 'inter-cultural' paradigm is a limited one, is there an alternative which provides us with both more understanding and with more hope? Is a play like *The Road* really trapped at the fence, shaking its hand like Samson vainly at the steeple? Does the erudition of its verbal usage condemn it always to be in reality a metropolitan text, irrelevant to the needs of its writer's own nation? Or, at the very least, is it a hopelessly confused complex of conventions, suffering an incurable, pathological identity-crisis; a work of 'two worlds': the Mr. Johnson of theatre?

As I have intimated, there is both hope and light in the nature of the theatrical text itself: that is, in its nature as a work for performance. We can express the power of the post-colonial text as a 'subversive' instrument by adopting as an alternative tool Homi K. Bhabha's notion of the 'hybrid' text. This is not the place to investigate such a suggestive argument in its full complexity; however, I can appropriate its primary notion for my own purposes. Bhabha has argued that the colonial text, rather than just being the magical 'book' of inter-culturalism, displaying the wonder, beauty and universality of the metropolitan tradition, is actually subversive in its very structure. Using an image from Fanon, Bhabha compares the text to the interrogative gaze of the colonial subject: a gaze which even as it admits its servitude, questions the very ideals of civilization and humanity which have been used to justify that very servitude.¹⁴ Similarly, the flawed mimesis of the colonial text, its implicit attempt to mimic the forms of its colonial parent, actually threatens that very form: in the constantly shifting movement between the so-called original cultural 'book' and the colonial copy, is the refusal of the marginal culture to deny its independence. Rather than merely adopting the post-colonial text in using the forms granted it by colonial

education, it appropriates these for its own use. An eloquent example on the linguistic front is the 'AKSIDENT STORE' of *The Road*. What appears firstly to be a mis-spelling and a ghoulisn mis-uunderstanding of civilized conventions, is revealed instead to be a functioning, creative sign of 'difference'. Moreover, this 'difference' reveals a reality which the colonial sign would try to avoid: this is an 'aksident store', and its location near the church and in the lorry-park identifies the material reality of their role in the neo-colonial economic system. I would argue that this kind of 'hybrid' text, this appropriation for personal use of both metropolitan and so-called 'traditional' discourses, is embodied in the broader speech act of the whole play itself.

The extra-verbal resources of drama are especially effective in subverting the central verbal logic of the text: its 'metaphysical' centre, to use the term of post-structuralism. I have expressed the ideological battle in this particular text, the struggle between margin and metropolis, as a spatial conflict between steeple and shack. In terms of character and narrative, the battle might be described as a struggle for supremacy between the Professor and the dumb Murano. I would argue that this battle is one that involves the performative signifier as well as any thematic signified.

As a man who has been staged in the middle of ritual transformation, Murano is a man who has a foot in both worlds. As Professor puts it:

When a man has one leg in each world, his legs are never the same. The big toe of Murano's foot - the left one of course - rests on the slumbering chrysalis of the Word. When that crust cracks my friends - you and I, that is the moment we await. That is the moment of our rehabilitation. (p. 187)

The Professor's attempt to hold Murano is an attempt to possess the concept of death itself. He wants to 'cheat fear, by foreknowledge' (p. 227). It is not surprising that he celebrates Murano's silence as being the silence of 'the Word, a golden nugget on the Tongue' (p. 186). The professor's academic project is only the intellectual side of his exploitation of the touts and his death trade in the 'aksident' store. Indeed, it is necessary for the Professor to have this metaphysical rationale for his otherwise material trade.

The central notion of the Professor's search, of course, is The Word. With its neo-Platonic and gnostic overtones, as well as its aesthetic implications, the Word is the supreme example of the metaphysical sign itself: it is poem as artefact, process frozen into product, Bhabha's magic colonial 'book'. The play provides its own image of the Professor's approach to meaning: the Professor finds a BEND sign 'growing from the earth' and he plucks it. The BEND is itself an ironic reference to the Professor's own form of hubris. Similarly, this alientation from the or-

ganic is also a political one: the Professor is the perfect image of the neo-colonial elite, broken with the metropolitan bishop and attempting to set up his own church, while still seeing reality through the broken stained glass window of his former institution.

Murano's silence, and his complete indifference to the Professor, is also a political statement. Not only is he transitional, but his silence rejects the whole notion of the colonial Word. Similarly, it is significant that he is a palm-wine tapper, because this 'traditional' trade only has a marginal role in the lorry-park world the Professor dominates. In this sense, he subverts the Professor's control in a material as well as a philosophical way.

Their struggle comes to a head in the 'communion' rite at the end of the play. This rite is what the Professor has been waiting for, and his use of the term 'communion' speaks of that metropolitan discourse which so dominates his thinking. What happens in the communion rite involves the subversion of the word 'communion' itself. The Professor's attempts to 'anticipate' the final confrontation, to provoke the dance of death, leads to his own literal destruction. His attempts to verbalize any tragic 'boon' are undercut by the continuing power of the rite itself, the playing of the musicians, and the spinning of 'the mask' which has now taken over centre stage. The play ends not with wise words from the hero, but with the 'welling' up of the dirge. The Professor's symbolic communion rite has become a material one; and The Word has been overtaken by action (pp. 226-229).

In the Professor's failure can be seen the subversive project of the 'hybrid' text. The victorious, if tragic, power of the ritual represented by the dumb Murano decentres any attempt by the audience to see the play as the story of the tragic hero in the narrowest European sense. The metaphysical discourse which sees power as being rested in a universal, transcendent steeping Word, the magic 'sign', is brought literally down to earth by the power of the non-verbal discourse consisting as it does of a ritual, and popular, tradition. It is not surprising, after all, that the instrument of judgement on the Professor's blasphemy is undertaken by the representatives of the most ignorant, seemingly ignoble and, significantly, the lowest class of the work's community. The steeple is indeed pulled down by, and into, the palm-wine shack. Rather than being the peaceful merging of two cultural streams, the play's mix of cultures is a tumult of partially consistent, radically contradictory discourses: discourses which destabilize the tragic form which seeks to contain them.

This subversion of the tragically centred text, carried out through the discourse of ritual, is not the only such project in *The Road*. Samson's constant parodies, for example, can be seen as belonging in the lam-

pooning tradition of the Yoruba 'apidan' theatre. What have been described as 'flashbacks' can also be seen as the visitation of the voice of the past in the style of 'egungun' ancestral theatre, and the use of popular songs, many of them composed by Soyinka himself, as an attempt to undercut the inflated rhetoric of the Professor. Music is used as an alternative way of unifying the text, replacing any narrative continuity. All these performative allusions, including the mask itself, are aided by the adopted theatrical technology of various lighting effects.

Nor is *The Road* alone in such 'hybrid' projects. As early as *The Lion and the Jewel*, Soyinka was using so-called 'traditional' theatre to subvert the easy metropolitan annexation of his works. In that play Sadiu's dance celebrating the battle of the sexes radically questions the harmlessness of the play's satire. In *A Dance of the Forests* the mixture of discourses is so grand and so complex that it makes the play almost un-performable. *Kongi's Harvest* is perhaps the most ambitious of the works in its use of the Yoruba festival to 'de-centre' the political centrality of the nationalist narrative.¹⁵ These projects can be compared to the notion of 'carnivalization' which has often been identified with Rabelais' where a writer uses popular, democratic art forms to subvert the metaphysical unity and primacy of the hegemonic discourse.¹⁶ Although it is well outside the scope of this paper, I would claim that this process of 'hybridization' so de-constructs the forms of metropolitan art theatre learnt by Soyinka that in his later works the forms open out off the stage itself. The university performing space is seen as simply too small and constricted to contain the more open and communal forms of Soyinka's theatre. Soyinka turns to film because of its more 'popular' range and reach.

We have come, therefore, to the hole in the fence. Rather than being a peaceful marriage, the inter-cultural theatrical text is a creative conflict; a battle for the centre-stage fought out between the discourses of the steeple and the palm-wine shack. The result is a 'hybrid' product. Rather than being trapped at the fence, the works connect the worlds through a subversive project of ritualistic de-construction. If critics were all members of the audience, they might not be so quick to be either as simplistically laudatory or vociferously damning about a work's level of difficulty. Works like *The Road* are knotty, problematic and contradictory: but they are creative and radical as well, striking at neo-colonial ideology at the root of its hegemonic project. Such a text in performance is, like the child of the Horseman and the unnamed girl in *Death and the King's Horseman*, a prodigious issue: a child of the inter-cultural gulf itself.

NOTES

1. The text of *The Road* I am using is from his *Collected Plays I* (Oxford, 1973). All future page references in the body of the paper are to this edition.
2. See 'Representation and the Colonial Text: a Critical Exploration of Some Forms of Mimeticism', in *A Theory of Reading*, ed. Frank Gloversmith (Brighton, 1984), pp. 93-122.
3. In 'Drama and the Revolutionary Ideal', in *In Person*, ed. Karen L. Morell (Seattle, 1975), p. 78.
4. *The Truthful Lies: Essays in a Sociology of African Drama* (London, 1986), p. 7.
5. Typical is Lewis Nkosi's analysis in his *Tasks and Masks - Themes and Styles of African Literature* (Harlow: Longman, 1981), p. 191.
6. In an interview with me at the University of Ibadan, February 23, 1986.
7. 'Wole Soyinka: A Personal View', *New Statesman*, 20 December, 1968, p. 76.
8. Chinweizu et al., 'The Leeds-Ibadan Connection: The Scandal of Modern African Literature', *Oriente*, 13, 1979, p. 43.
9. Typical is Charles Larson's *The Emergence of African Fiction* (New York, 1978). See Bhabha on 'universalism', op. cit., pp. 93-122.
10. See F. Jameson, *Marxism and Form* (Princeton, 1974), p. 10.
11. For an interesting discussion of Arnold's ideas see Edward Said, *The World, the Text and the Critic* (Cambridge, Mass., 1983), pp. 9-11.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 9.
13. See for example Adedeji's 'The Alarinjo Theatre'. Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, University of Ibadan, 1969; Osofisan, 'The Origins of Drama in West Africa'. Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, University of Ibadan, 1973; and Soyinka, *Myth, Literature and the African World* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1976).
14. Homi K. Bhabha, 'Signs Taken for Wonders: Questions of Ambivalence and Authority Under a Tree Outside Delhi, May, 1817', in *Europe and its Others*, Vol. 1, eds. Francis Barker et al., (Colchester, 1985), pp. 96-100.
15. *The Lion and the Jewel*, in *Collected Plays II* (Oxford, 1974, pp. 1-58); *A Dance in the Forests*, in *Collected Plays I* (Oxford, 1973, pp. 1-78); *Kongi's Harvest*, in *Collected Plays II* (Oxford, 1974, pp. 59-142).
16. See M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, translated by H. Iswolsky (Massachusetts: M.I.T., 1968).