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Excerpt

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## CHAPTER I

*'Representative' and unrepresentable modalities of the self:  
the gnostic, worldly and radical humanism  
of Wole Soyinka*

In one sense then (there is) a traveling away from its old self towards a cosmopolitan, modern identity while in another sense (there is) a journeying back to regain a threatened past and selfhood. To comprehend the dimensions of this gigantic paradox and coax from it such unparalleled inventiveness requires . . . the archaic energy, the perspective and temperament of creation myths and symbolism.

Chinua Achebe, "What Has Literature Got to Do With It."

The language in which we are speaking is his before it is mine. How different are the words *home*, *Christ*, *ale*, *master*, on his lips and on mine! I cannot speak or write these words without unrest of the spirit. His language, so familiar and so foreign, will always be for me an acquired speech. I have not made or accepted its words. My voice holds them at bay. My soul frets in the shadow of language.

James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.

Ori kan nuun ni/Iyato kan nuun ni  
(That is one person/That is one difference)

From a Yoruba *Ifa* divination chant

All the book length studies, the monographs, and the innumerable essays on Wole Soyinka's writings and career take as their starting point his stupendous literary productivity: some thirty-five titles since he began writing in the late 1950s, and a career in the theatre, popular culture and political activism matching his literary corpus in scope, originality and propensity for generating controversy. Soyinka had been writing for about five years when his first serious and mature works were published in 1963 and, in the words of Bernth Lindfors, "he became – instantly and forever – one of the most important writers in the English speaking world."<sup>1</sup> It is significant that this observation comes from Lindfors, who, almost alone among students of Soyinka's writings, has been obsessed with his literary juvenilia, hoping therein to find materials to prove that

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Soyinka was once a rookie writer, a neophyte artist, even if his rise to fame seemed instantaneous and meteoric. Bearing in mind the fact that Chinua Achebe's much-heralded emergence had taken place in the late 1950s, Soyinka was unquestionably the most talented entrant to the field of modern African literature in the 1960s, that first decade of the post-independence period in Africa. And it was an emergence etched with verbal élan and uncommon wit. His famous quip on Négritude – the tiger does not go about proclaiming its *tigrity* but merely lives and acts it – was complemented by innumerable phrases and lines from poems, short dramatic skits and essays which achieved instant fame for their memorableness, their “quotability,” the best of these being the mock-serious jokes and conceits of the more substantial writings of the period such as *The Interpreters* and *The Road*.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, within the first few years of that decade, Soyinka quickly emerged as the *enfant terrible* of the then “new” postcolonial African literature; moreover, he also quickly became that literature's most vigorous literary duelist, his targets and adversaries including not only corrupt officials and politicians, but also other writers and critics, his satirical review of J.P. Clark's *America, Their America* being only the most famous of his quarrels with fellow writers on matters of vision, craft and sensibility.<sup>3</sup> Thus, the recognition at the very start of his career that Soyinka's literary voice and presence were unique and distinctive was very widespread; such recognition is aptly captured in the following plaudits from an influential London theatre critic, Penelope Gilliat, on the occasion of the staging of his second major play, *The Road*, at the 1965 Commonwealth Arts Festival:

Every decade or so, it seems to fall to a non-English dramatist to belt new energy into the English tongue. The last time was when Brendan Beehan's “The Quare Fellow” opened at Theatre Workshop. Nine years later, in the reign of Stage Sixty at the same beloved Victorian building at Stratford East, a Nigerian called Wole Soyinka has done for our napping language what brigand dramatists from Ireland have done for centuries: booted it awake, rifled its pockets and scattered the loot into the middle of next week.<sup>4</sup>

There are important issues of imperial literary history and colonialist discourse buried in this genuinely excited praise for the freshness and vitality of Soyinka's literary English. The allusion to the “brigand dramatists from Ireland,” within whose ranks the critic places Soyinka, sets up a silent, non-conflictual opposition between “our napping” language and “their” revitalizing appropriation of it, an opposition which is rendered with poignancy in the second epigraph of this chapter, the passage from

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James Joyce's classic fictional autobiography, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. The location of Soyinka's writing in this "brigand" school of literary Englishness – which implicitly suggests "writing back" from (ex)colonial outposts to an imperial metropolis – opens up for our consideration some crucial aspects of both the distinctive features of Soyinka's literary art and, on a far more general level, the world-historical context in which his writings – and the writings of his generational cohort of West African Anglophone writers – emerged as an important body of twentieth-century literature in the English language. It is necessary for our purposes in this chapter to give a profile of the biographical and socio-historical contexts of these buried aspects of an otherwise remarkably perceptive commentary by this London theatre critic on one play in Soyinka's literary corpus.

In 1959, the year before Nigeria's independence, Wole Soyinka returned to the country after a sojourn of about five years in Britain. The year 1960 was a "bumper" year for decolonization on the African continent when sixteen countries gained their political freedom from the European colonial powers.<sup>5</sup> Ghana had of course become the first black African country south of the Sahara to gain its independence three years earlier in 1957, which itself was exactly ten years after India's independence.<sup>6</sup> The first few years of Soyinka's early career as a playwright and university lecturer saw more countries swell the ranks of the new independent African nation-states; by the end of the decade, it was clear that though there was a number of countries in western and Southern Africa yet to gain their independence, the era of formal colonization in the continent was gone forever, to be superseded by the then cognitively uncharted world of the modern African postcolony.<sup>7</sup>

As a student in Britain, Soyinka had come to political maturity in strongly internationalist circles of students, academics and writers; he had been a passionate partisan of the African anti-colonial struggles, especially in the settler-dominated East Africa region and in the bastions of apartheid in Africa's own deep south; and he had participated in the big protests and demonstrations in Europe of the late 1950s against the arms race and for a nuclear-free world.<sup>8</sup> Thus, although his sojourn in Britain had evidently provided him with an acute awareness of the great anti-colonial stirring of African peoples and other colonized societies of the world, Soyinka's return home in that portentous moment for his country and continent meant for him both an "awakening" to his own unique skills and sensibilities as a writer-activist and a "return to sources" linking him with other African writers and artists. Any

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evaluative analysis of this phase of Soyinka's literary career has to be especially mindful of the challenge of simultaneously seeing these aspects of his early career both in their distinctiveness and their inevitable interrelatedness. This is all the more necessary given the fact that the presence that unfolded as Soyinka's unique personality was expressed in imaginative writings that drew attention to themselves as very original works of literature as well as enacted through a passionate political activism whose acts and expressions startled many in the new Nigerian nation by the unprecedented nature of their radical nonconformism. This point requires careful elaboration.

Before Soyinka arrived on the scene from his five-year sojourn in England on the eve of the country's formal independence, there was an older "pre-independence generation" of writers and artists already active in Nigerian literature, theatre and the visual and plastic arts and laying the foundations of the Nigerian "renaissance" which was to reach its apogee with the generation of Achebe and Soyinka. This in itself was only a national expression of a general cultural and political "awakening" in the twilight of colonialism in the West Africa region with important counterparts in countries such as Senegal and the Cameroon, Ghana and Sierra Leone.<sup>9</sup> In Nigeria, the most prominent writers and artists of this "pre-independence generation" included figures like D.O. Fagunwa, Hubert Ogunde, Ben Enwonwu and Fela Sowande. And among Soyinka's own generation, his irruption on the scene was preceded by the ground-breaking fiction of Chinua Achebe and, to a lesser extent, Amos Tutuola; and it coincided with the crystallization of the powerful presence of figures like Christopher Okigbo, John Pepper Clark, Demas Nwoko, Duro Ladipo, Kola Ogunmola, Erabor Emokpae and Bruce Onabrakpeya, all of whom were splashing big waves of originality and vigor in diverse areas of the literary, performance, visual and plastic arts. And in figures like Abiola Irele, Ben Obumselu and Michael Echeruo, with crucial help and some guidance from expatriate patrons and fellow-travelers like Ulli Beier, Martin Banham, Molly Mahood and Gerald Moore, the foundations of a homegrown literary-critical discourse was already in place by the time Soyinka published his first critical essays. The brilliance and energy of members of this group – as well as their mostly idealistic but often self-absorbed and confused involvement at the margins of the political life of the new nation – are imaginatively rendered by Soyinka himself in his portrait of the group of artists and intellectuals who act as a collective protagonist in his first novel, *The Interpreters*. Robert Wren has tried to capture and celebrate the

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milieu and the social and cultural forces which produced these “titans” of modern Nigerian literature in his posthumously published book, *Those Magical Years: the Making of Nigerian Literature at Ibadan, 1948–1966*. And elsewhere in West Africa, that first decade of the post-independence era saw the increasing visibility and importance of writers like Ousmane Sembene, Cheikh Hamidou Kane, Kofi Awoonor, Mongo Beti, Abioseh Nichol and Efua Sutherland, and also of Ama Ata Aidoo and Ayi Kwei Armah of a somewhat later generation.<sup>10</sup>

With the advantage of historical hindsight and a lot of critical commentary on the collective situation and individual careers of these writers who may be described as the “independence generation” of modern Nigerian literature and criticism, it is relatively easier now than it would have been at the time to tease out the complex connections between their creative writings and their politics. In varying degrees, each writer came gradually to a sense of their collective identity as a cultural elite, an emergent literary intelligentsia whose international renown was at variance with the great gap which separated them from the vast majority of their countrymen and women, literate and non-literate. Achebe, Soyinka, Okigbo and J.P. Clark gradually emerged as perhaps the most talented and self-assured writers; and these four also seem to have been the most concerned to think through the contradictions of their elite status within the ambit of broadly left-identified, progressive views and perspectives.<sup>11</sup> Two things marked Soyinka’s unique location within this “quartet.” First, there was the extraordinary versatility and prodigiousness of his literary output: Achebe achieved world class status as a writer primarily as a novelist, though he also wrote very influential essays as a cultural critic and thinker; Okigbo produced a small but very distinguished body of work exclusively in poetry; Clark wrote some plays and produced a work of monumental scholarly research, but achieved fame as a poet; Soyinka wrote prodigiously in all the literary forms and genres. Second, and more portentously, Soyinka occupies his distinct place within the “quartet” on account of his propensity for taking very daring *artistic* and *political* risks in furtherance of his deepest political and ethical convictions, risks which often entailed considerable peril to himself and also profoundly challenged, but at the same time complexly re-inscribed the determinate elitism of his generation of writers. The articulation between the political and artistic risks is one of the most fascinating and complex aspects of Soyinka’s career.

Soyinka is certainly not an isolated figure with regard to the prominent role that writer-activists collectively play in the public affairs of his

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country and continent and more generally, in the developing world. In Nigeria alone, there is a large group of writers, artists and musicians who have played prominent roles in placing the arts at the forefront of the nation-building, democratic struggles of the last five decades. The group includes, among others, Ola Rotimi, Fela Anikulapo-Kuti, Sunny Okosun, Molar Ogundipe, Femi Osofisan, Femi Fatoba, Niyi Osundare, Festus Iyayi, Bode Sowande, Iyorwuese Hagher, Funso Aiyejina, Tunde Fatunde, Esiaba Irobi, Olu Obafemi, Tess Onwueme, Salihu Bappa and Ogah Abah.<sup>12</sup> This list can be considerably widened to embrace the role that a highly visible and articulate radical intelligentsia has played in the political life of the country. Indeed, some figures here have created public profiles for themselves almost as visible as Soyinka's public persona as a permanent intellectual dissident of the post-independence system of misrule and inequality: Yusufu Bala Usman, Bala Mohammed, Beko Ransome-Kuti, Gani Fawehinmi, Mokugwo Okoye, Ola Oni, Eskor Toyo, Segun Osoba, Omafume Onoge, Eddie Madunagu and Dipo Fasina.<sup>13</sup> What distinctly marks Soyinka out in this formation is precisely the degree to which he has consistently been prone to taking political and artistic risks most other writer-activists and the whole phalanx of radical academics and intellectuals would consider either totally unacceptable or quixotic, even when they applaud the courage and originality underlying such propensity for risk taking. Because the exceptionalism that this suggests has often led to distorted accounts of Soyinka's political activism, in what follows both artistic and political risk-taking by Soyinka will be placed within a profile which, while highlighting this aspect of his career, will nevertheless embrace the more "mundane," more typical acts of political and artistic radicalism that have linked Soyinka with the national and continental community of progressive, activist writers and academics.

The political risks are much better known, though some of Soyinka's experiences in this particular matter are little understood beyond rumor, speculation and gossip, even within Nigeria. For example, not much has been written on Soyinka's "fire fighting" interventions in the violent electoral and electioneering politics of the 1960s through the 1980s which often fetched a literal price on his head. Much more widely known and discussed are the famous radio station "happening" of 1965, and the near-fatal contretemps of the so-called "Third Force" phenomenon in 1967. In the radio station episode, sometime in October 1965, a young man managed to slip past units of the armed Nigerian mobile paramilitary police stationed at the Ibadan buildings of the Nigerian Broadcasting

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Service. Making his way into one of the studios for live broadcasts in the complex, he held up the startled and frightened duty officers in the studio at gun point and then proceeded to force the dazed controllers of the station to broadcast a prerecorded message which, on behalf of “free Nigeria,” repudiated the electoral victory which had been fraudulently claimed by the vastly unpopular and repressive regional government of western Nigeria. At the end of the swift operation, the young “desperado” who carried out this action still managed to slip out of the station unharmed. Soyinka was later arrested and tried for this action, but he was acquitted on the grounds of a legal technicality.<sup>14</sup> Barely two years after this incident, on the eve of the Nigerian civil war, Soyinka made contact with elements within the Biafran secessionist leadership, making no secret of this visit to Biafra if not of the details of what transpired with his contacts there, even though at this particular time such action was considered highly treasonous by the Nigerian federal military regime, with its large clutch of fractious, rabidly anti-Biafran military and civilian zealots. Soyinka later described his action as one of a series of interventions planned by a group, the so-called “Third Force,” of which the playwright was apparently a key member and whose objective was to avert war by neutralizing the equally compromised and reactionary leadership of the “federalists” and the “secessionists.”<sup>15</sup> Apprehended for this action but never formally indicted or tried, Soyinka was held in gaol for the entire duration of the civil war, most of this in solitary confinement.

Unquestionably, the most widely discussed aspect of Soyinka’s public personality is that of his fame as one of Nigeria’s most uncompromising and vigorous human rights campaigners, and perhaps the fiercest and most consistent opponent of the African continent’s slew of dictators and tyrants. The sustained and relentless nature of his activism in furtherance of the protection of democratic rights and egalitarian values places him in the ranks of other African writer-activists like Ngugi wa Thiong’o, Mongo Beti and Nawal el Saadawi. However, Soyinka’s activism is distinguished by the sheer reach of his involvements as well as the extraordinary resourcefulness that he brings to them. Quite simply put, Soyinka has always conceived of his political activism as appertaining to the *entire* continent of Africa, with his native Nigeria, apartheid South Africa before the inauguration of black-led majority rule, Hastings Banda’s Malawi, Idi Amin’s Uganda, Mobutu’s Zaire, and Macias Nguema’s Equatorial Guinea being over the years the most prominent “theatres” of his fiercest campaigns.



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From the foregoing account of Soyinka's activities, it is apparent that many aspects of his radical political activism sit rather uneasily with his general reputation as an "obscure" writer, an "elitist" artist who makes no concessions to populist demands for clarity of thought and accessibility of expressive idioms. Perhaps the most "uncharacteristically" populist of his cultural production in the cause of political activism are his effective forays into the domains of popular culture through the use of media like music and film for biting satire against the corruption and brazen brigandage of the Nigeria political class, and for making rousing calls for the dispossessed and the disenfranchised masses to take their fate in their own hands. The film, "Blues for a Prodigal" made in 1983 (but released in 1984) and based on actual events in the maximum use of violence and intimidation by large sections of the ruling party of Shehu Shagari, the Nigerian president, was far less effective than Soyinka's phonograph and audio cassette recording of a composition titled "Unlimited Liability Company." This was a long-playing album rendered in the brisk, mellifluous style of Israel Njemanze, a popular musician of the 1950s who perfected a compositional style for rendering topical issues and common experiences in an essentially apolitical, sentimental manner. In the flip side to this composition titled "Etiko Revo Wettin?," the tuneful, strongly melodic style of Njemanze is retained, but the ballad form is infused with parodic deflations of the "Ethical Revolution" declared by the Shagari administration as a national goal and promoted by "patriotic" jingles on radio and hypocritical, moralizing exhortations for probity in the newspapers and on television. The two sides of this long-playing album literally took the country by storm, many of the verses giving the common man's view of the hypocrisy and venality of the ruling circles:

You tief one kobo dey put you for prison  
 You tief one million, na patriotism  
 Dem go give you chieftaincy and national honour  
 You tief even bigger, dem go say na rumour  
 Monkey dey work, baboon dey chop  
 Sweet pounded yam – some day 'e go stop!<sup>16</sup>  
 (You filch one penny they'll send you to prison  
 But steal one million, that's patriotism!  
 They'll make you a chief and give you national honors  
 And dare to rob on a grand scale, they'll say it's all rumor  
 The monkey slaves while the baboon grows fat  
 This parasite's paradise – one day it will end!)



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Apart from his very skillful use of a modulated “pidgin” English – the national lingua franca of the “common man” in Anglophone West Africa – and the adroit politicization of the received ballad form which, in the hands of its originator, Njemanze, had been basically apolitical, Soyinka derived the forcefulness of the scathing social commentary of “Unlimited Liability Company” and “Etiko Revo Wettin?” from a radical refusal to suffer the misdeeds and follies of the Nigerian political establishment in either silence or with ineffectual, token protests.

One of the high points of the Nigerian writer-activist’s career as a public intellectual was certainly his involvement in the countrywide General Strike called by the Nigerian Labor Congress in 1964. Soyinka threw himself into a heady, optimistic promotion of the action in the Lagos-Ibadan sector of the strike. This general strike was a national event that almost led to the collapse of the first post-independence civilian regime in Nigeria and entailed a call for a popular uprising, totally endorsed by Soyinka, to institute a workers’ social-democratic order to replace the government of Abubakar Tafawa Balewa. Another high point of Soyinka’s political activism and one that marks a genuine conjunctural moment in the life of the country, is the series of crises and popular rebellions leading to the Nigerian civil war, continuing in diverse covert and overt forms of dissent during the war, and mutating into an unprecedented militancy of students, workers and middle-class professionals after the cessation of hostilities. This series of crises and dissent saw, among other things, the incarceration of Soyinka for most of the duration of the civil war; later it led to the one and only time in his entire activist career when Soyinka apparently overcame his deep and abiding suspicion of the usefulness of registered political parties and became a member of the People’s Redemption Party (PRP), the most left-of-centre political party to have actually ever won huge electoral victories in the entire colonial and postcolonial history of Nigeria.<sup>17</sup> Finally, one other high point of Soyinka’s career as a political activist is worth mentioning here, this being the central leadership role that he played in the external opposition to the Sani Abacha dictatorship between 1993 and 1998. At one point in this five-year period of yet another involuntary exile for Soyinka, the dictator formally and *in absentia* charged the writer-activist and eleven other leaders of this external opposition with treason, an offense that carried the death penalty.

Against the backdrop of the long periods of exile that Soyinka has had to spend outside Nigeria and the African continent, it may come as a surprise to those unfamiliar with the scope and range of our author’s

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political existence and tactical options that he has in fact periodically worked within the institutions and structures of the postcolonial state and in cooperation with its incumbents. The most widely known instance of this pattern entails the patience and dedication with which Soyinka created and sustained the Federal Road Safety Corps (FRSC) in the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, Soyinka worked mightily with the national government in 1977 to avert total failure of the Festival of Arts and Culture of Africa and the Black World (FESTAC '77) when it became known at the last minute that the scale of the festival far exceeded the competence of the bureaucrats responsible for the planning and execution of the event or, indeed, the available infrastructures on the ground. More controversially, in the mid-1980s Soyinka, in line with a small minority of progressives in the country, developed a partiality for the dictator, Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida, praising his openness to radical ideas and going so far as to volunteer opinions about the good intentions, the benevolent predispositions of a hegemon who would later annul the federal elections of June 1993 and plunge the nation into its worst period of crisis and military dictatorship in the entire post-independence period.

If much in what we have outlined so far as a profile of Soyinka as a writer-activist has dealt mainly with his political activism, the matter of his aesthetic avant-gardism, of his propensity for taking *artistic* risks also demands our attention, especially as it has, to date, generally received no systematic analysis in Soyinka criticism. The unprecedented experimentation with form and technique – and even subject matter – that informed Soyinka's early plays like *A Dance of the Forests* and *The Road*, and works in other genres like *The Interpreters* and many poems in the first published volume of poetry, *Idanre and Other Poems*, quickly established him as not only a major talent but also one willing to push radically beyond the existing boundaries of artistic practice, beyond also the scope of readers' and audiences' expectations. For instance, nothing then in existence in Nigerian or African literature quite provided anticipation or inspiration for the sheer audacity, the artistic gamble of a work like *A Dance of the Forests*, the very first full-length play written and staged by Soyinka. The press release of the Swedish academy announcing the award of the Nobel prize for literature for 1986 to Soyinka describes the scope of this play as follows: "A kind of African *Midsummer Night's Dream* with spirits, ghosts and gods. There is distinct link here to indigenous ritual drama and to the Elizabethan drama."<sup>19</sup> Without a preexisting company of professional English-language actors highly trained in the theatre and with years of