

WOLE SOYINKA

Politics, Poetics and Postcolonialism

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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.”¹ 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

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 *tigrityde* 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*.² 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.³ 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 Square 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.⁴

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

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.⁵ 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.⁶ 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.⁷

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.⁸ 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

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.⁹ 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 Obumsele 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

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.¹⁰

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.¹¹ 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

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.¹² 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.¹³ 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

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.¹⁴ 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."¹⁵ 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.

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!¹⁶

(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!)

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.¹⁷ 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

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.¹⁸ 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."¹⁹ Without a preexisting company of professional English-language actors highly trained in the theatre and with years of

a perfected performance style or staging experience to its credit, "The 1960 Masks," the newly formed company Soyinka put together for that first production of this play, had the odds stacked heavily against it when the company mounted the play in October 1960 as part of the celebrations for Nigeria's independence. With a sprawling plot and a large cast of characters derived in conception from such diverse sources as *The Tempest* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and the world of Yoruba ritual drama and cultic masque, as well as the "forest phantasmagoria" of folklore, the play attempted to yoke together into an artistic whole vastly disparate African and Western theatre and performance traditions which had never before then remotely been in contact. And as an item in the new nation's independence celebrations, the play's subject matter also calculatedly set the sights against the euphoria of the moment by insisting on exploring, not the glorious achievements of the past, but its crimes and evils, suggesting thereby that the sort of "new" beginnings touted in independence from colonialism is fraught with unexorcised moral and psychic maladjustments. Neither the contemporary reception of the play and its staged production, nor subsequent critical commentaries on the play indicate that the artistic gamble quite paid off, that "The 1960 Masks" was quite up to the challenge of the play's synthesization of disparate African and Western theatrical and performance styles and idioms, or that the profound moral and political vision of the play found communicable rendition appropriate to the playwright's apparent intentions to confront his nation at a crucial historical moment.²⁰

The mischance indicated in the generally confounded audience and critical responses to the artistic gamble of *Dance of the Forests* has not, fortunately, dogged Soyinka's artistic career. More illustrative of the successes that Soyinka has achieved with his avant-garde experiments in drama is the revelation contained in the "confession" of one of the most industrious and knowledgeable scholars of Soyinka's drama, James Gibbs, that until he *saw* and *heard* *The Road* in performance, he had been in serious doubts as to its power as *performable* theatre, so totally unprecedented were many of the play's extensions of dramatic and theatrical form.²¹

If the picture that emerges from the foregoing profile of Soyinka's career is that of one who acts in splendid isolation and absolutely according to the dictates of his unique and radically autonomous selfhood, this has to be substantially qualified by another crucial aspect of his personality as a writer-activist. This is the fact that more than any other African writer, the Nigerian playwright actually depends, and even thrives, on attracting circles and bands of collaborators, followers and acolytes around himself.

The circle of collaborators and followers has been crucial particularly in Soyinka's work as a dramatist. Each of the theatre companies he has formed and worked with over the years – notably “The 1960 Masks,” “Orisun Theatre” and “The Guerrilla Unit” of the University of Ife Theatre – was made up as much of the fiercely devoted friends, followers and admirers of the playwright as of professional and semiprofessional actors and performers. Femi Osofisan has speculated that some day, the story will be told of how much Soyinka relied on his friend, the late businessman and brilliant actor, Femi Johnson, for conceiving and creating some of the great protagonist characters of his plays.²² This observation can be extended to Soyinka's reliance, over the years, on a corps of actors, musicians and assistants in constructing many of the characters and situations of his plays, and especially in the composition of music and the writing of songs for these dramas. Indeed, over the course of four decades and from early plays and dramatic sketches such as *Kongi's Harvest* and the *Before the Blackout* series through plays of a “middle” period like *Opera Wonyosi* and *Requiem for a Futurologist* to more recent plays like *From Zia with Love* and *The Beatification of Area Boy*, Soyinka has depended heavily and tapped into the particular gifts and talents of a core of devoted collaborators and followers like Tunji Oyelana, Jimi Solanke, Yomi Obileye, Femi Fatoba and the late Wale Ogunyemi for the realization of the roughhewn, streetwise humor and parody in the dramatic action of these plays.²³ The list is long indeed of prominent actors, musicians, broadcasters, civil servants, journalists, critics and playwrights in Nigeria who, at one time or another, were either perceived, or perceived themselves, as part of the band of *awon omo Soyinka* – literally “Soyinka's brood,” but better rendered as “Soyinka's circle.”

On its own terms, this aspect of Soyinka's career deserves a book-length study, especially in light of the fact that in nearly all of his most ambitious works of drama and fictional and non-fictional prose, there stands in the foreground of the dramatic action or the narrative plot a larger-than-life protagonist surrounded by a band of followers and acolytes. This is indeed a crucial aspect of what this study conceives of, not as a simple artistic reflection of biographical experience or immediate social milieu, but rather as homologies of the self and the social in Soyinka's writings, fictional and non-fictional. Definitely, much of what Soyinka wrote, said and did in the first two decades of his career was deeply influenced as much by his reliance on the “circle” as by his unique talents and his uncommon angle on events and crises. However, since the late 1980s, the logic of mutability has considerably loosened the bonds

that bound the members of the “circle” to the writer-activist. Nevertheless, Soyinka has shown a remarkable capability for reinvigorating remnants of earlier formations of the “circle” into new incarnations. At any rate, whether in the earlier decades when the Soyinka “circle” was relatively more cohesive and dominated aspects of middle-class arts and cultural politics in Nigeria, or in more recent decades when it has been more amorphous, the band has always been cast in the mold of the playwright’s well-known persona as *okunrin ogun* (man of conflicts, of contentions), collectively embodying the nonconformist and sybaritic propensities of the playwright-activist. In other words, if it is the case that Soyinka and his “circle” have always managed to be in the storm centre of the tumult of Nigerian politics and letters, they have done so in great style, with panache and, paradoxically, with something akin to the cultivated mystique of a monastic order. This last detail relates as much to the playwright’s famed interest in mysticism as it does to his passionate attachment to notions of the sacredness of the bonds of friendship and companionship. And this, subliminally, is not unconnected with the “enchanted” nature of the Soyinka “circle,” enchantment in this case having a double side to it. One side speaks to the romance, the *joie de vivre* that is recounted in stories and legends in the Nigerian press and national grapevine about the playwright and his nearly all-male circle: the renown of the playwright and his circle as connoisseurs of good wine and food; their fame as purveyors of trendsetting fashion in dress styles that are fashioned out of locally woven cloth and neotraditional motifs, the famous “Mbari” smock being perhaps the most widely popular of these; their much-deserved celebration as passionate enthusiasts of the theatre and the arts who held rehearsals of plays and dramatic skits everywhere, from the regular university theatre buildings to the bars and nightclubs of Ibadan and Lagos in the 1960s and 1970s. At the heart of these stories and legends is the fame of Soyinka’s various homes in Lagos, Ibadan, Ife and Abeokuta in the 1960s through the 1990s as unparalleled watering holes for the select circle of his friends, admirers and followers.

“Enchantment” in these stories and legends also entail a peculiarly “Soyinkan” romantic mystique connected, significantly enough, to the symbolic capital of his famous patronym, “Soyinka.” Without any elisions, the full spelling of this is *Oso yi mi ka*. Literally, this means “I am surrounded by sorcerers.” More idiomatically translated, it means “I am surrounded or sustained by circles of protective shamans.” In the light of the symbolic capital inscribed in this patronym, to the extent that the band of collaborators, admirers and followers of the writer-activist are

gifted actors, musicians and artists in their own right, they are “sorcerers” in the world of Soyinka’s predilection for art that is cathartic, orphic and ritualistic. In this capacity they may be said to have nourished, protected and sustained the deepest springs of Soyinka’s decisive artistic and political interventions in the affairs of his crisis-ridden nation in the last four decades, thereby considerably complicating the “big man” syndrome in art and politics in colonial and postcolonial Yoruba culture and society that Karen Barber and Michael Etherton have subjected to careful scholarly scrutiny.²⁴ We may thus conjecture that this constitutes a sort of composite equivalent of the shamans, sorcerers and diviners who presumably in the precolonial society sustained the life and activities of the ancestor who supplied the patronym “Soyinka” to the family. It is thus no wonder that enchantment and romance, even if they often assume parodic and bracingly tragicomic forms, are powerful currents in Soyinka’s writings, just as a strong interest in mysticism and the occult are known to be aspects of our author’s private intellectual and spiritual avocations. It is thus a great lacuna in the critical discourse on Soyinka that beyond citation as mere background to the more “serious” issues in the life and career of the dramatist, these aspects of his artistic career and activist public life seldom ever figure in analyses and evaluations of the social impact and ramifications of Soyinka’s writings and his activism. This is a point that will be examined in the concluding chapter of this study in the context of the heroic *voluntarism* that seems to overdetermine Soyinka’s view of radical art and politics in Africa and the developing world.

The combination in Soyinka’s career of political risk taking with a propensity for artistic gambles reveals a convergence of *aesthetic* and *political* radicalism which, apart from Soyinka, we encounter only in a few other African writers. This observation has to be placed in the context of postcolonial West Africa where, as in many other cultural regions of the world, the paths of aesthetic innovativeness and political radicalism seldom ever converge. But while this convergence in Soyinka’s work is thus a crucial aspect of his career and legacy, it is important to remember that there are aspects of his works which are indeed not that far from the mainstream of the canon of modern African literature. Certainly, within the compass of what I have identified as the other distinctive mark of Soyinka’s literary art – the versatility and prodigiousness of his writing – many of his poems, essays and dramas have been huge critical successes with readers and critics who, on the whole, have been resistant or even hostile to his more “difficult,” ambitiously avant-garde works. Expressed differently, this observation is confirmed by the fact that over the years, as

the critical controversies have raged over Soyinka's so-called "obscure" works and his radical political activism, a good number of his poems have become not only staples of high school or college anthologies of modern African poetry, they have indeed been some of the most cherished of these collections, often to the Nigerian poet's own dismay.²⁵ Similarly, a number of his dramas have become favorites of both amateur and professional companies in many parts of the English-speaking world, while some of his productions in popular forms and media like music and street theatre have been phenomenally successful. For students of Soyinka's writings and career, this point indicates a double challenge. First, it entails a call to read the popular, accessible and generally formalistically conventional works in his corpus both in their own right and in relation to the more complex, more ambitious and more avant-garde works. Second, and far more arduous, there is also the challenge to see the more courageous, idiosyncratic and charismatic aspects of Soyinka's career and personality as a writer-activist neither in the simple, uncomplicated perspective of sedulous adulation nor outright, reactionary rejection but complexly, in its uniqueness and its contradictory determinateness.

The nature of this challenge can be stated both concretely in relation to Soyinka's writing and career and, more generally, in relation to the rarity of the conjunction of political with aesthetic radicalism in all the cultural regions of the world, but most especially in the developing world, with notable exceptions like the "boom literature" of Latin America of the second half of the twentieth century, and the radical film, theatre, dance and music of the first two decades of post-revolutionary Cuba. Concretely, there is the crucial fact that there is now in existence in the accumulated Soyinka criticism of four decades an implicit but nonetheless pervasive bifurcation in the reception of his works in Africa and other parts of the English-speaking world. This has inevitably created a great divide between, on the one hand, a large body of writers, scholars and critics who, at best, are cautious or even discretely suspicious of Soyinka's literary avant-gardism, of what can be described as "neo-modernist" expressions and proclivities especially in his drama and poetry and, on the other hand, a smaller body of critics and theorists who are avid and enthusiastic admirers of precisely these very aspects of Soyinka's works and career. Important figures within the former group are Chinua Achebe, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Bernth Lindfors, Chinweizu and Derek Wright, while the latter group includes within its rank influential writers and critics like Nadine Gordimer, Derek Walcott, Wilson Harris, Femi

Osofisan, Annemarie Heywood, H.L. Gates, Jr., Tejumola Olaniyan, and Ato Quayson.²⁶ The more general, but related problematique can equally be stated succinctly: the effective audience for the avant-garde, especially in *written* literature, in all parts of the world, is normatively very narrow; in the developing world, its real and potential audience is within the demographically tiny cultural elite, an elite whose historic colonial (and neocolonial) formation has not at all been predisposed to enthusiasm for either political radicalism or aesthetic avant-gardism.

It is my contention that these issues – of the articulation between art and politics, especially within the framework of historic avant-garde movements around the world, and of the problems of the audience for aesthetically radical works in the developing world – have, from the very beginning of his career, obsessed Soyinka to a degree that is without parallel in postcolonial Anglophone literatures. The most persuasive indication of this is the sheer scope of the occurrence of paradigms and figures of radical nonconformism, in art and politics, in his writings, including, very suggestively, all the works of autobiographical memoir. Even more revealing of this structure in Soyinka's writing is the matter of his attitude to language – by which is meant, implicitly, the scope, the contradictions and the limits of literary English for an Anglophone, postcolonial African tradition of writing. Language and signification in Soyinka's most ambitious, most experimental poems, plays and even essays often considerably exceed perceptible function and referent – confoundingly or exhilaratingly, depending on the reader's or critic's predispositions and sensibilities.²⁷ The implicit, and sometimes explicit, critical refrain in Soyinka criticism on this issue is: Why does a writer from the developing world, an African writer at that, delight so much in displaying his command of the alien English tongue? Sometimes, this assumes a more blithely philistine form such as: "Who is he writing for, the international literary elite of the English-speaking world, academic eggheads in his own society, or the popular masses he claims to be fighting for?"²⁸ In the present context of a discussion of highlights of Soyinka's career as a radical writer-activist, perhaps the most crucial aspect of these critical responses to our author's attitude to language is the complete critical silence on the countless instances of his extensive deployment of an "excess" of image and sign over obvious referent and function in his writings for the construction of a "self" that is mimetically unrepresentable precisely because its representation, or rather its representability, is beyond the horizon of presently available or formalized linguistic, artistic, generic and ideological frames.

Critical discourses on Soyinka's writings and career in the last four decades have, at best, only skirted the margins of these features of the Nigerian author's literary corpus. Certainly, the controversies over the alleged "obscurity," "difficulty" and "complexity" of his writing have not notably encompassed elucidation and analysis of figures and paradigms of aesthetic and political radicalism within his works, precisely because the matter of the articulation of the political and the aesthetic in our author's writings has largely been located outside the works, in the social ramifications of the writer-activist's most overtly political works. But precisely because of the pervasive inscription of these figures and paradigms in his writings, this articulation of the political and the aesthetic is as much a matter of what happens within Soyinka's works as they pertain to the effects and ramifications of the works in society. Moreover, the matter is compounded by the fact that many of the figures and paradigms of the convergence of aesthetic experimentalism and political radicalism are as much to be found in Soyinka's autobiographical memoirs as in his fictional works, clearly indicating that what we have here is the elaborate project of constructing a self-reflexive radical subjectivity over the course of his entire career and in all the genres and forms of expression in which he has written. Why Soyinka has apparently felt impelled to make this project such a decisive and pervasive aspect of his works is thus a matter of great theoretical and critical interest. Thus, this issue is central to the present chapter of this study of all the writings of Soyinka in its focus on the project of self-constitution or self-fashioning in our author's writings and career.²⁹

Commenting on the fact that Soyinka "wears many hats," James Gibbs has asserted that his hope as an interpreter of the Nigerian dramatist's works and life is to demonstrate that even within the diversity and versatility of our author's creations as a writer and of his involvements as an activist, "the reader will feel the current of a life which is not pursuing different courses separated by islands and delta flats, but a strong river, full of eddies and subtle flows, but one stream, one river, one flow."³⁰ This conception seems central to Soyinka's own self-understanding as an artist, to his conscious self-presentation as an African writer. It is a self-conception that is inscribed in more than a dozen of Soyinka's essays; and it is intricately woven into the very structure and texture of his writings. Moreover, this view of the unified, integrated personality of Soyinka as artist and intellectual seems to have decisively affected the critical reception of his works. Thus, most of Soyinka's sympathetic critics – and we might add, a few of the most insightful – have generally viewed

the Nigerian author as protean and multifaceted as an artist, but they also see a fundamentally unified sensibility at work in all his writings and activities. For such scholars, the fact that Soyinka has written in virtually all the literary genres, and the fact that he has sustained over the course of more than thirty years a prodigious output of some eighteen works of drama, six works of fictional and nonfictional prose, five volumes of poetry, a work of translation, three works of critical prose and innumerable pieces of cultural journalism and political polemics, all these facts do not in the least perturb the perception of the unified, integrated sensibility of Soyinka as an artist.³¹

This view involves many methodological and philosophical problems, especially when applied to the historical and cultural contexts of the postcolonial writer. For this reason, it has generated intense critical controversies that the proponents of Soyinka's harmoniously integrated selfhood have not engaged. At one extreme, there are influential writers and critics like Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Obi Wali who have argued that writing in the languages of colonial imposition entails evacuation of an alleged primary selfhood constituted by the indigenous mother tongue, not ignoring the perpetuation of unequal relations between indigenous languages and languages of imperial imposition.³² In the light of this postulate, there simply cannot be a unified, integrated selfhood for a postcolonial writer who writes in any of the languages of colonial derivation, French, English or Portuguese. At another extreme, there is the view that the postcolonial writer who writes in the "world languages" is a woman or man of two or more worlds, where such presumed linguistic and cultural pluralism is perceived not as a source of alienation and inauthenticity, but as the positive incarnation of the sort of hybrid, de-centered subjectivity celebrated by postmodernists. In other words, one view bemoans an evacuated or inauthentic selfhood while the other view celebrates multiple, heterogeneous selves. The insistence that Soyinka's artistic personality is a unified, integrated one, that in "essence" he remains the same sovereign agent of his "speech acts" in whatever genre he chooses to express himself, this insistence flies in the face of such mutually opposed views of the postcolonial writer, and in the face of the massively overdetermining social and cultural contradictions affecting the production, reception and academic study of postcolonial African writings.³³ Thus, it is useful to subject the theoretical foundations of this view to scrutiny before exploring its practical, embodied incarnation in a writer-activist like Soyinka who has made the issue of self-constitution or self-fashioning an abiding feature of his works.

A useful, widely quoted expression of this view, from the standpoint of classical mimeticism, is revealed in the following formulations of Aristotle in the text of *The Poetics* on how the unified construct known as the “hero” is arbitrarily synthesized from the variety and fullness of life:

Unity of plot does not, as some persons think, consist of the unity of the hero. For infinitely varied are the incidents in one man’s life which cannot be reduced to unity; and so too, there are many actions of one man out of which we cannot make one action. Hence the error, as it appears, of all poets who have composed a *Heracleid*, or a *Theseid*, or other poems of the kind. They imagine that as Hercules was one man, the story of Hercules must also be a unity. But Homer, as in all else he is of surpassing merit, here too . . . seems to have happily discerned the truth. In composing the *Odyssey* he did not include all the adventures of Odysseus – such as the wound on Parnassus, or his feigned madness at mustering of the host – incidents between which there was no necessary or probable connection. But he made the *Odyssey*, and likewise the *Iliad*, to center around an action that in our sense of the word is one.³⁴

Even after making the important observation that there are often “no necessary or probable connections” between the variety of incidents and experiences in the life of an individual human life, Aristotle’s main point in this passage from *The Poetics* is the suggestion that it is still possible to see in the life of an individual a “unity” or, in our terms, an “essence.” But we must note that this “unity” or “essence” which a powerfully distilled characterization in a play (or for that matter, in the biographical textualization of a writer’s life) projects is an illusion arrived at only by a process of selection and condensation which thus necessarily leaves out far more than it includes and highlights. In this connection, the “solution” proposed by Aristotle – the illusionary, full self-presence of classical mimeticism constructed around either a single action or a cluster of divergent but carefully selected actions – in fact produces its own problem, this being the absolutely unavoidable exclusions and elisions of vast areas of “life” or experience of a subject. The theoretical limit of this “unity” is thus unavoidable: as soon as the excluded details and incidents are acknowledged and brought into the representational and discursive field, the “unity” is shattered. In other words, the “hero” of the *Odyssey*, or more pertinent to the present discussion, Maren, the protagonist of Soyinka’s autobiographical memoir, *Ibadan*, can be represented as a unified construct only by leaving out a considerable number of incidents and experiences between which there are “no necessary or probable connections.”

Modern critical theory, especially poststructuralism, would seem to have resolved the problem of exclusions and omissions of classical mimeticism by suggesting that representation, *per se*, is in fact constituted by this “violence” of repressed or excluded terms or elements, that indeed no representation is possible without this violence. From this has come the suggestion that this “violence” of representation is somewhat mitigated if we pose the question of who and what are excluded and omitted in *any* representation, and if we read back into texts the repressions, gaps, exclusions and absences which enable their production in the first place.³⁵ But this hardly resolves all the theoretical problems thrown up by representation and subjectivity, especially in a colonial or postcolonial situation.

The mitigation of the inadequacies of mimetic representation through the recuperation of excluded or repressed elements is tremendously complicated when such “recuperations” pertain not only to a “represented” self but also a “representative” self who is deemed to be speaking out of, and for a colonized condition or an imperialized society. At this level, the “violence of representation” operates not merely and restrictedly in specific texts, or with regard to the isolated single author, but manifoldly, through cultural archives which work through the constitutive texts of whole institutions and entire societies. In other words, we are confronted at this level by two distinct but interlocking sets of exclusions and omissions: those which enable the crystallization of a unified subjectivity – either of protagonists of imaginary works or of the textual production of the personality of a writer-intellectual in an autobiographical memoir – and those which enable a whole society, culture or civilization to be represented, negatively or positively, as homogeneous and unanimist. This distinction is strongly indicated in the reported response of Soyinka to the initial news of the award of the Nobel prize for literature:

I have not been able to accept the prize on a personal level . . . I accept it as a tribute to the heritage of African literature, which is very little known in the West. I regard it as a statement of respect and acknowledgment of the long years and centuries of denigration and ignorance of the heritage which all of us have been trying to build. It’s on that level that I accept it.³⁶

It is perhaps undeniable that Soyinka underplays his own individual merits in this statement as an act of gracious acknowledgment of the contribution of other towering figures of modern African literature like Leopold Sedar Senghor, Chinua Achebe, Ousmane Sembene, Ngugi