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*Interviews with Five African Writers in Texas*

# **PALAUER**



*Occasional Publication of the  
African and Afro-American Research Institute  
The University of Texas at Austin*

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John Pepper Clark  
Dennis Brutus  
Ezekiel Mphahlele  
Kofi Awoonor

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African and Afro-American Research Institute

The University of Texas at Austin

Austin, Texas

1972

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The African and Afro-American Studies and Research Center of The University of Texas at Austin is pleased to offer this collection of interviews as its third Occasional Publication. The booklet was originally produced with the financial and technical assistance of *World Literature Written in English*, a biannual journal edited by Robert E. McDowell at The University of Texas at Arlington.

In the past, Occasional Publications of the African and Afro-American Studies and Research Center have been supplied free of charge to all subscribers to the Center's journal, *Research in African Literatures*, and to other individuals and institutions on request. However, it is now necessary to charge two dollars (\$2.00) for each of these publications in order to defray the expenses incurred in reprinting them.

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Reprinted January 1974

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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These interviews were collected over a two-year period at The University of Texas at Austin. Each author had been invited to campus to deliver a public lecture and to meet with African literature classes. After his talks he was always besieged with questions about his writing and his views on current African problems. The editors of this booklet recorded these public dialogues and sometimes met privately with the author to probe more deeply into literary matters. The tapes were then transcribed and edited and the transcripts mailed to the author himself for final checking.

We would like to thank the authors for their cooperation and for allowing us to publish these interviews. We also wish to express our gratitude to the African and Afro-American Research Institute, the organizers of "The Black Experience" colloquium, the Ethnic Studies Department, the English Department, and the Center for Intercultural Studies in Folklore and Oral History for sponsoring the visits of these writers; to the editors of *Africa Report*, *Studies in Black Literature*, *Transition* and *Studies in Black Classics* for permission to reprint material which first appeared in their pages; to Betty White, J.P. Clark, *The Daily Texan*, KLNK and Doubleday & Co. for supplying the photographs; to Gail Miksic and Barbara Levy for transcribing some of the tapes; to Tom Cunningham and Rhonda Boone for providing the art work; and to Barbara Priebe, Roy Holley and Sally L. Sullivan for typing the various manuscripts.

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#### INTERVIEW WITH CHINUA ACHEBE

*When Chinua Achebe visited The University of Texas at Austin in November 1969 on the final leg of a month-long American speaking tour, he was very tired but more than willing to undergo another hectic round of interviews, speeches and discussions. Within the space of twenty-four hours he gave a press conference, conducted two university classes, taped a half-hour television interview, delivered a public lecture, and met with numerous students, faculty and townspeople at an informal reception held in his honor. He spoke mostly about the Nigerian/Biafran conflict but also about the role of the writer in modern Africa. When questioned about his own writing, he frequently tried to relate his answers to the larger themes and issues that preoccupied him. What follows is an edited transcript of some of his remarks on the African writer and then some questions and answers.*

When people talk about African culture they quite often mean an assortment of old customs. The reason for this is quite clear. When Europe came to Africa and said, "you have no culture, no civilization, no religion, no history," Africa was bound sooner or later to reply by displaying her own accomplishments. To do this, her spokesmen - her writers and intellectuals - stepped back into the past into what you might call the "era of purity," before the coming of Europe. What they uncovered there they put into their books and poems, and this became known as their culture, their answer to Europe's arrogance. They spoke of civilizations that were satisfying to those born into them and of gods with whom they were at ease; they wept over the death of these gods, over the destruction of these civilizations.

But the culture of a people is more than books and poems. It is their cooperative effort to make a clearing in the jungle and build on it a place of human habitation. If this place is disturbed or despoiled, these people will move to another spot, make another clearing, and begin to build on it another home. So while the African intellectual was busy displaying the past culture of Africa, the troubled peoples of Africa were already creating new revolutionary cultures which took into account their present conditions. As long as people are changing, their culture will be changing. The only place where culture is static, and exists independently of people, is

the museum, and this is not an African institution. Even there it is doubtful whether culture really exists. To my mind it is already dead. Of course, a good curator can display the artifacts so skillfully that an impression of completeness or even of life can be given, but it is no more than the complete skin which a snake has discarded before going its way.

This has been the problem of the African artist: he has been left far behind by the people who make culture, and he must now hurry and catch up with them - to borrow the beautiful expression of Fanon - in that zone of occult instability where the people dwell. It is there that customs die and cultures are born. It is there that the regenerative powers of the people are most potent. These powers are manifest today in the African revolution, a revolution that aims toward true independence, that moves toward the creation of modern states in place of the new colonial enclaves we have today, a revolution that is informed with African ideologies.

What is the place of the writer in this movement? I suggest that his place is right in the thick of it - if possible, at the head of it. Some of my friends say, "No, it's too rough there. A writer has no business being where it is so rough. He should be on the sidelines with his note-paper and pencil where he can observe with objectivity." I say that a writer in the African revolution who steps aside can only write footnotes or a glossary when the event is over. He will become like the contemporary intellectual of futility in many other places, asking questions like: "Who am I? What's the meaning of my existence? Does this place belong to me or to somebody else? Does my life belong to me or to some other person?" - questions that no one can answer.

*What are you doing in the United States?*

I'm here on a program arranged by the Committee for Biafran Writers and Artists. This is an American committee which is trying to bring over Biafran artists and writers to show that Biafra is all kinds of people and not only starving children, though that is a part of it. The Committee is also trying to send American writers into Biafra to see things for themselves.

*What is your position in Biafra?*

It's difficult to say. If things were normal I would be at the University of Biafra, but the university is not functioning.

*As a professor?*

Well, as some kind of writer in residence

*Can we talk a bit about your past writing? In the four novels you have written do you try to bring out one message, one theme, or do you give each book a different theme?*

I like to make each book I write different; otherwise, to my mind, there wouldn't be any point in writing another.

*Do you believe literature should carry a social or political message?*

Yes, I believe it's impossible to write anything in Africa without some kind of commitment, some kind of message, some kind of protest. Even those early novels that look like very gentle recreations of the past - what they were saying, in effect, was that we had a past. That was protest, because there were people who thought we didn't have a past. What we were doing was to say politely that we *did* - here it is. So commitment is nothing new. Commitment runs right through our work. In fact, I should say all our writers, whether they're aware of it or not, are committed writers. The whole pattern of life demanded that you should protest, that you should put in a word for your history, your traditions, your religion, and so on.

One big message, of the many that I try to put across, is that Africa was not a vacuum before the coming of Europe, that culture was not unknown in Africa, that culture was not brought to Africa by the white world. You would have thought it was obvious that everybody had a past, but there were people who came to Africa and said, "You have no history, you have no civilization, you have no culture, you have no religion. You are lucky we are here. Now you are hearing about these things from us for the first time." Well, you know, we didn't just drop from the sky. We too had our own history, traditions, cultures, civilizations. It is not possible for one culture to come to another and say, "I am the way, the truth, and the life; there is nothing else but me." If you say this, you are guilty of irreverence or arrogance. You are also stupid. And this is really my concern.

*Some literary critics, however, don't regard you as a protest writer because you write with such restraint.*

Well, according to my own definition of protest, I *am* a protest writer. Restraint - well, that's my style, you see.

*But you don't picture the Europeans who came to Iboland as black-hearted villains.*

No, I don't think that is necessary. I think they were very ignorant. And that's very bad, you know, when you are trying to civilize other people. But you don't really need to be blackhearted to do all kinds of wrong things. Those who have the best intentions sometimes commit the worst crimes. I think it's not my business to present villains without any redeeming features. This would be untrue. I think what's more likely to be true is somebody coming with the best of intentions, really believing that there is nothing here, and that he is bringing civilization. He's wrong, of course. He's completely wrong and misguided. But that's the man that interests me because he has potentialities for doing great harm.

*Would you say that the focus of your protest has changed considerably over the years?*

Well, my role has been changing. And I think this is true of all the other writers in one way or another. We started off - and this was necessary - showing that there was something here - a civilization, a religion, a history. Then we had to move on to the era of independence. Having fought with the nationalist movements and been on the side of the politicians, I realized after independence that they and I were now on different sides, because they were not doing what we had agreed they should do. So I had to become a critic. I found myself on the side of the people against their leaders - leaders this time being black people. I was still doing my job as a writer, but one aspect of the job had changed. I think what you do as a writer depends on the state of your society.

*Ezeulu, the hero of your third novel Arrow of God, is a chief priest who tries to manipulate another religion - Christianity - for political reasons. What do you think of his behavior?*

Well, he was a man I have a lot of respect for, a great intellectual. He saw what was happening; he saw that change was inevitable - unlike the intellectual today who perhaps doesn't see that the change has in fact happened - he saw this and he asked himself, "How do I use this new force, while still retaining my position, and make it my own?" That was good. He failed, unfortunately, but he saw clearly what was happening, unlike my character in *Things Fall Apart* who was not an intellectual and did not see what was going on. Okonkwo just saw his duty to protect his own and stand against the assault. So he failed. Ezeulu said, "Right, I've seen this thing; these people are powerful but that doesn't mean they are superior to me. I'll make use of them." But he failed too, and that's a pity.

*So Ezeulu didn't really believe that Christianity was better simply because it was more powerful.*

No, he didn't believe it was right. He didn't accept it. He was concerned with tactics, with basic realities, and he recognized the need to make temporary alliances. He said, "This thing is coming. I'll send someone to go and make an alliance with them, but the assumption is that I will remain in power - that the religion, the civilization, the tradition I embody will still remain in power. Let us absorb this thing that is coming; let's arrest it before it ruins or breaks us."

*But Ezeulu's opponent Nwaka charged that he was trying to become more than a chief priest, that he wanted to become a king as well. Do you think this was true?*

What that man was saying in reality was that Ezeulu was getting too powerful. You see, the idea of kings really was not accepted among the Ibos. We did not go in for kings. So the word "king" was used here to describe someone who was trying to become too powerful. And this runs against the Ibo belief in the complete integration of life, against their concept of an individual versus society. I think Nwaka was reacting as people normally do whenever they see the possibility of someone becoming too strong in the society.

*You think Ezeulu might have had a tendency to try and assume too much power?*

I think he had enough priestly arrogance to attempt it. This shows from time to time, like when he's confusing his thinking with the thinking of the god. These are natural feelings for a man who is a priest. Every priest, I think, can fall into that danger.

*Our class has just finished reading A Man of the People and we wondered what your outlook on Odili was. Did you picture him as being naive and idealistic or did you intend him as an object of satire, even burlesque?*

My picture of him is there. What you are asking me is what your picture of him should be, which is not really fair. Well, I like that young man. He was idealistic, he was naive, he was this and he was that, but I think he was also basically honest, which makes a difference. He was very honest. He knew his own shortcomings; he even knew when his motives were not very pure, and he admitted that these motives were not very pure. This puts him in a class worthy of attention, as far as I'm concerned. And I think he probably would return to do a better job next time. He suffered in this kind of society because it was very cruel, very ruthless.

But he was learning very fast, and at the end I think he had improved his chances of being of service, of doing the things he thought should be done. He'd improved those chances

*What is the significance of the sex in A Man of the People?*

What a question! Well, I don't know what the significance is. It's a part of life. More particularly, it's an aspect of this young man's attitude. At the beginning, when he was just floating like anybody else, like a lot of young people, wondering what his role should be, he uses sex in a way that is appropriate in that kind of situation. Later on, when he gets involved in politics, his attitude changes quite considerably. The sex is not there just for titillation, if that's what you're worrying about. I think it plays an important part in the development of this character.

*But how seriously should we take the revenge idea? Was Odili's sexual failure an isolating factor which led him into politics?*

Well, people stumble into right causes in all kinds of ways. It seems to me perfectly legitimate to stumble into politics through failure in a love affair. If you take the view that politics is so important that one should only approach it through training in a monastery or something, then that's not really life. It's not necessary to judge a man's action simply in terms of "well, he's only seeking revenge." He himself was honest enough to know that there was that element in his motivation, but soon there were other more worthwhile reasons. And I think I wouldn't quarrel with him at all for that.

*Is Nanga characteristic of political leaders in Africa?*

He was characteristic of the leadership just before the military came into politics in Nigeria and characteristic of leadership in other places where the military did not come into politics. I would give you names, but I think I had better not. But if you look at the politics of Africa today, I think you'll find other countries where everything will be quite parallel to this book except the very end. In fact, two years ago a friend in an East African country I shall not name\* bought copies of this book and gave one to each government minister for Christmas.

*What factors caused the emergence of politicians like Nanga?*

Well, the colonial departure from the scene was not really a departure. I mean independence was unreal, and people like Nanga were actually used as front men, as puppets, by the former colonial power. As long as they

could go about saying they were ministers, as long as they enriched themselves, they were happy, and they would leave the real exploiter at his work. So I think in a very basic sense, characters like Nanga flourished because the colonial situation leading to the independence period in Africa made it possible. And it still happens; it's not a thing of the past.

*Was it from the events in the Western Region of Nigeria prior to 1966 that you drew the political action of the novel? Or was it an anticipation of something that had not yet happened?*

The novel was completed at least two years before January 1966. It was completed in '64. And the indication as to how politics was going to develop in Nigeria was there already. If you cared to look, I think the signs were everywhere, not only in the West. There were parallel events all over. The worst no doubt was in the West because that was the seat of the crisis. That was where the manipulation was the most blatant. But I think you could see signs elsewhere.

*Although there has been trouble in Nigeria between ethnic groups, you don't seem to make reference to any kind of tribal antagonism in your novels, particularly A Man of the People where one might expect to see this portrayed.*

I hate the word tribe. Tribes were not really all that important, you know, in the past. However, it is not quite correct to say that I don't make reference to these antagonisms because I do. I can even refer to places where somebody loses a job or doesn't get a job and blames it on somebody from another tribe. But it was at that level; this didn't really become a terribly dangerous and explosive issue until it became a subject for political manipulation, especially since independence. There were rumbles before, but they were not more than you'd find anywhere else. It really got out of hand when you had politicians exploiting it to win elections. It's very easy for resentments to be exploited, and so we had explosions.

*In addition to recording the past and current revolutions and changes that are going on, do African writers have any influence in determining Africa's future?*

Yes, I think by recording what had gone on before, they were in a way helping to set the tone of what was going to happen. And this is important because at this stage it seems to me that the writer's role is more in determining than merely in reporting. In other words, his role is to act rather than to react. Today we are saying, "Well, let's not

\*Kenya

waste too much time explaining what we were and pleading with some people and telling them we are also human. Let us forget that; let us map out what we are going to be tomorrow." I think our most meaningful job today should be to determine what kind of society we want, how we are going to get there, what values we can take from the past, if we can, as we move along.

*Are you doing any writing now?*

Yes, but not novels. I do articles and some poetry, but I can't do more than that. I started a novel just before the war which seemed to me at the time terribly important - I already had the idea for it as far back as '66 - but I finally gave it up because it later seemed to me completely unimportant.

*Often we think of creativity as something that has to come from a kind of contemplation, quiet or repose. How can you keep the artistic integrity of your writing while being so totally involved in the political situation?*

I think there is a myth about creativity being something apart from life, but this is only a half truth. I can create, but of course not the kind of thing I created when I was at ease. I can't write a novel now; I wouldn't want to. And even if I wanted to, I couldn't. So that particular artistic form is out for me at the moment. I can write poetry - something short, intense, more in keeping with my mood. I can write essays. I can even lecture. All this is creating in the context of our struggle. At home I do a lot of writing, but not fiction, something more concrete, more directly related to what's going on. What I'm saying is that there are forms of creativity which suit different moments. I wouldn't consider writing a poem on daffodils particularly creative in my situation now. It would be foolish; I couldn't do it.

*Are most of the writers in Biafra young writers?*

Yes. I'm supposed to be a sort of "elder statesman."

*Do you foresee a time when you will go back to writing novels?*

Oh yes, it's always possible, if one survives. There's always time. But these are not normal times, not for me. These are not normal times at all.



INTERVIEW WITH JOHN PEPPER CLARK



*John Pepper Clark spoke at The University of Texas at Austin in April 1970, nearly six months after Chinua Achebe's visit. Although most of his lectures and classroom presentations were on literary topics, he was frequently asked blunt political questions, particularly about the aftermath of the Nigerian/Biafran conflict and about what he thought the proper role of the African writer should be during a civil war. It is interesting to compare Clark's views on artistic commitment with Achebe's for he articulates a very different position. All the remarks recorded here were made in public discussions with students and faculty at The University of Texas.*

*You have written all your plays in English, a non-African language. Did you write Ozidi, a play based on indigenous theatrical traditions, with an African or non-African audience in mind?*

*In a new nation like Nigeria which cuts across several groups of people, or rather which brings together several peoples speaking different languages, you've got to have a *lingua franca*, and this is the role that English is playing in the absence of one widely-spoken Nigerian language.*

*So a play like Ozidi has several audiences and communicates at several different levels. It is true that my father and mother would not be able to follow the dialogue in the play because it is written in English. But at the same time, my brothers and sisters, who are part of the growing English-speaking community in Nigeria, can understand what I have written. I can communicate with them at two levels - one, at the level of the cultural heritage which they share with me and with my parents, and the other at the new linguistic level and overall culture uniting all the different peoples of Nigeria. And of course we also have a third audience, which is you people outside. So there are different audiences one has in mind, and one hopes to reach as many people as possible.*

*I will not pretend for one moment that I enjoy the same kind of local audience which, say, Hubert Ogunde enjoys in and outside Western Nigeria. This dramatist and his numerous imitators in what we may call*

the Yoruba dramatic movement write in Yoruba, act with Yoruba companies, and play mostly to Yoruba-speaking audiences. When their plays are running in Lagos, Ibadan or Ife, the audience, players, and playwright are of one community. This kind of instant union which they achieve with their public is not available to one who writes in English. I belong to the new community of Nigerians who have undergone a new system of education and therefore share a new kind of culture, a synthetic one which exists alongside the traditional one to which fortunately I also belong. Since the function of a play - like the function of any other work of art - is a social one, I write in order to speak to my own kind of people.

How much were you influenced by Greek tragedies in writing *Song of a Goat*?

It's quite possible that Sophocles or Euripides are in that play. It's quite possible that the Elizabethans are there too. But this business of looking for sources can be misleading. I remember that one of the first persons who saw the play in manuscript said, "Oh, J.P., you've been reading Lorca." I said, "Who is he?" So he lent me his volume of Lorca's tragedies, and there I read for the first time *Yerma*, *The House of Bernarda Alba*, and *Blood Wedding*, but, you see, by that time I had already written my play. What I am trying to say is that the influences may be there, but there are coincidences, too, because we are all human beings with the same basic emotions and experiences.

There are some differences, some regional variations, of course. The Ijo man who comes to this play will probably recognize things the Greeks never dreamt of. The idea of sacrifice is a universal one, but the theme of impotence is something that doesn't have the same kind of cultural significance for you as it has for me. The business of re-production, of fertility, is a life and death matter in my home area. If a man doesn't bear, he has not lived. And when he is dead, nobody will think of him. Whereas here, you have other interests and preoccupations which have made you less concerned with the issue of procreation, and the sense of survival after death that we derive from it. Of course there are several aspects to any work, and certain of the ideas in *Song of a Goat* may have come from places other than the Niger Delta. I suppose one is doing a sort of synthesis, marrying lots of things one knows in the course of producing. But it takes the courage of an old John Bull like Gerald Moore, alias Mr. I-know-my-Africa, to pontificate that in Ijo the sins of the father are not visited upon his children, sometimes to the last generation, by a particular god invoked to determine a dispute between two parties. Naturally, it's the guilty ones who get the punishment but so do the innocent if they fail to acknowledge the decision and sentence awarded.

Are any of the Shakespearean echoes in *The Masquerade* deliberate?

Yes. I would say that the Bard was very much in my mind in *The Masquerade*. When I made one of the neighbors cry in admiration that the bride, a shrew of a girl, "walked afloat, doing the last of her pageants," I wasn't unmindful of Enobarbus eulogizing Cleopatra, or of T.S. Eliot's parody of her in "The Waste Land." There are times when you are well aware you're doing a double-take, and it doesn't take a very clever critic to detect that.

Does your play *The Raft* contain a political message?

I was at Princeton in 1962-63 when I wrote *The Raft* soon after seeing Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* It is a play which has been seen by some critics as being an allegory of the Nigerian situation - one of the four old regions breaking away, seceding, when the raft breaks up. I tell them that I wrote it in 1963, and don't remember trying to write a political thesis. But then they insist that the seeds were already there by 1963, that there were signs and symptoms of distress that were to lead to the threatened break-up of the nation. So maybe subconsciously I was thinking about all this. But essentially I was trying to create a human condition which I knew existed not only in Nigeria but elsewhere. The play may, however, have at the same time some remote or close connection with the political reality in Nigeria at one time, though basically it's an invention, a work of my imagination.

Why has the philosophy of negritude had little impact on English-speaking African authors?

I don't consider negritude a philosophy as such but a natural reaction, a movement which was necessary at one time for a number of Africans who were living abroad in Paris and found themselves too assimilated, found themselves too submerged in French civilization for their own comfort. Negritude was a cry that they wanted to surface and be themselves. They didn't want to be drowned by European culture; they wanted to swim in their own stream, as it were. A good number of us in English-speaking Africa didn't find it necessary to shout our identity because we were not culturally submerged by the British in the same manner as was Senghor or the West Indian Aimé Césaire. This is not to say we've all stayed outside the broad current and sweep of negritude, our protests and criticisms notwithstanding. What is more important, perhaps, is that we who employ English in our works have tended to operate more as individuals than as parts of any movement such as Senghor and his French African contemporaries have had to do.

*Senghor has claimed that intuition and emotion are innate qualities of the African. What do you think of this?*

To say that some group of people have all heart and no head is, I think, one of those things you say to make a special point. I'm sure that Senghor is a very intelligent man, and knows fully well that Africans are not all music, all soul, and no brains, no technology. Science is acquired, after all; it's not genetic. You acquire it over a period of time. I think he felt music and dance and art were the things we had to offer Europe at that time. He was a good salesman, but he said those things then to counteract certain prevailing forces. It's like that in any war - you overstate most of the time to survive. Everything on this side is virtue; everything on the other, vice. Otherwise you wouldn't be able to kick the other man really hard to win.

*Do you think negritude has a viable future?*

No, I think it a temporary kind of achievement. Negritude was a useful movement at the time that it came, but to want to use it to apply to all life at all times is falsifying life and falsifying the movement as a useful measure. It served a useful purpose once, but no movement can be static. If negritude were to grow, it would have to grow into something else in a scene no longer the same. It would have to go forward or decay and die. I think part of the crisis of negritude today is that Senghor is trying to pump fresh blood into the heart of a body now grown old.

*How would you define an African writer?*

That's a question that frequently comes up in my own literature classes at home when discussing topics like the "African novel." Is there any literary genre that could be called African, and if so, are we talking about subject matter, language, ideas, forms, settings, or nationalities of authors? Because all these problems arise, and where do you draw the line? If you delimit it by subject matter and setting, *Heart of Darkness* by Conrad, which is about colonialism and right in the heart of the Congo, could it be called an African novel? Graham Greene of *The Heart of the Matter* or *A Burnt-Out Case* and Joyce Cary with his Nigerian tales - are they African writers then? Are the white South Africans African writers? And is there a new African form of the novel, or is it merely a rehash, a poor imitation of models within the great tradition of the English novel and the larger European context? Have African writers actually taken this and turned it into something which you can say is distinctively African in form or in spirit? These are some of the questions we are asking ourselves right now, and until we find the right answers, we cannot really

arrive at any definite kind of statement of whether there is an African novel or an African writer. I don't know that nationality is enough. Think of an African who is living in the United States and writing about apple-picking, for instance, and writing in some so-called cosmopolitan language like English, French or some other European language. What would you call his piece? Are we actually producing African works of art with recognizable African qualities out of our experience of a European culture with language as its vehicle? These are complex questions calling for no cut-and-dried answers.

*But what would you say the African writer's role in society should be?*

I think that the writer - whether African, European or American - is just like a lawyer, a doctor, a carpenter, a janitor, one type of citizen within society. He has his work as has everyone with a job to do. I don't think that any one role - not even that of the highest elective political office of the land - is so special that it should subsume the others. This is where I find it personally disturbing that some of my friends - some of my own kind - do not seem to be satisfied with their own role of writing and would rather become soldiers and politicians, preferring to play roles other than the one that they are good at and recognized for. If you are a poet and write songs for soldiers to march to, to fight to, I suppose you would be well within your field of militancy. If you write a play like any of Brecht's to propound and push an ideology, a way of life, you would be well within your field. But to be an artist while doing all this, you must at the same time create a work of art, carve a figure which, when all capital has been made of it in the interest of whatever ideology that is attached to it, retains its hold upon us principally as an object of beauty.

Another thing, the artist, we accept, is a social person. What he is creating is for consumption by a living group of people, and if it is anything valid it will have as long a tenure as the collective life of the people into the future. He may create his work for worship, he may direct it to an audience that is political, and he may direct it to audiences that are not political or religious-minded. It depends on where his talents really lie; he tries to create a work that is of interest to his public, and this may or may not address itself to any kind of topical issue. To that extent of his being a communicating citizen, I feel he is engaged and committed. But when as a writer he puts pen aside to take up sword, gun and hand grenade, or when he mounts a soapbox to spit slogans chosen for him by others, then I think he has left one role for another.

*So you believe he should pick his line, mind his own business, and just write things down?*

A lawyer practices his trade; so does a doctor. That does not mean either will not vote. And let's get this straight, a creative writer is not a scribe, just writing things down.

*But that is what you were implying.*

No, no, it's you who aren't listening in your zest to make me say the unpopular thing in these critical times that will have the artist "committed" to a cause. I didn't say the writer or artist should go and live out in a secluded place. He is a citizen like all the other citizens who make up the Republic.

*And should he fight in a war?*

Oh, yes, the professional man can give up his practice, but when a lawyer gives up his wig and gown and volunteers to go and fight as a combat soldier, that's that; he is no longer operating in a law court. And nobody remembers afterwards that he is a lawyer. But the glamor of the writer is such that even when he has left his position as a writer and taken on the newer duty of a soldier, there is a carry-over still from the old role to the new one, so that when he gets killed, everybody says, "What a waste!" whereas you don't hear that kind of cry when a lawyer, a doctor is shot down fighting. You may find it odd coming from me, but it seems to me that people are creating for the writer an almost superstitious role which I find unbearable, as if he were a special kind of human being who has certain duties, functions, privileges mystically set apart from other human beings. I don't at all assume that kind of romantic position. I'm not impressed with the social or political life a poet leads outside of his profession if he doesn't produce poems. He is a poet because he composes poetry; he is a playwright because he writes plays, not because he is out killing people or getting himself killed. That is a different role entirely, one for another type of citizen, I mean, the soldier. It may be a role that is open to every able-bodied man in society - taking up a gun in defence of the fatherland - but even in such an extreme circumstance not every draftee or volunteer can shoot or should be allowed to shoot.

*Isn't it possible to think of fighting as an extension of one's writing career?*

How many great poems have come out of men going to fight? How many plays? Do you think you have to see how people are killed before you can go and write about them? Did Homer, did Virgil, did Shakespeare for all their carnage? The writer, they say, is protean in his imagination: that is why he is able, without ever living a part, without actually acting out a

part in life, to enter into it. This is what Keats called "negative capability." You are a chameleon, an actor assuming many roles, because you are able to experience something without ever going into it. I don't believe a writer has to be actively engaged in battles for his vision of them to be valid. I think that is a dangerous way of looking for experience, and mankind must be thankful indeed that the great majority of its artists through the ages have not resorted to that method of chasing after metaphors and images.

*You seem to be saying there is no relationship between the writing you do as a profession and the kind of life you lead as an individual. In other words, you could completely turn your back on whatever is happening in society in order to keep your art clear.*

There you go again. No, these are not the options. One does not write in outer space. All art is a product of life, and nobody can create art out of void. This is no Miltonic heresy! But when you say a writer should be socially committed, it all depends on what you are talking about. There are many kinds of functions he can perform in society. The very business of giving pleasure is a social function. The business of urging people to go and die is another function. The point is that in producing art you are ordering material and creating something new which you hope will not just show life, not just help to interpret life, but also probably help to direct life. This is where the commitment is. I am saying that it is the quality of the work, it is what you do with your talent, that matters. It is what you create that matters, not any extra duties you take on as a politician, priest, prophet, or bomber-pilot.

Now don't get me wrong. Of course there have been men like Sir Philip Sidney who was a courtier, soldier, poet, critic - the kind of dashing hero that many of us would like to play. But we must not confuse the various roles of the man. His *Defence of Poesie* is not read today because he was a courtier and soldier at the same time. It is read because it is the work of a scholar and poet. I'm only saying that you must separate his talents. When you get the life of the artist mixed up with the work of the artist, then I think you are entering a new realm. Except of course you are dealing with autobiographical work in which case there is obviously a direct link between the life and the work of the artist as in the middle and later Yeats, or old man Donne. But even here, we've to be on the look-out for the theatrical and dramatized version of reality.

*The commitment you seem to be insisting upon is the commitment to put words on paper.*

No, not to put down empty words on paper, if you please. The commitment to produce something beautiful, and perhaps functional as well - this is the business of the artist as an interpreter, as a maker, as a creator,

as a constant renewer of life.

*And you insist that he write even when caught up in a compelling personal situation?*

Oh, yes, just like Wilfred Owen, unless he has reached his menopause. When Owen was in the trench, he was writing poems. But he has survived as a poet because he was writing poetry, not because he was in the trench. I repeat, the role of the poet is to create poems, and you don't have to go and carry a gun to create a poem about war. There are some times when a man finds himself fighting and comes out of it with new material to write about. I am therefore not trying to limit his subject matter or the area of his experience. And he can use his art in the service of whatever he believes. Like Shelley, he can, and run the risk of having it vitiated or strengthened. This is what a number of artists do all the time anyway. All I am disputing is that it is necessary for you to go some place like Vietnam and fight because you want to extend your art.





#### INTERVIEW WITH DENNIS BRUTUS

*When Dennis Brutus came to The University of Texas at Austin in February 1970 to participate in a colloquium on "The Black Experience," he spent most of his time talking about race and politics in South Africa. Throughout the day - which included a public lecture, a press conference, a television interview, and several meetings with students - he was bombarded with questions about apartheid, political oppression, revolution, and his own role in the South African struggle. Only once did he talk about his writing; this was in a large African literature class where he read and commented on several of his poems and invited questions from the audience. What follows is a partial transcript of that class meeting and probably one of the most revealing excursions into the complex mind and imagination of an outstanding African poet.*

I'm glad to be here, and it seems to me the most useful thing I can do is to spend most of the time answering questions on the things that interest you. I ought to warn you that I don't know all the answers, and when it comes to poetry, even my own, I don't always give the same answer to the same question. This may sound odd, but I believe one tends to look at the same thing at different times in different ways. I think only dead people don't change, and even they putrify so that there is a form of change.

Another thing I should say is that I feel I know what I try to mean by my own poetry and I think I know how it ought to be read in terms of meaning. So it seems to me sensible to read some of my poems while I'm here, partly because they tell you something about Africa and African writing and about the African predicament today and partly because they tell you something about my own work.

The first one I'm going to read is called "The Sibyl." You know, of course, that a sibyl was an old woman who made prophecies. There were sibyls or oracles in Greece. Now I had a friend called Sybil; it's really as simple as that. And so I would write, not a poem for her (because this would be a little "corny,") but a poem for her at a second or third remove by finding a new image, somehow. But as a tribute to her I would stick her name in the title. I'm really talking in the poem, as you can guess, about the politics of South Africa and the inevitable bloody kind of destruction that must come there.

But I shouldn't be explaining everything. If it's a good poem, it will explain itself.

Her seer's eyes saw nothing that the birds did not,  
her words were sharp and simple as their song;  
that mutant winds had honed their teeth on ice  
that sap ran viscous in the oaks and senile pines --  
these things were common cause except to those  
whose guilty fear had made them comatose;  
who could not guess that red coagulate stains  
would burst from summer's grossly swollen veins  
or spill out from the leaves of opulent decadence  
that autumn's austere nemesis would come to cleanse?

I think it comes off, and I think it says quite a number of things.

But perhaps we should go on to another, the poem about the troubadour. I haven't read this one for a long time, but I did look at it last night because I have always felt a little sad about a typographical error in it. It seems to me one can read the first line and it can sound terrible unless you put the accent on the first syllable of *traverse*. It should be *traverse*. This is because in geography, when you are using sextants and other things to map a country, it's called a "traverse" - the actual process of measuring a piece of land from the angles of the hills and valleys - and I am using the geographical term as a verb. Once you've accepted that, the rhythmic structure, I think, becomes much more convincing as a poem. One needs that accent.

A troubadour, I *traverse* all my land  
exploring all her wide-flung parts with zest  
probing in motion sweeter far than rest  
her secret thickets with an amorous hand:

and I have laughed, disdainful those who banned  
inquiry and movement, delighting in the test  
of will when doomed by Saracened arrest,  
choosing, like unarmed thumb, simply to stand.

Thus, quixoting till a cast-off of my land  
I sing and fare, person to loved-one pressed  
braced for this pressure and the captor's hand  
that snaps off service like a weathered strand:  
--no mistress-favour has adorned my breast  
only the shadow of an arrow-brand.

I know I don't read that one with much conviction, but this is just because I'm self-conscious about it. It's really a rather intricate poem, and if you will be patient, I'll spend a little time talking about it.

First the genesis. I was writing a lot of terribly loose, very bad free verse at the time, most or nearly all of which I threw away, and it seemed to me that I needed the discipline of a very tight poetic form. The tightest form I could think of was the sonnet, which is a very demanding form. And of all the sonnets - the Shakespearean variation, the Spenserian, Hopkins' variations and so on - it seemed to me that the Petrarchan was the most difficult. The Petrarchan rhymes abba/abba and cde/cde, and I decided I would make mine even more difficult; there would be only two rhyming sounds, an "a" sound and a "b" sound throughout the whole poem, not merely *ortet* and *sestet*. So I made up my mind that the next poem I was going to write would be a hell of a tight one and would have this kind of structure. I didn't know what it was going to be about, but I resolved that I needed some discipline.

At that time I was forbidden to leave a particular district in South Africa. I had an order from the secret police restricting me to Johannesburg. So for the hell of it, I used to think up excuses for having to travel. I would persuade my wife to find a pretext (she was about 700 miles away from me); I would smuggle a note down to her and back would come a telegram, "Baby seriously ill," or something like that. I would have to go to court, and there would be a legal process by which the banning order, the confining order, would be set aside for twenty-four hours or forty-eight hours. So I was allowed to dash away and come back. This happened fairly often. I liked those trips because I was doing what they were telling me I couldn't do. I was defying their orders and actually conducting underground political activity at the same time.

So, travelling around and having this notion of myself travelling around, the ideas began to fall into place with this shape. Gradually they came together. I wanted to catch a certain medieval quality - I forget why - and that's why you have a troubadour, a Don Quixote, quixoting in the poem. But you also have a line from a very early Latin hymn written by Thomas Aquinas, a very beautiful hymn from which I borrowed the phrase, "...motion sweeter far than rest."

Furthermore, the resistance movement in South Africa has as its signal an upraised thumb. So you can see the thumb is in the poem as well. This is a code signal. And "Saracen" refers to the armored cars the police drive which have searchlights on them and may have guns.

So there are all kinds of things woven into the pattern, but above all, there was an awareness that I was going to prison sooner or later. You can't go on doing this and not get caught. And I expected to go to

the prison on Robben Island, the worst prison in the country, which is off the beach of Cape Town. So when I talk of a weathered strand, it's functioning in two ways: it's a bit of cloth from a garment that's frayed, weathered, worn out, but it's also the strand where the waves break. It's an anticipation of a particular prison.

And whereas you went into battle, Don Quixote and everybody else, wearing your lady's scarf or handkerchief wrapped around your lance, I knew that this was not for me, that what I would wear could be imaged by a rather old fashioned prison garb with big arrows on it. The only kind of mistress's favour I would wear - my mistress being my country - would be a convict's clothes.

I hope this doesn't make it too complicated. I think it's still a successful poem, even if you forget about all these complexities. It still comes off, I think.

Of course, it is also a sexual poem. It's a poem for a particular woman - very much so in the first stanza where one recognizes her posture.

As for "cast-off my land," I was thinking back to the time of Defoe, and further back to Fernando Po, to the man who had been a cast-off, a castaway, as Robinson Crusoe was. A castaway is a man who goes to an island, and I expected to be a castaway; I would go to Robben Island.

But in another sense I am talking of fabrics, mistress's favours, weathered strands, meaning bits of worn cotton, worn wool, and they're cast off in stitches in knitting because you "cast on" and "cast off" when you're knitting. I don't know whether it's overambitious, but I was trying to do three things at the same time there. It's an anticipation of what would happen to me politically.

But I'm also trying to stick within the strict imagery of the poem which is of a mistress, a beloved, who sits sewing in a castle. I'm sure you know the image from "The Lady of Shalott" and things like that. So it's working in three ways.

Of course, all my poetry is not so complicated. But the troubadour image is important throughout my work. There was a phase when this was the dominant image in my poetry.

*Could you explain why you have moved from this kind of complex poetry to a poetry of plainer statement in Letters to Martha?*

Yes. As you know, I spent a period in prison for my opposition to apartheid and racism. But you may not know that much of it was in fact spent in solitary confinement. And this meant that you were in very great danger of going insane, and I came very close to it. To keep yourself busy you would have to organize your day in such a way that you could use up the whole day, because you saw no one, you spoke to no one, your food was just pushed under your door on the floor - a

bowl of porridge three times a day. So you said to yourself, "Well, I'll spend an hour thinking about literature and another hour thinking about movies," and you stayed away from things like your family and so on - you didn't dare think of them.

And eventually, having exhausted most of the common themes, I got onto looking at my poetry. And the more I looked at it, the more horrified I became. It seemed such utter rubbish. I could have, in a sense, committed suicide at the mere thought of it. I had reached that point. And you went through this kind of dark night, and then, sensibly, you would say, "All right, if it was so terrible, what's better than that? What would you do instead if you could start again?" Either you didn't write at all, which seemed to me the sensible thing to do, or you would write differently. I had even sent my wife a message (I was allowed one letter every six months) saying, "I want all my poetry destroyed and nothing published."

The first thing I decided about my future poetry was that there must be no ornament, absolutely none. And the second thing I decided was you oughtn't to write for poets; you oughtn't even to write for people who read poetry, not even students. You ought to write for the ordinary person: for the man who drives a bus, or the man who carries the baggage at the airport, and the woman who cleans the ash-trays in the restaurant. If you can write poetry which makes sense to those people, then there is some justification for writing poetry. Otherwise you have no business writing.

And therefore, there should be no ornament because ornament gets in the way. It becomes too fancy-schmancy; it becomes overelaborate. It is, in a way, a kind of pride, a self-display, a glorying in the intellect for its own sake, which is contemptible.

I don't know whether I would hold the same position now. I am only trying to explain how I arrived at that position then.

So I said, "You will have to set the thing down. You will 'tell it like it is,' but you will let the word do its work in the mind of the reader. And you will write poetry that a man who drives a bus along the street can quote, if he feels like quoting." Very ambitious indeed.

But this is based on the idea that all people are poets. Some are just ashamed to let it be known, and some are shy to try, and some write but don't have the guts to show it to others. But we all are poets because we all have the same kind of response to beauty. We may define beauty differently, but we all do respond to it.

So this was the assumption; don't dress it up; you will just hand it over, and it will do its own work. And I think in fact I may have succeeded in one or two poems. I'm going to read one where this may have come off.

It doesn't really need an explanation, but I'll just tell you that

I was kept in a prison in Johannesburg after I'd been shot in the stomach by the secret police, and then put in a truck with about sixty other prisoners. We were chained together, hands and ankles, and put in trucks and taken down to Robben Island. That's a distance of about a thousand miles.

First they would strip you, take all your clothes from you, and you'd line up naked. Then they would come along and issue everybody these short trousers - a kind of Bermuda shorts! - and a little vest, and then they would chain you. You'd be barefooted, of course. And you would travel about four in the morning in trucks escorted by security police and cops on motorbikes and in armored cars. (I don't know whether we needed that kind of security.) And halfway on the journey, in a little town called Colesberg, we stopped for the night and were given porridge and then put back in the trucks and sent off again. This is a poem about it.

Cold

the clammy cement  
sucks our naked feet  
a rheumy yellow bulb  
lights a damp grey wall

the stubbled grass  
wet with three o'clock dew  
is black with glittery edges;

we sit on the concrete,  
stuff with our fingers  
the sugarless pap  
into our mouths

then labour erect;

form lines;

steel ourselves into fortitude  
or accept an image of ourselves  
numb with resigned acceptance;

the grizzled senior warder comments:  
"Things like these  
I have no time for;

they are worse than rats;  
you can only shoot them."

Overhead

the large frosty glitter of the stars  
the Southern Cross flowering low;

the chains on our ankles  
and wrists  
that pair us together  
jangle

glitter

We begin to move  
awkwardly

*Colesberg*

Well, that's it. I don't know whether I ought to throw that out, and you will have to decide for yourself whether it achieves what it sets out to achieve. It may be that in time I can persuade people that my intentions were valid. Or it may be that I will have to be unpersuaded - this may well happen, judging from what I wrote yesterday. I would say that I seem to be occupying a kind of middle ground at the moment. But this may simply be because I lack the guts to maintain the position which I believe to be right and which people are persuading me is not right. I don't know. I have an open mind on the matter.

This Colesberg poem is in fact a more artistic poem than it appears to be. I think the art is just concealed. I think, for instance, the use of the word *awkwardly* at the end has more than one function. I think the use of the Southern Cross with a kind of religious overtone, a certain spirituality, helps the suggestion that awkwardness is gracelessness, is being without grace, is being ungraceful. But to be without grace, which is something given to you gratis by God, is a spiritual concept. And if someone is without grace, if one is graceless, if one is awkward, couldn't one also be, if without grace, forsaken by God? "My God, why hast thou forsaken me?": this - the loss of grace - is the absolute depth of deprivation. To be totally deserted by God, to be forsaken, is desolation. And what I am trying to achieve is an absence of grace so total that one is desolate, and I have made the word *awkwardly*, the absence of grace, function for it. So it is really perhaps a more arty poem than it would appear at first.

*How long after the experience was this poem written?*

At least a year.

*Is that typical of most of the prison poems?*

No, the *Letters to Martha* themselves were written earlier, but as you know, the *Letters to Martha* tend not to capture immediately an experience. They talk about it, but this one is immediate. And as the experience moved further away from me or I moved further away from it in time and it became less intense, it became more manageable. I could at first only write about it from the outside, but later on I could live inside it, to some extent. So some of the *Letters to Martha* were written within maybe six months or eight months of coming out. But the sharper ones were written further and further away.

*Do you regard this kind of poetry as protest poetry?*

No, I don't.

*But would you say these poems contain protest?*

Yes, I think they may have a protest function. I'd like to believe I don't go around in my poetry saying "What a terrible thing racism is," or "What a terrible thing apartheid is." I would like to believe I don't say that in my poetry, except by indirection, by implication. By reporting a simple experience I ask people to make up their own minds. But I don't try to persuade them as to how they ought to make up their minds. I don't think I myself would call this protest. I would say it functions as protest; it has the effect of protest. But I think it's poetry and not protest; it's not propaganda. The politics is not imported into it.

I may be a little old fashioned in this, but I have tried not to preach about racism or to make political speeches about racism in my poetry because I really believe that there is a thing called artistic integrity. I really believe that one ought not to turn art into propaganda. I think this is not only dishonest, I think it's a prostitution of the art.

I know people don't always agree with me. There are some who say, "So what, all art is propaganda," and I think this, in another way, is true. But I feel myself that it would be dishonest and discordant to introduce crude political statement, raw political dogmas, preachments against racism, in poetry. I don't believe one ought to do this.

Now that I live in Denver? I write poetry about the Rocky Mountains, or it gets into my poetry somehow. In South Africa you write about prison and police and machine guns because this is your landscape, in the same way that the Rocky Mountains are my landscape in Denver. The police and the system of tyranny surround you in South Africa.

\* Brutus was teaching at the University of Denver at this time.

*But isn't some of your later poetry propagandistic to some degree? I'm thinking, for example, of the poem where you speak about your role in sports or the poem entitled "Their Behaviour" in Letters to Martha.*

In "Their Behaviour" I was writing to a Welsh woman who said, "I wonder what it's like in South Africa." I was just trying to help her, and I was replying on a particular day which seemed to catch the quality of South Africa; this was Blood River Day, a once-a-year tribal ritual when whites celebrate their historic victory over the blacks in a battle which raged until the river ran with blood. The poem was written for her information. It may be propagandistic but that wasn't the intention. The intention was pure description.

As for the one about sport, I really don't think it should have been printed. I think it's the kind of personal statement which one makes in a moment of very grave self-doubt, when you begin to wonder whether you've done anything at all, and you say, "Well, damn it all, I did do this." You make a kind of assertion. I even think that, having chosen to write it, I argued it through all the way. I think it's got momentum; it does finish itself. But I think it may well be propagandistic because, in making that kind of defense of myself, I had to incorporate raw political elements, crude things. I would not have included that poem in the volume myself.

*You said you wanted your poetry to be easily understood by the bus driver, the man on the street, and so on. Wouldn't protest poetry permit you to communicate directly with such people?*

Well, I suppose one answer to that is you can't write poetry about anything you don't feel poetic about. If it doesn't take flight, if it doesn't get off the ground, if you don't feel that you've got a certain tension, a certain singing quality - well, you might even want to do it, but it won't come off. In fact, I think I've written some like that and thrown them away because I felt they hadn't come off.

*You have mentioned a number of times that you throw away a lot of poetry you don't like. Have you ever had any second thoughts about this?*

No, but strange things have happened once or twice. Once I was speaking at a meeting in Geneva, and after the meeting someone came up and said, "Oh, I liked your new poem in *Transition*." And I looked, and there was a poem which I had given away in disgust because I didn't want to see it anymore. When I looked at it, I said, "Damn it, did I write this?" because it seemed quite good! But when you see it in print, somehow it

doesn't talk to you anymore. You're more detached about it; you're not so self-conscious. It's not like striptease, when you see it in print. And also, after you've forgotten all about it, when you come back to it, sometimes it looks all right. But there are others I re-discover and tear up because they look worse than they did before. So it works both ways.

Is it true that you write a lot of your poetry on airplanes?

Yes, I've probably written more poetry in a plane, certainly of late, than anywhere else. Maybe it has something to do with gravity, but I do feel lighter in a plane. I feel in a sense liberated, freed of all kinds of restraints and - provided people don't make small talk - I find that I function better. Images, responses, and very often an idea which came to me in a class or in the toilet or anywhere else which I didn't work on then, can return to me, and the thing has matured over six or eight months so when I now write it, it already has a whole series of complicated images associated with it. Or sometimes just bits and pieces - you can pick up a stone here and a pebble two months later on a different beach and so on. Ultimately you can shape them together and get something. And a plane seems to do that to me. I find that the pieces settle together.

Could we look at one more of your poems?

Yes. How about "So, for the moment, Sweet, is peace," the last one in *Sirens, Knuckles, Boots*? It really isn't a bad poem. It was written, I should think, around about 1950, a long time ago. And it was written as part of about fifty or sixty of which this is the only one left; the others have all been lost. It's a little sad, I think, but when I looked for them, this was the only one I could find. I'd won the Mbari prize for poetry, and they'd written to say, "Have you got any more poetry we can publish?" and I scratched around and discovered I'd thrown them all away except this one. Maybe the others were bad, or I didn't like them, but this one seems to me, looking at it now, not too bad.

It was written at a time when I was doing some study on Gerard Manley Hopkins, and I think he is the strongest influence here. I've always been influenced first of all by John Donne, who is still, I think, the strongest influence on my writing, and then Browning in various periods, and people like Eliot, Ezra Pound, Patchen, Rexroth, Wallace Stevens - quite a lot of Americans, more than you would expect. But at this time I was on a Hopkins kick.

It's got a kind of sonnet structure, as you might notice. As far as I remember, I meant it to be four lines and then six lines and then four lines again. It adds up to fourteen but it's not a proper sonnet.

And there's rhyme in it too, but chiefly half-rhyme because I think I was influenced also by Wilfred Owen and Gibson at the time. You'll find a word like *cape* is not too far from *spray*, and still has the same kind of *i* that *crawl* has. It's a kind of half-rhyme. *Curve* and *scourge* are also not too far apart.

And the images, I suppose you can see, are fairly simple. The first one is the sea, the second one a snail, later on there's a bit about a pelican in it, and then it goes back to the sea. If you know a nineteenth century English poem by Swinburne called "The Swimmer's Dream," I may even have been influenced by it, because it's a poem about lying in the curve of the wave, or a part of it.

The pelican image is also interesting because although it's a long time before the troubadour, there is another hymn by Thomas Aquinas in which he compares Christ to the pelican. It's an old medieval image of Christ. Apparently when baby pelicans are dying of thirst, the mother pelican will peck her own breast and they will drink her blood. Christ, you see, shed his blood to keep his baby pelicans alive. I'm using the image in another way by saying that the pelican sustains itself, keeps itself alive. Can you keep yourself alive by feeding on your own blood? Like the "pelican pecks," you see. An unhappy little alliteration there, by the way. I think those *p*'s are too close.

The word *Sweet*, incidentally, should be capitalized because there was a girl whose name was Dulcey, and I'm playing on "Dulce et Decorum." One of Aquinas's hymns in Latin begins with the word *Dulcis* or *Dulce*. So the "Sweet" there, the sweetness, has many meanings.

So, for the moment, Sweet, is peace  
I rest, wave-cradled, safe from emotion's spray  
balm'd by the shadeless trough, the sun-greened, sensed,  
unfigured leau-feel of your ocean-self.

Oh I know unrest returns, the scourge--  
what love can pelican-peck for long  
its own swollen heart for sustenance?  
can one shake pain as raindrops from a cape?  
can the self, an unprotected mollusc, crawl  
free from the past's whorled labyrinths?

Even the thought of pain's return brings pain  
a fissure mars the moment's quiet delf:  
help me, my heart, to hold this instant still,  
keep me in quiet's acquiescent curve.

I think it comes off. There may be some defects, especially that

"pelican-peck." But otherwise it's all right.

I wonder if you noticed the use of assonance; there's a very deliberate use of certain vowel sounds: wave, safe, spray, where the same kind of a sound is consciously repeated. And notice too the f's and the l's, particularly the l's, which seem to me to give the feeling of leaning against a wave - *balmed, shadeless, the lean-feel of self* - all those l's against each other.

And, of course, when waves break, they are blue or green, but at the moment they rise to crash, they're colorless, really transparent, if you look at them very carefully. So the "shadeless trough" is the peak at which the wave is in fact uncolored, without shade.

I think that's all, except that I was writing the poem in a kitchen, I remember, and I looked at the plates on the shelf which were a kind of blue Delft, but I used delf instead. Think of cups and saucers without cracks in them and then think of one being cracked - this nice quiet plate on a quiet shelf. And if it's cracked, it's got a fissure, which spoils it. A fissure mars (I think that r is good there) "mars the moment's quiet delf."

But I'm afraid I'm showing off. I'd better stop.





EZEKIEL MPHABLELE

INTERVIEW WITH EZEKIEL MPHABLELE

*Ezekiel Mphahlele spoke at The University of Texas at Austin in April 1971, shortly after the anniversary of the massacre at Sharpeville, South Africa. Though much of his time on campus was taken up with public lectures, radio interviews and classroom discussions on race, politics and literature in the black world, he found a few moments to talk informally with a small group of students and faculty about his own writing. His novel The Wanderers and a new paperback edition of his autobiography Down Second Avenue had just been published, so the conversation tended to revolve around these two books.*

*In the first book you published, Man Must Live, it seems that the problems of racism weren't dealt with as strongly as in some of your later works. What do you think was the reason for this?*

*When I wrote those stories in Man Must Live, it was a kind of adventure into the literary field. I wrote things without the intention of having them published, and when I got them together, I sent them to a small publishing house just as a matter of interest, to see what their attitude would be towards them. When they read them, they decided to publish them. It was about 1941 when I started to write them, and things were pretty confused in my mind. I was twenty and was living in a town on the reef - the gold reef, about twelve miles out of Johannesburg - and it was a very secluded place. So I had a good deal of the natural setting around me; I wasn't living in a ghetto.*

*I was interested in people, in their own ghetto life and their own little dramas and tragedies, which would not necessarily have to do with the racial issue. That was my first entry into literature - my interest in people as people and not as political victims. It was when I became a teacher and came into contact with people and felt the political pressures around me that I began to wake up and became very sensitive to the political situation. Later, I wrote a number of things that I still have manuscripts of and which have never been published in book form. They appeared in Drum magazine, and in them I put the ghetto people aside, by themselves, acting out their dramas but at the same time implying the political pressure over them.*

*In the mid-fifties it was reported that you were working on a novel while in South Africa. What was this about, and what became of it?*

It was really a novel that had been turning around in my mind which later became *Down Second Avenue*. I decided to chuck the novel altogether and simply write an autobiography. I did part of it in South Africa in 1956, did much of it in 1957. From about January to June I did about half of it and did the other half as soon as I got to Nigeria.

*What was your method of composing Down Second Avenue? I know you wrote it on the run. Did you go back and write the interludes later?*

No, I did the interludes at the same time. I would write about my people and the events they were caught up in, and then literally come to a stop and try to think about what these things were doing to me, and found I could not express it in the strict order of biography. So I decided on the method of the interlude.

*Do you think that in Down Second Avenue more attention is paid to the development of events than to people? For instance, though Dinku Dikae seems to be a hero, the focus is less on the character than on the event.*

Yes, I think you are right. Because I found myself involved in events, events stick out in my mind throughout the period I talk about in *Down Second Avenue*. And yet I wouldn't say people had escaped my attention even then because the people themselves were part of these events. This is what happens in ghetto life. When anything happens down a street it becomes a big event and it really becomes memorable. I never forget the fights; I never forget the police rushing down on horseback. These events really stick out in my mind, and the people I would be interested in were those very close to my life.

*In Down Second Avenue the chapter "Church Shillings" seems to be a rather crucial one, for you say you had come to feel that Christianity was an integral part of the system of oppression in South Africa. Do you still feel that way? Do you feel Christianity has a place in Africa today?*

When the black man tries to use Christianity for a political problem such as in southern Africa he finds it doesn't take him anywhere. It ends up in contentment and thoughts about the future world, not about the present. Even when people try to use it so that it has relevance they come to a dead end somewhere because it has a theology that does not necessarily fit in with the political tempo of any particular time. Those who have tried to use it have always failed because they were

using an impossible tool on impossible terms - a tool that is not geared for political resistance. The theology of the Christian world is against any kind of political overthrow or political agitation. It is the gospel of kindness, of humility, of nonviolence. It instills a sense of authority to the extreme extent that you do nothing about it. LeRoi Jones would argue that Islam is the other preference. I don't see that there is any choice between the two. When we have pushed all these foreign religions into the background or flushed them out of our minds, do you know what we are left with? We are left with ourselves to depend on - no props, no visions of the world to come, no guardian angels - only our naked selves with our ancestors to think of. Who are our ancestors? They are those who fall by the white man's gun. Those are the ones we think of, and those are our moral props if we need any at all. When we have eventually divested ourselves completely of the Christian myth we will know we have won a battle.

*Do you feel that there is a clear distinction between fiction and autobiography or that there is really just a continuum?*

It's difficult to find a dividing line in one's mind between fiction and autobiography. All I can say is one's own experiences have a lot to do with any kind of fiction - much more to do than you probably would be aware of. It depends very much on one's attitude towards the people he meets at different times. It's unlikely that a man would create a character just out of the air. It would have to have a basis in fact and he might build up composite characters. He might even pick up one particular character that he knows very much about. As far as events are concerned, one has to invent a lot of them. I think one could say something is more autobiography than fiction and something is more fiction than autobiography, but the two are never completely separate in the novelist.

*Where do you put The Wanderers in that scheme?*

I would say *The Wanderers* is more fiction than autobiography. It has an autobiographical framework and it has real-life people in it, but it is still more fiction than autobiography. I plotted it that way - in the sense that I wanted to bring out the life of exile and put myself as the central character at different points. I then said to myself I want to find out in my own life what exile has led to. It has led to a disorientation in the children. It has led to a disorientation in my own self and it has led to discoveries in other territories and a realization of myself. Then I said I don't want to leave it as an open-ended thing in terms of a father-son relationship. Something has to happen to the son and that is a fictional plot. In that way I have a beginning and an ending, as distinct from *Down Second Avenue*. To that extent it is more

fiction than autobiography.

*Could one regard your work as a whole, including your latest book The Wanderers, as that of a journalist-novelist, in the sense that you're mostly relying on your own experience? In The Wanderers, for instance, the reporter is the main figure.*

I have relied very much on personal experiences, particularly after leaving South Africa, in the impressions I have of people and the countries I went to. I relied on my experience very much in the relationship between father and son in The Wanderers; although a great deal of it again is still fictionalized, much of the dialogue is what did take place. In my short stories I rely for the main dramatic incidents on news items I read in the newspapers and what other people recount as anecdotes. Literally not a single central event in my short stories is my own invention.

*Was your experience working for the magazine Drum in South Africa, then, more influential on your development than your reading of novels?*

No, my reading of novels did a lot - reading Dickens, reading Richard Wright, reading some of the short fiction by black Americans, reading Russian novels and short stories - much more than Drum because I hated that job. But what I did get out of the experience at Drum were things which I would not otherwise have seen - going into other ghettos besides my own and getting into political events and other situations as a political correspondent.

*In a recent interview, you said that you saw no hope for a great literature emerging from South Africa in its present political state - either black or white literature. Do you think it's possible for writers to produce more mature or better works from a position outside? Are there crippling problems for the writer in exile, too?*

That is something I really haven't made up my mind about. In both situations there are crippling factors, but those in exile are still less excruciating than those inside the country. In the country we are looking at life, as it were, through a keyhole; we see only that part which affects our lives directly. It would be almost impossible to write an all-inclusive novel, but at the same time, in exile you have this kind of spiritual, mental ghetto you live in. It's crippling in the sense that you just want a place to lay your eggs on and you don't find it easily. But you still have the freedom of vision which you would not have had in South Africa, and your experiences in exile have also contributed to your growth.

*Does the writer in exile feel that he is getting out of touch with the situation back home?*

I don't think that is important because the writer absorbs and accumulates experience in himself and he can go somewhere and make use of that experience because it is an experience which has left an imprint on his personality over a period. It is not something which can be cleaned out of his system. Being out of touch with the situation doesn't matter so much because you are aware of the historical events. You are aware of that so you don't need that physical closeness any more. In the beginning you thought you did. I've become thoroughly exasperated by the feeling that I was trying to reach out and then I felt I was quite at home. I didn't need that physical presence.

*Most of your own work could be called protest writing. Though you write mainly in prose, do you feel that poetry should be protest poetry?*

It seems to be a permanent human condition for poetry to be protest poetry of one kind or another. It will reflect a sense of urgency at one time which it doesn't at another time in history. There will always be people who will be writing poetry that does not have any kind of social relevance but is a kind of music box. It replays a human experience and that is that. But there will also be poets who simply are committed to some ideal, whose poetry makes a frontal attack on social or political matters of one kind or another. Today, or say twenty years from now, it may not be the same kind of protest, but it will always be protest for the simple reason that whenever you write prose or poetry or drama you are writing a social criticism of one kind or another. If you don't, you are completely irrelevant - you don't count.

*There was a turn towards politics in the last poems of Okigbo. Do you see that as an improvement in his poetry?*

Yes. In a sense I have always been very much worried about Okigbo. Reading Heavensgate and his other early poetry I would plow through his lines feeling that he simply indulged in a kind of music. He had a superb gift for music in language. But my capacity for emotional response was being dissipated because he was often making classical references and needed to footnote his poetry very much the same way that T.S. Eliot does. It worried me a hell of a lot. Reading his later poetry I felt a sense of relief, not merely because it was political poetry but because he was putting poetry to use in an accessible manner. He was not just throwing words about. It is controlled, and as far as I am concerned, this was a real improvement.

What do you have in mind for the future in terms of your writing?  
Are you thinking over new material?

Yes, I am busy working on a novel in my mind, doing something I would not have thought I was capable of doing - that is, writing on a setting I have just left, the Zambian setting. There are interesting people there whom I've gotten very well taped in my mind. It's something I would not have thought I was capable of doing, but I think I can handle it now; it probably has something to do with the fact that I have resigned myself to this situation of moving about from place to place.

While I was still resisting it and knowing it was going to be necessary but also something I should not accept, I always felt that I could not write a novel in a new setting that I hadn't lived in for a long time. As you see, even in the Nigerian and Kenyan bits of *The Wanderers* you really don't get a sense of place. I do describe Lagos and so on, but I don't dwell long enough on the landscape and on the physical setting. I've always wanted to be able to get the feel and smell of a place before I write about it. And now I want to do this thing set in Zambia; it will have three main Zambian characters and two South African characters, and will deal with the way in which their lives became involved in one another's.





INTERVIEW WITH KOFI AWOONOR

*When Kofi Awoonor visited The University of Texas at Austin in November 1971, he delivered a public lecture on "The Relationship Between Oral and Written Literatures in Africa" and met with undergraduate classes in folklore and African literature. Wherever he appeared he delighted students by reading and discussing examples of traditional Ewe verse and his own poetry in English. He also met one morning with the editors of this booklet to answer questions about his writing, particularly about his latest works, Night of My Blood and This Earth, My Brother, which had been published in the United States only a few months before. What follows is an edited transcript of that lengthy interview.*

*How long have you been in the United States?*

*I've been here just a little over three years.*

*Do you think that America has had an effect on your work, specifically in relation to the experience of being black in America?*

*It is going to have an effect. It hasn't yet because I have not done any sizeable amount of work here. But it is going to affect my work in a very interesting way and not only in terms of blackness. It's going to affect my work in terms of my absorbing what I believe will be the totality of my American experiences. I cannot compartmentalize any experience because such basic things are really the same for all of us. What I am saying is that we are all the same - that there is a unification of human experience. I have had some rather sad experiences, but I would rather not talk about them. When I do begin to write about my American experiences I will talk about America as a totality because I can't take it in bits and pieces.*

*Whom do you see as your basic audience, the people who will read and understand your work?*

Oh, I generally regard my audience as that sensitive and aware community of readers who are always the consumers of any literature, and I see them both in the African context and in the non-African context. I do not specifically believe that I am writing for any audience which is limited by either geography or by perception. Those who will read Norman Mailer, I hope will read me. Not that our work would necessarily have anything in common other than this broad, general community of readers.

*Do you see some of the esoteric qualities in your work as being a limiting factor?*

Yes, it can be a limiting factor just as certain esoteric qualities will be a limiting factor to an understanding of Pound or Joyce or any writer who has brought into his work the totality of his personality. There are some secret words or secret codes which most of the time will defy any understanding from the average reader. But I do not think that they will in themselves constitute a real block to a true comprehension of the work.

*What about your choice of English as a literary language? Wouldn't this also prevent you from communicating with certain people?*

Certainly. I do not think that the average reader who uses my language will be able to get into my books unless perhaps someday I decide to "translate" what I have done. That means, in fact, writing a different book, because the cultural terms in this book are more English than African - whatever that "African" is.

*Have you ever written in Ewe?*

Yes. "I Heard a Bird Cry," one of my long poems in *Night of My Blood*, was first written in Ewe. Shortly after hearing a bird cry I worked this poem out, but then translated it about six months later when *Black Orpheus* requested some of my poetry. I gave it to them and they published it first, though I had already read it in Ewe on a radio program. This was in 1961.

*Is this a common mode of composition? First in Ewe and then in English?*

Some of the poems in *Night of My Blood* have come through that way because the theme, the subject which I wanted very much to talk about, I could only get into, at least emotionally, from the Ewe. I wish I had my working notebook here with me. I would bring up the equivalences

of some of these completed poems, especially where I was dealing with this theme of absence. Those poems which I wrote in London using the theme of absence or the theme of exile, however you look at it, tend to reveal with every word the significant thing I had drawn myself away from. Not simply the totality of Ghana or Africa, but more precisely, the Ewe society, the Ewe community - the whole body of feelings and rhythms and senses and sounds which I have known since a boy.

*When you move from Ewe to English, when you translate your own poetry, do you change the content of it to fit the context of the new language?*

Yes, naturally some kind of transference of perception takes place. I move from one linguistic dimension into another totally different, sometimes violently different one. But I use myself only as a bridge, a unifying factor. Within me these two things exist side by side so I can move across these boundaries with, I hope, absolute ease. So at times ideas that exist in the Ewe, or that have taken place in the Ewe poems, either get mutated or expanded or contracted, whatever, depending upon what words and what technical mode I want to use in English.

*Do you find yourself reshaping Ewe traditions in order to accommodate your non-African audience?*

I do not feel compelled ever to accommodate, to translate these traditions into their English or American equivalents. I believe that if I attempt to do that I will be tampering with something which is almost sacred in that poetic sense. So, therefore, I leave it alone, I let it have its own entity in my work, and I hope by the very nature of the process of the work that this - what might be a kind of enigma - will become illuminated by the totality of the sense of the work. I respect the integrity of these customs and traditions, but whenever I am using them I believe that I become only their articulator, and my artistic mode reveals their own deeper and more complex nature.

*In drawing on Ewe traditions, do you feel any commitment to your African audience and their links with those traditions?*

Well, I think you are asking about my literary vision, if I have one, and I believe that I do, although it's a thing that emerged for me as I look back on all that I have written. I feel that from the old traditions, especially from the oral traditions, we have moved into a very expanded and very complicated world. As a writer I believe I

can project out of that past into this confusion of the present, create a vision out of that projection, create a vision which uses the original traditions as the basic platform from which I take off without denying the validity of my British education. As strong as my traditional values are, I believe I must recognize that the most traumatic kinds of changes have taken place in Africa, perhaps more than anywhere else, within the past hundred years. It is necessary for us, in order to understand our present, to be aware of the forces in our past which are there sometimes inexorably in control, at times compounding the confusion engendered by our having entered into the European ethos.

*It would seem that an African audience would have more of an interest in this vision than any non-African audience could have. Don't you think that non-Africans could only see much of this as some kind of intellectual game?*

Perhaps. Let me answer this question by giving you an example. Rabindranath Tagore wrote in English and he used his British experience to create out of the Bengali sensibility a new poem - a new vision if you like. I think it's possible that I, or any writer who is working from the African source, can do the same thing, and this is the only thing that he can do anyway. Because I was not born in England, I didn't grow up in that English world which would deny me knowledge, awareness of my own tradition. I would only hope that in my work it is possible for me to achieve a certain unity of these two sensibilities, and I believe consciously, now reading over a lot of my work, that I am getting on towards that unification. The very last poem in *Night of My Blood* is a statement which affirms this. Suddenly I am putting together all these various strands, and I am trying desperately, if not very successfully, to unite these strands. What I've been writing now, the few poems that I've got in a new volume I'm working on, is essentially a fusion of all these forces. I'm no longer sounding like my old self. I'm no longer the poet who is using the traditions per se. Now I'm a poet using both the tradition and the rhythm of everything that is around me. I have, for example, talked to the American poets, I have gone into their thinking, I have gone into their awareness and their consciousness. I have read all my contemporaries so I suspect that I am working in this direction.

*Have you read Edward Brathwaite? He seems to be working along similar lines.*

Yes, I read just one poem, one small section of his *Masks* and I was very intrigued by his attempt to do the same thing. For him, of course, there is this giddy joy of something which is new-found. There is something starchy, artificial if you like, about his use of his African experience.

*With Brathwaite there is now a West Indian literary tradition in which context his work seems to emerge. Do you see yourself turning to a new African literary tradition for conventions, techniques and material? As poets such as Okigbo turned to Pound and Eliot, are younger poets now turning to Okigbo?*

Well, that's a very difficult question to answer, Okigbo and I having been contemporaries. I think we were the creators of these new styles and techniques. A lot of the younger people who are writing now, kids writing in the universities, are imitating all of us. I've seen some poems which were almost echoes of some of my earlier poetry, and I've also seen some poems which are completely fashioned after Okigbo, some after Brutus, and some after J.P. Clark. I think it's a very healthy thing for the literature, but as we ourselves are changing, these kids will very quickly have to abandon this imitation and find their own voices.

*Do you see the role of the poet, perhaps as Okigbo did, in terms of the poet being a synthesizer of new myths?*

The poet serves a function or fulfills the role of the man who unites sensibilities, and I think he has the power to do it very well. As Okigbo has illustrated in his work, the poet pulls together various planes. Okigbo used the European tradition and also the African tradition. My worry about a lot of his earlier stuff was that he was so overexcited with the European tradition as to put it into the ascendance and let it usurp the legitimate place of his African sensibility. But I think this is also the process of his growth. Just as in my own work I started the other way around from the African tradition and worked my way into the European tradition. I believe we will achieve this unification by a lot of sheer technical competence. This is important. I insist upon this technical competence because anybody can say anything, but how well you say it is contingent upon your understanding of both worlds and therefore of yourself as an artist. It is contingent upon your absorption of both worlds, of both techniques, if you like.

*You mentioned that you think you've achieved some kind of new synthesis bringing together the European and African elements in your work. In*

*your early poetry it seems that one of your major concerns was this conflict of cultures within yourself, and I wonder how you would characterize your early poetry and contrast it with what you're doing now or what your major interests are now. What do you feel has been the path of your development?*

I have discovered that I've gone through three phases, three specific phases punctuated by both my relationship to technique and my relationship to theme. I was very much aware in my earliest poetry of the tradition of the Ewe song. This was basically the technical thing that I was into, especially the Ewe dirge, the dirge form, the lament, and its lyrical structure with the repetitions of sections, segments, lines, along with an enormous, a stark and at times almost naive quality which this poetry possessed. I was really fascinated by this kind of poetry. The difference, of course, was that I was using English. I wasn't myself as a writer then, though I think I was very much aware that I was in apprenticeship.

The second phase is the phase of the large bulk of my writing which was influenced both by the Ewe tradition and the European tradition. There are lines in which I echo T.S. Eliot, there are lines in which I echo Gerard Manley Hopkins, there are lines in which I echo W.B. Yeats. When I did this I was deliberately juxtaposing English lines against the Ewe, so that within the same poem may exist lines from the Ewe dirge or the Ewe lyrical form juxtaposed against lines or echoes of lines from Hopkins, or lines that just imitate the nature of these poems or even what comes out of my head as "English" English poetry. It was in this phase that I wrote "The Years Behind." "Age they say cannot wither the summer smiles/ nor will the trappings of our working clothes/ change into the glamour of high office...." I have almost, in a very "English" English sense, written an English lyric, but there are sounds, there are images, "Sew the old days for me, my fathers,/ Sew them that I may wear them," which are directly from the Ewe. There was also a very short poem, "What Song Shall We Sing?" where I swung into a drum rhythm. I tried very much to read to the drums here - I don't know how successful that is - so you can see the dichotomy.

Then, the third phase in which "Hymn to My Dumb Earth" was written. I had been pulling myself together, and strangely, this is the only poem in the book that has been written in this country. It's a long poem, full of all the elements, I suspect, of my education. "Baa, baa black sheep" of course comes from a nursery rhyme, the Biblical overtones come from the synoptic gospels. And then there is the voice - the almost prosaic speaking voice. Now and then I'm telling a story, I'm narrating, I'm having a conversation with my readers. Finally there are also various strands that I have taken almost as echoes of earlier poems and brought into it. This is a poem on which I have spent a lot of time; I have

worked on it very carefully. I don't think I had been working nearly as hard on a lot of my earlier poems. Here I was very much aware of form and content and what I wanted to say.

*How was the third phase different from the second? You seem to be doing the same thing.*

The difference is that in the second phase I was dealing continuously with the theme of the conflict of cultures. The poetry meant to be a commentary on the way the poet was torn in two by his allegiance to that side and his allegiance to this side, without this conflict ever being resolved. In the third stage, as illustrated by "Hymn to My Dumb Earth," I suspect that that thematic division has never been eliminated, yet we have come to one single man in whom there are so many things that exist in harmony. He can switch backwards and forwards without any conflict with any one of them.

*The rhythm seems to reflect this. There is a definite modulation between a stress rhythm and a prose rhythm.*

Yes. I think there are some elements in this poem which reflect the Ewe technique in poetry. It swings from lyricism into conversation, and into what we might call an address, "You, these people that are standing here, I am saying to you that this..." And then he swings into the whole story, he unfolds the symbols and the images. This quality - "The birds are flying from the palm grove and the crocodiles are riding the storm." And he goes on and on... "But you, these people, you must be aware that this and this is happening" and so on. So there is this duality to it. It becomes almost an echo of modern contemporary poetry which uses the journalistic technique that pushes lyricism into something that is almost a newspaper reportage. I think it is very much a contemporary technique. Ginsberg did it a lot, and Duncan has also done it. I think in this phase I'm now being aware of it as another dimension of my development. I'm not entirely sure of what I'm doing yet. I'm still groping. I'd be lying if I said I knew what it will turn into.

*Did this third phase begin after you left Ghana?*

Yes. I was living in London and I was very much aware of the new sounds that were around me and therefore my Englishness was becoming more accentuated. When I came into this country I wrote the poem I just spoke of, the only poem which seems to have left behind both the theme of the conflict and also the use of the two techniques as opposing forces within the same poem to state the theme. We have here, I think,

no opposition at all between the section, "I have no sons to fire the guns/ no daughters to wail/ when I close my mouth..." and the earlier section, "When I kept my mouth shut/ am I in gaol?/ Keep mute, my friend,/ for everything comes from God." Nor is there any such opposition present in the lines "They are singing obscene songs in the streets today./ Bud played his eyes closed/ in the little club/ Chords of sorrow, of hyssop/ soaked in rags for the Saviour/ to drink upon a Cross." The Bud here, the Christ image, the person who is left almost totally bereft of any love or any support, is what we see again and again. We have seen him in the earlier part of the poem, "I have no sons to fire the guns..." There is no opposition between these two - the "I" of this section and the "Bud" of the other. The Biblical echoes reflect the same thing. "My God gave it to me, this calabash," comes straight out of an Ewe song and coincides very well with, "...the Lord did not let the cup pass away." He will have to drink it. This is what I think suggests a groping, a journey towards unity.

*I think there were certain poems in your first collection, Rediscovery, which were left out of Night of My Blood. Did you have any specific reasons for leaving them out?*

I just took a look at them. Some of them were not finished works, and for the rest of my life I thank God that that publication is out of print. I have only one copy myself. When people ask me to give it to them I say, "No, I'll keep it, for one day when I am writing my memoirs I'll talk about what bad poetry I wrote at a certain phase."

*And those poems, do they belong to what you called your first phase?*

No, a large segment belongs to the second phase when I was continuously creating this cultural juxtaposition and so there were lines which - stuck out - bad lines, incredible lines. But I don't look at my poetry with any misgivings at all. I feel like a father or mother. These are my children and I have nothing against any one of them. You may have some bad children who are very bad-mannered, but they are still your children. You can't murder them in the night because they are so badly behaved.

*You started writing as a poet and then moved to fiction later. Would you say that your concerns in fiction are similar to those in poetry?*

What I attempted to do in *This Earth, My Brother* was to provide myself with a very expansive, a very wide genre form in which to push my poetic awareness. I do not think that I was essentially writing fiction as such, but rather a very long prose poem. I have a story line in which

I have a main character, but this becomes the only unifying factor. I was dealing with the same theme I have dealt with in my poetry, but I felt unsatisfied with my mode of expression in my earlier work. If I took a pen vis-a-vis a poem, I would know exactly what I would be writing. And I was worried about that because it was all too pat. This is why I haven't written very many poems in the past two years. Altogether I've completed about four poems of eight to ten lines each.

*Would you regard your novel as protest literature despite this poetic prose element? More specifically, what do you think of the review that Kazin did in the Saturday Review where he separates you from all the other black artists, saying that your novel is refreshingly lacking in exhortation.*

That was for his own convenience. I didn't know he was going to review me along with those other people. But Kazin doesn't know the world out of which this book comes. He saw it as something fresh and almost exotic in that sense.

On one level I think it is protest literature. It is a protest against corruption and the processes of corruptibility which impinge upon the character. Not the main protagonist, but everybody who occupies the landscape of the writer's world is subject to this. The landscape, on a symbolic level, is of course the African landscape. People have clearly pointed out the two images of the dunghill and the field of butterflies, which you may say have taken over my earlier duality. I saw the traditional society almost stupidly as a golden age, a beautiful and sinless kind of world. I no longer have that perception. I'm aware that corruption is an essential aspect of the human condition, and I'm aware that suffering comes out of that condition. Thus I created these two images, let them fight against one another and then had the image of this woman who will eliminate the conflict and the sorrows, and almost in an atavistic sense, take us back to the primal nature, the primal good nature of all ourselves.

*These are human images, not Ghanaian images?*

Oh, yes, human, totally human images. But, of course, for me these images come to play in a most violent sense because I locate them in a Ghanaian condition or in an African condition - the condition I suspect I know best.

*Do you feel then that the dilemma of Amamu is the dilemma of anyone living under a form of neo-colonialism? Is his experience universal?*

Universal is a difficult word because experiences and awarenesses have

been all sharpened by certain specific conditions. Yet there may be areas of coalescence between those conditions and what we vaguely call the universal. Now to answer your question. Amamu is not everyman. He is not everyman, I insist upon that. He is a more sensitive, a more aware, and a more spiritual person. I might say in the religious sense he is more of the priest, not the normal, run-of-the-mill kind of priest, but the real kind of priest you find once in a while. In the Roman Catholic sense, he is one who achieves canonization. As to his dilemma, I'm not talking about a political neo-colonialist condition and I'm not only talking about the colonial condition itself; I'm talking about the whole totality of the experience of being in that context. Thus I have talked about the traditions themselves, and I have been critical of these traditions. Amamu sees the weakness of these traditions just as he sees the collapse of the colonial era and post-colonial era. But all these are part of the total experience I'm talking about.

*Do you believe the writer should be committed to some sort of social change?*

Yes, I believe that the writer by the nature of his work, by the very commitment that he imposes upon himself to tell the story of our woes, sorrows and joys is a committed writer. Achebe once said, "What is the point of suffering if it is to go on forever." If suffering is not productive, it is no good. It sounds rather difficult to explain but I understand what Achebe means. The little man in the corner who goes through the grinding sorrow, whom everybody ignores, will perhaps one day be able to reach a little respite. He's not on a world stage; nobody knows his suffering.

*Do you believe that "art for art's sake" is artistically defensible in Africa?*

That is a big question. We have to presume that by "art for art's sake" we are talking about the same thing. There is the kind of art that was common in Europe at the turn of the century - and I think it is still being indulged in in certain circles - that art became the intellectual masturbation of the artists and their small coterie of admirers, a rather incestuous community. I do not accept that. As you write within the womb of your society, it's not enough to answer your own individual queries or just to articulate them. You need to provide a little window for the rest of the world, for the rest of the community, a window into your person, as a man who shares all his feelings and experiences with his brothers. You don't withdraw in order to do it. And when art exists at an ecstasy level, art becomes,

for example, a substitute for sex. I think that is wrong.

And at the same time I don't think that art should become a substitute for politics or a political program. Literature cannot be art and propaganda at the same time. There is, however, a middle ground that is vague and tentative. This is retailing gossip, but let me go back to something I have just heard of one of my friends, Wole Soyinka. Wole is taking a militant position on politics now and he is coming off with a lot of deliriously committed political statements. He sees the artist and therefore sees himself, as a man who leads the army of the revolution into the promised land. I would argue that I have a right to refuse to lead my people anywhere, because I don't even know my people except as everyman in that artistic sense. Well, we will seize our radio stations and we will defy the systems of law in the courts and be tried for treason, etc. These actions cannot be confused with art. They will not be a substitute for artistic creation itself.

*How far does your artistic commitment extend into political commitment?*

I'm not trying to set up a moral or ethical system. I totally reject any responsibility for that. Nor would I even dare to set up any political or ideological system in my work. That would be preposterous and pretentious on my part. What I think I want to do for myself is on one primary level to find out the relationship between the historical truth and my own poetic truth - the unification of what has been history and what must now be the reality seen through words and sounds and rhythms and whatever I use in creating my work. As a writer I feel that in Africa we have a world, in a dialectical sense, which is always in conflict, which is always in flux. I believe suddenly that the conflicts are simmering down, the flux is beginning to settle, though nobody knows into what. Rigid political forms will be emerging, and we are aware that Africa is going to be part of the whole global context.

And the value system that will be found? We Africans are not thinking about what we are as a people. The Orientals, even though I disagree with them now and then, have been able to keep a certain portion of their psyche intact. They have absorbed Western technology - yes, everybody must; if you don't do it you don't survive - but have kept their philosophy of love, familial respect and relationship with God or the Ultimate Good. We also are taking on this Western technology which we need so desperately to solve the great problems of hunger and malnutrition, but we are scattered to the four winds in terms of our own basic nature. The writer will provide the vision which is not so much a moral or ethical system, but an awareness of this nature. And he will as a man oppose those forces that will only be negative forces. By his work he will oppose them; as a human being who feels and loves and cries, he will be opposed to them. The

writer will provide not a political direction for his people, but rather a cultural direction. André Malraux is the one writer who has influenced me purely in the realm of ideas. Malraux is a politician but also a writer, a writer who has not confused his role as writer with his role as a politician. In short, he rose above that pure political limitation. These are just things I am groping into. My ideas are not yet fully formed.

*Wole Soyinka feels a need to be right on the African scene to draw from it for his work. I was wondering if you would elaborate on this in terms of yourself and your own self-imposed exile.*

I think we all have our own Africas in us. I believe very strongly that I have my Africa within me, so I do not need Soyinka's visceral contact with Africa. I do not need to go back there everytime I write in order to renew myself. The subject of exile is very paramount in any writing whatsoever, and particularly so in the writing of the African people. A lot of South African literature would not exist now as you know it if there was not this condition of exile, and I look at it as something beyond a pure physical removal. If people go into exile, they put themselves in a position to rise out of that kind of one-dimensional literature which raw protest has led to. South African writing in South Africa has been merely journalistic or short story writing which dramatizes the color conflict. But when South Africans go outside, when they move out of that environment, they are able to see their problem not in a narrow one-to-one relationship, but in a much more perspicacious sense. This is what I am talking about.

I was too closed - I spent all of my life at home even though I had travelled all over the world. I felt that the demands made upon me by my basic commitment to what was going on in Ghana were so great that they did not allow me to function properly as a writer. I was being asked to take sides on a number of issues within the country, issues which were in most senses artificial issues - red herrings created by others in order to divert attention from the main problems in the country. I saw myself being drawn more and more into political debate and political activism, and my writing always represented in a certain state an echo of something similar to what was happening in South African writing, sans the color question.

I believe that was also true of Wole Soyinka and a number of my other friends at a certain point in their careers. During the upheavals in the western regions of Nigeria, Soyinka saw himself as the dramatist of the conflict. And so he wrote plays like *Before the Blackout* which played to large audiences in Ibadan. As *Kongi's Harvest* comes out of a particular political experience I believe it is one of Soyinka's very weakest plays. It is simply the result of a closed confrontation with

the raw energies of politics.

*Then you think it is necessary to have this distance afforded by exile in order to see the universal in the particular.*

Yes. I rather see the exile in the way Joyce saw his own exile from Ireland. Joyce could not have written without moving away from the Ireland he loved, and at the same level deeply hated, thus creating for him a proper atmosphere, a proper direction in which his vision of Ireland could be forged. The more we stay in Africa, the more we get drawn into raw conflicts that surround us, the less sensitive, the less aware, the less sharp our work will be. I defy Chinua Achebe to be able to write anything at all on the Biafran conflict which will be first-rate. I do not think he will be able to do it. I have seen a few poems he has written, and I liked the lyricism as well as the concern, but they remain for me too anguished to be literature.

*Do you feel that it is always a good idea for a writer to go abroad?*

It is possible to exist within your own country and still go into exile. By exile I mean distancing yourself away from those things that touch you every day, to be able to create out of them a work of art. It sounds terribly selfish not to conform to an orthodox view of political commitment, but I believe that there is an aestheticism in a work of art. Its beauty is something we will have to take for granted. This is why I disagree with a lot of Black American poetry today. The facility of hate as embodied in "You motherfucker, stand in the corner," I do not regard as poetry. I see this as a pure splash of hate on the paper. But if an awareness of form, an awareness of technique, which comes through studious application, exists and is able to, not so much dull the edges of that hatred, but to create a distillation which will go beyond hatred, the work that results will have its own autonomy of existence. What I am calling for is the exile of the writer from what he imagines is the real anguish in order to state it in his work.

*This Earth, My Brother does not seem to fit a very strict definition of allegory, and yet you call it an allegorical tale.*

What else can we call it? I use symbols and I extend those symbols through the whole length of the book, and you can see the total meaning at the end. Certainly there is none of the personification you find in a traditional classical allegory, and yet the mode of expression is similar. And I insist that it is an allegorical tale because I don't want it to be confused with what other people might consider a realistic working out of the story.

*Why did you happen to choose an allegorical mode in writing This Earth, My Brother?*

I have found that the theme of the priest and the theme of the man who journeys out, achieves knowledge and comes back has a great base in African tradition and in African myths. Tutuola uses this very much in his books, and one can see it in Christopher Okigbo and Wole Soyinka. My hero in this book is following such a path, the great journey. At the end of the book Amamu leaves the city and in a sudden frenzy dashes back home, sits on the beach and waits for this woman who finally emerges, a real woman of Ewe mythology. But I have noticed she also exists in Ijaw mythology, and in Ibo mythology. Mammy Wata can be found in works by Achebe, Okara, and Soyinka. Right now in Keta there are magicians who can cure all kinds of diseases and it is believed that they have spent years in the waters with this woman. She is a very real woman.

*Why can Amamu only see her when he is insane?*

But insanity is only from those who are seeing him. It is not his insanity; it is those who are outside, the prosaic people, who cannot be part of that vision or that perception. They conclude that he is mad and want to put him away. At this point his salvation has arrived so he achieves a personal, individual redemption. Death is the only reality.

*There is no ambivalence about this? She is this beautiful figure, but she also lures him into death like the archetypal mermaid who is beautiful but can take your manhood away.*

She lures him into awareness mainly; using traditional reasoning, death is an awareness. When you die you proceed into a higher state - you become an ancestor and therefore you are in a better position to understand what your children, in life, will be doing. You can help them to adjust and solve their problems. Amamu is thus the lost soul redeemed by the agony of death.

*Is there on your part a certain invitation to your reader to participate in Amamu's vision?*

Yes. There is an invitation to participate in the festival of the senses. I think if we go back to the festival of the senses, our destruction of things and people will cease. In a way, that long journey that Amamu takes through Nima is a journey at a very realistic level, not only at the mythical level. It is also a journey into himself, into the society - into the very entrails of his society in order to turn from

it, as it were. It may be lonely and anguished, but is achieved and fulfilled.

*Would you say the book has any relationship to Pilgrim's Progress?*

Yes, from the point of comparative literature, one can say they show a similar awareness. But the difference, of course, is that *Pilgrim's Progress* came out of Christian theology. *This Earth, My Brother* has no basis in any specific theology except human theology.

*Could you talk about the manner in which you wrote This Earth, My Brother - especially the interludes?*

I started writing it in 1963. In fact, I had a story outline ready that same year. I still have the original manuscript. I called it *The Leaves of Time*. It is a straightforward narrative story, very prosaic, and very much influenced by E.M. Forster, by Conrad and by Joyce. When I decided that I wasn't pleased with what I had, I was aware that I was not essentially a prose writer, or a prose fiction writer.

*Did you incorporate this story into your narrative chapters?*

Some of them are part of this book now - though not all of it. Only five or six chapters are a part of that earlier manuscript.

*But the "a" chapters, the interludes, were not written then?*

The interludes were written between 1964 and 1970. These were pieces of prose poems that I was working on - a series of poems which dealt with various things. I've got a notebook in which I was doing all kinds of jotting. Instead of working in a lineal sequence I just put the words down as they came. So when I decided to rewrite the whole book, and this was in London, I began doing what finally came out here. From this year in London, I felt the possibility of unifying the story line plus the poetry, and then technically I worked it out. I knew exactly what I wanted to put at the end of every chapter. Now there was a publisher's error in this. I wanted the chapters to slide on into the poetic interludes which would be indicated by the use of italics. But they decided to separate them, and this imposed a more rigid structure than I wanted. More importantly, it makes the poetry seem to be a comment on what has gone before, though it actually moves into a lot more important area than what has just been said in the story. The story is an attempt to illuminate what is said in the poetry. In fact, the story plays a secondary role to the poetry rather than the other way around.

*Did the character of Amamu come to you later as a unifying character?*

He was always there.

*I was wondering why you chose a lawyer?*

When I finally decided to use this theme of the priest, the carrier, the man who bears his burden of the terrible truth, I decided it was very easy for me to go into traditional society to take a person from that society, to be able to do the sort of thing Okara did. But rather I would choose a man who, by his upbringing and by his education, exists almost totally outside this world and its outlook. The lawyer, the sophisticated international man is no longer a tribal African and would suffer a kind of claustrophobia when put back into his tribal origins. He is the one who is very much in need of this journey, in terms of the future and what the whole of Africa will become. He is the representative of the future in the sense that our people will change, our drums will be silent, the rural communities will change, and we will all be like this lawyer in some basic general sense.

*When you were writing the book, were you aware of what Armah was doing in The Beautiful Ones are Not Yet Born?*

You would not believe it, but I had finished the book before I read Armah. I wasn't aware of the way that he uses "the man." It now strikes me as strange because there is very much similarity between the two books. In afterthought, what I objected to in his work is this austere humorlessness which at times rings terribly sinister.

*What do you think of the negritude movement?*

I use only one yardstick about the failure of negritude and what a humbug it really is. Senghor goes back to Africa, he becomes president of a country, yet what you see in Senegal is a continual rule of the French, though in an indirect way. Dakar is a divided city with the black African locked in the ghettos and the whites in the beautiful houses on the other side. If that is Senghor's idea of negritude then I will have none of it.

I attacked Senghor's negritude because he has gone wrong and has confused himself with what he called his Latinity. He believes that he is a great classical scholar and he also believes that he is a great humanist. But a basic problem was that he said the African is only emotion and not reason. This is nonsense. If the African was only emotion, how could he have survived, how could he eat? How did he till the land? He didn't need emotion to till the land. If it was emotion alone he would have drummed and danced everyday and his stomach

would have been full. But there was a rational approach to things of nature because we knew that to eat we had to till the soil, we had to cut down the trees - even though we regard the trees as part of our ontology. There is a tree spirit, but we say, "Please, I'm sorry, but we have to cut you down and grow crops on the patch of ground, use you to make a drum and use you to keep our fires lit." Emotion alone could not have done that. There was a system of thinking, clear thinking, that went on. Of course we had a different perception of the world, but it was no better than the perception of any other group of people. The survival factor was paramount.

The negritude outlook connotes an extended infantilism which coincided with the European conception of the African as a happy, unspoiled, dancing child. The reason why we Africans became so traumatized was that we were not ready for the way in which Europe treated us. We didn't understand what Europe was bringing, and in our largess or our stupidity, the two which are alike, we said, "Oh come, come, come! Here is everything. Take it!" And we ourselves became corrupt in the process. There were kingdoms in Africa that grew up and were based in slavery. The kingdom of Dahomey rose up out of slavery and became a powerful slave kingdom. My ancestors are from Dahomey, and if I ask the old people to tell me the stories they say, "Well, we don't tell these things now because it brings up old matters, old stories. You will destroy the people."

*Could you say that negritude served a historical purpose in terms of changing the consciousness of intellectuals who were educated in France?*

Certainly, for the permanently exiled African, but by that I mean the American and the Caribbean African. It was a very important emotional and philosophical kind of journey for Aimé Césaire and Léon Damas and others who saw Africa in those delirious terms, created a golden age, and thereby created a new poetry. Yet once I asked Alioune Diop, the editor of *Presence Africaine* in Paris, "Why don't you bring down *Presence Africaine* to Africa and edit it there in Africa?" And in a very French manner he replied, "Well, I have my children in France and they go to school, and I can't afford to leave France now." Meanwhile you see them in the cafes with two blond women on their arms talking about the African soul. I don't want anything to do with them. This is just some kind of stupendous alibi. On the cold purgatorial streets of Paris they talk about possessing the African soul while the battle is right back in Africa with illiteracy and disease. These are more important to me than the philosophy of negritude. It is not important that I am black; it is important that I am human.

Do you intend to return to Africa?

Oh yes. When a snake dies upon a tree, that snake must always come down to the earth. And like that snake I want to go back. My return will not be triumphant. I shall sneak back and take my place, not because I am not happy here - that would be an understatement - but I believe I want to go into politics. You see, that is my secret. And I'll probably return as Ghana's ambassador to the United Nations. Then they will know which way to vote on the China issue. To my utter shame Ghana did not vote for the ejection of Nationalist China. We have a lot of neo-colonialism left in our country.

What other plans do you have for the immediate future?

There are four items in my file. I am writing my Ph.D. on the relationship between oral and written literature. I am writing a book for Doubleday which traces, from a very personal point of view, the history of African literature from 1960 to the present time. I am also finishing a book of poems, but that, as I mentioned earlier, is going very slowly. Finally, I have a novel which I am beginning to work out. Again it will be a poetic novel, but the story element will deal with a much wider subject than I dealt with in *This, Earth, My Brother*. Basically, it will be about the issue of unity between the Afro-American and the African, the unity of all men and their frightening disillusionments and grand dreams.

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#### The Authors

CHINUA ACHEBE of Nigeria has written four novels - *Things Fall Apart* (1958), *No Longer at Ease* (1960), *Arrow of God* (1964), *A Man of the People* (1966); a collection of short stories, *The Sacrificial Egg and Other Short Stories* (1962); a novella for children, *Chike and the River* (1966); and a book of poems, *Beware, Soul-Brother and Other Poems* (1971). He now teaches at the University of Nigeria at Nsukka.

JOHN PEPPER CLARK of Nigeria has written three books of poetry - *Poems* (1962), *A Reed in the Tide* (1966), *Casualties: Poems 1966-1968* (1970); four plays - *Three Plays* (1964), *Ozidi* (1966); an autobiography, *America, Their America* (1964); and a book of literary criticism, *The Example of Shakespeare* (1970). He now teaches at the University of Lagos.

DENNIS BRUTUS of South Africa has written three books of poetry - *Sirens, Knuckles, Boots* (1963), *Letters to Martha and Other Poems from a South African Prison* (1968), and *Poems from Aliquiers* (1970). He now teaches at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois.

EZEKIEL MPANLELE of South Africa has written three volumes of short stories - *Man Must Live, and Other Stories* (1947), *The Living and Dead, and Other Stories* (1961), *In Corner B* (1967); an autobiography, *Down Second Avenue* (1959); two books of literary criticism - *The African Image* (1962), *A Guide to Creative Writing* (1966); and a novel, *The Wanderers* (1970). He now teaches in Colorado at the University of Denver.

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