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Wole Soyinka

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First of Two Essays

Power and Freedom

Wole Soyinka

The totalitarian state is easy to define, easy to identify and thus, offers a recognizable target at which the archers of human freedom can direct their darts. Not so obliging is what I refer to as the quasi-state, that elusive entity that may cover the full gamut of ideologies and religions, contends for power but is not defined by physical boundaries that mark the sovereign state. Especially frustrating is the fact that the quasi-state commences with a position whose basic aim — a challenge to an unjust status quo — makes it difficult to separate from progressive movements of dissent, and with which it sometimes forms alliances of common purpose. At the same time, however, there lurks within its social intent an identical contempt for those virtues that constitute the goals of other lovers of freedom. Thus, to fully grasp the essence of Power, we must look beyond the open “show of force,” the demonstration of overt power whose purpose is to instruct a people just who is master. In short, we are obliged to include, indeed regard as an equal partner in the project of power, the elusive entity that is conveniently described here as the quasi-state, the shadowy corporation of power that mimics the formal state and exercises some form of authority or control over both the willing and the unwilling. We shall return to that mimic but potent entity in a few moments.

The formal state, in its dictatorial mutation, usually represents power at its crudest — the tramp of conquering jackboots through a prostrate city, etc. Equally familiar to many, are the daylight or night-time shock troops of state, storming the homes and offices of dissidents of a political order, carting away their victims with total disdain for open or hidden resentment. The saturation of society by near-invisible secret agents, the cooption of friends and family members — as has been notoriously documented in Ethiopia of The Dergue, former East Germany, Idi Amin’s Uganda or Iran of the Shah Palahvi and the Ayatollahs prior to the Reformist movement — all compelled to report on the tiniest nuances of discontent with, or indifference toward, the state — they all constitute part of the overt, mostly structured forces of subjugation. To fully apprehend the neutrality of the suzerainty of fear in recent times, indifferent to either religious or ideological base, one need only compare the testimonies of Ethiopian victims under the atheistic order of Mengistu Mariam, and the theocratic bastion of Iran under the purification orgy of her religious leaders, or indeed the Taliban of Afghanistan and the atheistic order of a Stalinist Soviet Union.

Wole Soyinka, Nobel Prize-winning poet and playwright, was imprisoned in Nigeria for his opposition to dictatorship. These lectures are two of a series of five from the BBC entitled “The Climate of Fear.” They are printed here with permission.

Tragic Role

Stalin's Soviet Union is gone; Afghanistan of the Taliban is no more. It is this quasi-state that today instills the greatest fear and, to complicate matters even more, often boasts a liberating manifesto of seductive ideals. Only rarely does it make the mistake of showing its hand in advance, as happened in Algeria. In that nation, decades of neglect, state corruption, and alienation of the ruling elite swung the disenchanting populace at the democratic elections of 1992 toward a radical movement, the electorate remaining more or less indifferent to the fact that the change threatened to place a theocratic lid on much of the secular liberties that they had learnt to take for granted. Employment, bread, and shelter are more pressing issues in the immediate, than notions of freedom of taste. Thus: *we shall ascend to power on the democratic ladder — declared the evidently popular Islamist party — after which we shall pull up the ladder, and there shall be no more democracy.* Let us spend a little time on the Algerian scenario; it holds many lessons for us and, of course, occupies the tragic role of being one of the unwitting dispersal agencies for our current climate of fear.

Algeria is merely a convenient example, but it is also a subjective choice. My generation grew up under the indirect education of a singularly vicious anti-colonial struggle — the Algerian. That nation played a key role in the formation of the radical corps of African — and even black American — nationalism in the fifties and sixties, served as a source of reference, solidarity, and material aid for many African revolutionary leaders. So it is perhaps inevitable that some of us would take more than a passing interest in her contemporary fortunes. A newly independent entity, Algeria's experiments in post-colonial reconstruction provided study models in the quest for the developmental transformation of other emergent African nations.

For some of us, therefore, to watch such a people plunged into a state of social retrogression, from whatever cause, is a harrowing cautionary tale, truly tragic, a reminder of the Sisyphean burden that unforeseen forces often place on the shoulders of would-be progressive movements. It is a daily reminder never to take any political situation for granted, never to underestimate the focused energy of the quasi-state whose instinctive recourse to the rule of fear as a weapon of struggle may drive even participants in the liberation struggle, into exile, liquidate others, and paralyze the creative drive of a dynamic people.

Algeria in 1992 was a dilemma posed to try the credentials of the hardest democrat anywhere in the world, but most pertinently, her African co-habitants across the Sahara who, in many cases, were then struggling to free themselves from the stranglehold of military dictatorship. That dilemma can be summed up thus: *if you believe in democracy, are you not thereby obliged to accept, without discrimination, the fallouts that come with a democratic choice, even if this means the termination of the democratic process itself?* This was the crux of the electoral choice that was freely made by the Algerian people. Why indeed should a people not, in effect, redeem Hegel from Karl Marx? They would only be paying Marx back in his own coins, since Marx's boast was that he began with the model of Hegel's schema of history but then turned Hegel on his head. He replaced Hegel's idealism with a materialist basis and the class struggle. Both are agreed on the dialectical process that leads to the fulfillment of history as the emasculation of the state order. Social contradictions are resolved and thus political strife is eliminated. Rulership becomes indistinct from the followership — in one case, through the benevolent embodiment of enlightened rule, in the other, through the eradication of classes.

Concept of the Chosen

What the Islamic Party of Algeria did was simply to embody Hegel's Historic Will, or Spirit, in the Koran. Ironically, this ought to be regarded as a democratic advance on Hegel, since the process of this annulment of History — whose annunciation was made quite recently by Francis Fukuyama — was reached through popular choice, and the mantle of administrators of the Historic Will has been bestowed on the theocratic class by the electorate itself. Choice remains the bedrock of the democratic process, and if a people have made a choice that eliminates all further necessity for the ritual rounds of choosing, well . . . that argument appears to have reached its terminal point. History has been fulfilled.

The perennial problem with that proposition, of course, is that this denies the dynamic nature of human society, and preaches that the purely fortuitous can substitute, at any time, for the eternal and immutable. Such a position opens the way for the triumph of a social order that is based on the concept of The Chosen — a mockery of the principle of choice — and totally eliminates the impulse to change or even experimentation, as a factor of human development. On the political field, it entrusts power in the hands of a clique of rulers, whose qualification could rightly range from membership of a military class to that of a Masonic order, a labor or clerical union. Revelation replaces enquiry, dictation dismisses debate. For us in Nigeria, in 1992, these were no abstract issues, much as we wished Algeria would simply go away or choose another time to pose a dilemma that provided ammunition for our own stubborn dictatorial order.

Let us quickly recapitulate, for those to whom both Nigeria and Algeria belong on an alien planet or, in some encounters I have had, are indeed the same nation since they sound alike. What happened was that in both countries, in 1992 in one case, 1993 in the other, a recognized political party looked all set to win an election. At that point, however, the process was truncated by the military for no other reason than that it did not like the face of the winners. There was a critical difference, however. The victorious party in Nigeria did not promote a manifesto that would abrogate all further democratic ventures while, in Algeria, this formed the core of its manifesto. Easy enough to simplify the issue and say, yes, take the democratic walk to its logical conclusion but then, as I have attempted to question, just what is the logical conclusion of the democratic option?

We could try and approach this dilemma obliquely, citing a very recent, and instructive development within Nigeria, one that is, however, only a partial and tepid echo of the Algerian situation. Following the May 2003 elections, the second since that nation's return to democracy, a state in the North, Zamfara State — progressively followed by nine others in the nation — declared that its governance would henceforth be based on the *Sharia* — a code of strict Islamic laws. One of the later subscribers to Sharia rule was the Plateau State. In December that same year, the governor, himself a Moslem, found himself obliged to take stern measures against an extremist movement that named itself after the Taliban. This group rose against his government, claiming that it had failed to keep strict adherence to the *Sharia*. It launched an insurrection, took over some police stations — one of which, incidentally, it renamed Afghanistan — inflicted a number of casualties and sought to overthrow the elected government. It was subdued by state forces, the movement banned and the Council of Ulama, the religious leaders, dissolved. Would it be totally illogical to project that this could also easily have been the fate of Algeria if indeed

the victorious party had succeeded in forming a government? Once Righteousness replaces Political Rights in the exercise of power, the way is paved for a permanent contest based on the primacy of the *holier-than-thou*.

Competitive Bestiality

But this is mere speculation. What we do know, as fact, is that since the undemocratic choice was imposed on Algeria, an estimated one hundred and fifty thousand lives have been lost, several of these in a most grisly manner. And not just writers, cineastes, painters, journalists, intellectuals — those purveyors of impure thought, always the primary target of fundamentalist reformers — we are speaking here of entire villages and sectors of urban society that were considered guilty of flouting the purist laws of the opposition, now transformed into a quasi-state. A resistance movement that began as a legitimate reaction to the thwarting of popular will, expressed along democratic usage, has degenerated into an orgy of competitive bestiality. State and quasi-state are locked in a deadly struggle, marked by a complete abandonment of the final vestiges of known norms of civilized society.

Such extremism could not stay localized for long. We have only to recollect that some of the leaders of this new insurgency cut their teeth in the struggle for the liberation of Afghanistan, a struggle that triumphed with the expulsion of Soviet forces of occupation from that nation, then recollect that such *Mujihaddins* are pitted against a regime whose leaders are also veterans in the bruising war of liberation against French colonialism. And the consequence of these antecedents for global politics? The notion of a nationalist war that would remain strictly within national confines was ended. Perhaps such a notion had long dissipated — only not much notice was paid at the time — since the Vietnam war, a war that sought no more than the liberation of its land from the domination of foreigners.

Regarding that war, I must acknowledge a puzzle: Vietnam, then known as Indochina, fought two wars of liberation, first from France, whom she defeated at the famous battle of Dien Bien Phu, then against the United States of America, which felt that she knew a thing or two that France did not. Who dare forget the saturation bombing carried out by the United States in the latter stages of the war, or the earlier barrage of defoliants whose effects have yet to wear off completely in that nation, the deadly chemical weapon, napalm, author of horrendous images of inhuman disfiguration. Now, the puzzle is this. I find it curious that the North Vietnamese, victims of two world powers in rapid succession, did not ever consider designating the entire world a war arena where innocents and guilty alike would be legitimately targeted. Not one incident of hijacking took place during those wars, neither did the taking of hostages or the random detonation of bombs in places of tourist attraction, or of religious worship. United Nations agencies, as well as humanitarian organizations appear to have enjoyed the respect due to neutrals in conflict.

Certainly, during the entire Vietnam wars, it would have been hyperbolic to suggest that the world was trapped in a climate of fear. While we may dispute in the end what lessons must be drawn from this contrast; it is one that deserves close study. In another lecture of this series, *I am Right; You are Dead*, I hope to be able to offer some pointers. Certainly we cannot ignore the antecedent histories of victim peoples, their philosophies and their religions. The same observation applies, albeit in a different vein, to the anti-apartheid struggle that was waged with no less commitment and intensity against a ruthless foe. The oppressed peoples of South Africa

did not pronounce the outside world guilty of the crime of continuing to prosper while a majority race was being ground to earth by an implacable machinery of racist governance. There are lessons in these studies in contrast, lessons that may enable us, after acknowledging the principal sources of the current climate of fear, to seek remedies that go beyond the rectification of glaring and sustained injustices undergone by peoples.

Strange Impulse

It is always easy enough to address the material factors of conflict, and we do know that in most cases, such will be found as the primary causes. They can be identified and grasped, and usually provide a basis for negotiations even in the most intense moments of conflict. Nations fight over land, over water supply, oil, and other material resources — these are accessible causes of hostilities. They go to the heart of a people's sense of social security and struggle for survival. Intermeshed with these, however, but not so intricately as to be totally inseparable is a much neglected factor in its own right — the quotient of power, the will to dominate, to control, that strange impulse that persuades certain temperaments that they can realize their existence either individually or collectively only through the domination of others. We are speaking here of that phase when a struggle moves beyond its material causes — to restore parity to an exploitative order or whatever — and becomes one that is dedicated to the seizure and exercise of raw power. It goes to the heart of the phenomenon of those dictators who, long past their creative usefulness, still cling ruthlessly to the seat of power, a contemporary instance of which can be seen in the pitiable condition of the once revolutionary, now merely embarrassing ruler of Zimbabwe whose governance is sustained today, not by popular acceptance but by the agency of terror.

Let us not therefore limit the thrill of power only to its structured manifestations and territorial embodiment — that is, the physical. We are speaking of the silent thrill of power by means other than actual governance, power as a pursuit in its own right, an addictive concentrate, extract or essence. The conduct of the child, taunting and circumscribing the motions of a captive insect, or the well-known antics of the school bully — these are early forays into the laboratory of power, from where a taste may develop into major assaults on entire communities. The complementary emotion of the victim — insect or school pupil — that is, what the tormentor loves to see, that reward is of course, the expression of fear, accompanied by an abject surrender of volition.

To what I have termed the quasi-state belongs the major credit for our contemporary climate of fear. With the rise of the quasi-state, the state that is not an entity in the geographical sense or through a certificate of membership of the United Nations, I believe that it is time to confront a heightened reality — heightened, because not exactly new — and accept the factor of power, the instinct to power, as a motivating component of the human personality, an unquantifiable element that has always governed much of social and nation relationships. History concedes to exceptional figures, past and present — Alexander, Suleyman, King Darius, Chaka the Zulu, Ataturk, Indira Gandhi — the temperaments of nation builders as well as nurturers of power. That latter impulsion is not glossed, neither by historians, nor by the psychoanalysts of supermen and women. What differs in our contemporary situation is that the relishing of power is no longer an attribute of the outstanding, exceptional individual, but is increasingly accessible even to the nondescript individual whose

membership in a clique, or activities on behalf of The Chosen more than fulfils this hunger for a share in the menu of power. Is it strictly out of a commitment to the moral law — *Thou shall not kill* — that the Christian anti-abortion crusader in the United States stalks and kills abortion doctors, patients, and innocent passers-by, sometimes operating from within a network of protective cells? Or is there also an element of the thrill of membership in a quasi-state, exercising a form of power that transcends all mainstream social accords? We shall turn more fully to the theme of The Chosen in the [next] of these lectures.

For now, let me assure you that if you wish to observe the face of power at its most mundane, you do not have far to seek. You do not need to pay to see Marlon Brando in his role as the Godfather at the head of a Mafia combine. That face is omnipresent — from the clerical assistant on whom the emergence of a critical file depends, to anonymous members of an unacknowledged terrorist organization in the United States known as the IRS — the Internal Revenue Service. Simply be on the receiving end of a letter of demand from that body and you immediately construct the driven personality of the writer!

Warped Genius

Actually, that ogre has long been displaced in my estimation by a creature against whom I readily confess that I nurse a deep, murderous loathing. To him belongs the modern crown of furtive, invisible power. I refer to the domination freak whose warped genius creates those invisible, proliferating Frankensteins from his dingy computer den and sends them in virtual space to invade and destroy the work of individuals and institutions. These monsters are without an ounce of hatred in their veins, with no wrong to avenge, no cause to promote, without physical territorial ambition, indeed with no motivation other than the lust for power over unknown millions, both the meek and the powerful, the affluent and the deprived, the professor and the school pupil alike. The most recent of these, like Mr. “Call me God” the Maryland sniper, is not without a message for his captive world — “Have the Guts to call the name of Jesus” is the name of the stalking horse on which his cannibal creation rides in cyber space to wage his war of destruction on the unsuspecting. It takes little imagination to picture this figure at his computer with, literally, the whole world at his fingertips, locked in a competitive lust with unknown others for the power to inflict the maximum injury on industrious humanity. This usually youthful individual is, of course, impelled by a genuine passion for discovery, but the space between that motion of a technological curiosity and the gesture that launches a virus on the world is the space that separates the explorer from the conqueror, the adventurer from the imperialist, the liberator from the dictator: It is the space of pure, unadulterated ecstasy of power.

Science fiction literature, of which I used to be an avid fan, and films in the same genre, are actually very instructive. Take *The Day of the Triffyds*, where plants attempt to take over human society, or films of alien body snatchers, that most subversively imaginative way of taking over the key elements in a community, its government, progressively taking over the nation by assuming the physical shapes of a nation’s ruling cadre. We may ask the question: what is the most basic element that twangs a chord of trepidation in the human viscera? What gives that piquant edge to one’s apprehension in much of science-fiction and horror literature? I suggest that it is very simply the notion of coming under the control of another being, of finding oneself dominated by an alien force, an alien bundle of values, sensibilities, tastes,

concerns, beliefs, and direction — in short, being robbed of one's personality and social anchor. Apart from a fear of the loss of identity to those goblins from outer space, with heaven knows what nasty habits — one recognizable source of that repulsion is, very simply, the ancestral adversary of human freedom that we designate as Power.

So now, finally to the conundrum — just what is power? We know that it has been credited with the founding of society under such related expressions as the need for recognition, acknowledgement, etc. from one's fellow beings, but just what is it? Victims of rape frequently testify that, next to the horror of bodily violation, the most humiliating aspect of the experience is that of being totally subjected to another's control. And the more sadistic the rapist, the greater his need to exact an acknowledgment from the victim of submission to his dominance. Sexual gratification is, of course, at the heart of such violations, but preeminent also is the satisfaction of dominating another, making him or her totally subject to his whims, some of which may not even be sexual in nature. In whatever proportion we choose to present these cravings, there is no question that a sense of power generates its own satisfaction, and is an important element in the drive towards rape. So, once again, back to the question: just what is power?

Is it perhaps no more than a deadly mutation of ambition, one that may or may not translate into social activity? Any fool, any moron, any psychopath can aspire to the exercise of Power, and, of course, the more psychopathic, the more efficient — Hitler, Pol Pot, Idi Amin, Sergeant Doe, and the latest in the line of the unconsciously driven, my own lately departed General Sanni Abacha — all have proved that Power — as long as you are sufficiently ruthless, amoral, and manipulative — Power is within the grasp of even the mentally deficient. So, power is really neither efficacy nor a product of vision.

Glitzy Brothel

Trying to cope with, or at least come to terms with the phenomenon of the will to dominate others — as if the endeavor to regulate one's individual existence is not sufficient burden for any mortal — I ended up with a notion that perhaps this tendency is no more than an attempt to appropriate the forces that one observes in Nature herself. After all, the manifestation of raw Power is an encounter that is inevitable right from infancy, and through the normal course of existence — be it in a rainstorm, the force of lightning, or an earthquake. Even the casual wind that takes down a rotten branch or a roof or two is a manifestation of the hidden force of Nature that suddenly exercises its authority from time to time, and without any intervention from man. Nature, therefore, sometimes reveals herself as a pure expression of power, and it is perhaps no more than an anthropomorphic conceit to suggest that man, in those activities that incline him toward the exercise of dominance, is merely attempting a crude appropriation of that elemental attribute that is an expression of the very forces that surround and threaten to overwhelm him, not least of which is Mortality. In short, Power is the precipitate of man's neurotic will to match himself with the force of Nature, that agency through which the various apprehensions of God, under whatever name, are filtered. You cannot, however, contain within yourself the elemental force of a thunderstorm, an earthquake or a volcano. Those who believe they can are subject matter for the rites of exorcism, and it is for this reason that ancient societies devised a number of ritualized scenarios for the banalization of power. As a dramatist, I have myself experimented

with a number of rituals towards that end. Here is one, designed however only for the formal, not his shadowy counterpart. It takes off from the French playwright and exorcist, Jean Genet.

A glitzy brothel, most appropriately, is the setting for Jean Genet's ritualization of the promiscuous facilitator, Power, in his play, *The Balcony*. There, the power-obsessed come periodically to act out their fantasies. Here now is a summary of my variation on Jean Genet:

Suppose we modernized Genet's rather primitive stage mechanics to embrace the very latest in special effects. Society would then proceed to offer its ruler a chance to erupt with the earthquake, soar on flues of the thunderstorm and become virtually one with the convulsion that attends the birth of new planets. Encased in a Virtual Reality capsule, a super Jacuzzi, the Maximum Leader would dominate the universe every day before breakfast. As a finale — and here I must acknowledge the inspiration of the television innovation of that late leader Mobutu Sese Seko — he would watch the morning product of his bodily functions morph into a celestial orb — the sun, no less — rising over the horizon, heralding a new day for his nation. After such an immersion in the utter sublimity of galactic power, any mortal must emerge with nothing but contempt for the mere pittance of awe and terror that are the normal dues from his miserable subjects. He would leave them — us — to wallow in our now unappealing state of unbroken freedom, and the absence of fear.

I am persuaded that this is a ritualistic offering that no man-eating dictator, with the innate theatrics of that breed, could ever reject.

Second of Two Essays

I am Right; You are Dead

Wole Soyinka

The French nation was lately involved in a controversy over its decision to ban ostentatious symbols of religious faiths from secondary schools. I was invited to take part in that debate, and readily accepted. It was a chance to openly interrogate a long-held conviction that there should be a period in the development of the young mind when the perception of differences in humanity is reduced to an absolute minimum, even if it cannot be eliminated completely. That period, it seems obvious, is that of school pupilage, where the space of instruction is cleansed of manifestations of private wealth, tastes, class, and so on. The symbol, as well as practical expression of this oneness, the leveler, is, of course, the school uniform.

Objections surfaced to the mind — the indelicate, even provocative timing — indelicate to the extent of almost sounding like a declaration of hostilities! Then the positive role of such symbols as spiritual and ethical reminders in the consciousness of youthful minds at all times, a corrective mechanism when on the verge of misconduct. In short, my mind was readying itself for the mode of dialogue, anticipating even the extension into as protest demonstrations. Capitulation by the government was already a possibility. I anticipated a protracted dialogue, involving the basic philosophy of education, going back to ancient times, inductions into age groups in traditional societies etc, etc.

For some, alas, such dialogue was superfluous. A hitherto unknown group, vying to overtake others as the Terminal Censors of our time, warned the French government that it was next in line for a Madrid-style reprisal and should prepare for a season of “sorrow and remorse” for her perceived assault on the Islamic faith. So now, perhaps it is only a matter of time before some public target, perhaps even a school is bombed in an effort to end the dialogue, the contested head scarves torn off to serve as tourniquet for severed limbs or even shrouds.

Crusade of Vengeance

Here is an even more ancient terminating venture — the ironically named “Right to Life” crusaders in the United States, known plainly as anti-abortion militants. One such group — self-styled the “Army of God” — boasts a supportive network for its assassins, one that extends to Europe. They gun down doctors, police guards, and the occasional patients or passers-by. The network provided protection for the one who named himself “Sword of God” while on the run for murders. Another of the same breed of Christian fundamentalist, an ordained priest, was executed in Texas last year, to a chorus of threats by his support group that they would unleash on the American nation reprisals that would make Timothy McVeigh’s crusade of

vengeance look like child's play. Timothy MacVeigh, for the uninitiated, was that remarkable zealot who was plagued by a unique social conscience that could only be stilled by blowing up a public building, one that housed both a state security department as well as an infant school. McVeigh did not profess any religion. Nonetheless he was a zealot of his own Supreme Purpose, the manifestation of a private irredentism. His chosen grounds of dispute were neither ideological nor theological, but he presents us with a clear psychopathology of the zealot, one who is imbued with a self-righteousness that can only be assuaged by homicidal resolution. It moves all possible discourse away from even the dogmatic, dead-end monologue of *I am right, you are wrong* to that of *I am right; you are dead*. The issue therefore, is not Religion but Fanaticism. This, however, does not absolve either Ideology or Religion of responsibility for the fanatic strain to which it gives birth, one that Religion even occasionally unleashes in the contest for political supremacy, then repudiates — too late. It is time for us to recognize that there is no regulating mechanism for the fanatic mind, once set in motion. Not for nothing do the Yoruba warn that . . . *sooner than have a monster child meet a shameful death in the market place, it is best that the mother strangle it in the secret recesses of the home*. What this means, quite simply, is that the primary burden of exorcizing the demon that escaped from the womb, rests on the same womb that gave it birth. Today, there is urgent need for mother religion of whatever inclination to come to the rescue of humanity with a creative act of infanticide.

It was not theocratic dictatorship, but repressions of a secular order that evoked my sense of unease when, a full generation ago, I delivered a lecture of the title "Climates of Art." There is however a link, unsought, a sense of brutal continuity. That link was the attempted murder of the Egyptian writer Naguib Mahfouz, a Nobel Prize winner by the way, but what matters to us is that he was — still is — a writer of his time and most relevantly, place. Unlike a number of other creative minds trapped within the killing domain of religious terminal censors, Mahfouz did survive, a living symbol of that space of creative martyrdom that stretches today from Afghanistan of the Talibans through Iran, to North Africa, Algeria most especially. That space of fanaticism aggressively expands into other nations of traditional tolerance and balance, including mine, Nigeria.

The Plunging Knife

My poem SAMARKAND was a tribute to Naguib Mafouz, who was fated to expand into the religious those apprehensions of the secular to which I had given voice in "Climates of Art," delivered some twenty-five years ago:

...the ink of Kandahar
Has turned to blood. The heir of ancient dynasties
Of letters — Khorassan, Alexandria, Timbuktoo lies sprawled
In the dirt and dust of a passageway

He is no alien. No roots than his grow deeper
In that market place, no eye roved closer home.
He is that fixture in the marketplace café
Sipping sweetened cups of mint, oblivious of
The bitter one that would be served
By the shadowy one, the waiter-stalker, a youth

Fed on dreams of sarabands of houris
Doe-eyed virgins, wine and sweetmeats in the afterlife
But to his paradise, a key — the plunging knife.

The nineteenth century black American scholar, W.E.B. Dubois once declared that the issue of the twentieth century would be that of race. It is becoming clear that while that century may have indeed inherited and been plagued near continuously by that social issue, it was replaced toward the end by that of religion, and it is one that has not yet been addressed with the same global concern as race once was. Perhaps the Katami-UNESCO initiative, a series of contacts titled *Dialougue of Civilizations* will succeed in bringing the world to confront this lethal successor to the secular monologue. Pol Pot is dead, gone the way of those other architects of the necropolis — Adolf Hitler, Josef Stalin, and other mixed company of both Left and Right. Today, the main source of fanatic mind is religion, and its temper, one that, ironically, is grounded in the doctrine of submission, has grown increasingly arrogant, doctrinaire, and violent, almost in an unconscious vengeful recompense for its apprenticeship within the spiritual principle of Submission.

At stake is tolerance, and the place of dissent within a social order. There are, however, differences between the workings of secular intolerance and those of the theocratic, and such differences may assist us in assessing the very real threat to human freedom that the closed world of the fanatic poses to humanity. Secular ideology derives its theories from history and the material world. The mind has therefore learnt to pause occasionally and reflect on the process that links the material world to the doctrines that derive from or govern it, to test theories against those realities, be they economic, industrial or even environmental. The dynamic totality of the real world is given rational space. Even the craving after infallibility — as in the case of Marxism — may result in the exposure of fallacies and inconsistencies, or at the least, ambiguous zones within the theory.

Thus, within a secular dispensation, even under the most rigid totalitarian order, its underpinning ideology — that is, the equivalent of theology — remains open to contestation. Open questioning may be suppressed, open debate may be restricted or prohibited by the state or the party of power, but the functioning of the mind, its capacity for critique — even self-criticism — never ceases. The mind remains a free agent within its own space, free to roam outside the confines of the totalitarian order, to seek, and often find kindred spirits and form a conspiracy of non-believers or at least, skeptics. This factor leads sooner or later to an alternative view, and perhaps piecemeal erosion of the doctrinaire system. Under the theocratic sibling however, one that derives its authority, not from theories that are elicited from the material conditions of society but from the secret spaces of Revelation, this disposition of the mind toward alternative concepts is next to impossible. Curiosity succumbs to fear, often masquerading as pious Submission. The theocratic order derives its mandate from the unknown. Only a chosen few are privileged to have penetrated the workings of the mind of the Unknown, whose constitution — known as the Scriptures — they and they alone can interpret. The fanatic that is born of this dogmatic structure of the ineffable religion is the most dangerous being on earth.

Homicidal *hubris* is the ultimate hallmark of the fanatic. The ice pick in the neck of Leon Trotsky, ensconced in the deceptive safety of Mexico, was forged in the same furnace as the knife that sought the throat of Naguib Mafouz.

Act of Impiety

We are sometimes able to observe the intrusion of political opportunism into the workings of religious zealotry, a common enough marriage of convenience that gives birth to monstrosities. Let us only recall the sustained mob arousal in India that ended with Hindus razing down an ancient mosque in the state of Uttar Pradesh, on the grounds that this centuries-old mosque had been built on the very spot where Lord Rama, a Hindu deity, first made his appearance on earth. The reverberations of that act of impiety have continued to haunt the Indian nation till today, but the immediate repercussions were orgies of killings, including the ambush of railway trains and commuter buses, the virtual “religious cleansing” of neighborhoods, creating ghost villages and derelict urban centers.

And here, let us pause, and use this episode to anticipate and silence those who, whenever an outrage linked to one religion or the other attracts amply deserved condemnation, immediately sound alarms of prejudice, sectarian hatred and world conspiracies, tacitly claiming for such structures of faith an immunity from commentary. The world, East and West, including its official organs — UNO and UNESCO — were unambiguous in their condemnation of that crime, even as they would later unite in condemnation of the iconoclasm of the Taliban against the historic statues of Buddha. That former rebuke did not lead to any claims by Hindus that the world nursed a primordial hatred against Hinduism or had entered into a conspiracy to eradicate that religion from the world. On a personal level, I found myself sufficiently exercised to note the event in my poetic menu of *Twelve Canticles for the Zealot*, published in “SAMARKAND and Other Markets I have known”:

A god is nowhere born, yet everywhere
But Rama’s sect rejects that fine distinction —
The designated spot is sanctified, not for piety but
For dissolution of yours from mine, politics of hate
And forced exchange — peace for a moment’s rapture.
They turn a mosque to rubble, stone by stone,
Condemned usurper of Lord Rama’s vanished spot
Of dreamt epiphany. Now a cairn of stones
Usurps a dream of peace — can they dream peace
In iconoclast Uttar Pradesh?

Few spots in the world today are exempt from the depredations of the fanatic. I believe it should be possible to view the bombing of innocents in the United States, Bali, Casablanca, Madrid or anywhere else in the same way. It is untenable to claim that, because those mass-killers implicated, and persist in invoking the banner of Islam, seeking legitimization and a killing rapture from that religion, that Islam is therefore under indictment. Equally is it unacceptable to claim that any condemnation of the act or pursuit of the criminals reveals hatred of the religion. A world in which a powerful organization like NATO goes to battle against the Christian Serbs on behalf of a battered Moslem population, and brings the head of their violators to justice before an International Tribunal, is not a world that is prejudiced against Islam, Christendom or Buddhism, and the propagators of such doctrines are merely disingenuous.

Cesspool of Fanaticism

In any case, the Christian world is not one, neither is the Islamic, nor do their combined authority speak to or for the entire world, but the world of the fanatic is one and it cuts across all religions and vocations. The tributaries that feed the cesspool of fanaticism may ooze from sources separated by history, clime, and race, by injustices and numerous privations, but they arrive at the same destination — the zone of unquestioning certitude. The zealot is one that creates a Supreme Being, or Purpose in his or her own image, then executes out the orders of that solipsistic device that commands from within, in lofty alienation from, and utter contempt of society and community.

We, on the African continent, whose people were decimated, in a time of our own troubled peace, in Kenya and Tanzania, our soil violated by one of the earliest aerial sabotage that scattered human limbs over the earth of Niger, have a special stake in this. The black freedom fighters of Southern Sudan, locked in a brutal war of over three decades against an Islamic regime, a genocidal war that has claimed at least a hundred thousand times more lives and overseen a thousand times greater destruction of a people, an environment and a culture than in the Middle East, have not resorted to accusing the Islamic or Arab world of a conspiracy against the black race. They are focused on their quest for liberation from a specified, localized, theocratic and often racist order, against which they have raised charges of genocide that remain largely ignored by the Western world and by the United Nations. We do not hear from the leaders of that struggle any proposition of the division of the world into the African world against All Others. They have not moved to set the bazaars and monuments of Medina on fire or burn Japanese infants in their cribs. Not even the historic — still ongoing in parts — denigration of African religions and cultures, or indeed the memory of both European and Arab enslavement of the African peoples, has elicited this inflammatory agenda.

African religions do not proselytize but, let me break that tradition, in the cause of the global quest for harmonized co-existence, and offer the world a lesson from African spirituality, taken specifically from the world of the *orisa*, the pantheon of the Yoruba people. This religion, one that is still pursued in Brazil and other parts of Southern America and the Caribbean, has never engaged on any equivalent of the crusade or the jihad in its own cause. The word “infidel” or unbeliever is anathema to its scriptures, thus it cannot recognize a spiritual dichotomy of the world. Despite its reticence, however, it has penetrated the globe and survived through confident retention by the displaced and dispossessed slaves and its infectious hold even on their European violators. Its watchword is — tolerance, a belief that there are many paths to truth and godhead and that the world need not be set on fire to prove the supremacy of a belief or the righteousness of a cause.

Them and Us

The dead-end dogmatism of *I am right, you are wrong*, has circled back since the contest of ideologies and once again attained its apotheosis of *I am right; you are dead*. The monologue of unilateralism constantly aspires to the mantle of The Chosen and, of course, further dichotomizes the world, inviting us, on pain of consequences, to choose between “them” and “us.” We must, in other words, reject the pronouncements of a George Bush in the ultimatum: “you are either with us and against the terrorists, or you are on the side of the terrorists,” just as strongly as we

repudiate Osama bin Laden's "The world is now clearly divided into two — the world of the followers of Islam against that of infidels and unbelievers."

Could the United States have responded differently immediately after September 11? Perhaps not. Hindsight is a most unreliable judge of such decisions, and those circumstances were clearly unprecedented. Did that nation, however, have to embark on that avoidable path that led remorselessly into Iraq? More specifically, and with no complication of hindsight: why were the Weapons inspectors of the United Nations ordered out of Iraq in submission to the will of one nation especially at a moment when Saddam Hussein had openly submitted himself to the authority of that very institution?

Let us turn to our present dateline. It is still the second millennium, the so-called era of the "global village." Concretely, it is the era in which the world has attempted to put in place, after many blunders and dereliction of responsibilities, International Courts and Tribunals for Crimes against Humanity. It is an era in which former heads of state are being hauled up for crimes against their own peoples and against others — from Chile to Rwanda. It is the era of the strategy of near globally upheld sanctions, not always successful, we know, and sometimes excruciating slow in the ability to produce the desired results. It is nevertheless the era of newly reinvigorated possibilities, a new global relevance for the organ called the United Nations. Indeed, perhaps it was stemming from this same consciousness, an attempt to impress upon the world the critical necessity of such an organ in the New Millennium, that the Nobel establishment in its centennial anniversary chose to honor that organization, and its Secretary-General, with the Peace Prize. We cannot deny or gloss over some of its failures to live up to the world's expectations, to its founding ideas, and the needs of humanity. We are only too keenly aware of the costly consequences — in global trust, and in human lives — of some of those failures. Nevertheless, we are doomed to despair if we failed also to acknowledge its many achievements and to accept the fact that it is the only organ in the world that has unquestioned authority of intervention in troubled spots.

Unilateral action, or the appropriation of a global duty of response, by any one nation, serves only to diminish the United Nations. That the greatest culprit in this respect should be one of such powerful achievements as the United States, one that is also host to that organization, physically, on its own soil, only denotes an enervation of global vision. That the United States has the capacity for technological, military, and economic leadership is not in dispute; what the United States lacks is philosophical leadership, despite its formidable reserves of original thinkers. The atrocity of September 11 was a crime against the world, against humanity. It was thus a moment for the United States to have demonstrated her readiness to reinforce the structures that take a global view of such criminality. The United States had the option of placing her formidable capabilities under the moral authority of the United Nations, instilling in her own people the imperatives of a global approach to justice.

Quagmire of Iraq

AMERICAN STRIKES BACK! No, this resort to what we identified in an earlier talk as rhetorical hysteria was not what the world needed to see emblazoning the screens of American television hour after hour, day after day and week after week as the United States gathered its strength to avenge a crime that was committed on its

soil. Such orchestration of mood was bound to lead, sooner or later, to the quagmire of Iraq, lose its ethical moorings in the original cause, and degenerate into an open-ended career of aggressive pursuit that would translate as AMERICA STRIKES ON — AND ON AND... ON... AND ON...its lethal array of weaponry poised to *awe and shock!*

If certain acts against humanity appear to place their perpetrators beyond dialogue, we must still embrace interrogation — that is, self-interrogation. In what way, in turn, have we contributed to the making of such a moment? Failure to do this limits the long-term effectiveness of response, and brackets us with the mentality of the fanatic who, literally, never seeks to recover, indeed is incapable of recovering a long receded moment of doubt, the zone of possible choices, of the potentials of the routes not taken. That quest is open and universal. What nature of an environment ensured the stabbing of a Naguib Mafouz? Has Marxism triumphed since the killing of Leon Trotsky? Was peaceful co-existence promoted by the demolition of the mosque in Utter Pradesh? Has the assassination of Sheikh Yassin made the world any safer? What kind of morality is it that turns a fourteen-year-old child into a walking bomb? Does a supposed wall of defense concretize hope or despair across the Middle East? Why did the woman writer, Taslim Nazreen, become a fugitive from her home in Pakistan?

Our theme is fanaticism — so let the last word be on behalf of that doubly endangered specie, writer and woman, standing in for the disdained of the world, seeking equality for their kind:

Some words are coarse, obscene, indecent.
They make a case for censorship, such words as
Pagan, heathen, infidel, unbeliever, kafiri etc.
The cleric swears he'll sweep the streets clean
Of the unclean, armed with Book and Beard. Both
Turn kindling, but overturn the law of physics.
For the fire consumes all but the arsonist. He lives
To preach another day. The promised beast
Of the Apocalypse left me unbeliever
Till a rambling cleric apportioned death on CNN —
Surely that devil's instrument! — on Taslim Nazreen
She wrote of an equalizing God, androgynous
Who deals, ambidextrous, with the Left and Right. ❁

