

K O F I    A W O O N O R

TRADITION AND CONTINUITY IN AFRICAN LITERATURE\*

We must make certain assumptions about the principle of continuity which seems to be at the heart of a great deal of our literature. By this I mean that the African writer creates within a cultural tradition, a tradition that defines its own esthetics and functions. For literature and art in tradition were not limited in their role to a utilitarian system per se, but expressed the continued endurance of a certain theological order. More important, the art forms of the traditions had as their primary impulse a concern with a fundamental process of integration and survival, integration as opposed to a dichotomized process of evil and good, beautiful or ugly, and, furthermore, opposed to what I may call an itemistic concern, a fragmentation, and, therefore, to the destructive absolutism of a one-dimensional totality.

Let me elaborate on this a little bit. The traditional artist is both a technician and a visionary. There is no division between the two roles for him. His technical competence enables him to select and utilize materials: words, wood, raffia, or whatever, which in themselves carry a spirituality or an innate essence. It is from here that the transformation into the visionary realm is primarily fed. Forms and motifs already exist in an assimilated time and world construct, and so he serves only as the instrument of transforming these into an artistic whole based on his own imaginative and cognitive world, a

\*Presented at Kane Hall, May 18, 1973

world which exists and has meaning only within the larger world. In this process he releases the ambiguity of the larger communal world in the dynamic impulse of the details of the medium which will bear his stamp. He is not a visionary artist per se, like the European artist who projects into space and time structures which simply were not there before. There is no otherness locked in the private psyche of his vision. Individually, of course, there are perplexing moments when forms and motifs achieve a power over him, creating fear and apprehension for him. But the ultimate shaping spirit of the wider world construct of the community returns him to a resolution, to an integration (which perhaps was briefly threatened but never really in danger), to a restoration of calm and quietude which is necessary for the widening of the circle into waves that ultimately will constitute the only human progress. In this, the proper reality, therefore, is part of the process of the transformation, fundamental to a combined physical and beyond physical totality, defying fragmentation, defying time, defying space. And man, therefore, is defined by the tree, by the beast, by the deity, but is never all powerful because there is no room for that kind of absolutist horror. The transformation, the artistic process, entails a primary exchange of energies through what, for want of a better phrase, we might call the magical projection. Shocks, surprises, dislocations into irregularities, basic splinterings, and all kinds of mercurial transmutations are essential aspects of the inner dynamics of the total process. Anyone who has read Amos Tutuola's books will understand exactly what I am saying.

Everything is irreducible because everything counts. The process therefore also encloses a self-generating ecstasy, moments of delirious madness, the breaking of the formalities of the perceived reality. The models of this lunacy exist in the artist, the carver, the storyteller, the poet-cantor, the music maker. The crisis of these models are overstepped, they are conquered, subdued if need be, for the calm integration, the making of the

units into one total whole, the reassembly of the fragments, and, therefore, the restoration of the real life.

The danger and the joy are part of the same indivisibility. Raymond Duchamp-Villon's remark, and I quote him, "The purpose of the arts is neither description nor imitation but the creation of unknown beings which are always present but never apparent." This remark, stood on its head and reunderlined for the artist of the African tradition (the continuing tradition to which I believe a lot of us belong), will mean the recognition of this process of transformation as the energetic, lunatic, ecstatic process that restores the felt and the long recognized beings to their proper world, and creates the reunification of all things in a primary universal construct.

In an essay in the *American Scholar*, volume 32, no. 3, 1963, Wole Soyinka, writing of Amos Tutuola specifically, discovers—and I quote him:

. . . a largeness that comes from an acceptance of life in all its manifestations; where other writers conceive of man's initiation only in terms of photographic rites, Tutuola goes through it as a major face of a concurrent life cycle, as a progression from a physical insufficiency through the Quest into the very psyche of Nature. The *Palm-Wine Drinkard*, as with Fagunwa's *Ogboju Ode* and universal myth, is the epic of man's eternal restlessness, symbolized as always in a Search. . . . For Tutuola involves us in a coordination of the spiritual and the physical, and this is the truth of his people's concept of life. The accessories of day-to-day existence only become drawn into this cosmic embrace; they do not invalidate it.

If we accept the premise that Tutuola is a writer whose art rests and has meaning only within the larger world construct of the Yoruba thought and

ontology, then we will understand Soyinka's statement here to be in a direct reference to the whole process of art in Africa.

In his novel *The Interpreters*, Kola, Sagoe, Egbo, Bandele, and Sekoni, the protagonists, represent a composite or combined artistic sensibility that seeks to infuse a moral balance into a fastly disintegrating world of man's waking hours; and each struggle, that is the struggle of this combined artistic impulse, is toward that restoration which I referred to. Kola, in his person, carries the urgent energy of the artist as he seeks to create on his great canvas the reassembled folk psyche, peopled by deities and men in a unified community. This search is at the center of his restlessness. It marks his dissatisfaction with a continuing line of surrogates. Sagoe, the apostle of voidancy, of the extended joke, almost totters on the brink of cynical destructiveness. Yet he expresses the inner continuing progression, though as that reintegration of the sacred and the profane, the agitated and the serene, the vulgar and the sublime. What struggles in his bosom is a wounded and a fragmented humanity that has suffered and continues to suffer the affront of a total immorality, the immorality that rejected and excluded all other possibilities. But it is Egbo, the Ogun character, who in his creative urge becoming the reincarnation of Ogun himself, stands at the center of the universal conflict astride the non-dichotomized world. In an essay entitled, "The Fourth Stage: Through the Mysteries of Ogun to the Origin of Yoruba Tragedy," published by Routledge and Kegan Paul, edited by D. W. Jefferson, Soyinka attempts to link in the restorative role of art the placid essence of Obatala, the god of creation, and the creative urge and destructive instinct of Ogun. The link here lies in the tenuous, quivering trance of the transitional abyss before which Egbo, like Ogun, hesitates. But the mystic chasm summons him to complete the essence of that dread power, the act of immersion, predicated upon the attainment of the tragic climax, the evilness of Lees which is the Obatala self-awareness, as it asserts itself in its

creative control of the universe. This is esthetic joy. The struggle is not, as Soyinka points out, as in the Nietzschean original oneness but entails the restoration to the original womb, the serenity of release born out of suffering, and the contained fragmentation. So of Egbo in *The Interpreters* he wrote, "And as a slow anger built in him, panic and retraction from the elaborate pit, what did they demand of him? How dare they suggest obligations? And elsewhere he writes, "The spectre of generations rose now about him and Egbo found he would always shrink, although incessantly drawn to the pattern of the dead. And this waiting near the end of the journey, hesitating on the brink, wincing as he admitted, was it not an exhumation of a better forgotten past?" I submit that this doubt, this hesitation, is at the heart of the movement toward the resolution. Bandele in *The Interpreters* is Obatala, the authority of Ogboni: just, balanced, enduring, and yet retaining the capacity to undergo a needful, even if limited, suffering and alienation in order that the restoration should be complete. It is not for nothing that his voice is the ultimate voice of the novel. It is he who restores through the serenity of his persona all the fragmented energies of his friends and of the world, and restores them to a state of calm, which is a precondition and prelude to the progression and the expansion of the human circle. In the process, therefore, there are the contradictions that exist within the same mythic continuum, expressing both a limited tragic spirit and a limited comic essence. The gulf and the bridge of inevitable separation will be bridged through the ritual sacrifice, in its ultimate and primary role. That is why Soyinka rejects a total tragic vision, the doom of repetition, which the Western tragic concept or outlook from the Greeks right down to our present time, entails.

Yoruba myth [he writes] is a recurrent exercise in the experience of disintegration, and this is significant to the isolation of Will among a people whose mores, culture and metaphysics are based

on seeming resignation and acceptance but are, experienced in depth, a statement of man's penetrating insight into the final resolution of things and the constant evidence of harmony.

And so the suffering and the pain are negated only in the restorative moment and are yet not rendered oppositional or undesirable as this leads to the fragmentation and the truncation that I talked about. There is futility only in the context of fulfillment. The accompanying rites of music, the ritual, the sacrifice, are providing the ingredients of the archetypal restoration, part of the transformation based in that numinous territory of transition in which ancestor, living, and the yet unborn unite to express the only cosmic reality. Man, Ogun, the protagonist of the abyss, dares, and in his day-to-day living underscores, the elemental restorative scope of his artistic and therefore ritualist role. Poetry, dance, carving, represent in their finished states the serenity which is the enduring aspect of the resolved crisis of our divine person.

Let me quickly cover the relevance of what I am saying by reference to my own prose poem, or novel if you like, *This Earth, My Brother*. (I have read all the reviews and the critical opinions which have linked this book with all the Western structures. In fact, one review—I think it was in the *New York Review of Books*—talked very deliriously about how my derivatives were largely James Joyce. This is a very interesting kind of thing because it seems to me that if we can be influenced by James Joyce, then it also means, therefore, we cannot be influenced by our own traditions.) What most reviewers of this work seem to be professionally unaware of is that I have used, taken, and utilized motifs from Ewe cosmology or ontology: motifs that are existing, extant, active. To any casual reader it should be quite clear that the work does not concern itself with the politics of the Nkrumah era, contrary to what a lot of people have said, in fact, in comparing my book to Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born*

when they immediately regarded us as the eloquent critics of the excesses of Nkrumah's rule. I wasn't talking about that. I was concerned with a total on-going historical process of fragmentation and decay. It's true the hero of my book is a lawyer, and, therefore, he's the most removed person from the primary area of that cultural impulse; he's the one who makes the journey; he's the one who assumes the role of the archetypal hero. He is, in fact, the Ogun essence through whom the restoration will be achieved. He epitomizes alienation, ennui, angst, but these are the preconditions that are attendant upon his search and the restoration and the awareness.

Theoretically the book attempts to create a fragmented world of opposites, and my careful reader will note that as we move toward the end of the book the fragmentation dissolves and the so-called "a" sections vanish, and we move into a unified area of both poetry and prose, if you like those terms. Unified, because there is no longer any dichotomy in the person. The images of dunghill, the field of butterflies, the woman of the sea, who is very, very central, are all part of this process of transforming the mundane and the spiritual, uniting the fragments, thus muting the edges of the agonized sensibility that is predicated upon the returning balance towards the end. There is too the return of the primal good nature of the anthropomorphic female essence, the woman of the sea. She eliminates the dichotomized conflicts and the palpable contradictions. She is the Earth. She is Africa. But where do all these come from?

One critic, Richard Friebe, in a recent article in *Ariel*, has suggested that to understand African literature one must also examine the concept of liminality (borrowing, I think liberally, from the work of Mary Douglas, particularly the book *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, published 1966), establishing a firm place for the so-called marginal persona. This means that all artists in the African society are people who exist on the periphery of the community; they do not exist in the center. And in this, correctly I

believe, he sees this artist as a priest, as a mediating agent between men and gods, a man who dares the dangerous frontiers of insanity, relative anguish and despair, in order to achieve for man the restoration.

Much as I agree with this idea of liminality, per se, I also think that liminality connotes a predetermined boundary, a boundary that has been responsible for the dichotomized ethical and visionary constructs. And so when we place man on the periphery, we have removed him, therefore, from the center of human activity. Accepting the theory in its most broad-based sense, we must guard against the possibility of demarcations. For man the visionary is also man the non-visionary. Man the ethical being is also man the abstract or man the physical being. I'll illustrate what I am saying when I come to Chinua Achebe, who I think as a writer has been very badly misunderstood by a lot of critics. If we use a circle, therefore, as our construct, the hero of *This Earth, My Brother* stands at a wider periphery, liminal yet central. It is his burden, whether by responsibilities beyond such characters that crowd the whole canvas in their brief and tormented appearances, to state for them the need for the restoration.

Chinua Achebe as a writer, I suggest, stands on the other side of what I am saying, the other side of the same system. His art is derived not only from the ritualistic structure, as specifically basing itself on a continuing survival motif, but also on the basic assumption or presupposition that we know if this home is threatened we shall proceed to a new ground and build for ourselves a new place of human habitation. In other words, things actually did not fall apart; the center held, for it was only Okonkwo who decided to commit suicide; Umuofia still stands. And in his *Arrow of God*, Ezeulu, the priest, half-priest, half-man, half-diety, refuses to eat the yam and therefore imposes hardship upon the community. Thus he was the one who had stepped aside. And, as Achebe puts it very beautifully, when they brought in the harvest they brought home the harvest in the name of the son, which critics have decided means that the Christian religion had won in the end. But it is not

a victory for Christianity. It was a victory for Umuaro.

Tradition, therefore, stands at the heart of this literature. In our work we have assayed consciously or unconsciously to step out on the long journey of the restoration that I have spoken about. Our concern is not with that regime or that condition. It is, as in the work of the poets, the *griots*, the carvers of the older traditions, a process of reuniting what on the surface would look like the discordant elements of a so-called fragmented world, of seeing the world from the African view, of making the African landscape physical and mythic, the point from which to see the world. That is why after all his wanderings, Amanu, the hero of *This Earth*, returns to that landscape in order to fulfill his destiny. Any critic who does not see him within the context of that construct of Ewe mythology or ontology in which such images as the river, the dunghill, the sea, the desert, the drum, and the passion of love itself are the eternal, elemental invocations of the ultimate ritual of his own and the communal restoration, better leave the work alone. In a book called the *Myth of the Bagre Among the LoDagaa People*, just put together by Jack Goody, there occur these lines:

In the beginning was god,  
the god of the initiates,  
and their gods,  
the god who comes,  
the god with the mark between the eyes,  
the god with white and black stripes.  
the god with the white arse,  
the thieving god,  
the lying god,  
the troubling god.

Thank you.

CLASS DISCUSSION\*

AWOONOR: I suppose you will have some questions; very informally, let's have a discussion or debate. There are other things which I might not have covered. I hope you will pin me down and contradict me, if need be. I thrive on contradictions, opposition.

PARTICIPANT: Do you have anything to say about the reviews such as the publisher's blurb on the back of *This Earth, My Brother*? I have the following sentences in mind:

Using a highly poetic, impressionistic style, alternating with stark sections of realistic narrative, the author conjures up a grimly depressing world dominated by decay, corruption, and death. Two of his most recurrent images, the dunghill and a meadow of yellow butterflies, indicate his conflicting feeling about Africa. However, he sees a dark and degenerative universe in which the dunghill prevails over all else.\*\*

AWOONOR: Well, what someone forgot to say is that out of the dark and degenerative universe there is also a regenerative element. He should have remembered specifically this section:

Then slowly he saw her, the woman of the sea, his cousin love of those years long ago rising from the sea. She rose slowly,

\*Kane Hall, May 18, 1974

\*\*Kofi Awoonor, *This Earth, My Brother*. (New York: Doubleday, 1971).

head first adorned with sapphires,  
corals and all the ancient beads her  
mother left for her pubertal rites.  
She rose slowly from a dream sea.  
The sea was real: the sun was beat-  
ing down hard and cruel. It was like  
a scene in that waking dream of fever.  
It seemed suddenly that the centuries  
and years of pain of which he was the  
inheritor, and the woes for which he  
was singled out to be carrier and sacri-  
fice, were rolled away, were being faded  
in that emergence. Here at last, he  
realized with a certain boyish joy,  
was his hour of salvation.

This tends to be not noticed at all. Some critics say that the only thing we write about is despair. I think we don't write about despair. Maybe some of us do. I particularly think that Ayi Kwei Armah is much more concerned with the degree of despair, which at times is very relentless, much more relentless than is warranted by the conditions which he is talking about.

PARTICIPANT: Since many customs are different in the West, do you feel that criticism should come from within African rather than from without?

AWOONOR: Yes, well this is what I said. Don't forget that we ourselves in Africa, because of the missionary process of education, have also been made to veer away from the internal structure, the internal dynamic organism of that society; a lot of us now are making a very conscious effort to go back to this organism. There is part of it that is a little weak here and there, but the total construct is still distinct. And I believe that until a critic understands Yoruba mythology and Yoruba ontology he cannot really write an intelligent book on Wole Soyinka's plays, or even on *The Interpreters*. To see *The Interpreters* as just the story of a group of young men hanging around in Lagos and drinking at beer bars and

on, without going into the idea these characters all represent on the larger canvas of Yoruba cosmology, is mistaken. They incarnate certain anthropomorphic concepts that I have outlined, like Ogun, Obatala, even Sango, the god of electricity. Sekoni, the engineer who dies very early in the book, is an epitome of Sango, and in his death, therefore, the sacrifice is accomplished. This serves to open the eyes of those protagonists to the frustrations that are around them. Sagoe, who is the philosopher of voidancy, is not just a clown; there is something deeper and penetrating beneath the laughter. It's like when you see the man dancing, dancing a dance of joy, there is also something very, very sad that pertains to the dance of joy. And all these must be put in perspective.

A very interesting thing that I can touch on briefly is the division between this use of traditional constructs and the position held by the négritude writers, particularly Senghor. While they are interested in the past for the sake of glorifying the past, I think our concern is for an interest in the past which will illuminate the present, so we are not going to be locked in the past. The writers of négritude talk about the Golden Age of Africa. Every people who create a Golden Age are going to suffer from a sense of narcissism and self-hypnotism. Well, we have had great empires, and princes and queens, and so on; that's fine, but what's going on right now? There was a lot of confusion in those days also. I will not take the same position as Yambo Ouloguem in his *Le Devoir du violence*, which is a book which tends to exaggerate the corruption of Africa, the contradictory nature in this whole process of decay that Africa was also guilty of. But we have to be critical of ourselves at the same time. So, therefore, we see mythology and legend as creative, ongoing instruments that stand in the center of our art.

PARTICIPANT: So you believe that although African writers use English, the Western people reading these works may misinterpret the African's meaning?

AWOONOR: The question touches upon very wide issues,

like the question of for whom does the African writer write; who reads the novels and the poems? Secondly, if he is writing in English, which is not his native language, does that not present another problem? Has English in Africa achieved enough localization to represent the different cultural perspective, as perhaps English in black America or English in the Caribbean, or even English in other parts of the Commonwealth, like Australia, or even Canada or the United States? These are questions that I sometimes have been involved in discussing; they are very, very difficult questions to ignore. I have heard a number of African writers now saying specifically that the time has come to go back and write only in the African languages. At a recent conference in Halifax, there was Peter Palangyo from Tanzania, the author of the novel *Dying in the Sun*, who has just completed a couple of novels in Swahili. Now if I write a novel in Ewe, which I can, I don't know how many people are going to read it. Ewe is probably one of the larger linguistic groups in Africa, but imagine a man who is an Nzima, a group in Western Ghana; that presents a problem.

I think Achebe tried in a number of essays to answer the question much more broadly. He said we must use English, yes, but an English which becomes internalized into our own cultural system. It's like Aimé Césaire talking about using French as "les âmes miraculeux"; we use it as the weapon. It's like Caliban in *The Tempest*. When he was taught English he used it against his conquerors. Prospero gloats about the fact that he taught him English. And Caliban said, "Yes, you taught me so I learned how to curse and I will curse you for as long as you occupy my island and deny me my rightful place in it." So it becomes an internalized weapon of our self-assertion because what we are also doing in the same process is to liberate ourselves from the stranglehold of Western cultural structures. This is the first step; and then in the same process we reassert those vanishing cultural forms of our own history, our own culture, our own traditions. But of course, there is a progress, there is a continuity. There is amalgamation, adaptation, only now from within the African language.

PARTICIPANT: There are lots of allusions in Soyinka, for example, which I, even as an anthropologist, don't understand. We can't then completely understand African-English. Who is the real understanding audience? Who understands the symbols and allusions?

AWOONOR: Well, I think we have got to agree that the symbols do exist in the traditions. And the writers are going to utilize or borrow these symbols and do all kinds of things with them. Soyinka is perhaps the most guilty or the most creative in this sense. He plays around with it, just the same way as in the traditional situation where a village poet will pick up an idea which is a recurrent motif in the culture and does all kinds of things with it. And this is where the individual creative talent comes into the fore. There are no boundaries or limits to what you can do with that. When I talk about the sun rising in the East and setting in the West, I may be stating what is extremely banal and obvious. Then within a specific cultural context, I may be talking about a whole journey of man from a certain point to another point. Or we can turn it the other way around if we see the universe as round, like the Ewe poet who says:

(I am sitting on the world's extreme corner.  
I am not sitting in a row with the eminent.)

The idea that you are sitting on the world's extreme corner would presuppose that the world has corners, and here we can extend this sort of symbol into all kinds of areas, but I think that the liberty that we take is deserved. Sometimes we may do it very badly because we lack talent.

PARTICIPANT: Do you think black Americans have the same resources? I think of America as being a

particularly mythless society. There are some untruths sometimes called myths, but that is all.

AWOONOR: I've just been looking very briefly at Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo*. I think what he's trying to do there is to create, is to use certain recurrent myths of the whole jazz age, of hoodoo, and mojo. These are myths that are there. In the West Indies there is *obeah*. It is in the work of a man like George Lamming or even the novels of an Indo-Caribbean writer like V. S. Nipaul as, for example, in his *The Mystic Masseur*; he is using something there that is part of the peasant memory of the people who had come from India. People turn into all kinds of things, and bats are messengers of death. People can look at you with the evil eye and so on. I tend to believe in some of these things now and then myself. It's a little spooky, but it's true. If you don't believe in those things, then you don't know what the universe is about. We can't explain them. Even though I went to school, I've some experience of those things that are relegated to the realm of superstition.

PARTICIPANT: Does the poet share in a sense of mystery as a necessary condition of his art?

AWOONOR: Yes, there is a sense in which there is a degree of clairvoyance, a propheticism, the ability to see beyond the immediate. Yes, this is part of it. This is what I think the role of the priest or the diviner is because he is also an artist in his own right, and the artist, therefore, becomes part and parcel of the same process of transformation. I've just been reading Castenada's work which is big news in this country now, but when I finished reading I said, "I knew about it all the time; why has this suddenly become a great discovery?" What you call juju, which I am sure you have all heard about, is part of the same thing. The Ewe have a reputation in Ghana of being juju men, but I think it's simply because they live in an area where they had a harder life. When people become affluent they forget about going to the diviner and so on. Rich people don't go

to diviners; it's only the poor who throng the corridors of the church. The rich men go to the church once in a while, but it's not because they need divine guidance; the poor need it more.

PARTICIPANT: How do you define this sense of mystery?

AWOONOR: It's a relationship with the earth. You have a closer link with the earth. As society progresses, this whole technological society in which we are living today, we tend to forget about those other mysterious areas of human experience. We leave those to the diviners, to the priests, to all those workers in mumbo-jumbo and hocus-pocus. But hocus-pocus is part of our waking world. I believe strongly, very, very strongly, that I'm never alone. I really believe that. And specifically, I have two friends who are standing by me all the time. So I sit on an airplane, and sometimes the airplane loses height, and you see everybody going ashen, and I'm just very casual about it. I say, well, if it's going to go, it's going to go; there's just no way, dying before we die. And they make sure I don't die in a plane, because they have promised that I will die safely in my bed of ripe old age. It gives you a sense of confidence; false confidence, if you like. [laughter]

PARTICIPANT: Would you elaborate further on your remarks about Achebe's work? Specifically, why didn't "things fall apart"?

AWOONOR: What I mean is that Okonkwo cut off the head of the messenger, and turned around and expected Umuofia to be whipped into a war frenzy, and Umuofia just stood. Nothing happened. When he knew Umuofia was not going to fight, he went and committed suicide. My interpretation of it is that Umuofia had decided to live; Umuofia had chosen to live because if Umuofia had gone to war, Umuofia, like Abame, would have been wiped out by the superior power of the European. In a way this is the kind of thing that happened to the red man in America; when he came into confrontation with the European—the settlers—he chose to

fight, and he fought. And we know the result of what happened to him. Philosophically, in most African societies the idea of survival is a very, very primary one. When we live in a place that is no longer good for us, we move, or we seek new grounds, and we build new places of habitation. We have to survive. I don't know what the explanation of it is, but it seems to have been justified. Otherwise, look at the whole of Africa. Africa could have suffered the fate of the red man in America. We would have been wiped out from the Cape to Cairo because there is land hunger and sheer greed for the resources of our earth. So the idea that we want to survive presupposes in Achebe's work, and this is very well illustrated in *Arrow of God*, a survival enclosing the acceptance of change. It is Ezeulu who opposed change and therefore was set aside, and Umuaro went forward and harvested the yam in the name of the new religion, not because they believed that the new religion was more powerful than their gods or their deities, but if their deities had abdicated, had abandoned the field at that moment, they were going to eat the yam and survive in spite of them.

PARTICIPANT: Do you believe that African rhythms show up in your English poetry? Or can you speak of an African rhythm? We certainly find differences in the music of groups adjacent to each other, such as in Ghana.

AWOONOR: Sure, certainly. When you want to talk about the differences, I think you also have to be aware that the music is specifically determined by the language. So Ewe, being a language that is different from Akan or Ashanti, will therefore have a specific kind of music. But then the functional nature of these various kinds of music becomes paramount. Reading Kwabene Nketia's *Funeral Dirges of the Akan People*, I felt suddenly at home; I had a sense of familiarity with the material, not because I knew Twi, but simply because I knew of these things also in the Ewe. For example, seeing the mother in terms of the wicker basket, or the recurrent motif in Ewe poetry

of the desert, which is an aspect of their whole migratory journey from the banks of the Niger River, these are things that you find also among the Akans, or, for that matter, among the Yorubas.

Now talking about English, therefore, each of us will bring into the English language our own understandings, our own transmutations of our own languages into English. So when I write English it will be a bit different from Achebe's English. Achebe recreates Igbo in his English and, in a lot of my poetry, I recreate Ewe. And I'm sure you notice that Wole Soyinka creates Yoruba in very large segments of his novel, or even his poetry. So we carry the distinction of belonging to these specific linguistic groups, but yet the thrust is to deal with a certain consensus of emotions, consensus of awareness, or concerns, to create an amalgam out of our total experience.

PARTICIPANT: Would you comment on the work of Amos Tutuola? His power seems to have failed.

AWOONOR: Well, Amos Tutuola is a very, very interesting case because when his books came out, you remember in 1952, he was hailed as the perfect example of the primitive, out of the sense in which people hail things that are exotic. Dylan Thomas wrote a rave review in which he characterized the work as a grisly, enchanting tale from the dark heart of Africa, or words to that effect, and the promise of that ecstatic kind of review never came to be because Tutuola continued to write the same things after five books. I remember writing a review of his last book, *Ajayi and His Inherited Poverty*, and all I said was that we're getting too tired of these stories now; will poor Amos come out and tell us something else? I think Tutuola is a good storyteller. Tutuola is a fantastic storyteller. He understands the structure of the Yoruba folk tale. He knows how the folk tale operates. And, being an inventive storyteller—and all storytellers must be inventive, that's how they can be good—he adds all kinds of things to his stories: airplanes, bombers, bicycles, and televisions, including motifs from the European contact.

This is the nature of the folk tale. The folk tale is never static.

Most Africans are very offended by Tutuola's English because they think he's been letting the side down by writing such atrocious English. Nigerians are especially annoyed by it and say, "Well, we don't speak that kind of English in Nigeria," when Tutuola says things like: "Something is smelling, I can hear it." They like to say that we also know how to use the Queen's English and use it very well. So you find in the works of people like J. P. Clark a rather stilted, very stylized kind of English. But this is a misunderstanding of Tutuola completely because I think there is some kind of felicity in that dislocation of the English grammar. He wrote as he felt. It's like hearing a lot of black American speech. It's much more creative than when I listen to William F. Buckley, Jr. I really feel that this is the language, the language of the people, vibrating, pulsing. What has happened to him now is that I think he has very correctly stopped writing for a season. I hear he still holds his job in the post office in Lagos. I think the publishers did ruin him when they began to correct his grammar, and they gave him books to read on grammar, how to say "he goes" instead of "he go." Pidgin English is a beautiful language. I have been in a number of debates with my fellow Africans, especially in Britain, where I said we should even start writing in pidgin, and people said, "No!" This is simply because you know that Westerners often like to give the impression that we can't speak any English other than broken English. But pidgin is not broken English; anyone who has heard pidgin spoken in the streets of Lagos or Accra knows. It is a beautiful language, carrying its own rhythm, its own drama. Its intonation is an African intonation. We are giving English new life, another opportunity to revive itself. They should be grateful to us. [laughter]

PARTICIPANT: Who is writing that we should know about?

AWOONOR: Well, I'm sure you know about my work,

which is very important [laughter], though I would say that there are quite a lot of young people who are writing now specifically in places like Nigeria and Ghana, and a couple of younger people in Sierra Leone. I am not very familiar with the East Coast, but I know that the works of people like David Rubadiri, the works of Peter Palangyo, whose book *Dying in the Sun* I think is one of the very really beautiful novels to come out of East Africa, these are exciting works. Names just elude me right now—I find it very difficult to think on my feet, because when I sit down I think better, especially with something in my hands—I'm extremely eloquent. [laughter]

PARTICIPANT: What do you think about the work of John Okai from Ghana?

AWOONOR: I think John Okai's poetry suffers from a certain tediousness, which is a tediousness he acquired from having listened to too much Russian propagandistic poetry. I think he's a poet who could have matured very well if he hadn't gone to Russia, but he went to Russia and he got involved in the whole of that Evtushenko-Voznesensky corny kind of a pseudo-revolutionary poetry which I find extremely suspect. Either poetry is good or it's not good. And he would benefit also if he went back to look at a lot of Gã traditional poetry. I don't think he's done that yet. If you look at Gã traditional poetry, like the poetry of Klamna, of the Krobos, and the Gã-Adangbes in the Ada area, you discover a great poetry of fundamental richness.

PARTICIPANT: Would you recite some?

AWOONOR: Maybe, yes: I will recite just two and—will that be enough? Well, in my language we say the hyena says he's always been wishing to run and then suddenly word came that his grand-uncle's goat has just broken its tether. So here I will go—I've been dying to read the whole afternoon. I'm reading from a new book which I hope should be out by the end of the month—my new book, which is called

*Ride Me, Memory*, which I hope should be out by the end of this month. Let me read from the second section which is called "African Memories." This is the only book of poetry that I intend to write in this country because I've come to the end of my stay in this country and the book itself constitutes a tribute to the lot of people that I met, both black and white, who represent something very, very enduring in the American character. Because in Africa one has the feeling that all America is a gun-toting, homicidal maniac, that people are going to shoot you on the slightest provocation, there's still lynching going on in Alabama, and that Governor Faubus has got a posse together, and they'll probably be riding towards Washington. Beyond that there is something very, very beautiful. I will read a number of these poems that constitute my memory of Africa in that kind of nostalgic sense in which all of us when we go away from home think of home. This is a poem called "My Father's Prayer." My father belongs to the old school; even though today he and I are very great friends, we used to quarrel a lot when I was a younger man, simply because I was very much like him. We had a clash of will all the time. But now we're wonderful friends. But then I remember things from my childhood, and this is a poem about it.

I dreamt again last night  
One of those magic dreams of childhood.  
It began, like my newest dream of maturing,  
amicable enough for laughter,  
exchange of small talk and destinies.  
You spoke, as always, of how I am  
the one who must resurrect  
ancient days, raise again those  
misty-glories of men and women  
who linger vaguely in the memorials of the tribe.  
Then the dream changed,  
into a race we run, I  
as a boy running running

\* Kofi Awoonor, *Ride Me, Memory* (Greenfield Center, New York: The Greenfield Review Press, 1973).

away from home and perdition,  
and you the father chasing the son  
across hillocks, beyond monuments  
and graves, till the burial ground  
at graves-end where all stop.

This poem I'll read is about my asking for my passport to be renewed. I didn't know that the Busia government felt that I represented one of the people who were opposed to them from New York. And they had asked these people (this was after the coup when I learned it) to keep an eye on what I did in New York. I wasn't doing anything. When I asked for my passport they gave me only one year and after the one year had expired I could only travel home, to Ghana, to have it renewed. No embassy overseas could renew the passport for me. And so I wrote a poem which says,

WHEN MY PASSPORT CAME AND  
I WAS GIVEN A YEAR.

My country, into the green world  
out here I fled  
seeking refuge under bare winter trees  
in rounded yellow moons perched  
on grey evening clouds.  
I have sought to hide my shame of you  
in birdsong at evenings;  
magpies, brown sparrows and robin redbreasts  
flit away from bunny rabbits  
escaping the catapults, traps  
and gunfires of our hungry men  
grown gaunt with malnutrition.  
See here where  
the squirrels hide their harvest  
brown trees and ancient tenements  
supervised by drunks and pederasts  
to be mistaken for judges  
and magistrates of the law.  
Oh, I know you curse my name  
and say I have fled; you call for  
silence from my parched winter lips;

I received the other day your passport  
with the one year stamp  
and the order that I cannot renew  
myself in alien lands  
But I renew myself here  
in winter's beginning day  
awaiting the coming of the sun  
so that your son will be ready  
for the snake-shrouds of homecoming.

Then I wrote some poems of abuse. In the Ewe tradition we have something called poetry of abuse, or *halo*. When I was growing up, if there is a quarrel among two sections of the village, the poets will sharpen their instruments, and will come out, and they can throw a lot of mud. I was doing field work in 1970 and I came upon, I sort of unearthed, a lot of this poetry of abuse, just incredible stuff. There was a guy who was referred to as "He had ears so big, that whenever he took the canoe, the canoe had no need of sails." [laughter] I'll read to you poems of abuse I did following this particular tradition.

TO MY UNCLE JONATHAN

Sir, you stink.  
Your red nose is covered with fifty ugly warts.  
You are a hairy bastard without a father.  
My father sent to tell me how you are walking  
    beaches  
in Bermuda shorts and cursing my sacred name.  
You fucker of sheep and goats,  
a pederast in bloomers,  
a whiskered fool with an obscene mouth.  
What wrong did I do you and you curse my name?  
I refused even to touch your stinking daughter  
that lean-assed whorelet you sent to my home the  
    other night  
the bitch temptress, smelling of mayonnaise and  
    pastrami.  
I threw her out, for I am a man of dignity and  
    respect.  
If you don't respect my name, others do,

And one other thing, you asked me to call you  
uncle

You said, "Call me uncle, boy!"

in that stage voice

I heard in Bobo and Lusaka,

So you have joined revolutions now,

gun running for the reds in Siam

piloting fighter planes in Saigon

drinking gin and vermouth in Guatemala

tequila in Puerto Rico.

O my uncle Jonathan you sent for me

When I came you left word that you had gone to  
the wars

that I should drink a glass of bourbon, eat a  
cake,

and get my ugly mug out of town before you came.

But I like it here. I want to stay awhile.

There is another one that is called, "To Felicity,  
a Girl I met in L.A."

Felicity, you are fat,

You are stuffed with hogs and sheep

who now grunt and bleat in your large bosom,

rolling hills without entrance or exit.

Felicity, I hear you've learnt a new laughter

since we last met--a shrill low moan

interlarded with wheezing jerks of fat flowing

in valleys

Go to a farm, lose weight, Felicity

fat freezes the seminal fluid of giants

congeals the heartwarming desire of braves and

stalwarts

and hides the entrance to kingdoms of joy.

Besides, Felicity, it is not good for your heart.

P.S.: Have you learnt to wash your girdles?

W O L E   S O Y I N K A

DRAMA AND THE REVOLUTIONARY IDEAL\*

Thinking about this subject, I found it advisable not to limit myself to the phenomena of African drama as I felt I could safely presume that it would not simply be an African or Africanist audience in the middle of Seattle, Washington, not even a black American audience but a very mixed one. And I wish to place the emphasis on the phenomenon of theater generally, not just dramatic literature. I wish, in the context of revolutionary ideals in the theater to relate my experiences of theater in Europe and America to certain concepts which I believe motivate the human being in society towards change. I shall in a moment refer to what might appear to be a strange work in the context of the subject; it is a play which most of you—what with the kind of fluctuating crisis of concerns which dominates European and American sense of theater—may have forgotten by now. It is, however, a useful takeoff point for this discussion because I find, in my experience, that in the activity of theater there is one constant, and that is the relationship between audience and stage. And that it is within this dynamic, this relationship that one must seek the truth of the theatrical phenomenon.

So let me commence by placing the specific event of this play in its particular context, relating my experience some years ago in Cuba where I witnessed the efforts of that newly liberated society to achieve on a cultural level what it had already begun to consolidate in the political and economic fields. This

\*Presented at Roethke Auditorium, April 18, 1973

very difficult to define objective may be described moving away from the narrower constrictive terms which naturally flood the emotive atmosphere of revolutionary euphoria—as the creation of the truly liberated man. One item, of which there was no lack in this cultural effort, in the practical organizational aspect of the task, was space. This was one thing which struck me: the space. The leisured classes, the allies of the dethroned dictatorship of Batista, had mostly fled, and these mansions of parasitic opulence were vacated—the private residences, but also the clubs and resorts where the American tourists formerly came to reinforce the spread of decadence throughout the Caribbean island. Magnificent golf courses which spread over acres and acres of the best and most secluded terrain on the outskirts of Havana—all these had been converted into drama, dance, and art schools for children. And the former night clubs and bordellos—a very questionable decision but let's move away from that—had been transformed into community theaters for the aspiring dramatist. All with organized support from the state. Theater companies proliferated rapidly throughout the island. In fact, my presence there, as was that of other playwrights and directors, was to participate in a most ambitious theater festival organized by the state. Arrangements included a tour of the island so there was the opportunity of observing not merely theater manifestations in the cosmopolis and urban areas but among the rural amateur groups operating in their natural milieu, with very little of that self-consciousness or semi-precious artifice and contrivance which creeps into rural theatrical traditions when transposed into a cosmopolitan atmosphere. There was a very vitalizing character to this cultural enterprise; it was both heady and infectious. It was, again let me emphasize, a policy-directed revival, an attempt to maintain the momentum of revolution by directing its creative energies into several fields simultaneously. And the strategic decision to decentralize its organization as much as possible, making each administrative region responsible for the maintenance and encouragement of writing and production, this did

not diminish the reality of this conscious exploitation of the innate activity of man, play-making, in the service of the larger historic process.

The same process incidentally was activated in the fields of painting, sculpture, music, poetry, and architecture. I recall Fidel Castro taking off three hours to address a congress of architects in the midst of a sugar crisis. But the emphasis on theater was the most remarkable and significant. What was most unexpected about it indeed was the eclectic nature of the program, considering the fact that this theater was state supported, that this was a tiny country with limited resources, and that the nation was actually in a transitional phase towards what was to become a policy of ideological orthodoxy, that there were the gargantuan problems of socio-economic development with which the nation was faced (the U.S. economic blockade being not the least of the headaches of this new nation). So within this very concentrated, and to-be-expected indrawn sense of direction, I was personally flabbergasted to find that one of the leading theaters in Havana was actually staging *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*.

Now what, I asked myself, is the relevance of a drama of America's willful, self-indulgent, domestic neurosis centered on an affluent, middle class intelligentsia to do with a revolutionary actuality within a small difficult nation like Cuba? Could it be—I indulged in various fantasies—could it be a surrogate for the appeasement rituals associated in certain societies with the destruction of a powerful enemy? The other question, whether this could be a deliberate and distorted exposé of the self-destructive character of the American psyche was answered in the negative when, on watching the production of this play I discovered that it had been given a faithful, sympathetic interpretation. I was left wondering, next: was this perhaps a hangover from American cultural colonization of the island, the snob instinct which identifies "names" with artistic validation or cultural relevance coupled, perhaps, with a slight naiveté (with which we are very familiar, especially we "developing" nations) of bureaucrats

in anxiety to retrieve a society from the shabby external subversion of its culture by the casinos, the go-go girls, John Wayne, plus a bit of cha-cha-cha, it was easy to picture a blanket replacement of this porlonged travesty of culture with the most current names of artistic elevation, the elevation of sensibilities. Just the same, I found the phenomenon of this production a very strange cultural bedfellow in that combat phase of the Cuban revolution, especially when coupled with this unquestioned reverence with which the play was approached.

Well the discussions—I will speak from time to time about the reaction of audiences to what they had seen because this really is the basis of the social activity called theater—the discussions which took place afterwards both in the bars and the cafés as well as in the more formal atmosphere of the Casa de las Americas, offered, on later reflection, a rather important clue to this unusual generosity, which perhaps would have made Totsky reach for his vitriol. It was not an answer formulated at the time, as I have said, but with periodic reflections on that heady, stimulating, and very often irritating experience with its very uneven mixture of breath-taking professionalism and crude amateurish enthusiasm. The answer was elicited later on, more from a recollection of the actual involvement both of the audience and actors in these manifestly bourgeois personalities and their domestic problems. It came in other words not so much from an intrinsic relevance of the play (there was none to that social situation), not from the masterliness of craftsmanship in the play (of which you must admit there is plenty), but from a pervasive sense of ritual which corresponded to the ritual nature of liberation itself.

Understanding of this phenomenon must be sought in the nature of the theater (which has been accurately described as the most social of art forms) and from the internal dynamic which operates in this fact. It is a truism that the theater is simply but effectively, in its operational totality, both performance and audience, and there exists already in

this truth a straightforward dynamic of drama which is not to be found in, shall we say, painting or music. A tension, if you prefer the word, an active, creative, and translatable tension which need not be announced in words or action (from the auditorium) but which occasionally spills over into the manifested response referred to as audience participation. (We will have more to say later about this whole business of audience participation.) And it is a human dynamic—there is absolutely nothing abstract or mystical about it—it is a direct operation of moral and sensual forces, human energy and intellect on the seemingly static receptacle which people tend to think the audience is. The reverse activity is equally true. Both audience and affect are contained within a very malleable matrix which is the sum of the physical energy and intellect, the sensual and the moral interaction, of the audience and the protagonist forces on the stage.

Also, since this is the operative technique, this technique of interaction, a technique whose only end can be change, not consolidation (change, however fragmentary, illusory, however transient, however lacking in concrete, ultimate significances, nevertheless is change)—it suggests that theater is perhaps the most revolutionary art form known to man. The particularized context of this matrix becomes secondary to the internal process, and for an audience whose very sensibility is honed, has been lately honed by the liberating awareness which again is one of internal change, the tensions created by two, three, or four beings of another culture and values struggling to free themselves from any form of incubus, as long as those tensions go to the roots of their existence as human beings and create in those moments a complete microcosm of their cultural world, these tensions tend to find a complete visceral identity with humanity's internal process of struggling free. From and towards what is, in a ritualized play, outside the definition of that activity, outside the definition, the awareness, the concrete articulation of the audience, even of their response. The experience of that activity, simply struggling

free and even failing too, sublimates the social particulars that go into the engagement, the conflicts that lead to self-liberation. One is tempted indeed to commit the ultimate blasphemy and suggest that it takes a revolutionary audience to respond in the fullest sense to a play on the affluent neurosis of a reactionary society.

Now the matter is of course slightly more complicated and will lead us back eventually into the very origins of drama and the tension of the individual assertive will within even a conditioned consciousness. For we must not forget that the idiom of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* is the conscious idiom of the ritual.

But first I wish to make a contrasting divergence, taking now a sample or two of arguments which surrounded this and other manifestations during that theatrical experience.

A discussion took place over a play about a family in the grip of the familiar dilemma of social conscience. On the one hand there were the conservative parents; on the other the troubled son torn between a safe existence and his duties toward the revolution. On the level of character study, the interest of the play was indeed the process which led to the son's conversion from the parental, conservative attitude. It was spiced with a suggestion of historic determinism, a pattern of the social forces which firstly made the son what he was, then turned him into what he would become. It was a fascinating and most of the time quite persuasive statement of revolutionary inevitability. However, and this was the disturbing thing, at the point of his conversion the son quite suddenly, savagely, and arbitrarily struck his father, not just once but again and again. The father had made a mild move to stop him when he had finally decided that his destiny lay at the side of his embattled comrades. It was not a case of the violence occurring in an active moment of the struggle. Our hero simply hit the old man and hit him again and again.

Now, I asked a beefy militia man, a revolutionary member of the proletariat, for his reactions. He

had also seen the play and admitted that he had been profoundly shocked. For him it was an unnecessary and gratuitous piece of violence; it also wantonly destroyed for him the traditional family relations which he claimed could only encourage social anarchy. I played the devil's advocate for awhile. I suggested that the essence of revolution is self-liberation, that partial self-liberation is dangerous and merely renders the individual susceptible to retrogressive influences which claim authority from traditional concepts such as family pietism, that the striking of the father by the son was therefore a symbolic and definitive severance of the entire family pietistic hold. Our friend used one expression which he reiterated again and again; it is sacrilege, he said, and it had nothing to do with revolution. But he said something else which struck his audience even more forcibly and which is related to this discussion. The play, he declared, had been written obviously by some urban intellectual. (The family which was depicted in this play, as with the majority of the Cuban plays at this festival, was a typical working class family.)

Now to break away from this observer for just a moment and admit my own subjective reactions. And believe me, subjectivity at this particular theater festival was constantly unavoidable. Quite apart from the struggle to satisfy the more important claimants to objectivity--the theme, the style, the mounting, the production, and so on--there were several instances, some of them quite hilarious and lighthearted, which completely destroyed one's constant attempt to maintain a fully objective attitude within the theater. One memorable example took place in the gymnasium of a military training camp. It was a structure built almost entirely of corrugated iron sheets, a fact which is important when you consider the artillery barrage which took place when this reminder of realities invaded us. Somewhere in the middle of that somewhat tedious play, at a point at which half the audience was frankly asleep, a sudden movement took half--well, that is an exaggeration--took a fair number of the audience in about

two seconds flat to the doors running, they didn't know quite where. Others were under their seats. I imagine that waking up from sleep suddenly, many of the audience thought that Batista had returned with artillery support from Uncle Sam. And you have to imagine the effect of a sudden barrage of mortars and machine guns within this strange acoustic enclosure. By the time we had all been recalled from under the seats or from outside, I think we had begun to reexamine all sorts of considerations, like the testing demands of a Brechtian detachment in the theater. We had now to face urgent hypothetical issues, such as what would happen if indeed Batista had appeared at this training camp and refused to ask any questions as to who were the audience and who were the revolutionary performers? But this is only by the way.

A more serious aspect of subjectivity (which I think all analysts of theater or so-called critics of theater sooner or later admit to) was, in my case, a complete immersion in my traditional world view and values of social cohesion. I quote from an article which I wrote some time ago.

Morality for the Yoruba is that which creates harmony in the cosmos, and reparation for disjunction within the individual psyche cannot be seen as compensation for the individual accident to that personality. Thus it is that good and evil are not measured in terms of offences against the individual or even the physical community, for there is a knowledge from within the corpus of Ifa wisdoms that rupture is often one visage of the Ogun destructive-creative unity, that offences even against nature may in fact be part of the exaction by deeper nature from humanity of acts which alone can open up the deeper springs of man and bring about a constant rejuvenation of the human spirit. Nature in turn benefits by such broken taboos; just as the cosmos by the

demand made upon its will by man's cosmic affronts. Such acts of hubris compel the cosmos to delve deeper into its essence to meet the human challenge. Penance and retribution are not therefore aspects of punishment for crime but the first acts of a resumed awareness, and invocation of the principle of cosmic adjustment.

Now it is from this context, from this situation, from this acceptance, this reasoned—this inherited yet reasoned acceptance—of the morals and ethics of my society, that I had to view my reactions towards this strange unfilial and rather hubristic act.

Prepared as I was for acts of hubris as acceptable in certain contexts, the revolutionary zeal of the new convert which manifested itself in this way was, to me, reacting subjectively, distinctly European, and neurotic. I discovered, in other words, that while I could dismiss during this festival *Virginia Woolf* as a piece of interesting but nevertheless irrelevant *tour de force*, I found this specific play very subversive. It had attempted to destroy what in my traditional social view, represents a humanistic stabilizing concept for society, without being aware what it had done, without accepting the obligation to render dramatically *inevitable* the destruction of that particular tradition and, without confronting the audience with a new vision of human relationships even within a revolutionary context. In short, one distinguishes between the destruction of paternalism *per se* and the gratuitous destruction of the organic family structure which has not been proven in a theatrical piece as fundamentally inimical to the larger revolutionary endeavor of society. And what that means, and what I believe that the worker and a few of his supporters meant by insisting that a worker could not have written the play, was that a phenomenon of individual conversion had taken place at the expense of a tried system of moralities which had created the revolutionary worker himself and which did not contradict his new liberated awareness. The play failed for

him because of the inability of the author to keep this dynamic play of tensions within the working class microcosm in which it lay claim to its revolutionary validity. The author had gone outside of it, outside the organic entity for a means of accentuation of social conflict.

It was not an isolated example, and it had a great relevance of the themes that preoccupied the assembled playwrights in their debates. There was, for example, the British playwright, Arnold Wesker, who not only comes from a working class background and experience but who consciously in his work and in his associated theater activities, his communal theatrical aims in England, has elected to center his commitment as writer on working class problems, especially those relating to internal emancipation. To this end he had written several plays: one dealt with the social battle of the labor movement in England—*Chicken Soup with Barley*; another with a deep realistic insight into the punitive and inhuman stresses of working conditions even in a modern welfare state—*The Kitchen*, and, more directly with the whole problem of the working class intellectual liberation—*I Am Talking About Jerusalem* and *Roots*. This last is an example which I wish to parallel with an instance of that reconstructive remove which is the eternal bane of plays which claim to deal with the proletarian mentality, like the Cuban play I mentioned and some South African plays with which we shall come to grips in a moment. In *Roots* we encounter families supposedly in the grip of total intellectual torpor. The action of the play consists of the efforts of the hero of this play to elevate the social and artistic sensibility of the heroine. He plagues her with the occasional modern art works which, of course, provides a lot of funny stage business, as these supposedly illiterate clods try to sort out which end should go up and which backwards and which one inside and out. The neighboring yokels come in and—it's all very funny for the kind of audiences for which this so-called working class play is written—they try and fail to make head or tail of the masterpiece. But the denouement

of the play, the climax of enlightenment, is when our heroine, infuriated by some statement or the other by one of her own family, launches into a quite articulate self-deprecating diatribe, then suddenly stops in the middle of a sentence astonished at the fact that she could speak, that she could articulate. Observe, the product of this dumb, indifferent, lethargic, and culturally comatose family, thanks to the nagging of the wise boy of cosmopolitan intelligentia, who by the way has just ditched her for some reason I can't quite recollect at the moment, this dumb clod is suddenly transformed into a Joan of Arc of the new bourgeois enlightenment. She leaps on a chair and rapturously thanks the absent Ron for bringing some light into her darkness. At no time in the course of this play is there the slightest suggestion by the dramatist that the hero investigate and discover whether or not the community into which he has come courting has got a culture of its own. Of course not. For the simple reason, which is not merely hinted but clearly stated, that this class of people, to whom we have been introduced rather like animals in a zoo, have no cohesive scale of values: no valid working system of relationships, no humanistic code of conduct, no sustainable view of phenomenological entities, all of which go into what we have described as culture. Don Juan of the cities comes into their midst and even though he breaks her heart he leaves her, the play tells us, and her class, with something of lasting value: cosmopolitan culture. The curtain brings down with Saint Joan giving praise to her absent benefactor.

My experience, by the way—I shall develop this further in a moment—of black American theater, is that there has been here a remarkably small proportion of this element of class condescension and alienation. Perhaps it is because the issues of color and the historical reality of oppression were and still are so stark, raw, and urgent, perhaps it is for this reason that the concept of theater was consciously transformed in black theater into that of the largely acceptable idea of a vast political and education arena compared to which the missionary

zeal of an affluent writer in a welfare state simply becomes comic and, in its anguish, frankly laughable. Because I may be accused of black chauvinism, I shall later on quote a slightly lengthy observation of a white writer on his first encounter with the kind of black theater which I am talking about. I do not say this goes for all black theater but I do refer to the best of its kind. And it seems obvious, therefore, that because of this social reality, even the brash and amateurish examples of black theater seem to move away from the more contrived anguish which I insist characterizes the consciously worker-proletarian motivated drama of the wealthier communities of Europe. Where black revolutionary theater has joined the comic, and—we must be honest--the gravy train, is where it gratuitously grafts its concept of African ritualism onto metropolitan conflicts, characters, situation, and even metaphor; where for instance, to refer finally to my earlier example, it does not understand that, as illustrated—to move away from the idiom of theater—as illustrated by the central tragic act in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*—the action of a son gratuitously striking his father is similar to the action of a father willfully beheading his own son, that this action, this hubristic act need not be the prelude to revolution but to tragedy at its best, and more commonly to melodrama in the European idiom.

And now a contrast of approach. The alienated mentality remains the same but the direction is different. All are concerned with the revolutionary salvation of their victims but, while an Arnold Wesker patronizes his class, two examples from the most grotesquely embattled area of Africa, apartheid South Africa, "elevates" their souls. The cause—alienated wish-fulfillment—is the same. The result is distortion and insult. In this new example we are not faced with the gratuitous, hubristic zeal of the Cuban working-class son but its very opposite: a pietistic resolution allied to the soul-nobility of a self-immolating hero on what we can only describe as a counter-revolutionary altar. The play is *Rhythm of Violence* by Lewis Nkosi. The action of

the play is quite straightforward. At the beginning there is in fact no action. What we encounter is a group of young students, black and white, getting together in an illegal multi-racial club, drinking and dancing, making small talk, smooching, doing things that all young people do. The dialogue tells us they are very liberated indeed, and gradually the deeper passions begin to creep in. Our young, sensitive hero, quiet and reserved, meets for the first time a newcomer to the club, referred to as a white flower of white womanhood, or something like that. She is completely new to the group. This is her first tentative step into the liberated awareness of the underground society. Before he has finished his coca-cola, however, our hero has fallen madly in love with her. Step by step we discover that this group of youths are plotting something. Any moment now the citadel of racism, the house of parliament, will go up in flames and send the Boer legislators to the ultimate white paradise. And naturally our lover-boy discovers that his new flame is daughter of one of the doomed men. But lo and behold because of this great love an anguish is introduced into the play, a dilemma. Our young hero twists and squirms on the knife, love wins, he dashes out to give warning or stop a fuse, I've forgotten which, and needless to say brings our young conspirators to a very messy end.

And yet another play by a South African, Alton Kumalo. We find again this strange hankering for the ethic of reconciliation. *Themba*, I believe the title was when I last saw it in manuscript; it was later staged by the Young Vic in London, a fact which is also remarkable considering the hundreds of scripts which keep knocking on the doors of the citadels of theatrical establishment. We may say the play represents the viewpoint of dialogue with South Africa. They have merely succumbed to the temptation of elevating the artistic soul above the logical arousal which the squalid reality that they have recognized and depicted in their work achieves even within the most dispassionate observer. (I do not wish to go so far as to suggest that they have

written for a white audience.) In Kumalo's play the white policeman, who's done his share of nigger-bashing in the earlier part of the play, whose every second epithet is "bloody Kaffir," or something worse, this beloved pillar of apartheid turns out to have been full of second thoughts on the subject. He gate-crashes a party, which he does normally to entertain himself, and the next thing we know he is dancing with a black woman and believe it or not the habitués raise three hearty cheers to his conversion. This on a public stage. The play ends with all of them dancing bum to bum. But what was singularly nauseating about this play was the concern of the author to show that the villains of the piece are indeed the blacks themselves who have turned their frustrated violence upon themselves. One gang leader walks into a bar, demands to sleep with the wife of one of the customers. The poor soul hesitates and is shot to death, and it is this psychological truism of the oppressed, this inward-turned predatoriness and savagery of the downtrodden as accurately observed by Fran Fanon, that our dramatist cheapens in order to suggest that the best friend of the wretched of the earth may prove after all the nigger-bashing policeman with a heart of gold.\*

Now it is not necessary to go so far as to accept Trotsky's principle that all literature written in a situation of revolutionary confrontation "cannot but be imbued with the spirit of social hatred." We need not go this far in the absolutism of one's attitude towards the demands of revolutionary theater. It is logical, however, that we expect that all literature which sets out to depict the realities of such a revolutionary situation cannot help but reflect that social hatred in its resolution which, after all, is central to the dynamics of the very

\*1974. I witnessed a revised production of this play at the Arts Theatre in London, and while the play remains on "the naive level of ethnic jollity, it has now dispensed with the obscene accommodation of the oppressor at the expense of the victims.

social situation. In short, we do admit that there are areas of contrasting awareness even in the most intense moments of upheaval, and that the human spirit is not impoverished even in the struggle by a faithful reflection of these very special and quiescent areas. But the pen which directs itself at the entire social matrix of upheaval must remain within it and resolve the struggle by the logical interactions of the components of that matrix, not go outside of it to impose an alien Christian pietistic resolution plucked from some rare atmosphere of the artist's uncontaminated soul. It is important to emphasize this because of the very frequent accusations which are made against black American theater as being somewhat too strident, accusations which as I say are sometimes quite justified but which should always be judged within the depicted social context. And the elevated concept of a benign resolution for a malignant genesis is all very well and beautiful but, if I may paraphrase Trotsky once again, somewhat out of context: "We cannot tear out of the future that which can only develop as an inseparable part of it and hurriedly materialize this partial anticipation in the present day dirt and before the cold footlights." To do this is not to be, as some authors imagine, a visionary; it is simply to be starry-eyed.

And now let me draw the threads of these thematic variants together. There has been, as you must all be aware, a very serious search among black writers for an idiom which would serve not only to rejuvenate the arid condition of European theatricality but which would serve to integrate the fragmented and even distorted consciousness of the black people in the midst of a domineering culture. The search has led them inevitably back to the mother continent in a desperate hunt for ritual into the very liturgy of traditional drama. It has bred some distortions, some superficiality, created even comic melodrama where none is intended. This search should be understood as going backwards into that recombining essence of ritualism from which drama emerged. Drama, I think we have agreed, is by its nature a

revolutionary art form. It is not therefore accidental that an exploration into the basic idioms of expression has been most manifest in drama on this continent, the black section of it. The dangers have been stated, and it is possible that once the reasons for this urge are understood, the most apposite form for the social reality here may be discovered in the existing ritual idioms which are on the spot and not necessarily those which are borrowed from Africa. Again this is not an attempt—you must excuse me for constantly making sure I am not misunderstood; I nearly had my head torn off in some cafe by a black sister who just couldn't be persuaded that I didn't mean what she thought I meant—so this is not an attempt to discourage a cultural return to Africa, as such, but to emphasize that there is a need of awareness of the levels to which such resources can be rifled and should be rifled. Franz Fanon writes:

The atmosphere of myth and magic frightens me and so takes on an undoubted reality. By terrifying me it integrates me into the traditions and the history of my district or of my tribe and at the same time it reassures me, it gives me a status as it were, an identification paper. The occult sphere is a sphere belonging to the community which it entirely under magical jurisdiction. By entangling myself into the inextricable network where actions are repeated with crystalline inevitability, I find that the everlasting world which belongs to me and the perennality which is thereby affirmed of the world belonging to us.

And for the dramatist who seeks to integrate myth and ritual into the revolutionary potential of a play, these words contain their own warning. The network is inextricable, the matrix of which the ritual form is merely a shell, is a perennial one, an intricate evolution from tradition and history, not merely of myth and magic alone. Ritual therefore

contains its own stringent dialectic; it is not merely a visual decorative framework. It is the difference, again to put it superficially, between whether the son expresses his self-liberation by hitting his grandfather or does it by breaking a sacrificial gourd. When this totality of the ritualistic form is appreciated it may be realized that black culture in American today contains its own abundance of ritual forms which are more appropriate to the erection of that formalistic shell within which the play of forces must be staged. It should be clear by now why I chose to commence this talk by recalling to your attention Edward Albee's play. It is not offered as a model but as example of the universality of the ritual form even in a seemingly incongruous environment. *Virginia Woolf* exploits a recognizable ritual of purgation, remains firmly in its sociological idioms, and works.

A singularly successful example of this method in black drama is a very modest play called *The Fanatic*. I hope, by the way, somebody can remind me who the author of this play is because I'm ashamed to say that though I directed it in Ibadan, it came among a sheaf of manuscripts from the Black Theater and of late I just haven't been able to remember the author. Does anybody know who the author is? Well, I'll find out before I leave the States.\* One of the reasons for the success of this small play was very simply that the author had achieved a successful integration of form, that is the ritual, and matter (story), character, conflict, social moralities within a dynamic of revolutionary tension, culminating in the ritual slaughter of a racist murderer right on the altar of a fundamentalist Christian church. It was a play which was very decidedly American and this not merely contextually but texturally. It received a thoroughly rounded production and when I say that I am not referring to the theatrical production. I am talking about the event which took place between the audience and the stage. After all, the boastful confession of the murder of a black boy by a white American, while it is very commonplace

\*Ben Caldwell

in America, is not all that familiar and in fact is slightly incredible in much of West African society. Racial polarization resulting in casual homicide is a little remote from West African experience, yet that audience (a mixed one by the way) was caught up in a near-hypnotic progression of action towards the climax. I still remember after many years my encounter with a book, *The Scottsborough Boys*. It represented for me the ultimate in horror fiction. It took a while before I could accept it as a social reality. And with this play it was not really a question of skin identity. But what happened on the night of performance, the magic event happened—performer and audience were enmeshed in a matrix of tradition and history, established, recreated, and made affectively concrete by a theatrical emphasis on the uniqueness and universality of that matrix. Night after night the magic thing happened, audience came under the magical jurisdiction of a network where everything proceeded towards an inevitable point of communal purgation. And in seeking the revolutionary dynamic for theater today, trying to move away from what you might consider has become the bourgeois form of theater, we may say perhaps that the goal at which we are all vaguely aiming is that point where the cementing communal roots of theater are made one with the liberating direction of the present. That this is not peculiar to the black peoples alone is I hope indicated by the fact that I have chosen to refer to a play by a white American writer who utilized the ritualistic form; also by the proliferation of experiments in Europe today, some of which are probably just the result of having too much research money. But the very nature of this movement, this motion away from a bourgeois death of theatrical form is towards that communal cementing factor which recovers a revolutionary dynamic theater.

A commonly mistaken notion however exists in this movement, on which, because of the opposition of communalism to individualism—the one as representing progressive thought and sensibility, the other as a decadent, elitist, reactionary, etc. etc.—has turned into a fetish what is called audience

participation. This expression has been misconstrued and debased beyond artistic or common sense. It has grown out of the mistaken concept of theater as consisting at any one time of two separate and irreconcilable entities rather than two fluctuating halves of the same unit both manipulated by a commonly shared dynamic. The definition of theater is, as I emphasized at the beginning, a social phenomenon. Even within the monastic, austere isolationism of a Grotowski, theater does exist as a means of social intercourse. If Grotowski chooses to regard his theater as a remote experience and to work so hard at this concept, that is his own individual choice which can be expensively worked out. It does not contradict the principle of theater as social interplay and it is not removed from the comprehensive theatrical pulses which emanate even in his own work from the bear-pit to the gallery or from the elevated ring to the ringside. The debasement of the concept "audience participation" is in any case what has driven experimentalists like Grotowski into that other extreme where the actors are viewed from the wrong end of a telescope.

And when he talks about a poor theater, I think there is a very simplistic definition here which really boggles my mind anyway; it reveals a narrow evaluation, the result of European materialistic obsessions. The idea is that one does not take into consideration the mental input as well as even the organizational affluence that makes possible the rigid, luxurious, and, in a way, self-indulgent monasticism which alone can create Grotowski's kind of isolationist theater. It is as much as to say that the Brecht Theater is a poor theater because it presents a socialist viewpoint, that the Berliner Ensemble which is dedicated to Brecht's work and takes sometimes as long as one-and-a-half years to mount a play operates on the principle of impoverishment. In Africa, and I'm sure in the poorer communities of America, you haven't got time for that kind of luxury. These are, however, digressions.

When Imamu Baraka in his *Slave Ship*, which I do not represent as being either the best example of

his theater or of black American theater here, when in the *Slave Ship* he instructs his actors to go around the theater to touch and shake hands with members of the black audience and leave out the white, he is using the concept of audience involvement in a truthful, relevant, and, in this case, deliberate personality dissociating sense. I read the reaction of a white critic in the audience who declared that after seeing the play itself, watching the catalog of dehumanization of the black man, and empathizing with it on a level which he had never before suspected, it was a shock to him to find literally that the play, and his ordeal, was not over, that he had to experience yet another level of his unsuspected rejection. He, in spite of these feelings of identification which had been fed into him from the universality of suffering, found that his emotive identification existed only for him and was not necessarily reciprocal in itself with the essential truths of the evening. The suffering humanity not only rejected him but by so doing questioned and raised doubts in his mind that he was a member of the human race at all, this not alone by the actual business of the selective handshakes afterwards but by its finality, the fact that it was a culminating metaphor of that emotive temperature which had been aroused. It was not, wrote the critic, simply a question of guilt. The charge which was lodged in his mind was that he was not a member of the human race, that this doubt had been achieved by the theatrical contraction of the entire human race as the summation of anguish and courage which was presented upon that stage. The world outside of it was wiped out in that microcosmic totality of ritual. Now this is a rational exploitation of audience participation, selective, unforced, perfectly posed contextually. By contrast I would like to quote—just this Sunday I was looking through the snob papers and looked in the critic section to encounter Brustein—he's one of your critics, I believe he's been in England lately—I was reading something he wrote on the American theater. It is useful to have this quote because then you can't

really accuse me of any prejudices.

. . . for it is a paradox that true privacy is possible only when the public life is blessed. . . . as (in) the theatre and the pub which gives the home a certain inviolability. . . .

Brustein is contrasting the British theater with the American, offering some sociological reasons for the parlous condition of the latter—

You may not be invited often to English homes for dinner, but you don't find television cameras welcome there either. The voluntary participation of the Louds in the televising of their disintegrating family life is simply inconceivable in England. . . .

I would add that it was inconceivable in Africa too, possibly everywhere except America.

In the United States on the other hand where the public life is brutish and corrupt, the streets unsafe and the doors of the living room open to the media, theater is something created almost everywhere but on stage. The actor-studio mystic of the private moment where actors are encouraged to expose whatever is most hidden and shameful in their lives has now become a popular game amongst some well known writers, personalities, and even ordinary citizens, as the country lolls about in an orgy of exhibitionism which makes every man an actor and every man a spectator. Encounter groups, sensitivity sessions, feelies, and the whole desperate paraphernalia of contact are invented in the hope of physical proximity of public confession, would somehow create

links of strangers while people divide  
along racial, sexual, and generational  
lines in a frantic search for brother-  
hood and community.

This is the burden of my statement--that audience participation is not really necessarily tactile, however much that becomes the vogue, nor is the frenetic effort to equate a contempt for the human body on stage with the liberation of his social personality anything but a blasphemy of the culturally depraved. Even the so-called animal in his pristine habitat--that ultimate state of grace--separates the ritual that precedes mating from the ritual that precedes confrontation with an intruder in his domain; yet the claims of avant guardists in Europe and America, treated with solemnity by various media-- constantly suggests that the nerve to copulate successfully in full view of the audience is analogous to the nerve required for a revolution. Permit me to enter a dissenting view. To indict the white world in an American or South African context, or to damn the capitalist menace and the acquisitive ethic, to denounce Vietnam and promote the ideals of international brotherhood, to liberate the sexually or racially exploited or indict the hypocritical puritanism of the corrupt economic lords of society is *not* to subject the sensibility of the audience to the pathetic effluvia of thrill-seeking, novelty-orientated dramatists whose sole charter of legitimacy is that wearisome banner which screams: Death to bourgeois separatist theater. I see nothing significantly anti-bourgeois in a bare arse clambering over the audience and flapping ugly tits between me and the main body of action on stage. Indeed, the only regret I have ever had at such times is that I had no lighted cigarette in my hands. I am in any case unlikely to submit to much more of this form of theater--quote revolution--even from an academic sense of duty. Since I was not weaned on Euro-American shame-culture I do not succumb readily to the western habit of cultural blackmail by which boredom with products of barren imagination is

translated into inhibition and lack of intellectual liberation. When we want some "action" we know where to go and that place is not called theater. When I go to the theater I do not like to see drooling morons translate audience participation into a license to maul me with their bodies simply because they are incapable of reaching me with their minds. This is the debasement of the principle of ritualistic communion at its most nauseating, the triteness which comes sooner or later to any culture whose rationale is based not upon irreducible truths of universal experiences, but on a cultural emptiness which can only feed on novelties, particularities and personal fantasies. These companies which prowl the fringes of the politely curious capitals of the world imagine that, because they profess the communal life and—let us do them justice—structure their companies on allied principles—their theater is necessarily revolutionary. There are of course truly inspiring exceptions, but let it at least be realized that *Oh Calcutta* in the Lincoln Center, on the sidewalk of Skid Row, or the pavement theater of Soho remains an example of bourgeois decadence, not of the revolutionary intellect and imagination which go to build the greatest art.

Back to ritual communion as it is meant to be, and I shall now quote the promised extract from a much hallowed critic. I shall not tell you his name because this is a confidential report which was written for a Foundation who sponsored his strip. He's a European, not even an Englishman, and he encountered black American theater for the first time and, again using the example of black theater merely because I know that this is where the search for the ritual origins of theater happens to be strongest, at least for the moment, I will quote a few paragraphs from his experience.

I found this the most overwhelming and powerful experience I had in the United States and to me it represented a black revival movement in its purist and finest form. I must confess I went to it with

some misgivings. The title suggested a kind of propaganda piece and I've always disliked direct exhortation of the audience in the theater. . . . The story element is simple, a community is terrorized and undermined by drug pushers and thugs, the only counter value to the sub-culture is an African religious revival group, here represented by Yoruba, a form of Yoruba Oshun [Oshun is a Yoruba goddess]. The drug king feels threatened by the Oshun cult. His clientele is diverted towards positive values, a violent attack on the Oshun workshippers is meant to suppress the cult, but the Oshun worshippers believe in their conviction. . . . powerful medium which carries the play along is the music. The jazz choir would be well worth listening to by itself. The producer has made strange and successful use of an operatic voice in the score. Miss X is cast as Oshun. She has been trained as an opera singer but has finally given up her art as being irrelevant within the context of the current black culture revolution. But to hear the producer set the classical belcanto purity of her voice against the hard-hitting jazz set and, thus alienated, the voice acquired totality of new meanings and colour. The audience leaves the hall slowly, somewhat numbed. . . .

Moving into a completely different room, somehow without really knowing what is happening to one, one finds oneself in this second room which is the Oshun temple. The darkish room has tiers of steps on which everybody sits down at the end an altar like structure. And now the direct assault on the audience is resumed, one's

defences weakened by the play, one is now more open to suggestion—more ready to accept the strange ritualistic experience one is subjected to. I could not attempt to describe what really happened with music, dance, and a barrage of words. The audience who have by now become the participants are carried through a series of euphoric unmediated moods, being thus manipulated one is ready to take in the message which is about new black consciousness, new values, the possibilities of change.

It is a useful quote simply because this is somebody who comes from the outside and who does not deny his own western values and cultural modes but is able to see how even the alien forms are used without actually breaking what sets out to be a different ritualistic mould. In other words, what we are talking about is not black "authenticity." We are emphasizing the sensitive adoption of what has become integrated within the cultural matrix of a society—whatever and wherever it is—into the idiom of the ritual for making new social and, we hope, revolutionary statements.

To end with, I would like—in defense of my position with regard to the frequent condescension of would-be revolutionary dramatists to make use of one more quote. As a writer I am, I confess, easily exasperated by an over-simplistic division of committed theater into what is apparent and didactic and what is imaginative and suspiciously elliptic. This is often then paralleled in turn by categories of public concern and private retreat and so on ad infinitum. I take the attitude that a work like *Virginia Woolf*, because it does not condescend, is ultimately more enriching, more liberating than the patronizing stance of an Arnold Wesker, however socialist he claims to be. The proletariat and the peasantry are not intellectual beggars to be talked down to by self-appointed sponsors of their membership into elite clubs of specialized sensibilities.

The would-be exponent of a proletarian or peasant culture must acquire the humility to immerse himself in aspects of that culture that can provide a foundation for the emergence of new forms, not approach his subject with the convictions of an alien and dubious enlightenment. All this is not to deny that it is the individual, working as part of a social milieu—and this may be a fluctuating milieu—who raises the consciousness of the community of which he is a part. (Raise is again a word which we must watch very carefully because we don't want to fall into the trap of suggesting that by raising we mean that what is there is low; so let us simply say that he opens up other awarenesses, other visions to a society which is too heavily committed, to the exclusion of everything else, to the achievement of a particular goal.) And it is not surprising to find Trotsky who, in another polemic draws a parallel between the right of a revolution during its physical remorseless march, the right of that revolution to destroy monuments and priceless architecture without thinking twice, who sanctifies this right to suppress creative artistic tendencies which are inimical to the momentum of revolution; it is the same writer, the same critic and revolutionary who comments, however, that:

Culture is the organic sum of knowledge and capacity which characterizes the entire society. It embraces and penetrates all fields of human work and unifies them into a system. Individual achievements rise above this level and elevate it gradually.

I have left this point, this statement of a revolutionary writer to the last for reasons which I have admitted are very obvious. I even quarrel with the word elevate because I believe it is this mental attitude which has militated against the artist and the intelligentsia in society, against their unreserved acceptance by the community with whom they are involved in the processes of change. The

larger crime, more insidious than the charge of self-elevation in a writer, is however the crime of the patronizing commitment, a refusal to find a creative mode which would not be coming downwards from a very imaginary, creative ideal, to find a language which expresses the right sources of thought and values, and merges them with symbols of contemporary reality or fuses them into a universal idiom such as ritual. No one at least will deny that ritual is a language of the masses. Art, and drama, most especially, should not take as starting point an exteriorized notion of the mores and social culture of that society or impose upon its product the mores and idioms of a different set of values. Of the purely commercial dimension of artistic desecration there is very little to add to the obvious, especially in this country. We are more concerned with the pitfalls which govern, not only the impulses of the artist in a situation that can be, to varying degrees described as revolutionary, but one which often misguides the critic in such a society towards certain preconceptions that dam up the creative paths natural to the writer's peculiar genius and, leads him towards artificial concepts of proletarian art. Drama is the most vulnerable to the habitual insult to mass intellect and imagination. Our excursion into the meaning of ritual and the roots of drama however suggests one positive root from which the gap is easily breached between a people who are not habituated to drama in its more modern formalistic encrustations, one which avoids that condescension which negates the very concept of revolutionary art. The creative ideal in revolutionary theater is not a self-conscious pandering to any proletarian illusion on any level whatever, be it the spiritual level or the social-revolutionary level because as we have said, the matrix of creativity most especially in the dramatic mode, embraces at all times—both in individual and communal affectiveness—the regenerative potential of society. And it is not the immediate defineable or tangible but the inherent potential of society—technological, political, artistic,

etc.—that constitutes the totality of a people's  
culture.