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Adversarial Contexts and Creativity

I was profoundly affected as a young man by the primeval rainforest and the savannahs of British Guyana in South America.

I travelled as a land surveyor on the coastlands and into the interior for many years and became immersed in the fabric of the place, the waterfalls, the calm but treacherous intervals that lie between the rapids.

The rainforest makes both a subtle and a deep impact on one's consciousness and on dimensions that lie beneath consciousness. First there is an unearthly chorus sprung not only from the sudden cry of wild creatures but from an organ of mimic voices within the rush and the impact of water on rocks in the rapids and in the waterfalls. One hears in a great waterfall, or in the long descending ravines of a series of rapids, sounds akin to the ceaseless commotion of a great city, the sound of wheels and of traffic, the gigantic archetypal step of phantom crowds in pounding water, the applause and clamour of phantom populations. It is as if an embryo is secreted in nature that bears the impress of diverse echo, diverse orchestration.

As the inimitable voice of a particular series of rapids declines or fades as one travels away from it, one may become peculiarly sensitive to the intricate volume and murmur of the rain and the wind within the immense tapestry of the jungle. And at times an acute sensation may arise that what one hears is caused not by falling distant rain but by the adversary of rain, by the hiss of flame making its way by stealthy degrees along the ground and in the air.

The jungle sometimes is a sponge of light, it absorbs light, it is porous with light. There is dazzling brilliance in an open savannah or in the mirrored sky in an open stretch of water in the forest, but that dazzle changes abruptly into a canvas of luminous darkness with a single brushstroke by a hidden artist clothed in the rustle of leaves as one steps into the density and gloom of the great Bush.

Night and day are hinged together there; night and day are adversaries upon an elusive hinge, within an elusive doorway or window backwards in time to evoke a sensation of lost or broken architectures, lost

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cities, belonging to vanished cultures, vanished El Dorado, a vanished civilisation.

Many cultures in South and Central America have vanished in the rainforests and the savannahs for reasons that remain obscure. Some were crushed in the sixteenth century under the heel of the Spanish Conquistador but even so conquest may have but brutally hastened internal conflict or internal enigmatic collapse that was already occurring. Other cultures survived the conquest only to disappear and we have but tenuous records of their fall. All this was to be augmented by the seed of new conflicts, by slavery, by the Middle Passage, and by new tides of greedy colonisers from Europe.

We know that one body of cultures sometimes appeared to step into the shoes of others, that they occupied certain places and experienced the elements I have tentatively outlined. We know they were concerned with the creation of music, sculpture, painting, dance, architecture, and so on. We may speculate that in some instances famine or civil war won the day and that their achievements must have looked hollow to them in the end.

All this was an invaluable torment in me. It pushed me subconsciously I would say into writing imaginative fiction. I sought through continuous revision to visualise the modern age, my own century, which is rooted in, even as it seeks to plumb, the adversary within and without.

My greatest difficulty in scanning the world of the present and the past was to determine the genuineness of moral conviction or action in humanity to transcend repetitive cycles of violence and greed.

Are moral codes hypocritical or invalid in essence? Or is there an equation with creativity that is lacking? We know that moral codes affecting humanity lie in the great rituals and religions of all peoples but whatever consensus there is between such religions or rituals remains ceaselessly imperilled, it would seem, by a failure of imagination within communities to make their moral codes creatively complex, creatively vital.

It would seem that the foundations for a moral vision in and of the nature of being do exist within cultures ancient and modern but how does one interpret these within the cultural limits and the vested interests of adversarial regimes? I put the issue in this way because to speak of 'cultural limits' and 'vested interests' is to address the cross-cultural challenges facing the humanities in our universities and schools and to begin to probe how vital is the connection between moral vision and creativity.

Can moral vision mean anything without evolving perspectives into profound cross-cultural creativity? Can a true science flourish without an evolution in the arts? Is moral vision destined to impotence within an age that becomes more and more hollow in its addiction to escapism? Do we need a crucial shift of perspectives within imaginative fiction as a correlative of moral vision? The time in which we live may seem at

first unpropitious for such a shift in our perceptions. Avant-garde individualism is suspect. There is insidious if not rampant commercialism in the mass media. And yet, at another level, all this, along with die-hard prejudice, may imply an adversarial context in which the life of innovative form and tradition takes new root.

Our greatest obstacle to a radical shift of perception lies, I think, less in the gimmickry of contemporary fashion or in die-hard prejudice and more in a slipshod idealism that seeks to bypass savage artefacts in human culture, though such savage artefacts paradoxically, I believe, are the very foundations upon which a capacity for genuine change rests in our visualising the conversion of adversarial contexts.

There are many savage artefacts at which we could look and which we need to perceive, I think, in a new light. The concept of child care, for instance, the difficulties of adolescence, the movement onto stages of maturity and old age, need to undergo a genuine evolution within a new and profoundly creative grasp of savage initiations our pagan antecedents performed. For the forces inherent in these initiations—that need to be endured and transcended within a revolving wheel of perceptions—are still active within us and to eclipse them, or ignore them, is merely to camouflage them in an increasingly dangerous world.

For the purpose of this essay I shall confine myself to the Carib bone-flute. I am thinking of the cannibal bone-flute that is associated with the ancient Caribs of Central America, the West Indies and South America.

The Caribs consumed a morsel of flesh from an enemy. Then they hollowed a bone from which they had plucked that morsel and made a flute. They sought to enter the mind of their enemy, the living, the dead, and the unborn. The origins of music for them lay in the bone-flute. That flute was the seed of an intimate revelation of mutual spaces they shared with the enemy, mutual spaces within which to visualise the rhythms of strategy, the rhythms of attack or defence the enemy would dream to employ against them. The bone-flute gave them access, as it were, to the very embryo of adversarial regime instinctive to themselves. One catches a hint therefore as one gropes back in inner space and inner time of illuminated bone-flute—as if the music has long faded or grown obsolescent but a light remains, a slow-motion light or dance or revolution of the bone within the mutual psyche of both protagonist and antagonist. A fine, a spider's web, revolving bridge, upon which the ghost of music runs, moves between the living and the dead, the living and the living, the living and the unborn.

As one pursues this creatively and imaginatively a question arises: Is the ritual of cannibalism in the Carib bone-flute a strange camouflage thrown over innermost shared bias, innermost shared greed for ascendancy, within protagonist and antagonist? Does the camouflage of the morsel thrown over the ghost of music imply a series of rehearsals and masks between adversaries, a series reaching far back in pre-Columbian mists of time to the origins of fiction, of dance, of theatre?

Let us look at this closely. My intuitive sensation—born I must confess of the complex rehearsals embodied in my own novels—is that the ritual morsel of cannibalism and the bone-flute are susceptible to a revolution, a swing, in which the camouflage of cannibalism begins to give ground to a deeply hidden moral compulsion to contend with innermost bias in humanity and to consume some portion of that inner rage, inner fire, associated with cruel prejudice. That the camouflage has occupied a long ascendancy over the hidden moral compulsion is a tragedy but it invites us, reluctantly perhaps, to probe again and again the links between moral being and profoundest creativity. If such links cannot break the impasse of tragedy, the camouflage hardens and the hidden moral compulsion sinks ever deeper into an apparent void.

It would be idle to pretend that the conversion of the bone-flute into an evolving fiction of complex mutuality and wholeness is compatible with absolute realism in the very violent world in which we live.

I make, however, two pleas on behalf of such a threshold into creativity. First of all, we are aware that the technologies which spin off from science are not only of a partial nature but may camouflage the essential ambiguity and complexity of the scientific imagination. Whereas technologies seem realistic or practical or commonsensical, so to speak, twentieth-century science from which they come has abandoned commonsense as its gateway into reality, a reality that seems more and more insoluble.

In the same token, the savage artefacts of culture are technologies of spirit and emotion, they too have been spun off from a mystery of being that remains unfathomable. Their genuineness arises, I think, from an implicit swing or wheel within the mutual psyche of protagonist and antagonist. As that wheel or revolution deepens we begin to peer beyond the technology of the bone-flute into the mysterious origins of music that promise, it seems to me, a vital coincidence with masks of terror through which unbearable ecstasy may be glimpsed, an ecstasy we may digest in bearable portions, so to speak, without succumbing to the camouflages or terrors that run in parallel with it. Ecstasy is at the heart of creativity.

My second plea springs from the wealth of the intuitive imagination that has its roots, I would think, in the collective unconscious as adumbrated by C. G. Jung. My experience is that I was involved in a wholly intuitive way in the wheel of the bone-flute long before I was able to validate what I was doing by a measure of intellectual research. I have outlined this intuitive cycle in an introductory Note to a re-issue of four of my novels called *The Guyana Quartet*. I speak there of fiction that seeks through complex rehearsal to consume its own biases.

The difficulty in accepting the force of the intuitive imagination lies, I think, in uncertainty over validating the discoveries a writer makes through interior guides that appear within his or her fiction. This is a task for scholarship and criticism. The fabric and texture of the work needs to be scanned closely. The detection of parallels woven into the evolving weave and cycle of fiction can be exciting in its illumination of profoundest unity of the human spirit. I have been fortunate to

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stumble upon little known archetypal savage myth that validated in two or three instances novels I had written which diverged, in some degree, from canons of realism.

The most recent discovery of this kind applies to my latest novel *Carnival*. When it existed in substantial draft I happened to read *Love's Body* by the American scholar Norman Brown and came upon premises that validated discoveries that had unfolded through interior guides in *Carnival*. As a consequence I adopted an epigraph from *Love's Body*.

Interior guides raise the question of a revival of Dantesque allegory. Will modern allegory prove of importance in Third World cultures where inner confidence, inner authority, inner guide-lines are so essential—after the ravages of colonialism—in the growth of true freedoms? Such inner guides or guide-lines are all the more imperative to combat the indiscriminate acquisition of technology.

Wherever one looks, whether in the West or in the societies of the Third World, it would seem that moral being cannot be divorced from a deepened cycle of creativity through which we may visualise a breakthrough from absolute violence. Such a breakthrough requires us to accept the adversarial contexts in which cultures wrestle with each other but to descend as well into camouflages and masks as flexible frames within the mystery of genuine change. *The mystery of genuine change*. And now to the mystery of light. I spoke of light early in this essay. Flexibility comes, I find, within a play of shadow and light. My fascination with light continues to grow over the years in the Northern world and in the United Kingdom where I now live. An imaginative writer may filter in himself, I believe, equations of light between North and South, East and West, that provide an invaluable sensation of global curtains and global theatre.

There is no absolute Inferno, absolute Purgatorio, absolute Paradiso. All of these overlap and re-appear in each other to chasten one, undermine one's complacency, because of the intricacies of light.

The marvellous play of soft noon light in an overhanging tree in a London park recalls luminous twilight in the Tropics before sudden night descends.

There is a kind of profound comedy in light in emphases it gives to black and white pigmentations, sometimes enhancing transparency, sometimes opacity. Much of this has affected novels I have written which have settings that vary from Mexico to London and Edinburgh.

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LINDFORS, Bernth. *Black African literature in English: a guide to information sources*. Gale, 1979. 482p (American literature, English literature, and world literatures in English, 23) (Gale information guide library) index 73-16983. 24.00 ISBN 0-8103-1206-9. C.I.P.

Lindfors replaces the out-dated work of Barbara Abrash in *Black African literature in English since 1952* (1967), but the book does not overlap the standard literary bibliographies such as Jahnheinz Jahn's *A bibliography of neo-African literature from Africa, America, and the Caribbean* (CHOICE, June 1966) since it concentrates not on the literature but on criticism *about* that literature. The listing covers the major scholarly books and all the associated journals including both European and African publications, some of them very rare. Structurally, the book is divided into two parts, one listing by topic and a second by author, with helpful cross references. There are also some specialized sections devoted to related subjects such as publishing, censorship, research, and teaching. Only Lindfors could have had the knowledge and industry to bring all this material into a single book. It provides the most comprehensive source of information available in this field. It is an essential tool for the scholar and obligatory for every academic library, for students at all levels will consult this work repeatedly. It is both a valuable resource and an impressive scholarly achievement.