

UCLA

Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies

Title

Criticism and the Tradition of Political Poetry in Africa: The Example of Wole Soyinka

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3139r90m>

Journal

Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies, 19(2-3)

ISSN

0041-5715

Author

Ogundele, Wole

Publication Date

1991

DOI

10.5070/F7192-3016789

Copyright Information

Copyright 1991 by the author(s). All rights reserved unless otherwise indicated. Contact the author(s) for any necessary permissions. Learn more at <https://escholarship.org/terms>

Peer reviewed

CRITICISM AND THE TRADITION OF
POLITICAL POETRY IN AFRICA:
THE EXAMPLE OF WOLE SOYINKA

Wole Ogundele

So well has literary discourse in Africa coupled literature with politics that discussions about their relationship have more or less settled into orthodoxy: we talk of colonial and post-colonial African literature, of literature of protest and assertion, of the writer's commitment, and of his/her efforts at finding solutions to our political problems. From the beginning of colonial times to the present, the reality of politics has been all-pervasive and too much with us, so much so that in consequence, literary production is itself more of a political than a cultural-intellectual activity. One might frame this last claim more delicately by saying that in African literature, the aesthetic impulse has remained under the controlling influence of the political imagination, and one hardly needs statistical data to prove the point. At any rate, the minor but significant contradiction of the African writer being a political figure without necessarily being a politician gives away the essentially political character of the literature.

Parallel to and reflecting this is the trend in the criticism of African literature. Apart from the general run of essays which comment on or interpret specific works, there are no sustained theoretical discussions; only speculations by authors—usually related to their own works—and polemical assertions by critics. Thus, from the 1960s to the present, three major controversies have arisen and been settled politically: the issue of "universal aesthetic criteria," that of the presence of oral background and elements in the written literature, and the political re-evaluation of literature by the doctrine of Marxist aesthetics and praxis.¹ In none of these controversies do the literariness and specificity of the literature count much.

The speculations of several African writers in their essays and speeches tend to reinforce, at once, the political character and imagination of the literature on the one hand and to subvert its literariness on the other. In his essay "Writers in Politics," Ngugi wa Thiong'o, for example, lumps together the writer and the politician as follows:

The poet and the politician have certainly many things in common. Both trade in words. Both are created by the same

reality of the world around us. Their activity and concern have the same subject and object: human beings and human relationships. Imaginative literature, in so far as it deals with and attempts to influence a people's consciousness, and politics, in so far as it deals with and is about operation of power and relationship of power in society, can mutually act on one another.²

Equally unambiguous on the political affinity and mission of the African writer is Wole Soyinka who, in his essay "Ideology and the Social Vision (1)," says that "the writer is far more preoccupied with visionary projection of society than with speculative projections of the nature of literature. . . ." ³ What is wrong with assertion such as these is not their stressing of the political burden of African literature, but their being liable to breed the kind of criticism which approaches the works of these authors as well as others from the wrong and narrow (political) end rather than from the wide one of literariness that can open up to include the political. Furthermore, such statements brace into dogma the orthodoxy in Africa about the inevitable assimilation of literature by and into politics.

In this paper, while granting the "politicalness" of African literature, I shall, however, go on to argue that criticism which starts from the political rather than from the literary end of the text misses its essential political value. That political value, I shall go on to demonstrate with Soyinka's categorically political poems *Ogun Abibiman* and *Mandela's Earth and Other Poems*,⁴ lies in the specificity of the texts. But I wish to preface that with a brief theoretical excursion into the general relationship between literature and politics, with Soyinka as the starting point.

Rival Imaginations

In Soyinka's reflections, the term which covers the literature-politics relationship is "social vision." In his essay "Ideology and Social Vision (1)," the constituent elements of this "social vision" are: the writer's "resolving [synthesizing?] genius," his "imaginative impulse to a re-examination of the proposition on which man, nature, and society are posited," and his "effort to expand such propositions, or to contest and replace them," depending on whether it conforms with his "own idealistic disposition. . . ." Soyinka does not tell us what the writer's "idealistic disposition" is or ought to be, but we can assume that whatever it is, it is not likely to agree with the politician's. If it does

not, then, the writer's social vision can only problematize the literature-politics relationship and make the former an equivocating, skeptical partner. In other words, the interaction which Ngugi talks about cannot be co-operative but oppositional.

The poet puts words and human interaction—which he/she shares with the politician—to a totally different use. Politics is about power, especially power in the state. To get to the position of holding it, the politician joins with others, accommodates his/her thoughts to theirs, and compromises on differences. The politician trades in his freedom for power. Politics is about deciding on and reshuffling priorities according to constant re-visions of human beings in the social aggregate. Because his/her actions are always future-oriented, the politician is basically an optimist. He/she uses words to divide his/her community and to persuade those on his side to submit to his authority. Literature, on the other hand, is about imagination, and imagination is about rebellion. It is about freedom, both collective and individual—freedom to be contradictory, to discover one's own values on one's own terms, and to choose whether to obey and whom to obey. The poetic imagination is naturally wary and skeptical of all propositions. Finally, the poet uses his tool—words—not to persuade but to raise a common perception and synthesis that will bind community together. W. H. Auden has, in fact, trenchantly put all these differences in the following words:

All poets adore explosions, thunderstorms, tornadoes, conflagrations, ruins, scenes of spectacular carnage. The poetic imagination is not at all a desirable quality in a statesman. In a war or a revolution, a poet may do very well as a guerilla fighter or a spy, but it is unlikely that he will make a good regular soldier, or in peace time, a conscientious member of a parliamentary committee.⁵

One possible objection to the neat contrasts made above is that they belong to a literate culture where the division of labor between poetry and politics has long been recognized, whereas Africa has just crossed the threshold of orality, a culture in which poetry and politics have been convivial bedfellows. The answer to this objection is that writing in Africa, combined with the introduction of foreign literary languages, has changed much irreversibly, including how the writer's imagination functions, as well as the role of his products in the new (literate) society.

When he made the big cultural leap from orality to literacy, the African poet lost to the politician that power of instant persuasion which the oral poet had. The literary artist is no longer, for this reason, as

unambiguously political as his oral predecessor, although what he has lost politically he has gained in intellectual freedom and power, the loss of political power compensated for by the gain of political freedom. Indeed, at the risk of exaggerating, it may be said that in the new socio-cultural milieu, the poet and the politician maintain a type-and-antitype relationship.

Ngugi's bracketing of the writer and the politician, therefore, can only come from a writer who looks back enviously at the period when rhetorical power conferred some political power on the oral poet, or who sees literature only as an avenue to, and means of gaining, political power. The idea of the poet either in Africa or elsewhere secretly, or openly for that matter, yearning for political power is, of course, not far-fetched. There are examples in Africa, former Eastern Europe, and South America, of poets turned politicians, while the intellectual's revolutionary involvement in the political process is a cardinal virtue enjoined by socialist doctrine.

However, the involvement of a Senghor or Neto in politics does not alone provide either the practical or theoretical justification for the coupling of politics and literature. To find such a justification, we should examine how far the writer's political involvement succeeds in making real his "social vision." This is a question for critics, but it need not be answered by measuring the poet-politician's record in office against the ideals expressed in his poetry, or by gauging the level of his commitment according to the kind of themes he articulates. Instead, the more important and theoretical questions ought to be: what are the constituents of poetry's social vision, and in what ways are they different from the politician's? Are poetic values and political practice congruent or divergent? What makes good political poetry? What I put down in the next few lines cannot be an answer, but only the outlines of a hypothesis which I test with my more detailed exploration of the Soyinka poems mentioned above.

Good political poetry will, of course, have first of all to be good aesthetically in the sense that it is pleasing and effective. It will be good politically if it exalts those values identified above with the poetic imagination. Those values will, with varying degrees of emphasis, constitute the poet's social vision (or idealistic disposition), and, as posited earlier, precisely because it is always questioning and skeptical, its political value lies in its problematical relationship with actual political practice. But even more than this, the idea of the poet as a visionary adds a practical dimension to this political value. The poet is a visionary in both the metaphorical and literal senses. The latter sense concerns the ways and means by which he vitally recreates in us the vision he has experienced, plus its accompanying "feeling intellect." These ways and means belong in the nature, idiom, and form of poetry—the "stylistic contrivances" that constitute its tradition and make it superiorly different

from the rhetoric of politics. That tradition is worth paying as much attention to, in all its manifestation, as the social vision it bears if we are to gain genuine perception and insight into that social vision rather than be mere passive victims of persuasion.

The elements constituting the tradition of literature have their own functions in shaping not just the poet's but everybody's response to political events. This response is ethical, as Soyinka's definition of the social vision makes clear. The ethical response is central to, and controls, the idiom, form, and technique of political poetry. While it is doubtful if any political poem can straighten a politician, poets inherit from tradition the idiom by which *materia politica* are transformed into *materia poetica*, renovate it and pass it on. This learning of a tradition, keeping it alive, and passing it on in renewable form is itself a social action of great political value.

Ogun Abibiman: Ritualizing Politics

When in March 1976 Samora Machel, the then president of Mozambique, made the declaration placing himself and his people in a state of war with Zimbabwe, then Rhodesia, he transformed himself from politician to warrior, from a remote and impersonal manager of men into a hero. But although the warrior-hero has a positive image in the popular imagination, his figure is culturally ambivalent: he is a preserver of community but also a destroyer of communities. He is a man whose action stands opposed to the culture-forming processes, but he makes possible the social conditions necessary for culture to grow and flourish. When, as it oftentimes happens, the warrior-hero, turns against his own society, his actions pollute the ethical fabrics of both himself and his community. The warrior-hero, like war itself, is therefore at best an ambivalent figure and at worst a wholly negative one.

Mythically, this worst-case scenario came to pass in the career of Ogun, the warrior-god, historically, during the rule of the warrior-hero and king, Shaka. In both cases, the preserver turned destroyer and defiler of his own community. Ogun may have undergone, partially, his own ritual of purification, but Shaka did not, or was not given the chance by his assassins. Thus, although the poet saw Machel's heroic stand as the herald of a new birth, he realized that that new birth carried a heritage of impurities of which it would have to be cleansed.

Hence, *Ogun Abibiman* is a poetic recreation of a communal ceremony of purification. But here we begin to come across that problematical and double-edged relationship between poetry and politics. For long now Shaka has been a ready-made symbol of African

heroic assertiveness and nationalism in the hands of modern African writers like Senghor and Mazisi Kunene. In the process, Shaka has been lifted out of history and transformed into a transcendent being, all the inconvenient aspects of his career glossed over. Soyinka, in his own poem, reverses this trend; his Shaka is a historical figure, a warrior and leader who made choices. Because voluntarily made, these personal choices and their public consequences defined his moral being and the ethical legacy he bequeathed to future generations. The poet of *Ogun Abibiman* casts an unblinking eye on this Shaka who, though truly a hero, violated taboos and thus tainted himself, his society and its future. Unpurified before his death, the poet now imaginatively resurrects him to undergo the necessary ritual of purification. It is necessary to mention another act of political iconoclasm of the poet's, as a preliminary to grasping in full the ritual form of the poem. Again, although the poet acknowledges Shaka's greatness, he sees that greatness as not isolated or transcendent, but immanent in and derived from the people. Hence the ritual experience in the poem is at once therapeutic and cathartic—therapeutic for Shaka, cathartic for his people who witness and participate in it.

In the ritual ambience, the supernatural and the natural are co-present; the natural is transformed and imbued with the numinous qualities of the supernatural, because it is in connection with it. This alone does not explain the presence of Ogun in the poem, however. Who better to assist a warrior-hero (turned destroyer of his own people) in his ritual cleansing than the god who has had the same experience before, and performed the necessary expiation? Moreover, Shaka is not only a "kindred spirit" to Ogun; Ogun is the god of transformations and revitalization.

The first section, "Induction," is a demonstration of these transforming and revivifying powers of the god. There is first a panoramic presentation of cosmic rebirth out of cosmic stagnation, presented in the apocalyptic images of storms, earthquakes, floods, and lightyear tunnels. His restorative motion having been earlier arrested ("A gesture frozen in ironwood, a shape arrested,/The adze on arc-point, motionless" (p. 3), Ogun is now in the midst of this cosmic drama, that motion powered by new cosmic energy and on the point of being brought to completion. He is in fact the source, medium, and agent of these millennial transformations:

Huge with Time, a wombfruit lanced,
A Cycle resumed, the Craftsman's hand unclenches
To possess the hills and forests,
Pulses and habitations of men. . . (p. 4.)

He then combines natural with technological powers, to go and revive Shaka, the "claimed divinity of mind and limb." The section ends, appropriately, with a long and varied praise-chant of Ogun, as is customary in his ritual worship among the Yoruba.

Where section I is an epiphany of Ogun's cleansing and restorative powers, section II enacts the ceremony of purification at the historical level, with the god present as the agent of purification and restoration. As pointed out earlier, Soyinka goes against the trend of reifying Shaka and reclaims him into history. This he does by giving him memory and by making him speak in his own voice. Both devices not only situate Shaka firmly in the continuum of history, but in fact they "liberate" him, for, in remembering and voicing the agonies of his past errors, he repeats and thereby overcomes them. Hence at the end of this section (and the whole poem, too), he is charged with truly subversive, liberating powers. The subjective, error-filled past he relives is, of course, one of the "evil energies of excess," to use Soyinka's own formula for describing another historical tyrant⁶—which had objective, catastrophic consequences. Both can, again, be explained in terms of the metaphysics of the warrior-hero. The warrior-hero, above all others, is the one who has the force and capacity to impose his being on his environment. But there are ethical laws that must curb his boundless energies, and which, therefore, call for self-control. Where this quality is lacking, the ethical bounds are transgressed, and preservation becomes destruction. Shaka is made to own up to these acts of excess and destruction:

Where I paused, Ogun, the bladegrass reddened.
My impi gnawed the stubble of thornbushes,
Left nothing for the rains to suckle after (p. 11).

The destruction is more than physical and it pollutes Shaka himself. The poet appropriately puts its ethical dimension in terms of a sexual infection transmitted down the generations:

This gangrene seeps, not through Shaka's heart
But in his loins. The sere bequest yet haunts
Descendants of the amaZulu, empty husks
Worm-hollowed in places of bursting germ (p.13).

The daemonic excess is also expressed as a mania—the image for ultimate social, moral and spiritual irresponsibility: he was "Best by demons of blood," his mind "transposed in/Another place" (p. 15).

Secondly, the evil energies also make him impure in the sense that he is neither an unqualified hero nor an unredeemed villain: he

defies categorization. "What I did/Was Shaka, but Shaka was not always I," he laments. He claims personal responsibility for his actions, yet those evil actions contradict his essential being. Hence he calls on Ogun to cleanse him (p. 13), so that his essence will shine forth, that essence being the king and general who

Fought battles, invented rare techniques, created
order from chaos. . .
Raised the city of man in common weal (p. 15).

This essence is fundamentally that of a culture-hero.

But clearly the poet sees the legacy of the impure Shaka as having been more politically active than that of his essence in modern Africa. This is why he brings in Idi Amin, self-acclaimed warrior-hero and descendant of Shaka. The ceremony of purification also serves to separate and cast out this impostor. Hence the caustic diatribe in which he is described (pp. 15-16) and the animal images of jackal, viper, hyena, etc. by which he is properly identified as a creature of blind appetite and excess—a creature, in short, beneath culture.

The transforming ceremonies of purification now completed, the poet can go on, in the last section "Sigidi!" to sing of "purity of claims" and justice, and of ends and new beginnings:

. . . Our songs acclaim
Cessation of a long despair, extol the ends
Of sacrifice born in our will, not weakness.
We celebrate the end of that compliant
Innocence of our millennial trees (p. 21).

Thus, in spite of Ogun's ascendancy and restoration of Shaka, what *Ogun Abibiman* actually celebrates is not an imminent war, but the desire for ethical and spiritual regeneration. The confident lyrical tone with which the poem ends derives from the ritual enactment that prepares the way, to borrow Soyinka's words on *Oba Koso* again, "for a post-climatic restoration for the race."⁷

In its use of chorus, adaptation of Yoruba praise-chant, and in its dependence on eloquence, the form of the poem correlates with, and reinforces its ritual content and structure. The chorus comes in in the middle section, and with its regular cheers of "Bayete," "Rogbodiyan. . .," makes the poem a dramatic enactment of the concept of change that is, after all, its central theme. Moreover, this chorus (of the people) also participates in the rites of (moral) passage that Shaka is going through, thereby turning the ritual into a communal act.

The ritual form also significantly alters the poet's relationship with his audience. There is not in this poem the myth of the poet as an isolated figure at ethical variance with his society. Instead, what we have is a figure united with his community, mediating between, and reconciling, men and gods. He is a passionate participant and witness in the ceremony:

Acolyte to Craftmaster of them all,
 Medium of tremors from his taut membrane
 I celebrate (p. 4).

This new relationship calls for a different style, and the word for it is eloquence. The whole poem can in fact be described as one long sustained performance in eloquence and any group of lines can be chosen for illustration:

...
 And Sharpeville followed Dialogue
 And Dialogue
 ...
 Ogun is the tale that wags the dog
 All dogs, and all have had their day (p.6).

Here are seriousness and playfulness in witticisms, punnings and compressed religious allusions, all directing our attention to the poet's own creative energy and frenzy, to match the elemental drama of creativity narrated in the first two pages.

The predominant oratorical tone of the poem, plus the celebrative atmosphere it evokes, are more common to oral performances than to literary compositions. This oral quality is present at the level of the free adaptations of Yoruba and Zulu praise-poetry genres and free borrowings from Yeats; and also more significantly in the mediumistic "I" that interacts and alternates with the communal "we." Within this ambience of oral performance the entire poem becomes a ceremonial social action in which the poet is the solo and his readers the chorus. It thus becomes the medium through which the ethical and the political, past, present, and future, fuse into one seamless experience. In other words, the poem's aura of an oral performance reinforces its ritual structure, content, and function. And in Soyinka, the ritual function of art is inextricably linked with its function as the provenance of social vision. Both functions are political—and more—in that they have to do with the strategies of collective and individual regeneration rather than with the logistics of power.

The Exaltation of the Hero

Where *Ogun Abibiman* enacts transformation through the experience and idiom of ritual, the poems in *Mandela's Earth* achieve the not-too-dissimilar effect of exaltation through the idiom of eulogy, or the effects of demolition through that of satire. But where in the earlier poem the historico-mythical times and motifs are of great moment, the latter are firmly steeped in the present by the synchronization of the present tense in the poems with the present situation (as of the time of composition) outside them.⁸ This double presentness serves a dual purpose: it gives the poems a more immediate and direct political meaningfulness; but through the lyric present, it at the same time rescues the motivations of political heroes from history into the timeless present. There are other remarkable formalistic features in the poems: the recurrent use of "I" and "We" pronouns addressing an absent "You" that turns the poems concerned into apostrophes; their semi-dialogic, semi-narrative forms; and their strongly rhetorical structures.

The six poems making up the "Mandela's Earth" group are all epideictic: they, by direct or indirect praise, transform Mandela from political prisoner into a suffering hero who, through sacrifice and courage of conviction, has turned political defeat into moral victory. This transformation is metaphorically expressed in the last stanza of "Your Logic Frightens Me, Mandella":

Your bounty threatens me, Mandela, that taut
Drumskin of your heart on which our millions
Dance. . . (p. 5).

The superhuman patience of those long years in prison, plus the determination not to batter personal for communal freedom, have become a bounty. The basic attitudes of the poet toward his subject are awe, admiration, and puzzlement, attitudes which are at the heart of praise poetry in African oral literature, especially in the Yoruba tradition where the praise poem often comes in the combined forms of riddles and paradoxes, as for example in the praise of deities. Like these deities, this prisoner has become, for the poet at least, an enigma and a being with the mysteriousness of the earth:

Your pulse, I know, has slowed with earth's
Phlegmatic turns. I know your blood
Sagely warms and coils with Seasons,
. . . . (p. 5).

Hence the poet-persona can only frame the awe and puzzlement in question forms. What deserves his admiration are not his subject's patience and endurance, which, in a prisoner, might amount to no more than enforced passivity, but the active qualities wisdom, which sees beyond the expedient ("Not for you the olive branch that sprouts/Gun muzzles, barbed wire garlands, . . ."); uncompromising demand for justice for all; and fortitude. Imprisonment is no longer defeat but a symbol of unconquerable defiance and rebellion, an assertion of will, energy, and desire. These, after all, are the qualities which heroic poetry celebrates.

Although lacking several of its more conspicuous features, "No! He Said" (pp. 21-3) is no less in the tradition of praise poetry. Indeed, here the transformation of contradictory desire into emancipatory will is reflected at both linguistic and structural levels: the rejections which maroon Mandela on an island of isolation become, in the last paragraph, the heroic "No" in thunder. He is himself become the island, the whale, and the Black Hole of creativity—that is, the source and principle of social transformations:

No! I am no prisoner of this rock, this island,
 No ash spew on Milky Ways to conquests old or new.
 I am this rock, this island. I toiled,
 . . . (p. 23).

The same poetic transformation operates in "Funeral Sermon, Soweto" (pp. 15-20). Here the poet concentrates on the political significance of those mass funerals in Soweto that in the 1970s and 80's became perhaps the most prominent feature of resistance in South Africa. The people only wish to mourn their dead in "Ceremonials well rehearsed,/All outward acts of group cohesion, smothering/Loss, performed." Apartheid kills, fragments, and disconnects; the funeral rites heal, reconnect and recharge the power-generator of social cohesion. It also helps the oppressed to transcend apartheid's rigid hierarchical structures by consecrating "A day to cross the barriers of our skin." Finally, the funeral serve as a strategy for survival: to cleanse them of the evil of the unnatural mass deaths inflicted by apartheid, to reconstruct their community's social fabric, and maintain its identity and continuity. The social identity which the poem concentrates on is more political than cultural, and this is the point of the contrasts between the "epic catalogue" of different types of grandiose funerals for the powerful, and the catalogue of cruel deaths and modest burials of the powerless. The first, a catalogue of "ancient vanities," starts on a note of sarcasm and develops into an ironic panegyric, to reach a climax in the terse line "Slaves do not possess their kind. Nor do/The truly free." The other catalogue is great poetic eloquence in which imagination transforms without reifying but, in fact, through

sensuous images, evokes the pains of living (and dying) under apartheid:

... We,
 The sludge of gold and diamond mines,
 Half-chewed morsels of canine sentinels

 Part-crushed tracks of blinded Saracens,
 The butt of hippo trucks, water cannon mush.
 We, the bulldozed, twisted shapes of
 Shanty lots that mimic black humanity (p. 20).

Here poetry transforms defeat into heroic endurance: the victims in these lines are not to be pitied but admired for enduring so much, and for surviving it all. The poem then represents an instance of the politically subversive use of the heroic signifier: it is used to downgrade the mighty and uplift the low.

In "Muhammad Ali at the Ringside" (pp. 46-9), Soyinka carries the praise idiom to the field of sports, thereby reminding us that in ancient times epideictic poetry was used for athletic prowess as well. Athletic distinction was also political distinction and symbol of excellence of mind too. It was necessary to celebrate that excellence, and even more significant to keep it in memory, for the body that achieved it was bound to be overtaken by inevitable dissolution. This poem reminds us of that ancient need, and more. Muhammad Ali's athletic prowess is usually politically interpreted as a symbol and proof of black possibilities in a white-dominated world that denied such possibilities to the black man. Hence, the poet's resort to *ijala* idiom and style as a poetically objective way of making a cultural identification and reclamation; Ali is not only a bearer of African excellence, he is borne by it.

Just as those who, by their moral visions or physical exertions, enhance the humanity of their community deserve exaltation through praise poetry, so do those who reduce that humanity deserve contempt and symbolic expulsion through satirical poetry. So satire is the complementary opposite of eulogy: it transforms by debasing. The two idioms are co-present in "Like Rudolf Hess, The Man Said!" (pp. 6-10), a poem which praises by condemning, and condemns by praising. It is high burlesque which uses fantasy elements as a magnifying mirror for the moral perversions that apartheid must engage in to justify itself. But it is in Section Two, "After the Deluge," that Soyinka's political satire rises to its uncomplicated heights. The poems "After the Deluge" (pp. 29-30) and "Apollodorus on the Niger" (p. 31), however, although referring to actual events in Nigeria, are too general in their referents to be effective. Political satires need to be direct and topical, and to name names, but the "he" of the first is too general while the Nigerian

In this, all that the poem performs is symbolic, not real, action. The performance of symbolic action that includes the political among its several meanings is characteristic of the poems in *Mandela's Earth* considered here. It is what has rescued Ogun Abibiman from the datedness that the political expediency of the Nkomati Accord would have rendered it. It is by this symbolic action that the poet consoles himself in the bleak "Apologia (Nkomati)" (pp. 24-5)—in words so framed as to highlight the problematical and equivocal nature of the poetry-politics relationship:

The poet
Strings you these lines, Mandela
To stay from stringing lead (p. 25).

Is the poet stringing words because he cannot string lead? Because he does not want to? Or because, after all, stringing words is a self-sufficient activity that needs no "praxis" to validate it? At any rate, read in conjunction with the poem on Doe, this poem illustrates in a salutary manner the problems of marrying poetry to politics. To kill Doe symbolically is an aesthetic decision and does not involve the entire social being of the poet; to go out stringing lead (in real life) is a political decision that involves the whole man.

Conclusion: The Need for Literary History

We end this paper by revisiting the skepticism of literature again to ask why literature is skeptical, and to answer that it is so because it recognizes that in reality not society but the individual is the source and object of all propositions, and that propositions never see trees, only the wood. So literature is forever rescuing the individual from that anonymity, and situating him as a significant being who experiences life as it is lived in his own time and place.

In traditional Africa the ceremonies of endings and beginnings structured communal and individual experiences of the important milestones in life while other ceremonies exalted and gave the individual a sense of historical role and identity in public life. These ceremonies developed equally elaborate and complex poetic genres respectively, and performed their socio-political functions at the more fundamental—psychological and moral—levels. Soyinka's use of these idioms is also at these levels; it is also a use that reveals their literary possibilities and continuing relevance in the contemporary world. The two claims just made above are more boldly and consciously demonstrated in his *Death*

and the King's Horseman,⁹ a play that dramatizes the tragedy of the philistinism of contemporary African leaders, and their life-denying politics, via the idiom and ritual structure of the traditional African cosmos. Thus, any consideration of the political surface of that play that does not start from its metaphysical idiom and ritual structure is bound to be reductive and a disservice to its integrity. Such a critical exercise would, in short, disregard the individuality of the play and its particular form, plus its unique yet very traditionally imaginative way of seeing.

What I hope this exploratory essay has shown, therefore, is that the critical neglect of the conventions and contrivances that make up a literary tradition is a neglect of an aspect of literature that is an important part of the whole of political culture. The connections between poetry and politics, or the relevance of the one to the other, are not always apparent or direct because, since the idiom of poetry are symbolic expressions for non-material states, those idioms often transform and outflank the data of material reality. Thus, although politics may influence literature, it does not control it. Criticism, after noting that initial influence, should pass on to the transformations that take place: the transformation of factual reality by idiom and form, and the transformation of that idiom itself in time. The study of these transformations properly belongs in literary history, and perhaps there is now a need for this aspect of literary scholarship in Africa. There is no denying the importance of politics in African literature; my proposing that literary history be taken seriously in Africa is therefore not with view to uncoupling the two. Indeed, going by sheer bulk alone, an argument can be made for the existence of a distinct poetic genre of "political poetry" in Africa. Only literary history, working separately within oral and literary traditions and connecting them, can trace out the continuities and discontinuities (between them) that together make up the poetics of this genre. A poetics is of course not a prescriptive thing, but it is useful to the poet as well as to the critic. It gives the poet a clear picture of a tradition to conform with or transform; it gives the critics a common ground on which to engage in a productive dialogue with poets and to base their interpretations and evaluations.¹⁰ But perhaps most important of all, it provides conceptual tools that are more suitable for literary analysis, and which relate literature to politics as free and equal partners.

NOTES

¹There are other minor ones, such as the language issue. The language controversy had a brief lifespan in the 1960s and was revived, by Ngugi wa Thiong'o in the 1980s. wa Thiong'o, however, settled the issue practically and privately. The

language controversy never attained the status of a major controversy precisely because it was discussed in more political than literary terms. Language, and not politics, is central to literature.

²Ngugi wa Thiong'o, "Writers in Politics," *Busara*, VIII/1, 1976, p. 1.

³Wole Soyinka, *Myth, Literature, and the African World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), p. 64.

⁴Wole Soyinka, *Ogun Abibiman* (London: Rex Collings, 1976); *Mandela's Earth and Other Poems* (London: Methuen Paperback edition, 1990). Further references are incorporated in the essay.

⁵W. H. Auden, "The Poet and the City," *The Dyer's Hand and Other Essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1975), pp. 84-5.

⁶Wole Soyinka, *Myth, Literature and the African World*, p. 57.

⁷*Ibid.*

⁸The use of the praise idiom still ensures the voice of the past in the present in this poem.

⁹Wole Soyinka, *Death and the King's Horseman* (London: Methuen Ltd., 1975).

¹⁰There are plenty of interpretative essays, but very few evaluative ones. In a situation in which there are no literary criteria, evaluation becomes a very difficult exercise to perform, while interpretation itself becomes a game in which each player determines his own rules. Witness the rules of interpretation and evaluation set by Chinweizu et al in their evaluation of Soyinka, Okigbo, Echeruo, etc. in their *Toward the Decolonization of African Literature* (Enugu: Fourth Dimension Pub. Co., Ltd., 1980).